



Special Report

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Teaching Your Children to Write

For many homeschooling parents, just the thought of teaching their children to write strikes fear in their hearts. Even parents who are talented writers can be intimidated by the thought of this.

That's why homeschooling parents spend lots of money on a variety of writing programs and curricula, all advertised to make the job easier. But it's hard to find something that works for each child, and besides, some of these resources are so complicated that you can end up more overwhelmed than you were when you started.

The truth is that it's really not that hard to teach your children to write. Children have an inborn desire to communicate, and writing is merely written communication. If we are careful not to overwhelm them with sadistic chores like diagramming sentences, many children will find that writing becomes a source of joy in their lives.

Of course, it may still be a necessary evil to others, but the key word here is "necessary." In this world, everyone must be able to write simply and effectively. There are ways to teach children this skill without making it harder than it has to be.

The Writing Formula

There's a simple formula involved in teaching writing:

Inspiration + Mechanics = Success

Successful writing starts with inspiration. The writer must have a desire to write about a certain topic. After that desire has expressed itself on the page (or the monitor screen), mechanics come into play. That's called editing. Tightening and correcting one's work isn't nearly as fun as writing. But it's necessary.

As the parent, your job is not to teach writing as much as to facilitate it. You need to get that little flame of inspiration going in your child, and once it's burning, you can add the mechanics very slowly so you don't extinguish that flame.

Starting Early

At some point, your young child will begin to make up stories. You can capitalize on this by encouraging the child to dictate a story to you. After you've written it down, your child can illustrate it.



Children love to make books. Use a simple folder to arrange the illustrated pages; your child can decorate the cover. Write the title and child's name on the cover if he or she cannot write yet.

This kind of activity can be addicting. Once children can write some words on their own, it won't be long before they start making their own books. You will be asked to spell certain words, but at this stage, that should be the extent of your involvement.



Making progress

As your child becomes more proficient at writing and spelling, you will need to add, very slowly, a bit of mechanics. Point out misspelled words and incomplete sentences, and discuss together how these errors can be fixed. Caution: don't give in to the temptation to buy a heavy-duty grammar curriculum once you've seen mistakes in your child's work. Just worry about the basics for now.

Encourage your child to proofread his or her work once it's finished by reading it out loud. If you note confusion about sentence structure, such as sentences without verbs, you'll want to increase the amount of reading aloud you do with your child. Listening to good literature allows a certain rhythm to penetrate the brain. The child who hears good writing will internalize it, and that will eventually show up in his or her own work.

All children benefit from keeping a daily journal. Just a paragraph a day will not only be good practice, but will be treasured some-



day. Lined composition books are inexpensive and useful for this purpose. Try starting your children on this habit when you leave for a vaca-

tion or some other trip. Keeping a travel journal eliminates the common complaint of older children: "I don't know what to write about!"

Some parents have found book reports to be helpful. They don't have to be very long, and they can be illustrated. Book reports are especially worthwhile when the book is one your child really enjoyed, because writing about it brings it all back again.

Practical writing projects include thank-you notes and letters to relatives. These don't have to be grammatically perfect. Sometimes

minor mistakes are what make them keepsakes, as far as the recipients are concerned.

What About Grammar?

Once their children reach their pre-teens, some parents become nervous because their child has not yet been exposed to a formal grammar course. Those parents need to consider how useful the grammar they were taught in school has been to them in their adult lives.

I'm not advocating the abandonment of all grammar instruction, of course. But there are ways to teach forms of speech and basic grammar that are painless, effective and even fun. A few examples:

- ◆ "Mad Libs," those fill-in-the-blank tablets where you ask your kids for a verb, a noun, etc. to complete a story that ends up sounding very silly. Always good for a laugh, these are especially fun when the entire family, including adults, participates.
- ◆ Winston Grammar is a program that teaches basic grammar using cards as well as a workbook, so kinesthetic learners aren't left out. You can stop anywhere in the program, and pick it up a few years later after a brief review.
- ◆ Daily Grams are quick daily lessons that reinforce grammar basics.
- ◆ Editor in Chief books (from Critical Thinking Books and Software) contain news stories with deliberately planted mistakes in them. It's up to the child to find them.

Note the repetition of the word "basic" in the above resource descriptions. Unless your child plans to become a grammar teacher someday, going beyond the basics of grammar really isn't necessary.



Something that *is* necessary to good writing, however, is the outline. Learning to outline will serve your child well in adulthood, whether the writing job is a business letter or a book. Start by teaching a very simple outline, and eventually work up to more detailed outlines. Outlining is a great help for writers trying to organize their thoughts. With a good outline, a piece of writing practically writes itself.

Encouraging Preteens and Teens to Write

If you always assign your older children to write about topics that don't interest them, you risk squelching their creativity. Try including fun assignments such as writing:

- ◆ a script for their favorite television show
- ◆ additional scenes for a movie they've watched recently
- ◆ a new ending for a famous children's book
- ◆ a play or comedy show of their own
- ◆ a persuasive essay with a topic such as "Three Reasons Why I Should Have My Own Room" or "Why Florida is the Best Choice for Our Family Vacation"

On the Internet, there are sites that feature the work of homeschooled children and teens. Seeing their work online gives kids a real boost. There are also many magazines that encourage article submissions from young people. Ask one of the librarians at your public library to recommend a few.

