

Because Writing Matters:

Helping Your Children Become Confident,
Skilled Writers, In and Beyond School.

from the California Writing Project



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“As a parent, you are the most important influence in your child’s success in school and in life.” This quote, taken from the National PTA’s website, sums up why the California Writing Project created this booklet for you—parents and guardians. Writing matters for success in the community, in school, in college, and in the workplace. Parents and guardians matter as their children learn to write, as they develop a real love for words and writing, and as they begin to understand the power of writing well, in and out of school. Even before school begins, the first and most important lessons children learn that help them become good writers and good students are learned in the home from you, their first writing teachers.

To create this booklet, the California Writing Project gathered ideas and resources from teachers and project leaders across California—most of whom are also parents—for how they work in collaboration with parents to help children become confident, skilled writers. This booklet is a small gift from us to you for entrusting us with your greatest gifts—your children.

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Writing connects families and friends.

Writing to family and friends generates dialogue between family members and establishes life-long links to loved ones.

Writing post-its

Families with children, young and old, can use post-it notes as a way to keep in touch with family members. Write notes on post-its to your children and have them write post-it notes to you. Start off with the smaller post-it notes and gradually move toward larger ones, writing messages to one another and leaving them hidden in strategic locations such as in lunch boxes, in books, in suitcases, on pillowcases, on mirrors, anywhere. Notes can start off with simple hearts or smiley faces and gradually progress to the sentence level of “I love you!” or “Lexy was here.” Message lengths can expand from there. Post-it note messages help children work on writing as well as on communicating feelings, love, and wonderful memories.

Kathy Baum, Teacher Consultant
Area 3 Writing Project, UC Davis

Writing holiday letters, not just at Christmas

Another way to keep in touch with family and friends is through holiday letters. If the task of writing those December holiday letters seems too daunting or too overdone, then families should pick another holiday. For example, Valentine’s Day cards are written after the stress and pressure of the winter holiday season. Instead of buying cards, think about writing letters. The letter writing itself can be a collective effort where everyone contributes, even with the youngest child dictating a sentence or two. Instead of compiling a list of achievements, promotions, and vacations, subjects can be anecdotes and memories of special times spent with the recipient of the letter. Or children can take this opportunity to write a letter of love and gratitude to a member of the family.

Edna Shoemaker, Teacher Consultant
Area 3 Writing Project, UC Davis

Writing connects families and friends.

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Keeping a pen pal letter journal

Have your children use a spiral notebook to write to a relative, friend, or pen pal. The responses should be written back in the same notebook to form one continuous journal of letters, made up of multiple entries over time. Your children can write to a friend in this manner even if they go to the same school. If your children have trouble starting letters, they can start off by exchanging profile forms or lists of favorites. Or your children can read over the most recent letter from their pen pal and write down comments on and responses to what was in the letter, whether they be encouragement, an observation, or a similar story. Children should practice being specific and quote their pen pal's letter if necessary. It is important to encourage children to ask a lot of questions in their pen pal journal. Questions give the receiver something to write about, and they will encourage the recipient to ask questions, too.

Katie Nguyen Lake, Program/Publication Analyst
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Taking advantage of email

In this internet age, children today are very familiar with communicating through email. One way for parents to encourage their children to write is through keeping in touch with their family and friends via email. When children use email, they are ready to learn how to adapt their writing for their audience—the recipient. For example, among friends, children may use the slang, abbreviations, and acronyms of text messaging and weblog writing, but they need to learn to make important shifts in their use of correct vocabulary and punctuation when they write to their parents, guardians, and grandparents.

Taken from an interview for *The Parent's Journal* with Richard Sterling
Executive Director, National Writing Project

Writing preserves memories.

Using family events and vacations to generate writing, children can create powerful pieces of writing that will help them remember their childhood experiences, family members, and family trips.

