Any Child Can Write, Fourth Edition

HARVEY S. WIENER

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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FOURTH EDITION

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Printed in the United States of America
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To my wife,
my mother, my father,
and my sister,
for helping
writers grow.

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Preface

Beginning in the mid 1970's, the cry of back to basics remains undiminished today more than thirty years later among concerned parents, particularly those who have made the difficult decision of teaching their children at home. Because we still see incredible weaknesses in how our sons and daughters write and are taught writing, *Any Child Can Write* has led a charmed life. Oxford University Press, long a bastion of literacy and supporter of books that advance reading and writing for American citizens, has encouraged me in this new addition to address the continuing concerns of parents everywhere.

What is the genesis of *Any Child Can Write*? I am a teacher of English with classroom experience in elementary, junior, and senior high as well as many years in the college composition classroom. Over the years, friend after friend would stop me on the street, telephone, or scrawl hurried postscripts to letters to express consternation about their children's writing. What steps, they wondered, could a mother or father take to influence a son's or daughter's writing abilities?

I looked in the libraries and the bookshops. But, in spite of what educators had already begun to call the "writing crisis," I could not find a single volume to tell parents what to do to help their children develop competence as writers. It was not long before I knew that I had to write such a book.

The first edition of *Any Child Can Write* appeared in 1978. The Book-of-the-Month Club chose it as an alternate selection, and I discussed the book with Tom Brokaw on *The Today Show*. When the book went out of

print, letters and phone calls from parents all over America, especially those dedicated to home learning, stimulated great interest in a new printing. In response to many requests from parents and teachers, we revised the book twice. Now again, as computers continue to play increasingly important roles in our daily lives, parents are eager for guidance on appropriate websites that can contribute to a home writing program. Where can you find useful on-line activities? How can word processing aid writing development? These and other concerns of the modern parent have led to this third revision of *Any Child Can Write*.

In writing this book, as a parent and a teacher I want to share with other parents my ideas for a fruitful, enjoyable home program in writing. Such a program starts in the building of attitudes and moves through simple, varied, and practical experience with the written word. A mother or father can direct such a program with confidence and can help a youngster develop abilities somehow overlooked or not adequately attended to in school.

You are without doubt your child's teacher, the best kind in many ways, because you love the one you teach, share the joys and suffering of your child's attempts, and want desperately to assure his success.

My suggestions in this book take into account a parent's busy schedule and other constraints; but they also speak to parents who are willing to give up some time to help their child from losing out on a chosen college or career because of a failure to master the basic, but essential, skills of writing.

There are things you can do—and you can have fun doing them.

In planning this book I am indebted to many people for their ideas about good writing and about how inexperienced writers learn best. Many of my suggestions are not original; I learned them from teachers, poets, counselors, tutors, and parents. My friend Professor

Don M. Wolfe taught me most of what I know, and often our ideas are so alike they are one man's thoughts. To other friends and colleagues—Mina Shaughnessy at the City University of New York, who died long before her time; Ellen Chodosh, Publisher of the Trade Division at Oxford, who believed in the book; Greg Tobin and Curtis Kelly, who raised earlier editions off the ground; Professors Nora Eisenberg, Marian Arkin, Dan Georgakis, and George Groman at LaGuardia Community College; Don McQuade at the University of California at Berkeley; Elaine Maimon at Arizona State University West; Charles Bazerman at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Filmore Peltz and Fred Cohen, distinguished high school colleagues; my agent and friend John W. Wright; my daughter Melissa, an elementary school teacher and a mother of two preschool aged boys, infused this revision with wonderful suggestions. I am indebted for ideas, advice, encouragement, and support, particularly in regard to home computer use. Mary Pride, author of *The Big Book of Home Learning*, has been a loyal booster of *Any Child Can Write*, and I thank her too.

