

Podcast: Good Enough Homeschooling

Episode: 16: Teaching Reading in the Homeschool

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Courtney: [00:00:00] Welcome listeners to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. Today we're discussing the English language arts, what they are and how to teach them within a classical framework.

AJ: [00:00:12] So hey, folks, we wanted to let you know that we have temporarily closed down new memberships for the Secular Inclusive Classical Teachers group. We had a huge number of people find us and we are just wanting some space to let them get integrated into the group and acclimate to what's going on before we let more people in. So we are going to reevaluate on March 15, the Ides of March, to see if it would be a good time to let more people in. So if you are looking for the group and not finding it, don't worry, we have not actually teleported off the planet. We have just made the group private for a while so that we can work with the new folks and get them taken care of.

[00:00:54] So we get questions on the Secular Inclusive Classical Teachers group on Facebook, about English language arts all the time. And that's partly because the English language arts or ELA is not just one subject. It's a group of different subjects that are all under this ELA umbrella. And figuring out how those things should be taught, in what order, let alone with what curricula, that that's all pretty complicated. So kind of giving you fair warning here, listeners, you might want to have pen and paper, take some notes. Or feel free to re-listen to this if you want to pick up some specific details about the curriculum or other things that we might be talking about.

[00:01:37] Courtney is going to take us through an overview of all of the different parts of the English language arts, how they work, and specifically how we in the broad classical world deal with them. We're gonna focus a lot on reading in this episode, and we're probably going to touch on writing, but that's probably going to end up being enough to be another whole episode. So you can look forward to that.

Courtney: [00:02:01] Teaching your child to read is perhaps the most difficult and most important job you will ever have as a homeschooling parent. Now the Simple View formula presented by Gough and Tunmer in 1986 is an

equation Decoding, D, times Language Comprehension, LC, equals Reading Comprehension, RC. So that's $D \times LC = RC$, which is great and lovely. But there's a little bit more to that, right?

[00:02:31] So Hollis Scarborough, a reading researcher, came up with the analogy of the reading rope. Her analogy is that learning to read requires seven strands of education for children to become fluent readers. Addressing each strand is necessary but insufficient by itself. Luckily, classical education addresses them all, often with specific curricula.

[00:02:57] Decoding is often the focus of the early years and you may say to yourself, I can just teach my kid with sight words, it's not a big deal. Well, I got news for you. There are over a million words in the English language and your kid is not going to be able to memorize each word. Why does it matter? Keith Stanovich in 1986 wrote a paper called "The Matthew effects in reading, some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy." He published this, by the way, in Reading Research Quarterly, and the money quote is, "The increased reading experiences of children who crack the spelling sound code early thus have important positive feedback effects. Such feedback effects appear to be potent sources of individual differences in academic achievement."

[00:03:44] In other words, the Matthew effect. The rich keep getting richer. Kids who learn to read early, read more, read wider, are better readers, and this has a snowball effect as they get older and they become better students. So with your little 'uns, how do we do that?

[00:04:03] Fortunately, it's something that we already do a lot. For example, phonological awareness is frequently introduced with nursery rhymes. Hickory dickory dock, the mouse ran up the clock. Or rhyming stories, Sheep in a Jeep, Llama Llama Red Pajama. Etc, so on and so forth. Just being able to hear syllables in words like chick-en, ba-na-na, cat-er-pil-lar, which is great fun when you do it with sound repetition or alliterations. Oops sounds like loops. Betty Botter her bought a bit of butter, and so on and so forth. Those tongue twisters are perfect.

[00:04:36] Now you that leads nicely into decoding and there are great curricula to teach your kids to decode. If one doesn't suit you get another one. The famous, the classic, the bestselling since 1986, is *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*. Generations of children have learned to read with this book. There's also *The Ordinary Parents Guide to Teaching Reading* which takes you all the way through fourth grade phonics. Yes, dear listener, there is a fourth grade phonics.

[00:05:09] *The Logic of English*, is super popular, super thorough, and has a special strand for children who are a little bit older but not reading well, so check that out if that's where you are. *All About Reading*. I highly recommend this for children who are suspected of being dyslexic but maybe not very severely. That's a great way to go. An oldie but goodie, I bought my copy for a penny, *Phonics Pathways*. Excellent program, doesn't have a whole lot of teacher instruction.

[00:05:35] Those are just a handful. There are more out there, there are free ones, there are expensive ones. If you have a child with severe dyslexia, the Barton with the Orton-Gillingham system is the gold star, very pricey.

