

7½ WAYS TO KILL A YOUNG WRITER

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Is it possible for the teacher to hold the blunt instrument that quickly and painfully kills a young writer's ambition before the child has even completed page 1? It is possible--although often the blunt instrument is used inadvertently and totally by accident. While this paper looks at writers who were never bludgeoned, there are at least 7 1/2 instruments of death which can subtly destroy a young writer. The instruments of death presented here have been selected because they include some common and accepted approaches to teaching writing which may or may not have a place in writing programs for older children but which are not appropriate for young beginning writers.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT NUMBER 1: INSIST THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO LEARN TO WRITE.

Young writers in kindergarten situations use almost as many approaches to the task of learning to write as there are children in the classroom. Each child brings to school a different understanding of the written language process. If a teacher insists on one and only one method for learning to write, many of these young writers will suffer a quick yet painful death of the desire to write before they have really begun. Some of the ways children learn to write are imitating others, dictating their stories, tracing letters, copying letters, experimenting with format, using invented spelling, asking for correct spellings, following teacher direction, and discovering self-direction. These methods illustrate just a few of the ways to approach the task of learning to write. The children are five and six years old, and they attend kindergarten with a teacher who uses writing as a prereading activity.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT NUMBER 2: INSIST ON A QUIET CLASSROOM.

Young children are by nature social beings. They insist on sharing their information. This includes information on spelling, writing topics, and book format. Following a unit on Mother Goose, many children had become adept at using a short table of contents. When Ramon began writing a collection of short stories shortly after the completion of this unit, he specifically saved a page at the beginning of the book for his contents. When he had completed

several stories, he began to copy their titles onto this page. Jason, who was writing a similar book, observed this copying process for a while then asked Ramon what he was doing. Ramon explained his table of contents and asked if Jason was also going to have one. Jason checked his first page and discovered he had already written on it. Thinking quickly, he announced to Ramon that he would have a table of contents, but he was going to put it at the end. Jason then came around the table to find out how Ramon was writing his. Ramon explained the entire process he was using. Jason then went back to his own book and began to copy his titles onto the last page. After each title, he took his book to Ramon for approval. This sharing could not have happened in a classroom where silence was insisted on and maintained when writing.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT NUMBER 3: INSIST THAT WRITING BE DONE ON LINED PAPER WITH THE LETTERS "TRAPPED" BETWEEN THE LINES.

While letter clarity is important to readability, the necessary clearness may not always come within lined paper and "trapped" letters. Jose was a particularly artistic child. In his mind the importance of writing with invented spelling was not so much the message as it was how the letters looked on the paper. After he had become fairly well practiced in the skills of invented spelling, he stopped writing with conventional manuscript letters. Instead, he carefully drew what he referred to as "fat letters." These were letters drawn with two lines about 1/4 inch apart and then filled in. They looked like a large version of primary type. It was also important to Jose that some words be written larger than others. Had someone insisted that Jose write all of his letters "properly" between the lines of paper, his adventures with print might have stopped. He was not pleased with his words when they were written with "skinny letters" like everyone else used.

Jose was definitely working at the upper end of any scale of creativity and fine motor control. The lower end of this scale presents other problems with lined paper and "trapped" letters. Eric was a child who possessed vast amounts of academic information but lacked the fine motor skills to accomplish many paper and pencil tasks. Part of the information he had was that necessary for invented spelling. Some days he wanted to use that information to write. When he tried to write, his letters varied in size, overlapped each other, covered the entire page, and were virtually impossible to read. Eric was provided with a lettering guide to help him shape the letters properly. This allowed him to write the same as other children and begin to use his inventive spelling skills to label pictures and write stories. It also helped him improve his printing skills until he could write readable letters without the guide. Insisting that Eric print letters between the lines of paper when he was unable to control the

shape of them would probably have killed the interest he had in writing and squelched the desire he had to write like other children.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT NUMBER 4: INSIST ON A PRIMARY PENCIL FOR ALL WRITING ACTIVITIES.

