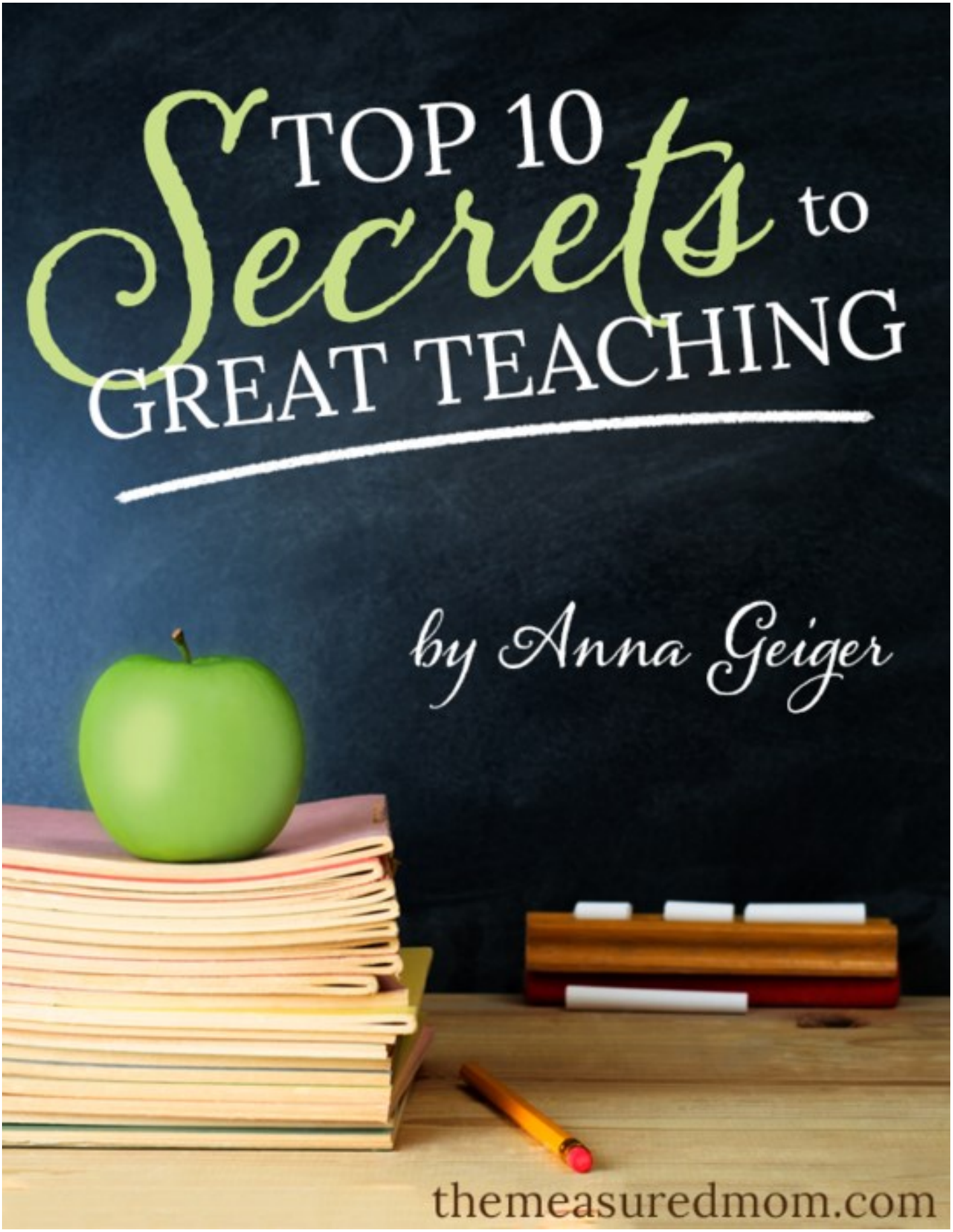

TOP 10
Secrets to
GREAT TEACHING
by Anna Geiger
themeasuredmom.com

Top Ten Secrets to Great Teaching

by Anna Geiger

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Top Ten Secrets to Great Teaching

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Cover design by Mindy of Simply Designs
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Dedication

To my husband and five precious children.

I am beyond blessed to call you mine.
Thank you for filling my life with joy.

To Becky and Kate.

Thanks so much for giving me feedback as I worked.
Your input and wisdom are invaluable!

To my Savior.

Your are my light and my salvation.
Help me keep my eyes on You.

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Introduction

Where are you in your teaching journey? Whether you're a veteran classroom teacher or a brand new graduate, a seasoned homeschooler or one about to begin, I've written this for you.

My hope is that this ebook inspires you to think more about how, why, and what you teach.

Do you have a degree in education and stand at the front of a classroom? Maybe you've brought your degree home to teach your own children. Perhaps you're a homeschooler with an entirely different background. No matter your circumstance, you *can* be a great teacher and love it too.

Secret #1

Create a well-ordered environment.

I don't know about you, but dinners at our house get a little crazy. With four little talkers begging for a turn, mealtime can easily turn into chaos. As our children grow, we've learned that we need to spend some time teaching dinnertime procedures to keep the circus at bay. Our kids need to know how to wait their turn to speak. They need to understand how to pass the serving bowls. (Not to mention how to help themselves without licking the spoon.)

Just as we need order in our homes, a well-managed classroom is also important. When a classroom or homeschool operates with order, structure, and clearly defined and followed procedures, fewer interruptions result. More learning takes place.



