

# First Language Lessons

for the Well-Trained Mind

Level 1

by Jessie Wise



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*For children everywhere—  
and for my grandchildren especially*



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## How to Use This Book

I believe we underestimate what young children are capable of learning. Our ideas are influenced by the school model, which aims most of its instruction at what it considers the largest population—the “average child.” But when we teach to the average, we train our children to be...average! Instead, we can grow children who exceed the average by exposing them to above-average content—as long as that content is taught patiently, frequently, and consistently, and is reviewed often.

### *General Thoughts on Teaching Language*

Learning rules without practical application is a sterile activity. Absorbing grammar incidentally without the guidance of rules is inefficient. By combining simple rules with continued “real life” use of those rules in language, the teacher lays the foundation for a child’s application of appropriate rules to his own work in the future.

Children are natural imitators. This book provides you with examples of correctly spoken and written English in order to train the child’s ear and hand. Then his original ideas can have form and beauty when they are expressed.

Every time a child speaks or writes correctly, that pattern is imprinted on his mind; the same is true for patterns that are incorrectly practiced. It is better to do less work, and do it correctly, than to practice errors. Then the child doesn’t have to spend time unlearning and relearning.

So don’t hurry through these lessons just to finish. Take the time to have the child answer in complete sentences. Take the time to frequently repeat rules until the child knows them. Take the time to have the child write correctly. Take the time to allow the child to make corrections immediately. If you require him to correct his mistakes, you will not damage his self-esteem. Compliment the correction and you will build his confidence.

Do not wait until a child is reading to expose him to good literature. Likewise, do not wait until a child is writing to expose him to proper use of our language. This is why I encourage the use of oral exercises while the child is young. Speech patterns are developed early. The longer a child uses incorrect language, the harder it will be to teach him correct speech and writing.

This early exposure is the purpose of my introducing young children to what some may consider advanced material. But this early introduction is not intended to result in mastery; mastery comes later.

I suggest you file the child’s work in a notebook. This will serve as a way to organize all of his language work—narrations that you write for him, his copy work, his exercises, and copies of the letters he writes to real people.

### *The Method of This Book*

*First Language Lessons for the Well-Trained Mind* combines the best of traditional content with examples and illustrations meaningful to present-day children. The scripted lessons focus on training the child in the proper use of standard English. They are not intended to be read by the child—instead, they aim to give you some idea of how to teach these skills. Appropriate answers that the child should give to your questions are suggested, but the child should certainly not be required to give those answers word for word! Do remember, though, to require all answers in complete sentences. If the child answers with a single word or phrase, reword the answer as a complete sentence, repeat it to the child,

and ask him to repeat it back to you. This will begin to train his ear to recognize complete sentences.

This book covers grammar skills for grade 1. You will also need to provide a phonics/spelling program, formal penmanship instruction, and a writing program. *The Ordinary Parent's Guide to Teaching Reading* (phonics), published by Peace Hill Press, is designed to be completely compatible with *First Language Lessons*.

An elementary writing curriculum is also recommended. *First Language Lessons* covers grammar but does not cover beginning composition. The young writer should be encouraged to write across the curriculum, rather than doing isolated writing exercises related only to his grammar lessons. *Writing With Ease* by Susan Wise Bauer, also published by Peace Hill Press, is a step-by-step guide to developing elementary writing skills. The lessons are coordinated with *First Language Lessons* so that grammar concepts taught here are then reinforced by the *Writing With Ease* assignments.

### **Goals for Grade 1**

1. To train the child's ear by allowing him to listen to correctly spoken language.
2. To train the child's speech by practicing correctly spoken grammar with him.
3. To train the child's attention by reading aloud to him and having him narrate back to you the content or story line, using proper grammar.
4. To teach beginning skills in grammar, capitalization, and punctuation.

Remember: exposure, not mastery, is the goal at this level!

### **The Tools Used in This Book: The "Four Strand" Approach**

This book teaches rules and usage by using four different tools.

#### **Strand 1: Memory work**

The child is assigned simple memory work—short poems and brief rules and definitions to learn by heart. The poems instill the beauty and rhythm of correct language in the child's mind. The rules and definitions may not be completely understood when they are first committed to memory, but they will be a resource for the child as he<sup>1</sup> continues to exercise his growing language skills.

