
“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 D

In Level D, students learn to write clearly and convincingly. They examine all kinds of claims, instructions and arguments, looking carefully for factual or logical mistakes. When they find a mistake, students write a sentence or paragraph explaining exactly what the problem is. From this experience, they learn to check their own writing for false or vague statements.

The program encourages students to always be skeptical, to expect to find statements that are wrong. This prepares them to think critically about the claims they hear every day. Do the \$120 shoes in a commercial really help you play better than ones that cost \$40? Is the model in the magazine beautiful because of the shampoo she uses?

Below is a list of some of the skills students learn in Reasoning and Writing D.

Parts of Speech and Sentence Analysis

Students practice what they learned in Level C: identifying the subject and predicate of a sentence and recognizing nouns, pronouns, verbs and adjectives. In the first 65 lessons, they learn to use compound sentences (sentences with *and*, *or*, or *but*), label parts of speech in a sentence, and classify sentences as statements, questions or commands. They also study subject-verb agreement — for example, one dog is tired, but two dogs are tired. Students also practice punctuation and capitalization.

Clarity

Clarity is the heart of good writing. A clear sentence says only what the writer wants it to say, without being ambiguous or confusing. This is the goal for our students.

Children practice writing clear sentences and editing unclear sentences. Many of the sentences are directions for how to draw something or go somewhere. An example of an unclear sentence would be, “Jane’s house is the third one on Elm Street.” The reader wouldn’t know if her house is third on the left or the right. Students look at a map and change the sentence to make it clear. This kind of activity starts in lesson 13.

Sentence Types

Students learn to write sentences that compare two things, for example, “Fran is taller than Bill.”

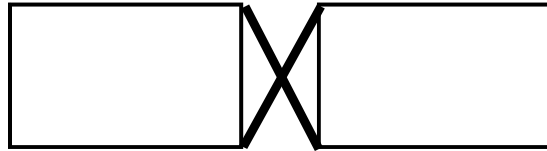
Starting in lesson 7, they learn to use the words *and*, and *but* in their writing.

Students learn to “read between the lines.” In lesson 4, they read an advertisement that says, “EZ Step shoes give the look and feel of leather.” Students look at some facts about the shoes and see that they are not leather. They explain (in writing) that the sentence is true, but misleading. This is a very good skill for children to have.

How many misleading commercials do they see that call Chocolate Sugar Crunch cereal “part of a nutritious breakfast”?

X Boxes

Starting in lesson 15, students use diagrams called X boxes to write claims or directions and what's wrong with them. Here is an X box:



In the first box, students write the argument or claim. The big X means something is wrong with the statement in the first box. In the second box, students write the reason why the argument or claim is faulty. Your child can show you an example of an X box and tell you about it.

Arguments

This is one of the most important topics in Level D. Students look at arguments and decide whether they are good or faulty. If the argument is not a good one, they identify problems in the writer's reasoning. Students learn that even if they don't agree with an argument, it can still be a good one if the reasoning is correct.

Starting in lesson 14, they review deductions, which they learned about in Level B. Here is an example of a deduction: *You shouldn't be cruel to animals. Ants are animals. So you shouldn't be cruel to ants.* Starting in lesson 46, they look at deductions where one of the three parts is missing and write in the missing sentence.

Starting in lesson 21, they learn about false dilemmas. Here is a false dilemma: *You should do exercises. Jumping up and down on your bed is an exercise. Therefore, you should jump up and down on your bed.* The dilemma is false because there are many kinds of exercises; jumping up and down on the bed is only one possibility. An argument is faulty if the reader can come to more than one conclusion. Children prove that this argument is faulty by writing other conclusions: *Jumping up and down on the bed is not the only kind of exercise. You could do sit ups.*

Passage Writing

For the first 40 lessons, children practice an exercise they did in Level C. They look at a set of pictures that tell a story. The middle picture is blank. Students figure out what must have happened in that picture and write a paragraph about it.

Starting in lesson 96, students write critiques with many paragraphs. For example, they read an article that says recess should be eliminated and gives reasons why. Students summarize the author's claims, explain why her reasoning is incorrect, summarize their own argument, and recommend that recess be kept. The format is like the five-paragraph papers that high school students write, so this activity gives them good practice for later work. Teachers

remind students that they must not be emotional in their arguments, even if someone's opinions make them angry (like the recess example). Students practice writing objectively and calmly.