

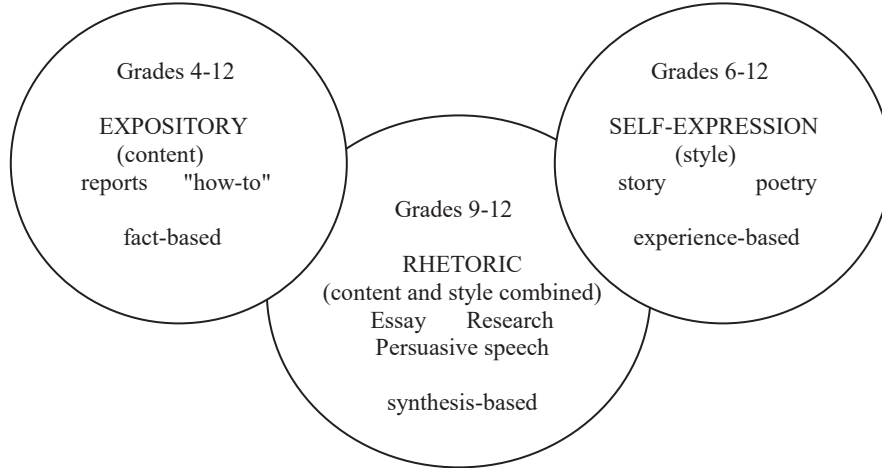
TEACHER 'S GUIDE TO *WORDSMITH*

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL NOT DO:

1. Teach comprehensive grammar. It's assumed that the student will know parts of speech and basic sentence structure. *Wordsmith* will, however, help him apply that knowledge.
2. Teach expository writing (reports, research papers, articles, etc.)--though the principles taught here will help with any kind of writing.
3. Produce an enthusiastic and prolific writer every time--but you may be surprised!

AN OVERVIEW OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT

If I could devise the ideal K-12 writing curriculum, the basic plan would look like this:



Notice that I wouldn't even address the subject of writing until fourth grade. Until then, most children have enough to do just learning to read and make letters. Of course, some take more naturally to writing than others, and that's fine: if they want to scribble stories as soon as they know how to spell their names, let them. But *making* children write stories and essays while they're still trying to learn penmanship only amounts to a lot of heartache with little tangible gain. If you happen to be pulling your hair out over a second-grader's lack of composition skills, RELAX! Concentrate on reading instead. Read to them as much as they read to themselves: let the patterns of good literature fill their heads before asking for literature from their pencils.

Around fourth grade, or maybe even fifth, children can move naturally from reading to writing. At this age the emphasis should be on content--*what* they write, not necessarily *how*, as long as they are producing complete sentences and reasonably coherent paragraphs. Also, their writing should be mostly fact-based--reports on what they read or what they do. There's a lot of interest these days in probing the emotions of young children: getting them to express how they feel about things. Of course young children have feelings, but they are not necessarily equipped to analyze them and don't always feel comfortable doing so. Most elementary-age children are interested in learning facts, not pondering or agonizing over them.

But this stage doesn't last. I have taught writing to upper-elementary grades and junior-high grades, back to back, and the contrast is striking. The younger class may contain woolgatherers and cut-ups, but if I am halfway interesting their attention is directed at me. Once they cross that line into junior high, their attention is directed sideways--all of a sudden they're more interested in each other than in me!

This is the age when kids start asking, *Who am I?* You may not hear it in so many words, but when your daughter wails that she can't do anything right, or your son demands more privileges, that's the basic question: what are my strengths, weaknesses, and limits? They begin to look to their peers for answers, judging what kind of person they are by the responses they get from others. That's why I consider grades 6-8 the optimum time for learning self-expression through writing. Not only *can* they do it now, but they *need* to do it now.

Wordsmith is written for students at the "Who Am I?" stage, but before returning to them, allow me to address the last circle briefly: Rhetoric. That word has an unsavory reputation these days: "just rhetoric" refers to a speech that sounds good and means little. But true rhetoric is a noble accomplishment, and I consider it the ultimate goal of teaching composition, in high school and beyond. Rhetoric is simply presenting the writer's point of view, logically and effectively. It balances reason with passion and brings together the two sides of our nature. If a student can clearly and winningly express a reasonable point of view, in writing, on a variety of subjects that mean something to her, that's what I call success.

WHAT THIS BOOK WAS DESIGNED TO DO:

Creative writing, in the simplest terms, is **expressing oneself**: communicating what is inside to the world outside. Expository writing is from the head; creative writing is from the heart.

Why is this important? After all, most school assignments are of the expository type: factual and objective. In an information age, the demand will increase for articulate writers who can communicate information clearly, without artistic frills or "creative" flourishes. So why bother with creative writing at all?

The distinction between head and heart is not as clear-cut as it may appear. Human beings are integrated beings. Head and heart are made to work together. The most memorable non-fiction is not dry, but charged with life and emotional appeal. The best fiction is grounded in concrete incident and detail, not vague flights of fancy. The major principles addressed in this book apply to both types of writing:

Use the tools of language (vocabulary and syntax) to your advantage.

