

**Courtney: Hello, listeners, and welcome to The Good Enough Homeschool podcast. We are:
Jenn Naughton,
Courtney Ostaff, and
Andrew Campbell.**

Jenn: Today we're going to discuss a very popular approach to English Language Arts and homeschooling generally: Brave Writer. Brave Writer is the creation of Julie Bogart.

AJ: In addition to selling ELA curricula, Brave Writer offers a "lifestyle" approach to homeschooling, parenting, and homemaking. The lifestyle aspect of BW shows up in videos, blog posts, and products that include lots of inspirational (or maybe aspirational?) content about home decorating, self care, coziness, etc. There's even a digital magazine, *A Gracious Space*, to support the BW lifestyle (\$10 per quarterly issue). Poetry Teatimes are probably the best-known example of the lifestyle side of BW.

Although BW doesn't seem to connect itself directly to any other homeschooling method or philosophy, I see a distinct CM influence in it. As CM said, "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life." I'm also reminded of Susan Schaeffer Macaulay and her mother, Edith Schaeffer, who were instrumental in introducing CM to American evangelicals in the 1980s. Both of them placed a strong emphasis on homemaking as part of homeschooling, and a lot of BW lifestyle advice has a similar vibe, although it's secularized and modernized for Millennial moms.

Courtney: I am reminded of YouTube and Instagram "influencers." If you're not familiar with the term, [Wired Magazine defines it as](#) "shorthand for someone (or something) with the power to affect the buying habits or quantifiable actions of others by uploading some form of original—often sponsored—content to social media platforms...the value of the content in question is derived from the perceived authority—and, most importantly, *authenticity*—of its creator." This hinges on [parasocial relationships](#), or the "illusion of a face-to-face relationship" with celebrities or influencers. This is, in part, what I think of when I think of so-called lifestyle brands—illusion.

Jenn: So, here's the thing. My company is pretty new and I can already see how easy it is to use your family as part of your brand. In the case of homeschooling services, it's difficult not to, when your expertise comes from teaching your kids. Much of the hype around Brave Writer has

to do with Julie herself. She is in this case a homeschooling influencer. That's fine and it is a valid marketing strategy. But, keep in mind you are her customer, not her friend.

AJ: Jenn, you are also a member of the Brave Learner online Community forum, right?

Jenn: Last year mid pandemic I thought I'd buy a year's worth of Boomerangs which at that time came with a membership to the Brave Learner Community. It had been a while since I had purchased any of the Copywork/Dictation packets and I was curious about how they had improved. I honestly haven't done anything with it except poke around prior to this podcast. Um, it seems like mostly a lot of peer support for women who homeschool. There are links to their webinars and events also.

AJ: There's a page on the BW site that gives links to multiple aspects of the BW lifestyle, and we'll have a link to that page in the show notes. Reading through those pages will give you an idea of what a BW homeschool might look like: playful, with a high ratio of parental input to student output, and heavy on non-academic sidelights to create a "magical" learning experience.

So who is this curriculum for? BW will appeal, first and foremost, to homeschoolers who describe themselves as "relaxed." That is, they prioritize things other than academics. I'd say it's for people who aren't dyed-in-the-wool unschoolers but who lean more in that direction than toward, say, classical ed. People who describe themselves as doing "relaxed CM" or "gentle" lit-based education might also like it. If you are considering BW, we suggest that you read the BW Values page on their site to see if their priorities match yours. (And again, we'll have a link to that in the show notes.)

Okay, on to the academics and curriculum, since that's our focus here at the Good Enough Homeschool podcast.

Let's start with the obvious: BW is complicated. There are many, many individual products; a certain amount of brand-specific jargon to get used to; and no straightforward scope and sequence document to help parents place their children. If, like me, you don't want to watch endless YouTube videos or take a class just to get a handle on how a program works, this is a serious problem. (It's also kind of ironic that a program centered on writing makes such heavy use of videos to convey information.)

Courtney: On their website, they divide their online classes into “Core, Early Elementary, Upper Elementary, Middle School, High School, and Family,” but I couldn’t find a single, cohesive document that tells you what knowledge, skills, and abilities your child is supposed to learn in each class. Placing your child seems like a lot of work to me. As a homeschooling parent of an asynchronous learner, I know my child’s skills, but I can’t figure this out. I couldn’t find a guide that pops out at me telling me where to place my child in terms of skill level.

AJ: To help listeners out, we’re going to start with an overview of the BW approach to the three areas of ELA that they cover: grammar, literature, and writing.

AJ: BW teaches grammar and writing mechanics through literature, mostly with copywork and dictation, using a spiral approach. The core products here are Darts, Arrows, Boomerangs, and Slingshots, plus the “Groovy Grammar Workshop” online class. The Darts, etc. are sold on a subscription basis, or you can buy them à la carte. Each one covers a piece of literature (typically a novel) over a four-week period. You’re given four short passages from the book—one per week—for grammar and mechanics analysis, and this is where you’d do copywork and dictation. There are skills checklists for mechanics and a loose weekly rhythm of suggested activities, but you won’t find detailed daily schedules, student practice exercises, or scripts provided.

