



# BECOMING A WRITER

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[John15Academy.com](http://John15Academy.com)



## Becoming A Writer

Writing is a way of offering one's self to the world. Writing is not an assignment. More than simply a subject at school, writing is more like baseball—or dancing. Young baseball players learn early the importance of being a “five tool player.” College and professional scouts look for players who can throw, field, run, hit for power, and hit for average. Young dancers learn positions and steps; they stretch, build strength, and develop balance. And like baseball and dance, skill is only a part of the narrative. Passion tells the whole story. Hall of fame players and great dancers bring their whole hearts to the field and to the stage.

[Writers offer their hearts on a page.](#) Skill is a vital part of the writer's journey: spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, paragraph planning, rough drafts, editing, and revising are all steps in a young writer's compulsory training. And an authentic craft is finely tuned in relationships, conversations, research, and prayer.

Writing truly is a composition. When a writer offers their gift to the world, it is fashioned much like the sail on a ship, woven with many threads that move over and under each other—and that ultimately hold hands so that the whole is stronger than the parts—strong enough to hold the wind. Writing is a craft of weaving—old and new, fear and love, fact and fiction, imagination and reality. With words we sit at our looms and share our stories.

Writing, especially at school, should do nothing if it doesn't help children find their voice. [Finding our voice happens in relationships.](#) Great books are teachers; authors are friends. When students learn to linger between the covers of a valuable book, they learn to write with value, too. When we read books by trustworthy authors, we can help children listen between the lines. We help their hearts to hear in a new way.

Hearing another's heart equips them to speak in a new way—and to write because they have something to say, and they know how to invite others to listen, too. Composing is the journey of a lifetime. The new road in education gives children this picture of writing.

## Becoming a Writer is a Journey

Imagine—if you will—planning for a family reunion that also includes a vacation. Your child is going to get to fly on an airplane for the first time! He’s going to meet lots of cousins and aunts and uncles. He’s going to get to take his first hike in the mountains—with family members he doesn’t often spend much time with. There’s a lot of excitement building about one of the activities planned for the week: zip lining over a canyon. What more could a kid ask for?!

Perhaps you’re already recognizing some potential trouble spots lurking on this whirlwind vacation. Your child is growing in his boldness, but you know that when he gets tired or overwhelmed, his emotions can overwhelm him. He loves to be outside, but he doesn’t yet enjoy long walks. You’re wondering about the hiking. One time, at a birthday party, his friends were loving the rock-climbing wall. He wasn’t. He’s not a fan of heights. Hmmmm... maybe all the excitement about the zip line isn’t really excitement for him.

And you want your son to try new things. You are confident in his strength and athleticism—and you so want him to be confident, too. Honestly, you’ve struggled in the past, trying to prove yourself in front of your family. You have this nagging expectation for your son to prove himself, too. Dang.

This three-paragraph fictitious family vacation is an analogy for the “becoming a writer” journey for all of us—including our children. There is SO MUCH to get excited about—and enjoy. And there are SO MANY potential tangles. Lies are waiting around every corner.

The process of writing the words for this e-book has required me to create the message in my mind—in sentence form, type the words on a keyboard—spelling them all correctly, choose appropriate punctuation that will help the reader more clearly gain access to the intended meaning of my words and phrases, and organize these thoughts into paragraphs—making sure that I’m not leaving out anything of particular importance.

Wow! All of that can be for our children like me going on a hike and a zip-line adventure while attending a family reunion. No, thank you! It’s too much.

Too often, this is how children experience learning to write at school. Lessons require them to combine too many skills before they’re ready. Even when good skills are forming, it’s difficult for young brains to combine individual skills into a dance that is an

original composition. It is not helpful to give them an “immature” writing assignment, simply because a more mature assignment requires us all to wait until they’re ready.

### **How do we get our children ready to write?**

We teach them the foundational knowledge and skills that are part of the writing process, and we allow them to build these skills into automatic habits—before we require them to combine the skills in a mature writing assignment.

When our children are young, we start with penmanship. We help our children learn to form letters correctly—from the top... down. We give them opportunities to practice making the letters correctly while at the same time fitting the letters accurately on lined paper.