Bring your subject into sharp focus.

Anchor your writing in concrete detail; don't generalize.

Creative writing is a good place to start learning these principles because your students have all the needed materials close at hand--language and experience. They will be starting where they are.

But no one is born knowing how to write. Though some are gifted with exceptional literary talent, even the most naturally gifted young writer must learn the craft in order to write well. Writing is a craft before it rises to the level of an art. This is an important distinction: art may be the purview of the gifted, but a craft is simply an acquired skill. To learn a craft, you gather the tools, learn to use

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them, and practice your technique. Because all humans possess the tools--the great gift of language--anybody, with practice, can learn to express himself or herself in written words.

Wordsmith is designed to help young people sharpen their language skills and put those skills to imaginative use. A motivated student could work through the book without much supervision, but it's a sad fact that many students are *not* motivated to write. Josh may be able to take apart his clock radio and put it back together so that it works better than before, but when faced with a blank page he can only despair of tomorrow. Kelli may be a math whiz and a precocious reader, but constructing more than two paragraphs seems beyond her. Writing is simply hard work.

Why should writing be any more difficult for students than figuring areas or labeling flower diagrams? Why is it that many of them just can't seem to get started? My theory is that they have too much to work with. The problem, not just for children but for adults too, is not of scarcity but of glut. Rather than having too little to write about, we all have experienced more than any book could hold, and further, our language contains hundreds of thousands of words to express that experience.

The purpose of *Wordsmith* is to help children pare this huge task down to a manageable size. The burden of learning falls mainly on them, but you, the teacher, have an important role to play as encourager, sounding board, critic and sometimes conscience ("Where's that writing assignment you were supposed to turn in today?"). You are also a fellow traveler--the best teachers learn right along with their students.

THE *WORDSMITH* APPROACH

Part One focuses on word usage. Much of this is familiar ground to children who have studied grammar since second grade. But rather than the familiar drill about what the parts of speech are, they'll learn how to use and expand their vocabulary to advantage. Special emphasis is given to nouns and verbs as the "building blocks" of language, to choosing effective adjectives, to the proper use of adverbs, to the function of prepositions, and to the pronoun-antecedent relationship.

Part Two is about sentences--strong vs. weak constructions, active and passive voice, and how to achieve sentence variety in a paragraph. This section in no way covers the entire subject of sentence construction, but is intended to introduce new possibilities inherent in it. The subject-switching "formula" at the bottom of page 35, for example, is a useful tool for breaking old patterns.

In **Part Three** the student leaves exercises behind and tackles longer writing assignments. This is where adult involvement is especially helpful, because few youngsters are apt to voluntarily do all the revision and rewriting necessary to produce their best work. Each division of Part Three contains some practice work followed by at least two formal assignments. In general, the first of these assignments will be based on the student's personal experience while the last will require transferring that experience to an imaginary situation. Reluctant writers are more the rule than the exception, but don't be surprised if an occasional project fires a child's imagination or engages his heart. Sometimes a simple device, like changing a point of view or revising an opening sentence, can open up new worlds to a young mind. I've seen it happen in the most reluctant writers.

If, by the end of the book, you still have a reluctant writer on your hands, remember that not all of us are called to produce novels or stories or magazine articles. Almost certainly he or she will have learned something about using written language, a basic and irreplaceable skill that seems to be

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eroding in our electronic age. My goal is to clear up some of the mystery and help students draw from and express the rich source material they carry with them.

But remember, practice is the key to learning almost anything. *Wordsmith* tries to teach some helpful pointers and guidelines, but no child will become a writer just by working through the course. The only way to learn to write well is to do lots of writing. This book is only a start.

HOW TO USE *WORDSMITH*

The course may be completed in three to nine months (or longer), depending on the student's age, aptitude, interest, and workload. This teacher's guide paces the work through one 36-week school year, including at least a little practice every day except Friday (with a few exceptions). Student assignments are boxed. All suggestions are merely that--you may copy them as is into your schedule book or adapt them to fit your needs.

The review quizzes are included to remind the student of material covered weeks before. Since there is no one right answer to any of the questions, grading is subjective. I would grade mostly on effort. Discuss the student's answers but correct only the ones that you think are especially weak. I've included some sentence and paragraph rewrites at the end of this guide for the sake of comparison, but my answers are by no means the "right" ones.

While working through the course, be on the lookout for good literature that illustrates the principles taught, such as using strong verbs or incorporating sensory detail. This helps students realize that the rules they are learning are not just *my* idea--all good writers use them!

ABOUT REVISION

Revision is an inexact science; most writers end up trusting their instincts as to what "sounds" good to them. Experienced instincts can often be trusted, but a beginner needs guidance in making intelligent choices--a responsibility which will likely fall to you. Don't be surprised if your own beginner resents the intrusion. "I have to say it my own way," is the usual line, and the more serious a young writer is about her work, the more sincere her protest will be. However, while it's true that every writer must develop a personal style, that development does not occur entirely within the feverish workings of her own imagination.