Courtney: This is a deal breaker for me. Because, make no mistake, the entire ethos of Brave Writer is to teach the parent how to teach the child. This is absolutely not a program you can assign to your child and walk away—and for that kind of money, I would expect deluxe hand-holding, including a daily list of prepared assignments.

AJ: And what about families with children at multiple levels?

Jenn: It would be easy to combine the lifestyle sections, but unless all your kids are at the same skill level, you’ll need to keep them separate like you would any other Language Arts program.

AJ: Literature is taught with the same products: Darts, Arrows, and so on. Again, these products are available on a subscription basis, with new guides offered each month, or you can purchase individual guides. Books are not included in your subscription, though; you’ll have to source those yourself. These products contain a fair amount of background information, but as we’ll

see, they are high on parental input and low on student output. There is also a certain amount of lifestyle content in them, like instructions for having a themed book party at the end of each month, complete with recipes. There is no must-read booklist and no attempt to tie literature to history or any other subject, although parents could of course choose individual Darts, etc. to do that if they wanted to do that.

Finally, there's writing, which is the centerpiece of the BW method. The main products here are *The Writer's Jungle*, a required book that explains the entire approach in detail; a series of age-specific products (Jot It Down, Partnership Writing, Faltering Ownership, Help for High School); a separate Writing Projects product; and a range of online classes, some of which are meant for parents and students to take together.

Courtney: I cannot tell you how much I do not want to take a class on writing which requires *me* to attend the *online* asynchronous class, teach my child the content *offline*, and then turn in my child's work products *online* for feedback which I then have to interpret and convey *offline* to my child. Maybe this sounds like a good time to other people, but I have two master's degrees and over 100 graduate hours, and I work online, and I am D.O.N.E. done with taking online classes unless I absolutely, positively have to. We did not even do online Girl Scouts this year. Online class fatigue is real.

AJ: As I understand it, BW leans heavily on techniques drawn from the creative writing world, especially freewriting. For those not familiar with freewriting, it's basically a stream-of-consciousness dumping of words onto the page with no regard for spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, or any of the other conventions of written language. From what I can see, the online classes use the writer's workshop format, meaning that student work is shared with the rest of the class, and the teacher's comments on each individual's work are visible to all. (There are actually some legal concerns about this that we'll come back to later.) From reading the material, the whole process is high on emotional support with lots of emphasis on nurturing the child's "writing voice" and "original thought," but it's very low on actual writing demands of students, with only one writing project suggested per month.

These products are only available as digital PDF downloads licensed for personal use, meaning they cannot be legally resold. When we get to talking

about the price of all this stuff, you will see that that is a significant factor for parents to consider.

Now that you have an overview of what's available, let's talk about the teaching methodology.

BW emphasizes building students' confidence in their writing ability and their own ideas. This is presented as the single most important aspect of writing instruction. The products are designed to help the parent become their child's writing coach rather than their instructor.

The problem here is that coaches are, by definition, experts and usually veterans in their field. You can't train someone to be a coach unless they already have domain-specific expertise—and if you have that in ELA, you don't need BW in the first place!

Courtney: Here's a passage from the website about what makes the BW approach distinctive: “The core difference between Brave Writer and other programs is that **we teach writing much the way professional writers teach writing**. Educators often teach writing from format or structure, believing that students will find ease in writing if they are told what the shape of that writing ought to be. These programs deconstruct a specific writing form (like an essay, for instance), identifying its elements. They create an assignment that will reproduce the structure of the model or the form (five paragraphs, has these components, takes up this much paper), and then expect the student to produce writing that matches that set of expectations without necessarily taking into account what the student wants to express.”

In my opinion, there are a few problems with this approach. The first is the curse of expertise, or knowing something so well that you've forgotten what you know and are unable to explain it. Driver's ed teachers exist, and it's not just because they have superhuman calm and reflexes. Instead, they know how to break down the complicated practice of driving for absolute beginners. This applies to teaching writing, too. Expecting novice writers to learn to write from professional writers is just not reasonable, in my opinion. There's a reason why my husband isn't the writing teacher in our house.