We also start with phonics and beginning spelling patterns. We teach them the sounds of the letters, and the sounds of letters in combination. We teach them how to rely on consonant-vowel-consonant patterns for short vowel sounds, and to look for the silent e to indicate a long vowel sound. Our children learn about suffixes and prefixes and digraphs and blends.

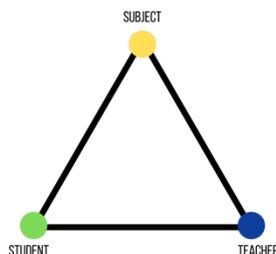
When our children are demonstrating good proficiency with penmanship, and a growing proficiency with basic spelling, we begin to combine these skills in transcription.

Transcription is simply copying. One of the great values of transcription is that the words on the page have already been chosen by a great writer, and they are already written in perfect order. The spelling and punctuation are correct, as is the spacing between words. The work of the child is to sit at the feet of a master and be a scribe. All this time, the child is enjoying beautiful books read aloud and becoming proficient in oral narration. The child is learning the design of a good story—a beautiful introduction, a powerful climax, a resolution, and a conclusion. The child is exposed to language that is new to him—every day. Language is the most important bank account for young children. Words give us the power to express ourselves and to connect with each other. It is our responsibility to give our children access to thousands of words and to help them learn how to “spend these words” in delightful and powerful ways.

By the time the child is in about the third grade, formal grammar instruction is added to the subjects in the weekly schedule. Because of his time in good books and in oral narration, and because of his time in thoughtful transcription, grammar becomes like a strength building class for an avid hiker. There is a reason for the work—and the work is a part of a grand adventure.

For too many children, the journey of becoming a writer is the equivalent of a zip-line at a bad family reunion, and then they declare, “I hate writing!” Sometimes they believe, “I’m a terrible writer.”

Our work is to give them a fair chance. Our work may also be to help them recover from bad experiences in the journey of writing.



We have the privilege of sitting at the bottom of the triangle, side by side with our child, while we help them navigate a relationship with all the skills and adventures that is the subject of writing. *It is a sacred calling.*

## A Practical Plan

**EVERY DAY—supply good books.** Our children need beautiful language—and lots of it. If our children can be rich based on what we offer them—let them be rich in words. Have conversations about good books—and about life.

Sit at the bottom of the triangle with your child and **RECEIVE** all that the book at the top of the triangle is **SUPPLYING**. Linger. Enjoy. Reading is not a demanding sport; reading is a garden. The books we enjoy will plant seeds that will bear fruit one day in our own writing.

Use a chalkboard, dry erase board, or large post-it chart paper to record some of the words in your conversations. Model what it looks like to make a record of your considerations and questions. It doesn’t matter that your children are not yet able to read what you are writing. What matters is that they see you writing—so they can learn how. What matters is that they live life with you and they trust what you trust about the future. *“You will become a writer one day. I am going to go with you on this journey and lead you in all the moments that you trust me.”*

**EVERY DAY—supply opportunities for your child to learn** to put marks on a page (or a sidewalk or a blank dry erase board) with a habit of carefulness and intentionality. There is a right way and a wrong way to make each letter. Submission is a beautiful response—because loving authority teaches us the right way. Your child will need to learn all the capital and lower-case letters and develop the skill of fluency alongside the habit of carefulness.

**EVERY DAY—supply many chances for your child’s eyes to see words spelled correctly.** Hold them in your lap when they are young, and you are reading aloud. Let them sit next to you as they get older. Sit side-by-side reading the same book when they are old enough to read History and Science.

I loved my years as a first-grade teacher; young minds come to school hungry and hopeful. If you had been a student in my first-grade class, you would have learned this mantra: *“The more you read, the better you spell.”* Or, this one, perhaps: *“The more you write, the better you spell.”*

Getting a good grade on a weekly spelling test doesn’t always transfer to the ability to spell words correctly when students sit down to write anything more than the words on the test. The goal of spelling instruction is not a good grade on a report card; the goal is a mature mastery of written words.

Spelling instruction happens naturally as a young child begins to read. Experiencing words in print begins to make an accurate imprint on a child’s brain; they are learning to spell.