[00:05:50] All of that doesn't mean that you don't need some sight recognition. So you want to use one of those items, you know, from decoding, plus books like the sight words from Bob books, or the Dick and Jane books, those are great. And this is because comprehension accumulates. Now there's a famous study from 1988, by Recht and Leslie. And what they did is they tested children by dividing them into four groups based on two factors, reading ability and prior knowledge of baseball. I, personally, would be in the low knowledge group about baseball. It gives you groups of high-high: kids who knew a lot about baseball and were good readers, high-low: kids who are good readers but didn't know much about baseball, low-high: kids who are not great readers, but knew a ton about baseball, and low-low: kids who didn't know about baseball and kids who weren't good readers. In all measurements, the students with high prior knowledge perform better regardless of what reading level they had been grouped with.

[00:06:50] This is the quote, "In light of the importance of adequate prior knowledge, strategy instruction and the knowledge base should be equally considered in the design of instruction." In other words, we need to give kids background knowledge *and* teach them how to decode text. Well, now that sounds really complicated, right?

[00:07:08] What about, "Oh, there's always gaps in education. Kids are just gonna learn what they're gonna learn. We want to create lifelong learners." Well, you know what, I'm sorry, there are things you can do. So let's talk about the things that we can do. And one of those is, well, actually diffuse background knowledge, things like field trips to museums and art galleries, and so on and so forth. Talking with your child, possibly the single most important intervention you can do with young children. Erica Christakis wrote an entire book about why it's so important. That book is *The Importance of Being Little*, by the way. Picture study. You

know, we see things with our eyes, our visual component is super huge, just studying pictures, it gets you an amazingly long way in life. And Susan Wise Bauer calls it an ongoing atmosphere of exploration, experimentation, and happy chaos.

[00:07:58] Now, this also includes memory work.

AJ: [00:08:00] Classical education uses memorization as a way to cement the knowledge that you gained in the curriculum, or any of this diffuse knowledge that Courtney's just been talking about. Part of why memorization works so well and why it's so important is that when you have information at your fingertips, it frees up your working memory to deal with whatever new cognitive tasks are in front of you. In other words, what you're learning at that moment.

[00:08:27] So an example of that would be, if you know your math facts really well, and you're in an algebra class, you're going to do much better than the student who, say, doesn't know their multiplication tables and has to spend all of their mental energy trying to calculate what is seven times eight. Oh, yeah, okay. And by the time they've actually got that worked out in their head, they have no energy left to actually plug that into the equation they're dealing with and make sense of the algebra as algebra. So that's just one example.

[00:08:55] The other thing about memorization and one of the reasons that classical education is so enamored of it is that it provides the sort of connecting points for new information to build knowledge. So it's a form of scaffolding, essentially. It's a support system for what you're trying to build, which is more knowledge. So in English language arts, we can memorize all kinds of things. Grammar definitions, a noun names a person, place, thing, or idea. Or of this more general background knowledge. Proverbs, the Olympian gods, probably the most common and popular type of memory work in the English language arts is poetry.

Courtney: [00:09:30] You know, Jenn, one of the ways that we can help guide our children and what they're reading or even you know, elsewhere in our classical education, is through directing their poetry memorization. And I, a couple years back picked up IEW's poetry memorization guide for free and I've been using it with Elena, but I'm not 100% happy with all the poems. She loves memorizing poetry, which I find to be totally bizarre. She loves to show it off. I want more about fun poems to memorize.

Jenn: [00:10:01] Oh, you know, you should talk to AJ about that, because I heard there's a new book out from Quidnam Press.

AJ: [00:10:08] For your daughter's age, honestly, what I would recommend is a book called *Favorite Poems of Childhood*. That's a very cheap Dover paperback. I think it's like \$3 that has all of the wonderful classic poems that you would want for children under about the age of 10. If you have kids who are older, I do have a poetry anthology, very inexpensive, at my website called *101 Poems for Reading and Recitation*. And that's what I would recommend for kids are, say, age 10, and up. And it's arranged chronologically, so that if you are trying to learn poetry in time with your history curriculum, for example, you can do that fairly simply that way.

[00:10:47] And then for people who are looking for a more comprehensive memory work program, Jenn is right, I have just brought out a revised edition, radically revised edition, of *Living Memory*, which was the big huge doorstop of a book that I brought out first in 2008. It's a compendium of classical memory work materials. The new revision is geared to grades K-8, it's completely secular, and it's much trimmed down. It's really designed so that you can use it over those years, your kids can learn almost everything in the book without a whole lot of stress or strain. And that will give them those really important pegs that they can hang other knowledge on. The kind of stuff we were talking about earlier, something like a history timeline that is succinct so that then a child can say, oh, that happened before or after the Civil War, before or after some other major event in history. And I really did make an effort with the timelines in particular to include important information from all cultures and continents and all of that different time periods.