Second, children are not mini-adults. Their brains are actually functionally different and work differently. I liked *The Teenage Brain* by Nutt and Ellis for more details on older students, and *What's Going On In There* by Eliot and *The Scientist In The Crib* by Gopnik for the under-fives, and *Nurture Shock* by Bronson and Merryman for between those ages, but basically, you cannot teach a 10 year old like a mini adult. It's not just that they know less than professionals, but to quote Dr. Willingham, “[what they know is organized differently in their memory.](#)”

Third, you can't think like an expert unless you have an expert's level of background knowledge, which takes decades to acquire. Again, to quote Dr. Willingham, "[experts are better able to single out important details, produce sensible solutions, and transfer their knowledge to similar domains.](#)" They've put in the thousands of hours of practice to organize all that background knowledge in a useful way. I don't think that asking beginning writers to create their own, automatic organizational schema with insufficient background knowledge--particularly in 4 hours of practice spread over a four week class--is a reasonable expectation. As we've discussed before, it takes years to get good at something.

Fourth, learning how to do something is best done in small, sequential steps, rather than a firehose of information. That's why we give students scaffolds to hang their writing on, including, yes, the five paragraph essay. First this, and then that. In Teaching WalkThrus, Sherrington and Caviglioli identify 5 steps for teaching: "1) present new material using small steps, 2) provide models, 3) provide scaffolds for difficult tasks, 4) ask questions, 5) check for student understanding." In step 3, those scaffolds include "modelling, checklists, writing frames, and anticipating errors and misconceptions." Experts don't need scaffolds because they already understand the deep structure of text, but our 13-year-olds are not experts.

AJ: Exactly. The point here is that if you want your children to learn how to write well, you have to teach them how to do it, slowly, explicitly, and incrementally over the whole course of their schooling. Having them do freewrites or dictations is simply not enough to assure mastery. And it's just not clear to me when or how BW bridges the gap between what are essentially pre-writing exercises (freewrites) and actual writing, whether creative or academic. I'd argue that it's exactly the conventional skills progression—sentence composition, paragraph formation, essays—that form that bridge for students. There's a reason that generations of English teachers have taught them explicitly.

When classical educators talk about "teaching children how to think," this is exactly what we mean. You want to give your child writing exercises that inculcate orderly thought: making outlines; learning how to structure a paragraph and expand it into an essay; understanding how to construct a logically sound argument and lead a reader through it. If BW teaches any of this explicitly, it's not clear to me when or how. And given the price tag on their materials and classes, that information should be readily available to interested parents, and front and center on their site.

Courtney: Here's a bit from the description of **The Writer's Jungle**: "*The Writer's Jungle* has **sold over ten thousand copies** and continues to be a hugely popular resource for homeschooling parents. *The Writer's Jungle* is the centerpiece to the Brave Writer program and lifestyle. The missing ingredient in writing curricula isn't how to structure a paragraph (information that can be readily found on the Internet). You don't need more facts about topic sentences or how to use libraries. Grammar and spelling are not the key components in writing, either, much to the chagrin of some English teachers."

We can find all kinds of things on the Internet, but I would like to remind you about the octopus study. In a study at the University of Connecticut, the vast majority of students fell for a hoax website about tree octopuses. Researchers blamed the lack of generic reading skills, but as per the baseball study we know that in fact, students didn't have the prior background knowledge about the natural world to understand that octopuses can't live in trees. They couldn't push back against false information without reliable background knowledge.

Since time is limited, what knowledge is most important? How to construct a paragraph? I think so. Whether your child is destined to be a Man Booker award winning writer, or a gas well tender filling out their daily reports, I think constructing a paragraph is a valuable skill that shouldn't be left to the vagaries of the Internet.

AJ: Amen. Here's *The Writer's Jungle* description again: "Paragraph instruction? Spelling and grammar? Sure, but not until our young writers know we value what they have to say. This is where we begin—stirring up our children's ideas, thoughts, and insights that hook, fascinate, surprise, enliven, and tell the truth. How do you help your kids reach inside and find those kinds of words? That's what Brave Writer 101 is designed to do!"

AJ: The best way to teach your children how to find words is to...teach them vocabulary. The best way to build confidence in writing, as with everything else, is to build concrete skills, systematically and incrementally. **Confidence follows competence.**

Look, I'm all for treating students with respect and taking their perspectives seriously, but there is also something to be said for intellectual humility. Students don't know what they don't know, and what they don't know is often...a lot. I'm not saying that a student can't have a brilliant insight about a book—they can and do; I've seen this with my students repeatedly—but it's pretty unlikely that your 8yo is going to come up with a truly "original thought." Having taught several modestly bright children who believed they

were brilliant thinkers because their parents praised their every observation as if it were $E=mc^2$, I'd caution parents to exercise some discretion here. There's a difference between confidence based on competence and garden-variety arrogance and egotism. Don't let your kid grow up to be "that guy or that gal."

Courtney: This is an interesting question, in a theoretical kind of way. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think this is more about parenting than anything else. Do your children know that you value what they have to say? In my opinion, that kind of trust builds up over the thousands of interactions you have with your child, from birth, and a writing curriculum is not going to repair your relationship with your children.

