

Hand*writing*

A collection of articles
all about handwriting

from Alison Harris, Occupational Therapist

Alison explores and offers advice
on some of the different aspects
to consider when supporting
children with their handwriting.



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Handwriting is undoubtedly an important, but complex skill which takes several years to acquire.

In each of the articles below, Alison Harris, Occupational Therapist, explores and offers practical advice for ways to support children with these different aspects of handwriting.



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Readiness to Write



I know that this will be relaying information that you are already aware of - but - not every child is ready to start writing. We are not talking about the ability to construct and relay a story - but readiness for the physical task of handwriting.

You will be aware that some children find writing much harder than others but have you stopped to evaluate why that is?



Handwriting is a complex task and one that we present to very young children. We get a lovely chunky pencil in their hand, use great multi-sensory strategies and get started. But let's stop and consider this a little bit more? Not just in terms of Early Years and KS1 children, but also older children with special educational needs.

Do you think a child needs to be able to:

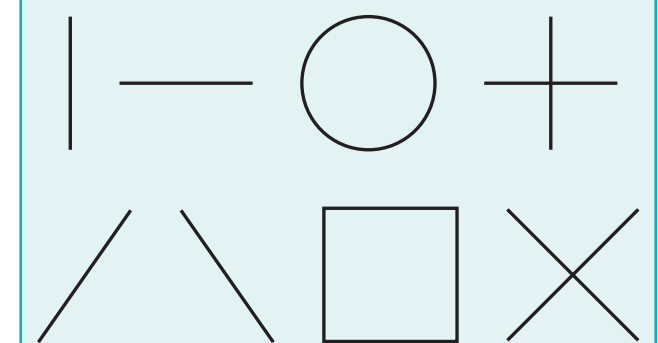
- Have enough postural control to sit on the seat without consciously thinking about it?
- Have an established dominance and not be frequently swapping hands for the task?
- Understand your verbal instructions around spatial elements of writing? (Start at the top, go around, below the line and so on)
- Copy your demonstrations of how to form letters?
- Use working memory to retain new information?
- Use motor memory to remember how the letter formation feels?
- Use effective eye-hand coordination?

The answer is "yes" to all the above.

But there's also more!

There is well established research that a child needs to be able to perform basic pencil shapes before it is advisable to introduce more complex letter shapes. This shows that the child can *cross their midline*, *organise diagonals*, *follow simple sequences* and be *consistent in how they approach an eye hand task*.

The shapes include:



Checking that your pupils can meet these criteria can assist you in finding gaps in their development which need addressing AND avoid a child who is not ready to be writing starting on a complex task that they are not likely to achieve without impact on their confidence and engagement with this very important, life long skill.

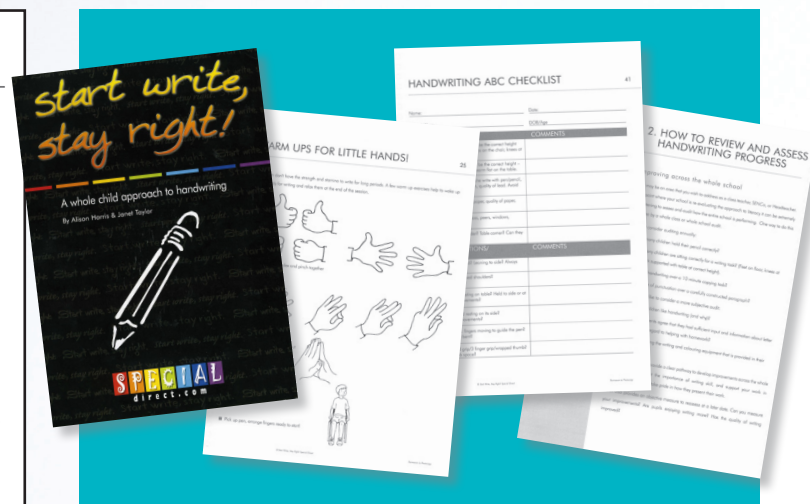
Ready to Write Checklist

Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

NB. Has vision been checked?	Y	N
Are glasses worn if required?	Y	N
1. Ability to sit on a chair and use both arms freely?	Y	N
2. Ability to use each hand independently doing a different task e.g. sharpen a pencil, thread beads, assemble nuts and bolts?	Y	N
3. Can the child grasp and release small objects easily and fluently using a neat pincer grip?	Y	N
4. Hand dominance identified or emerging?	Y	N
5. Awareness of direction i.e. up and down, top and bottom?	Y	N
6. Ability and wish to follow instructions?	Y	N
7. Can the child copy basic strokes and symbols?	Y	N