But the people to whom I am most indebted for the book are the children whose writing demonstrates what young talent, when tapped, can produce. Accordingly, I want to thank the following young writers: Sharon Adler, Kathy Apfel, Twyla Boardley, Pamela Bonavoglia, Karen Bracy, Judy Brewster, Helen Cohen, Angela D'Apica, Terry Dause, Mike Davis, Marie Della Porta, Patricia D'Esposito, Brian Donovan, Valeria Drafts, Sherri Dubner, Patricia Durante, Michael Eannelo, Karen Sue Evans, Ruth Feder, Alayne Finkelstein, Leo Finkelstein, Stacy Goldstein, Ellen Greneman, Leslie Gross, Harold Gruber, Katie Halper, Joe Havens, Eliezar Havivi, Janet Hutter, Lauren Hutter, Rose Jachter, Nancy Jones, Gary Kimball, Gina Kirsch, Hedy Klein, Sharon Klein, Vivian Krasner, Michelle Landburg, Robin Leach, Denish Leonard, Albert Leone, Mark Levine, Mindy Levine, Myra Leysorek,

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1

Introduction

THE SECOND "R"

Writing as Exploration

Writing is a magical realm of expression that allows your child to come to terms with the joys and pains of daily living. A few words, a few sentences glow on the page like a little crayon drawing. Writing is an expression of personal vision, a perception of the world as your child sees it. Writing is also a permanent record of experience—words and sentences holding and keeping the essence of a moment in language.

Every day in your child's life holds innumerable moments that bombard the senses through sight and sound and smell and taste and touch. Etched in your child's mind, either conscious or unconscious, these moments dwell in the brain, awaiting language to transform them into experiences that are intelligible and meaningful both to your child and to others.

It is this language of the senses that all children have at their fingertips. And it is this language that any child, with guidance, can transform into writing—to capture forever the special flashes of meaning a young life holds.

The key word here is *guidance,* and this is where you, as a parent, can play an important role. For if you have looked closely at your child's classroom learning, you will see that many schools fall short in guiding youngsters to develop essential writing skills.

What's Happening in School

Consider for a moment your child's grade school teacher as he leaves the classroom at the end of the day. On the chalkboard behind him he has written the homework assignment: "Read pages 25 to 45 in your social studies book and *write* the answers to the questions on page 46; check on line for information about the artist Renoir's last paintings and *write* a paragraph on his subjects; *write* up the experiment on air pressure we did in class today; *write* sentences for your week's spelling words; *write* a book report on the biography you took from the library." If he's a conscientious teacher, he's gripping a worn leather briefcase that is already bulging with written work collected from thirty children that morning. At home the burden of his students' work haunts him. Reams of paper stand in reluctant piles on the desk or on the kitchen table. Under such circumstances, how can the teacher do an efficient job when it comes to the instruction and evaluation of writing? How can he build in your child a positive attitude toward written work if he himself, being overburdened, views it as a tedious, unrewarding chore?

He can't.

And that's where you come in. By setting up an atmo-

sphere in your home that encourages creative written expression, you can give your sons and daughters an outlook on writing that will build confidence in their abilities to use language.

And that's where this book, *Any Child Can Write,* comes in: It will help you, who know the importance of written communication in today's world, help your children develop essential writing skills.

Some Basic Thoughts About Writing

Writing serves in a number of ways. First, writing lets your children show what they know; and, as such, it becomes a means by which a teacher judges your child's knowledge of a subject. When the instructor reads the answers to a history test or to a list of questions about science, she checks on the student's mastery of content. But, more often than not, she has decided that if students show that they know the answers, it really doesn't matter how successful the writing is. With time limits and excessive student loads, rarely will a teacher comment in the margin about sentences or the quality of ideas on a page of social studies homework. If you look at the last few pages of written work returned to your child by her teacher, you won't find much in the way of suggestions for writing improvement.

Writing teachers think about two broad areas when they evaluate a child's work. First, there is the world of ideas and the way a writer puts those ideas together. Often called "rhetoric" or "composition," this aspect of writing is the product of the way a mind works in dealing with thoughts. It involves invention, discovery, logic, organization of ideas, and style. Second, there is the area of correctness, often called "mechanics," "grammar," or "usage." This is the domain of more easily measured

skills: A word is either right or wrong, a sentence is either complete or incomplete, an apostrophe is either required or not required.

