

Ten Steps to Teaching Perfect Writing

By Cheryl Frost

With the rapid expansion of the Internet, it is clear that the quality of English writing—both American and British—has taken a dive for the worst. “Netspeak” is obtrusively taking over most electronic communications, making good writing practices increasingly scarce. With such a strong influence the Internet has over the world today, it is no wonder so few children can write. Even the most intelligent and successful business leaders seem small and insignificant when they distribute e-mails full of spelling errors and non-capitalized sentences. Therefore, it is more vital than ever to teach our children to write well before they are released into a relentless and competitive world.

The best way to learn to write is to practice. People learn best by making mistakes and correcting them for themselves. The following method of teaching writing enforces that very concept. It will work for established writers who need to polish their skills, and it will work for the struggling student who was absent the day they taught grammar. Whether you are a teacher, a homeschooling mom, or a tutor, you can teach anyone to be a better writer with a little patience and a lot of persistence.

With this writing technique, you as the teacher will act as an editor. You will give out the assignment, give the writers the freedom to write in their own style, edit their work, and return the work to the writers for revisions. You will edit the revisions, return the work, and await another revision. This will go on, back and forth, until the writing is flawless. Be consistent and unyielding in your editing process, and soon you will have a perfect writer (or a class full of perfect writers) on your hands.

Step One: Assign the Writing Task.

Have the student (or students) write something at least a page long—a story, a biography, a TV review, or a book report. For more advanced writers, assign a research paper or longer story. For students who hate to write, don't pressure them into writing something massive, just whatever comes to mind. If it's only two paragraphs, that's still a good start. Depending on the student's skill, this may be the only assignment he or she gets for the entire school year. But it will last the entire school year. Explain to the students that they will revise their writing assignments over and over until they are perfect, even if it takes all year. They need to understand this ongoing process or they might feel like each edit is a rejection.

Step Two: Assign a Deadline for the First Draft.

For the first draft, one week should be enough. You may have students (or if you are a mom, your one child) who will hand in nothing or just a sentence. Do not be discouraged by this. Chances are, the

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child is self-conscious about his or her writing and is reluctant to show you. It is vital that you address these students individually. Question each one until you find something he or she is interested in. That will be the topic you will assign. If they are still reluctant, have them start with one paragraph. Accept that paragraph as the first draft with the intention of building it up.

Step Three: Mark It Up

Edit each paper meticulously, using red pen or, if the paper was submitted electronically, the word processor's markup feature. For every markup, however, you must include an explanation. If the error lies with subject/verb agreement, for example, explain what that means or refer the student to a page in his or her grammar book. Mark every missing punctuation and cross out unnecessary capital letters.

Step Four: Be the Editor

In addition to simply proofreading a paper, offer suggestions to the writer. Tell the writer to write more details about a specific subject. Request more adjectives or less repetition of the same words. Ask questions in your editing to prompt the student to clarify. Return the paper to the student to revise.

Step Five: Set Another Deadline

If necessary, allow the students to work on their revisions in class so they can ask questions if they need to. If you make them revise their work at home, you may never get it back. In class, as long as they know exactly what to change, the task should be easy for them.

Step Six: Editing with Praise

In this next edit, be sure to note how well the writing is coming along. Comments like "Did that really happen?" or "That's funny!" will go a long way to boost your student's confidence. Make more suggestions to improve the readability of the piece.

Step Seven: Don't Give Up

After three revisions, you might be tempted to say, "This is good enough." But remember that you are not looking for "good enough." You are looking for perfect. The students may groan and complain, but you are doing the best thing in the world for them. Don't give up now. Mark it up, send it back, set another deadline.

Step Eight: Get Picky

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The student has done everything you've asked. It is time to nitpick, to find the most common and almost unnoticeable errors. Find errors that adults or even businesses commonly make. Make sure the paper has a good introduction and a satisfying conclusion. Make sure the title is catchy and the student's name and headings are exactly as instructed. What about content? Is the story interesting enough?

Step Nine: Have the Student Read Aloud

When you think all the revisions are complete, have each student read his or her paper out loud, either in front of you or in front of the class. Make notes where the student stammers or hesitates. This might indicate a section where the sentence flow is poor. Your critique of their readings will mark the final edit of the piece.

Step Ten: Finalize and Congratulate

After the students read their papers aloud, have them make last minute revisions based on your critique and hand in the final copy. By this time, every paper, whether it is one page or twenty, should be nearly professional in quality. Congratulate each student, and congratulate yourself. This hands on method of teaching students to write will stay with them throughout each of their lives. Each time they read a business letter or log onto the Internet, they will subconsciously mimic you in picking out mistakes.

Writing is a skill that takes practice. But that practice sometimes needs a little guidance. If you guide your students through one single writing assignment and stay with them from beginning to end, you will be giving them the gift of a lifetime. Not only will you improve the writing skills of a group of young students, but you will be contributing to the literary betterment of the world.