#### **Strand 2: Copywork**

Most first-grade students are not ready to do extensive written work. The first 41 lessons of this book are primarily oral. Beginning with Lesson 42, copywork exercises will appear where the grammar concept being taught requires written practice. These copywork exercises do not replace a writing program; they specifically target particular grammar skills. You should feel free to adapt the length of the assignment to the student's ability.

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<sup>1</sup> **A note on inclusive pronouns:** I studied advanced traditional grammar in the 1950s as part of my training in teacher certification. I learned that the pronouns "he" and "him" were generic pronouns, used to refer to both men and women. Although I understand why some users would prefer to see an alternate use of "he" and "she," I find this style of writing awkward; my early training shapes my usage! So I have used "he" and "him" to refer to the child throughout. If you prefer, simply change these pronouns to "she" and "her."

### **Strand 3: Narration**

While the student is studying the basic principles of grammar, he is also learning how to produce original content orally. This will allow him to practice correct grammar at a time when he is still too young for extensive written work.

Two types of narration are used; both are intended to train the child in attention, observation, and expression, so that as he matures he will be able to share his own thoughts with eloquence.

**a. Picture narration.** Some of the lessons ask the student to look at and describe a picture. This allows him to practice observation skills as well as proper language use—always encourage the child to describe the picture in complete sentences!

**b. Story narration.** In other lessons, you will read a short story to the child and then ask him to tell you about it in his own words. This type of narration helps the child to listen with attention, to comprehend spoken language, and to grasp the main point of a work.

### **Strand 4: Grammar**

The rules of grammar bring order to the chaos of words in the child's mind. Think of the study of formal grammar as the building of a room. The essentials—nouns and verbs—are the floor, walls, and ceiling. The room is decorated with adjectives and adverbs. The relationships between the different pieces of furniture in the room are demonstrated through prepositions and conjunctions. And sometimes the people in the room show intense emotion—with interjections!

The student is taught the correct definitions of grammatical terms from the very beginning. Lessons in oral usage are also provided so that the instructor can pinpoint any areas of difficulty in the child's use of language.

The lessons are planned to give an adequate foundation for every child. I assume that many children will not be ready to do a great deal of pencil-work in first grade. For children who are physically capable of doing more writing, I have provided "enrichment activities." But it is not necessary—or expected—that most children will do these enrichment exercises!

Plan on doing 2–3 lessons per week. Also plan on reviewing previous lessons as necessary, since the child may not remember material covered earlier. Young children forget more between the first-grade and second-grade years than in any other interval. Try to avoid a long break! Do not take three months off in the summer before continuing to the next level. Reviewing one lesson per week over the summer will prevent the child's forgetting the newly learned concepts.

### **Using the Lessons**

**Instructor:** Suggested wording for the instructor is in traditional print.

**Student:** Suggested wording for the student is in italics.

Notes to Instructor are indented, set in smaller type and in italics.

Suggested wording that the student is to read or follow is in larger traditional print.

Definitions and terms are in larger bold print.

If you wish to gather all your materials for first grade in advance, you will need:

- a map of your state
- business-size envelopes and stamps
- a family calendar and a child's personal calendar
- scissors
- drawing supplies, crayons, highlighter markers
- a tape recorder
- colored construction paper
- old magazines to cut up
- a flower seed catalog

..... LESSON 1 .....

**Introducing common nouns**

**Instructor:** Everything has a name. I will read the definition of a noun aloud to you three times.

**Note to Instructor:** *Repeat the following sentence three times.*

**A noun is the name of a person, place, thing, or idea.**

**Instructor:** We will talk about persons first. You are a person. Are you a boy or a girl?

**Note to Instructor:** *Encourage the student to answer in complete sentences. If he answers with a single word or fragment, turn his answer into a complete sentence and say it to him. Then ask him to repeat the sentence back to you.*

**Student:** I am a \_\_\_\_\_.

**Instructor:** “Boy” and “girl” are naming words that are common to a lot of persons, so we call them **common nouns**. Other naming words that are common to a lot of persons are words like “mother,” “father,” “sister,” “brother,” “grandmother,” “grandfather,” “aunt,” “uncle,” and “cousin.”

**Note to Instructor:** *Repeat definition of a noun three more times, emphasizing the word person: “A noun is the name of a person, place, thing, or idea.”*

..... LESSON 2 .....

