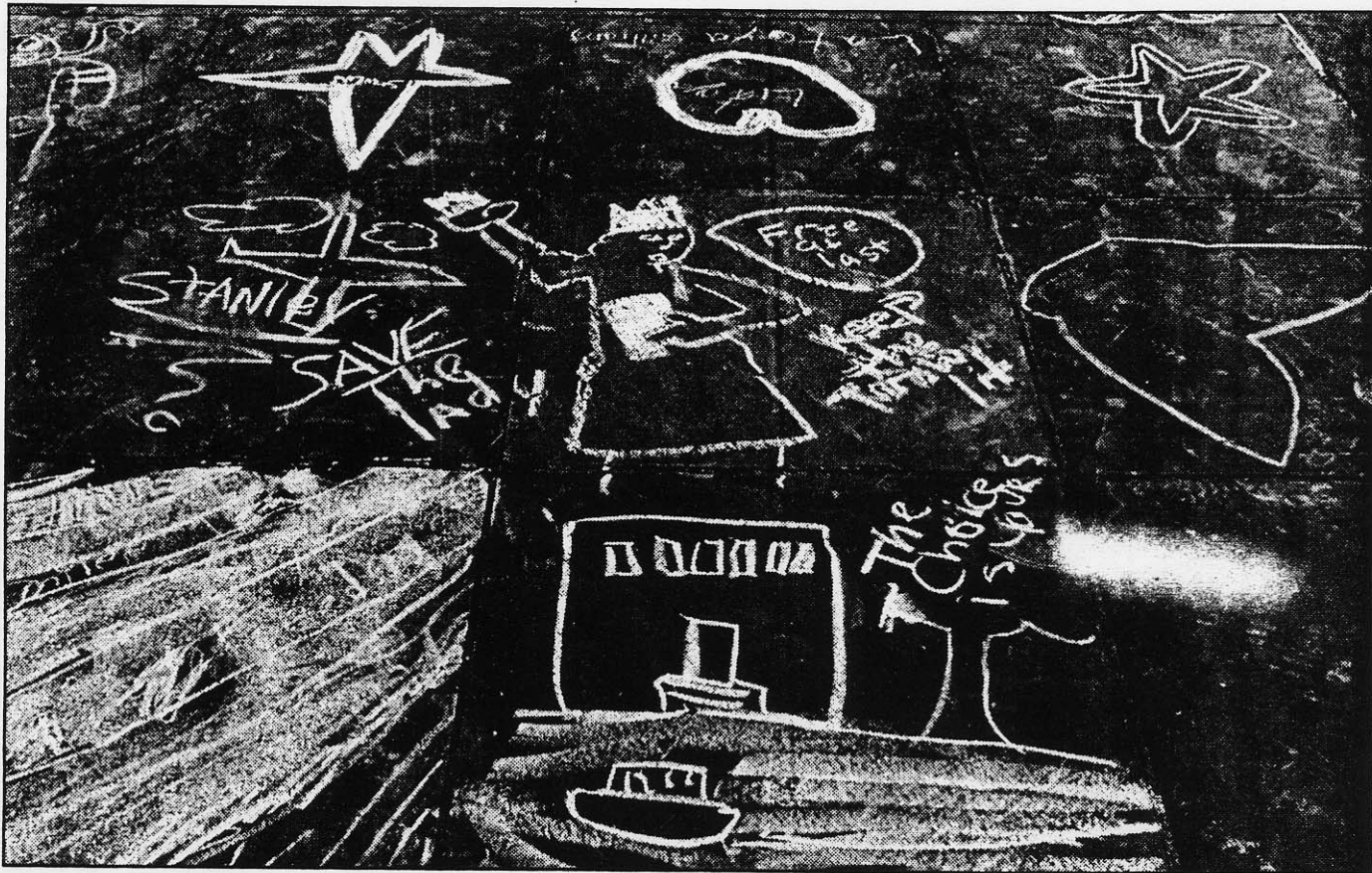


# With Pen in Hand, We Hesitate



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By WILMA DAVIDSON

**L**OOK at little children. Crayolas in hand or fingers in paint, they happily leave their marks on the wall, on the floor and on papers that adorn our refrigerators.