It was probably the realization that small hands sometimes had difficulty grasping a standard pencil that led to the invention and use of the primary pencil. While it may have a place in writing programs, young minds often have other ideas about appropriate implements for writing. Nathan became entranced with the electric pencil sharpener. His objective was to keep all the pencils in the room with a point that could be no sharper. Later he ground one standard pencil (with eraser) until it was about three inches long. This became his special pencil for all of his writing activities. When it could no longer be sharpened, he prepared another to be his special pencil. For whatever reason, he liked these tiny pencils, and they became his motivation for writing. Until he discovered these special instruments, he had written nothing except his name and the required work. Once he was armed with a stubby standard pencil, he began to write random letters on all of his papers and was able to tell anyone who would listen what he wanted those letters to say. With his special pencil and stapled papers, he also wrote "books" using his random letter selection method. It is impossible to say when this information would have occurred to Nathan without his special pencil, but it could easily have been much later if the only implement for writing had been a primary pencil.

Size appears to have been the basis for Nathan selecting a writing instrument. Color was the basis Tanya used. Tanya was having incredible difficulty learning the names of the letters of the alphabet. The introductory activities of the classroom had not succeeded in helping her learn them. However, she learned the names of all the capital letters after she spent the better part of a week copying them over and over with colored markers. As a self-selected activity, she took a box of markers to a table where she could see the alphabet cards on the wall. Using the markers, she copied from A to Z over and over again until she had used all the colors in the box. When she completed these pages, she was able to identify all the capital letters in random order. No doubt Tanya would have eventually learned the alphabet without the markers, but there is little doubt that the experience of writing with the markers and naming the letters as she wrote hurried the progress along. Had a primary pencil been her only choice of writing implement, it is doubtful she would have chosen to copy and recopy the alphabet at all.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT NUMBER 5: INSIST THAT GAMES ARE NOT WRITING ACTIVITIES.

Learning through play is an accepted process in many areas of

learning for the young child. It should also be accepted as a means of learning about the written language. Sonya and Toni took some very important steps toward understanding that oral language can be transferred to paper by playing waitress. They stapled together small stacks of computer cards which were used as waitress pads. They wandered about the room taking lunch orders from anyone who would give them an order. This information was written on the pads of paper. Toni used circles and squiggles in imitation of cursive writing. Sonya used random manuscript letters. How do we know that this activity was designed as an experiment in transferring oral language to written language? The whole objective was to imitate a writing function--not to play waitress. Never in the weeks that they participated in this activity did anyone ever receive any food. There were never any pretenses of preparing food nor of delivering it. Also, in the course of this activity, the written "words" on the pad changed. Toni began to use random letters, and Sonya began to use a primitive form of invented spelling. How easy it would have been to kill the experiments in transferring oral language to written language by telling these enthusiastic early writers that they were not really writing.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT NUMBER 6: INSIST THAT GLUE IS NOT A WRITING TOOL.

Some children enter kindergarten unaware of the existence of this sticky substance. After they discover the techniques of sticking stacks and stacks of paper together, they become aware of some of the constructive possibilities. Jennifer took her first steps with written words because of a bottle of glue. Children around her were writing in various forms, ranging from copied words to invented spelling while Jennifer was gluing stacks of paper. One day she, too, began to write. She would carefully copy one word from a book, and when the copying was complete, she carefully cut the word from the paper it was written on, gluing it to a full sheet of paper. She then selected styrofoam packing pieces to be used as a frame for the word. When she had glued these around the word, the result was a carefully framed word. Her final masterpiece she then took to the teacher to find out what she had written. Thirty or forty framed words later, Jennifer began to copy without cutting, gluing, and framing. Had her infatuation with the glue been squelched, her progress could have been delayed.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT NUMBER 6 1/2: INSIST THAT EACH LINE OF THE LETTERS BE WRITTEN TOP TO BOTTOM IN APPROPRIATE PENMANSHIP.

Observing young children who write will quickly bring the observer to the realization that most of them begin at the bottom of the letter and continue in a single line whenever possible. Infrequently will they use four downward strokes for an M or three for an N. Insisting on this use of pen strokes before the child has experimented

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