**Introducing poem memorization: “The Caterpillar”**

**Notes to Instructor:** *Read the poem to the student and discuss it before working on memorization. As a helpful technique to assist in memorization, try the following: On the first day that the poem is assigned, read the poem aloud to the student three times in a row. Repeat this triple reading twice more during the day, if possible. After the first day, read the poem aloud three times in a row once daily. (It may be more convenient to read the poem into a tape recorder three times, and then have the student replay the tape.) On the second day, and every day thereafter, ask the student to try to repeat parts of the poem along with you (or the tape recorder). When he can say the poem along with you, encourage him to repeat it first to a stuffed animal, then to himself in a mirror, and finally to “real people.”*

*Today, read “The Caterpillar” aloud three times in a row. Repeat twice more during the day. Don’t forget to say the title and author as part of each repetition!*

**The Caterpillar<sup>1</sup>**

*Christina G. Rossetti*

Brown and furry  
Caterpillar in a hurry;  
Take your walk  
To the shady leaf, or stalk.

May no toad spy you,  
May the little birds pass by you;  
Spin and die,  
To live again a butterfly.

---

<sup>1</sup> Several versions of this poem have appeared in print. The best-known alternative version was first published by Macmillan in 1893 as part of *Sing-Song: A Nursery-Rhyme Book*:

Brown and furry  
Caterpillar in a hurry,  
Take your walk  
To the shady leaf, or stalk,  
Or what not,  
Which may be the chosen spot.  
No toad spy you,  
Hovering bird of prey pass by you;  
Spin and die,  
To live again a butterfly.

..... LESSON 3 .....

**Common nouns (Family relationships)**  
**Poem review: “The Caterpillar” (Lesson 2)**

**Note to Instructor:** *Don't forget to review “The Caterpillar” today!*

**Instructor:** I will read the definition of a noun to you: **A noun is the name of a person, place, thing, or idea.**

**Instructor:** Try to say as much of it as you can with me, as I say this definition slowly three times more.

**TOGETHER:** **A noun is the name of a person, place, thing, or idea.**

**Note to Instructor:** *Repeat this definition three times along with the student.*

**Instructor:** The first part of the definition is “A noun is the name of a person...” You are a person. Are you a boy or a girl?

**Student:** *I am a \_\_\_\_\_.*

**Instructor:** “Boy” and “girl” are naming words that are common to a lot of persons, so we call them **common nouns**. The words “mother,” “father,” “sister,” and “brother” are also common nouns. They name persons in families. Let's talk about persons in families. Families start with mothers and fathers. Everyone has a mother and a father. I will help you answer the following questions:

**Note to Instructor:** *Help the student answer each question in a complete sentence. Give the student plenty of help!*

**Instructor:** What do we call two girls who have the same mother and father?

**Student:** *Two girls who have the same mother and father are called sisters.*

**Instructor:** What do we call two boys who have the same mother and father?

**Student:** *Two boys who have the same mother and father are called brothers.*

**Instructor:** Sisters and brothers are persons who have the same mother and father! Do you know what your mother's mother is called?

**Student:** *My mother's mother is my grandmother.*

**Instructor:** What is your father's mother called?

**Student:** *My father's mother is my grandmother.*

**Instructor:** “Grandmother” is the common noun that names the mother of your mother or father! Do you know what your mother’s father is called?

**Student:** *My mother’s father is my grandfather.*

**Instructor:** What is your father’s father called?

**Student:** *My father’s father is my grandfather too.*

**Instructor:** “Grandfather” is the common noun that names the father of your mother or father! Remember: Mother, father, sister, brother, and grandfather are persons in families. Aunts, uncles, and cousins are also persons in families. An aunt is the sister of your mother or father. Do you have any aunts?

**Student:** *My aunt is Aunt \_\_\_\_\_.*

**Instructor:** An uncle is the brother of your mother or father. Do you have any uncles?

**Student:** *My uncle is Uncle \_\_\_\_\_.*

**Instructor:** “Uncle” and “aunt” are common nouns for the brother and sister of your mother and father! A cousin is the child of your aunt or uncle. Do you have any cousins?

**Student:** *My cousins are \_\_\_\_\_.*

**Instructor:** “Mother,” “father,” “sister,” “brother,” “grandfather,” “aunt,” “uncle,” and “cousin” are all common nouns that name people.