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READING TO WRITE

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The functions of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, should form a solid foundation from which students can learn as they grow toward maturity in their educational endeavors. Without a proper grasp of those functions, a language imbalance occurs. One might say that the foundation tilts because the base is not sufficiently solid in each direction. As a result one or more language functions are slighted and may not mature sufficiently or may atrophy because of disuse.

From birth to maturity, the language development of most individuals follows a similar pattern. Children learn to listen, then they learn to speak and soon learn to read, after which they learn to write. The related vocabularies develop apace. Usually the listening vocabulary is the largest of all, then comes the speaking vocabulary and the reading vocabulary. Smallest of all, or usually least developed of all, is the writing vocabulary. Moreover, the desire to write or to express one's thoughts on paper seems to be the least desirable way to communicate for most individuals. The typical person would rather speak than write if a choice were given. So the writer has two strikes against him at the outset. Not only is his vocabulary limited in relation to the other language functions, but his motivation to write is often lacking.

Writing is, without question, the most demanding of the language functions. It requires a high degree of inner discipline. It involves inspiration (an idea to be expressed) and "perspiration" (the tenacity to remain at the task until properly completed) in order to be effective and the writer's thoughts properly expressed. It also involves being accustomed to writing, that is to say, the writer needs considerable practice that is meaningful to him and purposeful. It is to these ends that the present discussion is directed.

Teachers frequently pose the questions, "How can I help my students engage in a meaningful writing situation?" "How can I motivate them to write well without applying undue pressure?"

The answer is relatively simple: have your students write a weekly letter to their parents, guardian, or the individuals caring for them. This learning experience, the weekly letter, utilizes all skills in the communication or language process and combines them in a sound educational activity. The letter has the advantage of combining all phases of the school curriculum, reading, mathematics, spelling, social studies, science, handwriting, the fine arts, as well as oral expression, and all facets of syntax. Moreover, it is meaningful and enjoyable from the student viewpoint and parents also like it. Typically, parents become keenly interested in what takes place in school because the letter explains this. Such an interest tends to foster a positive

school-community relationship. Furthermore, parents can see their children becoming more proficient in the various skill areas because there is visible evidence of learning and progress through the medium of the weekly letter.

Initial Step. The idea of the weekly letter to parents is best developed early in the school year, at the end of the first or second week. To set the stage, ask the students to name the learning areas on which they worked during the week. Write their responses on the chalkboard and then ask them to mention specific concepts they learned in each area. List these under each topic. This serves as the outline.

The sequence should begin with the reading program. Ask students to recall the story or stories read and the related reading skill activities. Summarize the story plot in a few concise sentences and describe the related developmental activities which evolved from the reading. Do the same for the other major learning areas such as math, social studies, and science. In each instance it is necessary for students to recall and describe the learning which resulted from their activities.

The Second Step. Helping students discover that a letter to their parents is the best way to convey the information comes next. Here it is necessary to set the stage for the desired outcome. The teacher should ask students their opinions regarding the best way to share the information with their parents. Most students will respond that the best way to do this is to tell them. At this point the teacher should explain that writing is also a good way of imparting information and thus help students realize the two major ways of communicating ideas, etc.

Most students will probably reject the writing idea and actually believe that they can remember and tell about all the various learning activities which took place during the week. So let them try because it is important to move slowly and have the students discover for themselves the value of writing rather than telling. Let them tell their parents about school activities and see how effective it was.

This can be checked at the beginning of the following week. On Monday the teacher should ask if *everyone* remembered to tell parents *everything* that happened in school the previous week. Many students will have forgotten, or had no time, or had parents who had no time. It is at this point that the teacher should explain that telling is not such a good idea and also ask students to suggest alternative procedures for imparting information.

On the ensuing Friday, repeat Step 1. Ask the students what they did during the week and also what they learned in the several disciplines. Write their responses on the chalkboard. Ask them the best way to share this information with their parents and see what suggestions are made. Sooner or later the letter idea will emerge and be accepted by most students.

The discovery approach begins with teacher questions. Ask the students if they always remember to tell everything that has happened in any given event. Then ask them if a listener (parent, friend, etc.) always has time to listen the moment each student is ready to tell about a happening. Another

question to ask is about their own memories: do they always remember everything that has happened to them? And a final point is concerned with the possibility of error in speaking or telling vs listening and comprehending. How many times have the students experienced problems because they did not understand the spoken word?