Teaching Writing to Teens

The stakes are higher when your children reach their teens. You begin to realize how little time there is left to homeschool them, and you

want to make sure you've covered the most important subjects. Writing (and doing it well) is a very important subject.

Combine current events and writing by asking your teens for weekly, one-page "mini-research papers" on current events. These events could be local, national or global in nature. If you run out of ideas for assignments, scan a newspaper or an Internet news site.

If your teen forms a definite opinion about an issue after writing about it, suggest he or she write a letter about it to the editor of the local newspaper. Writing such a piece simply requires the writer to back up opinions with facts. Most newspapers publish such letters.

No matter what kind of writing assignments you give your teens, encourage them to use the Internet for researching topics before they write about them. This is a skill they will definitely need in adulthood. Besides, there is so much valuable information available online.

When they are doing research on the Internet, require your teens to print out their research instead of copying and pasting it to a file. Working from printed notes will help them resist the temptation to plagiarize, which is all too easy to do when you can copy and paste.

What About Term Papers?

The dreaded term paper has been a thorn in the side of many a teenager, and in the case of homeschoolers, many a parent. If your teen does not plan to attend college, it's really not necessary to put them through the torture.

College-bound teens, however, must know how to research, organize and write extensive research (or term) papers. The good news for parents is that they don't have to figure this out for themselves. There are many excellent resources available that lay out the process step-by-step. Such books are available at your public



library, and also from homeschool catalog companies. One book my family found very helpful was *How To Write A Great Research Paper; A Step-By-Step Guide* by Leland Graham and Darriel Ledbetter (Incentive Publications Inc., Nashville, TN, 1994, ISBN 0-86530-252-9).

Training Yourself to Teach Writing

You can prepare yourself to teach your children to write well, starting right now:

- ◆ Develop confidence in your own writing skills by writing in a journal as often as you can.
- ◆ Read good books for your own enjoyment; if you haven't been much of a reader up until now, push yourself beyond the magazines sold at the check-out counter.
- ◆ Read a newspaper or visit an Internet news site regularly to keep up with current events and to absorb different writers' styles.
- ◆ Buy several good dictionaries and a thesaurus, and keep them out where they can be used.
- ◆ Buy and study *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. This simple little book will be a valuable reference for you as you teach your children to write simply and effectively.

Teaching Tips

- ◆ Buy a red pen, and don't be afraid to use it on your older children's work.
- ◆ After editing your children's work, go over it with them, so you can show them what they need to fix.
- ◆ Watch out for "fluff," which you're more likely to find if you assign your children

to write a certain number of words.

- ◆ Promote tight writing by cutting unnecessary or repetitive words.
- ◆ Train your children to use descriptive verbs. There's a big difference between "he looked" and "he glared."
- ◆ Encourage polishing (making a good piece of writing better).
- ◆ Don't push writing for length at the expense of writing well; there's nothing impressive about a lengthy piece of writing if it has no substance.
- ◆ Make older children look up words in a dictionary or thesaurus instead of automatically answering their questions.

Most importantly, remember that children are encouraged by an appreciative audience, and that means you. Always take the time to read what your children write, whether it's the awkwardly worded story of a younger child or the first novel of a teen. The encouragement you provide will do more for their desire to write well than any curriculum on the market.

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Barbara Frank is a writer/editor, the mother of four homeschooled-from-birth children ages 14-23, and the author of "Life Prep for Homeschooled Teenagers" and "The Imperfect Homeschooler's Guide to Homeschooling." For more information about her books, and to visit her personal Web site, "The Imperfect Homeschooler," go to www.cardamompublishers.com.

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New from Cardamom Publishers in April 2008: *The Imperfect Homeschooler's Guide to Homeschooling* will soon be available in print!

As an eBook, it won rave reviews since it was published last year. Now, we've expanded the book, doubling it in size, and we're bringing it out in a perfect-bound edition. Packed full of information and advice, it's based on Barbara Frank's 20 years of homeschooling experience.

IS HOMESCHOOLING STRESSING YOU OUT?

Do you wonder whether your children are learning the right things?
Does it seem like the longer you homeschool, the harder it gets?
Do you sometimes ask yourself how *other* moms homeschool their children,
keep their houses running smoothly and still hang onto their sanity?