(Ref: Beery 1989; Moeland 1992) Pls tick as appropriate:

| — ○ + / \ □ ×



If you want more information about “Readiness to Write” – have a look at “Start Write, Stay Right” where there is a checklist that you can use with any child. This is a great resource to use with pupils as a whole class, or in a small group with a teaching assistant. You may well be surprised how many children struggle with these basics.

Time put in now working on all the underpinning skills such as core stability, shoulder strength, eye hand coordination, spatial skills through movement and motor memory development can make a huge difference to a child’s handwriting and longer term to even making a difference in their attainment.

It really is worth stopping and working on NOW.

When working with older pupils who have special educational needs, this is also an important consideration, even if they have

already started handwriting. Perhaps you notice that they are not progressing or that their writing is not maturing. Go back and check out their readiness skills. Some pupils may not be able to integrate all the complex skills needed and it may be necessary to focus on using IT rather than concentrate on handwriting. However, it is always important to practise handwriting basic information such as their name as this can be done by repetition and shape recognition even if they cannot achieve free writing.

The other element to focus on is achieving hand dominance.

Most children work out which is their dominant hand between the ages of 4 and 6. Some do it much earlier.

Some pupils will arrive at school with an already established dominance – reaching out for tools, food, cups, primarily with their dominant hand. Others will swap frequently – and be unsure as to with which hand to pick up a crayon, paintbrush or pencil.

You may even have seen children who seem to do well with both and wonder if they are ambidextrous. It’s funny how being ambidextrous seems to be seen as a positive thing, when in reality it means that the brain has not actually worked out which hand needs to be taking the lead – **and that’s not a good thing in the long run!**



Why is establishing dominance important?

An automatic sense of dominance is closely related to also knowing and 'feeling' which is left and right. This helps with directionality – knowing where to start writing on the left side of the page, look to the left side of the book to start reading and is the very start of automaticity in writing. Mixed dominance can also lead to errors in letter formation, reversals and even mirror writing, for example:

מיון דסרד אדונוח

Making repeated errors lays down pathways in the brain that mean those errors are more likely to be repeated.

So how can you help a child figure out which hand to use?

Firstly – don't push a child to use a particular hand and do include this in your early advice to parents. Young children need lots of opportunities to use both hands for all kinds of activities and swap between which is the 'lead' hand and which is the helper hand.

Think back to seeing a toddler feed themselves – both hands get involved making the mess! Slowly, after having had the experience of using both their hands, one will start to take the lead and reach for the spoon.

Secondly, you need to provide tasks (particularly in the Early Years) that use both hands together doing the same action – rolling dough with a rolling pin, squishing sand in their hands, squeezing playdough with both hands, shaking percussion instruments, putting blocks together, and clapping games.

If you are unsure about which hand is the dominant one, watch the child doing lots of different activities – eating, reaching for a toy, picking something up off the floor. Do you see a common preference?



The next stage is to then do activities that require a lead hand – scooping up water in a jug to pour out again, mixing ingredients with a wooden spoon while holding the bowl, placing bricks in a tower, or threading a bead. During this stage, children will still swap hands, but you may have started to have an idea which is their dominant and can check – **“Which hand does this job best? Let's try both and see!”**

Give the child feedback on which hand they are using so they can start to associate which hand is their lead hand.

From this point on, you and the other adults supporting your class need to be watching closely! If a child seems to be swapping or using what you believe to be their non dominant side – go and check it out with them.

Rather than telling them to swap over hands, help them to feel for themselves which feels right. It's important to sometimes get them to check when they are using what you believe to be the correct hand too!

And finally, when you believe that dominance is almost certainly established, it is time to encourage the child to start **and** complete a



task with the same hand. You can also promote consistency by liaising with the parents to check that they agree with which hand is dominant, particularly if there has been a great deal of swapping in the past.

