

# Considered Language Arts

*A collection of essays and thoughts on our Charlotte Mason Language Arts days  
by Jennifer Mackintosh.*

*These essays and thoughts began life as a series of blog posts. I hope this compilation makes them easier to read and ponder. The wide right margin is there to allow you room to journal your own thoughts...and to remind you to leave wide margins in your own days.*

## [Considering - Charlotte Mason and Our Approach to Language Arts](#) July 5, 2010

We're enjoying the beginning of a new year here! I thought I'd take some time to share our approach to Language Arts since some of you have asked. After typing for a bit, I realized this topic would probably be best covered through a series of happy-little-posts on language arts. This isn't to portend a complicated and difficult-to-comprehend approach, but rather signifies my desire to convey the details of what is a treasured part of our days in a way that isn't overwhelming in one long post! I have all the posts in the series written and set to publish anew every other day (which will hopefully give me enough time to answer your questions in the comment box)...so check back! I'll try to go in and link and connect the posts so that if you're reading this well after it is published, you can find the series easily.

We approach language arts with Charlotte Mason's methods. In fact, Miss Mason's methods and philosophies are the foundation of our days and always have been. We do happily blend a few other educational philosophies - like [Montessori](#) in the early years, some elements of Classical education, and even a bit of unschooling in the mix! I'm not a purist in any of these philosophies, and I do give myself the freedom to adapt to fit our home and family, but in the sense of a foundational philosophy in our home, Charlotte Mason's would best describe us.

Charlotte Mason was a 19th century British educator who had a great passion for children's education. She spent her life pursuing it, writing about it, fine tuning her approach, and training others in it. She established the *House of Education* to train teachers in the use of her methods. Not only can we derive inspiration and ideas from Miss Mason's [original series](#), there are [several articles published](#) (for free reading online) from her *Parents Review series* (edited by Charlotte Mason) which further illustrate some of that great, practical where-the-rubber-meets-the-road wisdom! I share her strong belief in the value of a liberal education; she believed that all children should experience a wide, varied, and generous curriculum based on the most up-to-date knowledge of the time. Simply put, she believed that...

*"Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life."*

*"Education is the science of relations."*

In other words, children are not buckets to fill. They are unique persons, created in the image of God, and their education should sustain them on living ideas - rich and noble. Their atmosphere should be lovely and inspiring. Their education is assisted by the discipline of good habits. Education is not a disjointed group of subjects compartmentalized in sterile bins filled with

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deceptively colorful, flashy blurbs, but rather, the child has a natural relationship with a wide and generous number of ideas, books, things, and activities. I'm really summarizing a lot, and possibly writing in between the lines a little based on the experiences I've lived in my own home; you can read a good [synopsis of the 20 principles of a Charlotte Mason education](#).

Rather than needing an entire curriculum for every single subject - Charlotte Mason's methods are integrated, connected, and anchored to subjects like history and literature. It couldn't be simpler in terms of planning; I simply implement the **methods** of language arts using the **substance** of **living books**! Language Arts is a natural part of the day, and rather than seeming disconnected and like "just another thing to check off" it is *connected*! It's *relevant*!

I'm not looking to debate any of the methods we choose, and I acknowledge that many home educators enjoy other methods and philosophies that make good and judicious use of texts. This series of posts is just meant to share how we joyfully live our days and how language arts becomes a part of the whole seamlessly, naturally!

It all begins with books of high literary quality, something Charlotte Mason calls [living books](#). Writing and communicating is born and nurtured in the imagination. Nourish the imagination with dry, stale, lifeless, uninspiring words and you can expect something similar in return - thoughts which are shallow and without the necessary relationship which anchors the idea in the memory. Feed the mind with rich, living thoughts and you can expect relationship with the idea, and ownership of knowledge! Consider the words of St. Paul in Phillipians 4:8:

***"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."***

This is our family's personal home education philosophy, and the measuring stick by which I seek to measure everything that comes into our home! My choices aren't perfect, and though I do enjoy sharing what works for us, I also know that I make (have made!) mistakes in choosing materials, so please don't take everything I offer without first discerning its use in your home!

Now....back to living books, inspiring ideas, and language arts!

The backbone of our language arts approach is in providing rich, lovely, noble ideas through living books! A living book yields rich fruit in so many aspects of a child's education - the benefits are too numerous to count! Charlotte Mason had [much to say about living books](#), among some of my favorite thoughts are these:

***"There is never a time when they (children) are unequal to worthy thoughts, well put; inspiring tales, well told."***

***(Living books contain) "...the fit and beautiful expression of inspiring ideas and pictures of life."***

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A living book is one in which the author writes with passion about their subject, the writing is of excellent literary quality, and the child's imagination is captivated!

Still not ready to ditch those stale texts with blurbs and dates and reading comprehension questions? Consider this: *how much more interesting and compelling is it to read a historical fiction detailing the life and adventures of Ferdinand Magellan through the eyes of Pedro Molino, a young boy sailing the open seas for 3 years aboard one of Magellan's ships ([Ships Boy with Magellan](#) by Milton Lomask), rather than a paragraph in a text detailing dry, stale facts about Magellan's life and his voyages?* In one book, you're aboard the ship: sailing the high seas in all its excitement, witnessing an attempted mutiny, travelling through what is now known as the Straits of Magellan, and experiencing the culture and drama of the Phillipine natives! In the text, you read a skeleton of facts and dates about Magellan. Which would you rather read? Which would capture your imagination and become a treasured part of your memory? Do you remember your 5th grade textbook blurb on Ferdinand Magellan?

Let's talk language arts specifics!

Here's a breakdown of language arts methods used in my home for various ages (very similar to those listed at [Ambleside Online](#)) For more great information on language arts, please click over and read through one of my favorite sites for Catholic Charlotte Mason - [Mater Amabilis \(section on Language Arts\)](#):

## Preschool and Kindergarten

- No formal language arts! During these years we are working on good habits and laying down the rails!
- Sometimes around this time, we begin a phonics based approach to reading based on the individual child's reading readiness. Please do not read this as "*Jennifer recommends starting a phonics program at 3!!*" I begin phonics when a child is ready, at his/her own pace, and very gently. I am generally in favor of starting later with reading, rather than pushing too hard and starting earlier. Push too hard down this road and you will experience frustration, and your child will not love learning!
- [A Strong Start in Language](#) by Ruth Beechick

## Grades 1 - 3 (ages 6 - 9)

- **Phonics program** - I use [The Little Angel Readers](#) and I've heard really great things about [Explode the Code](#). There are probably a gazillion really good phonics programs that all work very well; don't start doubting your choice unless you have good reason to believe that you might need something new!
- [A Strong Start in Language](#) by Ruth Beechick
- **Oral Narration**

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- **Copywork**

## Grades 4 - 6

- **Oral Narration**
- **Written Narrations** - beginning when the child is 10 - 11. I have found a tremendous assistance in making the transition into writing from the Bravewriter program, [The Writer's Jungle](#). It nicely complements the Charlotte Mason approach to writing.
- **1 year of Grammar** using the [Winston Grammar Basic level](#)
- **Dictation** - with some selections chosen from poetry and literature and some help focusing on specific spelling issues using the fantastic index in Spelling Wisdom
- [Typing/Keyboarding Skills](#)

## Grades 7 - 8

- **Oral narrations**
- **Written narrations** - continuing to use ideas found in The Writer's Jungle.
- **1 year of Grammar review** with [Winston Grammar Word Works](#)
- **Dictation**
- **Copywork** - if you have a child with fantastic penmanship at this point, you don't need to continue with copywork, but we still enjoy copywork in the middle school grades. I used this time to focus on calligraphy with my daughter.

## Grades 9 - 12

- **Oral narration** - still very important and begin to morph into discussions. We enjoy beginning a discussion with a narration from a current events article.
- **Written narrations**
- **1 year of Grammar** with [Advanced Level Winston Grammar](#)
- **Composition** (formal writing) - assisting my high schooler into more formal writing are Bravewriter's [Help for Highschool](#) program, and [Jensen's Format Writing](#).
- **Commonplace Journal** - this is optional, but is a great alternative to copywork which we no longer do in high school. It's a place for lovely thoughts collected from beautiful literature to land.
- **Dictation**

A few tools which are good general resources for language arts supplements which I enjoy and use are:

- [Stories With a View](#) by Margot Davidson
- [Primary Language Lessons](#) by Emma Serl, reprinted by Hillside Education (I prefer the reprints from Hillside. They're printed on lovely paper with beautiful color images!)
- [Intermediate Language Lessons](#) by Emma Serl, reprinted by Hillside Education

I haven't used, but have heard really great things about the following program:

- [Writing With Ease](#) by Susan Wise Bauer

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If you're interested in reading more on how to practically approach Charlotte Mason's methods and ideas, may I recommend [When Children Love to Learn: A Practical Application of Charlotte Mason's Philosophy for Today](#) by Elaine Cooper. If you're interested in really digging in, there's nothing better than [Charlotte Mason's 6 volume set](#) entitled *Home Education* which you can read online for free through [Ambleside Online](#)! Lastly, the Simply Charlotte Mason [All Day Charlotte Mason Seminar on DVD](#) is a tremendous help! Grab a cup of tea and watch it! I included it this year as part of my own little mini-home-education-retreat-at-home and found it so refreshing and re-invigorating!

I have several more resources to share, as well as details about how these individual methods work and look in our home. We don't live these methods perfectly, nor do we try, but we do live them joyfully! It's a living learning lifestyle!

I hope you find yourself inspired and invigorated as you ponder the days ahead of you in home education - no matter the educational philosophy that gives voice to your days!

Check back in a couple of days for the next post detailing narration!

The entire language arts series:

[Narration](#)

[Copywork](#)

[Dictation](#)

[Grammar](#)

[Composition](#)

Considering - A Week of Language Arts

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## [Considering Language Arts - Narration](#)

July 7, 2010

I started [my series on our approach to language arts](#), and realized that our approach, while not contrived or complicated, did contain a fair amount of \*meat\*. I didn't want to cram it all into one long post and lose you, so this is the second part in my series covering narration.

An integral part of our language arts approach is the narration. Narrations can be oral or written, but in this post I'm going to discuss how we approach the oral narration because it is such a solid feature of my days that it cannot be dispensed with. As I think back on my years of home education, without a doubt, some of my favorite memories are thoughts, impressions, and delights shared through narrations.