Classroom management is not discipline. Think about this analogy: when you learn to drive a car, you put your key in the ignition and turn. You put the car into gear. These are procedures. If you don't know them, you must be taught. When you drive, you use good judgment and follow the speed limit. This is behavior. When you don't follow the rules, you may be disciplined in the form of a ticket.

When children are noisy when they enter the classroom, interrupt the teacher, or play around when their work is done, they don't need to be disciplined. They need to learn procedures.

What will you observe in a well managed classroom or homeschool?

- Procedures are so well understood that they have become routines.
- Many things can happen at once with minimal distractions or interruptions.
- Students are busy at work because they know what's expected of them.
- The teacher and students feel comfortable and secure.

These are just a handful of the procedures you will want to rehearse:

- What will students do when they enter the classroom?
- What will they do when they break a pencil?
- What will children do when they have a question?
- What will they do when they hear the fire drill?
- How will students get help when I'm working with a small group?
- What are their choices when they finish their work early?
- What will they do when they need to leave the room?
- How will we walk in the hallways?
- How will students prepare to go home?

Homeschoolers need to think about procedures too.

- What time will school begin?
- How will my child ask for help when I'm working with a sibling?
- What are the choices when work is done early?
- How will I teach my toddler to respect our school time?
- What will we do when the baby needs to be cared for?
- Where does finished work belong?

After you've determined what procedures you need, prepare to teach them. Be ready to make this the primary focus of the first week or two of school. When procedures have become habits, the door opens for real learning to take place.

How to teach a procedure:

- State the procedure and model it for students.
- Give students opportunity to practice the procedure.
- Keep re-teaching, practicing, and reinforcing the procedure until it becomes a routine.



For further reading:

Classroom management is not discipline
Classroom management on the first day of school
30 classroom behaviors to head off behavior problems
Classroom management in preschool
How to use music to make routines more fun and effective
How to manage interruptions in your Montessori classroom or homeschool
Keeping toddlers busy during homeschool
Ultimate guide to keeping toddlers busy during schooltime
Quiet boxes for little ones
Homeschool organization Pinterest board

Secret #2

Meet your students where they are, and set goals for them that they can achieve.

If you're a parent with more than one child, you know that even in the same family, children's abilities and educational needs can be very different. In high school, I worked hard to make sense of math and was very happy to avoid Pre-Calculus my senior year. My twin brother, on the other hand, thrived in math class. (Today he's an engineering professor.)

You need teach only one class to see the variety of abilities in a single room. My first year of teaching first grade, I had two students who began the year reading chapter books and one irresistible little girl who needed three months to learn the word "the."

The truth is that meeting students where they are—and setting achievable goals— takes practice. At the beginning of your teaching or homeschooling career, you may often feel that you are just one step ahead of your students. But as you gain experience and a better grasp of the subject matter you teach, your ability to set reasonable goals will improve. In the meantime, trust your instincts. Don't feel tied to a predetermined schedule; rather, move at your students' pace.

How do we meet preschoolers and kindergartners where they are?

It's important that we remember to teach with *developmentally appropriate practice* beginning when children are young. If that's a new term for you, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines it as "meeting young children where they are (by stage of development), both as individuals and as part of a group; and helping each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals."

To teach young children appropriately, we need to know what's typical of each age and stage of early learning. We also need to know the children in our care well enough to understand their abilities and interests.

In order to teach our little ones in the best way possible, we may need to rethink the activities we prepare. When are worksheets appropriate, if ever? Will preschoolers benefit from flashcards, or would it be better to set them aside in favor of real life experiences? Do they need a lot of structured craft time, or would it be better to let them create open-ended art projects? By educating yourself about how young children learn, you can design your lessons to meet their needs.

How do we know if our teaching is developmentally appropriate?

If your student is using but confusing a concept, it's time to teach it. For example, if a child spells "rain" *rane*, he understands that long vowel words are spelled differently. He is using but confus-

ing. He is ready to learn long vowel spelling patterns.

If your child is bored or frustrated, you may be missing the mark by asking him to do something that is too easy or too hard. You will want to design activities that your child cannot do by himself, but *can* do with your help. Model and teach with lots of support, gradually releasing your child to do the work independently.



How can we meet older children where they are?

Meeting children where they are gets tricky when we have a classroom of students at different ability levels. However, it is possible to individualize learning for many subject areas. If you have a well-managed classroom, it can be done.

Individualizing reading instruction

When I taught first and second grade, reading instruction was primarily independent reading of leveled books. (I taught phonics lessons separate from "reading time.") Students came to me for private conferences so I could assess their reading and teach them a new skill or strategy. My students also benefited from guided reading lessons. By grouping children of similar abilities, I could teach reading skills and strategies that would help every child—not just a few. When I wanted to teach comprehension strategies to the whole class, I used our current read aloud.

If your school has a required reading list for each grade, find ways to support students in different ways. Can your struggling readers listen to the book and draw as they listen? Advanced readers can do more challenging writing extensions.

Individualizing spelling instruction

For my first four years of teaching, I gave my entire class the same weekly spelling list. Each week I had students who knew the words I assigned them — and children who, weeks later, could not remember the words well enough to use them in their own writing.

In graduate school I was part of a group of teachers who gave remedial instruction to struggling high schoolers. I taught an agreeable sixteen-year-old named Mike. He towered over me, but he was reading and spelling at a second grade level. Through the book *Words Their Way* (see my resource list), I learned how to reach him at his own level and help him move forward. The following year I began teaching word study in my own classroom. I never looked back.