Even in this arena, apparently guided by agreed-upon rules and conventions, lively academic debate fills the scholarly journals—should we use *that* or *which*, do we write *It was I* or *It was me,* must we use *who* or *whom*?

I like to use a comparison between effective writing and the human anatomy to illustrate these two broad areas. Rhetoric, the idea and organizing part, is like a person's body: the blood, muscle, bone, tendons, and nerves. Correctness, the right-or-wrong features of our language system, is like the skin, the outer layer, what we see straight off when we think of the human animal. This analogy is a good one, because it equates the writing process with a living being—but it is helpful only if we keep in mind that both the skin *and* the body make up the whole person. One without the other is incomplete.

Just as skin and body make the human being, so ideas and correctness make writing. Without the clear expression of ideas, the outer layer of correctness has no meaning. Nonsense correctly spelled and punctuated is still nonsense. Similarly, brilliant ideas that follow none of the principles of correct writing fall apart, a heap of fluids and organs without skin. Often, in fact, it is only through correct expression that a writer can make her ideas known in the first place. Of course, when I teach writing in the classroom, I focus first upon the internal organs, so to speak, the expression of ideas by means of effective language. At first, I minimize attention to right or wrong in language as I try to build to a concern for "the outer layer," or correctness. So the level of sentence construction, the ideas at the heart of the writing, and the degree of error all go hand in hand. Clearly, writing to communicate demands that ideas, the language used to explore them, and the conventions of correctness all work together.

Of course we are concerned with demonstrating knowledge through written language. Every book, letter, memo, or report you read illustrates what the writer knows or understands. When a child writes about himself he's also, in a way, showing what he knows. But I am not concerned here with what the written word can tell about how many books on Russia your youngster has absorbed or how meticulously he took notes on the experiment with a gasoline can that demonstrates principles of air pressure. My interest is with the expression of *ideas*, the muscle and blood of writing.

With your help and guidance your children can use the resources of their own experiences to develop that magical ability to express an idea—to capture the essence of a moment.

Poor Writers: On the Question of Blame

It's no news to anybody reading this book that today's school children as a whole are poor writers. College teachers over the country, pointing to low scores on entrance exams and poor writing samples submitted by freshmen, are stunned at the writer's inability both to express ideas clearly and to use the conventions of correctness in conveying those ideas. Who, they wonder, is at fault? How can generations of youngsters pass through high schools, earn diplomas, and still not know how to write? Why is it that previous groups of girls and boys could write so well, and even master the complex rules of grammar (a demand rarely made on students today)?

What is the answer? Why are our children not learning how to write?

As with all simple questions there are too many complex factors to offer simple answers.

The schools, even with the best of intentions, contribute their share to the problem. Although, clearly, there are many dedicated teachers who approach rigorously their responsibilities to teach students how to write, the portrait I drew earlier of the overburdened elementary school teacher shows part of the problem in the grade schools. In some of those schools that do insist upon writing—there are enormous numbers of literary magazines, class newspapers, and yearbooks churned out each year—instructors often take what students create and rewrite, edit, and correct the material themselves, instead of teaching children how to make revisions on their own. Still other teachers, in stressing the free and creative spirit of the writer, will praise badly organized, poorly supported writing because of a tiny flash of insight from the writer. Others, sadly, have no good ideas to give children at all. One sixth-grade teacher confided to me a while back that he taught writing no more than twice a year. Twice a year! "It's frustrating. There's not enough time. And I really don't know what to do."