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My young learners are not required to narrate - only those children 6 and above! Carving time out of the day to listen to narrations can be challenging, but I make it a priority! I couple this priority with fostering the good habit of **not interrupting** for the other children!

Please don't envision perfectly quiet, idyllic narration times here! We have our share of interruptions from little people, and I do my share of juggling to carve out the time for narrations. However, once you lay down the habit of narration as well as the habit of politeness for those not narrating: **not interrupting, speaking with a quiet voice, waiting your turn** with the littles (admittedly, these are all biggies that require patient and gentle consistence, but you'll NEVER be sorry you spent the time working on them!) you'll find these narration times to be among your most cherished treasures!

**Narration** - is simply this: the child telling back in their own words after reading something. Charlotte Mason had this to say about narrations ([Volume 6](#), p.260 - 261):

*"Give a book of literary quality suitable to their age and children will know how to deal it without elucidation...they will be able to tell you the whole thing with little touches of individual personality in the narrative. (T)elling again sounds very simple but it is really a magical creative process by means of which the narrator sees what he has conceived."*

There is an ownership which takes place as the child tells you what they read. Their enthusiasm and excitement are often conveyed in their retelling. Not every narration is a jubilant expression of the words on the written page; some narrations are simply summaries, and that's just fine! An example of a book which inspires an eager re-telling in our home would be something from Arthur Ransome's [Swallows and Amazons](#) series. These have to rank among some of the best children's literature of all time! However, some books must be read and narrated as a matter of discipline. A healthy, balanced meal is the most nourishing, and some of that balance may come from choices that aren't necessarily the child's favorite "comfort foods", but the food is nourishing none-the-less. Not everything can be written as if from the pen of Arthur Ransome. Of course, my 13 year old would retort, "and, *why not?*!" LOL!!!

So, from a variety of living books, the children narrate. Don't overcomplicate this! It's simple and intuitive. Read a book - retell it. Let's get to the good stuff!

**How much reading do you assign before asking for a narration?**

That depends on the age of the child, their reading abilities, and how much of the habit of attention the child has acquired. Ask a child, any child, to narrate too much and you'll end up with a very overwhelmed, frustrated child, and you will begin to question the entire method. It's easily fixed though.

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First, ensure that you've asked the child to read and narrate from a [living book](#) (*I've noticed that narration has caught some non-living books I've asked my children to read....a child has a very hard time narrating them because he doesn't have an opportunity to develop a relationship with the thoughts!*)

Next, start with reading aloud. I like to start with [Aesop's Fables](#), but anything with short little chapters will work here. Read and ask for a re-telling. Do they seem overwhelmed? Unable to remember anything? Frustrated? Don't push! Can you ask a simple question to get the ball rolling? Try to ask something open ended. Close the book for the day and try again tomorrow. Read a little less if needed....maybe just a paragraph. Ask your child to narrate. Can they remember what you just read from the short paragraph? Yes! Great! Praise them and read another paragraph! Narrate again! Read only once - you're building the habit of attention. If needed, work up to a full chapter or short story, but start small enough that you can build on success.

In general, my elementary aged students can narrate a short chapter's reading at a time. I try to provide time to narrate right after reading.

Middle school students do well with narrating and summarizing 1 - 2 chapters worth of information at a time. They no longer need to narrate immediately after reading if they've been narrating for several years. By now, they have a well developed habit of attention, and can narrate later in the day.

I only have one high schooler so far, so do check out some other blogs for more experience there (Barb at Harmony Art Mom has a [great post](#)). At this point, my high schooler has been at this for a while and can narrate at the end of the day or even the next day all that she read for the day. She can narrate more than one chapter of information and summarize well at this point. Sonya Shafer, in her [All Day Charlotte Mason Seminar](#), mentions that her high schooler can narrate an entire units worth of information in one narration.

## How do you ask for a narration?

Read aloud, or after the child has read independently, ask them to tell you what they just read about. You don't have to say, "Please narrate that fable to me, little Johnny." I like to say, "Wow, that was a great story! What can you tell me about it?" Or you could ask another open ended starter question, "Who was your favorite character?" "Did you catch that part about the bee?" Be interested. Engage your child! Your interest is generally all that is needed to motivate your narrator. Stay engaged and focused as much as you are able.

## How long is a narration?

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Each child has a different style of narrating, so there's no right or wrong way to narrate, there isn't a "minimum length." The idea is a re-telling in the child's own words. Some boys are natural summarizers. I think my brother was probably this way. My mom would tell me that his narrations were extremely succinct and to-the-point. If you have a child with a photographic memory, you may have to help that child summarize more by modeling through your own narrations.

## How many books a day do your children narrate?

Not every book around here is narrated! Some books are just for enjoying without a narration! Unless a read aloud is for a specific subject, I don't ask for a narration.

My older children narrate living books on science, history, literature, and religion. I include a reminder on their lesson plans to let my child know that I expect a narration of that reading. It looks something like this:

### **The Chemical History of a Candle by Michael Faraday**

#### **Lecture 2**

#### **O Narration**

Now my child knows that a narration is expected after a reading, and the prompt helps keep me accountable.

## We make time for narrations in various ways:

- **During quiet-time or naptimes** (I strictly enforce quiet time for my 6 yo and younger crowd! This time is treasured by my older children and I. We have our tea-time in the afternoons during quiet time, and this is their favorite time to offer narrations...while we sip tea or lemonade together!)
- **In the car on errands**
- **While making dinner**
- **While folding clothes or taking a walk**
- **Older children watch or work with younger children while another child narrates**
- **Toss small children in a dry bathtub** (containment is your friend!) **with a few special toys** - that gives you at least 15 minutes!
- **Keep a basket of special treasures tucked near your desk to pull out when needed.** These are just for short *re-directs* while I need to give quiet focused attention to my narrator. I have a small basket of:
  - [plastic magnifying glasses](#)
  - [toy telescopes](#)



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- kaleidoscopes - [big](#) and [small](#)
- tiny notebooks and pencils
- a collection of stickers and mini-books I make from cardstock - I like this [alphabet and numbers sticker collection](#)
- wooden animal figures and a tiny plastic fence
- [finger puppets](#) - a select few
- tiny found treasures - piece of string, cotton puff, aluminum foil goblets, little wooden miniatures

## What does the narration cover in language arts?

- Reading comprehension - once the child tells back, you **know** if they understood or not. No reading comprehension questions needed!
- Organization of thought - this naturally lays the groundwork for writing!
- Summarization skills - a progression from super-detailed narrations toward good summaries happens naturally as the child gets older. Observation of great detail is a wonderful skill and I absolutely don't discourage it. When my oldest (who has a near photographic memory) started working on written narrations, the progression from uber-detailed narrations to summary happened naturally as we looked together at thoughts on paper and began to discuss how to narrow thoughts and summarize.
- Oral communication skills
- Analysis and opinion - older children begin to offer more and more of their opinions during narration. Narrations lead very naturally into rich discussions with my older children.
- The habit of attention. The child reads once and **only once** and should be able to tell back - narrate - from that one reading! This builds in children the habit of attention!

That's a lot of bang for the buck with one narration! Make it a priority and don't dismiss the value of a narration! It's a precious time spent together, and so worth the investment spent carving out the time needed!

## Rules for me during a narration -

- No cognitive multi-tasking. I do fold laundry, do dishes, stir the pot, etc....but no computer multi-tasking, no reading, no engaging two speakers at once. Anything that keeps me from engaging my child is not allowed!
- No interrupting. I do sometimes ask questions at the end of a narration if I need clarification, and if a child is stumped I might ask a general question to get them rolling.

Don't forget the [Narration Cube](#) to help out with group narrations after a read aloud!

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Looking for more? There is so much to turn over and think about at Lindafay's blog, and so much practical wisdom: [Higher Up and Further In - Narrations](#). Lindafay compiled many of her wonderful posts into a website - you might find them easier to navigate than the blog: [Charlotte Mason Help: Narration](#). Happy reading!

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## *A Narration Cube*

July 1, 2010

Reading aloud to the entire group of kids is one of our favorite things. Oh sure, we have our share of interruptions around here when we read aloud! But, I treasure these times when we all sit down together to enjoy the next chapter in a book. We've got a number of read alouds going on at one time! We read in the morning, after lunch, before bed...and sometimes I read aloud special books to the older kids while the littles are enjoying quiet time in the afternoon.

So, if you're reading aloud to the family, how do you handle [narrations](#) after your reading? One at a time? Starting with the youngest moving to the oldest? I've done this a number of ways, but I came across a great idea that I had to share with you!!!

### **~ A narration cube ~**

I saw this idea on [Penny Gardner's amazing site](#) - click over right now if you've never been! If I have one complaint about Penny's site it's that it isn't very intuitively set up. The links on the front page will get you in the door, but you have to be willing to do some hunting and link clicking to uncover all the treasures there! Yesterday, I felt like a treasure hunter!

In clicking around, I had seen the [Language Arts section](#) before, but in clicking around a few links I found the [narration cube](#). The point of the narration cube is to break down a narration into smaller parts, and it serves as a great introduction to literary terms. Penny offers simple instructions on how to label the cube, and offers [a link to a template that you can print](#) and make your own cube.

I printed the template on cardstock and wrote the various terms on ours, using [Modge Podge](#) to affix the edges securely. You can use any glue, but I like Modge Podge because it's extremely forgiving and sets up very quickly! The whole thing took me about 30 minutes to complete - and that was with my standard share of interruptions. LOL!

Voila! A narration cube! Roll it gently at the end of a read aloud and allow the cube to indicate to a particular child exactly what to narrate. Keep rolling and narrating until you're satisfied!

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## Considering Language Arts - Copywork

July 9, 2010

This discussion on copywork is part 3 in a series [considering Language Arts](#).

Copywork is another very valuable tool in our Language Arts toolbox. At first, the name conjures up those awful writing-for-punishment assignments that used to be handed out regularly in grade school. "I will not talk in class. I will not talk in class." But copywork is far from the meaningless written punishments from my memory.