Writing postcards to the writer

Children usually send postcards to relatives and friends, but your children can also send themselves a postcard. They can write about something they learned, a highlight from the trip, or what they look forward to doing when they get home. Children can use downtime at the hotel, in the airport, or during a car ride to reflect on what they have seen and done. When they receive their postcards in the mail, they not only have a souvenir from their trip, but an opportunity to continue writing reflectively in a journal or weblog.

Katie Nguyen Lake, Program/Publication Analyst
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Creating a travel or vacation album

For this writing activity, children need a notebook and disposable cameras. Each day, children can write in a travel journal about what their most memorable happening of the day was. They should also be taking pictures of what they want to remember. After developing the film, children can use the pictures and their travel journal to create their very own vacation album. They already have their first draft—what they wrote on the trip—and they can revise their ideas after looking at the pictures to remember what they didn't capture in writing. When they publish their pages, parents can make sure that everything is correctly edited. This project will work just as well to capture new learning from trips to museums, art exhibits, and sites of historical events. The combination of writing and photography will make up a rich research archive that children can draw on for school research projects and reports.

Dawn Imamoto, Teacher Consultant
Area 3 Writing Project, UC Davis

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Developing photograph captions

Many times, photographs from trips, birthdays, or family events are stuffed away into boxes, never to be seen again. Children can help assemble photographs into albums. Many photographs, however, will require captions—something that tells about the person or thing photographed, where or when the picture was taken, or even something about the photographer. Children can even practice writing descriptive observations to complement the captions.

Cara Mendoza, Administrative Co-Director
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Writing for keeps

When Aileen Nishio's daughter left home for college, mother and daughter took some time, as they were packing, to sift through boxes of saved school projects. Aileen noted that what she and her daughter saved were products of intensive planning, rethinking, revising and usually reflections of things, events, and people relevant and important to them. Out of that experience, Aileen Nishio developed an autobiography project that she thought would be one that children and parents would want to keep. She taught her students how to interview their parents, so the students could gather information about the details of where they were born, how they got their name, the people in their family, and funny or interesting events in their lives. Children learned to write up the information from their interviews, and then these pieces of writing were used to create a special keepsake—the gift of life or an autobiography in a box. CWP has posted the instructions for the writing exercises and for making the keepsake on a new CWP website. Go to californiawritingproject.org and follow the links for parents. There you will be able to download Aileen's wonderful project.

Taken from a workshop by Aileen Nishio, Teacher Consultant
Area 3 Writing Project, UC Davis

Writing helps solve problems.

Using writing to work out solutions to thorny problems helps children to think more analytically. With practice, children can become adept problem-solvers.

Expressing emotion

Writing can be very therapeutic, but it can go beyond venting. Children can learn to deal with their emotions—sadness, anger, hurt, and frustration—if they can put them in writing. Have your child name the feeling and think of a helpful way to deal with it. It is also important for children to explore in writing the harm they can do when they just act on their emotions without thinking about the consequences of their actions.

Jayne Marlink, Executive Director
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Getting what they want

Frequently children make demands and expect to get their way. Parents can help their children recognize that they have choices and desires, but that they can find acceptable, appropriate ways to get or work for what they want. Children can put what they want in writing, list the reasons why they feel they deserve to get it, and suggest ways they might work to get what they want, especially if there is money involved. Aggressive children learn appropriate strategies to work for what they want, while timid children gain skills in asserting themselves.

Marlene Carter, Co-Director/Secondary Literacy
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Writing helps solve problems.

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Working through family disputes

An alternative to giving children time outs when they are in trouble or have been misbehaving is for parents to ask their children to write out the problem. When children get into a fight, parents can ask both children to sit down and write what happened from their point of view and then look at the two versions. As children become better at writing about family disagreements, they can write about the fight or dispute from the other person's perspective. "These are often good ways to cool down the situation, and also to see where the misunderstandings are."

Taken from an interview for *The Parent's Journal* with Richard Sterling
Executive Director, National Writing Project

Writing apologies

Making genuine apologies is a valuable lesson to learn, and learning to write a heartfelt apology may be even more important. Helping children learn to do both is a parent's contribution to their child's well being.

