



A PUBLICATION OF
Oak Meadow
Curriculum & School

Living Education



“I love that
Oak Meadow asks kids
to *write* very frequently
and *express* their opinions.

Some of the writing is of a
research
nature and some
is of a *creative* nature.

This is probably
the single most *important*
factor for me.”

Parent response from
Oak Meadow's
35th Anniversary
Family Survey

In this issue... *Writing*
Virtual Heart of Writing ⇨ Thoughts on Teaching Writing
Student Work ⇨ Favorite Writing Books

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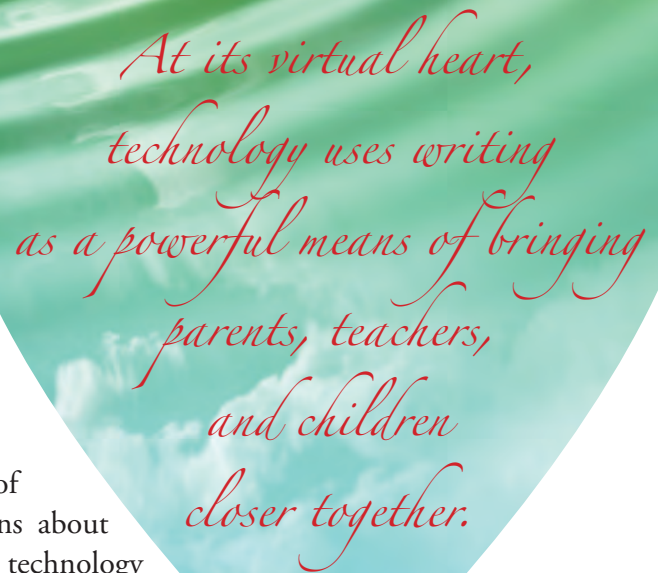
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LIVING EDUCATION

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*At its virtual heart,
technology uses writing
as a powerful means of bringing
parents, teachers,
and children
closer together.*

Many of us have concerns about the impact of technology upon human beings, and upon our children especially, and one of the greatest of these concerns is that technology will dehumanize us and make us less caring about each other.

By Lawrence Williams, Ed.D

This is certainly a valid concern, and no amount of virtual socializing will take the place of the social sophistication that comes from face-to-face interactions. But I believe that the most profound and meaningful use of technology is as an aid to communication. At its virtual heart, technology uses writing as a powerful means of bringing parents, teachers, and children closer together.

With the proliferation of the internet, many online schools (“virtual schools”) began to appear but writing and communicating didn’t seem to be an integral part of the curriculum. Many of these schools emphasize programs that enable students to complete their work online or to interact with a “learning program” that combines information with multiple-choice tests and automatic grading by the computer. In our view, this is the kind of dehumanizing application that has negative effect upon children, for it takes them away from the heart-to-heart interaction with other human beings that is a critical part of our growth and development as learners and as persons of integrity. At Oak Meadow, instead of developing programs that take the place of parents or teachers, we’ve chosen to focus upon technological tools that make it possible for parents, teachers, and students to interact with each other more effectively, wherever they may live. One of the most difficult aspects of homeschooling for many children (especially those of high school age) is the lack of peer interaction. We have designed and implemented a new pilot program using Google Apps that is aimed at bridging this gap through the use of online collaboration and class discussions.

Virtual Heart of Writing

Since virtual schools are relatively new, there are very few guidelines for the best way to create effective online learning communities. We are all too aware of the many pitfalls to avoid—such as discussions deteriorating into the literary equivalent of text and Facebook chats—but the potential benefits for supportive and effective communication drive us forward with enthusiasm.

I have had the privilege of witnessing very productive, compassionate, and enlightening online classroom discussions that confirmed my belief that students can use new technology to its best advantage. I have seen students from different backgrounds, cultures, and geographical areas overcome their conditioning and their separateness to reach out, cooperate, collaborate, and strengthen each other. Every minute

Technology provides the platform, but writing, one human being to another, is what connects us.

of every day, this same thing is happening around the world with individuals of all nations, races and cultures. One by one, we are discovering that—beneath all the superficial differences—we are all simply human beings, trying to do our best, trying to realize our dreams. This is all happening

through our writing. Yes, technology provides the platform, but writing, one human being to another, is what connects us. Although technology is opening more opportunities for communicating, writing is an art form that will never be replaced by technology. Writing lets us communicate our individuality and reach out into the world. Writing is a path to self-knowledge and creative expression. Taking the time to write, whether by pen scritch-scratching across paper or fingers clicking across a keyboard, is never a waste of time, in my opinion. I am often amazed at what appears on the page when I let myself write freely. Encouraging

our children and students to write freely is a gift we can give them, one generation to the next. Journal writing, letter writing, notes jotted on a pad of paper by the phone, or scribbled in the margins of a book—all these represent a human being making a mark on the world. Ideas, goals and dreams all take one step closer to reality when written down. Feelings and ideas gain substance and validation when shared through words.

Feelings and ideas gain substance and validation when shared through words.

Taking the time to write well, especially writing something by hand, is akin to the “slow food” movement; it is the nutrient-dense version of texting, tweeting, and online social chats. There is a delicious richness to writing that we take our time with. It develops nuances and blossoms into not just mere information but true communication. I urge you to practice “slow” writing yourself, even if your children give the impression that you are being old fashioned or out of touch for eschewing electronic devices in favor of pen and paper. Taking the time to write shows a desire to connect. Trust me, when someone sees a handwritten note tucked in a lunchbox or backpack, or finds a scribbled message among the luggage while traveling, the sense of connectedness will be recognized and savored.

Notes of all types—including the electronic kind—are a connection between two individuals, and making human connections is what enhances and brings purpose to our lives. We’ll continue to move forward into the brave new world of technology, finding its virtual heart, and embracing the new opportunities it brings, while never forgetting the simple joy of the written word. Write well, write often, and make your mark on the world.

Lawrence Williams is Oak Meadow’s Co-founder and President.

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT: Thoughts on Teaching Writing in Grades PreK-8

Leslie Daniels-Vanzo has been an Oak Meadow teacher for 24 years. She also created a program that offers educational activities to groups of home-schooled students, guiding children and their families toward the joy of discovery.



OAK MEADOW: At Oak Meadow, we take pride in respecting the developmental needs of children. At which age/developmental stage do you think it's most appropriate to introduce writing skills? What are some ways parents can recognize that their children are ready to write? When is too soon?