Tell your budding young artist that every writer, even (name a favorite author here) has to subject his or her work to criticism and apply the editor's suggestions. You may not consider yourself a good judge of literature, but you've read more than a 12-year-old and probably have better instincts than you think. In the first months, you as teacher will play a large role in the revision process, but by the end of the course the student should be taking more of that responsibility. If she doesn't like your "interference," reassure her that greater artistic freedom will be hers down the road, as long as she uses certain basic, proven and time-honored principles.

HOW TO REVISE

The easiest approach is to read the paper first for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors, mark them with the dreaded red ink, and require the student to correct them before going further.

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I'll admit, I've recommended this sequence in the past because it gives the teacher some confidence that she knows what she's doing. But the student's confidence may be more important. I firmly believe that the rules should be followed and mechanics are important, but the first goal of this course is to encourage young people to write. Too much red ink on a paper can knock the wind out of them before they've even made a start!









So focus on *content* first. This involves how well the student expressed his thoughts, how those thoughts were arranged, where the impact seems weaker than it should have been, where another choice of words, more detail, or a direct quote might have helped. My three rules for revision are these:

1. **Find something to compliment**, even if it's only the fact that the left margin is straight. Every small step forward, every attempt at improvement should be recognized.

2. **Avoid the word "But--"**. Children develop an uncanny sense of where that word is going to fall. A sensitive writer will wait for it, as a condemned man waits before the firing squad. No matter how many compliments you've showered on a composition, as long as the student knows this is an editing session he'll be waiting for that word. So make a conscious effort to avoid it. Instead of, "Your opening sentence is good, but this description seems weak," you could say, "I'm glad you mentioned the dress. Is there anything else you could say about it?" Instead of, "I like the way you described the race, but you could have a stronger verb here," say, "Can you think of a better action word here than 'went'?" *Ask questions*: that helps to get students involved in the revision process, which is what you want anyway. Your goal is to teach them to do it for themselves, not to become their permanent editor.

3. **Don't try to fix everything**. Don't make that paper bleed red ink--it can be very discouraging to a tender heart who doesn't enjoy writing anyway. Isolate on one or two major problems and work on correcting those. During the months of writing adventures ahead, you should have time to address the rest.

While we're on the subject of editing, several symbols are standard in the publishing industry and in the schools. It's a good idea to learn and use them, if you don't already:

	Delete word or short phrase		Reverse letter or word order
	Delete longer phrase or sentence		Capitalize
	Delete or change circled punctuation		Lower-case
	Start new paragraph		Insert (letter, word, phrase, or sentence)

Once the paper is edited and corrected to the satisfaction of both the teacher and the writer, it's time to make a final copy, typed or neatly written. Now is the time to correct the technical errors, like spelling and punctuation. Misspelled words should go on a list; persistent grammatical errors can become the subject of a short remedial lesson. At least some assignments should be typed and printed. Print just *looks* different from script, and it can give the student a fresh and startling view of his own work.

Student critiques--evaluations by classmates or siblings--can be helpful. Some students may try a

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little harder if they know they are writing for their peers, and at the end of this guide I'll give some suggestions for setting up a writer's club for that very purpose. But peer review at this age means "amateur assessment." It's no substitute for honest evaluation by an experienced reader: you!

SUGGESTED PLAN OF STUDY FOR WORDSMITH -36 WEEKS

It's a good idea to keep all *Wordsmith* writing assignments together as long as you continue this course. Invest in a three-ring binder or a sturdy portfolio with pockets. This will make it easier to check assignments against guidelines in the book, or compare current assignments with previous ones, or rewrite pieces written weeks earlier.

WEEK 1.

Monday

Read and be ready to talk about the Introduction.

If you have a good-quality print of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, perhaps in a history text (and you can always find one online), it may be helpful to look at it with the student and pay close attention to the composition. Notice how the line and light emphasize the figure of Washington, and speculate on what the effect might have been if the artist had highlighted some other part of the picture and left Washington in the shadows. The point of this illustration is to introduce some of the possibilities of creative writing--not just getting suitable words on paper, but *choosing* words to build to a climax, make a point, provoke a thought or a laugh. There are at least as many dimensions to writing as there are to painting, and literature can be as "pictorial" as visual art.

Tuesday-Wednesday

Write an essay two double-spaced pages long entitled, "What I Did Last Summer."

("Two *pages!* I can't write two whole pages!") This topic is almost guaranteed to produce a boring paper, and that's exactly the point. If summer is too far away, assign another topic equally broad, such as "School," or "I Like Sports." Give no guidelines, and when the assignment is completed, make no corrections other than spelling and grammatical errors. Keep this paper in the creative writing folder—we'll refer back to it a couple of times. By the end of the course, the student should be favorably impressed with her progress.

Thursday

Read pages 1-3 and complete Exercise 1-A.

WEEK 2. By this time in the student's school career, there should be no confusion about what nouns are. The goal in this section is to emphasize the use of specific, concrete nouns over general ones.

Monday