At the beginning of each year I assessed my students to see where they were developmentally and put them in ability-based word study groups. The groups were fluid and were adjusted as necessary. Grouping by ability never created a stigma; the children *appreciated* being taught at their own level. To begin teaching word study you need only a copy of *Words Their Way*. I recommend reading my word study series first.

Individualizing math instruction

In my experience, math is usually taught as a whole class lesson. But even within that there are ways to meet students of different abilities. Begin the lesson with a daily problem solving activity , but assign a different problem to students of different abilities. Structure your math lesson so that students play games to cement or extend their learning, but prepare different games for different ability levels. When a child finishes early, don't just give her more of the same problem. Give her an extension that challenges her to think about the concept in a new way. Not sure where to begin? My Top Ten Secrets resource page will get you started!

Individualizing writing instruction

I have always taught writing with the workshop approach. By teaching a whole class lesson and then releasing students to work at their own level within their writing notebooks, you can meet the needs of an entire class. This Reading Mama and I have collaborated on two writing series to help you understand how to design lessons that meet students of different levels. Check out our simple lessons for the primary grades if you have children in first through fourth grade. For kids just starting out, the preschool and kindergarten writing series is valuable.

If the writing workshop approach intimidates you, you need to read books by Lucy Calkins and Regie Routman. Their conversational style and practical tips will put you at ease!



For further reading:

What does it mean to use developmentally appropriate practice?
Teaching handwriting to preschoolers in a developmentally appropriate way
Developmentally appropriate practice for homeschoolers
Creating a science center for preschool
Developmentally appropriate reading curriculum for preschoolers
Teaching math to preschoolers
Everyday math in preschool
Teaching without worksheets in preschool
Teaching children to write well (Pinterest board)
Writing ideas for kids (Pinterest board)
Simple writing lessons for the primary grades
Preschool and kindergarten writing lessons
The Measured Mom's 5-part word study series
This Reading Mama's 10-part word study series

Secret #3

Clearly define your objectives for every lesson.



As my student teaching supervisor liked to say, "You need a lesson plan for every lesson, even if it's just a post-it note." To excel at teaching you *must* have clearly defined objectives.

Too often, objectives are vague and unclear.

- Study chapter 3.
- Read this book.
- Do pages 10-12 of your workbook.

What *are* good objectives?

Objectives must communicate clearly with both students and their parents by stating exactly what your students will do at the end of the lesson. Homeschoolers, this is important for you too. Try not to give one child busywork ("do these two pages while I help your brother") instead of clearly defining your objectives.

I've found that Harry Wong (author of the best-selling book *The First Days of School**) has done an outstanding job of helping teachers understand how to write objectives. Here are his tips:

1) State what students will be able to *do* when they finish the lesson.
2) Make your objective a small, specific behavior.
3) Learning objectives should be both observable and measurable.
4) To write an objective, choose a verb and complete the sentence.

Name the world's oceans and continents.
Summarize the events in chapter three of your novel.
Compare the accomplishments of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.
Judge Columbus' treatment of the Native Americans he met.

5) When you write objectives, use Bloom's Taxonomy as a reference. This will help you design learning objectives that are both simple and more complex.

What is Bloom's Taxonomy?

Bloom's Taxonomy is a chart which arranges verbs into six related groups. Each group moves into a higher level of thinking. Because we tend to teach to the lower levels of the chart, it's helpful to print your own copy and refer to it often. Vary the levels you choose from as you creative learning objectives. You can find your own copy in the links at the end of this chapter.

The list below will give you an overview of one version of the chart, with sample questions for each level.

Level 1—**Knowledge** (Remember)

- **Define** the word *population.*
- **Identify** the state with the highest population.
- **Label** the ten most populated U.S. cities on a map.

Level 2—**Comprehension** (Understand)

- **Summarize** the first chapter of *Charlotte's Web.*
- **Order** the list of events from the first chapter.
- **Describe** what happens when Wilbur meets Charlotte.

Level 3 — **Application**

- **Give examples** of the three states of matter in your kitchen.
- **Demonstrate** that water can be present in three different states.
- **Show** that oobleck has the properties of both a solid and liquid.

Level 4—**Analysis**

- **Debate** whether the United States civil war began because of the slavery issue or because of disagreement over states' rights.
- **Compare** the leadership of the Union to that of the Confederacy.
- **Determine the factors** which led to the Union's victory.

Level 5– **Synthesis**

- **Compose** a letter that a Tory could have written to his or her relatives back in England.
- **Predict** what would have happened had England won the Revolutionary War.
- **Write** a newspaper article about the Boston Massacre.

Level 6— **Evaluation**

- **Judge** the value of our city's mall curfew for teenagers.
- **Defend** the position of shop owners who voted to ban loitering near their stores.
- **Decide** what outcome would be a fair compromise for both teens and shop owners.

It's important to remember that your objective, though planned, might need to be changed in the middle of a lesson. If you are planning to teach the addition of two-digit numbers, for example, but you realize that half of your students struggle with place value, you will need to take intermediate steps.

This is why teaching is called an art. You will get better at designing and following through on your objectives with time and experience.

*Wong, Harry & Wong, Rosemary. **The First Days of School.** Mountain View: Harry K. Wong Publications, 1998.

For further reading:

Learning objectives: the heart of every lesson (a must read!)
Bloom's Taxonomy helpful verbs poster
Bloom's Taxonomy poster for parents
Writing objectives using Bloom's Taxonomy
Developing questions for critical thinking
The best resources for helping teachers use Bloom's Taxonomy in the classroom

Secret #4

Let your students learn by doing.

