

“What did you learn in school today?” Information for Parents

Reasoning and Writing
A Direct Instruction Language Program

We call Reasoning and Writing a language program, partly because it does not fit into any of the other subjects. It's not the same as reading, math, social studies or any other class you're used to hearing about. Even so, the skills taught are the ones that are most useful in real life. The program teaches children to listen carefully and follow directions exactly. They learn to understand what they hear, reason logically, and explain things clearly. Ultimately, these are the skills that allow children to make important decisions — decisions like what to buy and who to listen to.

Your child can show you many of the skills taught in Reasoning and Writing. Look at what is taught at your child's level of the program and see if you can find things to ask about. It's good practice and it's fun for them.

What students learn in Reasoning and Writing

The title, Reasoning and Writing, is a good description of what students learn in language group. Levels A and B focus mainly on reasoning, Level C on writing, and Levels D, E and F require students to do both. Distar Language, for children in kindergarten and pre-k, teaches basic skills like following directions and talking in complete sentences.

Students learn **reasoning skills** that help them to understand what they see, hear and read. Reasoning skills are taught at all levels of the program. Students learn to:

- follow directions
- put objects into categories
- use clues to answer a question
- find and correct unclear statements
- draw conclusions
- write formal deductions
- use evidence to support a conclusion
- understand arguments and decide whether they are valid
- identify faulty arguments and explain why they are flawed
- write clear, specific instructions

Students also develop their **writing skills**. In A and B, children write simple sentences, with most of the words provided for them. In Level C, they work intensively on their writing skills; by the end, they can write meaningful paragraphs. In Levels D, E and F students put their reasoning and writing skills together to analyze arguments and write critiques and directions.

The program begins by giving students few choices about what they write, and gradually allows them more freedom as they learn more. The idea is that students learn to write well by first learning all of the skills they need — things like grammar, different types of sentences, and deductions. To learn all of these skills, students have to practice, practice, practice. Some of the exercises ask students to apply rules in a very strict way, without much room for creativity. Once they have learned the skills, however, students can write sentences that express whatever they want to say, correctly and clearly. They can identify problems and come up with creative solutions to them. This creativity would not be possible without the intense skills practice. In writing as in music or sports, freedom comes from discipline.

Learning Skills in Small Steps

In their language classes, students learn about several different topics at the same time. For example, in a 30-minute period, the teacher may spend 7 minutes on each of four different topics. We do this because studies have shown that people learn more when the material is broken up into several short lessons, rather than one long lesson. Breaking the class period into several parts also helps students pay better attention, because they only have to focus for a few minutes before moving on to the next topic.

Each lesson requires students to use skills they learned days, weeks or months ago. This means that there is little chance for students to forget what they learned earlier in the year. They are always reviewing.

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Reasoning and Writing A

In Level A, children begin to learn critical thinking skills. They spend most of the class period on workbook activities such as crossing items out, doing mazes and coloring items a certain way. Every workbook activity has very specific directions, so students must listen carefully. They also listen to stories and answer questions about them.

Below is a list of the topics covered in Level A. Remember that students work on all of the topics, all of the time. For example, they practice *true and false* from lesson 2 until the end of the program (lesson 70).

Following Directions

Children practice listening to directions and following them exactly. For example, in lesson 1, the teacher asks them to touch their leg, their nose, their legs (both), and so on. She then asks only the girls or only the boys to follow the direction.

You can ask your child to show you what he does in language by asking him to touch different body parts or objects. Make it hard. Do it fast, and say things like, “Touch your ear. Touch your ears,” so he has to listen carefully for the difference between *ear* and *ears*. Be sure to praise him for good following directions when he does it right.

True and False

Children learn what these words mean and use them in many different situations. For example, in lesson 2 they see pictures of a horse climbing a tree, eating grass and driving a car. For each picture, they circle *true* if it’s possible, and *false* if it’s impossible.

Many true/false activities require students to use the words *some*, *all* and *none*. In lesson 31, they look at a picture of apples with stems. They make the true statement, “All of the apples have stems.” The teacher tells them to change the picture so that the statement is false. Students do this by drawing some apples without stems. Then they say a new true statement, “Some of the apples have stems.”

Putting Events in Order

Children listen to stories and practice putting events in the right order, either out loud or in their workbooks. When a character named Paul paints everything purple, children number the first object he painted, the second object and so on. Then the teacher calls on a child to tell the whole story, starting with the first thing he painted.

If-Then

Students practice using different if-then rules. They play a game like “Simon Says.” For example, the teacher says, “If I clap my hands, you’ll touch your head.” The teacher claps her hands and students touch their heads. After following the rule a few times, she tries to trick the children by snapping her fingers or touching her own head. Then she praises

students who (correctly) did nothing. (You can try this game at home. It's fun for children, and it's good practice.) Children also use if-then rules to predict how stories will end.

Classification

Children practice organizing objects into categories. For example, they take the category of *vehicles* and make a smaller category, *vehicles that go on roads*. On a workbook page full of vehicles, they color only the vehicles that go on roads, like a car or a bike. They would not color a train, boat or airplane. Later on, children make up their own categories — maybe *vehicles with wheels* or *vehicles that fly*.

Right and Left

In lesson 18, children learn which is their right side. In lesson 25, they learn which is their left side.

Questions and Clues

The group plays a guessing game in which children use clues to figure out which of several objects is the mystery object. In lesson 25, they have 6 pictures of vehicles. The pictures can be folded over so they can't be seen. The teacher gives clues about the mystery vehicle, for example, "This vehicle has wheels." The children fold over the vehicles that don't have wheels. They go on following the teacher's clues and folding over pictures that are not the mystery vehicle until they have only one picture left, which is the mystery vehicle.

In later lessons, students pick their own mystery objects and make up clues. This can be extremely challenging. They have to think about the difference between a good clue and one that is too specific. "This vehicle goes on roads" is an example of a good clue, while "This vehicle is not a bike" is too specific.

Stories and Characters

The stories in Level A all have characters who are very predictable. Paul always paints things purple or pink, Clarabelle the cow is always too heavy to do the things she wants to do, and Bleep the robot always says, "Okay, baby." Children listen to the stories and predict what will happen, based on what they know about the characters. They act out parts of stories and play guessing games. Some of the other characters are Sweetie, the Bragging Rats and Rolla. You can ask your child about the silly things they do.

Writing Sentences

Children begin writing sentences in lesson 53. The activities don't require them to know how to spell or punctuate. For example, they look at a picture in which Paul paints a pot. The students cut out the words *a pot*, *Paul*, and *painting*, and glue them into the right order. Later they write their own words.