Copywork is the copying of noble, living thoughts from poetry, literature, or from significant figures in history. The emphasis in copywork is in the perfect execution. It's a short lesson - with younger children spending maybe 5 - 10 minutes working on forming one letter, one word at a time - *perfectly!*

From Charlotte Mason, Volume 1, p. 160:

*"No work should be given to a child that he cannot execute perfectly, and then perfection should be required of him as a matter of course. For instance, he is set to do a copy of strokes, and is allowed to show a slateful of all sorts of slopes and all sorts of intervals; his moral sense is vitiated, his eye is injured. Set him six strokes to copy; let him, not bring a slateful, but six perfect strokes, at regular distances and at regular slopes. If he produces a faulty pair, get him to point out the fault, and persevere until he has produced his task; if he does not do it to-day, let him go on to-morrow and the next day, and when the six perfect strokes appear, let it be an occasion of triumph."*

Copywork is another example of how language arts methods are anchored and connected to the other offerings of the day. Are you studying Isaac Newton in science? How about copying the 3 laws of motion for copywork. What is your poetry selection? Use it for copywork. Shakespeare? There are some [free copywork quotes available for download here](#). Choose Bible verses, hymns, liturgical prayers from the Divine Office, quotes from the Saints, literary selections...as copywork choices. The point is that children are copying from beautiful living expressions and working on penmanship, punctuation, capitalization, and observing sentence structure.

### What does copywork look like in my home?

- The goal is *perfect execution* of letters and words with short lessons so as not to frustrate or overwhelm.

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- Short lessons = 5 minutes for new writers and increasing up to about 15 - 20 minutes for middle school.
- V-e-r-y----s-l-o-w----m-e-t-h-o-d-i-c-a-l formation of letters is my emphasis
- Each child gets a new copywork notebook at the beginning of the year. We start with a 3 ring notebook and the kids enjoy choosing special scrapbook paper to decorate their copywork notebook.
- Beginning copywork is about correct letter formation and penmanship.
- After letter formation is solidified, copywork continues to serve as penmanship practice, but I also introduce punctuation, capitalization, and other introductions to mechanics (one at a time) through copywork. I don't flood them with information all at once, but if a copywork sentence contains a semi-colon, I discuss why it's used.
- Selections for copywork are chosen with the same criteria used for selecting living books; writing must be of good literary quality.

Here's where it is so important to follow your instincts and know your children!!!! Each child is different when it comes to writing skills and abilities, and my boys are different from my girls. Even with my two boys there is a dramatic difference in what each is capable of in terms of early writing. My current 5 year old is a great writer and loves it so much that the other day I caught him copying the milk carton! LOL!!! My 9 1/2 year old still struggles with writing. Early writing/copywork for him was very short, and we used alternatives for other lessons that might require writing or spelling - I often pulled out our [moveable alphabet](#)!

## **A Lovely Thoughts Journal - Copywork for the older child:**

Up until last year, my oldest daughter (then in 8th grade) continued with and really enjoyed her copywork. Last year we focused on copywork with calligraphy using [Writing Can Help, Book 4, Calligraphy](#) and choosing from Lucy Maud Montgomery's [beautiful Victorian poetry](#). We then followed up with the [Calligraphy Bible](#). Since you might be wondering about pens, I'll let you know that she started out using the [Zig calligraphy pens](#), but then after some practice she was ready for a serious calligraphy pen. I still have my old Sheaffer pen, so we found some extra ink cartridges and away she went. I highly recommend the [Sheaffer sets](#)!!

This year, my daughter doesn't have assigned copywork on her lesson plans. She has chosen instead to continue with her calligraphy in her own [commonplace book](#), which sounds so....common (LOL!), so we're calling it a **Lovely Thoughts Journal**. She now chooses which passages she will copy, but still keeps to the same principle of perfect execution.

Many amazing literary figures kept a commonplace book to copy noble thoughts from their literature reading into their journal. I find it extraordinary that such a simple thing as copywork yields amazing and rich fruit in vocabulary and expressions, but I'm finding that it does!

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## A few resources that I enjoy recommending:

Though **all that is really needed for copywork is a pencil and a piece of paper**, I have found a few extra tools to be very helpful and enjoyed here:

- I'm sort of picky about a smooth writing surface. I like my kids to sit at a table with room for elbows and spreading out. It's a priority for us, but I've found a good workaround if table space is limited or there is a need to be portable. Dick Blick offers inexpensive [large sketch clipboards](#) (15 x 16 are \$6.99 at the time of this writing) that I really like. Paper clips to the top and the surface is large enough to provide a good writing surface.
- [Startwrite](#) handwriting worksheet wizard - There are a variety of handwriting worksheet makers available for free online. I made use of these until my son was ready to transition to cursive. Free worksheet makers offering cursive don't offer cursive letters that connect. This was the impetus that pushed me to finally purchase this program. I'm so glad I did!!!! Startwrite is my best friend when it comes to generating copywork pages for my beginning print writers or my beginning cursive writers. If you'll allow me, I'll sing it's praises:
  - I can enter any text from any source I choose - giving me the freedom to select copywork from history, science, religion, hymns, Baltimore Catechism - anything! I build my own copywork pages and again anchor it to the other offerings within our day so that copywork, while an exercise in penmanship, still supports other reading and is connected to the rest of the day.
  - I choose the font - print, italics, cursive. I'm very pleased with the font choices and offerings!
  - I choose the font size - this is a HUGE benefit to those of you that have learners with vision problems and you can't ever seem to find a book with print large enough for penmanship practice!! Build your own in the font sizes that your children need!
  - Choose from different guide lines.
  - Choose stroke arrows for beginning writers to show proper letter formation. These are optional, so I can choose not show these once the letter is taught and formation is solid.
- [Notebooking Pages](#) - These are just my favorite source of printable pages! The collection of [copywork pages](#) are a favorite here - the kids enjoy choosing their pages to fill up with living sentiments, carefully copied! My daughter loves the [floral designs](#)!!! My oldest son prefers the [simple designs](#), and my youngest son likes the [alphabet copywork pages](#) and the [animal pages](#)! These pages make fantastic copywork notebooks. My kids and I love using several of their other pages, too! The pages are very inexpensive, so you can

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try a set without a big investment, and there are often sales so sign up for the e-newsletter.

- [Notebooking Nook](#) -along the lines of Notebooking Pages for various subjects, but the page I'm linking you to has all of her **free** downloads!
- 3 ring binder and scrapbook paper to decorate the cover. This is one way we really spruce up our new copywork books at the beginning of a year!! Take a [1 inch binder](#) and grab some [scrapbook paper](#). Let each of the kids choose their own paper for their notebook covers. Now they have a pretty notebook for their copywork papers to live!
- [Lined journals](#) for a *Lovely Thoughts Journal* (commonplace book). My daughter chooses her own style, but she prefers lined pages with a heavier weight paper for the calligraphy. I really like [Moleskine lined notebooks](#), but my daughter likes hardcover journals with pretty decorative covers.

For lots more great insight on copywork, check out the [Copywork articles](#) by Lindafay at [Charlotte Mason Help](#). There are also wonderful articles for further reading at [Ambleside Online](#), and my favorite source of Catholic Charlotte Mason, [Mater Amabilis](#).

Next post in the series - Dictation!

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# Considered Language Arts

A collection of essays and thoughts on our Charlotte Mason Language Arts days  
by Jennifer Mackintosh

## Considering Language Arts - Dictation

July 11, 2010

This is part 4 in a series [considering Language Arts](#).

So, if you're still with me, we've covered a [basic outline of Language Arts using Charlotte Mason methods](#) as well as [narration](#) and [copywork](#). Let's talk about dictation a bit. You say, "Something else???" Another thing to put in the day?? How and where does it all fit? And, surely dictation isn't really all that important, is it?" **It is!** And, I hope to convey what a useful tool dictation could be in your basket of language arts tools! I'll wrap up all these language arts posts containing ideas and methods with a final post that has some sample lesson plans that illustrate how a week \*could\* look. You'll have the methods and some ideas to help you translate this into your own days! Now, let's get to dictation!

The purpose of dictation lessons are to provide an opportunity to study a living expression (same idea as all the others...passages chosen from **living books**...are you getting how important it is to offer your child a feast of [living books](#)?) and make a visual memory of a word image to teach spelling. Dictation exercises are also used to introduce grammar a little at a time - don't be intimidated though! I'll show you how easy this can be in my next post detailing grammar!

*Whoa! Did I just say that **spelling** is taught through dictations? **Yes!** Do you need spelling workbooks and weekly spelling quizzes then? **Nope. You don't.** Really? Does it really work? **It does!!!*** And, as with all of these Charlotte Mason methods, dictations are chosen from a variety of choices with high literary value exposing the child to a generous breadth of thoughts and living expressions. Again, there is relationship with the lesson. Remember what Miss Mason said?

*"Education is the science of relations."*

Relationship. With living thoughts and expressions. There is not a relationship in the memorization of a 10 - 20 word list. Relationships can be formed when ideas are shared.

Dictation is a tool I employ weekly for my children that write well, and with ease, usually starting around 4th grade. Letter formation should be solidly in place.

In addition to providing opportunities for learning spelling, dictation exercises provide wonderful opportunities to discuss grammar points as well as more practice with penmanship. Dictations passages are studied, dictated (read aloud by mom), and then written - all of this taking place over a period of 2 - 3 days in our home. Dictation is NOT about memorizing or speed writing, its goal is learning and executing correct spelling!

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## How do you choose dictation passages, and how long should it be?

Each of my children works on one prepared dictation lesson each week. Choosing a passage depends on much, and again, here's where knowing your child's abilities will assist you in choosing something with challenging words as well as a reasonable length for the overall selection.

In general, the length of the passage I offer is determined by the child's writing abilities. Passages can be chosen from your child's history reading, science reading, literature, the Bible, quotes from historical figures - any living book or noble thought. When choosing a passage, I look for a passage with a few words that are rich in terms of vocabulary and will probably be challenging in terms of spelling. (You know your child's spelling...if there is a blend he constantly confuses, choose a passage that uses that blend in a word.)

I began choosing dictation selections from the children's literature and history reading, and truthfully that's all that is needed!! Again, see how simple this approach is! Invest your time and energy in selecting engaging living books for your children, and the rest falls into place.

## What does a dictation lesson look like in our home?

Keep in mind that this is how I have *considered and translated* this method into my home. It could look different from home to home - you could spend more time on dictations, work on 2 a week, etc. This is just how it looks here.