During my first years of teaching primary grades, I had a phonics curriculum with a note to send home to parents. The note said that in first and second grade students would learn to read. In third grade, they would start "reading to learn." In other words, we'd do the mechanics of reading in the early grades and learn how to make sense of what we read in the later grades. That note never made it home to my students' parents, because I couldn't disagree more. I had every intention of my little first and second graders reading to learn—from the very beginning.

Our school's phonics curriculum taught reading with isolated skills practice, repetitive drills, and little phonetic books with such awkward, stilted text that I saw little thoughtful learning taking place. Its worksheets even lacked instructions for fear that children might try to start reading words whose phonics patterns they hadn't learned yet!

While it is sometimes necessary to teach skills in isolation, it should not be the dominant method of instruction. Let's break this concept down by subject.

Learn to read by reading. Children learn to read by reading. While there are certainly times that it is useful to read words out of context, the bulk of reading instruction should not be in completing workbooks or worksheets. It should be spent reading actual books. While the reading workbook may be a lifeline during the first year or two, set a goal of setting it aside forever.

Finding books for the very youngest learners can be challenging. But when we remember that students learn to read using three cueing systems (context, syntax, and phonics), we can utilize more than just phonetic readers. I've created a series of free emergent readers (80 books at last count) that are perfect for beginning readers ages 4-6. Please don't misunderstand me; phonics is very important. In fact, I've created a huge collection of free word family activities to help children master it. But phonics is just one piece of the reading puzzle.

My favorite online resource for leveled books is Reading A-Z. The yearly subscription is worth every penny because you can download and print as many books as you want. (You can also get phonetic readers through Reading A-Z.)

Of course, we don't hand books to children and expect them to teach themselves. One problem with the "learn to read/reading to learn" myth is that it leads teachers to believe that the work has been done by third grade. But in truth, children in all grades have a lot to learn about reading.

By teaching reading skills and strategies in whole group lessons, individual conferences, and small group instruction, we equip students to grow as readers. Then we release them to practice these skills and strategies on their own. With real books.



For further reading:

The myth of learn to read/read to learn
Dismantling the myth of learning to read and reading to learn
5 great reasons to read words out of context
Phonics or sight words?
Free sight word readers
Tips and tricks for teaching emergent readers
10 steps to teaching your child to read
10 things struggling readers need (incredible series!)
Comprehension strategies: reading equals thinking
Questions to help kids understand what they are reading
Learning to read (Pinterest board)
Comprehension strategies (Pinterest board)
Best picture books for kids (Pinterest board)
Chapter books for kids (Pinterest board)
Helping struggling readers (Pinterest board)
Word study/phonics (Pinterest board)
Sight words (Pinterest board)



Children can choose their own topics to write about. Young children do not need to copy someone else's writing to become proficient writers. Even at age five, they've had a life full of experiences just begging to be written down. This Reading Mama and I have written a series of preschool and kindergarten writing lessons to help you understand exactly how this looks.

As children learn to put words onto paper, they are ready for a writing workshop approach. When I taught writing workshop in grades 3-5, my students wrote for a variety of purposes in different genres. On a given day I might have one student writing a personal narrative, another writing a screenplay, and still another creating a short story. I taught a group lesson and then released the children to write on their own. As I traveled the room giving individual conferences, the children learned to write by *writing*.

And no, I did not give writing prompts. It's easy to find free writing prompts around the internet or bound and sold at teacher's supply shops. Writing prompts are popular because they get our children started. "Imagine you have a super power. What would it be?" or "My favorite holiday is ____ because…." Writing prompts will not hurt if they are used *once in a while*. They can even be helpful. But if we use them almost exclusively, they put our children in a box. How can our students grow as writers when they don't have room to stretch? If teaching writing without creative writing prompts intimidates you, fear not! My resource list includes books that will help you learn to teach writing well.

For further reading:

How to teach journal writing in preschool
6 ways to encourage writing in preschool
How to get kids to love writing
8 fun activities to get beginning writers writing
25 ways to make writing fun
Unleashing the writer in your child (a 5-part series)
Writing lessons and printables (to help you put away those prompts!)
Teaching kids to write well (Pinterest board)
Writing ideas for kids (Pinterest board)

Make spelling hands-on. Please reevaluate the busywork you might find yourself giving your students during spelling instruction. While children may be able to learn from word searches, fill in the blanks, and copying exercises, the time spent usually does not justify the activity.

Remember that the goal of spelling instruction goes beyond doing well on a test. The real goal is for students to use what they've learned in actual writing. When kids spend a lot of time completing spelling workbooks and other isolated activities, they often lack the time and energy to write.

By following the word study approach, you will find that your students learn how words are built. By physically sorting words and playing games to support what they're learning, children are able to apply this knowledge to their written work. Even if you do not (or may not) use word study, my 5-part series will help you look at spelling instruction in a new way. My resource page shares my top picks for teaching spelling.

For further reading:

20+ ways to make learning spelling words fun
5 tips for teaching spelling
75 fun ways to practice and learn spelling words
The Measured Mom's 5-part word study series
This Reading Mama's 10-part word study series

Do more than read about science. Students will learn to think and problem solve like scientists when they are given opportunities to do so. Science learning should include a healthy balance of demonstrations and experiments. Demonstrations show how a particular phenomenon works, while experiments allow children to answer open-ended questions. Kids should certainly be reading about science— but more than that, they should actually be *doing* it.

