

7.16 Instruction of Composition

Great writing is two things: the ability to explain ideas with the appropriate level of detail for the reader and the ability to unfold those ideas in a captivating manner. Such an explication of ideas is critical to schooling because it completes the educational cycle as students solidify what they have learned by “tutoring” the anonymous reader. At Liberty we strive to give students 1) fundamental writing mechanics and 2) a depth of content knowledge while providing exposure and guidance in developing the 3) advanced thinking skills and 4) artistic aspects of writing.

How does one become proficient in writing? By reading excellent writing, talking about excellent writing, copying and modeling excellent writing frequently, and by having one's writing graded and critiqued by a good writer. This means our teachers must be good writers. Teachers must continue to develop, practice frequently, and desire to master their own writing abilities. They must have detailed knowledge of the requirements of the next grade, as well as knowledge and mastery of the skills taught in the previous grade.

CSAP is only one reference point for assisting us in realizing our composition goals. Much more is required for quality writing than proficiency on this test. The classroom teacher and parents, in concert with the rest of the staff and headmaster, will determine whether students are becoming proficient in writing. The headmaster will consider the judgment of the upper school English and Literature teachers as the primary factor in evaluating elementary and upper school student writing ability.

1) Fundamental Writing Mechanics

Students will progressively develop good penmanship, learn the rules of spelling and grammar, and expand their vocabulary through reading good literature and direct development exercises.

- **Penmanship** practice is essential for organization of the mind and clarity of expression. Writing assignments will be handwritten. Students will not use word processors prior to completing the keyboarding course, and then only at the discretion of the teacher.
- **Spelling** is essential for clarity and is the basis for vocabulary. Liberty will incorporate a coherent and sequenced spelling pedagogy. The spelling word lists are built on three pillars: the study of Greek and Latin roots, words from the Core Knowledge Sequence and literature, and the Riggs spelling lists. These lists will be sequenced by grade to reduce redundancy and enrich vocabulary systematically. A master list of spelling words for each grade will be kept by each teacher.
- **Grammar** is an organizational tool for fluency, structure, and coherence. Traditional grammar is a beautiful and practical form of higher order thinking about language. All editing marks and grammar terminology will be consistent K-9. Student responses on homework or worksheets should be given in complete sentences when practical. Teacher feedback and corrections should also be provided in complete sentences when practical.
- **Vocabulary** is essential for reading comprehension and the conveyance of one's ideas. A well-developed vocabulary not only improves one's ability to communicate, but also one's ability to think. Latin and Greek based vocabulary, the words within our words, and vocabulary from literature will be used for direct vocabulary instruction.

2) Depth of Content Knowledge

Good writing is born in knowledge and discovery. Students must have something to say. They must write about that which they know. Students will write about what they are learning, the topics of classroom discussion, rather than new topics requiring independent student research. This does not preclude assignments requiring further research by the student on topics of classroom discussion. Students must read extensively. What they write must be based upon text. Students must show evidence of their claims in the texts which they have read.

“Creative writing” and “journaling” exercises which encourage students to put their thoughts and feelings on paper or to write on topics about which they possess little or no *content* knowledge do not promote writing mechanics, organizational skills, or thinking skills required for good composition. These approaches are inconsistent with content-driven skill instruction and will not be used at Liberty.

3) Thinking Skills

Coherency and fluency are developed by mental modeling. This is accomplished through copying, reconstructing, and composing. Memorization and recitation are also critical and will be required. Renaissance schoolboys learned content through copy and exercise books. This form of practice helped produce the world's best writers and thinkers in their time. At Liberty students will practice the word-for-word copying of excellent writing enabling them to incorporate good ideas and language skills into their own writing, as they gradually acquire the "inner voice" of great writers of the past.

Myra Linden's "Improving Grammar and Other Writing Skills with Text Reconstruction," gives the proper technique for copy exercises:

1. Read as many words as you believe you can write correctly from memory (usually 5-10 words)
2. Write those words from memory, including all capitals and punctuation marks
3. Check back to the original sentence and correct any errors
4. Read the next group of words and repeat the steps.

Students in each grade will use copybooks for neatly copying word-for-word text from content rich sentences, paragraphs, poems, short essays (or pieces of other works) and speeches. Each teacher will compile a collection of content samples for this purpose. In addition, teachers will compile a progression of composition exercises by each student, which will include some copy work, most of which are graded, so that improvement over time can be tracked.

In addition to direct copying, students will practice reconstructing text through exercises (e.g. ordering sentences) and their own note taking. Students begin by learning to take notes and making key word outlines from short selections. They then narrate and re-write the passage from their notes to create a unique composition in their own words. All writing composition should include an outline with a consistent format. On major writing assignments, at least 2 to 3 rewrites should be required and turned in with the final paper.

4) Artistic Aspects

An immense amount of regular practice with continual feedback from teachers and parents will be required in order for students to internalize writing mechanics as well as to develop an appreciation for the artistic aspect of writing. The study of poetry, poetic meter, and the art of versification helps give writing life. Diction, inflection, and intonation when reading aloud or reciting also help to give life and form to language as students hear their own voice, and the voices of others speak. These elements of language must be core components of formal language study as well.

Writing guidelines may be used to encourage students to incorporate a variety of writing elements and styles into their work. However, strict adherence to checklists can cause stultified writing and should be avoided.

SUPPORTING RESOURCES

Parental cooperation is needed. Parents are expected to review student assignments on a regular basis - checking for correct mechanics and accurate content, as well as fluency and coherency. Students are not allowed to edit or correct other students' written works.

The following programs have been approved to assist in the implementation of this policy. Any portions of these programs which are inconsistent with this policy, as determined by the headmaster, will not be used.

- **Getty-Dubay** is an italicized handwriting program for penmanship instruction. Books A-G will be used in grades K-6. Subsequent books (such as the adult version of the program and the calligraphy version) may be used for upper school elective courses. Teachers will hold students accountable for penmanship on handwritten assignments.
- **Riggs** Spelling lists will be used in K-4 grades.
- **Shurley Grammar** will be used for direct grammar instruction in K-3 grades.
- **Michael Clay Thompson** will be used in grades 4-9 for grammar, vocabulary, and poetics.
- **Writing with Structure and Style** by Andrew Pudewa will be used in all grades.
- **The Elements of Style** by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White will be provided to each teacher for use as a fundamental reference for writing composition.