LESLIE D-V: The time to introduce writing varies with each child. The most important consideration in determining when a child is ready to write is to allow the process to unfold in a natural way. The act of writing often begins with a preschool child in the form of lines and shapes. This changes into random letters, then moves forward to include the child's name, as well as the names of other members in the family. The interest in spelling words properly often follows soon after. One significant factor is how the child grips the writing implement (crayon, pencil, etc.). This is an indication of advancement in the fine motor skills, and if the child is ready to write. If help is needed in this area, then it is good to introduce activities that enhance the fine motor skill development. Simple exercises for inspiring and encouraging writing at a young age include stringing beads, working with pegged puzzles, playing board games with moving pieces, tying shoes, holding utensils, drawing and painting pictures, etc. A good resource for other ideas is *Ready, Set, Read & Write: 60 Playful Activities for You and Your Child to Share* by Marlene Barron. When the ability and the interest to write is present in a child, then it's good to practice writing on a daily basis, even if it starts out in very small quantities.

OAK MEADOW: You both have many years of teaching experience behind you. How have these years informed your teaching, and especially your teaching of writing?

In addition to being a K-8 teacher for Oak Meadow, **Lesley Arnold** also works as a Youth Librarian. Being both a teacher and a children's book librarian allows her to combine her love of children with her love of books.



LESLIE A: My years of teaching (40 years this year!) have influenced my life in so many ways. I wouldn't trade my career of teaching for anything! If I had to point to one thing, I'd probably say that my experiences have helped me to view learning as a creative experience that unfolds gradually. Learning is not something you do and you're done with; learning is part of life that never ends. Instilling in students the lifetime love of being a learner has been a lifetime goal of mine!

LESLIE D-V: I could write a book with a question like this! However, when it comes to the teaching of *writing*, the pictorial and storytelling introduction to the alphabet (and to the writing of words and sentences), which I learned as part of my Waldorf training, was a significant influence. I was also deeply moved by the Waldorf

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From Texting to Treatise: A Teacher's Perspective

By Ted Thornton, M.A., Oak Meadow High School humanities teacher

A HIGH SCHOOL SCIENCE TEACHER sits down to grade a pile of student lab reports. She quickly realizes her students don't know the difference between academic writing and the emails and texts they send to one another every day, sometimes by the hundreds: no words are capitalized, there is no punctuation, and arcane abbreviations known only to the initiated are dropped here and there. "I'm reading a foreign language!" she says as she shoves the pile aside in exasperation.

It *is* a foreign language. Emails and texts are not written in the "language" of scholarly exposition. Yet, it is expository writing that remains (for now at least) one of the principal communications media of the professional worlds into which we send a significant percentage of our students; and it is *good* expository writing we teachers are still expected to teach.

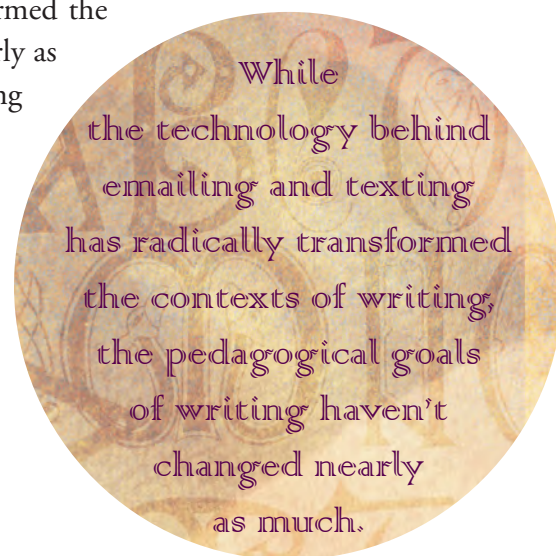
While the technology behind emailing and texting has radically transformed the contexts of writing, the pedagogical goals of writing haven't changed nearly as much. Nor, many of us feel, should they. The goal of high school writing courses remains to fully prepare students for college and professional writing tasks. Students should become well-grounded in the skills of expository writing including the abilities to analyze and synthesize, to carry out research, and to use research material to frame, support, and defend a thesis. They should also be able to discuss the often less transparent and more nuanced aspects of human experience, such as irony and paradox especially as these are expressed in literature and other art forms. The question facing teachers and parents today is, "How do we take a teen from texting to thesis writing in four years?"

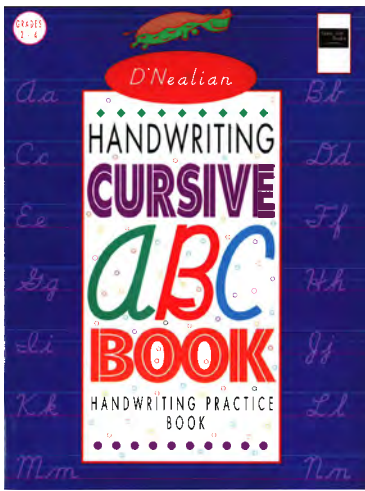
The greatest challenges for today's teen writers

High schoolers these days do a lot of writing in the forms of texting and emailing, especially when using the social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). In fact, they do much more writing than I ever did when I was growing up and going to school. The challenge for teachers today is to channel students' interest in the writing they already do and put that interest and the skills they bring to us to work in crafting prose that is powerful, well-supported, incisive, and persuasive. This is hard for many teens because the emphasis in texts, Tweets, and emails is on speed, abbreviation, and emoting, which often runs counter to producing good writing that is thoughtful and refined.

Still, I think the skills students bring today put us a leg up on the generations of teachers that came before us. While in college I paid others to type my papers, students today are learning how to type at earlier and earlier ages. And, aided by word processing, they come with more experience in the skills of drafting and revising than previous generations of students. As a result, they are able to produce more material with greater efficiency. This makes it easier for teachers to help students shape what they produce into good writing with less drudgery than I recall when I was learning how to write. In the end, though, writing well is still hard work, and that's a tough lesson for all of us to grasp when the message that society and the technologies keep sending is "Faster, easier, and (above all) painless."

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Oak Meadow students use the **D'Nealian book** for learning to write cursive, an important part of Oak Meadow's Third Grade curriculum.

that Common Core Standards, which guide curriculum choices for school districts nationwide, no longer require the teaching of cursive writing, a lot of attention in educational circles has focused on how the physical act of writing affects cognitive development.

What is the difference between handwriting and typing, and how does each impact learning and memory? Surprisingly little research has been done on this topic, considering how eager everyone is to jump on the bandwagon of educational technology, but a few studies have turned up results that won't surprise anyone whose first inclination is to grab a pen and paper rather than an electronic device.

In one of the most comprehensive works, a team of researchers from Norway and France, Anne Mangen and Jean-Luc Velay, identified significant differences between handwriting and keyboarding. They noted that the writer is much more physically connected with the act of handwriting, where all the attention is focused on the tip of the pen and the effort of graphically forming the letters. In keyboarding, the writer's attention is continually shifting between the keyboard (where the physical act of writing takes place) and the screen. This divided focus is particularly evident in those who are not yet fluent at touch typing (a group that includes most children). The researchers cited a study that noted *as writers become fluent with the physical act of handwriting, writing itself flows like a "kinetic melody,"* a free pathway between the mind and the hand. Musicians recognize this feeling of muscle memory, when the fingers are playing the music by themselves, seemingly without effort from the brain.

