

*“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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Distar Language  
(Pre-kindergarten and Kindergarten)

In Distar Language, **children learn to understand the words they hear** — things like location (“The cup is *under* the paper”), actions (“This dog is eating”) and the difference between some, all and none. Children complete part of Distar Language before they are ready to start reading, so that they have the ability to listen and understand. After all, if they don’t understand spoken words, how can they hope to understand written words?

Distar Language is taught to small groups of children, usually no more than 10 per group. The teacher spends the first part of every lesson giving different kinds of directions. During the second part of the lesson, children complete a worksheet called a take-home. (The take-home is class work, not homework. It’s called a take-home because your child will bring it home to show you.)

### **What Children Learn in Distar Language**

Children improve their skills in seven main areas: actions, description of objects, words used in giving directions, classification, useful information, applications, and the skills used for their take-homes. In every lesson, children work on skills in most of those areas. For example, they learn about actions from lesson 1 until they finish the program, at lesson 160. Because they are always working a little bit on every skill, they never have a chance to forget what they learned earlier in the year.

#### **Actions**

An example of an action activity would be the “touch your head” exercise. Children also do activities that help them understand the words *I*, *you*, *he*, and *she*. They also practice answering questions like, “Is the cup on the table **now**?” and “**Was** the cup on the table?” Children do some action activities in every lesson.

#### **Description of Objects**

Children learn to talk about different objects. For example, if the teacher holds up a cup, children practice sentences like these: “This is a cup. This cup is big. The cup is on the table. The cup is smaller than the bowl.”

#### **Words Used in Giving Directions**

Children learn to use words like *and*, *or*, *if*, and *when*. They also learn to understand ideas like before and after; some, all and none; and where, who, when and what. They do activities that show them what the words mean. For example, in lesson 93 the teacher says, “Show me **some** of your fingers.” She praises any child who puts up some (but not all 10) fingers.

While learning the word *if*, children practice rules about objects. In lesson 127, they see a picture of 3 dogs. The teacher says, “If a dog is fat, he has a bone.” The children must repeat the rule exactly. Then the teacher points to each dog and the children say whether or

not he has a bone. In later lessons, they look at pictures and figure out the rule by themselves. This activity sharpens their ability to think logically and apply rules.

### **Classification**

Children learn that objects are members of a larger group called a class. For example, they learn that cars, trains and boats are all part of the class of vehicles. They can make statements like, “A truck is a vehicle,” or “A tree is not a vehicle.” The other classes that children study are food, buildings, containers, clothing, animals, plants, furniture and tools.

### **Information**

Children learn basic information. Here are some of the things they learn:

- the first names and “whole names” (first and last name together) of everyone in the group
- the days of the week, months of the year, and seasons
- the meanings of more than 40 words, such as dentist, orchard, airport and mechanic
- the names of parts of different objects. For example, they learn that a pencil has a point, a shaft, and an eraser.

### **Applications**

Children learn to use their knowledge in new situations. For example, they learn a rule in lesson 84: “The rabbit will eat the big apple that has leaves.” Then they look at several apple pictures and decide which apple the rabbit will eat. In order to decide, they have to use some things they already know. They have to remember what rabbits, apples and leaves are. They have to remember the word *will* (something that happens in the future). They also have to be able to think about what a big apple with leaves would look like. This activity helps children use old information in new ways.

They also learn about *absurdities* — situations that don’t make sense. For example, in lesson 139 the teacher asks, “Would you find a checker in a grocery store?” The children say yes. The teacher asks, “Would you find a swimming pool in a grocery store?” When the children say no, she says, “That would be absurd.”

### **Take-Home Skills**

Take-home worksheets give children an opportunity to practice what they learn in language group. They also teach children to recognize colors and shapes. Children practice rules such as “Draw a square around every plant,” or “Color all the vehicles red.” In their take-homes, children practice matching, tracing and following directions given by the teacher.