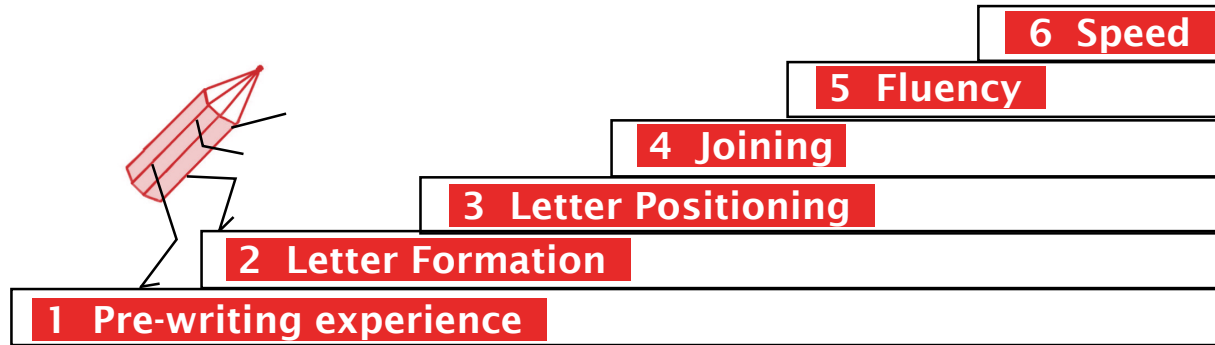


TIPS FOR TEACHING

National Handwriting Association 
Promoting good practice

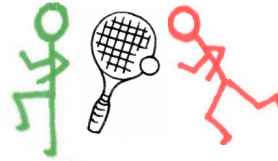
Basic Steps



Children need to be able to write legibly, neatly, comfortably and quickly. Teaching handwriting to the majority of children is not difficult but there are certain stages that are crucial to successful learning:

Step 1 Pre-writing experience

To develop good handwriting a child needs strength and stability in his body. This **gross motor control** can be developed in the playground and in PE sessions, for example, crawling, jumping, running, hopping, arm circling, ball skills.



Writing involves using a tool to make small, controlled movements. This **fine motor control** can be developed by activities such as cutting, threading, modelling, hammering, finger rhymes, sorting small objects, sticking, pattern-making & tracing.




A child needs to have developed **perceptual skills** before he can write. Working with shapes, objects in different sizes and sorting can assist this development.



Sets of activities to prepare children for writing are detailed in *Mark-making and Creativity*, CUP¹
See p4 for details

Tip

 Asking a child to hold a pencil properly and form letters before he is sufficiently mature to succeed is building in failure from the start.

★ When a child is writing attention should be given to his comfort - the furniture, body position and ease of movement - and encouraged to hold his pencil in a way that gives both control and flexibility.

Step 2 Letter Formation

In British schools the lower case alphabet is usually taught before the capital alphabet. How to form each letter can be taught at the same time as children are introduced to the letter's shape and sound.

A visual image and a verbal description helps a child to remember the movements necessary to form letters. There are many different images that can be used and your school may have its own style.

One set of images recommended by the Department of Education groups the letters according to the movement made when forming them².

Each 'family' has a leading letter:

l - long ladder c - curly caterpillar
r - one-armed robot z - zig-zag monster

Tip



The letters need not be taught in the order given here but each new letter needs to be related to its group e.g. 'q' is a curly caterpillar letter and 'm' a one-armed robot letter.

Some schools teach young children to begin each letter from the base line. This means that the starting point is very easy to remember but it may complicate the visual image of some of the letters and also result in the need for some relearning when the child begins to join letters together. (Any letter joined from **o, r, v, w** - and possibly **f** - does not start from the base-line). Requiring children to relearn an established movement pattern is not good practice.

Tip



Teaching young children how letters are formed does not necessarily mean expecting them to write with pens or pencils. The first shapes are best made in the air/sand/foam/paint /on the back of another child etc. where fine control is not required.



Always use the correct way of making each letter when writing in front of children.



Watch young children writing to make sure they use the correct movements.

 l i u t y

 c a d g q o e s f

 r n m h b k p

 z x v w y k

Young children will be accustomed to using some capital letters when writing their names. The whole capital alphabet needs to be taught after the lower case letters are familiar. Capital letters are all the same height and as they are not intended to be joined to other letters the order of strokes is not as important.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Step 3 Letter Positioning

Alignment

In written English letters need to be aligned in a conventional way to be easily read. Children need to understand that the 'body' of each letter sits on a line (like cats on a wall), some letters have sticks (or ascenders) that are taller and some have tails (or descenders) that drop below the writing line.