**EVERY DAY—supply opportunities for your child to learn the basics of phonics.** Teach them the simple rules: cvc (consonant-vowel-consonant pattern for short vowel sounds,) cvc-silent e (for long vowel sounds,) blends and digraphs (two letters that together make one new sound), etc.

[This link is to purchase letter boards and letter arcs for instruction and practice](#) in all things phonics. If you have young children, it would be very advantageous for you to schedule a personal consulting appointment. I can teach you how to use these boards. These materials alone could be your phonics curriculum for more than two years.

[This link is to a great beginning reader series.](#) These books pair well with the phonics materials.

**ONCE A WEEK—supply an opportunity for transcription.** Transcription is a part of a mature life. It is not a subject at school. On one trip to Washington, D. C., my souvenir was a transcription journal I brought for the purpose of sitting in the Library of Congress and copying the inspirational quotes inscribed in marble above the doors and windows. Some of Lincoln and Washington’s words are in my journal, too, copied while sitting at Mount Vernon and the Lincoln Memorial.

For younger students, you can model this simply by sharing your own journal. Or you can literally model transcription by letting your child watch you copy from a text. Show them how you look at each word—and each letter in the word—and that you are copying the word exactly as it is written.

Point out how you are copying capital letters and lowercase letters, exactly as they are written. Help them notice that you are putting spaces between the words but not between the letters in each word. Help them begin to see how to keep going when one sentence doesn't fit on one line. Show them how you are copying the punctuation correctly and talk about why the author used periods and question marks and quotation marks and commas.

Let your child “check” your transcription for accuracy. Teach them what to check for: capital letters used correctly, correct spelling, accurate spacing, correct punctuation, and no extra words added or words left out.

As your child begins to understand the purpose of transcription, invite them to begin: first with a dry erase board with no lines. This reduces the number of things they have to accommodate as they are learning a new skill. Help them copy one word at a time, one letter at a time. Help them pay attention to capital letters, spelling, spacing, and punctuation.

Teach them a few tips for near point copying. Use a post-it note to keep their place and move the note as more words are copied. Or, when appropriate, teach them to use a highlighter to highlight each phrase after it is copied, and then their eyes can easily find the next not-highlighted word.

When you transfer from a dry-erase board to lined paper, many children benefit from having lines to write on that help them with spacing. For example, if the child was to transcribe: “There is great hope,” you can help them by drawing these lines on their paper for them to write on, like this: \_ \_ \_ \_ \_    \_ \_    \_ \_ \_ \_ \_    \_ \_ \_ \_ \_.

The lines indicate the size of each word and the spaces in between. Each of these strategies supports the child and reduces the number of things their brains have to deal with all at the same time. Writing is multi-tasking! We can help.

Transcription is a guided adventure while children are developing the habit of careful execution. When the parent or teacher is transcribing while sitting side by side with the student, transcription is recognized as part of a mature person's life with words. Sharing this life is a satisfying investment for all.

## **For Young Children: More About Writing Letters and Numbers**

Writing is like speaking; both are ways we engage with the world in words and calculations. Young children learn to talk in response to our delight in wooing out their sounds and helping them practice making words. We don't grade them when they make mistakes; we don't punish them for mispronunciations. Writing letters and numbers happens naturally, too. We delight in wooing out their developing abilities to make straight lines and circles. Lines and circles become letters and numbers.

Practicing writing letters and numbers first requires few conditions and much support. Young children are not ready to write on lines; blank spaces are best. The directionality of their penmanship is more important than perfect execution of size and proportion. Teach them to work from the top and move down, rather than from the bottom and move up. Remind them as often as they need.

As they gain control of their markings, draw dotted lines for them to trace, first in big spaces instead of small. As their small motor skills develop, progress to lined paper. It is more beneficial for young children to write five carefully executed letters than to practice writing five lines of letters without much care.

Consider this example if your child reverses letters and numbers. Look at a coffee mug with the handle on the left side, and then on the right. Either way, it's still a coffee mug. Look at your car from the front, and from the back. Either way, it's still your car. Look at your child from the front, the side, or the back. Any way she's facing, she's still your child.

Letters and numbers are the only things in the world that are "wrong" when they are facing a different direction other than the "right" way. It sometimes takes a young child's brain a long time to remember that direction matters with letters and numbers, because it doesn't matter with anything else.