**Day 1:** Give the child a passage to study. Type it out, print it, or copy it. I ask the child to read it aloud to me. I correct any mispronounced words, or point out any times when the child went sailing over punctuation in their reading. Now it's time for:

### **Studying challenging words within the dictation:**

I ask the child to identify any words that look like they will be difficult to spell. I have the child underline those words on the paper. I go to the dry-erase board and write the word(s) nice and big and we discuss the spelling of that word - is there a silent letter? double consonants? a vowel team (ai, ae, ea, etc.)? Now, I ask them to look at the word and pretend that their eyes are a camera....study the word until your eyes can take a picture of the word spelled correctly and you can close your eyes and still see it in your mind. This may take a couple of days, and that's ok! Study and make a picture image of the word or words. For auditory learners, spell the word aloud. For hands on learners, use a [moveable alphabet](#) (also consider a [print your own version](#)), write the word on paper, or draw it in the air with a finger - but be careful - the child must see, spell, write the word spelled *correctly*!!!! Don't allow a mis-spelled version of the word to enter their memory!



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I have the child read the passage aloud one more time, and that's it for day 1. This whole lesson takes between 5 and 15 minutes depending on the length of the passage and the number of words requiring study.

**Day 2:** I ask the child if they're ready to write the dictation. No? *Work on studying the word again (repeat above process).* Yes? *Dictate.*

## **How to dictate a passage:**

The child should be comfortably seated with pencil and paper. I sit nearby, within arms reach (you'll see why in a minute), and dictate, one section at a time, pausing naturally at commas or other natural stops, giving the child enough time to write in between my reading sections aloud. This is not a speed writing contest so I only say aloud enough that the child can reasonably remember and write. My kids know to give me a simple sign to continue reading, either a nod of the head or a finger wave, so they don't look up and lose their place. I say the passage **ONLY ONCE!** No repeats! Quickly cover any mis-spelled words. I like to sit near the child and use [white-out correction tape](#) (in the pen form is easiest for me to use) and just gently reach in and white-out out the word so that is not able to be seen. Some people use little post-it notes to cover a word and I wanted to make that work so much, but I haven't been able to...so, I just use white-out. I have one child that I have to be very careful with because any interruption completely disrupts his concentration. I gently and quietly slide my finger on top of the mis-spelled word and then we use white-out. The point is to completely cover a word if it is misspelled so that the child does not make a visual memory of the misspelled word. If the child mis-spelled any words we go through the "study challenging words" process again. The child then writes the correct spelling on top of the white-out.

We might take a few minutes on Day 1 or Day 2 to discuss something grammatical/mechanical about the sentence or passage in the dictation exercise. This would be age/grade appropriate, and very simply done! My next post will detail how I approach grammar along with my favorite grammar resources. I thought about including grammar with the dictation post because in our days, we approach grammar very simply through our dictation exercises. But...sheesh...I've already gone on so much!!!! LOL!!!! *About dictation for goodness sake!!!!* LOL!!!! So, grammar will be next in the series, but please remember that most grammar is integrated with the simple and short dictation exercise.

**Day 3:** Optional day - If the child wasn't ready to write on Day 2, ask the child if they're ready to write the dictation. My kids usually only need 2 - 3 days to study a word and know it so we rarely need more than 3 days to complete a dictation exercise. But, this could vary from family to family and child to child.

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Some children are natural spellers, some are not. Do NOT make dictations a competition between children. Invariably, there will be differences in ability or familiarity or both in children within a family. I do not point out differences between the dictation lessons in my home.

*Editing this post* to add some examples of dictations. A few people have asked for more concrete examples of what a dictation might look like. Hopefully these will help. These are dictations from this week:

\* ~ \*

**9th grade** - good writer

From: [Secrets of the Woods](#) by William Joseph Long

*“I would only suggest that perhaps the real reason why we see so little in the woods is the way we go through them - talking, laughing, rustling, smashing twigs, disturbing the peace of the solitudes by what must seem strange and uncouth noises to the little wild creatures. They, on the other hand, slip noiseless feet through their native coverts, shy silent, listening, more concerned to hear than to be heard, loving the silence, hating noise and fearing it, as they fear and hate their natural enemies.*

*We would not feel comfortable if a big barbarian came into our quiet home, broke the door down, whacked his war-club on the furniture, and whooped his battle yell. We could hardly be natural under the circumstances. Our true dispositions would hide themselves. We might even vacate the house bodily. Just so Wood Folk. Only as you copy their ways can you expect to share their life and their secrets. And it is astonishing how little the shyest of them fears you, if you but keep silence and avoid all excitement, even of feeling; for they understand your feeling quite as much as your action.”*

Spelling words underlined and in red (so they stand out for you here), grammatically we discussed the dash and words in a list.

\*\*\*\*\*

**5th grade** - writing is challenging for this child, as is spelling.

From: *Trust the Creator* by Ralph Waldo Emerson

*All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.*

Spelling words underlined and in red (so they stand out for you here), grammatically we discussed capitalizing proper nouns.

Tools and resources:

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The following are a couple of tools that have become such a tremendous help for me in offering good dictations and helping me focus on particular trouble spots in spelling:

- [Spelling Wisdom](#) from [Simply Charlotte Mason](#), compiled by Sonya Shafer - This is an extraordinary resource!! It is a compilation of the 6000 most frequently used words in the English language, incorporated and used in a variety of living and noble thoughts from a spectrum of significant figures and events!!! AMAZING!!!! Is your child having trouble with a particular word? Use the comprehensive index in the back of the book to look up the word and reference the dication lesson(s) wherein that word is used. If not, start at the beginning and work through a lesson or two a week! It couldn't be simpler, and the assistance this series affords in terms of an excellent index and the use of the most frequently used words makes it a very useful and frequently chosen resource on my shelf! The books offer a simple and easy to understand explanation of how to use the book as well as how to employ dictation. Mrs. Shafer explains in the Introduction that the exercises contained in the [Spelling Wisdom](#) series cover a "broad range of subjects and topics to reinforce Charlotte's love of a full and generous education." There are multiple grade levels available for different ages, and for those of you overseas, **I LOVE** that this resource can be purchased as a pdf so there is no impediment in shipping for you!
- [The ABC's and All Their Tricks: The Complete Reference Book of Phonics and Spelling](#) by Margaret Bishop - this is a relatively new reference for us, but I really enjoy having it around! It's super helpful for the child who has learned to read and finished phonics lessons, but could use some review, and there's a great section in the appendix on remedial reading as well as a super helpful appendix on syllabication. It's a fantastic comprehensive reference for all-things-phonics-and-spelling! The bulk of the book (228 pages) is an alphabetized listing of letters (one per page) with each page containing rules and exceptions - so helpful!!! If you're a homeschooler and have been at this for any amount of time, you have experienced a moment when your child phonetically pronounces a word, but doesn't use the true pronunciation (which isn't phonetic at all...sigh). An example: the word *heir* could sound like "hair" rhyming with "their" if you were phonetically pronouncing it, but there are many exceptions to pronouncing *EI*. For example, if your child answered a confirmation catechism question with "hairs of heaven" you would have to suppress snorts of laughter and pull out this book and explain from p. 148 that *heir* is borrowed from the French, and French words usually have a silent h when it is a beginning letter. It's a good reference packed with helpful info for the why-of-it-all!

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I sure hope I've offered you a glimpse at how simple and effective dictation lessons can be! Free yourself and your child from a spelling workbook and spread out your spelling lessons as a rich feast of ideas before your child. You're wondering if it works - *it does!* And it's simple and beautiful in addition to being effective. Take a deep breath, and a step out in faith!

For more information on dictation take a look at the articles available at [Charlotte Mason Help - Dictation](#), as well as this helpful video how-to available at [Simply Charlotte Mason](#).

Stay with me, we're talking [grammar](#) next!

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## [Considering Language Arts - Grammar](#)

July 13, 2010

This is part 5 in a series [considering Language Arts](#).

Charlotte Mason did not begin formal grammar instruction until around the 4th grade, advocating that children who read from a generous feast of living books and were in the habit of narrating regularly would naturally transition into grammar lessons with ease around this time. She says in *Home Education* (p. 295 - 296):

*"...grammar, being a study of words and not of things, is by no means attractive to the child, nor should he be hurried into it."*

*"Because English Grammar is a logical study, and deals with sentences and the positions that words occupy in them, rather than with words, and what they are in their own right, it is better that the child should begin with the sentence, and not with the parts of speech; that is, that he should learn a little of what is called analysis of sentences before he learns to parse; should learn to divide a simple sentence into the thing we speak of, and what we say about it - 'The cat-sits on the hearth.' - before he is lost in the fog of person, mood, and part of speech."*

I began to doubt in our early years. Thinking that a Charlotte Mason approach to language arts was too simple to be real...too easy to be sufficient, I decided I'd need to supplement with purchased workbooks. Surely we needed to supplement, to add, to ensure adequate coverage. I was certain we were going to miss the boat grammatically if I didn't. What resulted was not grammatical fluency, or ease, or even adequate coverage, but frustration and a child that felt overtaxed and overburdened. I didn't trust the process. I had to learn the hard way that you can't do this halfway for it to work. That first step out in faith does require a bit of trust, but I can say from a unique perspective that it will be worth your while. Believe. It really is this simple.

**How in the world do you teach grammar then?**

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Gently and naturally with our familiar friends - the short lesson and the living book.

I approach grammar formally over 3 years - once in elementary, once in middle school, and once more in high school. For all the other years, from 4th grade (when I begin teaching grammar) and above, grammar is integrated and reviewed as part of [the dictation lesson](#), during what I call *grammar-naturally* years. This is the scope and sequence that I use:

- **4th - 6th graders** - *Grammar taught as short lessons through dictation exercises - sentence (subject & verb), capitalize proper nouns and the beginning of a sentence, a sentence ends with punctuation, introduce parts of speech.* (if this seems like a lot, please remember that it is taught in one short lesson at a time, over a period of time, not all at once.)
  - One year of formal grammar instruction -
    - My *very first lessons* begin with Charlotte's own lessons, which can be found on p. 296 - 300 of her book, [Home Education](#) (you can read it free online at Ambleside - [this link takes you directly to her grammar lessons](#)).
    - After these introductory lessons, we begin a year using [Winston Grammar Basic Level](#).
  - Other years are *grammar-naturally* years, reviewing basic grammar during dictation lessons.
- **7th - 8th graders** - *Grammar taught as short lessons through dictation exercises - usage and parts of speech review.*
  - One year of formal grammar instruction - [Winston Word Works](#).
  - Other years are *grammar-naturally* years, reviewing basic grammar during dictation lessons.
- **High school** - *Grammar taught as short lessons through dictation exercises - review of parts of speech, more advanced grammar, diagramming (if desired)*
  - One final year of grammar instruction - [Advanced Level Winston Grammar](#).
  - Other years are *grammar-naturally* years, reviewing grammar during dictation lessons.