Enlist their support to keep consistency with using the dominant hand at home for tasks such as teeth brushing, cutting out, and colouring.



Motor skills boards are a simple activity using a lead hand and give opportunity to practise making a careful pencil grip and accurate control.

Equipment and Environment...

from how to sit left handers to why am I using a pencil grip?

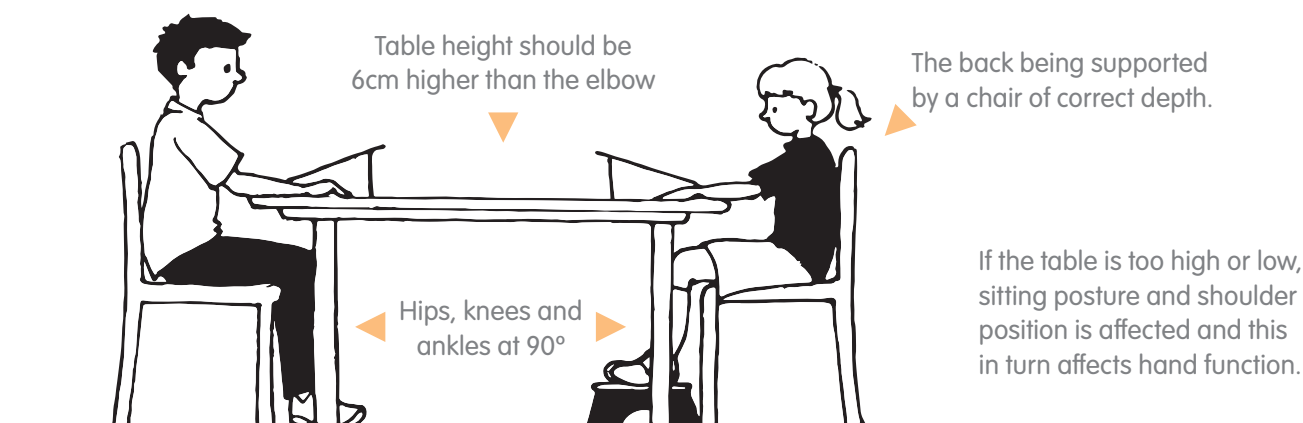


There is so much pressure on teachers to work through the curriculum, and to check that some children are not getting left behind and others are sufficiently stretched. It can feel like there is little time to work on the mechanics of handwriting but time spent on this is so worthwhile!

Avoiding glitches now can reduce the impact of bad habits literally for a lifetime. Input does not need to be time consuming, but it does need some preparation when thinking about the environmental challenges and what equipment to use.

Sitting Position

The ideal sitting position is:



Young children need to have their feet firmly on the floor and their back supported by a suitable chair. They need to not be consciously using precious 'brain energy' to keep themselves sitting on the chair. You will have seen just how many little ones can suddenly end up on the floor – sitting is not yet as automatic as it should be!

So, we need to ensure that we help them by having appropriate tables and chairs.

Working on early writing skills when balanced on an IT suite swivel chair is truly a recipe for disaster!



Postura Plus Chairs are particularly good and supportive and come in a colourful range of sizes, so you can easily see who needs the particular colour for their size.

Things to consider...

Children vary a lot in size

Can you swap a table with another class so that you have a range of sizes?

Position in class

Many children will find it hard to sit at right angles to a board as this means they have to rotate their head to look and then rotate back to their book. This movement in itself can cause some children to "lose" what they were trying to write. Looking straight ahead for copying is much easier as most of the work is done by the eyes only and the neck doesn't get involved.

Distractions

Never underestimate the fascination of people walking past or vehicles moving around. Consider work positions for tables to reduce this as much as you can.

Space for writing

If you sit left handers next to right handers, there will be lots of elbow clashing and cramped work. Try where you can to sit left handers together, so you can easily model the specific left hand issues around letter formation, using a ruler and so on!

Sloping Boards

You may know that these can be comfortable to write on, but why else are they needed and how should they be used?