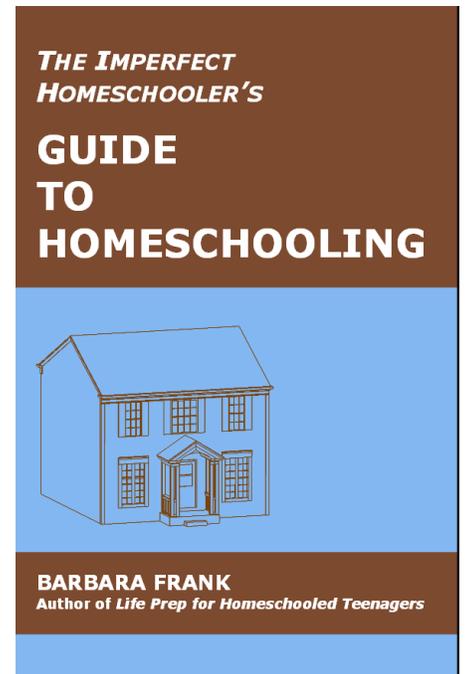
IF YOU ANSWERED "YES" TO ANY OF THOSE QUESTIONS, JOIN THE CLUB.

During nearly twenty years of homeschooling my children, there were times when I became so overwhelmed that I almost gave up. Getting through those tough times taught me strategies for making homeschooling easier. The habits I established and the mindset I developed turned me into a "homeschooler for the long run."

MAKE SURE YOU'RE IN IT FOR THE LONG RUN!

I am so glad I never gave up on homeschooling! I want to encourage *you* to hang in there, too. That's why I want to share my strategies with you.

Barbara Frank



\$13.95

192-pages

Learn how you can:

- Get past the "public school" way of thinking by customizing lessons for each child.
- Boost your self-confidence by learning how to measure what your children have learned.
- Reduce your stress level with "115 Organizing Tips for Homeschoolers."
- Free yourself of attitudes and habits that make homeschooling harder than it has to be.

New chapters in *The Imperfect Homeschooler's Guide to Homeschooling* include:

- "Top Ten Tools for Homeschooling Parents"
- "Reclaiming Your Child"
- "Homeschooling a Child with Special Needs"
- "Do You Know Where Your Math Manipulatives Are?"
- "The Freedom You'd Have If You Sent Your Kids to School"

**Available soon at
Amazon.com, CardamomPublishers.com and
homeschool catalog companies.**

the imperfect HOMESCHOOLER

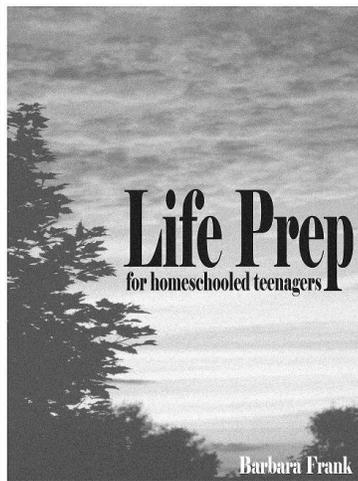
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“Both because of the content and the design, I think homeschoolers are likely to find this one of the most practical and important resources for high school.”

**Cathy Duffy, author of
100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum
www.cathyduffyreviews.com**

What is *Life Prep for Homeschooled Teenagers*?

It's a curriculum that teaches teenagers skills and values they'll need in the adult world they're about to enter.

It walks them through processes like....

- ◆ researching a place to live
- ◆ figuring out health insurance
- ◆ understanding credit
- ◆ learning about basic investing

.... with an attitude of prudence, and a goal of minimizing debt.

It also reviews concepts they'll need for....

- ◆ getting along with family, friends, coworkers and clients
- ◆ finding a spouse
- ◆ living their values, and making sure those values are reflected in their work

.... and helps them reflect on the principles you've taught them since they were small.

Literature and mathematics are important, but so is getting ready to take on the adult world. Barbara Frank designed this curriculum for her own teenagers so they would have some preparation for living on their own. They worked hard and learned a lot, and are now independent young adults. She hopes that *Life Prep for Homeschooled Teenagers* helps you

Free Sample Project From
Life Prep for Homeschooled Teenagers
Go to: **www.CardamomPublishers.com**
to download the PDF file.

Praise for
Life Prep for Homeschooled Teenagers

***Reviews from the First Edition of
Life Prep for Homeschooled Teenagers***

“Both because of the content and the design, I think homeschoolers are likely to find this one of the most practical and important resources for high school.”

**Cathy Duffy, author of
*100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum***

“I highly recommend this book for anyone with older children. While I am doing this with my daughter now at age 16, it would certainly be a beneficial study for 14- and 15- year-olds as well. Actually, I’m hoping I might learn something.”

Terri Miller, Staff Writer • *The Old Schoolhouse Magazine*

“*Life Prep for Homeschooled Teenagers* is an amazing resource designed for those preparing to leave home.”

The Virginia Home Educator

“I can tell you that by using this book as it is intended you will save your children much future grief.... Barbara Frank has put together a clear, helpful guide that covers more than I had thought of myself, in putting together a list of what our teen needs to know before she sprouts feathers and flies the nest.”

Eclectic Homeschool Online • www.eho.org

“High school students will likely find these projects meaningful and relevant, as they teach something students this age are eager to learn: what you need to know to live on your own.

P.S. - Many young (and not-so-young) adults may find this resource useful, too!”

**Cindy Prechtel’s Homeschooling From The Heart
www.homeschoolingfromtheheart.com**

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