

WHERE'S THE PAIN?
Why writing can be so difficult for gifted children

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INTRODUCTION

The disconcerting and all too familiar mantra: “But you are so smart, you have so much potential. We do not understand why you are refusing to do this!” is one I often hear from the parents of highly verbally gifted children during the first years of elementary school. The heart-felt question-concern-demand is most often about *writing*. Enmeshed in the complex hopes and dreams of family, many gifted children who genuinely care to do their best and thus please their parents and teachers, fall prey to a developmental conundrum which seems reserved for them. If they accept the concern and pressure; if they take on the projected hopes and dreams of their parents and their parents’ parents, they enter into an endless vicious circle of caring and intention leading mostly to paralysis and frustration.

I. BEGINNINGS

The Learning Process Sources of The Problem

Gifted children learn early and quickly. Verbally gifted children are able to put many of their thoughts into words so as to be understood [by parents] very early in life, well before adults in their culture require or expect. Many have oral-motor skills to enable them to adjust their rate of speaking reasonably well to their verbal-thinking rate. [For many gifted and/or spatially gifted children, the leap from mental *image* to physical representation is much greater, one which is often delayed or avoided all together. This is illustrated by so many gifted children who decide by age four or five that they *cannot draw*.]

As they have achieved a state of relative equilibrium of ‘speaking their minds’ at ages two to four, or five, many gifted children experience one of the first, if not *the first* great, long-lived [hopefully not chronic] barrier to personal expression *writing*.

II. CONTENT

1. What writing feels like:

The physical act of writing and its effects

The title “Where’s the Pain?” comes from a demonstration I have utilized with elementary-age children who struggle with writing. First, I tell them that we are going to figure out why writing is so painful for them. They immediately deny this [thinking I must be a bit crazy] and assure me that it is not really *painful!*” I disagree with their response. I say: “But you are a nice, caring person, you try your best, there really must be something very painful about writing that keeps you from doing it.”

I ask them to tell me “something interesting or funny that occurred in the past few days.” After negotiating for a few minutes about what might qualify as being ‘good enough’ I ask them to tell me about the experience, allowing them only 15 to 20 seconds to speak. I then stop them and say: “O.K., would you please write down exactly what you just said?”

At times, it feels to me as if I am pushing the envelope to its very edge of their tolerance, since it appears to be a terrible trick, such a terrible thing to ask.

2. What writing looks like:

Problems resulting from the visible product on the page

Rarely does a child get through the first *word* before grimacing and erasing. Writing down 15 to 20 seconds of speaking requires 3 2 to 4 2 minutes. And at the end, what they have written inevitably appears sloppy, minimal, and unimpressive. As we look, together, at the results of their efforts on the page between us, it is at this moment that I state the point of the demonstration. I state, dramatically: *“Is it any wonder that you hate writing?!”*

3. Contrast, Discrepancy, & Discouragement:

The frustration which inevitably results from the sample of words on the page that is an inadequate and unrepresentative sample of thoughts

Especially sensitive gifted children have completely refused to write as far along as second grade. One such student told me: “Anything I write can never be correct. It will never be what I am thinking.” His parents and teacher called him incredibly stubborn. I thought of him as amazingly caring and resilient. As I so frequently have to suggest to parents or teachers: “If he/she did not care so much about their work, there would be no problem.”

This is one among many circumstances in the lives of children in which we coach them to think and behave in ways that are appropriate for many situations which they encounter, but are absolutely wrong for others. Unfortunately parents most often do not recognize this, and therefore cannot point out the difference to their children. It is as if they were saying: “Yes, we love your ideas, we love how hard you try and how much you care about all the things that you do.”

Then, suddenly, when it comes to new learning and/or new performance [the demonstration of skill] parents expect the same child to adapt a new point of view. Again, as if they were able to say: “When necessary, have a good attitude about new learning, be comfortable making errors, do not be concerned if your efforts do not result in impressive [‘knock-our-socks-off’] results, as has been the case with everything that came before.” Writing: printing or cursive, becomes one of the first significant victims resulting from the conundrum of raising gifted and unique children in a perfectionist, competitive, measure-everything, world.

III. SOLUTIONS

1. Recognizing, validating the problem

Describing writing as a painful experience to children stuck in the throes of it, does not result in less effort, or caring, but results in learning the correct way to care and greater effort.