Teaching inquiry-based science takes more time, thought, and preparation than a factual approach. The books in my resource list will give you the support you need. You might also want to start fol-



lowing some science blogs. Two of my favorite blogs for teaching science to young children are Science Sparks and Inspiration Laboratories.

For further reading:

Getting started with science
Teach kids to think like scientists
11 science books for hands-on fun
How to help your kids love science
How to teach hands-on science
How to teach homeschool science
Planning science activities for kids ages 3-7
Science experiments for 4 and 5 year olds
Science lessons for kids
Putting inquiry science into practice
How to teach homeschool science
Easy science experiments and science fair projects that make learning fun
Preschool Science Ideas (Pinterest board)
Science for kids (Pinterest board)

Make sure kids are doing more than memorizing math. Many classroom teachers and homeschoolers have reservations about teaching math. Usually this is because they didn't enjoy math as children and still find that math concepts don't come easily. It's common for teachers to revert to what they know: basic math conventions. Unfortunately, some math curricula focus almost entirely on basic operations and simple word problems. While these things are important, they do not promote higher level thinking or deep understanding.

It's very important that children understand both how to do math *and* why we do it that way. Why do we cross out the tens column and make the number smaller when subtracting? Why do we invert a fraction before multiplying? Why does multiplying the length of two sides of a rectangle give us the area?

Hearing and then memorizing how to do something does not develop understanding. I can tell you this by experience, because this is exactly how I learned Algebra II. While I memorized the concepts enough to do well on my tests, it was all arbitrary to me. I remembered very little of it beyond the test. Math is still a weak area for me because I saw math as a set of rules to be memorized.

Can your students complete a large set of similar problems without difficulty? This does not necessarily mean that they have good math understanding. Do they know what to do when you give them a different sort of problem? Can they apply what they've learned to unique problem solving situations?

How to help children learn math by doing:

- Provide many opportunities to problem solve.
- Use manipulatives.
- Have them explain their thought process.
- Ask questions that require more than a memorized answer. "What are two numbers that add up to 25?" "How can you tell without dividing if a number is divisible by 2?" "What if we add two odd numbers? What kind of answer will we get?"

I know it is much easier and faster to tell your students exactly how to do something without making sure they understand the concept behind it. They'll memorize the procedure and find the correct answer. But long term math understanding will suffer.

Specific examples of problem solving in math:

- Give the children an addition problem with time to figure it out in their heads. Then let the children explain how they thought their answers through.
- Plan math field trips, such as a hike around the school to determine how much fencing you'd need to surround the playground. Go to the grocery store and determine which brands offer the best bargains.

For further reading:

Everyday math play in preschool
75+ math activities
Four habits of highly effective math teaching
Does our approach to teaching math fail even the smartest kids?
Seven secrets to get your child excited about math
How to encourage early math skills
Supplementing math at home



Liven up social studies. For many people, history is dry and boring. Actually, I'm fascinated by it. That's because people interest me. And history is all about people. While it may be difficult to actually experience social studies, we can find ways to make it meaningful.

How to make social studies meaningful

- Share family history. Children might interview an older relative or talk to their parents about a historical event. ("What were you doing on 9/11?")
- Study current events and connect them to the past. Find many kid-friendly approaches to

learning about current events in this post.

- Read primary sources — these are the actual words of the people who lived the history. You can read portions of biographies, diaries, and historical documents.
- Read historical fiction and biographies.
- Visit a living history museum if you live near one. Historical reenactments are also amazing!
- Make a personal timeline. For each year of your student's life, he should write both something that he did/accomplished *and* a corresponding historical event.
- Connect with a period of history by dressing up and cooking recipes from the time period.
- Visit antique stores and talk about what you find.
- Visit local historical sites.
- For every packaged item that you buy, check where it was made. Then plot the locations on a world map. What patterns do you notice?

For further reading:

Helping your children learn history (a giant resource!)
How to teach kids where in the world they live
How to use art to teach social studies
History for kids: 5 fun ways to learn about the past
How to help your kids fall in love with history
Teaching current events to homeschool kids
10 History Pinterest boards to follow
Geography for kids (Pinterest board)



Secret #5

Make your lessons multisensory.

Science concepts don't come easily to me. When I prepared for my Advanced Bio tests in high school, I read about each key concept and illustrated it. By talking myself through those diagrams, I could grasp the material and be ready for the test. Without knowing it, I had created my own multisensory lesson!

In the days before smart boards, I created a visual lesson about Christopher Columbus. I put a variety of images on overhead projector transparencies and shared them one by one as I told my children the story of the explorer. We went through it a second time, and they told the story back to me. Their homework was to dictate what they remembered to a parent. One bright but easily distracted 6-year-old had dictated over a page of text to his mother! He had remembered my lesson almost verbatim.

What is multisensory teaching?

It's when you teach so that your students can learn by seeing, hearing, touching, and/or speaking. The more experiences we have with a concept, the more likely we are to remember it.

Multisensory learning is usually categorized three ways:

1. **Visual learning** can include the use of written directions, illustrations, movies, diagrams, maps, and charts.

2. **Auditory learning** occurs when learning is presented verbally. It may be in the form of oral directions, lectures, speeches, recorded books, discussions, and songs.

3. **Sensory motoring learning** happens when information is experienced in a hands-on way or a way that connects body movement to learning. Examples include going on field trips, using math manipulatives, writing on raised paper, creating models, and engaging in physical activity.