In the junior and senior high schools, where teachers see themselves as specialists and teach "English" only, there's not much attention to instruction in writing either. First, the curriculum is overloaded with literary appreciation. Those courses of study that include units for writing are not explicit and are weak in their demands. I might add, incidentally, that English instructors complain little about this: It is only in teaching literature, many feel, that their true mission lies. As important as it is to teach poetry and the Great Western Tradition, the scope and dimension of literature programs in the schools are often beyond the students' needs. Time spent in teaching symbolism, onomatopoeia, and blank verse might be better spent in teaching about topic sentences, supporting details, and verb tense. I know I am striking, now, at the life's blood for many teachers. There is something about the personal satisfaction and prestige derived

from teaching an appreciation of fiction that is impossible to dislodge from the English teacher's outlook. Unfortunately, that attitude does not accompany the teaching of writing skills.

When I first wrote those words in 1980, my daughter, Melissa—an elementary school teacher, now a stay-at-home mom (you'll read more about her and my other two children, Joseph and Saul, throughout this book)—was eight years old, just moving through the lower grades of public school. I built my conclusions on many years of teaching experience in the schools. I had hoped in 1980 that by the time my own children reached high school age, significant changes in instruction would make them regularly practicing writers throughout the grades. Unfortunately, nothing of the sort has happened. Melissa admits and I confirm by observation that writing instruction is still in the subbasement of any building of knowledge constructed by the schools. Though a good writer—she was managing editor of the newspaper and has won prizes for her writing—she picked up much of what she learned at home and on her own. Joseph, former editor of his high school newspaper and now a high school biology teacher, cannot remember learning much about writing, occasional school composition assignments aside. Saul, now an English teacher in one of Brooklyn's hard-to-staff high schools, does not recall any formal writing instruction in his own high school years. Even in college, he says, his comp teacher merely made assignments without teaching anything about the craft. I hear hopeful comments from my elementary and secondary school colleagues about how instruction in writing is changing for the better, but, as I observe the landscape, except for showcase schools here and there, progress is a lazy turtle inching its way across educational reform.

As Saul's experience suggests, in college the situation is pretty much the same. Professors moan about the awful state of student writing; but having to teach freshman

English instead of literature is, to many, a fate worse than death.

It is true that, in the last few years, college English departments have turned with imagination and energy to teaching composition. Throughout the country directors of writing programs are establishing writing as a discipline worthy of rigorous study and investigation. Intelligent approaches to college writing have mushroomed at the campuses of Georgetown, Yale, Miami Dade Junior College, Ohio State, the University of Iowa, and the various colleges of the City University of New York.

In spite of all this, however, the freshman writing course is still the stepchild of the English curriculum.

To overcome this sad situation, one might reasonably ask if a teacher's training ought not to include more study of techniques in teaching writing. But more than *what*? The astounding reality is that few teachers in grade school, junior high, senior high, or college have had *any* training in how to teach composition. How to teach reading; how to teach mathematics; how to evaluate tests; how to teach science—in all of these, yes, but no course in how to teach writing. Now, in response to public outcries, some interesting courses and programs in writing for future teachers of English are developing at schools such as the University of Michigan, SUNY Stony Brook, UCLA, the University of Southern California, CCNY, and Columbia Teachers College, among others. Thoughtful books on teaching writing by William Zinsser, Don Murray, Lucy McCormick Calkins, Peter Elbow, and James Britton in England are now readily available to help teachers develop comprehensive writing programs through the grades. My book, *The Writing Room* (Oxford, 1981), is a resource book for teachers of English. However, I'm willing to bet that at the moment, your child's teacher probably has had little to no instruction in how to teach composition.

Teacher attitude and preparation offer one clue to

your child's poor achievement in writing, but there are others. Human beings vary in abilities. Some children never develop the skills parents would like them to develop; or they cannot learn in the time frame that schools have established arbitrarily. This is *not* the same as saying each child cannot be brought to his or her own level of maximal achievement. Putting ideas into written language with ease, grace, and clarity is a skill that is not easily learned. In any consideration of achievement, there is also the question of talent. But writing is just like any other creative skill—painting, drawing, ice skating, swimming, diving. Some people astound the world with their natural abilities to do things others reach only after great struggle. The point is that if we make the struggle we often *can* achieve our goal despite our own limitations. We'll not all turn out like Pablo Picasso, Nancy Kerrigan, Barry Bonds, and Venus Williams; but if one of the skills they command interests us we can learn it, and we can feel pride in our achievement even if we fall short of greatness. It means practice, hard work, and dedication, but if it's important and enjoyable to us, and, especially, if we begin at a young age, almost anyone can learn to draw or skate or play baseball or tennis.