2. Tools -

New approaches to the physical act of writing

1. Any writing implement is a tool. Children who dislike writing always have the same answer when asked what they with: “a pencil.” The generic pencil to which they refer is generic. It exists without their personal interest, investment, or telling. It is not the right tool.

3. Attitude –

Improving goals and expectations about writing.

4. Cognitive Transitions -

Techniques to transfer thoughts from the brain to the page.

- A. Transforming thoughts into pictures
- B. Bits and pieces - breaking up, breaking down strategies
- C. Webbing - guiding thinking toward written words
- D. Mental tricks - taking one’s self out of the story; the “get-fired technique.”

5. Judgment -

Learning how to form useful opinions about one’s own writing.

A. Do not underestimate the power of negative thinking...that is, your ability to throw yourself off task before you begin, based on your own negative expectations.

A. Primary Rule is also the Greatest Barrier:

“You cannot create and criticize yourself at the same time.”

It is important to start thinking differently about one’s own writing. The various breaking-down, webbing, outlining and other similar methods intended to help transfer thoughts to the page do not confront a second discrepancy-caused type of problem. That is the great contrast between the initial formation-of-ideas phase, or brainstorming phase, and the much shorter, more focused creation-of-final-product. We encounter a paradox in which the more intensely a child cares about his/her initial idea-development suggestions, the stronger will be his/her

WTP, Dr. Doug Kutner

feelings of disappointment or frustration as they approach the end product. Without careful attention to, and guidance about the contrast between initial and appropriate final product (which is so critical to feeling successful), we are unwittingly sowing seeds of disappointment.

And, has been discussed in numerous other contexts about gifted-ness: competitiveness, performance expectations, and other dilemmas of young students in American culture which make the measurable-final-product the primary determinant of value, is a pre-existing problem in itself.

We must try to focus on process; what the process of writing should feel like and look like.

To briefly illustrate, consider the following examples, contrasting the most ineffective and frustrating approach to writing with the most psychologically promising approach:

Example One:

“Nobody asked VanGogh: Paint ‘’Starry Night,’ again. He painted it, that’s it!” [Joni Mitchell, “Miles of Aisles” live concert album].

After the topic has been decided and/or research is done, Johnny B. Rigid begins to write. The goal is to write “The world’s best, most perfect, introductory paragraph, the first time.” He has absolutely no intention of editing [“outlining,” and “editing” seem to be curse words for most all of the children and teens I work with and have quizzed]. This, of course, is virtually impossible, therefore his experience is to feel completely stuck.

This is not laziness. It is a dilemma. This is a painful state of mental and emotional confusion caused by lack of judgment, because we do not teach children at the appropriate level of detail, how to understand the writing process. It rarely seems to occur that children are taught in a manner appropriately attuned to their level of conscious thought. We seem to underestimate the difficulty gifted children have of transferring words, concepts, or life events, from their realm of conscious thinking through the many cognitive steps required to arrive at a satisfactory rendition in the form of the written word.

Neither do we enable them to discriminate and choose between moments of ‘just-doing-and-not-criticizing’ their own work from ‘stepping-back- and-using-critical- judgment’ [editing] their own work.

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Example Two:

Fiona I.S. Flexible is accustomed to friends laughing and adults responding with surprise or anger, when they encounter her for the first time, sitting in front of a computer. Whether in school or at home, Fiona often types into a blank screen. Virtually every first time observer seems to be impressed by the speed at which this third grader types, but their verbal reactions are always about the blank screen in front of which she is typing. Positive comments they might have made about her obvious typing prowess are pushed aside by the blank computer monitor.

Fiona types into a blank monitor because she has learned a very valuable method of circumventing her intense desires to do everything perfectly. Someone had suggested to her that since she can never hope to write anything absolutely correctly the first time, she might try writing blindly. “It is just that simple, you cannot criticize, demean, insult, make fun of, or put- down, something that you cannot see. What a relief!

Sometimes Fiona looks at her writing the same day, sometimes a day later. When Fiona decides to print her document for the first time [sometimes before, sometimes after reviewing it] she prints it on pink paper. That way nobody, not her parents, her teacher, or even her older brother will mistake it for ‘something final, or what she really means to write,’ so she does not have worry about it. Sometimes there is a second but not final, printing which might be on yellow.

Fiona has figured out, as well, who the best parent is to show each writing project, and who the best parent is to ask for help when she is stuck. She has even determined how to decide when she has finished.

