

Unschooling and Writing

Do you remember sentence-diagramming in school? I do. It was the onerous process of breaking apart individual sentences into their component parts and identifying those parts, like the subject, the verb, the modifiers, and so on.

By the time sentence-diagramming was introduced in elementary school, I had learned how to play the game of school. I had learned that obedience, memorization, and regurgitation of exactly what the teacher wants is the key to school success. I played it well. Looking back, and witnessing how my own unschooled children learn how to write, I realize how arbitrary and artificial learning in school was.

Those of us who buried our enthusiasms in the name of conformity did well. Those who recognized just how silly it all was did not.

Along with sentence diagrams, we also learned how to write simple letters and five-paragraph essays, again by dissecting component parts and following meaningless (to us) writing prompts. Those of us who could ignore the fabrication and effectively mimic the teacher did well. Those who refused to play the game did not.

The reality is that sentence-diagramming and copying someone else's writing template don't create better writers. They create students who may meet contrived curriculum benchmarks and pass standardized tests. They create students who can play the game.

With unschooling, there is no game to play. There is no manufactured curriculum or assessment. There is simply life.

My son Jack (age 9) downloaded an app this week that offered a free 7-day trial. It includes an abundance of content related to **skateboarding**, one of his present passions. There is a section of content in the app that he particularly likes, and he wanted to know how often that content is refreshed before deciding whether or not to purchase the app. He searched the company's website for information. Unable to find the answer to his question, he drafted and sent the following email:

To Whom It May Concern:

I am interested in subscribing to [your company's channel] mostly for the show "XYZ" (and others). Right now I am in a 7 day free trial and am very pleased. I was wondering when the "XYZ" upload date would be. Is it once every 2 days or once every 2000 days?

*Thanks,
Jack*

We didn't spend time on sentence-diagramming. He learns parts of speech from playing Mad Libs with his siblings sometimes. He likes to practice typing to get faster and better. He asked me how to address a letter to someone when you don't know his or her name, and the rest he wrote by sincerely expressing himself about something that matters to him. He learned spelling and punctuation by reading a lot, and reading things that he wants to read.

This wasn't an "activity" we decided to do that day. It didn't occur as part of a curriculum segment on letter-writing or in preparation for a standardized test. It wasn't a lesson. Jack wrote this letter because he needed information that was otherwise unavailable. In short, he wrote this letter for the same reason you or I might write a letter: because it is purposeful. When we write, it is for a reason. It is authentic.

In my forthcoming *Unschooler* book (now at the publisher!), I highlight the story of a grown unschooler who didn't really write until he was a teenager. Then, he wanted to communicate with a girl he liked and wanted to impress her. That provided the real and motivating context to write—and to write well. He never had formal writing instruction as an unschooler, but after writing back and forth to the girl, he realized that he liked both the girl and the writing! He became increasingly passionate about writing, ultimately majoring in journalism in college and becoming a successful journalist.

When learning is connected to living it is meaningful. It is not something that occurs at certain times, in certain places, with certain people. It occurs all the time, everywhere, and with everyone around us. Unschooling allows natural learning to occur by providing the time, space, support, and opportunity for interests to emerge and talents to sprout. With unschooling, reading, writing, and arithmetic become purposeful activities connected to personal interests and motivations.

Writing letters is enjoyable and important when it is necessary for your own purposes. Writing letters when someone else tells you to—when it is forced—may not be so fun or helpful. As Plato warns: "Knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind."

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