Another reason today's children seem to have poorer writing skills than yesterday's children stems, in part, from the advantages of the modern world. There is no doubt that television, movies, slides, tape recorders, video units, stereos, citizens band radios, transistors, and portable televisions are making the written word in some sense obsolete. Even letter writing, a form of communication we once could have said with absolute certainty that children would need throughout their adult lives, may now be replaced by the exchange of homemade long-distance phone calls.

The irony of the seeming obsolescence of the written word in the wake of the media explosion is that written language continues to play a critical role in the way we

communicate. People *write* programs to motivate computers; children at school must take notes on what they learn, no matter what vehicle is used to convey the information to them; and parents still, and shall forever, write letters. The popularity of email and Palm Pilots and their reliance on the written word also assures a place for writing in today's world. Despite their seeming affection for nonwritten, often nonverbal, forms of communication, our children know what awaits them in a career if they lack writing skills. I've seen brilliant young students who are articulate, clever, and personable turn away from professions in law or business management because they believe they cannot write well enough. In many jobs, skill in writing and advancement throughout the ranks are correlated. Waking at last to the critical role of writing in education, the next round of Scholastic Aptitude Testing (SAT) for college entry will include a writing sample for the first time.

Will *your* children reject law, teaching, computer programming, management, public relations, government, civil service, editing, advertising, police science, research science, and countless other professions because they question their own skills with written language?

Sadly, many parents, too, fall easy prey to the media, which drain the family's time and which keep them away from the written word. In how many households do children never observe parents put pens or pencils to paper? Do you know that a family can keep a shopping list (such a basic writing exercise) without jotting down a single word? Just stick a peg in a wooden board, alongside the printed word for each staple, such as milk, butter, and eggs. How unfortunate.

On the other hand, some children are lucky enough to see mothers pursuing degrees and scribbling the notes for a sociology paper; or, perhaps, they may see their fathers behave like mine: Every Saturday afternoon my father sat in a green club chair working out the *New York Post*

crossword puzzle, a tattered copy of *Roget's Thesaurus* at his side, and a yellow pencil locked between his thumb and forefinger.

There are innumerable writing experiences for a parent and child to share. They are waiting for you.

And so, this book. As you look at the ways to help your child, you'll be looking at yourself as a user of the written word too. So be warned, it's not easy. Yet, given the poverty of other resources from which your child learns to write, you, the parent, must get the ball rolling.

2

Notes, Signs, and Shopping Lists:

HOW CAN A PARENT HELP?

Setting Examples

Children learn by imitation. As soon as my daughter could crawl about freely, she would slip into my study during the early hours when I write, and watching me carefully as she played, she would demand her own pencil and papers. Long before her second birthday she would sit on the floor near my chair, scribbling on small white sheets that she begged from my desk pad. The sight of her father scratching away at his desk each day set the frame for Melissa's own writing activities. Her dexterity advanced so well that when we tried to teach her to eat with a fork, we used a writing implement as our referent. "Hold it like a pencil," we urged. Watching me type, she soon asked for her own typewriter. We bought her a red plastic children's typewriter, and it remained one of

her favorite toys straight through her seventh or eighth year.

Many years back a cousin of mine had a short story published for the first time. His little boy was so excited to see the magazine bearing his father's story that with a feverish pace the child dashed off three little stories of his own!

Of course not every child has a professional writer for a parent. Still, there are countless opportunities for your child to watch you perform simple writing tasks every day. And there are few better ways to establish writing as a vital and enjoyable process than to watch Mommy or Daddy. These observed activities easily become joint endeavors as your child grows older and demands to participate.