Jenn: I have four grown up children, and while there are plenty of things that I would have done differently, I am happy that I stayed home and taught them. They are a quirky bunch and public school just would not have worked well for most of them. Let me say this, there is nothing you can buy that will ensure that you and your kids have meaningful conversations. The only way that happens is through putting in the time and building trust—like any other relationship in your life.

AJ: To sum up our discussion of methods: BW's approach to writing instruction doesn't seem to line up with our understanding of what research shows most children need to become competent writers: explicit instruction and copious guided practice. In our opinion, they make a fundamental error in assuming that novice child writers will benefit from using the same methods as expert adults. (We'll drop some references in the show notes for listeners who want to follow up on these ideas.) As far as we can tell, BW also doesn't distinguish adequately between the demands of creative and expository writing. Finally, we have concerns about how adopting these methods might place certain students at a real disadvantage.

Courtney: I don't know for sure, but I suspect that this is an off-shoot of laissez-faire (lay'-say fairgh) Charlotte Mason style curriculum, and you know how I feel about that. If you don't, let me repeat: I think we can expect more of our children. In the *The Well-Trained Mind*, Jesse Wise quotes Dorothy Sayers like this:

“education had given up on the trivium and was now running on what she called the “educational capital.”

Jessie Wise goes on to say,

“We no longer teach our children the process of memorization, organization, and expression--the *tools* by which the mind learns. The leftover remnants of those methods have carried us through several decades of schooling without catastrophe...But sooner or later, the capital gets used up.”

Now, when I first read this, I thought it was, quite frankly, a conservative response to what they erroneously perceived as falling educational standards. But then I read about [Pierre Bourdieu's ideal of cultural capital](#)--and he was not at all a conservative. Later, I read about Michael FD Young's idea of [powerful knowledge](#), and here again was someone who was not at all conservative, talking about how class and knowledge are related. So now, when I look at this kind of curriculum, what I see is, and this is a direct quote from the BraveWriter website:

[“As a native speaker, my grasp of grammar is largely intuitive. I speak according to my ear, not according to a prescribed set of rules. ... My kids, who have been raised with my lackadaisical approach to grammar, have shown an interesting development as they encounter foreign languages. The older two \(19 and 16\) were raised with dictation and copywork. We did three years of grammar total. They tell me today that they don't think they really grasped the nuances of grammar until they studied Klingon \(older one\) and French \(younger one\).”](#)

I ask, isn't this what Jessie Wise was talking about, when she spoke of “cultural capital”? This upper middle class attitude towards formal grammar instruction might allow people who grow up speaking General American English (GAE) at home to bypass formal grammar instruction and get away with it, but for children who grow up speaking another dialect, as I did and my native Appalachian children do, [or children who grow up speaking African American English \(AAE\)](#), or children who speak English as an additional language (EAL), or who have learning disabilities around language, then this isn't going to cut it. Dr. Seidenberg has an [excellent article](#) about the need for formal instruction and AAE in this summer's issue of American Educator.

My children need clear, explicit instruction in the rules and standards of General American English, and they need to be able to code-switch on a dime, because people who speak with their accents or write in their native manner [are discriminated against](#). Ignoring this is a luxury good that has real consequences that I can't afford to ignore, for my children's sake.

Jenn: I'm simply not comfortable teaching grammar and writing without a fairly scripted program. I feel like I'm relaxed but that's because I sub out creating programs and simply implement what experts provide. It's never too late to learn the basics of grammar, dictation, narration, all of that can be fast tracked through at any age. The price of the Arrows and boomerangs simply aren't worth it to me because they are an extra only in my homeschool.

AJ: Now let's look at BW's curricular sequencing.

Because BW's grammar and mechanics instruction takes a spiral approach, families need to commit to the program long term if they want to make sure that their children get comprehensive instruction in grammar. In other words, you'd need to subscribe to the appropriate level of Darts, Arrows, etc. and use all ten per year, which locks you into their book choices and their pacing. Picking and choosing a few Darts or Arrows is fine for reinforcement and variety if you're also doing a traditional grammar program. But if you're not, it could easily result in spotty coverage of concepts (that is, the dreaded academic gaps).

The subscription service poses some additional problems. Because there's no overarching scope and sequence available to us, it's impossible to see what skills will be taught in which monthly PDF over the course of the ten-month subscription. That means you can't plan ahead or integrate BW effectively with other curricula. Also, if you have a child who needs academic acceleration or if you simply find BW's pacing way too slow (which all three of us agree it is), then you are going to have to buy additional products to make up for it. But again: you won't be able to see at a glance what skills are covered, so you won't know where and how to supplement.

The same problem applies if you want to tie your literature program to history, as many neoclassical educators do, or if you want your children to be familiar with a certain set of literary masterpieces, as many traditional classical educators do. If you pick and choose texts that fit the rest of your curriculum, you are running the risk of missing key grammar and mechanics skills. The lack of transparency about what gets taught when makes BW a poor choice for people who care about long-term planning—and episode 15 of this podcast is all about why we think planning is crucial for homeschoolers who prioritize rigorous academics.