Handwriting quickly becomes imprinted into muscle memory, flowing from the thought of the word directly to the page without the writer having to stop and think about the formation of each letter. Keyboarding can also become an automatic process, yet the difference between keyboarding and handwriting is dramatic: with keyboarding,

Hardwired for Writing:

By DeeDee Hughes, Managing Editor, *Living Education*

It's not hard to imagine a future where keyboarding replaces handwriting altogether. Keyboarding, with its helpful cut-and-paste, deleting, and spell-check, allows thoughts to be revised and refined easily, a technological marvel that many writers—particularly those of us who remember manual typewriters—hail right up there with sliced bread. But does that mean that handwriting, and cursive in particular, is antiquated and superfluous? With the media buzzing over recent news

Handwriting:

PREWRITING ACTIVITIES:

Children need to experience the letters with as many senses as possible. In addition to telling stories and drawing pictures about the letters, make sure to include physical activities using each letter shape. The more, the better! Try these ideas: form letters out of bread dough and bake them (delicious for an afternoon snack!); draw them in chalk on the sidewalk or rug, and walk the letters; make letters out of clay or beeswax; draw them in sand with a finger or in the dirt with a stick; cut them out of sandpaper; hammer together bits of wood in letter shapes; make letter shapes with rocks in the garden; and make letter collages. Use your imagination and see how many ways you and your child can explore letters.

MAKE WRITING FUN:

Try the Three Color Road Race, adapted from Peggy Kaye's *Games for Writing: Playful Ways to Help Your Child Learn to Write*.

Here's how:

Draw a "road" on a large piece of blank paper, and then draw an identical road on a second sheet. The road should have two parallel lines a few inches apart (the two "sides" of the road), and the roads can be curvy roads, roads with sharp turns, roads with straight parts and with twisty bits.

Using colored pencils, each player draws

The Intelligence of the Hand

most writers continuously interrupt their thoughts in order to backtrack and make typographical corrections. Our fingers are not so well-trained to type that mistakes are eliminated. Each key feels the same as the next, so we miss sensory feedback about whether or not we “formed” a letter or word correctly. The disparity between visual feedback on the screen and what we meant to type causes us to stop and self-correct. The result is that typing often develops a

disjointed, stop-start pattern. In contrast, handwriting—and cursive writing in particular—flows without interruption as long as words are flowing from our brains. True, handwriting mistakes happen, but “typos” are generally made much less often. *With handwriting, the connection between our actions and our intentions seems stronger.*

Donald Graves, a noted expert on writing research, agrees that the flowing process of handwriting allows a more uninterrupted connection of the writer’s thoughts. Toronto psychiatrist and neuroplasticity expert Dr. Norman Doidge poses that if cursive falls by the wayside, so will the cognitive skills that handwriting builds. Cursive requires the writer to form each letter and connect it to the next in a different way with each word, which presents a greater challenge to the brain than typing. Doidge believes that the unique demands of cursive bear a striking resemblance to how we form letters and sounds into words in our thoughts and speech as well as how our eyes distinguish words on a page. He and other neuroscientists believe that as children learn to write cursive, they often become more fluent in speaking and reading as well.

Some people consider typing to be more efficient than writing, but is it? If your goal is to record something that can be retrieved, shared, and altered easily, typing is probably your best bet, but if your goal is to remember or learn, handwriting may be the most efficient process.

Writing things down helps many of us remember them better.

As one blogger put it: “When I type, I type very fast and thus do not think, my fingers are working but not my brain. ...When I get up from the computer, anything I wrote is forgotten. But when I write, even a shopping list, I retain that information. It is similar to writing on the paper and at the same time, writing on my brain cells.” Both visual and kinesthetic learners—and an estimated 70-80% of the population fall into this category—make the connection between writing and remembering. In fact, Stanford University’s Guidelines for Note Taking states that “Notes inscribe information kinesthetically” and “Notes trigger memories of lecture/reading.” These guidelines do not make the distinction between handwriting and typing notes, but they make it clear that writing itself aids memory.

There is evidence that the physical act of inscribing letters graphically (as opposed to tapping homogenous keys) makes it easier to create a clear picture in the mind (i.e. remember). In addition, Dr. Jason Barton, a

The Education of our Fingers

a line down the center of his or her road. The goal is to finish the fastest without touching the edge lines (sides of the road). If you touch the sides (“run off the road”), you have to return to the beginning of the road and start your trip again. When you reach the end of the road, use a different colored pencil and draw a second line, again without touching the edge lines and if possible, without crossing your first line. For the experienced “drivers,” repeat with a third color!

ENCOURAGING EMERGING WRITERS:

Encourage the idea that children “draw” each letter, and take care to make it beautiful. When your child is practicing, ignore his failures and praise his successes. If he continually makes the same mistake on a particular letter, draw his attention to it gently: “When I make the B, I always make sure that the back is straight and tall.”

Create birthday cards to friends and relatives, or signs for yard sales. Friends and relatives are always pleased when they receive a handmade card. By integrating such activities into your child’s life, you help him to develop attitudes of thoughtfulness and concern for others, in addition to providing opportunities for the expression of his unfolding abilities.

**STAFF PICKS:
FAVORITE WRITING BOOKS**

Looking for writing inspiration? Check out these faculty favorites!

Lesley Arnold, K-8 faculty:

Show, Don't tell! Secrets of Writing

by Josephine Nobisso (for students in grades 3-6)

Writing Magic; Creating Stories That Fly

by Gail Carson Levine (grade 5 and up)

Megan Buchanan Cherry, High School Humanities faculty:

What It Is by Lynda Barry

(great for high school students and adults)

Leslie Daniels-Vanzo, K-8 faculty:

The Art of Teaching Writing

by Lucy McCormick Calkins

In the Middle—New Understanding About Writing, Reading & Learning by Nancie Atwell

How's It Going?: A Practical Guide to Confering with Student Writers by Carl Anderson

Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook by Aimee Buckner and Ralph Fletcher

Writing for 100 Days by Gabriel Arquilevich

Apple Gifford, K-8 Program Director and faculty:
anything by Nancie Atwell

Strunk and White's *Element of Style*

The Transitive Vampire: The Ultimate Handbook of Grammar for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed and its punctuation partner *The Well-Tempered Sentence* by Karen Elizabeth Gordon

Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within by Natalie Goldberg

DeeDee Hughes, Managing Editor, Living Education:
Prentice Hall's *Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage* by Muriel Harris

Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English by Patricia T. O'Conner

Several dictionaries—one is NEVER enough!