In this chapter I want to explore some simple, everyday types of writing that you can set into motion at home. Even before we get to that, however, you need to collect the simple equipment required for your child's writing experiences.

The Tools of the Trade

It's not a big task to keep available the tools your child will need for frequent writing activities. Most households already have many of the items I suggest. Gather them together and make them accessible to your child.

Here's what you'll need:

• ***Writing paper.*** Don't be fussy: Any type will do. It's a good idea to offer as many kinds as you can. Loose sheets of different sizes will accommodate your child's unpredictable preferences at any given moment. Always try to provide unlined paper as well as lined, and if the lines are narrowly spaced, do not *insist* that the writing fit between them. You should encourage, but not de-

mand, writing within widely spaced lines. Variety is the key to paper supply: Your child may want to use two- by three-inch note sheets, plain white paper, lined yellow pages, backs of envelopes, index cards, the reverse side of ruined sheets, newspaper edges, napkins, personal notepaper, all with equal interest and pleasure. A book, a spiral-bound pad of pages, or a tablet will provide more permanence for your child's work. Spirals suit a youngster's sudden whim to rip out a damaged page.

• ***Heavy-duty paper.*** Provide index cards, oak tag sheets, cardboard from shirts, the backs of pads, cut-up shoe boxes or cartons. These make good homemade signs and resist tearing when they are hung from a wall or door.

• ***Stationery.*** Some notepaper of your child's own and some cards that can be stamped and posted will go a long way in establishing the value of letter-writing. If you're lucky, letter-writing practice during the early years (three and four years old) will save you phone bills later on!

• ***Writing implements.*** Pencils and crayons allow children a wide range of expression, according to their tastes and inclinations. Supply and encourage the user of erasers. Teach your child that all writers make mistakes often and that correcting errors has value (much more of this later on). During a trip through Europe we found colored pencils were a wonderful, durable set of writing tools. Making pictures and words in color held our child's interest on train rides where long, dull stretches of landscape and empty coach compartments offered no diversion; and an inexpensive sharpener fixes a broken point simply. Crayons, though more versatile in color possibilities, break easily. However, for many children, a crayon is easier to manipulate than a pencil. If your child is still developing dexterity, supply large thick crayons. I am at a loss to understand children's attraction to pens (perhaps they think it is "grown-up" to use pens!) but nothing thrills a four- and five-year-old more than writing in ink. As long as you watch your white linen tablecloth or beige

velvet couch, pens are fine. If you encourage felt-tip pens—children love their variety of colors—buy only the water-soluble kind so that you can wash the pink and aqua off a ruffled blouse or the back of a thumb or an elbow.

• ***Chalkboard and chalk.*** Chalk and chalkboard in your child's room support writing activities, providing excellent opportunities for experimental writing exercises and for practice with newly learned words. A picture and a few words easily are erased to make way for another presentation. The feeling of the chalk in your child's hand, the different angle of the writing surface from the usual horizontal on the desk top to the vertical on a chalkboard easel or on a wall provide a learning alternative that will reinforce what your child practices on paper.

• ***Word books.*** A variety of alphabet and word books provides more than reading activities. Many books encourage a child to follow dotted or broken lines in order to write out the alphabet or to spell out words, to copy words printed in large letters alongside pictures, or even to write original responses to questions. (The Dr. Seuss-Roy McKie book, *My Book About Me*, is a notable example of this last group.) These are all fine, so long as they remain activities for enjoyment. Nothing will turn a child away from writing faster than "work" assigned to him in a word book by a parent. An older child (fourth grade and up) should have a dictionary, and the upper junior and senior high school youngster will need a thesaurus as well; these are two indispensable tools for any writer. Inexpensive pocket dictionaries work handily for an older child, but the small type and incomplete definitions often confuse grammar school youngsters. You might want to explore some of the titles listed in Appendix C; but, in any case, your child ought to have an illustrated children's dictionary. A good, hardbound adult dictionary should stand on a conspicuous shelf; and, if for no reason other than to set an example, you should refer to that book fre-

quently. Start building correct habits as soon as possible. The thesaurus, a book of synonyms, not definitions, helps adolescents and young adults expand their writing vocabulary. Children who suddenly realize its potential love the thesaurus—but it needs careful supervision. Word processing programs have built-in thesauruses and, because of the great potential for misuse, also require oversight.