[00:11:48] So that book covers English language arts, so your grammar definitions, some things for composition, those kinds of things, social studies, history, geography, and US civics, mathematics. So all your math facts and formulas, things like that, that you need there. And then finally, science, so elementary through about middle school science. Those are things that you can look to for memorization.

Courtney: [00:12:12] Well, that's cool. I wouldn't even have thought about putting science in there. But that totally makes sense, AJ.

AJ: [00:12:17] As Courtney mentioned, nursery rhymes and tongue twisters build phonemic awareness like nothing else. They also help with pronunciation. I actually was just last week in an online Spanish class. And we used tongue twisters in Spanish to practice particular sounds that are very difficult for English speakers to make. The rolled R, something like that. So you can do this with all kinds of things.

[00:12:40] The thing that's nice about poetry too, is that children's poetry in particular, it's very playful, it's very humorous. A lot of poetry that's

written for adults or older kids tends to deal with kind of, I won't say necessarily harsh subjects, but sometimes it can be a little depressing or just heavy. But children's poetry is often really funny, but it's also a great way to introduce poetic forms, help kids get used to the rhythm of language, and you know, not to diss the classic poetry for older students, that helps exercise the memory and it also helps them recognize types of figurative language. And all of these things become important in another part of the English language arts, which is literature, literary analysis, and then also in their own writing.

Courtney: [00:13:24] Spelling, or as they get older, it moves into vocabulary and etymology and orthography and yada yada yada. But one of the big things is a systematic curriculum that presents new words in familiar context, thereby enabling students to make correct meaning guesses unconsciously. Thank you, Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. Or let's take it from Susan Wise Bauer. In the content areas of history, science, literature, art, and music, classical learning provides a systematic framework for learning about new things. So you say, "Okay, that's great. How do I do that?" And I say, "Okay, that's great. Let's look at *Spelling Workout* or *All About Spelling*, or the Barton system or *Vocabulary from Classical Roots*, or *Wordly Wise*." It's out there if you want to use it.

AJ: [00:14:07] To me, this is like the most wonderful thing in the world. It's Merriam Webster's *Vocabulary Builder*. You can get this in every Barnes & Noble in the entire country and it costs \$7.

Jenn: [00:14:17] Oh, nice.

AJ: [00:14:19] Yeah, and actually you can get, it's like \$4 on Amazon. It's a mass market paperback and I have used it for kids from about 7th grade through 12th grade. Very specifically, I used it from for the vocabulary part of the language arts classes that I taught at the classical school and broke it up into four chunks. So taught one chunk each year as part of their English class. It's a roots based book. So basically, you'll have a root like you'll have B-E-L-L-hyphen, so BELL-, all the words that come from the Latin word bellum, right, meaning war. So bellicose and antebellum and all of these other words. So its roots based, best I would say for junior high and really for high school. Very, very easy to use. That's an option for if you need something that is quick and dirty and cheap. Merriam Webster's *Vocabulary Builder* by Mary W. Cornog.

Jenn: [00:15:10] The only thing I was going to ask you guys is if you'd ever use *Sadlier Vocabulary Workshop*, because that is my favorite.

Courtney: [00:15:16] No, tell us about it. Sadly, I've never heard of it.

AJ: [00:15:19] I've heard of it, but never used it.

Jenn: [00:15:20] I use this in eighth grade and so when I saw that Kolbe Classical School used that I jumped on it back in the day, and that is the one resource that I have never changed since I found it. And it's been updated a gazillion times so I think the newest edition is maybe 2018. So it's not like it's ancient, it's new.

[00:15:44] There are levels that start in third grade and go all the way up to 12th grade. It's a workbook. Sadlier does not make it easy for homeschool parents to get the answers. They don't seem to be rolling with the times very much. You can buy the workbooks from Sadlier direct or you can buy them through the Kolbe online store. It's a little harder to get the answer books. Parents that are enrolled through Kolbe can buy them.

[00:16:14] Okay, so the books themselves are small in stature. They are just crammed. So there are sections A, B, C, and D for each week. Yeah, you've got four days and on the fifth day you give a quiz. Then, in the book, every so often, yeah, there's a unit test. And then you go over all the words up to that point. So by the end of the year, it's a huge test.

