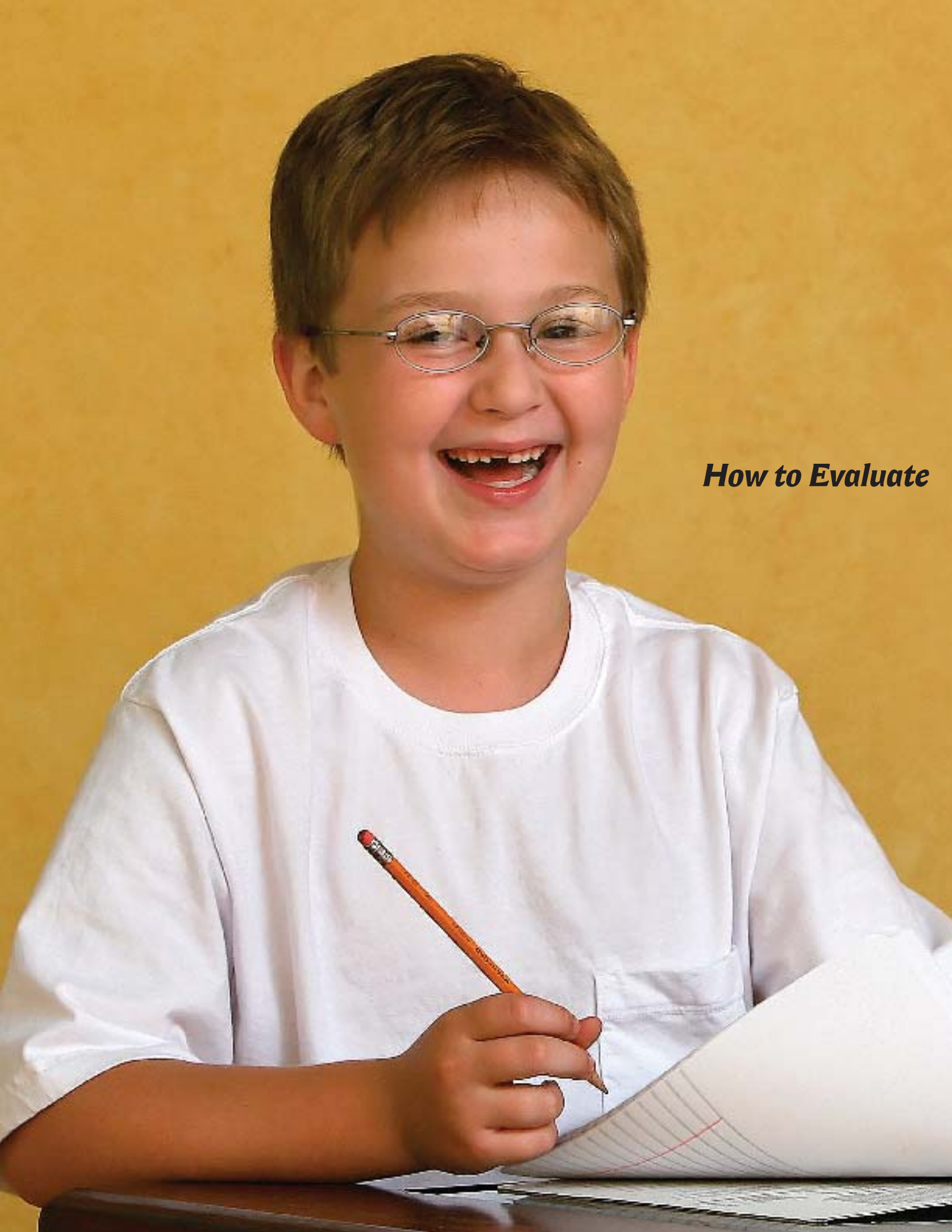


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How to Evaluate

Your Child's

WRITING

by Sandra Garant

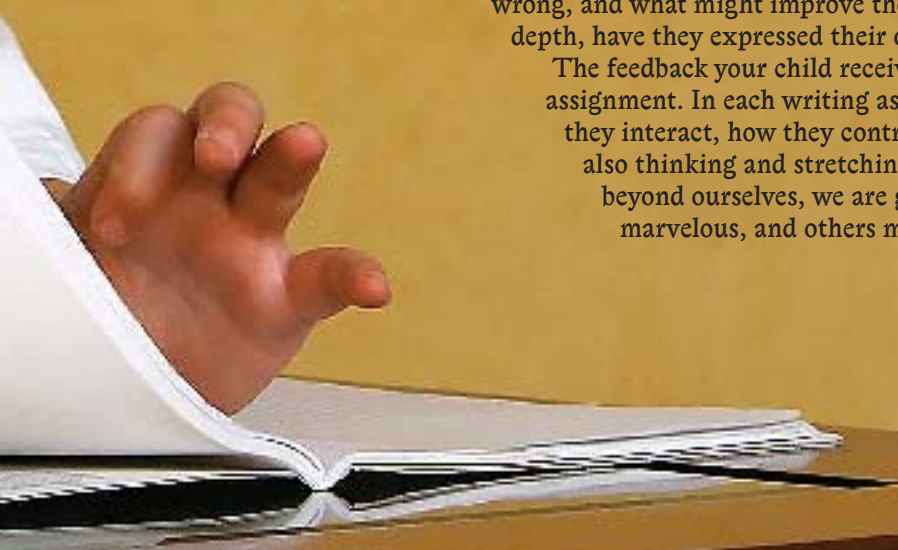
Why Evaluations are Critical to Writing Success



Writing is more than words on paper; the essay and story are greater than the sum of spelling and grammar. Excellent spelling and perfect grammar are not enough. They are important, yet they are not enough because quality writing needs organization, insight, and depth. The extent to which these elements are applied to the writing will depend upon the writer's age and ability. An eight year old will not usually be capable of the insights and abstract thinking that a thirteen year old will be able to express.

All writers need feedback. They need to know what they are doing right, what they are doing wrong, and what might improve their writing. Is their writing organized, does it contain depth, have they expressed their own unique viewpoint?

The feedback your child receives can be more valuable than any particular writing assignment. In each writing assignment, your child is playing with words, seeing how they interact, how they contrast, how they can be stretched and reshaped. Your child is also thinking and stretching intellectual limits. When we play, experiment, and reach beyond ourselves, we are going to make mistakes. Some of these mistakes may be marvelous, and others may just be messy.



For instance, how would you evaluate the following:

In my room is a wooden bed
In my room is a wooden bed with a fluffy pillow
In my room is a wooden bed with a fluffy pillow and a pink blanket
In my room is a wooden bed with a fluffy pillow and a pink blanket and a scruffy bear
In my room is a wooden bed with a fluffy pillow and a pink blanket and a scruffy bear that Grandma gave me. I love Grandma.