**Do you use any formal programs to help you teach grammar?**

I use [Charlotte Mason's grammar lessons](#) to provide that logical sense of the whole - working with the sentence first. After that, I use [Winston Grammar](#) to convey formal lessons on the parts of speech, usage, and advanced grammar lessons. (more on *Winston Grammar* below)

**What do grammar lessons look like during *grammar-naturally* years?**

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I keep in mind the language arts scope and sequence I listed above, and those things I'm looking to convey for that grade, and review concepts a little at a time. With each dictation, I discuss something simple and small!

During elementary years we enjoy [Schoolhouse Rock](#) songs and [Grammar Songs](#). I'd like to tell you that Schoolhouse Rock is only used in elementary years...but alas...it is popular with everyone in this house, no matter the age! *conjunction-junction...what's...your...function????*  
One other surprisingly fun resource for hitting punctuation...and convincing your 4th grader that a comma actually *means* something in a sentence is [Victor Borge's phonetic punctuation](#). Hilarious!!! But also SUPER effective!!!!!!

Let me give you an example of a dictation that makes use of a gentle grammar reinforcement. We'll take the dictation example I offered for my 5th grader from [the last post on dictations](#) (Keep in mind that this is a *very short* dictation lesson for a 5th grader, and it was chosen based on my son's needs and abilities. You'll choose dictations based on your child's needs!):

*All I have seen **teaches** me to trust the **Creator** for all I have not seen.*

Here's how this dictation lesson sounds:

**Me: Can you read this aloud?**

**\*\*Sparkly reads aloud\*\***

**Me: Are there any words in this sentence that you don't understand - you don't know what they mean?**

**Sparkly: No.**

**Me: Are there any words in this sentence you think would be hard for you to spell?**

**Sparkly: Yes...>> starts looking at the beginning of the selection <<.....teaches and Creator. >> He underlines them on his study page <<**

**Me: Ok , let's talk about them a bit...teaches has a vowel pair - ea. Do you remember what ea says when they are found in a word together?**

**Sparkly: Yep....E.**

**Me: Right. Now, let's take a look at Creator - it's capitalized because proper nouns are capitalized. Do you remember what a proper noun is?**

**Sparkly: It's a special person, place, thing, or idea, right?**

**Me: Yes! It's a PARTICULAR person, place, or thing. So, Creator in this quote is a particular name of God, the Creator. So, it's capitalized. Are there any other capital letters in this sentence?**

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Sparkly: No.

Me: Really? There are NO OTHER capital letters in this sentence?

Sparkly: Oh yeah....the first letter...because the first letter of a sentence is always capitalized.

Me: YES!!!! You remember! And what is ALWAYS at the end of a sentence?

Sparkly: A period.

Me: Hmmmm....Is it always a period?

Sparkly: It is in this sentence.

Me: >> **laughing** << That's true...but are there any other punctuation marks that could end a sentence? What are they?

Sparkly: >> **thinks** << .....an exclamation point.....and a question mark.

Me: Yes! Great! Now, can you read the sentence aloud to me again?

Sparkly: >> **reads selection** <<

Me: Great! Now, you work on making a picture of the words you underlined in your mind's eye. Can you study it for a while until you can see it in your mind with your eyes closed? Look at the first letter, and the letter that follows that, and the letter after that...and so on. Take a picture of all those letters in EXACTLY the right order. Spell it out loud if you need to.

.....studies for a few minutes.....

Sparkly: I'm ready, I can see the words.

Me: Ok - good! Would you like to write them really big on the dry erase board now?

Sparkly: OK. >> *Writes words....while I stand nearby watching to make sure that he writes the words EXACTLY as they are spelled! I DON'T WANT a memory of an incorrectly spelled word* <<

Me: Great! We'll study more tomorrow.

This takes about 10 minutes. Lesson over.

## What do grammar lessons look like during formal grammar focused years?

On years that we study grammar formally, using *Winston Grammar*, we work on a lesson or two a week. Lessons are short, and each lesson makes use of a card to represent a concept or part of speech. These cards make it easy to branch out from the program examples to other sentences that might come from a living book. I keep lessons under 15 minutes.

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Keep watching [Schoolhouse Rock](#) and *Victor Borge!!!*

Dictations are simple and follow the same basic format of the grammar naturally dictation lessons. The only difference being, if we're discussing "adjectives" in Winston Grammar, I might ask my child to identify the adjectives in the passage...that kind of thing. In this way, dictation lessons reinforce Grammar lessons.

## Resources that work well for us:

[Simply Grammar, An Illustrated Primer](#) - Karen Andreola has revised and expanded Charlotte Mason's own grammar lessons and compiled them in this book. I use it loosely, as a guide, not necessarily in the order it was written (save the first lessons), and certainly not all in one year. It's a book that serves as a great supplement for me over the years and across ages. It's something I pull out occasionally to reference, or from which I can springboard a lesson. It is also a good source for those very first lessons, providing children with that logical sense of the sentence so that we can then work toward the *words* - the parts of speech, and the places they occupy within the sentence. (It is not something I'd consider necessary, just helpful. Charlotte Mason's own first lessons can be found for free online as I linked earlier.) I prefer *Winston Grammar* for its logical, step-at-a-time approach to teaching parts of speech. However, I enjoy filling in lessons with this book after our first year's introduction of grammar is complete, so you'd likely find me using it during our *grammar-naturally* years.

[Winston Grammar](#) - There are a number of great grammar programs out there, and this is one of them! This program has earned a valued place on my shelf and fits our approach as well as fitting the learning styles my children have (if you have a hands-on learner, consider this program). I wanted to link to an outside review for you, but Cathy Duffy doesn't have an online review available. She does review the program in her book, [100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum](#)...so it must make her top 100 list. It definitely makes mine! There are a number of really good grammar programs out there, several of which lend themselves naturally to the short lesson. I like Winston Grammar because it is simple, hands-on, and effective. The program makes use of 1) clear and simple explanations of the parts of speech, 2) how they sometimes relate to or signal another part of speech, and 3) contains hints for identifying parts of speech on small (business sized) cards, which the child uses as part of the program. Lessons are taught and build each on the other, a little at a time, and the cards are used by the child to "build" practice sentences, using cards to indicate which part of speech is represented by the words in the sentence. It works super with a short lesson approach, and I can use the cards that come with the program to build and analyze ANY sentence! It's not the only grammar program out there, but it works great for us! If you have a child that *\*needs\** a hands on approach and have wondered



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how in the world to do that with grammar lessons, this would be a great program to consider. Beyond that, it is effective in its simplicity and logical approach!

[The Elements of Grammar](#) by Margaret Shertzer - there is nothing fluffy about this book. It's a good general grammar reference. It was passed on to me by my mom when she was done teaching with it, and I pull it out when I need to look something up. Plain. Straightforward. Streamlined. Useful.

[The Harbrace College Handbook](#) by John Hodges and Mary Whitten (there are several editions, I have my old copy, a [10th edition](#)) - this was my high school grammar book. As distasteful as high school grammar was for me, and having discarded almost every shred of uselessness from my high school days, this lone book remains on my shelf and is often used as a reference. It covers a comprehensive scope including grammar, mechanics, punctuation, spelling and diction, effective sentences, and composition of paragraphs, research papers, and business writing. I find its layout to be intuitive and useful as a reference.

[Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation](#)- by Lynne Truss - a gem!!! Every high school student should read this book! It is a true *living* grammar book, written by an author with an unabashed passion for the topic!

[Grammar-Land](#) by M. L. Nesbit - the hat tip for finding this gem goes to my friend across the ocean, Erin at [Seven Little Australians Plus One](#), and her sharing on [a thread](#) at the 4Real Learning Forums. This makes a fantastic teatime read aloud for introducing the parts of speech. It's engaging and informative. My kids loved this book!

[Schoolhouse Rock](#) - I can't help myself. I grew up with *Lolly, Lolly, Lolly get your adverbs here*. It's still great!

[Grammar Songs](#) by Kathy Troxel - we don't go through all of these, but there are some fun songs in here. The lyrics are catchy and full of helpful grammatical hints!

So, that's how grammar looks here...integrated naturally with dictation lessons, with a few years of a formal approach after the 4th grade.

Next up, the final component of language arts - Composition!

I hope this series is, in a small way, helpful. I feel compelled to say again that I'm no expert in living this! I have certainly made mistakes, and my home, though joyful, is not a perfect embodiment of any of these examples I give to you. I pray I'm succeeding in letting you know how valuable I find these methods, along with some ways they might *practically speaking* look

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in a home. We consider and express these methods in our home because I believe in them, trust them, and have seen the fruits of them. Stick with me and we'll uncover and consider a little more of Charlotte Mason's methods with regard to language arts, and I'll give you a further glimpse into how we live out language arts in our home with various ages!

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## Considering Language Arts- Composition and Writing

July 15, 2010

This is part 6 in a series [considering Language Arts](#).

Ahhh! Composition and formal writing! We all know and believe this skill to be necessary, but how.in.THE.world to bring it into our home? And when? And with which of the dizzying multitude of writing programs? And what if I don't have a clue how to write myself, much less teach it? or edit? or both? and what do I do if my child stares blankly and skeptically at me when I ask him to put pen to paper? WHAT IF HE NEVER LEARNS HOW TO WRITE????

Deep breath. You can do this!

As with every other aspect of language arts making use of Charlotte Mason's methods, writing points back to, and is anchored in, the *living book*. Provide your child a generous feast of living books and he **WILL** write. Encourage and foster narrations in your home, and your child will have almost all the useful and necessary tools of writing in place by the time they are ready to put pen and thought to paper! Think about it - only recently (historically speaking) have we inundated children with writing curriculum containing prompts and rules and guides and lessons...on HOW to write.

