

First Steps Toward Writing

Some children begin to write even before they can read. One successful educator, Maria Montessori, even taught writing before reading. After she had taught her students the one-to-one letter-to-sound correspondences of the Italian language, Montessori would get them started with writing words by sounding them out. Her students would get excited as they suddenly discovered that they could write any words they could speak and then read the words that they had just written.

Unfortunately, English is not as phonetic a language as Italian. In order to get one-to-one correspondences in English for the beginning writer-reader to use, the English alphabet has to be bent a little. One of the most successful English-language school reading programs of all time used ITA, an artificial alphabet which closely resembled the regular alphabet except that there was one sound for each letter and one letter for each sound. ITA was never dropped because of bad results -- every study found that children who learned with ITA became better readers faster than children who learned with the regular alphabet. The children not only learned to read, they also learned to write.

I have talked with teachers who had taught first grade classes using ITA. They all talked nostalgically of how even these young children would write up a storm. Sometimes the teachers would fish through their file cabinets and pull out the odd spellings and the fun stories that their pupils came up with.

ITA was dropped for several reasons. First it meant that schools would have had to buy libraries of books written in a different alphabet for their first graders to read. Second, ITA's text-book was being published by an independent publisher, and the big-time publishers who had big-name reading specialists under contract were losing some of the reading textbook market. Finally, one study found that a good reading program which used sound-spelling writing with the regular alphabet could get the same excellent results as those obtained with ITA.¹ Unfortunately, when ITA was dropped, sound-spelling writing in first grade was also dropped.

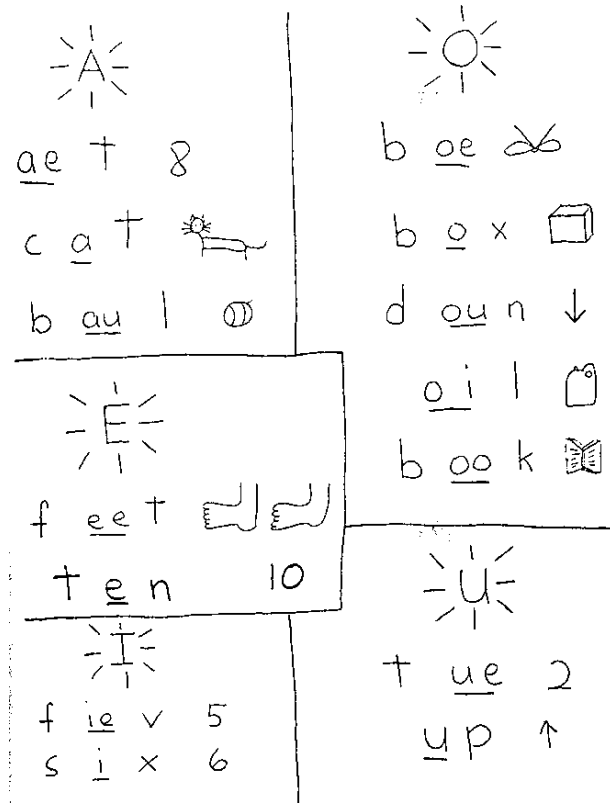
There is a new program sponsored by IBM called *Write to Read* which fills the Kindergarten classroom with IBM typewriters and computers and encourages children to engage in sound-spelling. Unfortunately, it is designed for use in Kindergarten, rather than First Grade and forms part of the movement to bring formal instruction to ever-younger children. Nevertheless, it may herald the beginning of a revival of sound-spelling in the schools.

Jesse Begins Sound-Spelling

When Jesse was about six and able to recognize all the letters and about sixty words, he was quite reluctant to do sound-spelling writing. He always wanted to spell every word that he wrote correctly. The result was rather stilted sentences which always contained the same words.

At about that time, I found a book in the library called, *How They Murdered the Second "R"* and Susan and I read about the use of ITA sound-spelling in the schools. The author included several examples of the delightful writing of first grade children when they were encouraged to spell words any way that they could.

One day, I showed our monkey puppet (with Jesse watching) how he could use sound-spelling to make the vowel sounds. I made a chart showing Monkey how he could use any vowel followed by an "E" to make the long vowel sound, use the vowel by itself to make the short vowel sound, and use "OU," "OO," and "AU" to make some of the other sounds that occur. It was a simple chart incorporating pictures and words that illustrated each sound. Monkey liked the idea, and Jesse was interested.

