

Excerpted and adapted from: “Parents as Writing Partners”

by Mary Ehrenworth, Deputy Director for Middle Schools, Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

When asked what they struggle with as writers outside of school, lots of kids say things like, “finding a quiet space to write” or “finding any time, ever.” It makes you realize that kids need help getting the television turned off, clearing a table, and managing their jam-packed schedules even more than they need a specific checklist or rubric. Sometimes we don’t talk about the most essential elements that enable kids to thrive academically because we assume they’re a given, but kids are leading ever-busier, more fragmented lives. So double-checking on the essentials can be transformative in and of itself.

A Tool Kit of High-Leverage Strategies

My colleagues at the Reading and Writing Project and I work with parents across the United States and internationally. Everywhere we go, we see that parents want their children to succeed. The lesson is, never underestimate parents. Give them a tool kit of high-leverage, practical tips for coaching writers, and they will be the school’s best resource. Here are some of the major tips for parents to become effective writing partners:

Tip 1: Help writers rehearse their structure.

A lot of parents jump in to help kids at the end of their writing. Lucy Calkins and her colleagues at the Reading and Writing Project (2013) suggest, though, that one of the biggest issues kids have is structuring their writing. To help with that, you want to help at the beginning of the process -- while kids are figuring out how their writing will go. Talking helps kids sort and sequence and correlate. Deanna Kuhn (2011) has shown that this kind of rehearsal has a particularly significant effect on students’ argument writing.

One question parents can ask before kids begin to write is, How will your (story/essay/article) go? Ask them to tell you about the parts. If it’s a story, they’ll often talk about the parts. If it’s a story, they’ll often talk about the beginning, middle, and end. If it’s an argument, they’ll often talk about the claim, the reasons, and the evidence. If it’s informational writing, they’ll often talk about the topic, the subtopics, and the text features. If they don’t talk about these parts, act curious about them.

Sometimes it helps to use your hands while repeating the parts, folding down your fingers or counting across them. Sometimes, as a child names the parts, it is helpful to jot them down and then ask whether one part is going to be more important than the others and, if so, star it. In a narrative, this helps a writer figure out where the heart of the story lives. In an essay, it helps a writer figure out whether the introduction or conclusion will share the most important insight, or what particular piece of evidence will most strongly support the central argument. Just leave that slip of paper in front of your writer before you walk away -- it’s going to help him or her.

PARENT PROMPTS TO HELP KIDS REHEARSE THEIR WRITING

Basic Prompts

- How will your (story/essay/article) go?
- Tell me more about the parts.
- How will it start?
- Then what will come next?
- How do you think you want to end?
- What will be the most important moment in the piece?
- What will be the tricky part -- where might it get confusing? Let me know when you're at that part, and we can talk it out if you want.

More Advanced Prompts

- Try out a couple of leads on me. Let's see which ones really get the reader interested.
- What are you thinking about pacing? How will you control tension?
- Do you want to tell everything at once or let out the details bit by bit?
- What do you want your reader to know right away?
- What do you want your reader to wonder about?
- What are you saving for the ending?
- How are you going to tailor this piece to your audience?
- Do you have to explain any technical vocabulary?
- Is there a particular perspective or point of view you want to represent?
- Will you do anything to acknowledge other points of view in this piece?

Tip 2: Help writers elaborate

When you rehearse with a writer, you also set yourself up to be an expert partner later in the writing process. We often see kids who say a lot more than they write. Maybe they struggle with getting words down on the page or with keyboarding; maybe stamina is an issue; maybe too much time has passed between rehearsal and actually getting their ideas down on paper. When you rehearse with a writer, work on trying to remember what he or she has said so that you'll be prepared later to help with elaboration.

Jot down great phrases or ideas. Keep the notes so that later, if that thinking is not in the writing, you can say (casually), "There was one thing you said that was really cool . . . It was . . . Do you want to get that in here?" Other times, you can't really jot because it just doesn't feel right to whip out a clipboard in the middle of dinner or while you're driving. So work on your concentration and your eery skills. Don't listen with half a mind. Don't look at your phone or glance at your e-mail. Put your worries about your own work out of your head for these few minutes. You need to be able to compare your child's plan for the writing with what he or she actually writes. You need to ask yourself : What parts did y child mention earlier that aren't in here yet?

Transcribing -- writing what a kid is saying while he or she is saying it -- can also catapult a writer into elaboration. "Wait a second, say that again," you'll remark, and then you'll jot down or type every word, and hand it back with "definitely get that part in -- that's great." It's really satisfying for kids who say more than they write to see their words appear as writing. Lots of writers need help sometimes to capture all their thinking.

Mostly, being this kind of writing partner means getting involved at a real partnership level -- caring enough about the piece and the writer to give them authentic, deep attention even in the midst of our frantically busy lives.

PARENT PROMPTS TO HELP KIDS ELABORATE:

- There was something you said before that struck me . . . you have to get that bit in here!
- When you were talking about this, I jotted down this one idea/phrase that was very cool . . . Is this something you want to add?
- Say more about this one part...
- Wait a second, I'm going to jot down what you're saying... Now take this -- see if it works anywhere.
- How did that part we starred [or that part you said was most important] turn out?
- You know, thinking about how strong this piece is, it might be worth thinking about the beginning [or the ending] a little more