Bob Sizoo, Co-Director
Redwood Writing Project, Humboldt State

Writing helps children take a stand.

When writing to present personal views, children learn to form opinions and back them up with evidence and examples.

Writing because statements

Students' writing too often includes opinions without back-up. One way for parents to help their children learn how to avoid this is to have them explain their opinions verbally or on paper in this easy way—for every opinion, make sure they have a “because” statement. So for anything from a food tasting bad, to a movie being funny, to a decision being the wrong one, children can learn to state their opinion and follow it up with their because statements.

Vickie Burns Sikora, Teacher Consultant
Central Los Angeles Writing Project, Cal State Los Angeles

Sustaining conversation about an issue

Many issues within the household or in the news provide topics for family discussion—fairness or justice, guilt or innocence, why or why not. Parents can ask their children to give their opinions about the topics that interest them and the issues they raise questions about. Asking children to justify and discuss their opinion will help them to learn to develop ideas and to focus on a single subject. This also prepares them to develop a written argument or persuasive essay or letter.

Karen Stepanian, Teacher Consultant
Inland Area Writing Project, UC Riverside

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When writing to present personal views, children learn to form opinions and back them up with evidence and examples.

Reading and writing about letters to the editors

It is a good idea to sit and read letters to the editor together as a way to give your children short pieces to read that are full of opinions and examples of people taking a stand. Parents can read the piece with their children and then ask them what the point is. Then, for practice in forming opinions, the parent should ask children to write a sentence—a thesis statement or claim in disguise—telling whether or not they agree with the person’s point of view and then giving a reason why. Parents can also have children read newspaper and magazine editorials and complete the same activities, or children can choose excerpts out of *Teen People* and other publications that they read. These activities will help children learn that an important part of reading and writing is agreeing or disagreeing with authors and backing up your opinions.

Brooke Nicolls, Teacher Consultant
Area 3 Writing Project, UC Davis

Writing letters to the editor

Similar to reading and discussing printed letters to the editors, children can write letters to the editor or to an elected official. Children become very engaged in learning to revise or improve their writing when they have a specific person from whom they are soliciting information or with whom they are sharing their opinions, especially regarding controversial topics.

Bissa Zamboldi, Teacher Consultant
Bay Area Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Writing helps children learn responsibility.

Let your children become responsible for writing tasks—as many as their grade level and age allow—that take place in daily life. This practice will encourage children to write clearly and descriptively.

Writing to do household tasks

Parents can let their children take charge of household tasks by teaching them the practicality of writing—making lists such as grocery lists and task lists; or jotting down reminders and phone messages; or writing instructions such as caring for pets and directions to the park. This also teaches children important organizational skills. Other writing tasks children can help with include party invitations, dinner menus, and thank you notes.

Ethel Bojorquez, Teacher Consultant
Central Los Angeles Writing Project, Cal State Los Angeles
Rosemary Cabe, Co-Director
South Coast Writing Project, UC Santa Barbara

Writing thank you notes

According to an internet article on Parenthood.com, “Parents can help kids write meaningful thank-yous by asking questions to help kids capture the moment in vivid details.” For example, “What did they give you? They didn’t just give you a ball; they gave you a big, red, bouncy ball. And how did it make you feel when you saw the package? Did your eyes pop out? How did you feel when you held the box? Did you feel good? How good? So excited you ripped off the paper? Let’s write that down...”

Helping Kids Write Well at Parenthood.com

Writing should go public.

By sharing their finished writing, children build an awareness of the importance of writing.

Publishing student writing

Children need to feel support and acceptance from their family in order to take the kind of risks involved in the process of producing good writing that goes public. By creating family newsletters, building a library of books authored by the children, or setting up a gallery in the house for displaying their children's writings and drawings, parents can acknowledge good writing, and their children will become more eager to write, edit, revise, and share their writing with others.

Jayne Marlink, Executive Director
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Creating family websites

In an interview with *The Parent's Journal*, Richard Sterling mentioned the growing trend of parents and families developing their own websites. Websites can include family photographs, poems, and song lyrics, in addition to the children's writing. But most importantly, parents should encourage every member of the family to contribute something in writing to the website.