Sloping boards are primarily used by children who have one of the following difficulties:

Hypermobility

Wobbly wrists and fingers which struggle to maintain a good position for writing. The sloping board pushes the wrist into a more functional position, slightly flexed upwards. This is a great writing position. Try it yourself leaning your hand to write on a lever arch file. This position can reduce fatigue and help keep the great writing angle for the fingers.

Posture

You may have seen some children slump at their desk or leaning their chin on their hand to prop themselves up. This is because they are struggling to maintain their posture against gravity. It's hard work for them. Using a sloping board pushes them up into a better posture.



The **TTS Writing Slope** has no border or clip to hold the paper. That's on purpose! It means that the child must use their non dominant hand to support the paper or book on the sloping board and hey presto! This keeps their body symmetrical and sitting upright.



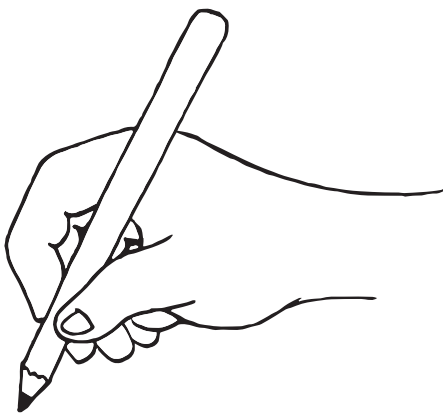
Pencil Grips and Writing Tools

You probably have a favourite pen or shape of pen and you know that it helps you write neatly or fast or both. Children also need a range of pencils, pens and crayons, so that they can find out what helps them to present their best work. Some children who have hypermobility in their fingers will really struggle to use thin pencils and are much better with a chunkier grip.

We tend to use chunky tools in Early Years but why exactly do we not have these for older children too? It can make a real difference. Chunky tools that don't have chunky leads are important to have in your toolkit.

What about a pencil grip? Do you check how your class hold their pencil? Time spent working on this early on makes such a difference.

The **Start Write, Stay Right** book has a whole section on how to encourage the best hold on a pencil.



One easy way to teach the skill is:

- A) Lay the pencil down pointing to the child's tummy
- B) "Pinch the pencil near the writing point" (mark with tape or a band)
- C) Pick it up to swing over and to sit comfortably in the web space
- D) Sit it on the middle finger



Try developmental pencil grips.

These support a young hand to move from a dagger or whole hand grasp grip on to the beginnings of a tripod grip. From there, it can be gradually reduced down to a tripod grip on the pencil without any equipment. This chunky developmental grip can also reduce fatigue in the hand – a common problem which can put children off wanting to do their work.

What about children who keep on with a dagger hold on their pencil? It may be because they are struggling with the development of grip, in which case it's important to work on fine motor skills (see our article on **Hands and Eyes**).

It can also be helpful to have a few pieces of equipment that will help children to develop the motor memory of how to hold a pencil correctly. If you can ensure lots of correct attempts and reduce the times the child does a piece of work with an awkward pencil hold, they are much more likely to get it right.



Pencil Grips and Writing Tools



There are lots of types of pencil grips available and these can be really useful, but working on a correct hold in the first place and helping children to arrange their fingers on the pencil right from the start can save a lot of money on pencil grips too!

The one example of a pencil grip that may be required by an older child is the Ultragrip, which is great for those who have poor strength in their fingers or hypermobility.

These come in a couple of sizes too, so even adults can benefit.

Make sure you get it on the right way (it can be confusing). The wider part is higher up the pencil, away from the tip to offer support for the joint of the thumb and index finger.



Another great option is to use a penagain pen.

Have you seen them?

As you thread your fingers through the 'y' shape, you cannot help but put your fingers into the correct hold. This is a super transition to practise before using a pencil without an additional grip on it.

One last nugget of advice about positioning is about ...

Paper Position

Are you aware of how much difference it can make with how you position the paper or book that you are writing on?

