

Why I Write

By Alfie Kohn

Is it possible that a hint of self-congratulation adheres to the fact that we writers like to pose this question to ourselves? You don't see a lot of people holding forth on, say, "Why I Sell Tires." The assumption is that there's something uniquely marvelous about the choice to spend a lot of one's time coming up with words and then typing them.

Personally, I'm clearer about the explanations that don't account for my choice. First, I don't do it mostly for the money. I'm not saying I don't want my books to sell a lot of copies, but if financial gain were my primary objective, I think, given the odds, it may safely be said that I made a serious error in selecting a career. Second, I don't do it to achieve immortality. I'm not saying it wouldn't be nice to have people remember me after I'm gone, but I'm going to have to agree with Woody Allen when he said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality through not dying."

So why, then, do I write?

Even though I'm not a novelist or someone with literary pretensions, I like playing with language: paying attention to subtle differences in the meanings of words and to the rhythm of sentences and the way an argument is framed.

Also, I read a lot and often feel a need to talk back, to have my say about the topics about which I'm reading, at least when I've formed an opinion on them (which is approximately always). I'm particularly stirred when I notice that research and practice diverge: Study after study shows that using traditional disciplinary techniques, or making students do homework, is downright counterproductive. Yet we continue to rely on rewards and punishments; we continue to force kids to work a second shift when they get home from a full day in school. So I fire up my computer to say, "If the data point this way, why are we still going that way?"

In other words, I write to goose people. I also give lectures, but you can fit only so many folks into an auditorium. Also, words that are on paper — or on those new electronic thingies — last longer and, at least in theory, can be reread.

Finally, my interest in changing minds and debunking what I take to be misguided notions about human behavior, parenting, and education is complemented by my love of puzzles. In [my first book](#), published a very long time ago, I wanted to figure out why competition fails to motivate people in any lasting or beneficial way. In my latest book ([The Myth of the Spoiled Child](#)), to be published any minute now, I grapple with the odd fact that even political liberals seem to have accepted deeply conservative beliefs about what children are like and how they should be raised, repeating canards

about “inflated self-esteem” and “helicopter parenting” and the need for “grit.”

Sure, I could try to work these things out privately, but where’s the fun in that?