If you want to see multisensory teaching at its best, check out the CD's and DVD's from Heidisongs! Their creator, an experienced kindergarten teacher, has created catchy songs with movement so that kids can easily learn letter sounds, sight words, and more. When you pop in one of the instructional DVD's, your kids are seeing, hearing, AND moving!

Here are some ideas to get you started with multisensory teaching:

- Teach letter writing by having your child trace a sandpaper letter while saying its name.
- Use base 10 blocks to teach place value.
- Have your child write spelling words in a salt tray.

- Make a model of the layers of the earth.
- Have your child record his reading to improve fluency.

Students with learning disabilities may have trouble learning through a particular sense. That's why it's important to build up your arsenal of multisensory techniques. I find that the more you incorporate multisensory ideas into your lessons, the easier it will become.



For further reading:

Set up stations to write the alphabet
An introduction to multisensory learning
30+ fun multi-sensory writing activities
Multi-sensory activities for learning letters
Multi-sensory ideas for teaching sight words
Multi-sensory activities for teaching reading
Top 10 ways to use flash cards
25+ multi-sensory ideas for learning words with flash cards
Learning disabilities: Productive ways you can help your child
Multi-sensory learning to read (Pinterest board)
Multi-sensory math (Pinterest board)
Multi-sensory math for upper elementary (Pinterest board)

Secret #6

Make read alouds a regular part of your lessons.

I can't say it strongly enough. Reading aloud to kids matters. *A lot.*

After a huge two-year study, the 1983 Commission on Reading* had several important findings. Among them was this:

"The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. It is a practice that should continue throughout the grades."

Whether you teach preschool, eighth grade, or even high school— reading aloud to your students should be something you do often. Why?

Reading aloud helps children

- be enthusiastic about reading
- learn of rich, complex lives outside their own experience
- hear books they'd be unable to read on their own
- build oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension
- improve reading strategies
- build their topical knowledge about certain subjects
- develop a sense of how stories work
- enhance their listening skills
- hear a model of fluent reading
- notice how authors write
- be prepared to discuss a tough topic
- learn (or be introduced to) a challenging math or science concept
- personalize history and other subjects which may be perceived as dry or boring

How can you find time for reading aloud? The first trick might be in how you view it. Don't look at read aloud time as an optional activity, or as a break from learning. See it as a very enjoyable reading lesson.

When should we read aloud?

In the classroom, I found that our regular read aloud time worked well after lunch. It was a transition from recess and got us on the right foot before we started a long afternoon. *When* you read isn't important, but it should be a time when all your students are present and listening.

Of course, reading aloud should not be confined to one moment every day. Even if you teach departmentalized classes, you can still incorporate reading aloud into your subject area.



How can we make the most of read aloud time?

- Pre-teach vocabulary.
- Build background knowledge before you begin.
- As you read, pause to think aloud. "I noticed… This reminded me of… I like the part when… I wonder why… I was surprised to see… I didn't understand…"
- Stop as you read to talk about the text with your students. Give them opportunity to discuss their inferences, ask questions, connect to their own experiences, and ask questions.

Where can you find book lists?

Here are some of my favorite places for themed book lists:

What Do We Do All Day?
The Best Children's Books
Delightful Children's Books
No Time for Flashcards
Reading Rockets
Growing Book by Book
Fantastic Fun and Learning
KC Edventures
I Can Teach My Child

Gift of Curiosity
The Measured Mom
Pragmatic Mom

*Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I.A.G. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the Commission on Reading*. Champaign, IL: Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois.

For further reading:

Reading aloud to young children

The do's and don'ts of reading aloud to young children
Tips for reading aloud to your young child and infant
Quiet read aloud activities (for kids who have trouble being still while you read)
How to help young children love chapter books
Over 50 chapter books to read aloud to preschoolers

Making the most of read aloud time

Questioning and connecting during read alouds
13 ways to encourage vocabulary development by reading aloud to your child

Books about math

GIANT list of math related children's books (a must-see!)
Another big list of children's books with mathematical themes
More picture books for math organized by category
Books about math for kids
Math chapter books and story collections
Fun math reference books for kids
31 counting books for kids
10 math books for the first ten years of life
15 books that explain math in a fun way
Math picture books for ages 4-8, organized by concept
10 fun math books
Teaching math with children's literature

Books about science

Top science books for kids
Summer science series: experiments and accompanying book lists
Science activities based on children's books
Teaching science with children's literature (great resource!)

Books about social studies

Teaching social studies with children's literature (organized by theme-awesome!)
Fun books about history for kids
Children's books for different periods of history (scroll down to find them)
History books for kids ages 4-10
Book lists for learning about continents (scroll down)
Ten unforgettable biographies
13 fun geography books for kids

Books about literacy

Teaching grammar with children's literature
Kid-friendly books about the writing process
Books about writing
20 children's books told through letters
Picture books about writers and writing
Picture books about reading
Books about kids who find reading hard

Books about the arts

Exploring the great artists—20+ art books for kids
21 picture books about art
Must have story books for the elementary art room
Books about art
Children's books about music
Books about music for kids
10 great books about music for kids
12 books about theater for kids

Secret #7
Incorporate the arts.

Do you have a student who struggles academically, even though she gives it her all? The spelling words are tough. Reading is a constant struggle. It takes her twice as long as her classmates to finish her writing assignments. But when it's time for art class?

She shines.

Another secret to great teaching is incorporating the arts (music, art, drama, and dance) into our teaching of academic subjects. Not only is it fun for everyone, but it gives children of all abilities the opportunity to succeed.