Michelle Simpson-Siegel, Executive Director:

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life by Anne Lamott

On Writing by Stephen King

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron

Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg
Book of Lists

John "Penner" Solie, High School faculty:

The Art of Fiction by John Gardner

Ex Libris by Anne Fadiman

The Transitive Vampire by Karen Elizabeth Gordon

Hardwired for Writing continued

neurologist and Canada Research Chair at the University of British Columbia, believes that *we recognize handwriting much like we recognize faces*. If the handwriting is familiar, Barton says it activates a memory trace, "bringing back emotions, knowledge, all the different facets of information and experiences with that person stored from the past." It seems reading handwriting may have as many benefits as writing by hand. Handwriting might be a learned behavior but it feels hardwired, reaching deep inside us.

Let us not forget what handwriting reveals about the writer, yet another aspect of handwriting that keyboarding will never replace. Typing and texting might be filled with emoticons, but even with expressive fonts, type size, and colors, how much can uniform, typed characters say about the character writing them? *Handwriting shows the writer's personality and mood* in a completely unique way. Why do people save all those handwritten notes from children, paramours, best buddies, and relatives long dead? Handwriting reaches inside us in a way typed words on a page never could.

While it seems certain that handwriting itself will never be replaced entirely by keyboarding—imagine putting a typed note on a loved one's pillow—cursive seems a more endangered species. However, even if schools choose to ignore research that points to links between cursive writing and overall fluency, one obstacle to extinction remains: Are we willing to exclude our children from the wealth of handwritten history? Can you imagine not being able to read the postcard your friend sent from Egypt, or the letter Great-grandpa wrote home from the war? Can you imagine not being able to read the original founding documents of our country, or the dusty journal found in your mother's attic? Are these handwritten treasures destined to become as incomprehensible as an unknown language?

Writing has always been and will always be a vital link between human beings. Aside from the cognitive benefits, writing something by hand has its own charm. It's easy to forget that while caught up in the wonders of modern technology, but all you have to do is open the mailbox to find a handwritten note from a friend to be reminded again. Sit down and take a few minutes to write a letter—it won't just make someone else's day, it'll make yours.

DeeDee Hughes has been interested in writing since she was a teen, and still loves to write by hand. In addition to her many roles at Oak Meadow, DeeDee has been a freelance editor of children's books for almost 20 years.

Oak Meadow
STUDENT WORK:
Charlie Fineran

IN OAK MEADOW'S AMERICAN LITERATURE COURSE, students explore the work of Walt Whitman. After reading, studying, and writing about Whitman's poems including "There Was a Child Went Forth," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and "Song of Myself," students are asked to write a poem that imitates and possibly parodies Whitman's style. Oak Meadow junior, Charlie Fineran, approached this assignment with gusto and with great respect for his native Ohio and for the voice of this distinctly American poet.

Allegheny

The campground, the creek, the constant, unending unchanging noise of the water moving not quickly, not slowly, towards the river.
The squeak-clang of the pump brings water from the ground
The Mountain looms over the valley, always there and silent.
The night, darker than imaginable, is filled with the noise of the forest.
The bear, blacker than the night, lumbers across the forest path, making not a sound except the exhalation through his nose.
Saturday, the day when people arrive.
The hiker heaves his heavy pack and begins towards the trail,
On his pack, two small pots swinging freely,
Clanging audibly with each step.
My father asks me why, and I answer,
To keep the bears away.
My father looks again and says
It's working.



Oak Meadow
STUDENT WORK:
Belle DiMonté

A Not At All Serious Discussion of Writing



*Someone asked me for advice the other day.
Writing advice. I rolled my eyes. The day must come, eventually,
I suppose, when any writer is asked for writing advice.*

My advice?

Never accept advice on writing.
Nobody knows anything. Honestly.

When I was still unpublished and insecure about my own writing, I scoured countless books on writing advice in the hopes of discovering the Golden Gem of Writing Wisdom, an ephemeral, only-whispered-about-in-dark-alleys bit of ultimate writing advice that ensures an excellent story, inside and out. Guess what? I didn't find the Golden Gem. Instead, I was so exhausted from adventuring, seeking, and fleeing (Indiana Jones movie, anyone?) that it took me a very long time before I was able to pick up a pen again; and, with a trembling hand, write a few words.

You see, everybody has advice to offer, but everyone likes and dislikes different things. Thus, you find 'How to Write' books (interesting concept, isn't it, a book on how to write a book? What about a book on how to write a book on how to write a book?) rife with contradictions and, in some cases, just plain stupidity: one book I read had a pages-long list of writing rules for beginners to remember; and the last rule was: "Don't be afraid to break rules!" So what was the point of our memorizing those pages of rules?

Now comes the predictable part of this post. Though I advise people not to accept writing advice, I can't help but indulge my hot-air-filled author's ego and attempt to offer helpful hints. My inner mage-mentor is chuckling
continued



continued

STUDENT WORK: Belle DiMonté

gleefully and rubbing her hands together. She loves this. She really does.

- Never accept advice on writing. Yet I will give you advice anyway.
- Listen to your characters. They are wise. And when they displease you, send gremlins after them.
- When in doubt, take the other path. Mind the gremlins.
- Please, use spellcheck. It's the least you can do.
- Don't write when you're not in the mood. Please, for the sake of your characters. And the gremlins.
- As tempting as it might be, don't make yourself the main character. Then you're overly nice to them or give them super hot boy-friends and the story seems unbelievable. And it's just selfish.
- Nothing fixes a troubled plot better than a sudden snowstorm or character's untimely demise. No explanation needed. Things happen, you know.
- Microsoft Word, though lovely, is not one-hundred percent safe. Keep backups of your precious stories, either by handwriting your story first, printing the file, or burning the file to a disc. And PLEASE do not write on a low battery, while drinking coffee, or when your keyboard-walking cat is in the room.
- When plagued with writer's block (I call it mental constipation), go outside, watch TV, or drink prune juice. Something ought to come out. Pun intended.
- Let your mother read your story. Not only will she surely flatter you (what else are mothers for?), she might also offer helpful hints to improving the work.
- Never, ever accept advice on writing. Remember that. And remember that advice. Never accept advice. Wait...if I said not to accept advice, but say not to accept advice on accepting advice, does that mean you *should* accept writing advice...? Now I'm confused...

Belle DiMonté, age 16, loves writing, reading Latin, and brewing tea. She's been frequently published and has just finished writing her first novel. Find out more about her work at belleofmountains.wordpress.com.

Oak Meadow STUDENT WORK: Beatrice Zorrilla

Oak Meadow 8th grader Beatrice Zorrilla created this graphic essay for an English assignment. When she's not drawing, Beatrice enjoys music and dance. She lives in Honduras, and although she's not sure about space travel, she would love to travel around the world one day.