Do you start marking the missing punctuation, or do you marvel at the wonderful use of repetition and the meaning expressed in these simple sentences?

The point of writing is to express ourselves, to communicate information and emotions, to develop communion with one another. The point of evaluating writing is to encourage that self-expression, the exchange of information and emotions, and communion between two minds.

Proofreading vs. Evaluating

You are not a professional proofreader, and your child's writing is not going to be published at this point. This is a learning experience and a writing experiment. Your child's writing does **not** have to be perfect. Your child's writing does not have to be perfect. **It does not have to be perfect.** Professional writers rely on proofreaders because their writing is not perfect. Think of yourself as a writing coach rather than a proofreader.

Proofreading is important, but I have seen too much emphasis placed on getting the technical elements right to the loss of the content. Trying to coordinate spelling, grammar, and meaningful flowing sentences is like juggling.

I can almost guarantee you that if you insist on perfection, you are going to end up with a very discouraged child who balks at writing. That problem can be solved but in another article.

I hope you would not take a red pen to your child's artwork and slash it about this way and that. That type of an evaluation does not encourage and improve a child's art, and it doesn't always do much for writing either. **Please use a blue, purple, or green pen to evaluate your child's writing.** Try not to slash through it. If the writing is saved in a file on your computer, insert comments in a different color (not red, but pink is okay) within the lines or at the end.

