

# Help your child write with confidence

For parents of students in junior school

Writing is a part of students' daily lives. It involves recalling ideas, vocabulary, rules of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Writing also means making use of strategies—like problem solving, brainstorming and creating ideas—while putting their thoughts on paper.

Planning before writing is a good way to begin. Students need to learn that writing should not be a rush job, and that the processes of planning, thinking and organizing are just as important as the final product.

## Generating or brainstorming ideas

Writing begins by answering a basic question: What do I want to say to the reader?

To answer this question, the writer generates or brainstorms ideas. Here are some strategies to help students develop their ability to generate ideas during writing:

- Provide prompts or story starters for your child if he has difficulty in selecting a topic. These can be paragraphs, scenarios, a sentence or a picture.
- Ask your child to brainstorm by drawing pictures, sharing ideas with family members, or dictating her ideas into a tape recorder.
- Use your child's favourite books to inspire him to come up with ideas. For example, have him choose a favourite book and discuss where he thinks the author got ideas for the story.
- Encourage your child to keep an *Idea Journal*. She can list things that have happened to her, a timeline of big events in her life, funny or interesting news stories, and pictures from a paper or magazine, or a photograph she took.
- Have *What if...* discussions. For example, "What if you came to school and no one else was there?" or "What if you woke up one morning and your dog could talk?"

## Organizing ideas

Once ideas have been generated, they need to be organized. Here are some strategies to help your child develop the skills to organize ideas during writing:

- Give your child a list of ideas in the wrong order and have him identify or reorder the list in a paragraph. He can also do this with the ideas in a comic strip.
- Your child might benefit from using a tape recorder to "store" her thoughts by verbally discussing them on tape before she begins to write. She can then transcribe her dictation.



- Have your child use computer software programs that help him generate outlines and graph maps of his ideas, such as the Inspiration program.
- Provide specific age-appropriate strategies for your child to organize her work. For example:

### TREE

- Think of a topic sentence
- Reasons to support topic sentence
- Examine reasons
- Ending

### STOP

- Ssuspend judgment (consider each side)
- Take a side (pick strongest argument)
- Organize ideas (strongest points, weakest, order)
- Plan more as you write

### DARE

- Develop topic sentence
- Add supporting ideas
- Reject at least one argument for other side
- End with conclusion

## Beginning to write

For students who are having trouble beginning to write you can:

- Provide jump-starts for your child to help him begin homework or classroom assignments. For example, provide the first sentence of a paragraph he has to write.
- For larger scale writing assignments, have your child begin on the day it is assigned. Then, develop a plan for finishing the project by dividing it into "chunks" of work with deadlines and rewards.
- Encourage your child to start a homework session by planning what will be accomplished during the session. If necessary, help her develop objectives that are clear, specific and measurable (e.g., how long she will work, how long the report will be).
- Be aware that fears of doing a less-than-perfect job might be interfering with your child's willingness to start assignments on his own.
- Some students need to practice writing every day, preferably in a format that is interesting to them. Encourage your child to keep a journal and write e-mails or letters to friends.

## Monitoring your child's progress

Have your child self-monitor her own progress as she moves toward completion of tasks by using checklists, keeping logs, or marking progress on a graph.

During larger scale projects allow him to delay judgments about the quality of his work. Allow a day or two to elapse between the writing of a report and re-reading the report for quality.

Your child may require a list of questions to start the self-monitoring process. These can include:

- Am I clear on the point of the question/assignment?
- Do I understand how that connects to what I've already written?
- Who is the main character?
- When does story take place?
- Where does story take place?
- What does the main character want to do?
- What happens?
- How does story end?
- How does the main character feel?

Create a chart to help your child monitor the specific quality of her work. For example:

**Monitoring Dimensions of the Writing Process**

<b>Planning</b>			
Number of ideas generated	Need more	Just enough	Too many
Quality of ideas generated	Poor	Okay	Great
Sources or resources used	Need more	Just enough	Too many

**Helping your child stay on track**

Sometimes your child may seem bored or lazy during writing tasks, and may have trouble concentrating on writing assignments. Students also become more restless when they have no time goals.

You can help your child establish good writing habits by avoiding marathon sessions, which can overwhelm your child and encourage procrastination. Instead, schedule short writing sessions. For example:

1. Set the timer for 15 minutes.
2. Write until the timer goes off.
3. Get up and move around for a couple minutes.
4. Write for another 15 minutes.

Speak to your child about personal study habits, exploring how some students study well in the morning, some in the evening, etc. Emphasize that the key is setting a study schedule that fits your child's personal style.

Schedule frequent, but brief periods of activity, especially after difficult tasks. Encourage your child to take physical breaks, and to use stretching and walking around as ways to revitalize. Explain that such activities cause blood to flow more evenly throughout the body, and more oxygen to be carried to the brain, thus making us feel more alert.

If appropriate, offer reinforcements when your child completes tasks. Let your child help you decide what works best.

**Encouraging your child to reflect on writing**

Encourage your child to ask questions that guide self-reflection:

- What went well today?
- Where or when did I get distracted or take the wrong path? What happened when I did that?
- What I will do the next time I get distracted or start to go in the wrong direction?

*Workshop presented by Linda Coombes, Resource Teacher.*

*Tip sheet prepared by Rob Di Prospero, Teacher, and Margaret Lane, Vice-Principal.*

