

The Reluctant Writer

by Brenda Rinard

Why is nonfiction writing so difficult for some gifted children?

Like many questions surrounding the gifted child, this question is difficult to answer. Because of accelerated cognitive development, gifted writers do not fit the profiles of non-gifted children learning to write. They therefore need writing curricula specifically designed with their needs in mind.

Often, the best writing curriculum is one that teaches accelerated college-level critical thinking and composition strategies, starting at approximately age nine. College-level curricula and strategies assume a high level of reading comprehension and the ability to think abstractly, two qualities that most gifted children have in abundance. Without challenging composition and language arts curricula, however, many gifted children who might be capable of high-level writing simply choose not to complete school assigned writing tasks. They may write fiction, send long emails to friends, or even create elaborate web sites with sophisticated written text, but balk at academic writing. These children soon become labeled ‘reluctant writers.’

But assuming reluctant writers are poor writers is a mistake. I have worked with many reluctant writers who excel quite quickly at school-assigned tasks once they have been given challenging writing instruction that breaks down and explains the writing process and the expectations of the written work. These writers may or may not ever ‘love’ to write, but they do gain confidence and the ability to build on their newly learned writing skills. They slowly begin to see the value in writing.

There are many reasons gifted children may become reluctant writers:

- Gifted children may feel that writing is a redundant step in the learning process. These children, while deeply absorbed in a topic they are interested in, will read voraciously on a subject, but view putting their thoughts into writing just to prove they know something (especially to a teacher) as pointless. They often assume that the act of writing up their ideas is another hoop they must jump through in order to satisfy what they assume is a silly requirement with no real world purpose. They have exceptional memories and can verbally explain everything they have learned, so they don’t understand the need to clearly explain what they know in written form to a teacher.
- Reluctant writers may struggle with the physical act of writing. Writing is too slow a process, and their minds race far beyond the ability of their hands to keep up. Because of the mind/hand lag, gifted children can end a writing session in tears, or begin to discount the importance of writing in the learning process. For gifted children with learning disabilities, and especially dysgraphia, the physical act of writing can be almost painful.

- Perfectionism also plays a role in the reluctance to write. Some gifted children, too caught up in the mechanics of writing, focus on small concerns like capitalisation and grammar which prevents them from expressing their complex ideas.
- Gifted children often don't know where or how to begin, or get stuck once they begin, because they may amass so much information or generate so many ideas about a topic. They haven't been taught how to narrow a general topic into a manageable amount of information which they can then focus and organise into a comprehensible piece of writing.
- Gifted children may be inundated with a 'skills and drills' method of teaching writing. This approach relies on worksheets that drill vocabulary, sentence structure and mechanics or ask for short, one-sentence answers to simple questions about a reading passage. These types of assignments, when incorporated into longer, more complex writing assignments can be important, but as the totality of instruction, they can be stupefying.
- Finally, gifted children may have been criticised early on or told that they were 'bad' writers. Early criticism leads to a lack of confidence, which stifles their writers' voices, sometimes forever.

Unfortunately, all these reasons can accumulate and prevent a gifted child from excelling in writing and language arts. If gifted children refuse to write in their early years, they may fail when faced with more difficult and meaningful writing tasks later on. This lack of preparation may make them unable to perform at the necessary levels for college level work and beyond. Although gifted children may argue that the small writing tasks they are assigned in their early years are useless (sometimes rightfully so), they cannot argue with the fact that they will need to have advanced writing skills if they want to excel at top level, rewarding careers. But parents and teachers may give reluctant writers advice about the importance of writing to no avail. Simply telling a reluctant writer 'you will need this later,' as parents and teachers of reluctant writers know, is not enough to motivate them. But parents and teachers also know that advanced communication skills are simply too important to be left to chance. So what can these same parents and teachers do?

Helping reluctant writers has several components, but I want to discuss only one aspect here:

Gifted children need to see a larger, more significant purpose behind their writing. Writing can have many purposes: to communicate (as in an email), to inform (as in a report), but an important aspect of writing that needs to be taught to gifted children is the fact that writing equals thinking. What do I mean by this? Simply that writing and thinking are interdependent. When we engage in the act of writing about a complex topic, we are working out solutions, imagining other perspectives, and sorting through strands of ideas that must eventually come together in a logical manner that others can

understand. Writing is not, as many assume, simply a straight transcription of already worked out ideas. Our writing often surprises us. When writing, we may make unusual connections or uncover thoughts and ideas that were unconsciously buried in our brains. The process of writing can be full of detours and rough spots. It can make us reconsider, probe and reevaluate. It is a valuable part of deep learning and retention. Gifted children must be led through this difficult process in order to see the intrinsic value of writing, and not reduce writing to a scribal act. Although many gifted children do incubate ideas and organizational strategies for long periods before beginning to write-and then produce wonderful products-I seldom see this happen in reluctant writers.

