

Six Secrets of Writing Success



Creating a top-notch story or report is easier if your youngster knows how to tackle each part of the writing process. Share these six secrets to help him become a better writer.

1 Pick an interesting topic

If your child likes his subject, his enthusiasm will shine through. Here are suggestions he can use to come up with topics that he'll look forward to writing about.

Inspiration poster

Have your youngster make a poster with pictures of things that interest him, such as skateboarding or cats. He can cut photos from old magazines or catalogs or print them from the Internet. Let him hang the poster near his desk.



When he needs a topic to write about, he'll have plenty of ideas to choose from. For example, he might write a story about inventing a new kind of skateboard. Or if he's assigned a report on an animal, he might write about different cat breeds.

Question journal

How does a touch screen work? Why do some people become vegetarians? The things that your child wonders about can make good writing topics. Encourage him to keep a list of his questions in a small notebook. When he has a writing assignment, one of the questions might provide an idea. He could write a report about smartphones or an essay on the pros and cons of eating meat, for instance.

2 Start with a plan

Strong writing flows smoothly from one idea to the next. Your youngster can do her best writing by organizing information before she gets started. Encourage her to try these tools.

Color-coded facts

Let your child use highlighters to group related ideas. First, have her brainstorm facts about her topic and write them on paper, in any order, as she thinks of them. Then, she can highlight each type of fact in a different color. For instance, if she's

doing a report on butterflies, she might use pink to mark information about diet and green to highlight facts about metamorphosis. As she writes her paper, the colors will make it easy for her to spot which ideas belong together in a paragraph or section.

Story organizer

Your youngster can use transition words, or words that connect ideas, to put story events in a logical order. Before she writes a story, have her list "first," "next," "then," and "finally" down the left side of a sheet of paper. She can ask herself "What happened first?" and "What happened next?" Then, she can write the answer beside each word. ("First, I left my hamster's cage open. Then, I noticed he was missing.")



3 Add variety

Just as it takes blocks of various shapes and sizes to build interesting towers, it takes different lengths and types of sentences to make good paragraphs. Your child can vary his sentences with these tips.

Different beginnings

When your youngster is writing a paper, suggest that he start sentences with different letters of the alphabet. This will help him avoid beginning every sentence with a common word like *the* or *I*. For instance, if he has already used *T* ("There are seven continents"), he wouldn't write, "There are five oceans." Instead, he might write, "Earth also has five oceans."

Statements, questions, and more

Remind your child that there are four kinds of sentences: statements ("I need a break."); commands ("Take a break."); questions ("Can I have a break?"); and exclamations ("Give

continued



me a break!”). A combination of sentence types will add variety to his work. Can he think of ways to include all four in a story?

4 Choose words carefully

When your youngster uses a specific word (balmy) instead of a general one (warm), she creates a clear picture for her reader. Suggest these ideas for making careful word choices.

Precise nouns

Building and *bug* are vague nouns—neither gives a reader much information. Is the building a cabin or a skyscraper? Is the bug an ant or a praying mantis? Have your child reread her draft and try to replace general nouns with more precise ones.

Lively verbs

Interesting verbs help a reader imagine the action. When your youngster finishes writing a story, encourage her to find and circle all the forms of the verb *to be* (*is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been*). Then, she can rewrite the sentences using livelier words. For example, she might turn “Jill *was* tall” into “Jill *towered over* the other kids.”

5 Find your voice

Your child’s writing should sound natural—and it should sound like him. Encourage him to develop a writing voice, or style, that lets his personality and creativity show.

Personalized phrases

A cliché is an overused phrase like “once in a blue



moon” or “bright and early.” Together, come up with a list of clichés. Then, have your youngster think of a substitute for each. He might replace “like finding a needle in a haystack” with “like finding a paper clip in a junk drawer.” He can use his replacements instead of clichés when he writes.

Dialogue

Using realistic dialogue is one way for your child to develop his writer’s voice. When he writes dialogue in a story, encourage him to read it aloud. He should ask himself if it sounds like something a person would really say.

6 Proofread

Misspelled words, missing punctuation . . . mistakes happen. Careful proofreading gives a writer a chance to find and fix them before turning in her work. These habits can help your youngster make sure her writing is error-free.

Read and reread

Your child will catch more mistakes if she reads her draft several times, focusing on a different type of error each time. The first time through, she might look for missing words. Then, she can check for incomplete sentences on the second pass and incorrect verb tenses on the third.

Start at the end

Reading a paper or story backward is a good way to spot spelling and punctuation errors. Have your youngster start at the last word and read until she gets to the first one. This will help her concentrate on one word at a time instead of getting distracted by what the story or report is about.

Use a checklist

Your child can make sure that she doesn’t forget anything with this handy list:

- Are the words spelled correctly? Use a dictionary to check. (When using a computer spell-checker, be sure to use the right word, because it might not catch substitutions such as *there* for *their*.)
- Do the subjects and verbs agree? Read the subject and verb of each sentence aloud. A singular subject needs a singular verb (Jane *scrubs*) while a plural subject needs a plural verb (Jane and Michael *scrub*).
- Is the punctuation correct? Scan to the end of each sentence to make sure there’s a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point. Also, check for correct use of commas, and make sure proper nouns are capitalized.