Speaking of which...we have some serious concerns about rigor.

As one example, let's look at the Boomerangs, which are aimed at younger teens, ages 13-14, although they appear in the high school bundles. The product for older teens is called the Slingshot, but it follows the same basic

approach, just with more challenging novels. The format is similar to Darts and Arrows, with one book to read per month, weekly passages for copywork and dictation, and discussion questions. Writing projects per se are not included; you have to buy those separately. Or you could use the discussion questions as essay topics, which is what I would recommend.

Jenn: The routine that BW provides in their Boomerang Getting Started pdf seems pretty light for that age. But, if you have already covered grammar systematically maybe it'd be just enough to keep those skills fresh. I do like the idea of using them for a change of pace. They would be ideal for December when we only have 2 weeks of school anyway or the February slump when everyone is feeling burned out. Again, I prefer programs with a schedule, teacher manual, and student text. Memoria Press literature Guides remain one of my favorite programs to teach.

Courtney: Honestly, looking at the Boomerang sample on the website, and the ones I purchased earlier, I couldn't do it. I work and I homeschool two kids and I'm the primary caregiver for my elderly mother, and I simply do not have the time to "create and print the [dictation] passage" myself, or create this "French-style" dictation or "reverse dictation" every week. Neither am I going to have time to choose the concepts we're going to discuss--why aren't those already laid out for me? Why aren't sample responses to the Think Piece Question given? How do I know whether my child is meeting the standard if I don't know what the standard is? I certainly am not going to fuff around with candles. According to the National Fire Protection Association, on average, 21 home candle fires are reported per day. We don't routinely play with candles at my house.

AJ: No hygge at Courtney's house! LOL. Seriously, though, the Boomerangs I looked at struck me as very light for this age group.

- Copywork and dictation are fine for elementary school, but not for this level. Kids should already know their grammar and mechanics thoroughly by 8th grade, and any fine-tuning in that area should come through targeted practice based on the student's writing.
- The commentary on the text covers a lot of ground, and there's some useful information in there, but it strikes me as incredibly random. Kids are getting a few literary terms here and some vocabulary there and some history tidbits over yonder, but all in a jumble. This results in the same potential for gaps that we saw with grammar. Because students can work through any number of Boomerangs in any order, there's no guarantee that they'll ever cover all the points on the instructional

spiral. This is just one of many places where a comprehensive scope and sequence would be helpful for avoiding gaps.

- There's no indication of how the author arrived at the insights in the guide (no footnotes or bibliography), so there's no way for students to learn to replicate that process. The guidelines for using the Boomerang give some examples of open-ended questions to ask based on the grammar points or literary elements, but I can easily imagine a child who hadn't read the text with understanding or who was vague on grammar just shrugging. Much of the historical background information provided in the Boomerangs could and should be researched *by the students themselves* at this level, so something like a recommended supplemental reading list or even a few vetted internet links would be helpful here.
- The nine "Think Piece Questions"—which is just a fancy name for discussion questions, by the way—are the only part that asks the student to grapple directly with the *meaning* of the text. (That's only one page out of 50 in the guide to Jane Austen's *Emma* that I looked at. By contrast, there were four pages on how to throw a Regency-style dinner party with games.) The questions are adequate for discussion or for use as essay topics, but you can find much more robust content in any number of homeschool literature guides. For example, Memoria Press's Teacher's Guide to *Pride and Prejudice* comes in at more than 130 pages because it provides appropriate scaffolding in the form of comprehension questions and vocabulary lists for each chapter (differentiated by student level). It also contains substantive writing assignments, memory work, an essay template, and several tests. And at \$12.95 for a print copy, it costs less than the Boomerang—and you can resell it when you're done.

As an academic writing tutor, I want to see teens spending the bulk of their time actively discussing and especially *writing about* their reading. That is how they internalize the structure of language and develop ordered thinking.

This gets back to something we touched on earlier. On the whole, Brave Writer has parents doing the bulk of the work. It's heavy on parental input and very light on student output.

Jenn: Homeschooling is hard enough without the parent and child sharing the work. It is your job to become the best teacher you can, and it is their job to be the best student they can be. I can't stress that enough. Teaching at home is very different than in a school setting, but it is teaching. I will admit it took years for me to become the teacher I am today. And that's okay to learn on the job. But, you can't just download Insta curriculum and jumpstart the process.