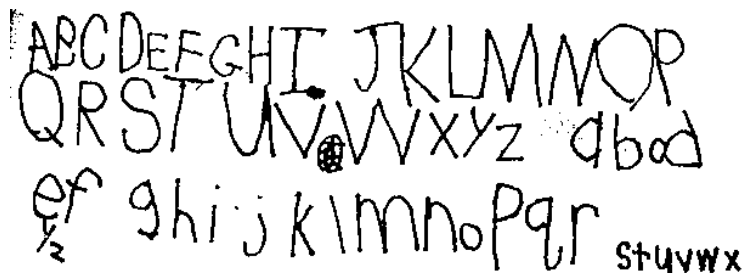


Jesse asked me to write down the sound-spelling versions of some of the words that he already knew how to spell. He could see that the words usually looked about the same no matter which spelling was used -- "monkey" became "munkee," "ate" became "aet," "pie" stayed "pie" -- and he was sold.

Soon Jesse and our monkey puppet were writing sound-spelling stories back and forth and Jesse began to free up in his writing. Around the same time, Susan began listening to Jesse read for about five minutes every night just before Susan would read the going-to-bed stories. When Jesse didn't know a word, Susan would encourage him to sound it out and he progressed steadily as a reader. He has continued to both read and write, and now at age ten he is both a fluent reader and a lucid writer. But the story of Jesse becoming a writer is really Susan's to tell. When Jesse was almost seven, Susan wrote...

Over the past half year, Jesse has become a writer. He'd been dictating stories, letters, and little poems for years, but he had no idea of how to even begin to do the actual work of translating his own spoken ideas into print himself. Even forming letters was slow, exacting work. For him to have written out his own pieces then would have been akin to us, as adults, having to carve our words in marble, with dull chisels at that -- a pretty arduous task. Jesse dabbled some with our electric typewriter, enjoying pretending to be typing fast, enjoying typing small parts of letters he'd dictated to his "Mother/Scribe" (i.e. *me*). He was completely dependent, though, on copying my written out correct spellings of words he needed. Early on, he wanted his spellings to be *right*. I'd read in *Growing Without Schooling* magazine about children happily "sound-spelling" when they began to write on their own, and wondered if Jesse would ever take off in this way. I thought for a good while that his temperament was just averse to the idea. That has now all changed.

A bit of chronology may help put this growing in perspective... In September, '83, we began a few small "routines" that proved helpful and eventually led up to sound-spelling. Jesse and I decided that he would write out the whole alphabet each month, upper and lower case, for display in our livingroom. He understood that we'd be keeping these handwriting samples in our portfolio of work that we show to our school district periodically.



The image shows three lines of handwritten letters. The first line contains the uppercase letters A through P. The second line contains the uppercase letters Q through Z, followed by the lowercase letters 'a', 'b', and 'c'. The third line contains the lowercase letters 'e', 'f', 'g', 'h', 'i', 'j', 'k', 'l', 'm', 'n', 'o', 'p', 'q', 'r', 's', 't', 'u', 'v', 'w', 'x'. The handwriting is somewhat irregular and shows signs of being a child's work.

September's alphabet was a tortuous affair. Jesse hadn't written much over the summer, and his letters were wobbly, awkward, uncomfortable for him to form. He was also severely critical of his work, would cut out any "wrong" letters and tape on a new piece of paper -- the whole alphabet was a twisting segmented crumple. He kept at the job though -- the task had become self-chosen. Then, sometime that month, Jesse was hanging about the kitchen table while I was cooking supper. I laid down a sheet of blank paper and suggested that he write something, anything at all, just write. He began, and by the time the stew was ready to serve, he'd proudly written out several lines of wobbly print. He wrote only disconnected words, "safe" words that he was sure he knew how to spell (Mommy, Daddy, etc...). From that night on, he wrote almost daily and I felt progress was happening. He was growing physically more comfortable with pencil and paper, he was writing out lots *more* each day, he seemed pleased with what he was doing.

Oddly, he decided that he would just keep *rewriting* what he'd written the day before, maybe adding a new line, even slowly beginning to put his separate words into little sentences ("cat sat Daddy" became "the cat sat on top of Daddy," etc.). There was some movement going on, but I could see that Jesse was grinding deeper into his rut of only using "correct" spellings, and so limiting terribly what he might say. He would occasionally snap, when I urged him to perhaps write something *new*, as it was getting a bit boring for me to just read the same thing over and over every day. "But I'm trying to learn all these words *first* before I go on to any others!" Writing was becoming mechanical for him -- he was seeing it as an exercise in penmanship and correct spelling. He still did it willingly and with interest, proud of his growing ease, but I was becoming distressed that he was not seeing writing as a communication tool anymore. I knew, too, that his "plan" to learn each word perfectly before going on to others was a doomed one -- too limiting, too slow. Think how stunted our *oral* vocabularies would be if we had tried that tactic at age two!

