



Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner offers tips for reluctant writers.

In the workshop you recommend getting students to write. My student doesn't want to write. He says he just wants to learn to read better. What should I do?

Anxious Tutor

Students need to have some of the pain of writing removed. We need to break the writing process down into smaller pieces so that it becomes manageable. Students also need encouragement to begin to express themselves. They need to experience success.

Many students resist writing because they feel insecure. When you write something down your mistakes are visible and this makes students feel exposed. In addition, writing is very hard work for many students, and some of them have become adept at avoiding exactly this kind of work.

You will need to help your student understand how vital it is to write in order to learn to read better. The two processes are intertwined. As students write they are training their brain to recognize and understand the written code. All kinds of research shows that writing improves reading and spelling. Let your student know why you are asking him to write. Ask him to trust you on this one and give it a try.

Sometimes, tutors also feel reluctant. They don't want to put pressure on their students and they may also feel uncertain whether a particular technique is worth trying. We strongly recommend three different writing techniques to help students overcome their reluctance to write. These techniques are tried and tested by volunteer tutors who have found them to be very effective with adults. However, they are not miracle cures. You and your student will have to persevere for them to work. Make it a point to try a technique at least five times before giving up on it. Chances are you will find it successful.

The Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is a wonderful tool for working with reluctant writers. Details about the technique are in your Tutor Handbook or you can borrow a short, excellent book, *Using Language Experience with Adults*, from our Resource Room.

LEA is a way to download what is in a student's head and heart and to build reading instruction around that material. The student dictates a story to you. You write it down, skipping every other line, and the student reads it back. Going through this process a number of times really teaches students the essence of literacy: "I think, therefore I write, therefore I read."

From the testing process, we are noticing that most students' grammar and writing skills are very poorly developed compared to their reading skills. The LEA approach is particularly effective in helping people develop these skills. Once a student has dictated a

story, you can use that story to reinforce all kinds of skills from developing a sight word vocabulary to understanding punctuation rules.

Directed Writing

For students who are having a great deal of difficulty expressing themselves at all, you might try Directed Writing. Directed Writing is a form of LEA. The tutor develops some sentences about things that are interesting or of concern to the student. Then the tutor leaves a key part of the sentence blank for the student to fill in. For example, “My favorite job was _____. When I think of Monday morning, I feel _____.” The Voyager series has sentence completion exercises, but it is even more effective if the tutor develops sentences that are relevant to the student. For beginners, you may need to write words for them to copy into the blanks.

Practical Writing

Many students have trouble with very basic practical writing skills like taking a telephone message, using a calendar to keep track of appointments, writing a birthday card, or keeping a to-do list. Brainstorm with your student exactly what information they need to write down for each kind of task. Then model each of the steps involved for that particular kind of writing. Give your student practice in asking questions to complete the writing. For example, they may need to say, “Can you spell that slowly, please?” Encourage your student to keep a crib sheet or template to support them as they start to use these writing skills in their lives.

Journal Writing

We strongly recommend journal writing as an integral part of every lesson. The Tutor Handbook has information about journal writing, and there is also some information about journaling on our website (<http://cfliteracy.wilmington.org>). Dialogue journals, where you and your student take turns writing and responding to one another, are particularly motivating.