In chapter 7, I will deal more fully with the dictionary and thesaurus as tools for your child's learning.

• ***Miscellaneous.*** Here are some useful items that allow your children to spell out words and sentences rather than to write them in their own handwriting.

• *typewriter*. For ten to fifteen dollars (some are more expensive), a child's plastic typewriter offers an exciting tool for a young writer. Typing letters in upper case, the children's typewriter allows another medium for written expression. If you have only an adult typewriter (largely obsolete now in our computer age), urge your son or daughter to use it under your supervision (most typewriters are sturdy enough to withstand some rough treatment). Type out a few simple words in a sentence or in a question; have your child copy it or respond to it.

• *label makers*. An inexpensive writing tool, a label maker allows a child to stamp out words and thoughts on plastic tape. Encourage frequent questions about spelling, however; once the letters are imprinted on the plastic there is no way to erase them.

• *alphabet stamps and stamp pads*. Using a rubber stamp for each letter and a well-inked pad, young children can spell out words and sentences. Rubber stamps help teach alphabet recognition. As you help your child decide on some simple things to write, ask her to select the letters, and name them together. The words stamped out on a sheet of paper will spell out your youngster's thoughts.

• *computer word processors*. A whole new world of writing adventure has opened up for young children lucky enough to have computers at home. I'm always amazed at how even five- or six-year-olds feel comfortable enough at a computer keyboard to learn the rudiments of word processing no matter what the hardware or software. Joseph was nine and Saul six when the IBM PC invaded my office, and before long they were showing me the ins and outs of the computer age. Microsoft *Word* is the ubiquitous word processing program of choice. It has a built-in auto tutorial that even computer-anxious reactionaries (give me back my pencil and yellow pad!) can learn easily. In college both boys blessed their computers. As you know, classroom activity relies more and more on computers. They stimulate a child's interest in writing in ways I never could have imagined. And the World Wide Web is an invaluable tool for learning. Chapter 16 explores the role of computers in your home writing program.

You want to investigate the sign-making features of your computer software. Varied print sizes and illustrations that you can clip from a bank of resources support a home writing program. Just watch out as signs and labels sprout like mushrooms all over your house. Later in this chapter we'll look at the special role of signs and labels in helping your child build skills and confidence in writing.

Now that you have supplies for your home writer's workshop, here are three simple writing activities you can nurture with ease at home.

"I've Got a Little List"

The shopping list (that instution challenged by the pegboard!) is one of the most accessible writing activities.

Children of three or four who know their letters and sounds should be encouraged to add words to the list for the supermarket. For those still learning about the alphabet and the sounds letters make, preparing a shopping list offers painless reinforcement. At the grocery shelf, ask your child to read the word he wrote and to select the item—a can of beans, a bar of soap, or, better, a favorite treat, that brown bag of M&M's or sandwich cookies in cellophane.

In general, lists provide substantial writing practice for any age group. You and your child can prepare a guest list for the next birthday party; a list of toys to take on a visit to Grandma's; a list of favorite foods or best friends; a list of things to do on a special day; a list of clothing to buy for school—the ideas are inexhaustible. As your child grows older, she can adapt the list to her own interests and needs: a list of CDs to buy from the radio shop; a schedule of activities for after school; a list of expenses to keep track of weekly allowance or money earned in babysitting.

You may recall that Benjamin Franklin kept lists throughout his life. During his twenties, his project was to arrive at moral perfection, so he listed thirteen virtues that he believed necessary and desirable. He made a little book, giving a page for each of the virtues; and drawing red lines to make columns for each day of the week, he marked with a black spot every fault that he felt he committed in regard to a specific virtue. To people today this plan for moral perfection sounds strangely oversimplified, but list keeping does help bring some order to plans or schemes that we see as important. It works for children as well as for adults.

