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### *THREE R's MINUS ONE*

#### THE PROBLEM

- Kids can't write.
- CSAP test portion on writing poses a major threat to schools
- Teachers don't know how to help kids write better because they themselves are not writers.
- There is no instant fix out there (up till now)
- Writing is not easy. It takes practice, preparation and the courage to work in the dark of the soul.
- The inability to write, like the inability to read, is a lifelong impairment.

#### THE SOLUTION

- Teaching writing in any grade is a challenge, but the upper grades hold particular peril because you think of the kids as more capable and they simply are not.
- Most adults hate to write because as kids they were judged failures at writing. Here are some field-tested tried and true ways to make writing better for ALL age students. In my inservice workshop for teachers, I provide lots of hands-on exercises that are guaranteed to make writing better at every level--kids and grownups alike.

1. **Choose topics that have emotional freight**--monsters, dreams, the time they stole something, that day they cut their own hair just before the big wedding, the stolen kiss.
2. **Use authentic writing prompts.** Model a story for them by telling them one of your own (stolen or true), or use a picture book you love. Or pull a quote you love. Keep a list of quotes on hand to use
3. **Write for a set amount of time** at least twice a week. Don't cheat the muses. If you say you're going to write for seven minutes, DO IT!
4. **Use a kitchen timer** that goes 'tick tick tick' like the crocodile in Peter Pan. It helps condition the writing response. Use it every time.
5. Write on only **one side of the paper**. Paper is cheap.
6. **Skip lines**. Paper is cheap.
7. If you must **correct spelling**, do it in something other than red.
8. To correct spelling, put the **CORRECT** spelling above the word. That's how bad spellers get turned into good spellers--not by using a dictionary!
9. **Reward good writing** with plus marks in the margin and particularly well turned phrases underlined--NOT IN RED.
10. **Reward funny**. "It is fifty times harder to make somebody laugh than cry," says Dave Barry. Give them an A+ just for being funny.
11. Make time for writers to **share** their work out loud.
12. Teach the audience to **ask questions** rather than spout drivel like "I liked that a lot". Questions lead the writer to tighten the work.
13. Encourage journaling in **bound books**, not looseleaf notebooks.
14. Use **pen, not pencil**.
15. Take **dictation** to jumpstart their writing. Three minutes of your speedy typing can often

keep a beginning writer working for weeks filling in the blanks.

16. **Build stamina** by writing more often for the same period of time (Seven minutes is ideal) rather than the opposite.

17. Give the writer permission to do awful **first drafts**--or call them "zero" drafts. Help them get the second draft in the computer, even if you have to do it yourself.

18. **Reward edited work** by rereading it, giving it the honor due.

20. Remember that **writing is easy**--all you have to do is just slice open your guts and smear them all over the page.

#### BRIEF BIO

Gwynne Spencer is the author of WHAT'S COOKING IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE (Linworth Publishing), THE ULTIMATE FAMILY GUIDE TO NEW MEXICO (Parenting New Mexico), INSTANT SCIENCE PROJECTS (Fifth Raccoon Press) and PLACES TO GO WITH CHILDREN IN THE SOUTHWEST (Chronicle). She has written hundreds of articles on children, books, writing and literacy. She has been a featured presenter at writer's conferences in New Mexico and Arizona, a lecturer at University of New Mexico and Santa Fe Community College, and is a certified K-12 teacher. She owned and operated trespassers william childrens bookstores in Albuquerque and Santa Fe for 17 years, and has presented dozens of inservices to teachers and librarians on topics relating to teaching children to read, story structure, myth, writing, The Hero Journey and children's literature. She lives and writes from her secret rebel base by the Mancos River near the foot of Mesa Verde. She has two grown children who are addicted to reading and theatre and three weener dogs who despite her best efforts, still cannot read.