Some projects are finished when Fiona runs out of time. Others when she has nothing more to say. Occasionally, her project looks so good that she feels that there is nothing left to improve. Somehow, Fiona has even learned that when she is thinking more and more ideas about a project, it does not mean that she is not finished and should keep on writing. She has accepted that she will never run out of ideas, she will always be able to think of something more to say, if she tries.

Even then, however, Fiona has learned never to print on white paper until the last possible moment before it must be submitted. And to never show it to her brother.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

1. Teachers can help children to deal with their mistakes:

A. Change the meaning, change the grade

“If you turn any written work minus any errors, your grade cannot be better than ‘B.’ If you want an ‘A’ do your usual careful, thoughtful work, and be sure to leave a few errors in it. This must be presented with conviction. I perceive our culture to be extremely competitive and oriented toward unattainable perfection. Perfection may take the form of a 4.0 +; beating someone/everyone; or a highly respected adult telling you so. Children or teens locked into perfectionist expectations appear, most of the time, to not care about their work, or effort, at all.

B. Provide Pre-committed Errors:

Provide your student with one or two sheets of paper, one if writing assignment is two or less pages, two pages to provide front and back pages, and make some permanent marks on those pages. Offer a misspelled name or word, either on line or plain white. We must be a bit creative here, matching the type of errors and type of paper to the grade level and type of task. In this manner, you are modeling at least two useful behaviors:

1. You, the teacher, must try to model that you are not afraid to make errors or to write, or receive papers with errors. Challenge your class to catch your errors, for which there may be a fun prize, or privilege, for catching your errors, many of which you plan to make on purpose. This is also a great method to help some children to be interested and pay attention.

2. You require that each student return their written work on at least one piece of paper provided by you, which represents the “break the ice,” or, “too late, there are errors on it already, so relax,” document which provides errors, in advance. Hopefully, at least for some students, this may serve to pre-empt the perfectionist problem.

WTP, Dr. Doug Kutner

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[An example of role-playing to make an experiential point about the pain of writing, in order to then *reframe* the child's concept of his/her own efforts at placing their ideas on the page.]

I. FIRST, I ask a child or teen to tell me something "interesting or funny that happened in the past few days," just to get them to begin to speak in logical, story form for 15 to 20 seconds.

At the end of 15 to 20 seconds, I announce: "Please, now, write down exactly what you just said." We observe that the verbal speech which required seconds, requires 3.5 to 4.5 minutes to write.

I then say the following:

II. "You have very high verbal intelligence. You think very quickly, turning your thoughts into words instantly. You have a good memory, therefore you have many ideas to think about."

"When you try to write it down, what occurs is:

"Your writing is too slow. As you write your thoughts go racing along. You are losing many of your thoughts as you try to write."

III. "How do you know if the few thoughts [perhaps 10%] you have written on the page are the best ones, or even the good ones? Maybe your best thoughts flew right out of your mind, and out the window."

IV. "Then, as you look at your handwriting there, on the page, it stinks. It doesn't even look good. It's not art, it's not pretty. After all you must write as quickly as possible to capture as many thoughts as possible [a losing battle]."

"Your writing has a bunch of holes in it [maybe your best thoughts]. And, although you are not sure yet, there are probably a bunch of misspelled words there, and you are not even sure, at first, which words they are!"

The nasty results:

V. This procedure, this experience, of forcing thoughts onto the page is **so bad**, that it not only feels **painful**, but is capable of **blocking your thoughts!**

If you saw a movie, and were discussing just after viewing it, you would have all kinds of things to say. On the other hand, if a parent were to say, suddenly:

"OK this movie seems like a good candidate for that tow-page project you have to do for school:" **suddenly you would have no ideas!**

WTP: Dr. Doug Kutner

Simply thinking that you will have to write your thoughts down actually impairs [gets in the way of] your thinking.

VI. A truth about all of us who are caring, hard working human beings, is that “You cannot *create*, and judge, or criticize yourself at the same time.

*Writing requires that you put your thoughts on the page. It commits your thoughts to a permanent physical record for all to see. If you really care about what you think and write; and
If what you write seems always to be a poor, incomplete and random sample of what you really think, or of what you know then,*

Why are you supposed to feel good about it??!!

[Consider this: The only children or teens I have know who have great difficulty with writing are highly verbally intelligent, very creative, and care very much about everything they do...(If you were much less creative and intelligent...If you did not care very much...it would not be possible for you to have this problem.)

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