There are many visual images to help children understand this. One suggestion by Kath Balcombe³ uses the sky, forest and underground. Some letters such as a e o s live only in the forest but others stretch into the sky (b d) and others (g p) grow into the ground.

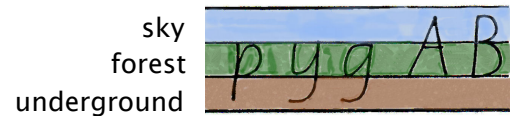




Diagram using Kath Balcombe's idea

 **Tip** Giving children lined paper with a solid line for the letters to sit on and a dotted or coloured line to mark the tops of the small letters can be useful.

Spacing

Children need to understand that letters in a word should be evenly spaced. In addition there needs to be sufficient space between each word and the next.

 **Tip** Recommending that small children use their finger as a spacer between words is not a good idea as it is impossible for left-handers and becomes inappropriate when children are older and their writing becomes smaller. A more reliable rule is to leave enough space for a letter 'o' and/or supply a slip of card as a spacer.

Step 4 Joining

A child who writes correctly-formed letters with confidence is usually ready to learn how to join them together.

There are three ways of teaching children joined writing:

1 Pattern making. Children who have plenty of experience making writing patterns, both standard handwriting patterns and those made from linking pairs of letters (eg. **cl**, **wh**), will find that they have all the skills necessary for joined writing and little additional teaching is necessary.

(see *Tips for Teaching - Patterns*)

clclclcl whwhwhwh

2 Groups of letters. A blend of letters being taught in a phonics lesson can be joined together when demonstrated by the teacher and practised by the children in the air or on small whiteboards. (Note that some letter combinations are easier to join than others.) The children who are confident can be encouraged to use the joins in free writing.

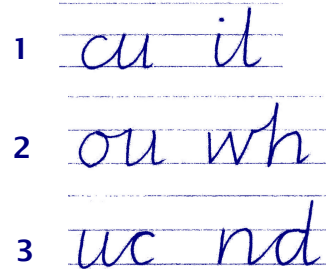
(Note: This would necessitate using a mixture of joined and separate letters for a time. See below)

cool cat play time

3 Basic joins.

These can be taught in a series of lessons with plenty of practice:

1. Diagonal (up the hill join) to a long ladder letter, both tall and short (e.g. **c-u**, **i-l**)
2. Horizontal (washing line join) to both tall and short letters (e.g. **o-u**, **w-h**)
3. Joins to curly caterpillar letters (e.g. **u-c**, **n-d**)



Step 5 Fluency

Steps 5 and 6 are often overlooked because it is thought that children who have mastered Step 4 are able to write and need no further help. (This is like allowing children who have just learned to control a two-wheeled bicycle to ride along a busy road.)

Children are expected to write in greater quantity and at greater speed as they grow older and will need functional handwriting that will allow them to do this. They need to be able to write automatically so that their attention can be given to the content of their writing (just as most people can walk without thinking).

Fluency can be developed by:

using joined writing in all situations so it becomes a familiar skill. (except for presentation, labelling etc.)

using handwriting patterns.
See *Tips for Teaching - Patterns*

helping students to assess their own writing and monitor their progress. (see *Tips for Teaching - 'S' Rules & Above Y4*)

Step 6 Speed



When students concentrate on writing quickly, as in an exam, legibility often suffers. Most children need to:

understand that different tasks require different levels of speed and legibility. E.g. for personal notes speed is usually important and legibility less so; work for display requires a high level of legibility and neatness but speed is less important.

develop a style of writing that is both legible and speedy. This can be done by practice sessions and the children encouraged to measure the speed of their writing (see *Tips for Teaching - Speeding Up*)

References:

1. *Mark-making and Creativity*, Foundation 1 Teacher's Book, Penpals for Handwriting. CUP
2. *Developing Early Writing*, Section 3. DfEE 0055/2001 (obtainable free. Type the ref. in Google)
3. Kath Balcombe Educational Resources www.kber.co.uk

Further reading:

Handwriting. The way to teach it. Rosemary Sassoon, (2003) Paul Chapman Publishing, London
Handwriting Pocketbook. Julie Bennett, Teachers' Pocketbooks. www.teacherspocketbooks.co.uk
Tips for Teaching by NHA - *Above Y4, Patterns, Speeding Up, 'S' Rules*

Compiled by Gwen Dornan