They will smell our concern if we worry that there's something uniquely wrong with them. The fear we bring to the atmosphere can add an extra weight to the learning experience, making it more difficult, or even impossible, if the child responds in fear, too.

Cortisol (the fear hormone) shuts down the part of the brain that makes new connections. When our children sense our confidence rather than our fear, and when they trust our help, most struggles build new pathways in the brain, instead of becoming long lasting tangles.

[This link is to a great handwriting series.](#) Start letter formation with sidewalk chalk or on dry erase boards with no lines, and then move, as developmentally appropriate, to lined paper. This is key. Children should never start learning to form letters in a workbook. And a workbook is a good place to land after a child has had good practice. I suggest D'Nealian print because it transitions well to cursive.

## **Oral, Dictated, and Written Narration**

Narration is retelling; a mature narration includes many details from the reading, offered in the correct sequence. A mature narration also includes significant use of the author's language.

Oral language sets the limit for writing vocabulary. We give our children a great gift when we offer them an inheritance of many words. This is the heritage of sharing great books and meaningful conversations.

**Oral narration is done—orally!** Oral narration provides children an opportunity to tell a good story, because they are “sitting at the feet of a master” and retelling a great book. The rhythm of beginning, middle, and end—climax and resolution—become a pattern for organizing thoughts. Characters have depth, setting has details. For a young child, oral narration is mature storytelling, with training wheels!

**Dictated narration** happens when a child gives an oral narration, and an adult keys in the narration word-for-word as the child is retelling. A parent or teacher can use dictated narrations to keep a record, while the child is still forming the skills to write the narration themselves. Narrations dictated at the end of the school year show signs of maturity compared to the ones recorded at the beginning of the year: more details, and more author's language.

As children begin to master forming letters correctly, and writing on lined paper, transcribing dictated narrations is a good step that leads to independent written narrations. Copying from the dictation gives students the spelling and grammar support that is important while they are learning to move their thoughts from their hand, to their pencil, and finally, to the page.

**Written narration** combines all the skills of mature oral narration (details, sequence, and author's language) with the skills of correct letter formation, use of upper- and lower-case letters, and punctuation. A parent or teacher can assist with spelling by writing words on the board or a note card. Inviting students to look back at the vocabulary they've written as a part of “considerations and questions” is another way of supporting correct spelling habits.

Older elementary students, as well as students in Intermediate and High School, will grow in their ability to write substantial narrations in Literature, History, Science, Bible, and Spiritual Maturity.

Experiencing a text in oral and written narration offers students a substantial opportunity to linger in a well-chosen book; the details and vocabulary become a part of their personal treasury. These are valuable gifts to maturing writers.

Something I learned at Ambleside: we did not begin inviting our students to write narrations until January of third grade.

My experience taught me that children are not ready to begin written narrations until they can

- **offer consistent and mature oral narrations.** This is because oral language sets the ceiling on what we can read and comprehend and what we can offer as a writer ourselves. This is one primary motive for a banquet of conversations each day and the vocabulary offered in mature books.
- **spell most simple sight words accurately.** Yes, we can help our children use correct spelling when they are writing a narration. But their brains will be on overload if every element of a written narration is something they're still struggling with or that is very difficult. These elements include oral reading comprehension, the habit of remembering, penmanship, spelling, and a beginning understanding of basic grammar and punctuation. All of these things are experienced in the years of education prior to the time of writing narrations. Most of these things are experienced in sharing great books together.
- **write letters and words with ease, accuracy, and good spacing**—using upper- and lower-case letters correctly. This is learned in handwriting and transcription.

So, written narration doesn't begin with just one sentence. A mature written narration can trace its roots back to an oral narration that was one sentence... that grew to two sentences... that grew to include more details... that grew to give details in sequence... and to include rich vocabulary because it includes the author's language.

Let's consider 3 FAQs:

### **How often do you ask children to write a narration?**

At first, once a week—with your help. One week the narration can be written in Literature, and then History, or Science, or Bible. By the time a student is in high school, a written narration would be a weekly part of Literature, Science, and History—and sometimes Spiritual Maturity (or Bible.)

