RESOURCE CENTER

With nothing more than a word processor and some art supplies, you and your child can create a storybook together. The project will be educational for your child, and you'll both have fun. by MARGARET MORABITO

One of the best ways to teach your children how to write is to encourage them to create their own stories. For young children especially, writing stories, illustrating them, then reading what they've written and sharing it with others promotes creative expression.

As with many other learning activities, your home computer can play an important role in this kind of project. There are commercial programs available that direct students through writing and editing exercises. Some of these programs culminate in printed storybooks that are laid out like real books and illustrated with stickers or computer graphics.

However, you don't need a special writing program to help your child create illustrated stories. Similar results can be accomplished with a word processor, such as RUN Script, and some guidance from you. You and your child can design imaginative page layouts and type in the text with the word processor, and then your child can add the illustrations. Using the procedures outlined below, together you can create illustrated stories, poems, letters, photo albums and school reports.

WRITING AND EDITING

Let's say your child wants to produce a short story. The first job is the writing; then you'll work on page layout, printing and illustration.

The writing involves several steps: brainstorming for ideas, organizing the ideas, writing the first draft, and then proofreading, editing and rewriting. In this kind of limited project, planning can be done without your computer, although you may want to use a thought processing program if you have one. [See "Outlining Your Thoughts" in this issue for more on thought processors.] Your word processor comes into play for actually writing, revising and printing the story.

While some children will have plenty of story ideas, others will find planning the story the most difficult part of the project and will need help from you. You could suggest writing a story about him- or herself, family, friends or heroes, or perhaps rewriting a favorite television show, movie or fable. Maybe your child already has a story that was written at school.

For the first draft, some children prefer to write with pencil and paper; others like to start right off with the word processor. Either way, after the story has been typed into the computer, save it to disk and print it out in double-spaced form. The printout will provide an immediate reward for the child's effort and make the story easy to read and edit.

You both can proofread the printout and make revisions to the story on the paper. In the process, point out and correct errors in spelling and sentence structure insofar as the child can understand them.

When you've finished going over the story, have your child type the corrections into the computerized document, using the word processor. This process will produce a great sense of accomplishment; even deleting a single letter provides a sense of control not available with pencil and paper. Be sure to save the changes to disk and use the revised version for the final printout.

PAGE LAYOUT

Now you can get to work on the next job: page layout. With your help, the sentences can be artfully arranged on the printout for placement of illustrations in varied positions. Some pages will have a blank space at the bottom for an illustration; some will have a blank area off to the right or left side; some will have one at the top.

I usually leave plenty of room for illustrations—about half the page. This space will be needed if the pictures are to be drawn freehand, and younger children are likely to write tiny stories, so large pictures will help fill out the pages.

Use the formatting commands of your word processor to control the page layout. You needn't burden your child with entering these commands; this task is best done by you. Some of the commands must appear at the beginning of the document, and some have to go within the text. Experiment on the screen with a few formatting commands to see what results they produce.

I use the screen-print option in RUN Script to preview page layouts. To activate this option, press F1, then P for print, N for noncontinuous output and S for screen.

When you format the story, you'll probably want to leave the top half of the first page blank for a lead-off picture, as in illustrated books and magazines. You'll also probably want to include the title of the story and the page number as a header on each page.

In Table 1 you'll find a sample sequence of commands for formatting a child's story. The first command produces the header on each page. The two commands on the second line print three blank lines between the title and the text on each page and designate double spacing for the entire document.

The command on the third line inserts 20 blank lines above the text on page 1. It's followed by ten lines of text and a force-page command to end printing on page 1. You'll need a force-page command anywhere you want a page-break to occur. For the first printout, you'll have to estimate where the force-page commands should go. I usually place one at the end of a paragraph, with one or two paragraphs per page.

After the force-page command that ends page 1, there comes a series of commands that control the layout of page 2. They produce a small left margin and a large right margin, compressing the text into a 30-character-wide left column and leaving room for an illustration on the right.

After the force-page command ending page 2, another line of margin commands sets up page 3 with a right column of text and a picture on the left.

The fourth page will have room for a picture across the bottom. Its formatting commands reset the margins for a full line length and limit the text on the top half of the page to ten screen lines.

These sample commands should get you started on some interesting page

TABLE 1. Sample page-formatting commands.

Format for page spacing:
.hd Title
.hs3.ls1

Page 1 format:
.el20
(Insert ten screen lines of text.)

Force-page:
.fp

Page 2 format:
.lm5.rm45
(Continue text for about five or six more screen lines.)

Force-page:
.fp

Page 3 format:
.lm30.rm5
(Continue text for five or six screen lines.)

Force-page:
.fp

Page 4 format:
.lm5.rm5
(Continue text for ten screen lines.)

Force-page:
.fp

layouts. You can experiment with line spacing, margin widths and page widths to create your own text arrangements. Print out some samples, and let your child choose which layout he or she wants for each page. Most commercial word processors include similar formatting features, so you can easily apply the principles illustrated here to your own program.

Illustrations

Writing and page layout are just part of the fun of creating a storybook with a word processor. After the story has been reprinted according to your layout, it's time for the illustrations. These can be done in several ways. Your child could draw pictures on the printed pages and color them in, or perhaps decorate the pages with colorful stickers, available inexpensively at most variety stores. He or she could also cut pictures out of magazines and glue them onto the printed pages, and you might even donate some family photographs to the cause.

Of course, the computer can produce illustrations, too, but this wouldn't be as easy for your child. If you want to use the computer, a graphics program would help. After the graphics have been created, run each page of text back through the printer to add the graphics in the reserved blank spaces. Then your child can color the pictures in.

When they are all illustrated, you might paste the pages of the story onto cardboard or construction paper and place them in a colorful binder, perhaps with plastic page protectors. You could also photocopy the pages to make several books. Use your imagination, and you'll end up with storybooks that your child will be proud to show to friends, relatives and teachers.

More Ideas?

While a word processor can't take the place of a well-designed commercial writing program, it's perfectly adequate for enhancing a young child's writing and reading skills. You'll also find that story writing fosters a desire to do more creative activities and that your child's school work will improve from using a word processor at home. If you invent other interesting projects to do with your word processor, let me know what you come up with. ■

If you're using Commodore computers for educational purposes (at home or in school) and would like to share your experiences through the Resource Center, write me a letter detailing the equipment you're using, subject areas you teach, grade level or age of your students, software you're using and any other information you feel like including.

Also, if you'd like to donate public domain education programs to the Resource Center for sharing with other educators or parents, please send along a disk with a brief description of the program. Send correspondence and disks to:

Margaret Morabito
Resource Center
c/o RUN Magazine
80 Elm St.
Peterborough, NH 03458

You can also leave mail in my on-line mail boxes: CompuServe (70616,714) or QuantumLink (MARGM).