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY



A SIMPLIFIED COMMENTARY
ON THE PREFERRED REPOSITORY OF KNOWLEDGE
FOR HIGHER-ORDER RATIONAL BEINGS
AND ASPIRING CEREBRAL TYPES

BY BEATRICE ZORRILLA

SAN PEDRO SULA, HONDURAS, CENTRAL AMERICA,
EARTH, SOL, WESTERN BRANCH OF THE GALAXY, UNIVERSE

NOVEMBER 2011

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR A PERSON TO "KNOW WHERE HIS TOWEL IS?"



For more of Beatrice's work go to <http://oakmeadow.com/newsletter/2012-student-beatrice.php>

As part of Oak Meadow’s pilot program using Google Apps™ to facilitate online classroom discussions and collaboration, K-8 Program Director Apple Gifford initiated a recent discussion, sparked by an 8th grade Civics assignment regarding the 8th Amendment. An excerpt of this discussion thread shows how online writing can enrich and extend the learning experience for students living thousands of miles apart.



DYNAMIC DISCUSSIONS IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

TEACHER: It seems that most of you believe that suspected criminals should be held in jail until it is proven that they are innocent. Interestingly, I feel quite differently. The law states that people should not be held in jail unless it can be proven that they have committed a crime. ...It seems that innocent people should have rights and that our legal system should be very careful to avoid infringing on those rights. Do you think you can convince me otherwise?

RE: I think it is wrong to allow someone accused of a crime to post bail! Money should not have a place in the legal system because of the opportunity for corruption it offers!

ZL: I believe that suspected criminals should definitely not be released on bail before their trial... anyone who has committed a crime has essentially given up all their rights as citizens... the probability of being merely mistaken for a criminal is very small, and in the large scheme of things, taking away that unlucky person’s rights is terrible for the person, but beneficial for the society at large. ...If a suspected criminal is released on bail until the trial there are many things that could occur including further committed crimes, persuasion of the judge or jury, and run away to a different place or country, never showing up for the trial.

RE: Another problem with allowing suspects free is that those with financial benefits have a large advantage, and those are usually the ones that go unpunished. For instance how could a homeless man with no family, accused of murder get bail? He couldn’t, but a rich man accused of the same crime would be able to pay the fine. This makes it easier for the rich man to prepare his defense than it is for the homeless man... the only way to give the homeless man the same chance as the rich man is to deny them both bail!

ZL: ... one can imagine how bribes and corruption can play a role in getting certain (affluent) people out of jail but not others.

TEACHER: Martin Luther King was held in jail after he was arrested for civil disobedience. He couldn’t afford his bail, but a famous singer, Harry Belafonte, bailed him and the other people who had been arrested out of jail until they could stand trial. Do you think that it makes sense to keep people like MLK in jail or is your way of thinking reserved for people accused of committing violent crimes?

ONLINE WRITING ETIQUETTE:

All students using who participate in online discussion groups can benefit from some guidance on online etiquette.

The anonymity of the internet sometimes causes people to forget their manners. When responding to the work of others, please observe the following guidelines:

Avoid *ad hominem* (“toward the person”) remarks. Be critical of ideas, not persons. In work on the internet with people you cannot see and do not know, it helps to keep your tone friendly and supportive.

Never write something online that you would not say face-to-face or in person to someone else.

No profanity or obscenity.

Support your remarks with evidence.

by Ted Thornton

CA: Why should people stay in jail if they are not even guilty? People should not stay in jail before their trial. If they are in jail, who is going to take care of their children and house?

RE: What if they are guilty and they commit another crime? Only people with the funds can be released on bail. Doesn't this make things unequal? ... although it may be unfair for the innocent, isn't it better to protect the common good instead of a small minority? I also think that it is too hard to distinguish between those that should be kept in jail and those that shouldn't

DU: Yes, but it could be based on a % of someone's wealth so that it would be fair to all of the classes.

CA: ...everyone should have the opportunity to be released on bail. Unless they are a dangerous criminal or they are a flight risk.

RE: How do you decide what a "dangerous criminal" or one who is a "flight risk" is? Who decides? And how are they kept from corruption?

CA: The judge will decide if the criminal is dangerous.

ZL: The judge is human and might make mistakes. He or she could also be bribed. ... sometimes doing something for the common good means that a few people might have to

give up their freedom unfairly or suffer... it is all about the benefit and cost analysis.

CA: Why should a few rotten people make everyone else suffer?

RE: The masses should not be put at risk from released criminals when the safety of all could be protected by putting possible offenders of all crimes in jail... It seems to me that the greater good must be protected... but I agree that it could be dangerous for the government to not trust the citizens. ...I do think "innocent until proven guilty" is a good thing.

ZL: In principle I agree with the statement that people should be innocent until proven guilty. But just like a lot of great ideas (e.g. democracy), for it to work everyone must do his or her best, make good choices, and generally participate in society. Only then this principle can really be applied, because if someone is really innocent, the community will know about it and support this person. On the other hand, if someone is guilty, citizens will step in and present evidence for it quickly and having the person in prison will make sense. Until the point (if it ever comes?) when the majority of people are conscientious citizens, we are stuck with an imperfect system which makes mistakes for both the innocent (probably more often) and the guilty (less often).



Facebook Rewind: Posts Worth Another Look

Oak Meadow's curriculum, steeped in literary tradition and culture, encourages immersion in the written word. Sparked by a recent article in the New York times entitled *For Their Children, Many E-Book Fans Insist on Paper* (published November 20, 2011), Oak Meadow recently posed this question on Facebook: *Can an e-reader capture the enchantment of a picture book, or the intimacy of sharing a book with your child?* Here are some of the lively responses:

■ I like to have my kids have the option of being able to pick a book up and look through it, and have as part of our bedtime ritual that they get to pick a story and bring it to me (or my husband) to be read to. I've utilized e-books while we are out of the house, but I don't think paper books can be replaced.

■ I like the joy of reading to my children, and we have some beloved picture books (love love love Barefoot books, the Llama series, and so many others!), and chapter books. I would not want to replace those with an e-reader BUT I do like the ease of reading my nook to my youngest when we are in a waiting room, or at the airport, etc.

■ I don't think it matters what you touch. I think the time spent reading and the access to materials, which e-readers can increase, matters. I plan to get an e-reader that my children can use for reading, too. It also conserves valuable space in small homes that families would like to have filled with books, but can't find a practical way to do so.

■ "Wow, Grandma! You had BOOKS when you were little?!" or "What's a book, Grandma?" I certainly hope that isn't the future our children face!!

■ Never can an e-book fill what a real book can provide.

Oak Meadow Student Wins National Writing Competition

Oak Meadow 8th grade student **Haley Coe** won the YES! National Student Writing Competition with her essay entitled “A Lesson on Life.” Haley, who has been enrolled in Oak Meadow School since second grade, wrote about her life as a home schooled student. Her essay will be published by YES! in their February issue. YES! is an independent, ad-free magazine of solutions for building a just and sustainable world. The magazine goes out to the public, as well as to 25,000 teachers across the country. (To find out more about YES! Magazine Student Writing Competitions, visit www.yesmagazine.org. Also, stay tuned for a posting of Haley’s essay on our website.) Congratulations, Haley!