Courtney: [00:16:36] Oh, you keep adding as you go along.

Jenn: [00:16:37] You keep adding. Yeah, you keep adding, but then you never really forget those words. If you have a decent vocabulary, especially the younger years, you don't need the answers, right? When you get into high school, you know, some of them are kind of hard. But if you look up the definition, you can figure out the answers.

AJ: [00:16:54] The Sadlier book is available on Amazon.

Courtney: [00:16:57] And then another one of those seven strands, as AJ already mentioned, is language structures. And that's where you get into your grammar and your composition. And we will deal with those more later. Two curricula that are a personal favorite for the early elementary age are the *Writing with Ease* and *First Language Lessons*.

[00:17:15] But also another strand is verbal reasoning, again, what AJ was talking about with the tongue twisters and so on, riddles, that kind of thing. But curricula already exists for that. That's in the early elementary, that's your *Lollipop Logic* or your *Logic Safari* or your *Logic Countdown* or your *Building Critical Thinking Skills* or *Writing with Ease* in the narration part.

[00:17:36] Now when you talk about read alouds and literacy knowledge, that's a huge subject all in of itself. One of the nice things about *Writing with Ease* is that it uses a variety of genres and it really works with a lot of those print concepts. Really nice for that. We have gotten more than one book out of the library because my children wanted to hear the rest of the story.

[00:17:58] So Susan Wise Bauer, again, we're going to quote, "The student who is working on ancient history will read Greek and Roman mythology, the tales of The Iliad and The Odyssey, early medieval writings, Chinese and Japanese fairy tales. And for the older students, the classical texts of Plato and Virgil and Aristotle and so on. All of that really great.

[00:18:16] Now, penmanship and composition are not the same thing. They go together, but they're not the same thing. And so there are good curricula for penmanship. There's *Handwriting Without Tears*. There's Memoria Press' *New American Cursive*, there's *The Logic of English*, the *Rhythm of Handwriting*. And Jenn, you're a big fan of Getty-Dubay right?

Jenn:

[00:18:37] I am. I think it's one of the prettiest, easiest that you could learn. It's very easy. There's lots of teacher help. There's even books for adults or older teenagers if they want to transition into that. It's a very easy to read cursive.

Courtney:

[00:18:54] And there are good reasons to teach your kid cursive. So for example, if they have some dysgraphia or dyspraxia, keeping that pen on the paper really helps keep them oriented on that spatial sense when they're writing. Also, cursive is actually literally faster, because your pen doesn't leave the paper, then you can in print. So if you're in a really intense college class, (and I have had those classes) where the professor writes with one hand and erases with the other--maybe you have, too. Being able to get that down as fast as possible is really important.

[00:19:29] Something that we see is children who are advanced readers. Or are they advanced readers? Or advanced decoders? Because your child can be an advanced decoder, but unless they have the other six strands, that prerequisite background knowledge, that knowledge of language structures, the verbal reasoning skills, that knowledge of print concepts and genre, and the ability to compose coherently about it, they're not actually a high school level reader, because you have to be able to bring all those things to bear.

[00:20:01] So it's not that your kid isn't bright. I'm sure they are. I'm sure they're super bright, but it takes time to be able to develop all that kind

of stuff. Now, you may notice that I slid that writing in there at the last minute. So let's talk about writing for a second. Writing and reading are often taught together, but they don't have to be. You can, in fact, teach children to read without teaching handwriting at the same time. You can separate that out, and in fact, doing so is not historically unusual.

[00:20:31] Milton famously taught his daughters to decode Greek and Hebrew, but not to be able to read it or write it because all he wanted was someone to read text aloud to him, and they didn't understand it themselves. And sometimes reading and writing shouldn't be integrated. If you have a three-year-old who is absolutely insistent on learning to read but doesn't have the fine motor skills to write letters, let them learn. Think about all our students with dysgraphia who are excellent readers but have immense difficulty with putting pen to paper for physiological reasons. There is no reason to deprive them of the gift of reading.

[00:21:05] Along the lines of the Simple View of Reading, Berninger and Amtmann developed the Simple View of Writing in 2003. In their view, there are three main parts and all three are constrained both by attention, probably working memory is what they meant, and memory, which I think probably means long term memory. Now one part of the simple view of writing is self-regulation, such as setting goals for writing, planning your writing, organizing your writing, monitoring yourself as you write, and then evaluating what you wrote. And then you go back and you revise that writing and then you know, like, hey, I did a good job rewarding yourself for that good writing.