Our break-through came when my husband and I both read a book by George Riemer, *How They Murdered the Second "R"*. Among other things, the book strongly advocates using some way of simplifying the sound/spelling correspondences in English for beginning writers, feeling our unreliable language is a terrible trick to play on a little kid. The book is full of wonderful examples of genuine writing done by 6-7 year old children who felt unencumbered by the onus of spelling correctly. These children wrote whatever they could *say*. Their written vocabularies were not limited by what select batch of short vowel words they had just been doled out in reading or spelling class. The book in many ways supports the ideas in Glenda Bissex's wonderful book, *GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns to Read and Write* which describes the author's son's development in writing and reading through his invented spellings. Jesse, unlike Bissex's son Paul, didn't come up with the idea of inventive spelling on

his own -- he had apparently never thought of it. To Jesse, spellings were "givens," something you copied and eventually just knew. They come from the outside-in, not the inside out.

Jesse finally understood and took to heart the idea of "sound-spelling" when Howard had Jesse's favorite puppet, Monkey, begin to "sound-spell" messages and questions to Jesse. (Monkey has been a very loved family member for three and a half years now.) Jesse began writing little statements and replies to Monkey, sound-spelling "because Monkey would find it easier to read." The playful situation made it possible for Jesse to not worry about correctness. Howard also wrote out a vowel chart for Jesse (Jesse already knew the sounds of most consonants fairly well), using basically the "Unifon" simplified spelling system (a system where all long vowels are written to this pattern -- *ae, ee, ie, oe, ue*, each sound getting only *one* spelling pattern.) I also was reading Jesse parts of *How They Murdered the Second "R"* aloud, and that also seemed to give him confidence in this new approach. He could readily tell which writings from the book were done by the inventive spellers and which were done by the "Dick and Jane" group -- the latter were stilted and chopped, not at all the natural voices of children.

Within a month, Jesse was writing whole little stories. He was also using written language for real purposes -- little notes to Howard ("Doet feel BADLee DADDY love Jesse I will not teeZ yoo Tunite"), signs on block buildings or drawings ("Dun Bie Jesse"). In the beginning, writing was incredibly hard work. Jesse would at times burst into frustrated tears when I couldn't make out what he'd written, or sometimes he'd be unable to remember what word it was he was writing as he was so buried in dissecting the smaller sounds within the word. I, too, had a lot of *patience* learning to do. I had to learn not to question or correct his spelling, but just try to do the best I could to understand his *meanings*.

Doet feeL
BADLee DADDY
Love JESSE I WIL NOT
TeeZ YOO TU NITE

This experience made me realize, again, how valuable parents are as their children's guides and teachers -- just as usually a sensitive parent is the best person to understand a toddler's beginning spoken language, so too, we're the ones most likely to be able to decipher the first rough written words. We know the context of our children's thoughts so well that we're more likely to be able to predict their meanings.

Jesse needed me to be near physically, while he wrote during his early spurt. He would need to ask me for sounds he didn't know (I was surprised how often *sh*, *th*, *ch*, *ou* -- "harder" sounds we hadn't worked on much before -- came up.). He needed me to reread his writing aloud for him, as at that point he couldn't always read back what he'd written. Letter sounds he'd never been able to remember before now were needed for his writing and he began to forge memory links he'd never had before. I was pleased he would *try* any word at all, long words with several syllables, anything. All words were his.

My mother wondered over Christmas, while delightedly reading Jesse's little note that began "Hie Grammo," when Jesse might ever learn to spell correctly. I've been amazed that the free writing process, coupled with his growing reading, just naturally involves us in discussions about our specific written language and its idiosyncrasies. Through my responding to his questions, Jesse is gaining more and more sense of how our complex code works. As Bissex noted with her son, there is clearly no danger of Jesse developing "bad habits." As his spellings are thought out new each time he meets a word, he is not merely repeating marks on paper that he made once before. Also, Jesse is very aware that he is moving towards "REAL" spelling, and knows that certain situations (addresses on envelopes for instance) are inappropriate places for invented spellings. We've read children's books on the history of our language, and this has helped him understand the somewhat snarled, though rich, roots of English, and so why we have so many odd spellings.

