

## The Language of Handwriting

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

*Children develop concepts, dispositions and skills in relation to:*

- Engagement
- Motivation and choice
- Conventions of print and sentence structure
- Spelling
- Handwriting

### Handwriting and Literacy

The interrelationship between oral and written language is well recognised. Handwriting influences how children write words, improves their ability to transform their ideas into language and so supports literacy skills. Recent research has shown a direct link between teaching and learning handwriting skills and improved

planning and organisation of thoughts required for effective composition. Teaching handwriting, spelling and composing skills in an integrated fashion is most effective. This interrelationship is clearly illustrated within the new Primary Language Curriculum. It is equally important to ensure that children's imagination, expression, creativity and ideas are developed through the provision of regular opportunities to write.



For children, handwriting requires motor skills as well as the ability to learn and recall letter forms. When learning to write, they are introduced to a lot of new words associated with handwriting. In addition, they come to understand that the symbols they are forming are letters which

- have names
- look differently when formed in upper case and lower case
- may be different sizes, shapes and colours
- have sounds, sometimes more than one
- can be short or tall
- are formed in specific ways
- need to be turned in a specific way, or it could change its name (e.g., **b** and **d**)
- have special features such as sticks, curves, and tails.

Handwriting is producing letters to support writing words, syntax, and text to transform ideas into written language.  
(Berninger, 2012, p.16)

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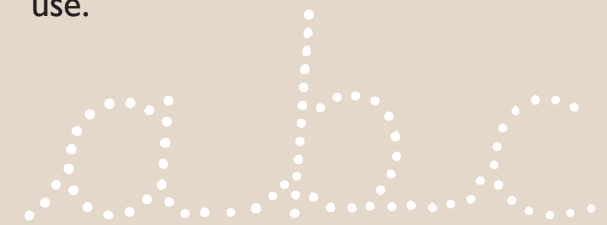
When teaching handwriting, research suggests that children must perform three main tasks:

1. Understand and recall the letter form.
2. Plan the sequence of strokes required to form the letter.
3. Write the letter so that it is legible and becomes automatic.

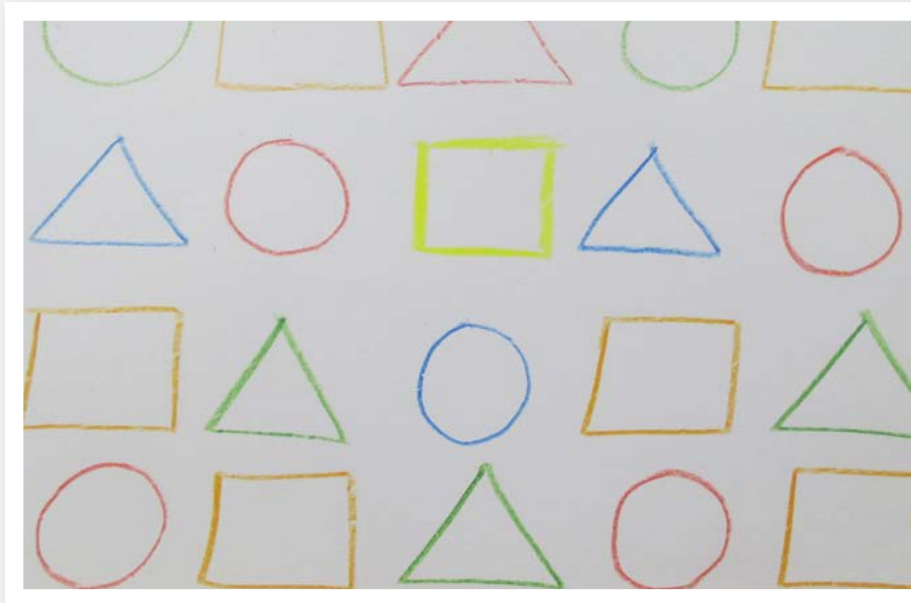
At a school level, it is important to **agree a set of words** to be used when communicating with children about handwriting. All teaching staff and parents should use this **consistent terminology** and ensure that they understand what they mean by it.

Common words used when teaching handwriting include:

- **Capital** or upper case and **small** or lower case.
- **Base line/bottom line** – this is the continuous line upon which the main bodies of the letters will rest.
- **Ascenders** and **Descenders** – these are the correct terms for what children often call *sticks* and *tails*.
- **X-height letters** – these are letters without ascenders or descenders such as *m*, *c* and *o*.
- **Letter bodies** – the parts of the letter which are neither ascenders nor descenders, e.g., the rounded parts of *d* and *b*, and the arches of *m* and *n*.
- **Entry** and **exit strokes** – these are words used to describe the strokes a child uses to begin and finish each letter when preparing for, or doing cursive writing.
- **Up, down, left and right** – it is important to check that young children understand the concepts of up and down as used when working with a pencil on paper. Children may have only encountered these concepts in instructions such as *look up*, or *fall down*. Rather than using words such as left and right, when giving instructions to young children, it may be helpful to provide a reference point, e.g., *towards the blackboard*.
- **Cursive or joined up** – handwriting schemes can use these words inconsistently so it is important to agree on which word your school will use.