Taken from an interview for *The Parent's Journal* with Richard Sterling
Executive Director, National Writing Project

Writing inspires creativity all year round.

Children can derive an enormous amount of pleasure out of being creative and imaginative in their writing.

Drawing to writing

As young children draw pictures at home, parents should take the opportunity to ask them to tell the story that would go along with the picture. With very young children, parents can write down the story as they dictate it. Children can then read or tell the story back to the parent. As children get older, they can begin to share the pen or pencil with a parent or older sibling, in order to tell the parts of the story they know how to write. Soon, they'll be writing and illustrating their own stories and books.

Karen Stepanian, Teacher Consultant
Inland Area Writing Project, UC Riverside

Writing the comics

Writing the Sunday comics can become a family weekend ritual. Families can clip the comic strips and white out the text, but keep the dialogue bubbles. Then they can work with their children to write their own version of the funnies. Through this activity, children will learn to write scene descriptions and imagine dialogue. This gives children early practice in understanding that sometimes writing about an event makes use of only the most important highlights and dialogue.

Cara Mendoza, Administrative Co-Director
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Writing inspires creativity all year round.

Children can derive an enormous amount of pleasure out of being creative and imaginative in their writing.

Writing an “I Spy” story

Elaborating on the game “I Spy,” parents can name an object or point out a person they see and ask their children to use their imagination to create a story about or around the object or person. This activity helps children learn to make creative observations and interpretations about their surroundings. Once told orally, children can write the story with the parent or individually.

Katie Nguyen Lake, Program/Publication Analyst
California Writing Project, UC Berkeley

Writing during the summer

Many California Writing Project sites offer a summer Young Writers’ Camp, but families can also hold their own reading/writing camp at home. Parents can spend an hour with their children, reading and writing together. They can take advantage of their surroundings—the yard, the park, the tree house, or the kitchen table. Parents and children can read the same book out loud, or read it individually, and discuss it together. Parents and children can talk about what they are reading and recommend books to one another, too. Families can write stories together, write as individuals, and write in response to one another’s writing. But most importantly, families should take every opportunity to read and write together, and the lazy parts of the summer can be well spent in a family reading/writing camp.

Kathy Baum, Teacher Consultant
Area 3 Writing Project, UC Davis

Writing improves reading. Reading improves writing.

Read with your children, read to your children, and encourage your children to read. Readers and writers use many of the same thinking strategies, and children need to learn many of the same skills to read and write well.

Connecting writing with reading

Reading stresses the connection between reading and good writing, between authors and readers. Parents should develop in their children an interest in reading of all kinds—reading and memorizing poetry; taking turns reading and listening to stories and books; reading non-fiction on a variety of subjects to stimulate children’s curiosity; reading something interesting from the newspaper and asking them to find something interesting in the newspaper to read to you.

Rosemary Cabe, Co-Director
South Coast Writing Project, UC Santa Barbara

Talking with them about what they read

It is important for parents to talk with their children about what they read—about what the writer did that worked and what the writer did that they didn’t like. Reading and talking about text builds a foundation for improving literacy. It also develops a love of the written word. Once children love the written word, they will work hard on writing their own ideas.

Kathy Baum, Teacher Consultant
Area 3 Writing Project, UC Davis

Writing in reading journals or notebooks

Children can use reading to inspire their journal writing. Parents should encourage their children to keep a reading log in a journal or notebook. As they read, children can write down thoughts that are going through their head, reflect on whether they are reminded of something in their own life, and note what questions came to mind. They can write a letter to the main character or the author of the book, or put themselves in the place of the main character and describe what they would do and explain why. Children can study the author’s use of words, picking out a few ways the author uses descriptive words and phrases, choosing some of the author’s words they like and want to use in their own writing. They can illustrate parts of the text, draw one of the characters using the author’s description, or become the illustrator of the chapter they just read. Keeping reader’s journals or notebooks actively connects reading with writing and critical thinking.