[00:21:39] In classical education, we start this process young with dictation. You have to plan where to put the sentence on the page, figure out how to organize it on the page, monitor yourself as you write it out, evaluate it as you check that dictation and so on and so forth. Now, of course, this gets more complex as students work from dictation to composing original sentences and then paragraphs and then essays, step by highly structured step. Another part of The Simple View of Writing is transcription or translating sounds, words, sentences, and passages into print. This includes handwriting or penmanship, or typing, spelling and mechanics. And of course, classical education is on it with a widespread practice of copy work. And copy work, we think of it like this Dickensian thing where all the kids are sitting at their little desks shivering while they write and they copy things down. Or the medieval monks in the scriptorium with depression copying this stuff down. But in fact, copy work can turn into a great sense of pleasure for people. Even today, adults learn calligraphy for fun.

[00:22:46] Now that last part, text generation, is described as turning ideas into text, including coming up with the idea choosing the words and content, deciding on your text structure, understanding genre, and here again, classical education's emphasis on poetry and text memorization and recitation.

[00:23:03] Aristotle once said that giving your child a good education and those facts to go in the education is like stocking the construction site for a house. You put in those bricks. You're constructing the mental architecture of their mind. And when you have children memorize things with good word choice and content and structure and genre, it puts it in long term memory, helps students with this process. And that is why I am not a big fan of allowing students complete free rein in their reading. They need to be exposed to a wide variety of genres and text types in order to help with their reading and their writing.

Jenn:

[00:23:41] As far as decoding, readers will tell me that they've read things but that they didn't understand it. And that is the biggest thing. And that it leads right into what I wanted to say.

[00:23:52] So I want to talk about reasons that I suggest that parents wait a little bit before pushing them ahead when reading for pleasure. Now, in homeschool, when you're studying literature, the novel should be a bit above your child's level. You want vocabulary and concepts that are new. For free reading, not so much. I know it seems like a good idea to give them all the books you remember as a child. It's natural because readers want to talk books and compare notes.

[00:24:21] We as a society talk a lot about getting kids off screens and getting them reading. Things you read as a child, they stay with you in a way I think that nothing else does later in life when you read it and it really isn't worth reading a book before you're mature enough to handle the content. Decoding words is not the same as reading them. In young adult books there are ideas such as racism, mental illness, sexual abuse, rape, religion, poverty, sexuality, suicide, drug use. I strongly urge parents to wait on titles that include heavier themes, just as you would withhold an R rated film. It'll still be there later.

[00:24:58] Another example are the Harry Potter books, which I advise you to buy secondhand. When they were first being released, each one was at least a year apart, meaning my kids started reading them at around the age of 11 and ended at 17. So they grew with the series. And now, they're all out there and a voracious reader could finish reading all of them in a summer. Your eight-year-old is not going to be into moody

lovesick Harry. And the last book really should be marked YA with all the death of characters and rampant violence.

Courtney: [00:25:30] If you really must read more Harry or more Percy, fanfic has got your back.

Jenn: [00:25:35] Books with these themes are often banned books. And I am in no way saying that they should be banned. I just think that they should be read by a mature reader so that they can get the most out of the story. Of course, in the end, you know your child best.

Courtney: [00:25:51] So Jenn, I have a 13 year old and she's a precocious reader and I don't want to get in her way. But I do want to guide her reading to things that are important in her world. Do you have any suggestions?

Jenn: [00:26:02] Well, that's most of what I do at The Bookish Society. One of the things I'm finding with junior high kids is that they have greater interest in the world around them, but at the same time, they need help choosing appropriate resources.

Courtney: [00:26:18] Or mom needs help choosing.

Jenn: [00:26:20] Right, you can't read everything. You're doing enough. You're already homeschooling, you can't pre-read dozens of books on top of all that. So, one of the things I'm offering next fall will be a class on women's studies for junior high students. And by junior high. I mean, in junior high. The age of junior high, not decoding at junior high level. I am hoping that, well, one, it's a big success, and two, that kids will come away with an age-appropriate awareness of social issues in our time. Smashing the patriarchy. I'm just calling it women's studies for junior high. We are going to read books that examine the experiences and contributions of diverse groups of women in society. We will go into women's social roles and their involvement in health and history and political activism. And I'm just super excited about it.

Courtney: [00:27:16] Thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschoolers. Before we go, show some love for your new favorite podcast by leaving us a review and stay tuned for next week when we'll show some love and hate for a curriculum. I promise.