

# Impact of culture and background knowledge on writing

Education



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The way how child is raised in the family influences his or her writing skills, ability to be successful in accomplishing school tasks and even the ability of the child to understand requirements of the teacher. The way children use language in their childhood especially influences writing skills. In 1960s Shirley Brice Heath made an interesting ethnographic research, which explains why such correlations exist. She studied three groups of families: 1. White mill workers – “ Roadville”; 2. Black working class – “ Trackton”; 3. Both black and white mainstream families – “ Townspeople”.

The culture of language usage in each of these three groups has very different features, which causes very different understanding of “ stories” by children from these different cultural backgrounds. From the early childhood “ Roadville” children were expected to give concrete “ correct” answers to the questions. Such culture of language usage might be explained by the norms of fundamentalist Protestantism society, which can accept only one possible interpretation of Bible. Obviously, such children understand “ story” as a true report of events, which has some moral meaning according to the biblical understanding of morality. They are usually not creative in writing, however they usually do well in primary grades, where displaying memorized knowledge is needed.

In the contrast to “ Roadville” community, people of “ Trackton” value word play, imaginative fictionalized story telling. Children from these families are used to making inventive “ stories”, which should not necessarily be true, but should be as creative as possible, filled with proverbs or citations from various parts of popular culture, such as songs or TV shows. While being usually creative in writing, “ Trackton” children (opposite to “ Roadville”

ones) have difficulties with demonstrating their factual memorized knowledge, such as naming objects and their properties.

“ Townspeople” families pay special attention to the development of analytical language habits in their children. From the early childhood parents read books together with children and engage them in such analytical activities as interpretation or hypothesizing. As the result, writing skills of these children are the most appropriate according to the requirements of formal school education.

The results of Heath’s ethnographic research show why children are not equally ready to fulfill formal requirements of academic writing. Teachers should not neglect these differences and use knowledge about them in order to help children to adapt to the requirements of formal school.