Phyllis Dinwiddie, Teacher Consultant
Inland Area Writing Project, UC Riverside

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Reading as writers

Parents can help their children, not only by reading to them on a regular basis, but also by leading discussions based on the text. Move the discussion beyond highlighting the story's plot to discussing what the author did to capture them and make them want to keep reading. If children are not sure how to describe what the author did, helping them notice "golden lines and words" helps them become aware of how writers manipulate and use language to capture the audience. When parents discuss the text with their children, they can also start with pointing out specific details and facts and then move, as children get older, to more complex questions involving things that are implied, things that connect to other stories, things that connect to their own experiences.

Ethel Bojorquez, Teacher Consultant
Central Los Angeles Writing Project, Cal State Los Angeles

Reading well-written articles from professional writers

Encourage older children to read well-written articles from professional writers. When they see "real" writers taking risks to make their writing interesting, children better understand how they can find their own style and use their own voice in their writing. Rather than trying to hook them on a news magazine or *The New York Times*, have them check out www.aldaily.com, to find an interesting article, and then highlight the parts that they consider most engaging.

Coleen Bouris, Teacher Consultant
San Marcos Writing Project, CSU San Marcos

Writing improves with parents' help.

Helping children with their writing assignments can help them improve their grades and allow parents to know what each child is doing well, or not so well, in their writing.

Discussing writing assignments

When your children receive a writing assignment, discuss it—during dinner or while taking a trip in the car, for example—to help them generate ideas and get them to think about it before they begin to write. Try to get them to discuss the assignment and the questions they have about it, and as parents, keep the discussion going by asking more questions that will help your children clarify their thinking.

Susan Davis, Teacher Consultant
Great Valley Writing Project, CSU Stanislaus

Getting to the point and past writer's block

Sometimes the best support parents can give children who are writing but not focusing, or who are struggling with how to get started, is by sitting with them and asking, "What do you want to say?" Then after giving them time to verbalize their thinking, tell them, "Just write that down. We can polish it later...together."

Cameron Burton, Teacher Consultant
Great Valley Writing Project, CSU Stanislaus

Organizing and outlining

Parents can help their children practice organizing and outlining their information before they start the first draft of a writing assignment. A list of points to make in a persuasive essay, the chronological sequence of a story or an event, or an outline for presenting information in a report are all critical tools for children to use when organizing their thoughts. Children often understand how to generate lots of information through "clusters" and "word webs" or through journals and notebooks, but they may not know how to take those words, phrases, and important ideas and organize them by the story they want to tell or the points they want to make. By helping children learn to use these tools, parents can help them prepare to write with greater confidence and purpose.

Cameron Burton, Teacher Consultant
Great Valley Writing Project, CSU Stanislaus

Writing improves with parents' help.

Helping children with their writing assignments can help them improve their grades and allow parents to know what each child is doing well, or not so well, in their writing.

Proofreading with, but not for, your child

If parents offer to be proofreaders or editors for their children, it is important to help them see or find the errors, but then let them correct as many as they can on their own. Place a check by the lines of text that have errors, noting whether they are spelling, punctuation, or grammar errors. But do not point out exactly where the errors are. Have your children try to find and fix them. Another way for parents to help their children proofread their own papers is to ask them to read their papers aloud, pausing every time they come to punctuation. Children catch a lot of their own errors this way.

Susan Davis, Teacher Consultant
Great Valley Writing Project, CSU Stanislaus

Vickie Burns Sikora, Teacher Consultant
Central Los Angeles Writing Project, Cal State Los Angeles

Karen Stepanian, Teacher Consultant
Inland Area Writing Project, UC Riverside

Letting a writing assignment rest and incubate

Time away from a draft, even if it is only overnight really brings the writer back with a far more critical eye. Help your children develop the writing routines and habits that give them time to let a writing assignment rest, rather than writing in a hurry and at the last minute.

Nancy Harray, Teacher Consultant
Central California Writing Project, UC Santa Cruz

Writing does not need to be just in English.

