

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

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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 B

In Level B, students work to improve their critical thinking skills and (to a lesser extent) their writing abilities. They spend most of the class period doing workbook activities such as crossing items out, completing sentences and coloring items a certain way. Every workbook activity has very specific directions, so students must listen carefully. At the end of each lesson, children hear a story about people or animals whose behavior is very predictable. For example, in every story about Paul, he spills purple or pink paint on something and “fixes” it by painting the whole thing (even if the “thing” is his brother). Almost all of the workbook activities revolve around one or more story characters.

Below is a list of the topics covered in Level B. Remember that students work on all of the topics, all of the time. For example, they practice classifying objects from lesson 1 to the end of the program.

#### **Classification and Clues**

Students build on what they learned in Level A about classes, or parts of a larger group. For example, they learn that within the class of dogs, there are smaller classes: hounds and work dogs. Within the class of hounds is an even smaller class, beagles. Children use cutouts of dogs to demonstrate different classes. Later, they use their knowledge about classes to identify “mystery objects,” given a description of what the object is and is not.

#### **Sequence of Events**

Children practice putting events in the right order using pictures and sentences. For example, they look at pictures that show 4 different versions of a story about Dud, a Saint Bernard. The teacher tells them to find the one where Dud eats a ham bone *after* he tracks in the snow. This kind of activity sharpens their ability to put events in order.

#### **Deductions**

Students learn about logical deductions like this one: All birds have feathers. An eagle is a bird. So an eagle has feathers. (You can see how this connects with what they learned about classes.) After practicing correct deductions, they learn about incorrect deductions.

Deductions are extremely important for later work in science and other academic subjects. You can ask your child to complete one, if she is working in lesson 30 or higher. For example: “All tigers hunt at night. Otis is a tiger. So what else do you know about Otis?”

#### **Predictable changes in words (Dialect)**

Bleep the robot keeps tinkering with his circuits, which makes him say words the wrong way. His mistakes are always predictable, however. Children learn the rules about his mistakes and correct what he says. For example, sometimes Bleep says *u* instead of *e*. When he says, “It’s time to rust,” students know he means, “It’s time to rest.” These activities give children practice in using word rules. In Level B, the rules are silly, but they prepare students for more important rules of spelling and grammar.

### **Directions — North, South, East and West**

Students practice facing north, south, east and west in their classrooms. They also do activities that teach them to recognize the directions on a map or diagram. For example, they have a picture in which a character has to move east to get somewhere. They learn to make statements like “The skunk is south of the pig,” and “The pig is north of the skunk,” based on a map in the workbook (lesson 33).

### **Sentence Writing**

In lesson 7, students write 3 sentences using pictures and a word bank containing 6 words. They decide which words to use and copy them from the word bank. This sort of activity sounds easy, but it serves as “training wheels” for writing. Students have almost no chance of making mistakes and picking up bad habits. Later activities are slightly more complicated, but they are still very structured. For example, in lesson 67, children look at two pictures and figure out what must have happened between the first and last picture. They write sentences using a word bank.

### **Direction of Movement (Spatial Orientation)**

Using ropes and gears as examples, the program teaches children to figure out what direction something will move after turning several times. For example, a character pulls on a rope that is wound around a tree, a bush, a rock and a sign. Students draw arrows to show which way the rope is moving at different points.

### **Unclear Sentences**

Students learn to fix sentences with unclear pronouns. For example, they read these sentences: “My brother and my sister had pet pigs. They just loved to roll around in the mud.” The workbook has a picture of pigs in the mud. A second picture shows the brother and sister in the mud. From the pictures, children can see that the word *They* is unclear. They cross it out and write *The pigs*.

### **Relative Size**

Students are introduced to the idea that *large* and *small* depend on your perspective. A beetle is tiny to us, but to an ant it’s enormous. Children listen to stories about Owen (a giant) and Fizz and Liz (people who are an inch tall). These characters have very different ideas about which objects are large and which are small.

### **Time, Rate and Distance**

Children learn how time and distance are measured. Using these units, they learn to express rate (speed) as *miles an hour*.

### **Cooperative Activities**

Students work together to write stories and books, put on short plays, and draw maps involving characters from the stories.