Courtney: I'm going to lean on my teaching experience here. For new teachers, research shows that it's common ([as in 95% of teachers](#)) to spend 7-12 hours a week just [Googling for teaching materials](#), and then spend [another 5 hours per week adapting those materials to their students](#). That's an extra 40 hour week every month because they're not using a high-quality curriculum. Homeschool parents are not exempt from this trap. What's worse, research also shows "[the work assigned to them reflected grade-level academic standards only 17 percent of the time](#)" because teachers (and homeschool parents) are simply trying to get by without coherent academic support. This is part of the reason why I want to see sample completed assignments in a curriculum--and I don't see that in the BraveWriter Boomerang sample or the one I bought years ago. As far as I could see, none of the ThinkPiece questions had possible answers. I get it--it's much easier to think of cool questions than it is to "dog food" your assignments, and do them yourself, so you know what to look for and ensure rigorous academics. But parents spinning their wheels, putting in *all* the effort, while their child puts in 60-90 minutes a week for English language arts (keep in mind that [a 180-day Carnegie unit is easily three times that amount, or 200 minutes per week](#)) that isn't fair to the parent who is limited in time, or to the child who might later run up against high expectations for the first time and feel utterly bewildered in post-high school education.

Jenn: I think that teens should be spending time reading some things of their own choosing. I feel like one of the biggest problems in our society today is that we are now into our third generation of non readers. It's my soap box issue. Here's the thing, I am not anti-screen. We watch too much TV and play all sorts of video games in our home. But, when people are talking about training young minds to be logical and empathetic there is no better way than reading a book. And that means listening to a book also. Graphic Novels, Manga, Comic Books, Fanfiction all of that. I thought that the author Avi makes a good point when he brings up the fact that we often assign adult fiction to high schoolers. Now, thirty or forty years ago that was the only choice we had. YA didn't really exist. But now there is no reason to only assign the books that we read in high school. Certainly there are some that we want to study in depth, but for many kids that is all the reading that they'll do in their high school years and if you kill the joy of reading something that kids love, they will abandon books entirely. It is too easy to get that story fulfilled through a screen. Humans crave stories, and if you are held hostage by one that doesn't interest you, that's simply not great. When you hear the phrase, the book is better than the movie, what that means is that in the book you'll know what each character is thinking and feeling, and on the screen they cut all of that down and it's up to the the actors to convey that backstory through fewer lines and

facial expressions. I gave my teens an hour every school day to read whatever they wanted to read. That ranged from scientific fishing reports of the salmon run, to a car repair manual, or the latest YA hit. And I know this is long, but since we talked a bit about creating an atmosphere for conversations- read a book that your kid loves. You'll be shocked how insightful even little kids are in empathizing with the characters in their circumstances.

AJ: So we've talked at length about BW's materials. What about their online classes?

Courtney: I spent several hours sifting through the website in an effort to find the sequence of online courses. To the best of my understanding, it seems to be: Essay Prep, which is an interchangeable set of three courses: Reading the Essay, Dynamic Thinking, and Research and Citation. Then I think your student would move to more advanced classes: Expository Essay: Exploratory & Persuasive (\$300, six weeks), then Expository Essay: Rhetorical Critique & Analysis (\$300, six weeks), then Advanced Composition (\$300, four weeks), and then the MLA Research Essay course (\$350, six weeks). According to a video, each of those four more advanced courses is worth $\frac{1}{4}$ of a high school credit. I'm honestly not sure what you're supposed to do with the other $\frac{3}{4}$ of the high school year.

Jenn: My two oldest boys used a correspondence school called The American School. They are still around and are still a bargain. They are secular and basically provide public school at home. At that time (2005-2009) we mailed everything in to a teacher and they mailed back graded papers with comments and revisions on the side as if they were in a brick and mortar school. You still have that option with them as well as online courses now. My third kid went to our highly rated public school for high school and they used MCT LA which made it easy for me to help him out with assignments. My daughter used WTM products mixed with a little OM and R&S. OM has provided a scope and sequence and excellent rubrics. But, there is something about it that didn't work for us. We did a whole OM episode so you can go back and listen to that. Right now Declan is working through WWS 2 as a 10th grader and we will occasionally pull some writing out of his R&S Grammar book and I use some assignments from Bookshark's World History (now discontinued).

AJ: Courtney, you had another concern about the format of the online classes, right?

Courtney: I have an issue with the lack of educational privacy. This is apparently a feature, according to the video, not a bug. They say your child's writing is not private. Instead, it's posted for everyone to see, and the feedback to your child is also available to everyone for comment. Students can also comment on each other's work. This is apparently called the "writer workshop" model, with a promise of in-depth teacher feedback. I'm assuming that you waive

your rights under the Federal Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA) when you agree to the Terms and Conditions when you sign up for the class. They say there are no synchronous classes or office hours, and again, this is billed as a feature, not a bug, because then your child is reading all the time. Funny, though, I only found some key information readily available in the video, not in writing. If I was worried that my kid needed other kids to comment on their work, I'd sign them up for an account on Archive of Our Own, or another fanfic site, and let them post there. Positive comments and feedback are an integral part of the fanfic culture--and hey, it's free!

AJ: Jenn, one of your kids took a class with Brave Writer a few years ago, didn't she?

