

Helping Your Child Become a Writer

Simple Strategies for the Whole Family

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Writing has many benefits. It can improve children’s speaking, boost their reading comprehension, build their knowledge, and elevate their thinking. But one reason it’s hard to learn is that without explicit writing instruction, children often write the way they speak.

From elementary through high school, many children answer questions with little elaboration. Others tend to ramble on, giving unnecessary information in a disorganized fashion. It’s not unusual to see the same tendencies in their writing. With the strategies shared in this article, your child will be on their way to becoming a clear thinker and coherent communicator—not just in school but for the rest of their life. We can see some of this progress with Michael.

Ms. Worth, mother of 10-year-old Michael, looked forward to hearing about his day at school. However, when asked, Michael always gave the same answer: “Good.”

After reading about the benefits of explicit writing instruction, Ms.¹Worth decided to try an approach that seemed to make sense to her: sentence stems. But she didn’t ask Michael to write; she just added them to their conversation. When Michael provided his usual response, “Good,” she asked him to turn the following sentence stems into complete sentences:

School was good because _____.

School was good, but _____.

School was good, so _____.

Ms. Worth learned that Michael had a good day *because* his class visited the aquarium. Michael's day was good, *but* he had to write about the field trip. Finally, Michael shared "School was good today, so I hope tomorrow is, too."

Michael was able to provide much more information to his mother when she gave him an approach that incorporated the conjunctions *because*, *but*, and *so* than if she had just asked her usual question, "How was your day?"

Although the *because/but/so* strategy was developed to help students with their writing, there are great benefits to using it orally, too—especially at home. It gives children a structure to extend and elaborate their verbal responses. And, when children offer their families even a few more details, great conversations are often sparked.

Since the sentence stems worked well, Ms. Worth also started using them to extend Michael's written responses when she helped him with his homework. She found that this strategy had a great impact when applied to the content he was studying.

For example, when Michael was learning about the American Revolution in school, he read about the causes of the conflict. Rather than asking "Why did many colonists want to break away from Great Britain?," Ms. Worth tried checking his understanding by giving him the following sentence stems:

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain....

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain because they
believed Parliament's tax policies were unfair.

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain, but the Loyalists
wanted to remain part of the British empire.

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain, so the Continental
Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence

Prompting children with *because*, *but*, and *so* is a simple yet powerful strategy. It requires children to think more analytically, while also teaching them how to extend their written responses.

Writing Complex Sentences

Like so many children, Michael often writes the way he speaks—and the quality of his writing may suffer as a result. Written language generally requires more precision than spoken language because the reader of a text cannot ask for clarification the way a listener can (i.e., when you're reading a book, you can't ask the author what a confusing sentence means). In addition, the sentence structure of written language is more complex than the language we generally use in conversation. Writers often use multiple clauses and subordinating conjunctions such as *although*, *since*, *before*, *after*, and *if*, especially at the beginning of a sentence. If children are

unfamiliar with those structures, they are more likely to struggle with understanding what they read. But when they learn to use more complex sentences in their own writing, their reading comprehension often improves.² Their writing quality improves as well.

Wanting her son to continue developing as a writer, Ms. Worth helped him practice writing more complex sentences—and in reading his work, she could assess his comprehension of the text he had been assigned on the American Revolution. She gave him the beginning of a sentence, and he needed to supply the rest (Michael's responses are shown in italics).

After the Sons of Liberty dumped tea in Boston Harbor,
Parliament punished the colonists with the Intolerable Acts.

Although the British military was well-equipped, *the colonists' knowledge of the land helped them win the war.*

Expanding Sentences



When responding to questions, Michael, like many children, often omits information that he assumes a reader or listener already knows. In the *sentence expansion* strategy, children add information to a simple sentence, called a *kernel*, by answering the relevant question words: *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*.

Ms. Worth decided to add this strategy. Michael found it fun to use when given a kernel that allowed him to use his imagination, such as *He ran*. Practicing it at home improved his writing for school assignments—and his mom enjoyed hearing the answers he'd dream up.

Continuing the revolution theme in his social studies class, Michael was asked to complete a sentence expansion activity about Gandhi leading the Salt March. He knew that when he saw dotted lines under the kernel, he didn't have to write complete sentences, just key words and phrases. Still, his written responses allowed his mother to check his understanding of the text about Gandhi.

He led the Salt March.

Who? *M. Gandhi*

When? *1930*

Where? *India*

Why? *protest Brit. salt tax inspire nationalism*

Expanded Sentence:

In 1930, Mohandas Gandhi led the Salt March in India because he wanted to protest the British salt tax and inspire nationalism.

As with the *because/but/so* activity, parents and caregivers can practice this sentence expansion strategy with their children using academic or everyday content, and in any grade level and subject area. The example below about leaves changing color demonstrates that even first-graders can become adept at expanding sentences.

They change color.

What? leaves

When? autumn

Why? trees receive less sunlight

Expanded Sentence:

In autumn, leaves change color because
trees receive less sunlight.



Writing may be the most cognitively demanding academic skill we expect children to master. For many, crafting clear sentences is challenging, and producing paragraphs is even more difficult. Written assignments often require knowledge of the subject matter, awareness of one's audience, varied vocabulary, logically sequenced information, and a consistent focus on the topic. Fortunately, the strategies in this article, as well as others available for free, can improve children's oral and written responses. And, by helping your child with these strategies, you'll learn a lot more about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings as your prompts encourage them to open up.

1. J. Hochman and N. Wexler, *The Writing Revolution: A Guide to Advancing Thinking Through Writing in All Subjects and Grades* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2017).

2. C. Scott, "A Case for the Sentence in Reading Comprehension," *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 40 (2009): 184–91.

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