



Spelling & Writing: the Prescriptive Approach

When your body gets sick, you don't just go to the medicine cabinet and take the same pill for every ailment. No, doctors write prescriptions to address the specific needs of your individual situation. I feel that is a wise approach to improving the health of writing as well.

I see three basic components to writing: penmanship, mechanics (spelling, punctuation & grammar), and content or flow. You can always work on penmanship and mechanics, but it is the flow of the child's unique thoughts that makes writing amazing. If we hover and correct as he writes, it can stymie the flow. So just let him get his thoughts down.

I truly believe that the only way to learn to write is to write! I recommend at least one piece each week of original writing of any style. Keep the flow flowing. You do not need to correct each piece. I recommend choosing 1 piece a month to proofread, edit, correct, and make a polished final copy. The choice can be yours, or, even better, you can allow the student to go back through the last several pieces and select one to "dissect."

As you read what the child writes, make note of patterns of errors. When you see multiple errors under one spelling rule or word family, then focus on that rule and "play" with it until he is more solid with it. Likewise if you see similar errors in one type of punctuation or capitalization, make note and focus on those rules for a time. The same applies to word usage or grammar.

Here's what I propose:

- A. Day 1: The child writes his thoughts on the assigned topic, then PUTS IT IN A DRAWER for 3 days. (I do recommend getting him in the habit of skipping a line as he writes to allow more space for editing later.)
- B. After 3 days, (this time lapse allows the piece to be less connected to his heart as it was when he was writing it... making him less vulnerable to wounds when correction is needed) make a photocopy of the piece, allowing the original to remain intact (which also reduces wounds to his heart). (This step can also be applied to older pieces of writing chosen for "dissection.")
 - a. Have the child select a colored pencil of his preference.
 - b. Have him go through the piece and circle anything that doesn't look right. (He doesn't need to fix anything yet. This simple finding helps with discernment, getting a feel for something that is out of line... a great life skill to have!)
 - c. Then have him pick a different color pencil for you to use.
 - d. You go through and circle any errors left unnoticed by him, particularly holding him accountable for previous material covered in spelling or mechanics.
 - e. Compare to see who has more circles. Challenge him as the year goes on to try to "beat you."
 - f. (Did you notice that no teaching has taken place yet?)
 - g. Now, while your child is working on something else, you must do your work and go over the piece, looking for error patterns in both spelling and mechanics.
 - h. Set your goals for the rest of the week as to which rules will be spotlighted.

- i. Develop activities or lessons for addressing the identified areas of need for the week or as long as you need.
 - j. You may want to have a two-prong approach. Pick one target for spelling, and pick a separate target for writing/English/grammar.
- C. In my experience, you're either born a speller or not. So we need to challenge the spellers to excellence and strengthen the non-spellers to be all they can be. I suggest making a spelling notebook (a good commercial tool is *Tricks of the Trade* and its companion *How to Teach Any Child to Spell* by Gale Graham). Have him enter misspelled words onto the pages corresponding with the spelling rule violated. i.e. *nieghbor* would be entered on a page designated for the eigh – 'ay' rule. As you and/or the child sees a page begin to fill up, you will focus on those rules for spelling lessons. I also like the approach to teach spelling that is outlined in *Teaching Children* by Diane Lopez. Later in the week have a spelling bee, being sure to load it with words from the target rules. (This day can actually morph into day 1 of a new spelling module to be stretched out over several days while he continues to work on refining the targeted written piece.) My children loved when I found a website that created word search puzzles, and I entered words related to our target spelling rule and created puzzles for them.
- D. Present lessons or worksheets (great free ones available online) addressing the patterns of errors in punctuation or capitalization or word usage. (Continue to hold him accountable for these rules as you move forward, so it's cumulative.) (Take as many days as you need to help him get solid in these areas of need.) Then move on when you feel he's ready.
- E. Once he is closer to mastery of the concepts, have the child go through and make corrections on the photocopy of the selected piece of writing.
- F. Finally, have the child make a polished final copy with beautiful penmanship. Perhaps he could even decorate it with original art work. Then make another photocopy, and mail it to someone as a ministry of encouragement.

This editing process can take as long as needed. Each of the steps above is flexible in length of time. Strive for mastery, not just conquering a curriculum. Even if you only get through a few rules, it's still "progress," as required by the PA law.