Why incorporate the arts into our teaching?

- Some children who struggle academically can express themselves through the arts.
- The arts allow children to express or apply academic knowledge in creative ways.
- The arts can help children experience—and understand—abstract concepts.
- Music, art, and drama open the door to critical thinking.
- It's just plain fun. When children enjoy themselves, they're more motivated to learn… and more likely to remember.

Thankfully, you don't need to be an artist, musician, actor, or dancer to incorporate the arts. You just need a little creativity and flexibility.

Just getting started? Here are some simple ways to incorporate the arts:

- Play quiet instrumental music when children are working. Choose a favorite upbeat song to play as a cue during classroom transitions.
- As you read aloud, have children draw what they visualize.
- Sing folk songs related to a historical period you're studying.
- Have students create a collage about your current science topic.

Ready to get creative? Try one of these:

- Compose a reader's theater for your students to read as an extension of any subject area. (Even in math! Characters can be the quotient, divisor, and dividend.)
- Work with your students to create a song to teach new information. Choose a popular tune and write new lyrics to teach the names of the continents, historical facts, new vocabulary — the possibilities are endless!
- Students can write, rehearse, and perform a commercial. They might do a campaign commercial for Abraham Lincoln or a public health announcement about the new food pyramid.



For further reading:

12 ways to bring the arts into your classroom (love this!)
Incorporate the arts into every subject (fun ideas in this post)
The arts matter: Real teachers share how they integrate the arts into the curriculum
What you can do when the arts are missing from your elementary school
Popular art activities for language arts
50 ways to integrate art into any lesson
Ideas for integrating music into daily classroom life
50 ways to use music and song in the classroom (so many fun ideas here!)
Simple and fun music games
5 easy ways to add music to your homeschool… even if you're not musical
How to raise a musical child
Science and dance together

Secret #8

Use assessments to improve your teaching.

I was teaching a beginning geography lesson to my first grade class. On the board I had created a graphic to help my students see that our city was within our state, country, continent, and the world.

I could almost see the light bulb above her head as a little girl raised her hand to say in wonder, "I never knew that. I thought it was all Arizona!"

By listening to her thoughtful comment I was able to perform a quick assessment. I learned that a visual representation helped her grasp a challenging concept. Now that I knew what was clear for her, I could determine where to go next.

What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word "assessment"? For many of us, it's the word test. Tests are useful and often mandatory, but if we rely on them to measure understanding and do nothing about the results, they don't help our students grow.

That's why it's important to remember that assessment means much more than "test." An assessment refers to activities that lead teachers to modify their teaching to meet student needs. Great teachers assess their students in a variety of ways and use the results to influence how and what they teach and re-teach.

Summative and formative assessments

Summative assessments are the kind we are most familiar with. They are big tests at the end of a unit, a big final project or paper, or the big standardized tests. Summative assessments can give you a general idea of how well your students grasp a concept, or which students perform at advanced, basic, and proficient levels.

But to acquire data to truly improve their teaching, teachers need formative assessments. Formative assessments don't just measure learning; they promote it by helping students see their strengths and weaknesses. They also help teachers see how to improve their teaching to better reach their students.

Why formative assessments are useful

- They provide daily feedback about what students know.
- They can be quick and informal, taking less of your time.
- They help children evaluate their own learning.
- They help students think critically about what they're learning.
- They help students focus on understanding and not just "getting it right" on the test.

Simple ideas for formative assessments

Many of these are designed for classrooms, but you can adapt most of them for the homeschool.

Write what you know: Before beginning a new unit, have students spend five minutes writing what they know (or think they know!) about a topic. Then share. Collect the papers to help you plan the next day's lesson.

Think-pair-share: Ask a question. Give students a few minutes to think about their answer. Then have them turn and talk about it with a partner.

Response cards: Create cards that students can hold up to give a quick answer to a true/false or multiple choice question. In a quick glance, you can get a picture of how well your class understands the lesson.

Agree/disagree: Make a thoughtful statement related to your lesson. Have students agree or disagree and say why they feel that way.

Thumbs up/thumbs down: In the middle of a lesson, ask a quick question. "Does this make sense to you? Give me a thumbs up or thumbs down."

Short quiz: Give a short true/false, multiple choice, or short answer quiz at the end of the lesson. Rather than taking a grade, go over the answers with students to help them see where they need to improve.

Exit slips: As children finish a lesson, and before they leave the room, have them answer a question on a piece of paper and hand it to you. You can read through them to see if students grasped your lesson. You might ask them to write what they understood most and least. You might ask them to write about one point that's still unclear.

One-on-one interview: Meeting individually with students is one of the best ways to assess. It can be hard to find the time, but try to meet with at least some of your students. Ask questions about a particular concept, give your student a problem to solve, or listen to him read. This is something a classroom volunteer can do for you if she takes good notes.

Just observe: Without realizing it, thoughtful teachers assess all the time. You can often tell how effective your lesson is by a child's body language or expression. You can also listen in as students work cooperatively. Keep track of your observations by writing on sticky notes and putting them inside a folder with a page for each student.

Questioning: This one feels a little obvious, but when you question your students with open-ended questions you can learn a lot. When a child gives you an answer to a math problem, follow up with

"How did you figure that out?" Check to make sure your student understands the why behind a process. "Why did you cross out the tens column when you were subtracting?"