### **Can I help my child with spelling and grammar and punctuation?**

Yes! If you don't help them, how will they learn? You can generate key words together and write them on the board before they begin writing. You can offer a sticky note with "commonly misspelled words" to your child to use as a reference and a support for accuracy. After they have finished their narration, you can read it together (probably on another day) for the purpose of adding punctuation and revising grammar.

### **What if my child won't (or can't) write a narration?**

Do it together. Record an oral narration on your phone and then sit side-by-side and write out what you replay. Help them learn to make the leap between speaking words and ideas and writing words and ideas. Also, continue to engage in dictated narrations that then are transcribed by the child to build the skill and the confidence to make the leap to written narration.

## **Grammar**

Young children first experience grammar instruction in conversation; children learn by listening. Dinner table conversations are natural grammar lessons. Relationships offer the support young minds need about the correct use of pronouns, subject-verb agreement, singular and plural nouns.

Bedtime stories are natural grammar lessons, too. Instruction happens naturally because children are experiencing great books. Patterns of language are absorbed by young minds like nutrients from real food.

Focused grammar instruction begins in the Elementary School for Older Children at John 15 Academy, at about the age of eight. Like other subjects, grammar instruction is offered as a part of the transformative journey of becoming a mature writer. The child receives instruction because they need to know, which is very different than getting instruction because they need to prove or to earn.

Grammar instruction can be tedious and terrible if offered in the old economy for living—the economy of "I get because I do." I remember, as a young girl, the night I slept at the dinner table because my parents said, "You can't get up until you finish your brussel sprouts." I ate them cold for breakfast the next morning.

Too many times this transactional approach is how we offer technical and tedious tasks to children. We hand them a workbook—like warmed up, previously-frozen brussel sprouts—and then grade them on their still immature skills.

The new road admits that grammar, like most tedious tasks, is best experienced in relationship. The new economy for living is transformational: "I get because I need."

Children need help with grammar. A quality workbook can be a fine tool, and students need help, and supported practice, so they can benefit from a fine tool. As older children gain fluency and expertise in grammar, helping a younger student meets a real need for significance in a way that the reward of a good grade never does.

[This link is to a great resource for grammar books.](#) Level C is appropriate to begin in 3rd grade—and continue for about 5 years, using one level each year.

## Thank You Notes

Writing thank you notes is a natural expression of a grateful heart. For young children, parents help them compose an appropriately mature text, and the text is simply transcribed onto a carefully chosen piece of stationery. Children can also combine the handwork of calligraphy—or block lettering—to design their own stationery. Addressing the envelope is an opportunity to learn as well.

A fun first step is helping your child choose a box of appropriate thank you notes from the stationary department of your favorite “paper source” store. Remind them that these notes are not for “play,” so they won’t be used without intention. Choose one day each week to routinely be “thank you note writing” day. It’s a wonderful lifetime habit.

For young children, you can help them by composing the message and writing it on a piece of blank paper. Something like this is a simple sample:

*Dear ,  
Thank you for the \_\_\_\_ you gave me for my birthday. I am already enjoying playing with it.  
Love,*

After you write the sample message, you can support your child in several ways:

- draw (faint) dotted line letters for your child to trace
- draw (faint) lines for your child to write the words in to help with letter and word spacing
- copy the letter you’ve written together

Thank you notes can be written for time spent with grandparents or sharing a movie-night at a friend’s house. The habit of gratefulness can begin to expand beyond gifts that come wrapped in a box.

Older children may find safety knowing that composing the message of the thank you note is something you can brainstorm together. Older children can write longer, more detailed messages. There will come a day when they will feel comfortable—and even

eager—writing their own messages. Just like walking, they will not always want you to hold their hand.

Writing thank you notes can naturally transition to writing letters. Both establish an atmosphere of truth about writing: Writing is a way of communicating. It is a way we share ourselves with the world—and with each other. Writing is a way of “having a conversation” with friends and family that don’t live close by. Sending and receiving real letters in the mail is a delight for everyone!

The message of a letter will be a “together” experience for a while—just like the message of a thank you note. Write the message together at first. Transition into letting your child “dictate” the message to you. They create the message in their mind and with their words—and you do the work of making the message visible with correct spelling and grammar and punctuation for the child to transcribe.

