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***“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 F

In Level F, students build on what they learned in earlier programs to write clearly and use logical reasoning.

By the end of Level F, students are skilled enough at reasoning and writing to complete long and complex writing assignments. For example, in lesson 72, students work in teams to write 5-paragraph essays, then critique and edit their work.

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

#### **Retelling a Passage**

In lessons 7 through 54, 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.

#### **Grammar Review**

Students review the major parts of speech and subject-verb agreement. They also learn about some new things: adverbs (lesson 31), verb tenses (lesson 24) and “is verbs,” (lesson 41 — they’re the same as linking verbs). They practice writing possessive nouns, like *children’s*. They also learn how to change a sentence from passive voice to active voice.

#### **General and Specific**

Students expand their understanding of *general* and *specific*. One of the activities requires them to look up words in the dictionary and write definitions. They may not simply copy what they read, however; they have to write definitions that make sense to them. Students learn that a good definition tells what general category the word fits in, as well as specific details about the word. For example, *An Appaloosa is a breed of horse developed in the American West.*

#### **Clarity**

One of the main goals of all levels of Reasoning and Writing is to get students to write clearly. By the time they reach Level F, students have learned to recognize and avoid many of the pitfalls of unclear writing. In this level, they learn about several more. They learn about the difference in meaning between *The boy, who had short hair* and *The boy who had short hair*. They read sentences like, “They had old coins and jewels.” (Were the jewels old, too? The sentence is unclear.)

Students practice writing clear, specific instructions. For example, they write directions for drawing a figure. The goal is to write directions so that anyone could read them and make the exact same figure.

#### **Deductions and Inferences**

Students review deductions. They disprove rules by finding exceptions. For example, in lesson 4 students look at a picture of some cups. The rule is, *All the cups have handles*. Students find one or more cups that do not have handles, proving the rule is wrong. Starting in lesson 16, students write their own rules, based on pictures in their book.

Another type of activity involves inferences. For example, in lesson 27 students look at pictures of houses. One small, well-kept house is \$70,000. Based on that information, students make up prices for a mansion, a small house in a run-down neighborhood, and a broken-down house. The idea is not to turn them into real estate agents, but to get students to make common-sense comparisons.

### **Writing**

Students practice and improve the writing skills they learned in previous levels.

For many exercises, students use a variety of odd-looking diagrams. Your child can show you some and tell you and what they mean. They use these diagrams to help them evaluate other people's arguments and write their own.

In some activities, students use rules to figure out which item someone should choose. In lesson 5, the Smith family is planning a vacation. They are very picky about cost, distance and other aspects of their trip. Students look at the Smiths' requirements and at the 4 possible vacation spots, then make a written recommendation.

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.

Students learn about incorrect conclusions that someone could make after looking at only one part of a group. This example is from lesson 61: *The car has the finest heater made. Therefore, the car must be a superior car.*

They also learn about misleading claims, which they studied in Levels D and E. In lesson 67, they look at an ad for Eatmore candy. The ad says that Eatmore gives you more pieces of candy than Yum-Yum. Students refer to a fact table, which shows that Eatmore candies are much smaller than Yum-Yum candies. Students write a paragraph explaining why the ad is misleading.

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 look at many kinds of faulty arguments, including those that rely on inconsistent or contradictory evidence. They learn to rewrite rules based on contradictory evidence.