

# Methodology module: Teaching writing



## Naomi Jenkins

Naomi Jenkins studied English Language and Anthropology at Durham University, qualifying as a teacher with a BA (Ed) Honours degree in 1994. She went on to teach English as a foreign language to young learners in Spain, specialising in pre-school teaching. Upon her return to the UK, she taught in various primary schools, later working with children with profound special needs. Naomi has also experienced the other side of the classroom as a parent of young children.

*Even as we move to a touchscreen society, children still need to learn to write by hand. Handwriting is so much more than simply putting letters on a page; it is a vital part of learning to read and communicate.*

*Putting pen, pencil or crayon to paper stimulates the brain like nothing else. In fact, learning to write improves children's motor and visual skills. It also improves hand-eye coordination and the connection between our hand and brain. Even more impressive is the fact that learning to write is shown to improve brain development in the areas of thinking, language and working memory.*

## Teaching writing

The following elements should be included in any effective handwriting curriculum:

A **multi-sensory approach** so that children see, hear, say and write each letter sound, making the letter in a single stroke movement whenever possible, to develop the automatic motor plan or memory.

**Perceptual skills** to interpret what is seen. Children need to be taught to look carefully if they are to become good at handwriting. If a child cannot visually discriminate the letter *b* from the letter *d*, he/she will be unable reliably to reproduce these letters. This in turn can lead to reading problems because of difficulty with letter and word recognition.

**Positioning** of the paper and child in relation to the writing surface. Demonstrate the proper grip, paper position, arm and wrist positions. Tilt the top of the page slightly to the left for a right-hander; tilt to the right for a left-hander.

Help the child to use two hands when writing. One hand holds the paper, the other hand writes. This skill is key to efficient writing. Remember a right-handed child writes away from his/her body and pushes the pencil, while a left-hander must write toward his/her body and pulls the pencil.

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Teach left-handed children to remember three things as they learn to write:

- Grip the pencil 2.5 cm (1 inch) to 3.8 cm (1.5 inches) from the point
- Slope the paper so that the top right corner of the page is tilted toward the writer
- Write with the hand below the writing line and keep the wrist straight.

**Fine motor skills** – Correct children's pencil grasp and in-hand coordination to manipulate a pencil. Teach the tripod grasp; this means the pencil should sit near the base of the thumb, and be held in place with the thumb, index and middle fingers.

A common problem for all young children learning to write is a tendency to grip the pencil too tightly, making writing tense and tiresome. Usually the child learns to relax his or her grip as writing develops, but teachers can remind students to hold the instrument gently. Frequent practice and letting the child write large letters also helps children learn to relax their grip.

**Gross motor skills** – The children should sit with good posture so that they can move their wrists and not lean heavily on their forearms. The child's head should be upright and not bent over the page. If the child is having trouble seeing what he/she is writing, get him/her to hold the pencil further back from the tip.

**Motor planning** – Large muscles help children feel directional changes in print and help store the memory of motor patterns. The children can form the letter in the air using their whole arm as one big 'pencil'. They can take turns writing large letters on the board, or 'paint' the letters using water on sheets or in the playground. A great way to see if children have developed the 'motor memory' for the letter is asking them to close their eyes and try to form the letter on a blank piece of paper.



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## Teaching writing in *English World*

English language learners require instruction that provides sufficient opportunities for them to learn how the sounds of spoken English are represented by letters or groups of letters.

Short handwriting sessions are needed every day. Research shows that pupils make most progress when they have short, focused handwriting sessions.

The *Writing Worksheets* are intended to be used in the first few weeks of Level 1, alongside or immediately after the *English World* Starter Pack.

Using *Writing Worksheets* 1–8, teachers should focus carefully on the formation of correct habits. They should observe closely how children hold their pencils and the way they form letters. The *Writing Worksheets* have been carefully developed so that:

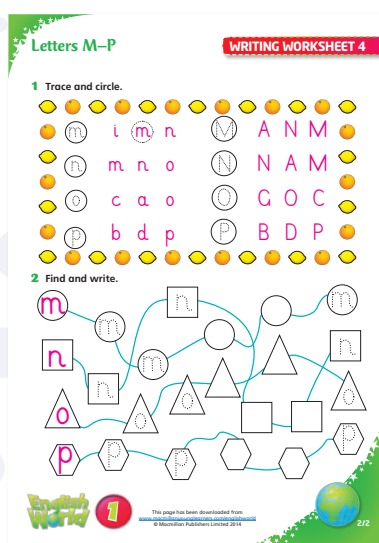
- children see the sound the letter represents
- the letter formation is clearly outlined in order
- children can trace, copy and produce their own letters numerous times.

Children need to be taught to look carefully if they are to become good at handwriting. They should look at a letter shape for a long time, analysing it so they are able to get it exactly right. Encourage them to show you the letter formation sequence and talk it through with them using words like *up*, *down*, *round*, etc.

Children can be assisted to improve by developing their ability to discriminate between handwriting that is of a high quality and that which is of an inferior quality. One way to assist them to do this is to get them to self-assess and draw a circle around their 'best' letter. Children will become aware of the importance of paying attention to the presentation of their work.



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Having worked through *Writing Worksheets* 1–8, pupils can now move on to copying full words. See *Writing Worksheets* 9–15 for target words practice pages. At this stage, pupils have to remember and practise different letters to produce a full word. This is a great opportunity to see motor planning in action and check good and bad habits. While pupils are working independently, you can do spot checks and check-ups to support individual learning needs.

## Action points

Implementation tips for the classroom. Choose some of the following ideas to use in your lessons:

- Draw three lines on the board for writing on – the bottom line can be brown to represent the earth under the green middle line which represents grass. The top line should be blue to represent the blue sky. This really helps pupils to understand the positioning of letters on the practice lines. Then when demonstrating how to draw a letter you can refer to the lines the letters touch by name.
- Reinforce this idea by getting the pupils to show you how the letters are formed. Get them to stand up and use their bodies to act out 'sky' (hands in the air), 'grass' (hand on hips) and 'earth' (pupils drop to the ground). The word 'dog' is a great example for acting out the three different types of letters.
- As you demonstrate the letter formation, talk it through with the pupils. Use words like *up*, *down*, *round*, *across*, etc. The children can form the letter in the air using their whole arm as one big 'pencil'.
- Pupils can practise 'writing' big letters in the playground using chalk or water and paintbrushes. This is a fun activity that takes the pressure out of producing good writing, which some pupils can find very stressful.
- Pupils can self-assess their own writing and draw circles around their 'best' letters or words.

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## Reflection notes

- What do you find works best when teaching letter formation, and what causes you the most difficulty?
- How do you teach handwriting skills in your classroom?
- How do you support pupils who struggle with their handwriting?
- Which of the recommendations in this article will have most impact on your teaching?

## References:

*National  
Handwriting  
Association* [www.  
nha-handwriting.  
org.uk](http://www.nha-handwriting.org.uk)