Example: A fat bear scared a fat dog that scared a fat cat that ate a fat rat that ate a fat piece of cheese.

Recommendation: This is a bit short. It ends too quickly. I did not specify a particular length, but it would be more interesting if it contained something slightly unpredictable. I know you have a spunky personality. Let that show up in your writing.

If the writing is on paper, you might underline a word or phrase or use parenthesis to mark it. If the same mistake is made again and again, do not mark each instance. Mark the first one and then make a comment at the end of the page: **Watch out for words needing capital letters. Your punctuation needs repair. Review the usage of commas.**

Evaluate by noting what was done correctly, what was done incorrectly, and what can be done to improve the writing. Try to balance these so that you don't have ten mistakes and recommendations vs. one well done. Make it clear that recommenda-

tions are not necessarily mistakes. This kind of evaluation takes time, but your child will learn and be encouraged by it.

The Inklings were a famous group of talented writers—C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien, and a few others—who got together to read and comment on each other's work. They needed to talk about their writing and share it. They weren't proofreading or grading each other's work; they were appreciating, criticizing, and encouraging each other. That is the goal of your evaluations for your own child.

Praise

There is always something to praise in writing. Find it!

Sometimes beginning writers do not know what they are doing right until you point it out. Maybe the writing is well-organized and easy to read. Perhaps the title is creative. Maybe a difficult word was spelled correctly. Perhaps the description or dialogue is excellent even if the punctuation is terrible. Maybe one sentence shows great insight. Perhaps the beginning is excellent.

Example: One of my students wrote in great detail about her younger brother. She outdid herself on this assignment with the details. I was pleasantly surprised. Obviously his misdeeds are very near to her heart. Here's what I wrote: **Very clear specific images here. You do a great job of proving your point that he gets into trouble and causes trouble for others. I like the way you arranged the material. You draw the reader along and continue to explain why he is a bully and troublesome in increasingly dire deeds. Well done.**

Another student wrote a description of a birthday party, using all five senses. Here's what she did correctly: **I can tell that you used your imagination to write this. Thank you for adding a title to your paragraph. I like the little details you added, such as the coconut-flavored cake, the candles in the shape of the numeral 100, and the sound of the candles. Good going!**

Always notice when your child adds details. Always notice it. Details are the rays that enlighten the reader. Readers are blind until the writer gives them details to kick-start the imagination. **So praise those details.**

Praise any clear specific images, such as the ones I underlined in this excerpt from a recycled fairy tale:

Once upon a time there was a young pig called Melody. Melody was not afraid of the Big Bad Wolf, she was not afraid of the Wicked Witch, and she was not afraid of her stepmother. Melody was worried about floods.

So Melody found a big beautiful oak tree in an enchanted forest that was overrun with handsome princes. They had a lot of free time because Sleeping Beauty and Snow White had already been rescued. Melody hired the men to build a tree house thirty feet up in the oak tree.

The princes hauled up the mahogany wood and the nails and the shingles and the stained glass windows. The Big Bad Wolf bit one of the princes on the leg, but Melody whacked him with a sledgehammer, and he let go and ran off howling. The Wicked Witch sent a terrible rainstorm that ruined the mahogany, but Melody's stepmother filed a lawsuit against the witch for damages.

Praise efforts at applying information from other lessons. For example, if you have studied quotation marks, and your child uses them, praise that effort. If you recently studied a

particular time period or a particular geographic location, and your child applies that information to the assignment, encourage that kind of connection. Writing requires this interplay. And that is why writing is so difficult for children—they have very little experience to draw upon. The experience and knowledge a writer has accumulated deepen the writing. If a writer has little experience, the writing will necessarily be thin. Any time your child manages to include some particular knowledge, you want to encourage and praise that effort.

Mistakes

Make sure the mistake is a mistake. Is your child experimenting? Have you covered that particular lesson yet? Do not mark off for grammar, spelling, or other information that a child has not learned yet. If your child is writing a conversation and has never had a lesson on quotation marks, then please do not “correct” that. Make a mental note to teach quotations soon.