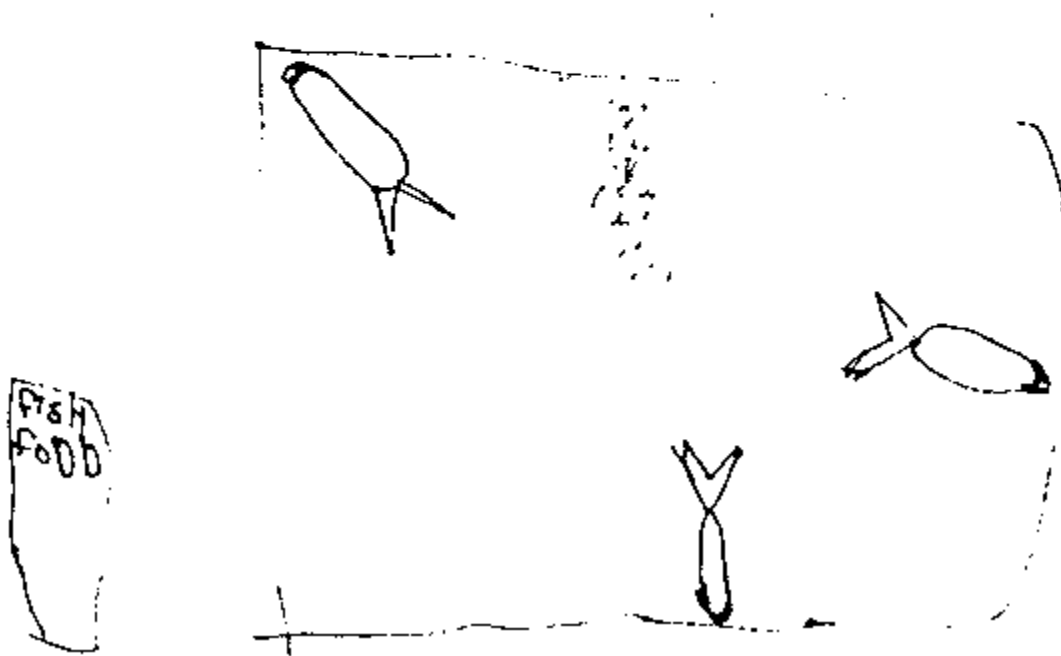
An interesting side benefit of this work is that it's given Jesse a way to observe and learn about some of his articulation difficulties. He usually pronounces "th" as something close to "z," and so in his early writings he'd happily write "zn" for "then." He's now aware of this difference, indeed at times he's *over*-compensated and *over*-generalized, once correcting his "WUZ" ("was") to "WUTH." He also did what John Holt mentioned in an old GWS -- spontaneously wrote "chraen" for "train," and indeed this is closer to what most of us *do* say.

Jesse is no longer so terribly "touchy" about his writing. His handwriting has even improved greatly, and more lower-case letters are proudly sprinkled through his capitals. He needs no reminding about spaces between words, he's gaining rudimentary knowledge of what a sentence is and how we punctuate them (LOVES exclamation points!), and can take low-key questions about sounds he may have left

out of a word in mature stride. He writes almost daily, and no longer needs me. We discuss writing a lot, everything from "writer's block" to needs for editing and proofreading for *adult's* writing (he sees *my* rough drafts!), to how writers come up with ideas or how writers borrow and change others ideas, to why most young kids in schools don't write much. (Jesse was astounded to discover our nine year old neighbor clearly felt *copying* an encyclopedia article was "writing"). And Jesse has gone from writing "CAT SAT DADDY" to "Win cats ar siting dan thae git a rool lok" (When cats are sitting down they get a royal look). Why, my wooden sword-loving son even now loves the old saying, "The pen is mightier than the sword." He's thinking like a writer...

Jacob and Molly Begin Sound-Spelling

gold fish swim around. they say
in the water some food!! + they swim
in the corners!



One of the nice aspects of getting your first child started with something is that your next children just naturally expect to do the same thing when they get older. So it was with writing. Jacob and Molly just naturally started sound-spelling on their own as soon as they were able.

Here is a caption that Molly (age 4) wrote to a picture that she drew of goldfish swimming in a fishtank (the goldfish are shown looking in the corners for food that was actually floating in the middle of their tank):

Gold fish swim arownd. They say wars some food!! They swim in the corners!

As Jacob turned four, Susan wrote about Jacob's beginning attempts at writing...

