

## A Survey of Charlotte Mason's Transcription

This first post will focus heavily on transcription (also known as copywork), how handwriting overlaps with it, how spelling can be derived from it and the copybook. I will follow with separate articles for the commonplace book and dictation.

Transcription is what Charlotte Mason referred to when speaking of the act of “making a written copy of” (Merriam-Webster) or “a written or printed version of something” (Oxford Dictionaries); it is what we today refer to as copywork. In *Home Education* (Vol. 1), Ms. Mason sets out the value of transcription, what should be transcribed and the particulars on how it should be executed. Interestingly, it is not a perfect match to the copywork method set forth in most Charlotte Mason style curricula; copywork in many of these circles is described as having a child copy specific, pre-chosen excerpts of poetry and literature and passages from the Bible. Typically, a young child would start with one short sentence and gradually, as writing fluency and age increases, add to this amount, working up to longer passages and excerpts. Eventually, this would be phased-out as written narration and dictation would take precedence and a commonplace book would be introduced. This is a very short synopsis of how the copywork method is defined by most curricula today.

Looking more closely at Mason's own words, we discover that there is no insistence on having a child copy pre-chosen excerpts and passages, but instead is encouraged to “transcribe favorite passages” (238). Here she writes: “A certain sense of possession and delight may be added to this exercise if children are allowed to choose for transcription their favorite verse in one poem and another (238). The relationship between a child's choice of passage and their ability to actually write it must be in place before this can be properly started, which is supported by her recommendation that a child not transcribe until 7 or 8. She states: “The earliest practice in writing proper for children of seven or eight should be, not letter-writing or dictation, but transcription, slow and beautiful work...” (238).

Very young children should be focusing more on a handwriting program until some proficiency has been established. Their transcription can be focused on producing “one letter to be mastered each lesson” (PNEU Program 93; Form I). As fine motor skills build, and an introduction to all strokes needed to write the alphabet has been established, a child will gradually be ready to write words and then short sentences. It is at this time that transcription can begin. Beginning before this time will only create

frustration as children may eagerly wish to transcribe a favorite passage only to be limited in their own ability to write the words needed for it. Since the focus is always on quality and beauty with regard to transcription, this will be lost in the struggle between what children wish to write vs. what they are able to write.

Transcription and handwriting are connected in that what we know as handwriting is essentially the beginning stage of transcription. Without the latter, we cannot have the emphasis on the beauty and perfect execution of transcription. A child must have time and practice to develop the skills and habits needed to achieve at this level. Many handwriting programs, such as Getty & Dubay's *Italic Handwriting Series*, develop children's skills by beginning with specific strokes and joins and then connecting these to make letters. This approach is similar to how *A New Handwriting for Teachers* by M. M. Bridges works; the latter book used in the PNEU programs. As the book levels increase, the child begins to apply their newly developed skills to first words and then sentences. Children can then begin additional transcription work, where favorite passages and excerpts can now be incorporated into their routine.

There is also a great deal of overlap between transcription and handwriting programs in that both emphasize and instruct on important technical habits such as proper posture, hand grip and position in writing. For young children, letter size should be developmentally appropriate for each child with smaller letter sizes initiated later and lessons should last only 10-15 minutes each time. The habit of perfect execution is vividly illustrated with the act of transcription. Ms. Mason tells us:

No work should be given to a child that he cannot execute *perfectly*, and then perfection should be required from him as a matter of course. For instance, he is set to do a copy of strokes, and is allowed to show a slateful at all sorts of slopes and all sorts of intervals; his moral sense is vitiated, his *eye* is injured. Set him six strokes to copy; let him, not bring a slateful, but six perfect strokes, at regular distances and at regular slopes. If he produces a faulty pair, get him to point out the fault, and persevere until he has produced his task; if he does not do it to-day, let him go on to-morrow and the next day, and when the six perfect strokes appear, let it be an occasion of triumph. So with the little tasks of painting, drawing, or construction he sets himself—let everything he does *be well done*. An unsteady house of cards is a thing to be ashamed of. Closely connected with this habit of 'perfect work' is that of finishing whatever is taken

in hand. The child should rarely be allowed to set his hand to a new undertaking until the last is finished (160).

Young children who are just learning to write should have daily or almost daily lessons, but focusing on only one letter at a time, but be sure to balance this if you are using a handwriting program. Since the focus is on building the habit of perfect execution, only have your child complete small sections of a handwriting book at a time; young children might complete only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the page or less per lesson. Remember that writing is a fine motor skill, but there are also many other ways to work on these skills. Painting, cutting and pasting, tracing, coloring, lacing, and many other activities build these same hand muscles and coordination. Children can trace the lines of letters using sand trays, rice trays and sandpaper letters. Gross motor skills are also important to develop—large letters can be created using the whole arm such as on sidewalks and chalkboards using chalk, on large chart paper using crayons or brushwork or just “writing” the letters in the air. Children who are transitioning from writing letters and single words would benefit from adding labels to pictures, such as labeling the parts of a bird, for additional practice. They might also dictate a title for a narration or picture and the teacher, in turn, can write on the board or type and print a model of it for them as reference as they neatly copy it.