Oak Meadow Bookstore Spotlight

CREATE-A-STORY:

The Creative Writing Game

Make story writing a fun game the whole family can enjoy together! This unique, engaging board game is designed to lead children through the process of developing interesting characters and plots, creating dialogue, and setting up a story conflict and satisfying resolution.

oakmeadowbookstore.com

Book Review

In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, And Learning

By Nancie Atwell (1998, Boynton/Cook Publishers)

Nancie Atwell doesn’t just teach her students writing and reading, she shows them how to be an accomplished writer and reader. She treats her classroom as a reading and writing workshop where everyone works and learns together. By writing with her students, Atwell gives them the tools they need to understand the hard work and process involved in being a writer, and it appears to work better than any traditional language arts curriculum ever could. In her book, *In the Middle*, she describes in practical, comprehensive detail how anyone can bring this innovative program to their students.

One of the more surprising aspects of Atwell’s method, which she developed in the classroom over the course of two decades, is that giving students the choice of what to read and write actually works. She realized that this caused them to be invested in their work, and “their commitment to their ideas and purposes made them work hard; their hard work made significant writing happen.” Students are encouraged to explore many difference genres and styles in their reading and writing, and to keep notes on what they have read and written. They are also encouraged to abandon a book if they don’t like it, noting on their reading list why it didn’t work for them. And above all, students are given the time and space to read and write in class because it is only by reading and writing copious amounts that a reader or writer moves beyond proficiency to true mastery.

Atwell’s emphasis on sharing the reading and writing experience (“I write out loud in front of my students...I show them my drafts. I ask for their responses... I read with my students. I show them what I’m reading, and I talk about and lend my books.”) is what really makes her approach unique. Parents and teachers of students who are homeschooling, distance learning, or attending brick-and-mortar schools can all incorporate this approach into their lives. By sharing how reading and writing work in real life—how we write and when, why we read and what we’re reading—we can enhance our students’ academic lives and more importantly, their overall growth as human beings. As Atwell points out, writing can “play a crucial role in helping [students] grow up, making it possible for them to capture who they are, then come back and measure themselves against their earlier selves.”

Packed with “minilessons” topics, student work samples, teaching anecdotes, and dozens of very practical lists, this book is well worth the time it takes to read its 500+ pages. Atwell’s candid, friendly style gives the flavor of how inviting her classroom must be. *In the Middle* invites all of us to join the reading and writing workshop and share the love of reading and writing with our children.

Reviewed by DeeDee Hughes, Managing Editor, Living Education

Oak Meadow's Michelle Simpson-Siegel Named Executive Director



We are excited to announce that Oak Meadow Curriculum and School has appointed Michelle Simpson-Siegel to the position of Executive

Director. Lawrence Williams, Oak Meadow's Co-founder and President, who served as Interim Executive Director, notes that Michelle already brings with her a wealth of Oak Meadow know-how. As High School Program Director, she developed a solid understanding of all aspects of Oak Meadow. Lawrence reports, "Under Michelle's leadership, I'm confident Oak Meadow will enter an exciting new stage of growth and development."

Michelle's professional and educational background is a perfect fit with Oak Meadow's focus on environmental awareness and stewardship, and on helping students develop strong reading and writing skills. Michelle received her undergraduate degree in Education and English from the University of Rhode Island. She pursued her graduate degree in Environmental Education from Antioch University New England. Before coming to Oak Meadow, she taught English at Northfield Mount Hermon, was a Learning Specialist in the Massachusetts public schools, and worked as a Program Director for The Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Michelle is looking forward to witnessing Oak Meadow's continued progress as a leader in homeschooling and distance learning. She notes, "2012 promises to be a dynamic year in which we guide our organization into its next phase. Oak Meadow is an empowering option for students and their families; our curriculum and our school provide families with a model that promotes a lifestyle of learning." As Executive Director, Michelle hopes to guide Oak Meadow in creating new ways to serve and support homeschooled students and families worldwide.

Oak Meadow Welcomes New Faculty Members



David Rosner, M.Ed., K-8 Faculty

David Rosner received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Classical Music from Oberlin College, and a Master of Education from Manhattanville College. He joins the Oak Meadow faculty as a 5th through 8th grade teacher and high school math teacher. In addition, David runs an independent tutoring business in Westchester (NY) County where he works individually with students in math, history, writing and standardized test preparation. When he's not teaching, David enjoys hiking, nature, art, music, cello, reading and spending time with friends and family.



Megan Buchanan Cherry, M.A., High School Humanities

Megan holds degrees in Urban and Environmental Policy and in Creative Writing/Poetry. She has taught English, bilingual literacy, creative writing, learning skills and dance for over 15 years, and her poems and essays have been published in national magazines. Megan has lived in California, Arizona, Ireland, and France, and now lives in southern Vermont with her husband, teenager and toddler. In her free time, she loves to go for long walks on dirt roads, read, cook, sew baby quilts by hand, and grow vegetables.



Ted Thornton, M.A., M.Div., High School Humanities

Ted Thornton is a frequent lecturer and panelist on Middle East affairs and Islam. He has presented workshops on teaching about the Islamic world at professional conferences in Cairo, Montreal, San Francisco, and Boston. He has led student travel-study programs to Egypt, Turkey, Portugal, Jordan, Brazil, and South Africa. In addition to his Oak Meadow teaching, he specializes in the creation of online resources and web-based applications linking students and teachers around the world.



Peter Siegel, M.S., High School Music

Peter Siegel's musical credits include Grammy award winning mandolin tracks on the Best Children's Album of 2010 and a guest appearance on the nationally syndicated, *Etown*. He's played venues around the country, including Newport Folk Festival and the Kennedy Center, and shared the stage with Pete Seeger, Judy Collins, and many more. Certified in the Orff and Kodaly methods, Peter also holds degrees in music and political science, as well as an advanced degree in environmental studies.

continued from pg. 5
From Texting
to Treatise:
A Teacher's
Perspective

Oak Meadow
recognizes the value
of opening new
avenues of written
communication.

Writing is the heart of technology-based connections

The key to student success is to meet them where they are and then guide them forward. We understand that many of our students communicate with one another primarily in a digital world, and we can use that to our advantage. Oak Meadow, as one of the premier distance learning schools, has always been at the forefront of innovation in education, and we are once again poised to integrate best practices in teaching with the evolving needs of students in an ever-changing world of technology. Using the Google Apps platform, we are launching a program that will allow students in seventh grade and above to collaborate online with other students and faculty. Students can submit, brainstorm, and work through assignments with their teachers and with each other using the latest in online educational tools and services. Writing more, writing better, writing with purpose—Oak Meadow recognizes the value of opening new avenues of written communication.