If you have not covered point of view, then do not count point of view errors as mistakes. For example, if your child is writing from a first person point of view, and his character Rex falls asleep during the story, and then Rex continues to describe what else is happening while he is asleep, that is an “error,” but not one for the mistake column. Although the lack of logic might be obvious to you, a child may not remember that “I” is the character in the story. To remember that requires concentrated abstract thinking. You might mention it in the recommendations.

One of my students wrote a story about a soldier going off to war. It was obvious from the plot that she lacked knowledge about the military, but that is not information I would expect a nine year old to have. She did an excellent job of using dialogue to reveal her characters and their emotions. She used description, tension, and sounds to draw the reader into the action. She put a lot of effort into writing the story and applying **what she did know** and that effort showed. Her story would have been better if she had known that soldiers have to go through intensive training and that they can’t go home when the battle is over, but I did not even mention that in the recommendations. That kind of knowledge will come later; it is not a mistake.

If the writing sounds like “fill in the blank,” count that as a mistake. This is writing that you want to discourage. An assignment on description may result in: I smell flowers. I touch the dirt. I taste sweat. I feel tired. I see grass and leaves. I hear birds singing.

This assignment needs to be redone. Ask your child specific questions to revise this style of writing: **What kind of flowers did you smell? Why were you touching the dirt? Were you planting flowers? Where were you? Do you like flowers?**

Count as a mistake any grammar and spelling errors that you have studied. Count as a mistake any errors that could have been found by proofreading if you have taught your child how to proofread. For instance, one of my students changed

a character’s name in the middle of the story. If your child has the sun setting in the east, that would be an error. If the character is running home and parks his bike in the garage, that would be an internal error.

Point out changes in verb tense. Typically, writers use past tense for stories and present tense for nonfiction. Beginning writers can get confused and switch tenses, especially if they include dialogue, as in the following: Ben walked home with his best friend. “Al,” he said, “Let’s go play ball tomorrow.” “Sure,” agrees Al. “Let’s do it.” They reach Al’s home and say good-bye. Al goes in and Ben walked back to his own house. He is thinking about tomorrow.

The narrative should be all past tense—Ben **walked** home, “Sure,” **agreed** Al, They **reached** Al’s home and **said** good-bye, Al **went** in, He **thought** about tomorrow. The dialogue in this case should be present tense, although it could also be past or future depending upon the conversation, as in “Did you get that new bat you wanted?” Ben asked. “No, but I **will** once I’ve saved enough money,” Al said. I generally count this as a mistake if the writer is over the age of 11 because by that time, most children should have developed an ear for changes in verbs.

Disregarding directions should be counted as mistakes. If a student leaves out a section of the assignment or fails to answer the question, then those are mistakes.

With children in the elementary grades, choose one or two elements to mark as errors. **Do not try to correct everything at once.** It is too overwhelming. Remember that the writing does not have to be perfect. You might focus on punctuation and organization. Leave the spelling

errors alone. Next time you might focus on spelling and a lack of details.

What is the most important element or error in the particular writing you are evaluating? Draw attention to that.

Example: If people had wheels instead of feet(,) we could race from place to place. People would look strange and would not need there shoes. We might need oil, so we would smell funny(,) and we might squeek if we didn’t get oiled. We would not have as many cars. We would need people lanes. People would have to be careful not to run into each other() (S)some people would knock over littler people.

The punctuation and the weak ending would be the mistakes to focus on in this paragraph. Leave the spelling errors alone. The paragraph does have some excellent details and a strong beginning. Weak endings seem to be a common error—students get tired and stop thinking, or they just haven’t figured out how to wrap up their topic.

Children in sixth grade and up can handle more error messages, but again, choose the major problems. Try not to nitpick the technical points, especially when they are trying a new writing style or challenge. **Save the thorough-going proofreading for the last year or two of high school.**



Recommendations

Recommendations are the most difficult part of the evaluation. You are making suggestions in this category, not making corrections. **How can the writing be strengthened?**

Here is a basic checklist of what to look for:

1. Are the sentences vague?
2. Can the reader visualize the information?
3. Does the beginning immediately catch the reader's attention?
4. Does the middle prove a point, develop characters or situations, or otherwise draw the reader deeper into the writing?
5. Does the end solve plot problems or wrap up the point being made?
6. Is the material easy to follow and well-organized?
7. Does the writing enlighten the reader?
8. Is the writing impersonal (like a textbook), or does it reveal something about the writer's personality?