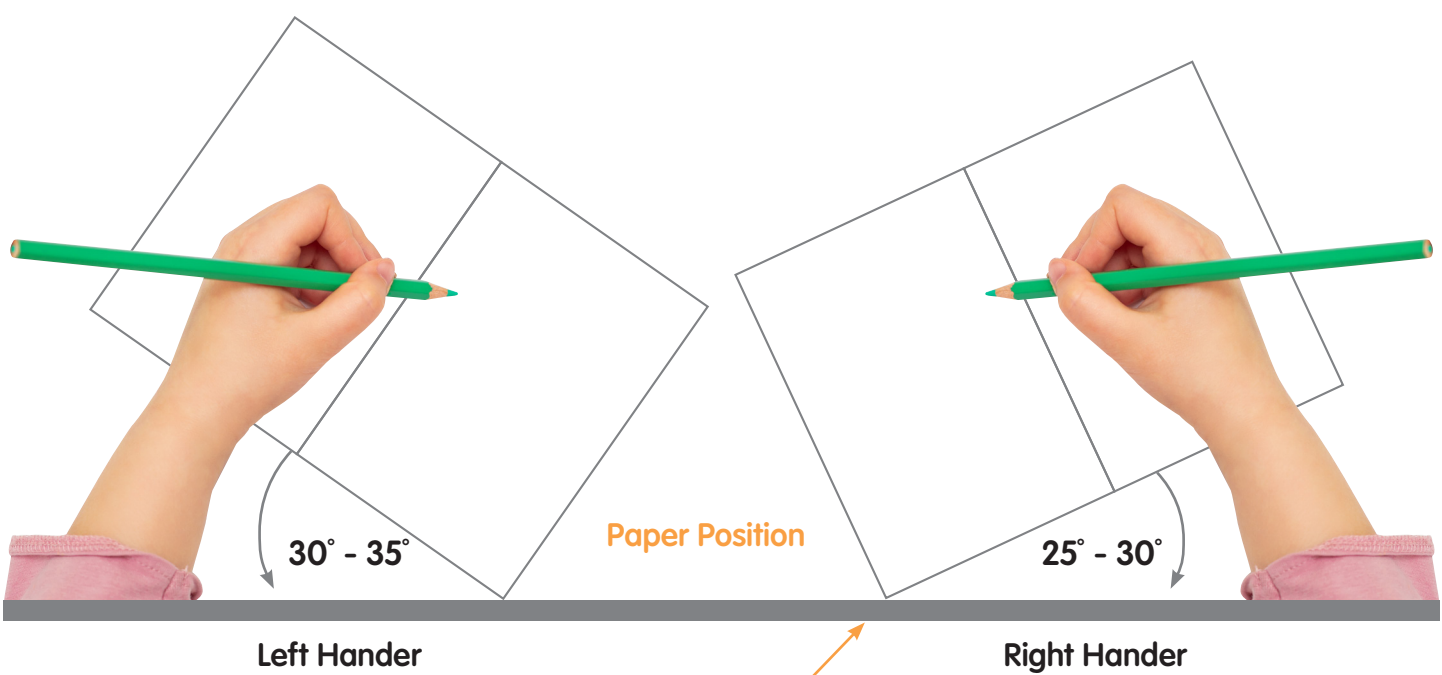
Have you ever wondered why some children (and adults) write with a hooked grip?

This is absolutely the result of not angling the paper but attempting to write on it when it is upright and perpendicular to the table edge.

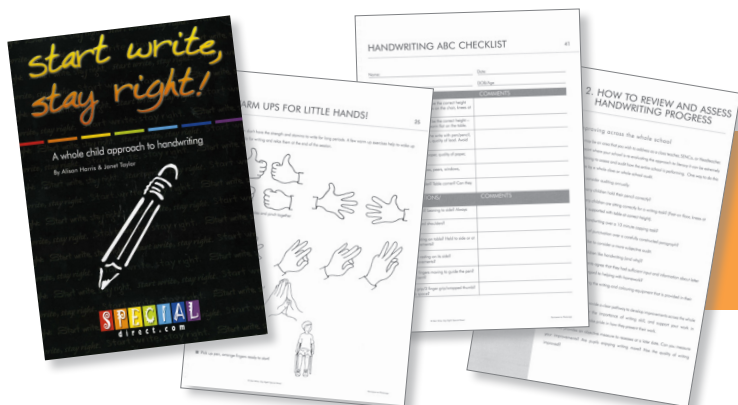
Not an ergonomic position at all!