An English professor at John Jay College, Andy Selsberg, has also found a way to adapt the teaching of writing to the experience of students today. His assignments include asking students to write texts, Tweets, and ads for eBay. He finds these short exercises especially useful in training students to write concisely (see “Teaching to the Text Message,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2011). Selsberg’s pedagogy is just one example of different ways we teachers may engage students in the process of writing and encourage them to become invested in learning to communicate more effectively through the written word.

When I design a new online resource or web-based application for linking students with other students, I know that writing will be at the heart of the students’ experiences and interactions. Especially for today’s digital native, writing is often the only form of communication used to establish and maintain connections, regardless of whether the motivation is social, academic, recreational, professional, or all of the above. Since computing became common, I’ve regularly required students to post online summaries and analyses of news stories and other material as well as journal entries about a piece of reading or some other experience. There is easy-to-use “blog” software out there that enables teachers and students to post and comment upon each other’s work. We are still in the early stages of learning how to apply and steer the technologies to their full advantage, but I’m hopeful about the prospects. I’ve used such software to link my students with teachers and kids in other schools and other countries, and have seen some very productive collaboration develop across many different subject areas. I believe Oak Meadow’s focus on distance learning is ideally suited to make the most of these technologies.

The benefits of “writing across the curriculum”

Students *are* writing, and they are writing about every subject imaginable. It is up to us as teachers to harness this enthusiasm for communicating with others and channel it into the production of clear and powerful prose that will pass muster in academic settings. “Writing across the curriculum” has always played a major part in the teaching of writing: students have been writing papers in other courses besides English all along. But, in an age when innovations in the delivery of curricula, such as “block” scheduling, mean that students in some cases no longer take year-long English courses, it is more important than ever for other disciplines to encourage solid writing skills.

Over the course of the last fifteen years I've seen growing interest on the part of teachers in every discipline in the teaching of good writing. At a school like Oak Meadow, where a student's work may undergo frequent interruptions due to travel, training, and competition schedules, I think it becomes all the more important for teachers to exploit every teachable moment where writing is involved. Writing across the curriculum also gives students more opportunities to experience different types of writing and writing for different purposes. This more closely mirrors the way we write as adults, for many different reasons and in many different circumstances. Asking students to produce different types of writing and actively instructing them in the specific goals, conventions, and strategies of each type serves them well for all future endeavors.

Integrating writing across the disciplines

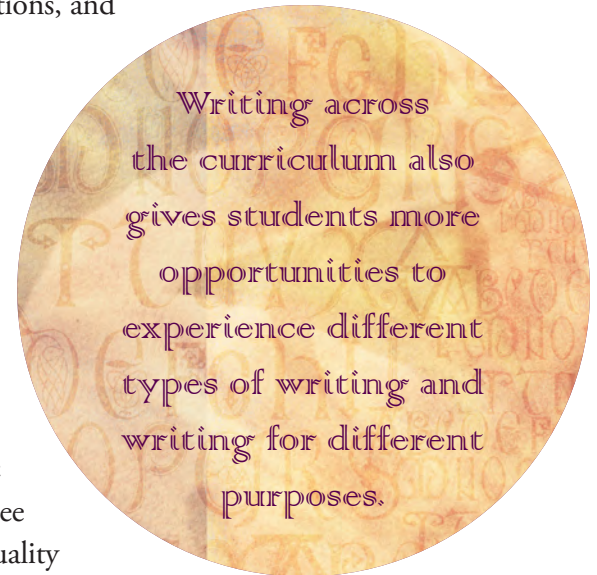
Students (and teachers) who are unused to the creative uses of writing sometimes benefit from a nudge in the right direction. Journal writing is one popular method for encouraging students to begin writing in other courses. I know some math teachers, for example, who ask their students to keep journals both as a means of recording problem solving strategies and as an aid in confronting and processing the fears that arise when face to face with difficult material. Science teachers are finding it pays to spend time teaching kids to write good lab reports and other scientific papers. One only has to pick up a professional journal in any discipline to see how awful the writing can be and to become motivated to improve the quality of writing across the board.

“Free writing” is another proven method. This is a drafting and brainstorming technique that may be applied in a wide variety of settings. The process is simple: students write as rapidly as possible (without any revision or second thoughts, even omitting punctuation) for a set amount of time on a prompt the teacher tosses out. All material generated is saved

for possible revision and reshaping into coherent and mechanically sound pieces down the line. Teachers in the classroom often use free writing to interrupt a discussion, especially if it is flagging, or is becoming repetitive, or if it has taken a vehement turn that may profit from a cooler, more reflective “time out” period. Afterward, when you pick up the discussion again, the results are almost always better: thinking and speaking become clearer and more effective, and learning advances. The main point is that free writing can be applied anywhere and anytime a student may benefit from taking a break in an activity to conceptualize and write about whatever he or she is doing at the time: in the dance studio, the chemistry lab, wherever.

Neither our exasperated science teacher above nor her students should tolerate sub-standard academic writing. Being clear with our students about which types of writing are appropriate in which circumstances is the first step. From there, our imaginations are the limit.

Ted Thornton has studied and taught all around the world and is dedicated to finding ways for students around the globe to connect with and learn from one another. He joined the Oak Meadow faculty in October, 2011, and looks forward to sharing with students the new high school social studies courses he is busy creating.





idea of creating of a beautifully written and illustrated Main Lesson Book that becomes the child's first reader. I value the educational philosophy that encourages the teaching of writing before reading, and I also love the idea that students learn to read from their own written and illustrated material. I love seeing my Oak Meadow students' Main Lesson Books!

OAK MEADOW: Lesley, you teach many middle school students. What are some of the most fun aspects of teaching writing to middle schoolers?

LESLEY A: Middle schoolers who really love to write improve quickly even with the smallest amount of help. That's the most fun for me---seeing the improvement and great strides a student can make.

OAK MEADOW: What are some of the greatest challenges in teaching writing to 5th-8th graders?

LESLEY A: I think the biggest challenge is getting a student to understand that writing is a process that takes years to get "good" at. From 5th to 8th grade is a long time and each year the student improves. My hope is that students, and their parents, learn that this is a practice time! Just like soccer or painting or playing an instrument, the writing skills need practice and will get better with time.

OAK MEADOW: Many parents complain that their once highly-motivated children become complacent or disengaged in middle school. Can you talk a little about how writing can be used as a tool to help motivate students and sustain engagement?

LESLEY A: Variety is the spice of life! The Oak Meadow curriculum offers many different kinds of opportunities for diverse types of writing and projects. With variety, flexibility, and creativity in different assignments, a student will be able to find something to be engaged in.

LESLEY D-V: I've also found that having students do interesting assignments, like writing a dialogue between historical figures or writing the journal of a child who lives in prehistoric times, really sparks their imagination. They start to run with the idea, and suddenly it doesn't feel like work anymore. Keeping a journal, writing poetry or song lyrics, or writing comic books or graphic novels are also great ways to revive an interest in writing.