“Research suggests that the best writing teaching simultaneously supports the child’s home identity while promoting success in school,” taken from *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*.

For more information about this publication, visit <http://www.writingproject.org/pressroom/writingmatters/index.html>

Writing in many languages

Some parents who speak and read more than one language well sometimes worry about raising their children bilingually. They wonder if they should use only English with their children, thinking that this will help their children do better in school. Research suggests otherwise. According to Kathleen Marcos, “Research suggests that children who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not. Studies have shown that bilinguals outperform similar monolingual peers on both verbal and nonverbal tests of intelligence and tend to achieve higher scores on standardized tests.” Parents who can, then, should help their children write the activities in this booklet in English and other languages as well. (*ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics*)

Parents, who do not speak and write English well, can still help their children develop important skills in their heritage language and build a strong foundation for writing in English. Norma Mota-Altman writes about the literacy foundation her Spanish-speaking parents built for her, “First and foremost, my parents talked to me. They explained things to me, asked me questions, and told me stories. My parents were constantly telling me about life in Mexico, comparing and contrasting life there and in the United States. My uncles and aunts would tell me jokes, teach me rhymes and tongue twisters, and my father would use musical lyrics to teach me Spanish vocabulary. I still remember listening to my father’s favorite song, *Usted*, while he explained the meaning of the words and told me about Mexico’s great composer, Agustín Lara. I never had children’s books, but I had stories, real life stories, and I had music. These were the ‘funds of knowledge’ that my parents gave me and that I took to school.... My parents had taught me to think, reason, and to question—all in Spanish.” What Norma’s family gave her in Spanish is what all children need to learn to do, in the language of the home and also the language of school.

Writing does not need to be just in English.

“Research suggests that the best writing teaching simultaneously supports the child’s home identity while promoting success in school,” taken from *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*.

For more information about this publication, visit <http://www.writingproject.org/pressroom/writingmatters/index.html>

Writing five senses poetry

One quick poetry activity parents can practice with their children is called “I Remember”/“Yo Recuerdo.” Begin introducing it by reminding children of their five senses plus one—their feelings—and of the importance of remembering their childhood. Parents can talk about how the senses make their children’s writing more interesting and practice writing a simple poem with their children that helps them use their senses. Use symbols, if necessary, to remind them of each sense—eyes, ears, nose, lips, a little hand, and a heart for feelings.

Below is an example of such a poem. This poem is written in English, but it can also be written in Spanish, Hmong, Vietnamese, Russian, Urdu, any of the heritage languages:

I remember the brown, rocky hills of Tecate where I ran with my brother and sister.
I remember the song of roosters and chickens that woke me.
I remember the smell of wood-smoke that filled the air at night.
I remember the touch of my abuelita’s rough, hard-working hands.
I remember the delicious taste of the warm tortillas my abuelita made.
I remember how warm and safe I felt when my abuelita put me to bed.

Place one visual symbol next to each poem line as a reminder to include all six senses and see what comes through in their poems.

Norma Mota-Altman, Associate Director
UCLA Writing Project, UC Los Angeles

For More Information

To find out about local writing project sites in your area, contact the California Writing Project or the National Writing Project.

California Writing Project

<http://csmc.ucop.edu/cwp/>

<http://californiawritingproject.org> - Coming mid-July

National Writing Project

<http://www.writingproject.org/>

Writing and Other Resources for Parents

ERIC Digests

<http://ericece.org>

National Council of Teachers of English for Parents

<http://www.ncte.org/parents>

National PTA

<http://www.pta.org/>

Parenthood.com

http://topics-az.parenthood.com/articles.html?article_id=2714

The Parent's Journal

<http://www.parentsjournal.com/InterviewsElementarySchoolChildren.html>

Read Write Think

http://readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=82

Scholastic Kids

http://www.scholastic.com/kids/home_flash.asp

Scholastic Families

<http://www.scholastic.com/families/>

U.S. Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/Writing/index.html>



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