I realize with a certain guilt that Jacob, my second son, has been overlooked somewhat in my writing. We are probably all familiar with the syndrome of taking countless photos of child #1, some mere dozen of child #2, and poor child #3 gets in an occasional holiday shot. (I was a third child myself and know the situation well now from both sides...) So, too, with my writing -- this piece is my rectification. When I told Jacob that I was planning an article about him for the homeschooling newsletter, he got an overwhelming look of gratitude in his whole body, and said earnestly, "Make it a LONG article, Mommy, very, VERY long!" He understands that to be written about is to be noticed, cherished, regarded as important and worthy of respect. It means that *he* is special, not just a minor character in oblique orbit about a bigger brother.

Jacob feels, now, that it is imperative that *he* show some progress in reading, now that Jesse is moving along with it all. He can usually read his name, he's recognizing more and more alphabet letters, he knows printing carries meaning -- but he's really not ready or wanting to focus on *much* print yet. It's not that he really is asking for help with beginning reading, what is at stake is *keeping up*. Jacob's latest attempt at salvaging his self-esteem has been to proclaim proudly that *he* knows how to read, "that SILENT way" (something he knows Jesse only does occasionally). He will demonstrate his technique for a curious parent or brother -- he gets a knowing look in his eye, posts his finger under the first word in a line chosen at random on a page (he clearly knows our language reads from left to right), slowly moves his finger across the print, and beams widely when he reaches the end. Miracle accomplished -- reading! He knows that no one can challenge him, for he is indeed doing just what he sees the bigger folks doing. The secret is all his. (Reminds me a bit of when Jesse at one and a half used to hum into my recorder before he figured out blowing. He also seemed a bit suspicious that he might be "found out," so he wouldn't keep it up for long... A kazoo at Christmas was the natural solution...)

Jacob's other passionate venture now is writing. He sees Jesse writing daily, sees Jesse receiving personal letters in the mail, and he wants to DO THAT TOO, and so Jacob has his own clipboard, and paper, his own pencils embossed with his name, and he, too, sets out almost daily to write, and his writing is seriously kept in his own specially marked folder and his letters are sent through the mail (his own JACOB RICHMAN address labels affixed to the envelope, on the proper side...). He writes stories, imperiously demanding, "What letter spells `Today I planted a garden of pumpkin seeds!'" He sprinkles his wobbling letters all about the page, often circling bunches of them to try to show his separate words and sentences. Often he will print batches of letters all over his paper, *without* saying aloud what it is he thinks he's writing, probably without having any idea himself. He then presents the completed writing to me and I must then READ it to him, and I'd better not ask *him* to read it to me, or an overwhelming tantrum will ensue. What is needed is that I say, perhaps, "Oh! I bet this is about little Rabbit Jump-Jump running away from his mother?" (A favorite theme of Jacob's...) If hopefully Jacob answers affirmatively, I can then elaborate, spinning out a whole story on the spot in a definite Reading Voice (Jacob is very sensitive to when people are "just talking"). Howard tries occasionally to feign "silent reading" when perusing these pieces, but Jacob will have none of it, clearly seeing *that* as a hoax on our part -- "READ it!" he insists.

Jacob also knows how Jesse goes about slowly sounding out words he's writing, so he too says his words in slow motion, "RRRRRRRR -- AAAAAAAA -- BBBB -- IIII -- TTTTTTTTTTTT -- what letter makes TTTTTTTTTT?" He now usually demands, "Is that *all* the letters in *rabbit*?" What *other* letters are there? What other letters are there *that I know*?" Jacob has also discovered writing the "baby" letters. He's been watching my small, scribbly handwriting, and is imitating it, making little squiggling mountains and valleys all across his paper, laid out in neat rows. The feeling of freedom is delicious to him -- this is so fast, so *real* looking, so JUST LIKE WRITING. Interesting, too, that Jacob takes the word "letters" literally -- he "writes letters" to people, which means he writes alphabet letters all about the page, as many as he can squeeze in...

Jacob insists now that I keep writing, more and more -- different from his usual reaction to my writing urges. In fact, he recently dictated in a letter to a little friend that "It is not fun to have a writing Mommy." Guess it all depends on who I'm writing about if he can sense that through my writing, I'm paying more attention to him, not less. I love you, Jacob.

1 H. T. Hahn, "Three approaches to beginning reading instruction, ITA, language experience, and basal readers -- extended to second grade," *The Reading Teacher*, May 1967, 20, pp 711- 715

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