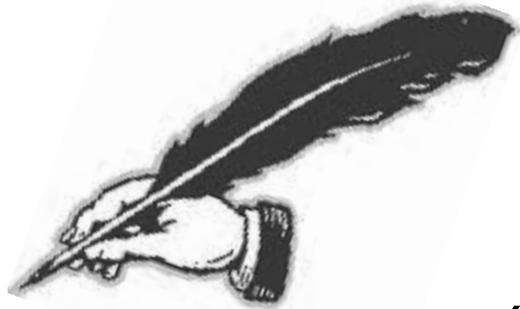


# *Not Your Grandpa's Composition*



*by*  
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## Preface

It has been long recognized that effective communication is the “currency of success”. In recent years, however, greater and greater attention has been given to the topic of literacy. New programs are constantly under development, both in public and private sectors. Universities have created specialties around the subject of literacy education. Why the relatively sudden interest? Are more children slipping through the cracks than in past decades and generations or has the problem always been before us?

I maintain that a number of factors have conspired to intensify the need to examine our methods for teaching the various components of literacy. Advances in technology and knowledge have brought us tremendous new abilities and understandings. They have changed the stimuli to which we all are exposed; they have changed the way that information is shared and the speed with which it is shared; they have enhanced our ability to study brain function and the relationship to cognition and learning. One can argue whether these influences are a net positive or a net negative, but irrespective of the side with which a person tends to align, the influences have affected how children learn, and educators must be cognizant of these influences and of the many tools now available to enhance the efficacy of instruction, especially in literacy. Consider:

- **Children’s brains are different than they were even half of a generation ago.** Learning modalities today more heavily favor visual and kinesthetic processes. Auditory skills in many are poor. Some do not discriminate well between similar sounds. Some discriminate well but do not process oral information and directions well. There are a number of factors contributing to the enhanced development of visual and kinesthetic information receptors and processors, not the least of which follow.
  - **Children are exposed to tremendous visual stimuli at a young age**, when their brains are still developing and their neural pathways are first being built. A significant portion of these stimuli are moving – sometimes at a very fast pace (television, video and computers). The result of this is children’s brains being trained for greater reliance on visual bursts to receive information.
  - **Pure auditory transfer of information is rare today.** When I was young, a major source of children’s entertainment came from books being read aloud by parents, teachers, and even the local children’s librarian at “Storybook Hour”. The more well-seasoned among us remember when children’s television programming was developing; the host would often read aloud from a book. Then, the illustrations of the book themselves, *sometimes* lightly animated, and the talented recitation by the reader made the stories come alive. During the 22 hours per day that there was no children’s programming on television, books on tape or on vinyl records were popular, featuring a chirp that indicated to the child when it was time to turn the page. Today, most entertainment designed for children has strong visual and elements, with sound falling mostly into the category of “sound effects”.
- **Schools today have fewer instructional hours and are expected to teach far more than the three R’s**, leaving less time for each of the R’s.
  - **Children are being held accountable for a much broader span of knowledge than they once were.** This is partly due to the ever-increasing body of knowledge. However, it is also partially attributable to the growing trend to expose children to more complex topics at an earlier age. For example, mathematical concepts like median and mode, coordinate graphing, logic, and pre-algebra were once reserved for high school. Now they are assessed on early elementary standardized tests. Additionally, as technology grows, the need to educate children on the use of technology grows.

- **Schools are expected to teach more than academics.** Social skills, anti-bullying curricula, cultural awareness and tolerance, and even moral decision making are addressed directly and indirectly in classrooms every day. The need for this is, in my opinion, going to increase as technology increases and continues to change the way that we humans interact with one another. Consider the effects widespread texting and tweeting. Children who grow up with these influences featuring prominently in their lives have been shown to be less adept at picking up on non-verbal communication such as reading facial expressions, and on other social cues.
- **Technology is increasing our ability to observe and measure components of learning.** Advances in the understanding of the brain have given rise to many new ideas on brain-based learning, and will continue to do so. If we stay attentive to these, we can begin to separate the fads and gimmicks from truly effective techniques.

Given all of this, it is no surprise that developing proficient and enthusiastic readers and eloquent writers is a daunting task. Now, more than ever, we must have many ways to entice a child to challenge himself to rise to higher linguistic levels while being attentive to the red-flags indicating emerging barriers in need of attention.

*Not Your Grandpa's Composition* is a compilation of ideas and activities for Montessori classrooms, traditional classrooms, and home-schoolers, with ideas adapted from many different reading and writing programs. The first sections provide an overview of various components of literacy and the vital skills that enable children. This is not intended to be a compendium of intervention strategies, but rather, a helpful guide to identifying when evaluation by a qualified specialist might be advisable and to possible techniques and resources for initial intervention. Later sections constitute a collection of classroom-tested activities for providing engaging activities and instruction to develop core skills. When ideas have been adapted from other resources, they have been so noted. I strongly urge teachers to seek out additional training on literacy often, as ideas are changing and new techniques are being developed constantly. My favorite providers of training and materials are listed in the Appendix.

Feedback from teachers on lessons that worked well or were less successful, awesome resources, subjects that seem particularly difficult for children to internalize, or fun and effective activities would be greatly appreciated. Please address any questions, concerns, or stories to:

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