You can “coach” your child on sentence transitions and help them learn to make more mature word choices—one suggestion at a time. Experiences such as these—where you are working together—build the safety of the triangle of trust... instead of striving to complete an assignment.

Every time your child works with you to write a thank you note or a letter, they are practicing beautiful penmanship and accurate spelling. They are learning about grammar and punctuation.

Creating a message that touches an “audience” is the seed of idea — planted for future reference when the message will be a paragraph or an essay. And by this time, the foundational skills are well secured — as is the habit of asking for help and trusting the encouragement you are offering. There is great hope!

## **Paragraphs and Essays**

Building a paragraph is much like building a birdhouse—or following a recipe. There is a pattern to follow and a sequence; patterns and sequences are learned in relationship. Together, a parent or teacher demonstrates choosing a topic sentence and brainstorming and selecting supporting ideas. A concluding sentence clearly—and finally—secures the main idea. When paragraphs are written together, the student then transcribes the joint project and is reminded again how the parts make a whole.

A similar shared experience leads students through the process of writing a three-paragraph essay, and a five-paragraph essay, too. Students learn to write articles, blog posts, speeches, letters, and research papers in the same way. And they bring a background of individual strengths—in penmanship, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary,

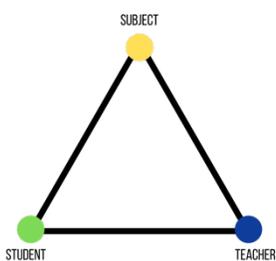
and grammar—to each task. More than that, they bring their voice. Students on a new road write confidently, and they are comfortable asking for help when they need it.

Two questions are always helpful as we begin something new with children of any age:

### **What have they done in the past that has helped prepare them for this new work?**

In the writing journey that has been mapped out for children benefiting from a John 15 Academy education, children have learned beautiful and fluent penmanship; they have a strong foundation in phonics and basic spelling; they have an abundant oral language vocabulary and a strong "story sense" developed in oral narration; and, they have good practice writing ideas with pencils in their own hands because of the regular routine of weekly transcription and written narration.

### **What do I, as the teacher, need to do to support my child's learning of the new thing?**



This is why our place is not at the top of the triangle—requiring them to navigate a transactional relationship with the subject (this triangle would have "paragraph writing" as the subject.) Instead, our place is beside them sitting under the principles of paragraph writing together—and helping our child navigate this new learning side-by-side.

So, for a while, paragraph writing will be done together. My suggestion is to use a dry-erase board (or a chalkboard) that is large enough to brainstorm the elements of the paragraph and model the writing process—with the partnership of the child.

- First, choose a topic. If you've been having conversations about a character in a book, you may write a descriptive paragraph.
- Brainstorm together words and phrases that describe the character. For example, ask "What do we know to be true about \_\_\_\_?" Write ALL of the true ideas on the board.
- Model writing an introductory sentence that will serve as the topic sentence.
- Use the brainstorming you've done to write the sentences in the middle that provide details.
- Model writing a concluding sentence.
- Re-read the paragraph aloud and revise awkward wording, replace repetitive words, add transition words between sentences to make reading accessible to a reader. Re-read the paragraph again to check for punctuation and the use of capital and lowercase letters appropriately.
- Now the child can transcribe the paragraph for himself.

A few additional thoughts:

- Paragraph writing can begin in about 3rd grade—or earlier with this kind of assistance, but only because the child has had plenty of prior experience with all of the things listed above.
- Yes, it's ok that you don't feel comfortable writing paragraphs either, and it's even ok that you're not a skilled writer of paragraphs. There are plenty of polished examples in books. This may be a powerful opportunity to admit your own fears—and model doing the hard work anyway. If you use this opportunity to trust the power of the Holy Spirit in you—and choose not to let your emotions (or fears) stop you from doing hard and uncomfortable work—that lesson alone will be far more valuable for your child than simply learning to write a paragraph .
- You will continue writing paragraphs together for as long as your child needs the assistance. As they are becoming more capable, you may start one day by each person doing the brainstorming part on their own and then sharing the brainstorming together as you write. Or you may have each person, one day, write a topic sentence on their own and choose one of the sentences to use in the paragraph that you're writing together. Think about building a scaffold of support around a new construct and then taking down that supporting scaffolding piece by piece—not all at one time.