Before there was a market for a \*curriculum\* to teach writing - there were *living books*. Great writers and thinkers *read books*. You recoil perhaps? Can it be that simple? It can. They read quality writing across a spectrum of subjects. And they wrote. Their styles were formed from their reading. Trust that if you provide a generous banquet of living books and ideas to your children, they **WILL WRITE!**

Now, before you think that I'm about to eschew any and all writing curriculum, let me say that I am not. Just as I do not **NEED** a breadmaker on my counter, I consider it a kitchen helper! It's a tool I make use of. I do not **NEED** a writing program, just as I do not **NEED** a breadmaker, but there are a couple that have been a help for us, and I do make use of them. They fit with my educational philosophy, and align with Charlotte Mason's methods and that makes them useful and a good fit in our home. I'll review a few of my favorite resources below!

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by Jennifer Mackintosh.

Charlotte Mason didn't believe formal writing instruction was needed for a young child. She believed that a steady supply of worthy ideas through living books would feed and nourish a child enough so that when they were ready to start writing, around age 10, it would be a natural extension - just a step forward. Isn't that a lovely thought? I see that again and again in a Charlotte Mason education. Lay down the foundation, give the child room to explore and self-educate within that generous foundation, and he will step out and upward naturally, on his own, without us trying to artificially accelerate or advance him. To me, this is the essence of a gentle, considered education. Ok...tangent over. :) Here's what Charlotte had to say about teaching writing (from [Volume I](#), p. 247 - read it free at [Ambleside](#)):

*"...lessons on 'composition' should follow the model of that famous essay on "Snakes in Ireland"—"There are none." For children under nine, the question of composition resolves itself into that of narration, varied by some such simple exercise as to write a part and narrate a part, or write the whole account of a walk they have taken, a lesson they have studied, or of some simple matter that they know. Before they are ten, children who have been in the habit of using books will write good, vigorous English with ease and freedom; that is, if they have not been hampered by instructions. It is well for them not even to learn rules for the placing of full stops and capitals until they notice how these things occur in their books. Our business is to provide children with material in their lessons, and leave the handling of such material to themselves. If we would believe it, composition is as natural as jumping and running to children who have been allowed due use of books. They should narrate in the first place, and they will compose, later readily enough; but they should not be taught 'composition.' "*

Alright, we've covered the philosophy behind the method - let's talk practicals!

## What do you write?

**Written narrations** are a natural extension of oral narrations. By the time a child is ready to write their narrations, they have already mastered the process of taking information, processing it and organizing it in their mind, and communicating it. That's the AMAZING benefit offered in being consistent through the years with oral narrations. (*By the way, if I were just starting to use Charlotte Mason's methods, I would NOT approach written narrations until we had spent some time really working on oral narrations!*) You've introduced basic grammar gently and naturally through dictation exercises and copywork. The next step is to simply get the child's thoughts on paper in the written word.

There is a transition trick (from oral to written narrations) that I think I learned from [The Writer's Jungle](#) (which I'll review for you below). As the child gives an oral narration, I type it into a word processor, setting the font to a large type and using double spacing. I then print it and have the child cut apart the sentences - one sentence to a strip of paper. Now, we review the thoughts, re-arranging them so they are more pleasing, coherent, and flow better. This is really when a

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child sees (literally) how many superfluous details are being offered in a narration and this is when I begin to show them how to summarize in narrating. We set aside details that aren't necessary or add too much bulk. After we're done arranging, we type it back in. This process takes place over a week's time.

I don't start asking for written narrations until a child is around 10. The child writes or types his thoughts on paper. I provide a folder in the basket on my desk to collect all the written narrations. After a child finishes a written narration, we read it together, but I do not use this time to bleed all over a beginning writer's papers, and for real beginners I do not want to discourage at all! We read it together, and then we file it in the folder.

I still continue with oral narrations!!! It's important to note that written narrations do not take the place of oral narrations, they just begin to exist alongside them. Initially, I don't ask for many written narrations as a child transitions into writing. Within a year, they are writing weekly.

## What are some ideas for written narrations?

There are so many!!!! Don't fall into the trap of considering written narrations stale book report-ish things!!!! Here are just a few of the ways we enjoy written narrations here:

- **History narratives** - ask the child to write a short narration about a historical figure they just read about and include this in their Book of Centuries.
- **Newspaper articles** - the child writes from the perspective of a journalist, reporting on the material as if it were a significant "current event".
- **Perspective of a historical figure** - I asked my daughter to write a narration about Queen Victoria once and she just *could-not-get-fired-up* about it. She struggled to put pen to paper, finding it boring and dry. I asked her to write from the perspective of one of Queen Victoria's ladies-in-waiting. She was to write a letter home to her mother and detail her perspective of her life with Queen Victoria. It worked, and was probably one of her best written narrations.
- **A letter** - see idea above. :)
- **An obituary** - write the obituary for a historical figure!
- **A private blog** - I'm not looking to solicit a maelstrom of emails detailing the pitfalls of allowing children online or into the blogging world, so if you disagree with this, please do just skip on ahead. :) Having said that, allowing my daughter a private blog to narrate some of her thoughts has proven an amazing way both to collect narrations and motivate them. She enjoys the format, and loves writing like this. Giving her a blog to share with some of her friends and family (still private, but open to some readers) has proven a wonderful way for her to write. She really enjoys this expression of herself and her thoughts. It allows her to experiment a bit with writing, to find her voice without it being

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"an assignment". We have a few private blogs ([blogger](#) blogs are free to set up and use) and I'll list a few ways we use them:

- Just for fun - this is a child's place to share thoughts, experiences, pictures, whatever! Invite grandparents and close friends.
- To collect a child's written narrations - Use the sidebars to record books that are read. Set the notification preferences to notify YOU when a post is uploaded so you know to your child has published a narration and you can read it and even comment on it. This blog is only open to my child and I - there are no other readers.
- For a language arts program like [Lingua Mater](#). A few years ago when my daughter and I worked with this program, I set up a blog specifically so we had a place to collect assignments and writing. She REALLY enjoyed this. Again, this blog was only open to my child and I - we restricted view-ability through the blogger settings.

Still wondering if this is really all that is necessary? Take a look at Lindafay's [written narration samples](#) as her daughter progresses. They're amazing, but not atypical. This is what happens when a child feasts for several years on living ideas and books.

## Do you correct written narrations?

Once my child has become accustomed to writing narrations, we meet together after they write and we discuss errors or areas that need improvement **ONE** at a time. I do not flood a paper with red marks, especially at the beginning - we take one concept to work on with each narration. Perhaps their sentences are super long. I discuss ways we could shorten the sentence and we take an example from their writing and do that. I always note words that are mis-spelled and sometimes we work on them or correct spelling on-the-spot, using the same tools we employ in dictation exercises, making a mental image of the word. I don't ask for re-writes unless we're walking a narration through the entire editing process. So, with each narration: we meet together, I encourage them in their writing, and we discuss something for the child to work on for improvement. It's a gradual and gentle process that does work! Be patient with it!

There was an article written by Lindafay (her blog: *Higher Up and Further In*) that was so helpful to me in learning how to work this process and I encourage you to read it!!! [Yes. There is a time to correct written narrations.](#)

## How about high school writing?

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Ok. I'm reminding you that my oldest is in 9th grade, so I can't speak to this with the same experience or perspective as I can from K - 8th grade. However, I have looked to Miss Mason on this as we form our approach. From [Charlotte Mason](#), Volume 6, p. 193 (available [here at Ambleside](#)):

*"Forms V and VI: (my note...this would be roughly the equivalent of grades 10, 11, and 12) In these Forms some definite teaching in the art of composition is advisable, but not too much, lest the young scholars be saddled with a stilted style which may encumber them for life. Perhaps the method of a University tutor is the best that can be adopted; that is, a point or two might be taken up in a given composition and suggestions or corrections made with little talk.*

**Formal writing** is a skill I want to teach at this level. Whatever a child's future vocation, this is the time to begin teaching the elements of formal writing - expository essays, persuasive essays, informative essays, etc. I'm making use of a few resources to help us this year and I'll list them for you below.

## Writing resources

Again, much like the grammar resources I offered, I need to say that there are a number of really good writing programs out there! If you're working with one already, please don't assume that I'm implying that the ones listed here are any better! Use what's working for you! I would always encourage you to make use of what is already living on your shelf! I do appreciate when people share with me what works for them, so with that in mind, I'll share:

- [The Writer's Jungle](#) by Julie Bogart - This program, while costly, was very helpful to me in understanding how to approach writing. It is not a program written to the child; it is written to the parent. I found this helpful as it put tools in my hands, but I'm mentioning this because if you're looking for scripted lessons detailed out, you won't find that kind of thing with this program. You *will* find solid examples of different assignments as well as some ideas for assignments. The discernment process Julie walks you through in helping a parent determine just *where* a child is in the natural stages of writing development was so very valuable because she then takes you from there and helps you form a plan that not only speaks to that stage, but encourages growth. The book is filled with ideas and solutions. There is a chapter detailing the editing process. This book provides the parent with the tools needed to encourage and nurture a child's "writer's voice" empowering the parent as writing coach. (A note - I have only used this home study course; I have not made use of the lessons offered online through Julie's site, so I cannot speak to those or review them, but I would, as always, encourage discernment there.) I really think that this one book provides a parent with the confidence, tools, and vocabulary to encourage and nurture young writers, particularly reluctant writers.

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- [On Writing Well](#): An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction by William Zinsser - I haven't used this yet - this is a book that became mine as part of the home-education-bookshelf-windfall that I was gifted as mom slowly but surely cleared her shelves. I'm grateful I have it though! This will be a part of our high school approach! It's a living book AND a guide to writing! The author has an unmistakable passion for the subject and conveys it compellingly, but simply. The author's perspective is to convey how and why a writer SHOULD write about the world they live in. (A note - I have the 1990 revision, so I don't know what's new in the most current revision).
- [The Elements of Style](#) by William Strunk Jr and E.B. White - (also a part of the bookshelf-inheritance-windfall) This is a C-L-A-S-S-I-C, and as used copies can be obtained for next to nothing, it really ought to be on every shelf. This slim book was originally written by William Strunk, a college professor of English, in 1918. He offered it as his text to his English class, and one day in 1919, into Mr. Strunk's class strolled E.B. White (as in [Charlotte's Web...Trumpet of the Swan...Stuart Little!!!!](#)) Some 38 years after taking Mr. Strunk's English 8 class, E.B. White was asked to revise the book for general publishing. What evolved has become a classic and a treasure! I'll let Mr. White tell you in his own words what the book initially set out to do:  
*"The Elements of Style, when I re-examined it in 1957, seemed to me to contain rich deposits of gold. It was Will Strunk's parvum opus, his attempt to cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin."*

In this little gem you will find "seven rules of usage, eleven principles of composition, a few matters of form, and a list of words and expressions commonly misused" (these are Professor Strunk's contributions). E.B. White added a chapter entitled, "An Approach to Style" - and who among us would not LOVE to take a lesson in style from the man that could turn a phrase like no one else -- "*Where's Papa going with that ax?*" (The very first line from *Charlotte's Web*).