How to use assessments to improve your teaching

So you've assessed your students. Now what? If your students understand the concept, you'll need to find ways to challenge them with enrichment activities. If they're struggling, you'll need to teach the concept again – in a new way. Try using manipulatives, breaking the concept down into smaller pieces, or pairing a student who "gets it" with a struggling student.



Flexibility is the key.

If you've mapped out your year to the day, you won't have time to stop and re-teach. If you've decided exactly which math lesson you're teaching a month from now, you won't want to slow down and break down a concept because you'll get behind. That's why it's important to map out your year without getting too specific. When things don't go as you planned, try not to see it as a problem; it's an opportunity! Be sure to check out my resource page for books that will help you make the most of assessment.

For further reading:

Using classroom assessment to improve teaching
What are formative assessments and why should we use them? (fabulous!)
Using informal assessments to inform your instruction
Listening while you work: using informal assessments to inform your instruction (great article)
20 simple assessments you can use every day (love!)
Pre-K student portfolios
Pre-K assessment forms



Secret #9

Trust yourself enough to choose your own path.

Most of us identify with a particular method of teaching. Whether that's a specific curriculum, an approach to teaching a certain subject, or a homeschooling method, we tend to grab on and hold tight. We might define ourselves by the method. We might even depend on it—without it, how can we be sure we're doing it right?

Do you remember the first time you learned about your favorite method? Maybe it was in a college class. It may have been that teacher development course you attended. Or it could have been the summer before you began homeschooling, when you began a particular book and were hooked. Whenever it was, it made a strong impression on you.

It's not uncommon for teachers and homeschooling parents to become passionate about a particular method. But we all need to remember that no one method or approach to teaching works all the time for every student. The closer you follow a method does not make you a great teacher; even the people who created these methods grow and change!

The mark of a great teacher is one who isn't afraid to think for him or herself. When you step away from your predominant method, please don't feel the need to defend yourself. By choosing what works best for your classroom or family, you are showing thoughtful consideration. Continue to be open to adjust what you use, year by year and child by child.

If you're just starting out in homeschooling, I would encourage you to be careful how much money you invest. If you buy too much ahead, you won't want to rethink your approach. Buy what your children need right now. That way you can purchase something different for next year without feeling that you've wasted an investment.

When I taught I had a great deal of curricular freedom, but I realize that many classroom teachers don't get to make those decisions. I would encourage you to be the teacher who pushes the envelope. Develop good relationships with your principal and fellow teachers. Not only will it make your work more enjoyable, but it will mean you are respected when you present a different point of view. Instead of being content with a system that you feel isn't working, make as many changes as you can and push for more. It's the teachers who think outside the box who make the most difference!

For further reading:

How to homeschool: determining your homeschooling style
Choosing a homeschooling method: which one is right for you?

Secret #10
Keep learning.

Great teachers love learning and are always finding ways to grow and improve.

Ideas for continued growth

- Attend teaching or homeschooling conferences.
- Listen to speakers in person or online.
- Ask a teacher or principal to visit your classroom and offer feedback.
- Take online classes from a local college or university.
- Join a homeschool association to network and find out what other people do.
- Join or create a teachers' book club to read and discuss an education-related book.
- Create a reading list and read a new teaching and/or homeschooling book every other month.

Be patient with yourself!

If I could go back and revisit my first year teaching self, I would remind myself to set attainable goals and accept my limits. I stayed up late most nights and got to school early the next morning; still, I never felt like I'd done enough. A challenge that you have as a teacher or homeschooler is doing the best you can without expecting too much of yourself at any given time. Patient, enthusiastic teachers need rest and time away from their work.

Set reasonable goals for yourself each year. Maybe one year you're going to ditch the reading workbooks and integrate the arts into social studies. This may be enough "new" for you, and you'll teach the other subjects in your normal way.

Use your summers or breaks to reevaluate and regroup. When I taught, I used my summers to think more thoroughly about particular aspects of my teaching. Each year I chose a subject I wanted to teach differently—whether that was creating my own units for science, teaching spelling with a word study approach, or incorporating more authentic problem solving into math.

The important thing is that you are always setting goals for yourself. Be open minded enough to let your thinking change, and wise enough to know when to implement what you've learned.

For further reading:

5 ways to continue growing as a teacher
Principals recommend best professional books
Top ten great books on teaching
12 must read books for homeschool moms
Books about education for teachers and homeschoolers

Resource List

Recommended Reading
for teachers and homeschoolers



My giant list of recommended books will help you grow as a classroom teacher or homeschooler. You'll find books on many topics, including classroom management, homeschooling methods, reading, writing, science, and much more! Click on the above image to get you there.



Final Thoughts

I taught for eight years and received an M.Ed. In Curriculum & Instruction before beginning my career as a stay-at-home-mom. Even though I'm now a parent to five little blessings (7, 5, 4, 2, and 6 months), I haven't forgotten the joys and challenges of teaching. That's why I'm thankful to educate, encourage, and support classroom teachers and homeschoolers on my blog, The Measured Mom.

I know that teaching can be a rollercoaster. You will have days that you feel on top of the world—when you're sure you could teach for years, or homeschool until graduation. But the tough days come too—sometimes in the same week. Your lessons will flop. Your students will disappoint you. You may wonder if teaching or homeschooling is right for you.

When I get discouraged as a teacher or parent, I turn to God's promises in the Bible. I gain perspective, joy, and purpose when I remember my Savior's plan for me.

In the tough moments, I encourage you to bring the focus back to your students. Children know that the best teachers are the ones who care about them, listen to them, and have a passion for teaching.

Enjoy the journey!