Jenn: I paid for one BW class for my daughter. It was the movie one and she found it to be entirely useless. So I don't think she posted anything beyond the first week and we called it quits. I have two natural writers and they used some of the assignments from Bookshark/SL which isn't exactly explicit instruction, but I have to say while they are not classical or really secular- they have improved their IG a lot. I think if the parent is a decent writer, there is enough there that with the BK/SL guide and rubrics you could turn out a decent creative writer.

AJ: Finally, since we're all about the real talk here, we need to acknowledge the elephant in the room: cost. BW is hands-down the most expensive curriculum we've reviewed so far. And remember: we're only talking about ELA here, not a full curriculum package that covers the five core academic disciplines. So Courtney, you did a cost analysis for your daughter, right?

Courtney: I have a 13-year-old going into the 8th grade next year. If I subscribed to the Brave Writer approach, I would need the Writer's Jungle for the "Original Thought" section. That's \$79. For the "Mechanics," I would need the year-long subscription to Boomerang, at \$129 plus \$112 in books to buy. The recommended Boomerang asynchronous, online discussion board is \$99 per month. And then for the "Writing Projects" section, I would need the Help for High School, at \$79, plus, optimally, the three Essay Prep courses (Reading the Essay, Dynamic Thinking, and Research and Citation) at \$239 per four-week asynchronous course. This totals out to \$2,106 for English language arts for a 10-month school year—and for this, I don't even get a daily schedule of instruction and prepared assignments with work samples?!

AJ: Seriously, for that amount of money, you could hire a private tutor to come to your house weekly and teach your child one-on-one for a whole year. Or you could sign your high schooler up for a rigorous full-year course in expository writing at the WTM Academy (\$685) or at Memoria Press's online academy

(\$650) and buy MP's 8th grade literature set, which comes with the books...and still have spent less than half what BW would cost.

And what are you actually getting for that money?

Courtney: I sat through the 37-minute video about the Essay Prep courses so you didn't have to. Seriously, I couldn't find a good bit of the information contained in that video written anywhere on the website.

Each of the Essay Prep courses (Reading the Essay, Dynamic Thinking, and Research and Citation), is \$239 for four weeks of asynchronous instruction, or about \$60 per week, for what the video says should be 60-90 minutes of effort on your child's part. This about a dollar-a-minute cost is more or less the equivalent, for me locally, of a face-to-face ballet class, one-to-one swimming class, or a one-to-one piano lesson. In other words, for the price of an asynchronous, group class, I could buy the equivalent amount of time in private, face-to-face tutoring in writing from a professional instructor.

In the video, it's said that "if your kids have just been neglected...throw them right in." But as far as I can tell, there is no formal sentence-level or paragraph-level instruction. If you have neurotypical children brought up in a wealthy household in the dominant culture, maybe you can get away with this. I don't believe in leaving things to chance when I could make a difference. My kids are going to get early formal instruction in first sentence level and then paragraph level expository writing.

According to the video, none of the three essay preparation classes (Reading the Essay, Dynamic Thinking, and Research and Citation) actually teach your child to write an essay, and they don't claim to. Instead, they offer preparation exercises. For example, according to the video, in the Dynamic Thinking class your child is to do free writing about one of their past experiences, then choose a sentence that appeals to your child from their own free write, free write about that sentence, and then repeat. Now, I'm not an English teacher (though I have written a commercially published book, and my husband has been making his living as a professional writer for over 30 years). I'm going to confess that I don't quite understand this assignment. As I interpret it, this seems to be teaching students that whatever they deem to be interesting is the most important thing, and that their opinion about their own writing matters to other people. Maybe if you're a wealthy student with parents who have good connections to get you published, no matter how bad your sentence and paragraph structure is, maybe that could be true. I don't think this is going to be true for most kids.

AJ: We reached out to a parent whose two sons have taken BW classes in the past year. Her older son, who is at the end of high school, took two

essay-writing courses, and the parent reported that the teacher was responsive when the student wanted to write on a different topic than the one assigned and that both parent and student were happy with the work he produced. She felt that the assignments were appropriate for a college-prep curriculum, although neither of the assignments she described to me were academic essays. She and her younger son, who is in middle school, began the parent-child class that introduces the BW method, but for some personal and logistical reasons, they didn't complete it. Again, the parent said that the teacher was responsive and offered accommodations and suggestions to help the student deal with his frustrations and fears, but the actual writing assignments were minimal (e.g., freewrite for five minutes without stopping).

Jenn: The only part of BW my kids liked were the fluffy parts. I am a better teacher when I have scripted explicit instructions and my kids learn better that way too. My college attending kids have routinely excelled in academic writing. I have one kid that I can see publishing a book someday.

AJ: We recognize that parents have different goals for their children and different tastes in curricula. Not every family is preparing students for college. Not every homeschooler cares about a clearly structured, sequential curriculum. Not everyone likes scripted curricula or needs an open-and-go program. Those are some of *our* priorities, so those are the standards we use when reviewing curriculum. But you might not share them, and that's okay.