So, if children start out wanting (even needing) to leave a permanent mark for the world to see, how did so many adults, once children, learn to hate writing? And if wanting to write (including scribbling, its early form) is natural, why does writing seem unnatural and uneasy for many?

Where did so many adults learn to dislike, even fear, an activity that once was natural and pleasurable for them?

From:

(1) Early instruction that too painfully stressed only the correct formation of letters on the paper.

Instruction emphasized by a slap across the knuckles with a ruler went far to discourage joy in learning. So did public classroom ridicule of our early writing attempts.

(2) Efforts of well-meaning but misguided instruction that marked every error appearing on the page.

Thus, our writing efforts came to resemble a battlefield overrun with casualties — all ours. Many teachers felt they were not doing their job unless they corrected every mistake.

This continues to take place, despite the overwhelming research stating that marking every error does little to improve writing ability

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and may, in fact, do more harm than good.

When the goal was perfection rather than growth, is it any wonder that enthusiasm about writing quickly waned? Is it any wonder that our willingness to take risks by trying new sentence structures, experimenting with words and just plain playing with writing dwindled?

Correcting is not the same as teaching. Teaching involves assessing the primary problem in a piece of writing and helping the writer discover ways to eliminate it through more practice,

(4) The commonplace and odious practice of using writing as a punishment.

Did you ever talk out of turn in class? Forget your homework? Chew gum? If you did, chances are that you also wrote — at least 100 times — that you would never do it again.

While practice in writing is essential to learning, punitive practice makes you quickly associate writing with a negative experience. And if you're young, this message stays with you, sometimes for a lifetime.

(5) Not understanding the assign-

(7) Little nurturing of writing "for the pure fun of it," at home as well as at school.

Many a night our parents said, "Let's read a story." But what about, "Let's write a story?"

Parents pass on values to their children. If parents themselves depicted writing as a worthwhile, pleasant activity and modeled it as one, children stood a better chance of adopting that attitude themselves.

Did your parents?

So much for the explanations. The problem remains: What to do about hating — or fearing — to write?

To start, understand the origins of that feeling. Then, because that negative response was learned in the first place, unlearn it through good materials and informed instruction.

The trick, of course, is to know what is good. Writing programs — in schools and in businesses — should be conducted by instructors knowledgeable in current research on writing, able to explain it plainly and experienced in training methods based on that research.

Your choice of a program, for yourself and your children, could well be a crucial factor in getting rid of the "blahs" about writing.

Equally important, think about your negative experiences, and don't perpetuate them on your children.

Hence, my excellent friend, you must train the children to their studies in a playful manner and without any air of constraint, with the further object of discerning more readily the natural bent of the character... In the case of the mind, no study pursued under compulsion remains rooted in the memory. — PLATO ■

## Children's sense of fun with words is dampened by rigid teaching.

through discussion and even through groping uncomfortably for a time without fear of reprisal.

(3) Linking writing to being evaluated.

In schools, all writing was usually graded. In addition, rarely did we write to anyone besides the teacher, and hardly ever, if at all, did we write to the teacher without a grade being put on the paper.

Did we write to our classmates? To wider, even unknown audiences? To ourselves — to clear our minds, search our hearts, to just practice — without a red pen stabbing to death our efforts. Is it any wonder that many adults today still associate having to write with being graded and judged?

ment.

The teacher assigned the task. Talking with a peer was viewed as cheating. Even discussing it with the teacher, or asking for further explanation, designated you a "dummy."

Hence, you floundered or guessed, despite evidence that cooperative learning practices (such as working in groups) foster learning more than independent or competitive learning practices.

Talk, discussion and questioning are essential tools for learning. Were they valued and used as a way for you to learn to write better?

(6) Few opportunities to rewrite.

We learn through making mistakes. But once a grade was branded on the paper, could you try again?