Once a child is slightly older and demonstrates a true comfort with writing, add transcription into your weekly schedule. Allow your child to choose what they would like to copy, but keep their burgeoning skills in mind, guiding their choices as needed. If they are really motivated to transcribe a specific sentence or verse, then consider having them work on it over the course of several days, thus keeping lessons concentrated. These passages, verses or excerpts can be taken from any book with which your child has connected.

Here are some suggestions for how to guide children in their selections:

- Allow your student a chance to choose what they wish to copy. This should primarily be taken from books currently being used for lessons, but exceptions can always be made, especially with high quality books read for pleasure. If you feel that some books should be “off the table”, then perhaps set out two or three approved book choices and ask their preference. Be sure to encourage your children to rotate through their books, allowing their work to reflect a number of types of books.

- Very young children should copy short and simple sentences for the most part. Sentences which reflect more complexity will come later. Longer sentences, if not overall complex, could be used but allow your student more than one lesson to complete it.
- Before each week begins, choose a handful of possible sentences from various books and write the page number and book title in your notes. These may be helpful if your student doesn't always have a specific book in mind. These could also be quickly typed and saved, making it easier to print when needed. These sentences should reflect your student's abilities. If your student cannot read it, then it is not a good choice at this time. If your student will greatly struggle to spell it, then it is not a good choice at this time. This is not meant to frustrate, it is meant to be skill-building.
- Here are three examples from the Year Two book titles: "Edward III decided he wanted to rule France as well as England." (*A Child's History of the World*) "Finally, the clouds rolled away and the moon came out" (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) or "There are fairies at the bottom of our garden!" (*Fairies and Chimneys*). Your lesson for history will have already noted the name of Edward III before reading the chapter. There is much for a child to contend with in even these short sentence samples, such as verbs ending in "-ed", capitalizing proper nouns and how singular nouns change their spelling when made plural.

It may be helpful if the selections are then typed and printed or written neatly by the teacher. The child can then transcribe from this copy. Mason writes: "In all writing lessons, free use should be made of the blackboard by both teacher and children by way of model and practice" (239). *StartWrite* is a software program which allows a teacher to create printed pages in the Italics font, so this may be helpful for children of this stage. As children become more adept at writing and transcribing, their selections could be copied directly from the book. Using book flags to mark the page or a book stand can help in keeping track of the selection and managing the book itself.

Transcription develops spelling as well as handwriting. Mason states: "Transcription should be an introduction to spelling. Children should be encouraged to look at the word, see a picture of it with their eyes shut, and then write from memory" (238). This means that each word is meant to be looked at and copied as a whole and not one letter at a time. It may be helpful to cover each word, one at a time, allowing the

child time to see it, close their eyes and visualize it and then write it from memory. From Volume One: “The whole secret of spelling lies in the habit of visualizing words from memory, and children must be trained to visualize in the course of their reading. They enjoy this way of learning to spell” (243). This approach builds the skills needed by the child for dictation. Dictation will require the student to hold a number of words in their mind, especially as it progresses. Again, children who struggle with this may need to “write” the word in the air while it is covered to help connect the word to the muscles of the hand together.

Also, while transcription typically phases into a commonplace book in the upper years, it still may benefit struggling writers of all ages and as well as students new to the methods and ideas of Charlotte Mason. Sometimes it is helpful to these students to back up a little, gain control of these skills and then move forward. Often, as they are older, they will move through these beginning stages quickly.

As children become proficient readers and writers, words and ideas from books will become even more inspiring to them, prompting them to show more interest in what they copy. At this time, I move children into what I call a “copybook”. This book falls midway between copywork and a commonplace book. It even more firmly models itself after Mason’s express desire that children transcribe what they choose-words and ideas to which they have personally connected.

Here is how a copybook is kept:

- A plain composition book will work fine for a copybook. The composition book should have a half-page of lines on the bottom with the top half being blank. This allows the student to copy the entry and then illustrate it. There are even primary level composition books which have additional mid-lines to serve as better handwriting guides.
- The copybook differs from copywork in that the child chooses even more freely the entries they find interesting. This should be introduced only when children have proven they can transcribe properly without direct supervision. These lessons will be handled primarily by the student with the teacher checking entries weekly and making adjustments in requirements, as needed.
- An assignment sheet, if you are using this with your student, requires the student to complete at least two entries per week. The student may choose

from any books currently being used for lessons. Any exceptions should be approved by the teacher first.

- A child may need more guidance in the first year. It's good to make sure the books are varying at least a little and that the child is not using just one specific book title or just one type of book. If needed, a note in the assignment sheet can take care of this. For example, your assignment sheet entry might read:  
*Complete two entries into your copybook using any one of your history books for one entry and any one of your literature books for the second entry.*
- The students choose any sentence(s) which they find interesting. They copy it into their book and illustrate this excerpt in the space above. They should date the entry and the book from which it was taken.
- It becomes a very special record of the books that they have read and loved.

From Volume Five, we read: “Such a diary, carefully kept through life, should be exceedingly interesting as containing the intellectual history of the writer; besides, we never forget the book that we have made extracts from, and of which we have taken the trouble to write a short review” (260). Although this quote is referring to the commonplace book, the ideas still apply to the copybook.