Kids are different, too. Some of them will love freewrites, while others will freak out at the very idea. (Count my kid in the freakout camp.)

Jenn: My kids have accumulated zero free writes over the years.

Courtney: I have never asked my kids to freewrite. Never occurred to me.

AJ: In addition, mental health issues or learning challenges or family crises may make a high-input/low-output style of homeschooling appropriate for certain kids at certain times.

Jenn: One thing I wish I had learned sooner is that if one member of your family is suffering through a mental health crisis then you all are. In times like that we may read more, and do oral tests and quizzes. There is nothing wrong with going with a low tide approach during a family crisis. High Tide/Low tide is a description coined by Melissa Wiley, a long time homeschooler. High Tide is a time where you are heavily academic and Low Tide is either a season of choice or

happenstance. You could decide to do less school from Thanksgiving to Xmas and plan a low tide season. Ironically, Melissa writes some of the BW guides. She is also a published author of some of my favorite books: *The Prairie Thief* and *The Nerviest Girl in the World*. (I had to get some book recommendations in here somewhere.)

AJ: I think we all agree that BW's products are wildly expensive for what you get. But people's homeschooling budgets vary dramatically. If you can afford to drop two grand a year on one subject for one kid, more power to you.

And because BW presents itself as a whole lifestyle, there are parts of it that are too subjective to evaluate from the outside. After all, how can you review family culture? Just because Poetry Teatimes seem contrived to me doesn't mean they won't be a treasured part of another family's homeschool experience.

Jenn: After following Julie on social media I adopted a lot of her ideas when my older kids were young. We like Poetry Tea time and I like alliteration so that was our Tuesday afternoon. We also had Monday Movie, Wednesday Woods, Field Trip Thursdays and Free time Friday, which was usually art.

We could do this because we used scripted academics. We could all finish by 1 and then do these fun things. That said, the only poetry my kids have memorized comes from FLL, IEW Poetry, and MP Poetry. They don't remember any of the poetry we read- just that we made brownies. That is one thing I can't stress enough, I know you want to make everything perfect for your kids so that they are happy, and have happy memories. But, honestly, they will not remember much at all, and as a homeschooling parent you have so much on your plate, it is really okay to not worry about making anything remotely Pinterest worthy.

Courtney: We tried Poetry Teatime exactly once. My kids had zero interest in the poetry, got all hopped up on the sugar in their tea, and then the toddler yanked the tablecloth onto the floor and made a huge mess. My husband did end up playing "tea party" for about six months after that. Toca has a really cute app called Tea Party that I can recommend, though.

AJ: So even though all three of us agree that we can't recommend Brave Writer as your primary ELA program, there might still be a place for parts of it in your homeschool. If you're comfortable with a very relaxed approach to academics and you enjoy things like craft projects and tea parties, you might like some of the lifestyle elements that BW offers. If your child has had negative experiences with more formal approaches to writing, the exercises in *The Writer's Jungle* might offer a way past that. If you've been using more

traditional grammar and writing curricula like Hake or R&S English or WWE/WWS, an occasional Dart, Arrow, or Boomerang could make a nice change of pace or a way to keep kids in the learning game when the family is going through a rough patch.

As always, we encourage you to determine your *own* goals as a homeschooler and choose the curricula that will help you meet them.

Courtney: Thanks for listening, and if you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts. Then join us next time when we give you some more real talk about homeschooling.

Show Notes

Brave Writer: bravewriter.com

[Brave Writer Lifestyle](#)

[Brave Writer Values](#)

Julie A. Washington and Mark S. Seidenberg, "[Teaching Reading to African American Children: When Home and School Language Differ.](#)"

Paul A. Kirschner & Carl Hendrick, [How Learning Happens: Seminal Works in Educational Psychology and What They Mean in Practice](#) (Routledge, 2020). See especially chapter 1: "A novice is not a little expert" and chapter 18: "Direct Instruction."

"All evidence, from the laboratory and from extensive case studies of professionals, indicates that real competence only comes with extensive practice. [...] In denying the critical role of practice one is denying children the very thing they need to achieve real competence." (Quoted in Kirschner & Hendrick, p. 140)

 Why Explicit Instruction?

Daniel Willingham, [Why Don't Students Like School?](#)

[Tree Octopus Hoax](#)

[Melissa Wiley Tidal Homeschooling Post](#)

Where to Find the Good Enough Homeschoolers

Website/blog: <https://goodenoughhomeschool.com/>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/goodenoughhomeschool>

Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1392201754219831>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/goodenoughhomeschool/>

The Bookish Society (Jenn Naughton): <https://www.thebookishsociety.com/>

Quidnam Press (Andrew Campbell): <https://quidnampress.com/>