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### Language and Teaching Handwriting

Teaching children how to **form their letters correctly** is one of the most important parts of handwriting instruction. Children will then develop the correct movement memory for each

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The use of **verbal pathways** is an important teaching tool for handwriting. A verbal pathway involves providing children with verbal directions to help with learning the sequence of movements needed to form each letter. This verbal pathway helps them to understand and recall the directional movement. It gives the teacher and child a language to use when talking about the formation of the letter and about its features. It also supports acquisition of automaticity in writing. Once automaticity occurs, children no longer need to use verbal pathways.

When introducing handwriting, teachers can model the formation of each letter and give children a verbal pathway. This helps children to say aloud the directions for 'making' a letter, e.g., around, down and up. For young children, teachers may use examples of sayings, rhymes or stories which can help children to remember how each letter is formed.

Teaching letters which are formed with similar movements together in groups, is a useful way of teaching correct letter formation. There are many ways to group letters together for this purpose, e.g., c, a, o, d, g. Teaching letters with similar movements reduces the learning load while also reinforcing movement patterns.

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### Fun Fact

A series of research studies explored how children used different ways to learn how to write Russian letters. The findings illustrate how the process of developing movements for knowing the letters supports children's learning.

1. After being given just a model for a letter, and instructions to copy it, 50 repetitions were required for an average child to master the task.
2. When the model was presented with the teacher's verbal guidance for the actions for writing the letter, mastery occurred after an average of 10 repetitions.

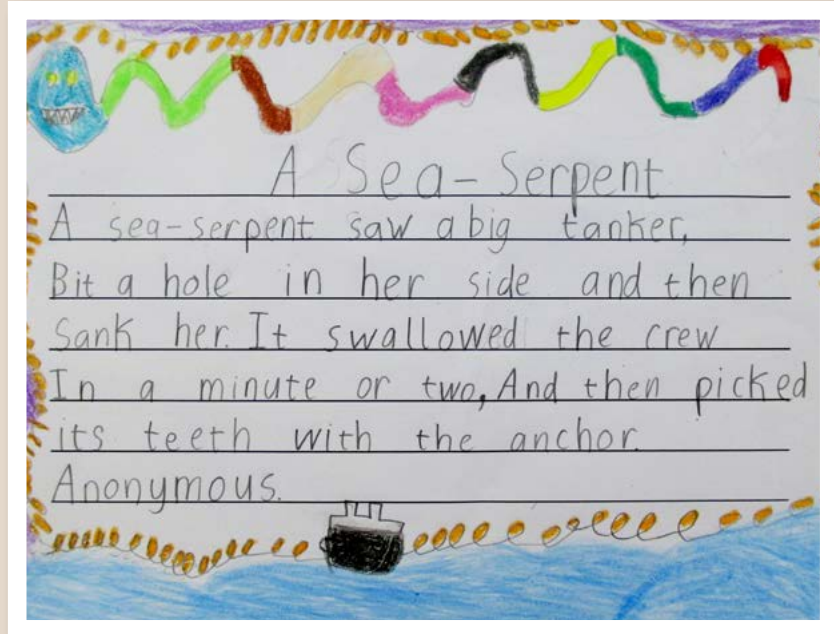
3. When the child was taught to describe the features and actions for forming the letter, providing direction for himself, mastery was achieved after an average of four repetitions.

It would be reasonable that writing letters contributes to learning about them. (Clay, 1991, p.41)

### Stages in Teaching Handwriting

Research supports the integration of teaching writing, spelling and oral language.

The main stages are set out on the next page.



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### Stages in Teaching Handwriting

**1. Naming letters** – at this stage, the goal is for children to name and form letters. Teachers model the sequence of strokes (introducing verbal pathways) required to form a letter while children observe and imitate. Children then progress to tracing over letters and copying and naming them.

**2. Recalling letters** – at this stage, children learn to recall and write letters from memory. Some useful strategies include

- Asking children to close their eyes and visualize the letter in their ‘mind’s eye’, to write the letter from memory and to compare it to the model.

- Writing each letter of the alphabet from dictation. The teacher calls out letters for children to write.
- Writing letters that come before and after other letters in alphabetic order.

**3. Incorporating self-monitoring** – at this stage, children are encouraged to monitor their handwriting. A teaching idea may include asking children to exchange their work and circle all the letters they cannot recognize in each other’s writing. Then ask children to fix the circled letters in their own writing

**4. Integrating handwriting practice with composing** – use activities to support children to use their handwriting to express ideas.

### Teaching Handwriting to Left-Handed Children

Alongside general supports for teaching children who use their **left hand** to write, e.g., posture, pencil hold, page angle and position, it is helpful to consider the following.

**1.** Ensure children can see the **letter model** so they know what they are writing. This can be done by placing the letter model either above where they are writing or directly to the right side of where they are writing.

**2.** Letter formation is generally the same for children who use their left hand. A left-handed demonstration can be helpful. Children can learn to ‘pull’ their little lines backward to cross their letters (like for lowercase f and t and for capital A, E, F, H, J, T) by going from right to left rather than ‘pushing’ from left to right. If children can write these lines well left to right, it can help with speed and fluency later.

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The drawings and writing examples included in this Support Material were produced by pupils of Kilrickle N.S., Loughrea, Co Galway.