

Teaching Writing

as a Profession



By Cindy Downes

When it comes to instruction in the area of language arts, homeschool parents tend to teach what they were taught: grammar, punctuation, spelling, and the basic parts of speech. Why? Because it's easy: there's a right and wrong answer.

Instead, parents should think more like Lucy McCormick Calkins, author of *The Art of Teaching Writing*, who said, "Teaching English, and particularly writing, must become more like coaching a sport and less like presenting information." By definition, a coach uses "a variety of methods, tailored to the client, to move through the process of setting and reaching goals."

What are your child's language arts goals? If the goal is to improve his punctuation or learn to write a three-point essay, then continue to use resources to teach those skills. If, however, your child has mastered basic grammar, he knows how to punctuate and capitalize properly, and he's able to write a high school-level research paper, why not set a new goal? Why not teach him to write professionally?

According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2012–13 Edition, there continues to be a demand for professional writers. The biggest demand is for online publications, in public relations, and as freelance writers for newspapers and magazines. In addition, writers continue to make a living as technical writers, scriptwriters, grant writers, songwriters,

... Require your student to read in a wide variety of genres, both fiction and nonfiction.

and novelists. You can be the "coach" to equip your child to succeed in whichever area of writing appeals to him most.

Can you do this and still fulfill state requirements? Absolutely! States simply require that English instruction include reading, writing, grammar, and literature. How you teach these topics is entirely your decision. Instead of spending time in a language arts textbook, your child can use a variety of methods and resources

that will not only reinforce previously learned language arts skills but also will teach him how to write professionally.

The first step to teaching writing as a profession is to determine what your child needs to know. Professional writers must learn how the publishing industry works, how to network, and how to write to please an editor rather than a classroom teacher. There is a difference. A classroom teacher wants the student to know all the rules of writing. In contrast, an editor wants an author to know how and when to break those rules in order to create a saleable product.

Technology is changing the publishing industry. Editors now require that manuscripts come through an agent. Agents receive so many manuscripts they can't read them all. Publishers are specializing, so sending a manuscript to the wrong publisher is a waste of time. Writers must do much of their own marketing today, whether they are traditionally published or self-published. If self-published, authors must also learn how to format their manuscripts. The craft of writing is important, but just as important is learning the other skills necessary to get the right

manuscript into the right person's hands and at the right time.

Next, choose the right resources for coaching your future author. At home, have your child practice basic language arts skills, not in a grammar textbook, but in context. Use his professional writing practice to reinforce grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. Invest in a good thesaurus, such as *Roget's International Thesaurus*, to increase his vocabulary. For literature, require your student to read in a wide variety of genres, both fiction and nonfiction. Instead of reading excerpts from literature textbooks, require him to read original, unedited books available at the library or from bookstores.

Conventions are the place to go to network and the most effective way to get a manuscript into the hands of agents and editors.

Provide books on publishing in general, as well as on specific topics such as how to write dialogue, how to structure your novel, and how to use social media to promote your book. Invest in at least one market guide. Books such as *Magazine Markets for Children's Writers* and *2013 Novel & Short Story Writer's Market* are invaluable tools for finding buyers for your child's work. These books provide information about what specific publishers are looking for, guidelines on how to submit a manuscript, and what the publishers will pay. Writer's guidelines are also available online. Do a Google search for the name of the publication and add "writer's guidelines" to the search. Encourage your child to read professional blogs for up-to-date market information, as well as tips on writing for a particular agent or editor.

Help your child find a mentor by encouraging him to join a local writer's group where both published and unpublished writers meet for instruction, support, and networking. (Local groups are often listed on a national organization's website.) Ask about getting your child involved in a critique group, a group of three or four writers who meet together on a regular basis to read each other's work and give both positive and negative

feedback. This will help your child learn to give and take constructive criticism.

Local groups also provide information on professional writers' conventions, which feature workshops and seminars taught by published authors, agents, and editors. Conventions are the place to go to network and the most effective way to get a manuscript into the hands of agents and editors. If you can't send your child to a convention, ask if you can purchase recordings of the sessions. Although your child will miss the networking opportunities, the recordings will provide a wealth of information about the craft of writing and about the publishing industry itself.

Enroll your child in writing classes, available online or locally. Call colleges in your area, contact local writer's groups, and search the websites of national writer's organizations for classes and workshops offered.

Finally, when choosing resources, keep in mind that anyone can write a book or teach a class. Choose resources written or taught by professional writers. Check credentials before investing money. If you can't locate this information, search for the author's name on Amazon or on your library's website. What has the author written? How many copies of his work have been sold? Read reviews and testimonials from other readers and students. Were they satisfied? Have any of them been published as a result of reading the book or taking the class? Search for the reviewers' names on Amazon to see what they have published.

By using this coaching model rather than the traditional textbook model, you'll not only reinforce your child's previous language arts skills, but you will also prepare him to be a professional writer. Perhaps he'll become a journalist or a content writer for a major corporation or, just maybe, he might end up being the next Christopher Paolini, a homeschooled student and the bestselling author of *Inheritance Cycle*. 🏠

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Cindy Downes is an independent writer, a homeschool veteran, and author of The Checklist, a scope and sequence for homeschoolers. She is also the creator of a variety of unit studies and worksheets available for free on her websites. For more information, see her website at www.cindydownes.com.

Resources

Books:

- *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Creative Writing* by Laurie E. Rozakis
- *Anatomy of Nonfiction: Writing True Stories for Children* by Margery Facklam and Peggy Thomas
- Any of the books published by Writer's Digest (www.writersdigest.com)
- *Seize the Story: A Handbook for Teens Who Like to Write* by Victoria Hanley
- *A Writer's Guide to Transitional Words and Expressions* by Victor C. Pellegrino
- *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* by Christopher Vogler

Blog: Chip MacGregor, literary agent (www.chipmacgregor.com)

Classes:

- Christian Writer's Guild, Christian fiction (www.christianwritersguild.com)
- Anastasia Suen, children's books and poetry (www.asuen.com)
- Writer's Digest University, all forms of writing (www.writersdigest.com)
- National Novel Writing Month in November offers curriculum and motivational resources to teach young authors how to write a novel. Download the free lessons plans for K-12th grade (ywp.nanowrimo.org).

Organizations:

- Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (www.scbwi.org)
- American Christian Fiction Writers (www.acfw.com)
- Mystery Writers of America (www.mysterywriters.org)
- Poets & Writers (www.pw.org)
- Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America (www.sfga.org)

Writer's Markets for Teens

- Homeschooling for Teens—not a paying market, but a good place to start (www.homeschoolingteen.com)