

GIVING THEM SOMETHING TO SAY

By Carol Krahn
KONOS-CanadaWest

The process of learning to express our thoughts in written language can be compared to a child learning to walk or talk: the process takes time and encouragement, requires much practice, does not happen all at once, and does not occur at a given age. Children will learn to walk or talk when they are ready. So too they will learn to write when they are developmentally ready and given the appropriate assistance. We, as parent-teachers, need to remind ourselves often of this and be prepared to patiently encourage, nurture and support our student writers through this learning process.

Unit-style method teaching has the potential to significantly improve the writing experience for most students. By definition and by nature, unit studies blend the subject areas around a chosen theme. They immerse the students in a topic, explore that topic from various angles, and create unified thought, understanding, and meaning from the related information. When the instruction also includes multi-sensory hands-on learning, the child immediately has more resources with which to engage written work. Let's examine the writing process in more detail to see why this is true.

It is important for us to understand the process involved in learning to write, and it is helpful to identify differing stages of the process (Jessica Hulcy, *Building Good Writers*). The first stage is the oral stage - listening and speaking - and begins long before children pick up a pencil and long before most of us begin to think about them writing anything. This stage starts at infancy and continues until our children are "school age"; it is a time when children learn by listening to others speak, by experimenting with sounds, by imitating adult speech, by learning words (vocabulary) and then by gradually organising thoughts to express themselves. This first step is the fundamental basis for the process of learning to write in the future. To foster good writing later, the very best thing we can do during this stage is to provide our children an abundant experience with language. As young children hear the word patterns in conversations, in nursery rhymes, or as we read to them, they are receiving the building blocks for future thought and expression. Dr. Jane Healy, author of *Endangered Minds – Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It*, suggests that the most important thing we can do as parents to develop thinking children is to talk with them – to dialogue with them in ways that go beyond "yes" and "no" answers, and that go beyond giving our children instructions about behaviour or tasks. She says that providing a stimulating environment for child development is as simple as having on-going, engaging conversation with your children. Dialogue builds the thinking skills of the mind. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Healy, passive exposure to language, as through video or television, does not qualify as an enriching language experience. Reading with your children and asking reflective questions about the story is also an excellent way to promote development of language skills. As your children are exposed to genuine discussion and purposeful reading, their vocabulary grows, they learn to put ideas into sequence, and they build an understanding of concepts.

The second stage of writing is the beginning reader and writer stage – the basic learning stage where the mechanics of penmanship, punctuation, capitalization and usage become the focus. This is often a rather tedious stage made up mostly of copy and label work where children are very dependent on the instructor. Children can find this stage both exciting and exhausting and will need you to be a their cheerleader! By continuing their exposure to language through dialogue, reading and discussion, you will provide your children with the tools necessary for writing and will encourage them to spend the energy required to learn how to read and to write. Be patient with the stage two writer, and provide encouragement in large doses.

The next stage is the transitional writer where the student has learned the basics of writing, but does not yet write fluently or independently (which is the fourth stage). The emphasis in this stage is on the writing process rather than a perfect final product. The student in this stage can easily be discouraged as he looks at his own writing. Along with clear instruction, he will require plenty of support and encouragement from you; so as well as being the cheerleader, you will need to be the coach.

Writing is a complex task: first, thinking of what to say, then figuring out how to say it, finding the vocabulary to express the thought, and then finally, at last getting it onto paper in a readable format is a big job! One of the difficulties for young writers (and perhaps older students as well) is not having **something to say** when given an assignment. There are at least two reasons for this: first, their life experience “bank” and their knowledge base from which to pull thoughts and ideas is limited and, secondly, they have not had enough experience with language to be able to organize thoughts into meaningful written communication. This is the key area where unit studies will enhance your children’s ability to write, whether they are just learning or are more advanced students. Unit-style teaching utilizes multiple “windows” to explore a topic including literature, history, geography, and science, music or art. Each window provides another dimension to understanding. Children learn about the topic through reading library books. They experience the lesson content through hands-on activities, field trips, dramatizations, demonstrations or experiments. They make discoveries while gathering the information and doing the activities. They then integrate the new information and create meaning with it through discussion and dialogue. For example, to do a unit study on the ear, you could gather numerous books on the topic from the library; your children could learn the parts of the ear (vocabulary) as they build a crawl-through model; they could do experiments about sound waves, pitch, frequency, volume, etc; they could visit a music store to investigate sound and vibrations in pianos, violins, or other instruments; they could learn about causes of deafness; they could study the life of Beethoven who wrote music even after losing his hearing; they could read and dramatize the story of Helen Keller; they could role play being deaf; they could play “Grandmother’s Trunk” to practice listening well; they could go on a field trip to an ear doctor and have a hearing test; they could learn sign language. And all the while they will be asking and answering questions, learning the vocabulary, and dialoguing about their learning experiences. Each of these learning activities (selected from the KONOS Curriculum Attentiveness unit) broadens your children’s understand the topic thus providing a base for their creative writing projects.

This multi-sensory unit style teaching approach allows children of all learning styles to be successful at writing because you have provided information in a rich blend of visual, auditory and participatory experiences. Unit style learning enables young writers to succeed by providing both the first-hand experiences and the information base necessary for fluent written communication. Doing unit studies will give them something to say.

Carol Krahn and her husband have home-schooled three children through to graduation, using primarily KONOS curriculum. Carol's on-going desire is to support, encourage, affirm and equip home-educators with tools, and information to enable them to accomplish their own goals by sharing from her experience and research. Carol is the Western Canadian KONOS Rep.

KONOS hands-on, literature-rich, character-building elementary unit studies combine serious fun with challenging academics, effectively teaching all learning styles! KONOS high school is an integrated, classical study that allows parents to mentor their teens while developing independent learners.

Contact Carol at **306 225-4355**
carol@konos-canada.com
www.konos-canada.com