At this point many students will be receptive to the idea of keeping written records of them in class activities. This is a valuable reference device for future use in either writing or telling about school activities. Ultimately it can be used as a guide to writing the letter.

Step Three. Because writing is such a demanding activity it is wise for the teacher to write the first several weekly parent letters, putting them on the chalkboard for students to copy. Then, gradually, as the students mature in their familiarity with this process, the teacher will do less and less. Students will do more and more of their own work using their own outlines and notations. When this happens, the teacher is free to move about the classroom and check on each student's writing.

Suggested Outline. The letter outline given below should be used only as a guide and changes can be made as warranted.

1. Introduction to the Weekly Letter
2. Reading and Related Language Skills
 - a. Stories read during the week
 - b. Related language activities and learnings
3. Mathematics
 - a. Concepts practiced during the week
 - b. Problems illustrating the concepts
4. Social Studies Activities for the Week
 - a. Materials read and concepts learned
 - b. Current social studies project
5. Science Activities
 - a. Resources used and ideas learned
 - b. Science project underway
6. Spelling Lesson (or activities)
7. Fine Arts this Week
 - a. Music and related activities
 - b. Art and related activities
8. Health and Physical Education
 - a. Games and skills learned
 - b. Current health status
9. Concluding paragraph

A Final Point. Some teachers may feel that the suggested outline is too detailed and specific while others may believe that it is not specific or detailed enough. Whatever it is, it is a starting point. Most experienced teachers know that many students will be able to cope with and follow the outline. Others will not. Each student should do his best and the detail with which the individual writes is indicative of his general language proficiency and achievement as well as his thought processes.

The outline for the lower grades will be simpler to follow and for the

middle or high school it will be more detailed. In the primary grades, teachers will wish to follow the language experience process and let students dictate answers to the points posed in the outline. Students could copy the text if they have matured sufficiently to engage in writing. If not, the teacher should request help from a student in the upper grades and follow this procedure: Have the student helper write (or print) the letter on a ditto master as the dialogue develops and thoughts are put on the chalkboard. When the children have finished dictating their joint letter, the student helper will probably have finished the master. It should be duplicated and distributed to the children who will take it home and read it to their parents.

One kindergarten teacher tried this approach with the following result. Below is a copy of the actual duplicated letter:

Our School Week
We did many things this week.
We heard the story of the Three Bears.
We learned to count money.
We learned colors.
They are red, blue, yellow, and green.
School is where we learn.

Obviously not all kindergarteners would be able to read this letter to their parents, but the parents could read it and discover what is going on in school.

A third grade teacher had a student who wrote this letter:

Dear Mother and Father,

We worked on many skills this week. Our teacher helped us. It was fun to learn so much.

In my reading group we read the story, "Hoppy the Helicopter." It was interesting. Hoppy was different from the other airplanes. They did not like him. They called him a bug. I don't think that was nice. Just because he was different was no reason to make fun of him.

We worked on problem solving in arithmetic. There were written problems and we had to read them. I thought they were hard.

My practice spelling test was good. I missed only four words. I will study them over this week-end.

We did other things this week. I have no more time to write about them. I will tell you about them tonight.

Love,

A sixth grade teacher copied this letter from one of his pupils:

Dear Mother,

We have been really busy in school this week. It has been one of the busiest and one of the most interesting weeks yet.

In reading my group read three stories from the basic reader. During free reading time I continued to read my Homer Price book. That was during the USSR period. Remember what that stands for? Our teacher helped us learn about figurative language and idiomatic expressions. When I come home I will tell you what "The ship plowed the waves," means.

Mathematics was not easy this week. We tried to work on story problems. I had difficulty with the terms subtrahend and minuend. It is not much fun to work on these problems. We are now working on spelling lesson eight. This is a review lesson. I have had trouble spelling "embarrassed" and "spaghetti," but I will try to learn them for our test on Tuesday.

In social studies we are learning about Canada. It is a very interesting country and needs more people. Our book tells us that Canada is sparsely populated. It has many natural resources that it sells to other countries. Tourism is a very important industry in Canada.

This is all I have time to write about.

Your loving daughter,

These sample letters are evidence indicating that students can write and write well if they are properly motivated and well guided. The writing ethic needs to be nurtured. Students should realize early on just how valuable effective writing can be. Through this process, writing as a medium of communication can be fostered, improved, and can become a vital force in the lives of most individuals. Such vitality seems to be lacking in the area of writing, but writing a weekly letter to parents can go far toward proving the value of written communication.

Try it. Once your students become accustomed to the idea, they are sure to like it.