OAK MEADOW: What are some of the most important habits to instill in this age group, especially as they approach the high school years?

LESLEY A: Note taking, outline, first draft, second draft, final draft! The whole process should be a comfortable habit. I recommend spending time with reworking a rough draft. Read it out loud to check for punctuation and grammar errors. Then go over it again for spelling. Then again for content. Then read through it again and put in adjectives or adverbs that would add more detail to the sentences. I think that once a student can be comfortable and confident with reworking the rough draft, the final draft is easy!

OAK MEADOW: In your experience, what are some of the most common writing challenges for children who are struggling with writing? What are some tips parents can use to help their children overcome each of these challenges?

LESLEY A: Most kids will say, "I don't know what to write." I like to tell students, "Write what you see!" Writing is like painting with words. If you have an image in your mind, you can create it in words. If you can't get started, then paint it, draw it, find a photograph, or talk about it and the writing will be much easier. For example, if you are going to write about a tree, what type of tree do you picture in your mind? Describe it so that others can "see" it too! There's a great book that describes this process really well. It's written for students by Josephine Nobisso. It is *Show, Don't tell! Secrets of Writing*. The writing process takes time. Some kids need to spend a lot of time just jotting down ideas, or doodling, or walking around before they begin writing. Some need to spend a lot of time taking notes or correcting a first draft. Let each part of the process take its own time.

OAK MEADOW: Are there any homeschooling strategies for teaching writing that you would caution parents not to pursue?

LESLEY A: I have complete trust that when the tears start to flow or anger erupts, parents will sense that they are pursuing the wrong teaching strategy!

Writing in Grades K-8

LESLIE D-V: Good point! Don't be afraid to try something new, or to let it go for a while and then revisit it a few days or weeks later. There's no reason to push or rush.

OAK MEADOW: Writing across the curriculum is an important focus at Oak Meadow. Can you talk a little about how you have applied this focus in your own teaching?

LESLIE D-V: I teach a lot of K-4 students and in the early grades, everything they write is integrated across subjects! Students are writing about the tree growing in their backyard, or the snail they watched, or a dream they had, or retelling a story. All this writing relates to their science work, or their social studies, or their math. Writing springs organically from their experiences, which is the best way since it is always relevant and meaningful to them.

LESLEY A: I have an 8th grade student who wanted to create a story about an immigrant coming into the United States from Mexico. She made the choice to do this as part of her Civics lessons on immigration. I told her that I had just been to hear Avi, the award winning youth fiction writer, speak about his writing process. I told her that he said that after he gets an idea, he spends years researching before he writes the book. I told her to do her research first and then her story would have a real foundation of facts that she could weave into the plot. She took up the challenge, did quite a bit of research, and came up with an excellent fictionalized story of a hardworking man from Mexico that legally came to live and work in the United States. She wove in the immigration facts and requirements that she learned in her research quite beautifully! She also integrated, with great sensitivity, the challenges and difficulties a person faces when immigrating to a country.

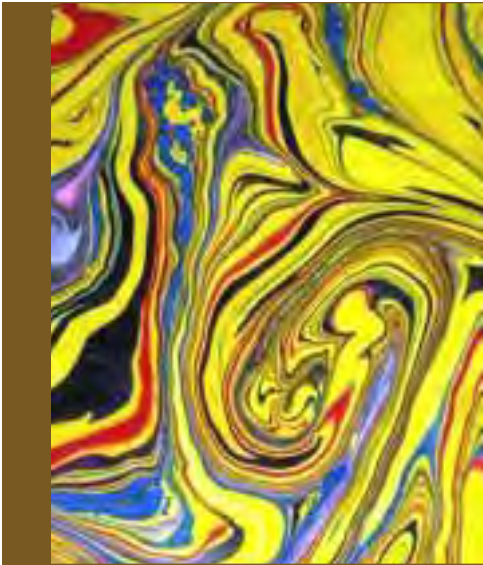
OAK MEADOW: How can parents encourage the innate talents of students who love to write?

LESLEY A: Read! Read! Read! As a librarian and teacher, I can't stress enough the importance of reading in the development of writing skills. Choose all kinds of books! Explore the integration of the written word with all subjects. For instance, if your child likes books about cats you could suggest listening to the musical *Cats*, and next thing you know you will all soon be reading and sharing T.S. Elliott's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. It's fun to choose favorite

authors or favorite illustrators. My own children have enjoyed comparing and seeing how much an illustrator's style changes over the years. Experiencing another person's writing helps build a solid foundation for your own writing. Parents who read aloud to their children and have conversations about books or articles they've read are encouraging their children to read and write. If you like to read, you probably like to write.

LESLIE D-V: Nancie Atwell wrote a great book called *In the Middle* that is all about how to encourage kids to write (Editor's note: see a review of *In the Middle* in this issue of *Living Education*). She suggests that adults write with students as a way to encourage them in the enjoyment of writing and the development of more sophisticated writing skills. There are so many ways to write, so many reasons to write. Sometimes all it takes is offering a new idea and kids will run with it. Lots of kids love to make their own books, for instance. One of my most enjoyable writing experiences relates to my own family. My husband and I decided to write "The Great American Novel" with our daughter while we were driving cross-country. We each took turns writing a chapter and then reading it aloud. It was a great delight to hear what the last person wrote and how the new chapter would spin the story. It ended up being a lengthy project because it was such fun. We still enjoy pulling it out of our homeschool archives and rereading it!





Craft: Book Binding

In Oak Meadow's Third Grade curriculum, students make their own books with marbled paper covers, which they can use for writing stories, reports, or journaling. Exploring the art and craft of bookmaking imparts a sense of purpose to the written word, and gives students an appreciation of the beauty of language. Words become more than just marks on a page; they become worthy of care and intention. They become a journey as well as a destination. Make a book of your own and see where your writing will take you.

Paper marbling kits, book binding materials, and calligraphy sets can be found in our online **Bookstore**.

BINDING A BOOK is a very simple process. After you have learned the basic process, experiment with making books of all sizes and thicknesses; the range of possibilities is endless. Older students might want to go one step further and make handmade paper, adding bits of flower petals, grass, or leaves to give each page texture, color, and distinctive individuality. Calligraphy can be used to hand letter the cover (or the whole book, for the more ambitious!). You might want to make several books to give as gifts.

Detailed instructions on Book Binding can be found on our website (<http://oakmeadow.com/newsletter/2012-winter.php>), on the web, or at your local library.



If you want to love homeschooling, use Oak Meadow. Have faith in it and enjoy it. It's more than a curriculum, it's a guide for a wonderful lifestyle of learning with your family.

Oak Meadow Parent, 35th Anniversary Family Survey, 2011



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