

“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.

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

Reasoning and Writing C

Reasoning and Writing C sets very high goals for students and teachers. Its purpose is to teach students how to write good sentences, paragraphs and stories — ones that make sense and don’t have mistakes. Good writing requires students to use many skills: grammar, punctuation, paragraphing and organizing ideas, to name a few. Level C teaches every skill by breaking it into small parts. This means that students learn to write slowly but surely. If writing is taught carefully, students are less likely to pick up bad habits.

In general, students learn to write correctly by following this sequence: First they learn a rule, for example, *Always begin a sentence with a capital letter*. Once they know the rule, they use it to edit sentences in the workbook by crossing out mistakes and writing in corrections. After they have learned to edit other people’s sentences, they practice using the rule in their own writing.

Students write sentences in most of the lessons. For every piece of writing, they are expected to follow directions exactly, check their work, and correct any mistakes they find (or their teacher finds). As with other levels of Reasoning and Writing, skills are cumulative. Once they learn a skill, students use it for the rest of the program.

Below is a list of the topics children study in Level C.

Sentence Analysis

Students learn to identify parts of speech in a sentence. First they learn to separate subject from predicate. Then they learn to recognize nouns, pronouns, verbs and adjectives.

Starting in lesson 1, students learn to identify “the part that names.” When they reach lesson 11, they learn to identify the predicate, “the part that tells more.” (By lesson 24 students know the words *subject* and *predicate*.) If you show your child a simple sentence, like “The dogs ran in the park,” she should be able to show you which part is which.

Students begin to learn how to change a verb’s tense in lesson 4. For example, if a sentence uses the word *burn*, the teacher might ask them to cross it out and write *burned* or *was burning*. In lesson 41, children begin to learn the difference between a verb and a predicate.

Over the first 58 lessons, students learn the pronouns *he, she, it, they, him, her* and *them*. For example, they might have a sentence like, “Susan loved birds.” They would replace the noun *Susan* with *she*. They also learn to look at a paragraph and decide where a pronoun is needed, or where a pronoun is confusing and should be replaced with a noun. For example, consider these sentences: “My brother and my sister had some pigs. They loved to roll in the mud.” You can ask your child to tell you what’s wrong with the word *They*.

By lesson 73, students can identify nouns. By lesson 94, they recognize adjectives.

Mechanics — Capital Letters and Punctuation

Starting in lesson 17, students practice “fixing” sentences that need capital letters and periods. They learn to use apostrophes (*the lion’s tail*) starting in lesson 44. Beginning with lesson 53, they learn to write sentences that have quotation marks. By lesson 73, they know how to use commas in most situations.

Editing

Starting in lesson 30, students begin editing sentences by fixing the “mistakes” in their workbook sentences.

Reporting

Students learn to tell whether a sentence reports on a picture, meaning that you can look at the picture to see if the sentence is true. For example, children look at a picture of three men fishing. The sentence, “All 3 men wore hats” reports on the picture, but “The men were brothers” does not, because you can’t tell that from looking at the picture. Students also practice giving the main idea or main thing someone did in a picture.

Starting in lesson 19, students write paragraphs about pictures. The directions are very specific: For each character in the picture, they write one sentence telling the main thing the character did. Then they check their work for spelling, capitalization and other mistakes. Teachers read some of the best paragraphs out loud.

Inferring — Writing What the Picture Doesn’t Show

Students look at three boxes. The first and last box show the first and last things that happened. The middle box is blank, but you can tell that something happened there. Children use clues from the other pictures to figure out what must have happened in between them. Then they write some sentences telling what happened. This activity, introduced in lesson 47, can be challenging. Students have to think about what to say, then say it in complete sentences.

Clarity (Giving Details)

Students rewrite descriptions so that they are more specific. For example, they read, “An animal fell out of a tree.” They rewrite it to say something like this: “A huge striped snake fell out of a big old tree.”

Longer Writing Assignments

Starting in lesson 91, students write stories and letters with many paragraphs. They learn rules for how to write interesting stories. In lesson 95, they write a story about a man in a restaurant who has forgotten his wallet. In lesson 105 they write a letter describing an adventure, and in lesson 107 they write another letter, this time complaining about a product. In some lessons, students work together in groups to revise their assignments.