My view of a parent and a three-, four-, or five-year-old working together on a list—the shopping list, for instance—is simple and stress-free. For a child who has not yet mastered the alphabet you, the parent, must write slowly, firmly, and clearly in large letters, saying the let-

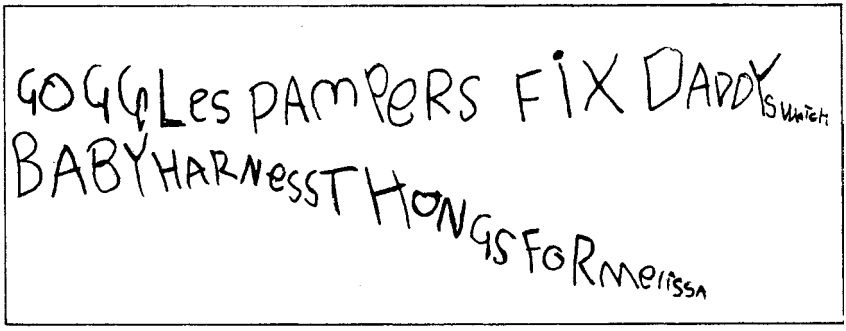
ters aloud, then pronouncing the word. Next, ask your child to say the word. If he shows interest, urge him to copy the word onto a separate sheet or directly alongside or below yours. Right now, you are trying to establish positive attitudes, so do not worry too much about undersized or oversized or incorrect or transposed or mixed upper- and lowercase letters. Praise your child's effort before you point out his error.

For a child who has command of the alphabet, a parent also might encourage list writing. A youngster without advanced skills often can write his name, can contribute at least that to the joint list-making venture, even if mother or father has to write all the other words. You might suggest titles that include your child's name, titles looking like these: "Hilary's Favorite Foods" or "Guest List for Matthew's Party" or "Clothes to Buy for Maria." In preparing the list you should ask your child to suggest items, which she should then try to write. If she has a sense of the sounds letters make, encourage her to say words slowly and to try to figure out the letter or combination of letters that make a sound. Give as much help as needed. After an incorrect guess you might say, "Good try! But here the letter *S*, not *C*, makes the sound you want." If your child cannot determine the letter, tell it to her. The goal is to get your child to print an immediate experience in her own writing. Once the word stands out in green or red or blue upon a page, it is your child's own, a word to read and to savor, a word for you to read and to praise.

For your next shopping excursion, let your child make a list of things you both need. Be patient; name the letters to spell the words or word parts your child cannot manage alone. After the two of you prepare the list, read the words together—first your child trying to read her own writing and then you rereading the list. Watch the way her eyes light up as you read your child's words!

Here is a list that my daughter Melissa—at five and a

half—and her mother prepared one July afternoon before a vacation trip (the Pampers were for her brother Joseph):



Busy gathering things together, my wife did not supervise the writing, although she did help name the letters as Melissa sat at the kitchen table and penciled in the words. Barbara showed little concern, therefore, for the fact that words ran together occasionally, or that the words were not placed under one another as in a more conventional list. The point is that Melissa wrote the items—many things she wanted for the beach—in her own handwriting, and she knew that the writing would lead to a concrete act. During the shopping trip that followed, Barbara frequently asked, "What's the next thing here? Read this for me," in order further to reinforce the vitality of the writing experience.

List making won't stop with the preschool years—especially if you convince your child that writing can be a powerful means to deal with issues in your daily lives. Case in point: Like many busy families, as the children grew older we tried to divide up kitchen chores and responsibilities so that the youngsters would share in the cleanup. "Saul, you set the table"; "Melissa, please clear"; "Joseph, load the dishwasher": Every night the assignment was made with names rotated so that no one felt unduly burdened. The daily announcements worked for