Therefore, gifted children need to be taught that writing tasks are ways to solve complex problems. Reluctant writers are resistant to the fact that they may be able to know more, or importantly, know 'differently' about a topic. In their early years, gifted children's reading and search for knowledge is frequently 'fact driven. They devour as much information as possible about a topic that fascinates them, and then regurgitate the facts showing they 'know' a topic. Case closed. This view, however, is limited, especially as they age. Advanced knowledge is not only fact collecting. Advanced knowledge begins when children are asked to make connections between disparate ideas, to synthesise several sources into a new structure, to critically analyse, to take existing ideas further. The accumulating of facts is only the beginning. Luckily, gifted children are able to abstract at very young ages, and are therefore able to learn these advanced strategies, if given the chance, long before their same-aged peers.

Abstract thinking

Proper writing instruction for gifted children then, is not just about fact regurgitation; it is about encouraging abstract thinking on a topic. Ideas can come from literature, non-fiction, journalism--any kind of reading material the gifted child finds interesting. The writing assignments, however, must focus on critical thinking about the reading or topic. Teachers and parents must ask gifted children to consider not just the question 'what' but 'why' and 'how.' They must ask them to consider, in writing, how what they read compares to other things they have read, how they might connect past events with the present, or to engage in literary interpretation or critical analysis. Too often gifted children, especially in the third and fourth grades, are assigned numerous book reports, which only ask for simple summaries of a book's plot. These assignments, though valuable as a starting point, become repetitive and tedious, as most gifted children have no difficulty quickly summarising books they have read.

What gifted children need is to quickly move from summary to analysis. For example, when writing about a work of fiction, they should consider not just what happened (or the plot) but instead answer questions such as:

- Why did the main character act the way she did?
- Why would the author place these two characters together?
- What main point do you think the author is making by creating the character the way she does?

- If this story were to continue, what do you think would happen? What about the story and characters makes you believe this?

This questioning method asks students to analyse complex issues, synthesize information, and argue a position, all advanced cognitive processes. These processes help gifted children reach a state of healthy cognitive dissonance, or until one of my students exclaimed, “my brain hurts!”

During the writing process, gifted children need supportive teachers and parents who are willing to discuss their ideas with them and prompt them to think further about their subjects or to consider their subjects from a variety of perspectives.

Feedback

And perhaps most importantly, gifted children need detailed, consistent, and supportive feedback on their writing in order to feel they are not simply writing into a void. They need to talk about their writing with peers and more knowledgeable adults. The written feedback they receive should be part of an ongoing dialogue that reflects genuine reader response which should include questions, not just criticism. For example, comments like “Good point” or “I like how you compared these two characters” help the child understand what he did well. But questions such as “Good observation of the character’s actions, but why do you think the writer had the character do that?” help the child further her ideas. And when they do turn in a final product, they should get detailed written comments that states what they did well and what they should work on in their next writing task. Simply stamping ‘good job!’ on a finished paper just leaves gifted children thinking they can’t improve. Above all, gifted children need to see their written work as valued and as something they can be proud of.

The suggestions above involve training, resources, and above all, patience. Is it a lot of work? Yes. Does it work. Absolutely. I have been teaching young gifted students college-level writing techniques and have seen how they blossom from reluctant writers to very competent writers, from good writers to excellent writers in less than a year. I have seen them become proud of their writing and more confident when faced with writing tasks.

I would be naïve, however, to assume that a few suggestions solves the frustrating problem of reluctant writing. With crowded schools and large student loads, most teachers simply don’t have the time or training to assign complex writing prompts and to give feedback on written work. Parents who are home schooling their children are not usually trained in teaching composition. Therefore, as is often the case, writing instruction may fall through the cracks. The dearth of research and attention to reluctant writers and to giftedness and writing in general is also disappointing. I am confident, however, that with increased discussion on giftedness and writing, and with more awareness of the special place of writing in the learning process, we will see changes in the writing curricula for gifted children.

Brenda Rinard has worked extensively with gifted writers and their parents as the English Coordinator for the Education Program for Gifted Youth at Stanford University.