

WHY DICTATION?

Teachers know that few if any students will show improvement in their own writing as a result of isolated instruction in spelling, capitalization, or punctuation. Dictation is the single most effective strategy I've found for teaching and reviewing to *mastery* almost anything covered in a typical language text with the exception of creative writing. It is an essential link between *instruction* in spelling and mechanics and *application* in real writing. It is also a very efficient use of time. It takes 15–20 minutes to dictate and have students write, check and correct four sentences a day. With dictation and the writing process, I can teach almost anything in the language curriculum so that by the end of the year, students *apply* the skills as they write.

As adults fluent in writing, we often forget how much one must know and apply in order to correctly write a “simple” sentence:

- Capitalize the first word.
- Recognize and capitalize all proper nouns.
- Remember spellings of any words needed. For example, a child must recall whether to spell a word with the *ā* sound as it's spelled in *came, day, they, wait, great, eight, straight, veil*, or even *gauge*.
- Recognize when a word needs an ending and when it's a base word: *pact / packed*.
- Remember and apply rules for adding endings: *hop + ed = hopped, hope + ed = hoped, city + es = cities, lone + ly = lonely*. Remember irregular cases such as *truly*.
- Recognize whether a word is a homophone and choose the correct spelling.
- Recognize whether a word is a contraction or possessive needing an apostrophe.
- Recognize when a comma is needed and place it correctly.
- Determine the type of sentence and ending punctuation.

All this is necessary to write a single sentence. In real writing, there are also paragraphs, form, and dialogue. It would be virtually impossible for learners to remember all of this while their minds are engaged in creative thinking and writing. It is unrealistic for teachers to expect that they will. Creative thinking is incompatible with the critical thinking needed to remember spelling and mechanics. Even as adults, we generally function better when we creatively and freely brainstorm solutions to a problem, then go back to critically consider each possible solution. Literate adults are able to write creatively and correctly at the same time because they have *mastered* basic spelling and the mechanics of writing to the point that they require almost no conscious thought.

As teachers, we must realize that most children need our assistance in bridging the gap between the creative and critical aspects of writing. I teach the writing process concurrently with spelling and mechanics, but separately. At the same time, I build a bridge from critical toward creative with dictation, and from creative toward critical with personal words and editing. Improved first draft writing is the goal.

ADVANTAGES OF DICTATION

- Dictation provides a means for extended and mixed review of spellings, especially of homophones. Although daily practice and homework ensure that correct spellings are *stored* in memory, dictation provides the repetition and day-after-day review needed to practice *recalling* spellings when needed in the course of writing. Without such practice, it is unlikely that spelling in writing will markedly improve.
- Students are not asked to think creatively and critically at the same time during

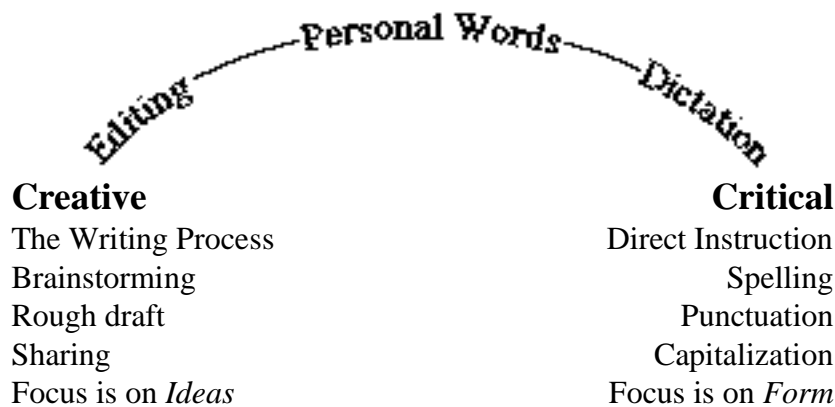
dictation. Sentences are supplied by the teacher so the students can focus on form.

- Dictation is routine. The process is basically the same every day—familiar, secure, and comfortable. Students’ minds are free to concentrate on concepts rather than directions.
- Dictation provides a means of introducing capitalization and punctuation rules one element at a time, focusing on the new element intensively for a while, then gradually tapering off the amount of practice as students achieve mastery. Periodic review can continue indefinitely.
- Students learn to carefully check and correct their own work. Self-correction is positively correlated with learning.
- Dictation proceeds from oral language to written language. Some methods for teaching checking and correcting give students sentences containing deliberate mistakes and ask them to find and correct the mistakes. I avoid this approach until students are *quite* good at spelling. There’s

always a risk that one child’s mind will “snap a picture” of an incorrect spelling, and *that* will be the impression that remains.

With dictation, the only mistakes children see and correct are their own.

- Students receive immediate objective feedback. They correct any errors they find without penalty or teacher intervention.
- Teachers can be flexible with dictation, introducing new concepts as soon as they feel confident that their particular students are ready and not before.
- Teachers can lift dictation sentences directly from student writing or use the names of their own students in sentences to reinforce the connection between dictation and writing.
- The 15–20 minutes a day of dictation give more long-term results than I’ve experienced with any other use of that time.
- The dictation paper collected from each child at the end of a week provides me with up to three grades: spelling, language and handwriting.



The goal in dictation is eventual synthesis between the creative and critical aspects of writing. It *is* possible for children to learn to write creatively and correctly at the same time. Literate adults can do it. Both creativity and correctness are important, and balance between the two is possible. If a person has no ideas to communicate, excellence in spelling and mechanics is useless. On the other hand, if a person has a great deal to communicate but cannot do so in standard written English, he or she is operating with a handicap. His/her ideas are unlikely to receive the serious consideration they may deserve.