When you make recommendations, if possible, suggest at least two options. By doing that, you stress that the writer needs to make choices, and that sometimes, no one particular answer is the right one.

Example on a paragraph about dinosaurs: **The ending is weak, which would not be as noticeable if you had not had such a strong beginning. If you will read your paragraph aloud and leave off the last two sentences, perhaps you can tell that the paragraph is stronger without them. You could also rewrite the last two sentences, making them more specific. They are too general to help your reader get a clear image.**

How could you make the last two sentences more specific? Perhaps you could describe a dinosaur that looked like a chicken following the sentence on taste. Or you could describe a dinosaur that would feed a whole village of people, like the brontosaurus.

Don't be surprised if the evaluation is longer than the writing assignment!

Weak endings are a very common problem with young writers, and there are several ways to repair them. Try to give specific suggestions, instead of saying "rewrite the weak ending." **This ending is weak because it fades away. Make a positive statement about your reaction to the situation. How do you feel about it?**

Trying to cover too much ground in too little space is another common problem. This example skims the surface and neglects the in-depth details in the following paragraph: I like to dance, but it can be hard. Getting to meet people is great. Another part is just the music. One of the hard parts is remembering the steps. While I'm dancing, I have to look perfect and the steps are challenging. You have to pay attention to a lot of different things to dance well. You can't get nervous before the judges.

Recommendations: You have the beginnings of a great paragraph or even essay on dancing. You would just have to dig deeper to share this experience with your reader. If you know that you have a very limited amount of time to write, you must really narrow down your topic. You could have spent the whole ten minutes just describing how to perform one step. What

do you look at when doing a step? What do you hear or is that even important? How you feel when doing a step would be very important. What is it like to perform before a judge? What are you doing with your hands?

You may decide to make some recommendations mandatory. Clearly mark these. For example, if your child's paragraph contains too many punctuation errors, then make a note for a mandatory review of punctuation. If the images are too vague, and this has become an on-going problem even after you have prompted your child in previous writing, then make the revision mandatory. If your child did not follow the directions, make the revision mandatory.

What About Second Drafts?

Getting students to write second drafts is very difficult. They simply do not want to do it, but second drafts are often necessary. No one writes perfectly the first time every time. What often happens is that students will make one or two tiny little changes on the second draft. They cannot see what changes to make unless the recommendations are specific.

To help your child get used to making revisions, begin with **oral revisions**. These take less time and are almost as effective as the rewriting. They are not quite as effective as rewriting because the improvement will be momentary and thus less obvious.

Example: I would have a student who wrote something similar to the dancing paragraph describe orally to me what dancing in front of a judge is like. I would have a student tell me a stronger ending for a paragraph with a weak ending.

In the case of grammatical revisions, you can also have your child read the correct punctuation into the sentences, as in "Capital I am not hungry, comma are you? question mark" for *I am not hungry, are you?* This reading of the punctuation sharply focuses the attention on the grammar, and most students do not seem to mind trying this novel approach to grammar.

The child can write shorter assignments that are of high quality rather than simply writing to get an arbitrary amount of words on paper. These shorter assignments are also easier to evaluate and to revise when necessary.

Through this method of evaluation, your child will learn from mistakes, realize strong points in writing, and make choices when revising writing. Evaluating should be a positive encouraging experience. Remember that your child has just put much time and effort into an assignment, and that effort should be valued by both the child and the teacher. Too often all that work is simply checked and recorded and never truly appreciated by a reader. Be that appreciative audience for your child and your child will come to enjoy writing because writers need readers.

Sandra Garant is the mother of three, author of Creative Communications, and a writing tutor. Visit her website for writing workshops, monthly book discussions, word games, and more: www.workshopsbyemail.com. Sandra is a member of CHC's support team at Mom-to-Mom Connections and is available to answer your writing-related questions: www.chcweb.com.