

TEACHING HANDWRITING

A compilation of relevant references and printable templates for teaching handwriting

By Dr Tessa Daffern

Handwriting is an important secretarial role of the writer. Handwriting refers to the formation, size, spacing, position and placement of alphabetic letters on a page.

Schlagal (2007) observes that handwriting (along with spelling) has been marginalised in the curriculum due to a shift in instructional priorities in the late 20th century that emphasised electronic forms of communication. He also argues that 'word processing programs and the spell-check function have led some people to believe that teaching children how to spell or write legibly is no longer necessary.' However, it is argued that 'there will continue to be many settings in which fluid, legible handwriting and correct spelling are essential' (p. 179).

Schlagal, B. (2007). Best practices in spelling and handwriting. In S. Graham, C. A. MacArthur & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing instruction* (pp. 179-200). New York: The Guilford Press.

Handwriting is a skill that is often overlooked in order to focus on other areas of the curriculum. However, research indicates that handwriting is tied to academic achievement, especially composition and literacy skills.

Cahill, S. M. (2009). Where does handwriting fit in? *Strategies to support academic achievement. Intervention in School and Clinic*, 44(4), 223-228

One of the most important rationales for handwriting instruction is the development of automaticity and speed thus freeing up working memory so that attention can be devoted to other important writing processes that are needed to translate ideas for others via well-crafted texts.

Medwell, J., & Wray, D. (2007). Handwriting: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know? *Literacy*, 41(1), 10-15.

'A significant proportion of children experience handwriting difficulties throughout their schooling. More of these children are boys than girls and their handwriting difficulties are likely to impact upon their ability to compose written language' (p. 43).

**Medwell, J., & Wray, D. (2008). Handwriting – A forgotten language skill? *Language and Education*, 22(1), 34-47.
doi:10.2167/le722.0**

If handwriting or keyboarding is automatic and fast, the writer is able to concentrate on other elements of writing. Children of the 21st century need to learn both skills so they can choose the appropriate method for the task. From eight years of age children spend up to half of every school day engaged in writing tasks. This is of concern for children who struggle with handwriting.

Daffern, T. & Mackenzie, N (2015). Building strong writers: Creating a balance between the authorial and secretarial elements of writing. *Literacy Learning: the Middle Years*, 23(1), 23-32.

In a study involving students in Years 7 and 8, it was found that higher handwriting fluency was associated with better planning skills and better planning skills were associated with greater writing performance.

Limpo, T., Alves, R. A., & Connelly, V. (2017). Examining the transcription-writing link: Effects of handwriting fluency and spelling accuracy on writing performance via planning and translating in middle grades. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 53, pp. 26-36

The Australian curriculum (ACARA) is clear that handwriting should be taught from Foundation (first year of school) until Year 7 when students should have 'a personal handwriting style that is legible, fluent and automatic and supports writing for extended period'.

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>

A widely used method by researchers and schools to test handwriting involves children being asked to write as many letters of the alphabet (in lower case and then upper case) in one minute. However, according to Medwell and Wray

(2014), 'although children have plenty of opportunity to write all these letters in the course of their school work, they rarely write the whole alphabet from memory in sequence, so this task is not well rehearsed and demands organisation and retrieval of letter forms in visual memory as well as the generation of the relevant motor patterns' (p. 39). Medwell and Wray advise that at the beginning of Year 1 a child should be able to form all the letters correctly and easily when copying and in response to letter names. They should also be able to recite and write the alphabet in correct order. By the end of Year 2 a child should be able to form all the letters correctly and easily when copying and in response to letter names. They should also be able to write the whole alphabet from memory using correctly formed letters in alphabetical order in under 1 minute. This format of assessment is intended to test automaticity. At this point in time, these children should also be able to decide when it is appropriate to use neat handwriting.

Medwell, J., & Wray, D. (2014). Handwriting automaticity: The search for performance thresholds. *Language and Education*, 28(1), 34-51. doi:10.1080/09500782.2013.76381

Schlagal (2007) advises that 'it is important to provide explicit instruction and sufficient opportunity to practice correct letter formation. Short daily practice sessions are likely to be more effective than longer, less regular sessions' (p. 196).

Schlagal, B. (2007). Best practices in spelling and handwriting. In S. Graham, C. A. MacArthur & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing instruction* (pp. 179-200). New York: The Guilford Press.

The transcription skills of letter writing and spelling impact written expression from a very young age. Research has shown that handwriting and spelling contribute to written expression in kindergarten (n=242), after controlling for oral language, reading skills, SES and verbal and nonverbal IQ.

Puranik, C. S., & Al Otaiba, S. (2012). Examining the contribution of handwriting and spelling to written expression in kindergarten children. *Reading and Writing*, 25(7), 1523-1546.

In another study, Graham and colleagues found that handwriting fluency (writing letters of the alphabet or copying text under timed conditions) is causally related to writing. Explicit and supplemental handwriting (and spelling) instruction can play an important role in teaching writing to young children who acquire text transcription skills more slowly than their peers.

Graham, S., Harris, K., & Fink, B. (2000). Is handwriting causally related to learning to write? Treatment of handwriting problems in beginning writers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 620-633.

According to Schlagal (2007) the order in which letters are best taught is not yet clear. However, he argues that the 'ABC order is not necessarily the most effective way to introduce letters, in part because the reversible letters *b* and *d* come so close to each other' (p. 197). In teaching letter formation, Schlagal supports the view that teacher modelling is an important component of instruction. For example, when introducing a letter, the teacher should demonstrate *and* describe how a letter is formed. Clear and correct models are an important ingredient in guiding students to effective practice.

Schlagal, B. (2007). Best practices in spelling and handwriting. In S. Graham, C. A. MacArthur & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing instruction* (pp. 179-200). New York: The Guilford Press.

Recommended references

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Modelling letter formation and placement

The following pages contain printable templates for teaching handwriting. The illustration below shows the direction and order for letter formations. To scaffold student learning, coloured lines can be used (as shown below). The coloured lines assist with letter positioning. Placement of letters on the lines is a challenging task for many children. This also applies to consistent sizing and spacing of letters both within and between words.

This file contains printable coloured lined templates in different sizes. The larger formats can be used for the purposes of modelling handwriting to a group of children. The smaller formats can be printed for students to use in their own handwriting.

To scaffold the learning process, visual and verbal prompts may be provided to students. For example, a story can be used to explain and demonstrate how letters are placed on the lines. In this example, the colours are blue, yellow and green. Blue could represent the sky, yellow is the sand, and green is the sea where the seaweed grows. As students become increasingly confident with their letter formation, the colours can be gradually faded or removed and the lines can become narrower.

When teaching handwriting, it is important to tell children that no letter will start at the bottom.

A story prompt might be:

Tall letters love the blue sky (b, d, f h, k, l and t)

Short letters like to build sand castles so they are placed in the sand (a, c, e, i, m, n, o, r, s, u, v, w, x, z)

Long letters like to dive into the deep sea so they are positioned with their tails in the sea (g, j, p, q and y)





