
“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 E

In Level E, students build on what they learned in earlier programs 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 passage explaining exactly what the problem is. From this experience, they learn to check their own writing for false or unclear 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 E.

Parts of Speech and Sentence Construction

Students review what they learned in Levels C and D: identifying the subject and predicate of a sentence and recognizing nouns, pronouns, verbs and adjectives. They learn “tests” to see what part of speech a word is. For example, they learn this rule: If you can write *one* or *some* before a word, it’s a noun. They learn similar rules for the other parts of speech. In lesson 6 students begin work on contractions. Starting in lesson 52, they learn to combine sentences using a conjunction (*or*, *and* or *but*).

Retelling a Passage

In lessons throughout Level E, the teacher reads short passages out loud and students retell them in writing. The activity gives students practice in listening carefully, remembering details and taking notes. Usually, the teacher gives them some category words to help organize their notes. Students do not have to write every word the teacher says, but they do have to include all of the important details.

General and Specific

Starting in lesson 21, students practice telling the difference between general and specific. For example, they decide which word is more general, *clothing* or *hats*.

Clarity

Students practice writing clear sentences and editing unclear sentences. For example, consider this sentence: *They discussed their future in the kitchen*. Students discuss the two meanings that sentence could have.

Many of the unclear sentences are directions for how to draw something or go somewhere. An example would be, “Jane’s house is the third one on Elm Street.” The reader doesn’t know if her house is third on the left or the right, from reading this sentence. Students would look at a map and change the sentence to make it clear.

Vocabulary

Students learn new words, including *inundate*, *arduous*, *expunge*, *altercate*, *adapt* and *conceal*.

Descriptions and Mystery Objects

Students look at a group of objects such as circles, rectangles and other shapes. They read descriptions that help them identify a “mystery object.” For example, the description might say, “The object is black.” Students could rule out any object that is not black. Eventually they only have one object left.

Students use this idea to figure out which item someone should buy. In lesson 56, Henry needs a jacket that is washable, warm, light and less than \$200. Students look at facts about 5 different jackets and pick out a jacket that meets all of his requirements.

Your child may already make choices like these in real life. For example, a parent may say, “You can pick out some shoes, but they can’t be more than \$50 and they have to be a dark color, so the dirt won’t show.” The decision-making activities are good practice for this kind of real-life choice.

Deductions

This is one of the most important topics in Levels D, E and F. 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.

X Boxes and Other Figures

Students use diagrams called X boxes to write claims or directions and what’s wrong with them. Your child can show you what they look like and how they work. Students use X-boxes and many other diagrams to show their arguments clearly.

Students use similar diagrams to describe misleading claims. In lesson 31, they read an advertisement that says, “A Spuddo bike costs less than a Yusha.” They look at facts about the two products and find that a Spuddo costs \$210.99, while a Yusha costs \$211. The Spuddo claim is true, but misleading. Students draw diagrams and write paragraphs explaining why. You can see how this activity is good practice for real life. Companies and politicians often make claims that are true, but just barely. When you see misleading claims in a store or on TV, you might want to point them out to your child and see if she knows why they’re misleading.

Students learn about different kinds of faulty arguments. An argument may not give enough evidence, so there could be conclusions other than the one the writer gives. There are “false cause” arguments, like this one: *Every time I sneeze, it rains. Therefore, if I sneeze, it will rain.* Other faulty arguments involve inadequate evidence, too-general conclusions, and inadequate testing of a hypothesis.