I've probably gone on long enough about my own appreciation for this little gem. Needless to say, it is a wonderful resource both for mechanics and composition style.

- [Help for Highschool](#) by Julie Bogart - My 9th grader and I are using this program right now. This program is written directly to the teen, and could be used at any time during high school. There are writing exercises within, and the program guides the student through writing exploratory and expository essays. The program is divided into modules with specific assignments and each builds on the previous module. My high schooler and I are finding the modules in the first half of the book to be good (and sometimes challenging) exercises for review. The second half of the book is devoted to the formal essay, and there is a helpful rubric for evaluating writing. The website offers the entire

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first chapter to download for free as well as the Table of Contents and Introduction so that you can get a better idea of whether or not this program would be a good fit for you before investing.

- [Format Writing](#) by Frode Jensen - I haven't used this yet, but I plan to. This book can be completed over one or two years. Since I really like the way this book looks, but haven't used it yet, I'm just going to link you to some good reviews of it that helped me discern.
  - [Review at Tammy's Homeschool Curriculum Reviews](#)
  - [Review at Donna Young's site](#)
  - It is reviewed in Cathy Duffy's [100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum](#)

That's it! We made it! I do have a wrap-up post that will follow this because I'd like to show you how all of these language arts methods *can* fit in a week of work. See you back here for the final wrap-up post soon!

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## [Considering Language Arts - A Day In the Life](#)

July 17, 2010

This is the final post in a series [considering Language Arts](#).

If you're still reading at this point, you probably have one burning question, "*How in the world does it all fit?*" All the generous feasting on living books, the liberal education, the narration, copywork, dictation, grammar, composition? It's one thing to break it down and discuss practicals, but it *does* help to see how it might look. I'll share.

What I am sharing with you are the lesson plans we're using for Term 1 of this year - one lesson plan for 5th grade, and one for 9th grade. We're living them right now. They aren't a nebulous maybe. These plans are living; we're into our 4th week. These lesson plans are also a guide, not a straight-jacket. I print these weekly plans every Friday and attach a particular child's plans to their individual clipboard. We make notes and record progress on the plans throughout the week. At the end of the week, they are filed, and a new set of sheets replaces them. This has SO streamlined my lesson planning!

I ask you to remember that these plans are built for my children, based on their needs, interests, and abilities, and in no way is my sharing meant to prompt unhealthy comparison or inner turmoil about your choices. Ok? Just imagine we're all sitting around chatting in my living room, and I show you my plans. You look them over considering them in light of your family; you might grab a few ideas and leave the rest....or leave the whole thing if you think I've lost my mind! I just ask you to understand my motivation for sharing - this is to prompt your own inner



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brainstorming and give you something to visualize so that you can take ideas and tools to fit your day and your family! :) Questions are certainly welcome!

This year I found that I needed to offer more detail to my children. In general, I eschew having a set time reflected on a set of plans, and truthfully, I haven't abandoned that in principle, but I have accepted that some of my children work best with healthy boundaries. They operate more freely within the boundary rather than total open-endedness. I do consider the times listed a guide. I have also accepted that we need a set of plans that foster independence and the self-education Charlotte Mason spoke of:

*"(Children's) education should be largely self-education. A sort of correspondence school was set up, the motto of which,—*"I am, I can, I ought, I will,"* has had much effect in throwing children upon the possibilities, capabilities, duties and determining power belonging to them as person."* [Volume 6, p. 28 -29](#)

These plans we're living work well toward that end. We're enjoying our days. The children are reading, learning, and loving their learning. They know what they *"ought"* to be doing. It's a treasured time.

Because our days reflect Charlotte Mason's methods and philosophies, you will find this expressed in our plans. I ask you to please keep in mind that these plans were written for two very strong readers; the number of books and pages read for the term are very similar to the numbers read in Charlotte Mason's schools for corresponding grades.

So...now that I'm done with the gazillion disclaimers about sharing one's plans...LOL...

Specifically, you will find language arts represented on these plans:

- **Narration** is noted on the lesson plans under specific books for which the children will offer a narration. All of the 5th grade narrations are oral. Some of the 9th grade narrations are written. Keep in mind that Charlotte Mason didn't indicate which books would be narrated in her plans; students needed to be prepared to narrate anything they read. Charlotte wasn't juggling 4 different levels of children's education at once, one of whom is learning to read, another of whom is a toddler in need of almost constant attention to foster good habit formation...the house...the laundry...the day. I am. Indicating clear expectations of a narration on my plans has been a tool for me serving as a visual reminder and keeping me accountable to the valued practice of narration! **I do regularly** ask for narrations that aren't indicated on the lesson plans! Narrations satisfy both oral and written language arts, so **writing practice is covered under this heading** as well - 2 birds with one stone. I like it when methods are super efficient! My 9th

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grader is also doing composition specific lessons to convey the "how-to" of essay and formal writing. **Narrations happen daily for both children**, multiple times a day.

- **Copywork** is only indicated on the 5th grade plans. My 9th grader is keeping a *Lovely Thoughts Journal* (Commonplace Book), and this is not listed on her plans anywhere.
- **Dictation and Grammar** exercises are both integrated with Dictation lessons. This is a *grammar naturally* year for my 5th grader, but my 9th grader is completing a year of grammar review (ala Winston Grammar). Grammar lessons are gently integrated in short lessons throughout the week alongside dictation lessons, as well as offered after written narrations for my 9th grader. You might occasionally find a mention of grammar during copywork.
- **General language arts curriculum** - I am finishing up [Primary Language Lessons](#) with my 5th grader this year. We use it loosely. We do many of the exercises orally and we can move quickly as skills are improving. It *isn't necessary* to use this in addition to the other language arts I've offered; it's something I've chosen to do with this child though. I mention this resource, as well as some other really great **general language arts** helps/curriculum, in the resource review section of [the very first post in this series](#). When incorporating Charlotte Mason's method's with additional language arts curriculum, I have to be attentive and watchful - it's a fine line between challenging and overwhelming. I think it's working because our energy and effort goes into the Charlotte Mason methods, while [Primary Language Lessons](#) is used in a relaxed/reinforcement way. If it were too much, I'd stick with my tried and true Charlotte Mason methods and drop all else.

## 9th grade Language Arts:

(don't forget there could be bonus Narrations requested!)

### [9th grade - Term 1](#)

**Monday** - 5 Narrations (one of which may be written), Essay/Composition instruction

**Tuesday** - 5 Narrations (one of which may be written), Essay/Composition instruction

**Wednesday** - 4 Narrations (one of which may be written), Essay/Composition instruction, studied Dictation lesson

**Thursday** - 5 Narrations (one of which may be written), Grammar Review, Dictation,

**Friday** - 4 Narrations (choose a written narration to discuss and walk through the editing process - 1/month), Grammar review

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## **5th grade Language Arts:**

(don't forget there could be bonus Narrations requested!)

### 5th grade - Term 1 Plans

**Monday** - 4 Narrations, study Dictation lesson, short Primary Language Lesson

**Tuesday** - 3 Narrations, Dictation, keyboarding skills, short Primary Language Lesson

**Wednesday** - 2 Narrations, Copywork, keyboarding skills, short Primary Language Lesson

**Thursday** - 2 Narrations, Copywork, keyboarding skills, short Primary Language Lesson

**Friday** - Bonus/Unannounced Narration, Free Write Friday

You'll notice that I stagger Copywork and Dictation days. Fridays are writing days; my 5th grader gets his writing practice in with "Free Writes" - 10 minutes of pen to paper. He can write longer if he chooses (and he often does), but the rule is he must write anything...something for 10 minutes.

There you have it! Language Arts! I sure hope this has been helpful!!! Now...

### **Because you asked...**

I compiled the entire language arts series, including this post into one document for you. I hope it's a help. I know I can only handle a finite amount of blog reading! All the links are hot within the document. You know....I had no idea that I had gone on *quite that much*. LOL! (I'm ducking digital tomatoes here...I'm afraid this little series amounts to 42 pages worth! Sheesh! That's practically a book!) Do forgive the wordiness. I did format a wide right margin because I like making notes on things, and I also formatted and included Questions and Answers because there were some great questions asked. You'll find those below. For you...

### ~ Considered Language Arts ~

**Consider your days.** Free your shelves and your days of cumbersome handwriting workbooks, spelling workbooks, grammar workbooks, and dry reading comprehension questions! Fill your shelves and your days with beautiful living books and allow your lessons to connect. Foster relationships between your children and rich, noble ideas within the covers of these living books! Leave enough margin in your day so that your children can enjoy their reading and have time to explore! Let the learning moments in your home be a feast of generous thoughts and literary richness!

***Days of living and loving learning await!***

***God bless you richly!***

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## Questions and Answers:

From: Considering - Charlotte Mason and Our Approach to Language Arts

**Charline asks:**

*I feel inspired but not sure where to jump in. We have never done it and I have children who are in grades 7, 5, 3, 1, as well as two soon to be three year olds ( and can not leave out my seven week old baby ). Where do you suggest I start with the older children?*

Wow! What a lovely family you have, Charline! Here's how I would start - pick a fantastic read aloud that the entire family will enjoy. You could anchor your read aloud to science or history if you'd like to kill a couple of birds with one stone.

Let's see about an example...Gombrich's *\*A Little History of the World\** would be great for all in history - just figure out where you are in history and start reading there. How about science/nature study ideas? We're reading aloud from Burgess' *Bird Book for Children*, but I also highly recommend Arabella Buckley's series *\*Eyes and No Eyes\** (there are several mini-books within her series and Yesterday's Classics has reprinted them all, but they're also available online for free at Baldwin Project:

<http://www.mainlesson.com/displayauthor.php?author=buckley>

So...anyway, choose a book to read aloud and make it the basis of your science or history. Read one short section/chapter a day. Ask the kids to narrate - perhaps start with your 1st grader. Ask him what he remembered from the story. It's ok if he only remembers one little thing - this is a group narration and you're just trying to ease into the habit of close attention and narration. Next, ask the 3rd grader for a different something he remembers...and so on. Keep doing this until the kids are starting to feel more comfortable with narrating. Encourage attention to the reading!

If one of the kids mentions an interesting section, and another responds that they don't remember that...say, "Oh, that's too bad! That was a great part! Pay close attention next time!"

Once they're comfortable narrating, keep rolling with your read aloud, but begin to ask for individual narrations from them from another living book in their lineup. I think starting with a group read aloud will be a great way for everyone to work into the habit together.

Hope this helps, Charline!!!

From: Narration

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## **Paula asked:**

***Do you require both an oral narration and a notebook page/written summary of every chapter when it comes to your older kids? Or do you alternate?***

I alternate, Paula. And, when we transition into a new writing skill, I am careful not to overwhelm so I think you're very wise on that approach!

## **Annicles asks:**

***I have one question though - it seems that you read the passage/chapter etc but narrate it later. Ordinarily, if a child was doing a boring text book comprehension it would be an immediate thing - read the passage and answer these questions. How long do you wait between reading and narrating, or is it tailored for each child?***

This really depends on the child and their age/ability a lot! For an early elementary child - we read together and then I ask that child to narrate immediately afterward. I have a 5th grader that is a very strong reader; he can narrate several hours after he reads a selection.

If you're just starting to ask for narrations, I'd try narrating close to the reading to really lay down the habit of attention and to help build narrating skills. After you do this for a bit, you'll begin to get a feel for your child's abilities. Watch for signs of frustration -- if you sense them, drop either the amount read and narrated, or move the narration closer to the reading. Move gently and slowly so as not to overwhelm all at once. Hope this helps!

## **Erin wants to know:**

***How often do 'you' write down their narrations?***

Everyone does this differently. I know some moms transcribe their kids narrations for them. One friend of mine shared with me that she created individual (private) blogs for each of her children and that's where she records their narrations. I thought that was a fantastic idea because you could also keep up with the books they are reading/have read!

Confession: I don't transcribe narrations until a child is moving from oral narrations to written narrations. It is just so helpful to do this for a child so that they begin to see the level of detail, and it's such an amazing way to help them begin to summarize and further organize their thoughts. I print the transcription double spaced. The child cuts out the sentences and then re-arranges in a way that makes more sense.

That's it for my transcriptions. :)

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From: Copywork

**Kelly asked:**

***Could you expand on the alternatives to copywork you used for your oldest son that doesn't like to write?***

Sure, Kelly.

First, copywork wasn't optional, but it was a short lesson and the only writing I asked for. 5 minutes a day with best effort and the goal of perfect execution. 5 minutes.

Now, if we were working on building words, rather than asking him to write with a pencil, I'd use the moveable alphabet and ask him to build words with his letters. If he was copying a word that was challenging to him in terms of spelling, we'd practice building the word with the moveable alphabet and I'd ask him to make a picture of the word in his mind.

Other tools were a small bin of sand or cornflour and having him trace a letter in the sand. Still another alternative is tracing letters in the air. This is super helpful for teaching letter formation with big sweeping motions with the finger rather than focusing on something tiny on a paper.

Does that help illustrate that more, Kelly?

**Mary asked:**

***I have always wondered with my younger kids who are just finishing up printing, and taking on cursive....do you spend time SEPARATELY on the Writing Can Help books, before taking on copywork, or do you MASTER handwriting and cursive BEFORE beginning copywork? I never know if I should have them working on the WCH books with cursive while PRINTING copywork.***

I used to use the Writing Can Help penmanship series for the children's penmanship, but I use copywork (assisted by Startwrite worksheets I build) for penmanship practice exclusively now.

At this point, the only time I use Writing Can Help books is for something like the calligraphy course my daughter wanted to try. She taught herself and practiced formation with the Writing Can Help book, but once she had learned her lettering formation, she simply picked back up with copywork again as normal, using her calligraphy skills.

I teach manuscript and cursive using the Startwrite program to offer guides for letter formation until the basics of letter formation is accomplished, and plug in simple copywork exercises as the

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actual penmanship practice. These can be very simple! For example, for my 1st grader, I'm building pages using Mother Goose rhymes (which he loves!).

If a child is just learning cursive, I might print a page from Startwrite with only one word printed in cursive...and the rest in manuscript so as not to overwhelm the new cursive writer. So...one copywork assignment --> but print or require only 1 - 2 words of cursive and the rest in print as you transition. Does this make sense? I hope so!

Since the goal of copywork is perfect execution, I'd want all their effort and energy to go into that one short lesson and for them to execute it PERFECTLY!

Hope that gives you an idea or two to use, Mary!

## **Angela asked:**

*I guess I'm wondering what the definition of "perfect" is when you're dealing with 6 year olds?*

I'm looking for 5 minutes of best effort with a goal of perfect execution. Is every letter perfect? No. Is perfect execution always our goal? Yes.

I have a child with fine motor challenges, so I waited to start copywork until he was more ready for the fine motor challenge of writing. Once we began copywork, we moved very slowly and gently, and once again, lessons were super short. They still are for this child. 5 minutes and stop - before I lose him to frustration!

I expect his letters to look like the letters on the page. When I say s-l-o-w--m-e-t-h-o-d-i-c-a-l writing for first lessons, I really mean super s--l--o--w. I model how to move slowly and carefully over the top of dotted letters first. Move slow enough that the pencil doesn't have a chance to jump off the guide lines.

## **Here's another part of your question:**

*I'm not sure if the way you set up your kids is to tell them to concentrate so they can do it \*well\* the first time or if you tell them they're aiming for perfection or if you make them erase or what. Or maybe you have them copy the same word every day until they have it "perfectly executed"?*

Sorry I was unclear. Let's see...I stay with my new writers during this time to lay down good habits with writing. I don't want them to get in the habit of dawdling during the lesson. It's 5 minutes of writing. Period. Some children can write very well and write a great deal in 5 minutes. For some children (and I have one), that will be 5 minutes laboriously spent on 1 - 2

# Considered Language Arts

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by Jennifer Mackintosh.*

words. That's fine. It's 5 minutes of best effort. If, after 5 minutes of best effort, letters are less-than-perfect, I don't make them erase, re-write, or keep writing til perfect! It's 5 minutes of best effort. I might point out that tomorrow we're really going to move s-l-o-w-e-r so that all the letters will sit right on the line, but we're done after the short lesson. I don't want to frustrate the child.

If it's clear that a letter is a particular problem for a child, I'll continue choosing copywork that includes that letter, but writing one letter over and over again has always bored and frustrated my children. They'd much prefer to write letters as part of a word and thought. So...we might trace that letter in sand, or write it really big and slow on the dry erase board if I need to model again how to form that letter, but I don't ask the child to write a page of letters or words for copywork.

This isn't necessarily CM, but I have found that challenging letters are best worked out if we can write one or two really BIG on the dry erase board. Once the basic movements and formation is down, it's easier to translate that smaller on the page.

Hope that helps some!

From: Dictation

**Kelly asked:**

*You mentioned before that your son doesn't like to (write), I'm wondering if you do dictation like this with him or if you do it differently (movable alphabet, etc). Thanks!*

Writing is difficult for my son. However, he writes dictations exactly as I describe in this post. I do not use the moveable alphabet. I would not start dictations UNLESS AND UNTIL a child was writing, which is why I mention that dictations don't begin until 4th grade-ish.

**Mette asked:**

*what about all the creative writing a child just does on his/her own? :: Do you supervise every writing that gets done or do these kind of misspellings not matter so much, maybe because they are not made during "formal" instruction time?*

Great question!!!! I have kids that LOVE to write...everywhere and everything. You're right. You can't catch every spelling mistake, and I don't try. I'm just thrilled they enjoy writing, and I don't want to discourage that! I approach their free-writing a couple of ways:

\*\* If they're expressing themselves through creative writing of some kind I think that's great! I don't correct them or their mis-spellings. I DO (discreetly) make note of words frequently mis-



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spelled and work to incorporate those words into dictation lessons (if the child is old enough to be doing dictation lessons...if not, I leave it alone).

\*\* If they are writing a letter, or an article for submission somewhere, we walk it through the editing process together. I do help them correct mis-spellings at that time.

Hope this helps! In short, I'm only super vigilant about mis-spellings during dictation times because the child is engaged visually, kinesthetically, and auditorily in making a mental IMAGE of a word. Since all their senses are totally engaged, I don't want the wrong spelling plugging itself in! Sure hope that makes sense!

From: Grammar

**Donna Marie asked:**

***If I were to use Winston Grammar, which level do you think would be good for them?***

I can definitely answer this, Donna Marie! In my experience, \*\*\*Winston Grammar Basic Level\*\*\* is the best all-round program for every grade/level/ability. It's my "if-I-could-only-buy-one-grammar-help-and-have-it-work-for-all" recommendation. You could use this program with your 4th/5th grader...and then later that afternoon use it with your teen...all without skipping a beat. There's nothing twaddly about this resource - it's simple and straightforward which is what makes it so useful.

I have a hard time telling someone where to invest their home ed \$\$...because what if it doesn't work well for them? But I'm going to go out on a limb...if you made a decision to purchase Winston Grammar Basic, you would have everything you need for all ages/grades of grammar...this year, and every year. It is a solid and valuable fixture on my shelf, and because I find it so adaptable and useful across ages and grades, I can recommend it with much confidence!

If you find that one day you have the resources to add Winston Grammar Word Works and the Winston Grammar Advanced Level - Great! If not, you're still fine with \*\*\*Winston Grammar Basic Level\*\*\*! I'll tell you why...let's say you work through the program with one of your children this year. They do well, and next year rolls around and you find that there are some holes in their memory - they can't find the prepositional phrase easily...or they've forgotten what an adverb is. Easily fixed! No need to purchase a new workbook...or anything else! Pull Winston Grammar off the shelf, review a small section as part of your short lessons, and use the cards to work with sentences you choose for your dictation lessons.

I will say that I laminated my cards for durability. I'm glad I did!

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I know...I gushed. I probably shouldn't have. There really ARE other great grammar programs - I just stopped looking after I found something that worked so well for us. It would be great if you could borrow this and take a look at it to make sure it's a worthwhile purchase consideration, but I'll tell ya...it sure has earned it's keep here!