The most relaxed position for writing is one where the paper aligns with the arm and the wrist can remain relaxed and in a neutral position:



Putting a taped line on the table can be a brilliant visual cue for pupils to align their paper so that they are in the best position.



If you want to explore these starting principles in more detail, there are many more pieces of advice available in the **Start Write, Stay Right** book, including a whole checklist assessment.

Hands and Eyes



Effective eye hand coordination is part of the building blocks towards good handwriting. Remember though that posture, shoulder stability and basic fine motor skills need to be addressed first!

At the risk of repeating this (not really apologising for this CRITICAL point!) this is the way skill development works, like building a wall - brick next to brick, layer upon layer, making firm foundations for the higher skills aimed for.



Look out for children who are experiencing difficulties with PE (especially ball skills), with manipulation of small objects, or who have difficulty copying from the board or following demonstrations. For example, a child may have brilliant verbal knowledge but have clear challenges with their coordination which affects their learning potential. They may really dislike writing and will do all they can to avoid it.

It is important to be vigilant here – it's not always the children that you expect to be having difficulties that still may be.

Additional help for fundamental eye hand coordination skills can help build self-esteem and belief in their ability to produce work which they are proud of.

Another more common difficulty seen in almost every classroom is hypermobility – have you heard this term?

Hypermobility can affect any joint of the body but most commonly the hands and fingers.

It means that there is more laxity or “looseness” around the joints, and this means the joints are less stable. For fine motor tasks and handwriting, this is clearly rather a problem.

What you will tend to see is children gripping harder and applying more pressure through their joints to gain the required control. Sometimes you even see children using such force that their knuckles go white. This is a giveaway sign that there may be issues with joint strength.



The Penagain pencil helps develop a good ergonomic grip and reduces pressure in the hand. Well worth a try.

There is no need to graduate onto thin pencils so fast! Why do we do this?

Hypermobility is really common, but also easy to manage for most children. (Some will have such extreme difficulties with hypermobility that they will require input from a health professional such as a physiotherapist or occupational therapist.) Most children can be assisted with having a range of different sized tools to use, such as chunky barrelled pens and crayons.

For children who have hypermobile joints, consider using wider lined paper, keeping handwriting larger and limiting the amount of writing they have to do.

These children will benefit when they are encouraged to focus on the really important handwriting tasks rather than 'unnecessary' copying type tasks. They may run out of steam, complain of hand ache and produce less work than which they are capable of if they get too tired. You run the risk of not seeing their true potential!

Equipment Options ...

- Various pencil options, such as Penagain, chunky triangular pencils, or move easy pencils.
- Developmental grips are particularly helpful for refining an immature whole hand grip to a tripod grip.
- Using a slope board is also helpful for some children to put their hand into a better position and reduces the pressure they put through their lax finger joints. It is really worth having a couple in class to use with certain children and to trial what helps them.

Get children's engagement in evaluating what helps them. When they are struggling with handwriting, children can lack confidence and singling them out to use equipment can further damage self-esteem.

If you can set up a culture of: "What helps us do our best work?", this can open up all kinds of opportunities to suggest (and model) the use of equipment which can help to develop confidence.



What ways can you incorporate development of hand skills in your classroom ?

- Hand strengtheners are great for all hands but especially good for those with hypermobile joints. They should not be used to extreme or to overexert joints but to have short periods of practice at appropriate times in class.
- Finger fidgets can help to improve focus and concentration and also to promote good listening. They can be very tempting, so ground rules need to be understood on how and when to use them.



- Keep a focus on fine motor activities in the Early Years and beyond. Children will automatically want to go to tasks that they are mastering and are at just the right challenge for them. Resources such as the **Fine Motor Skills Activity Bag** are great as they are not only fun, but also help children to work towards mastering self-care skills too.



Eye hand coordination for writing, without writing?

It seems counterintuitive, but time spent working on pencil control and the fundamentals of pencil accuracy can significantly improve a child's handwriting, without a single letter being written!

Handwriting is such a complex task. Taking time to peel away some of the layers of complexity and focus on core components reaps dividends.

Removing the need to remember how to form letters, spell words, and construct sentences allows time to practise the fluidity of movement needed for writing, develop eye hand accuracy, work on spatial skills with a pencil and improve confidence in the child's ability to produce work that they are proud of.

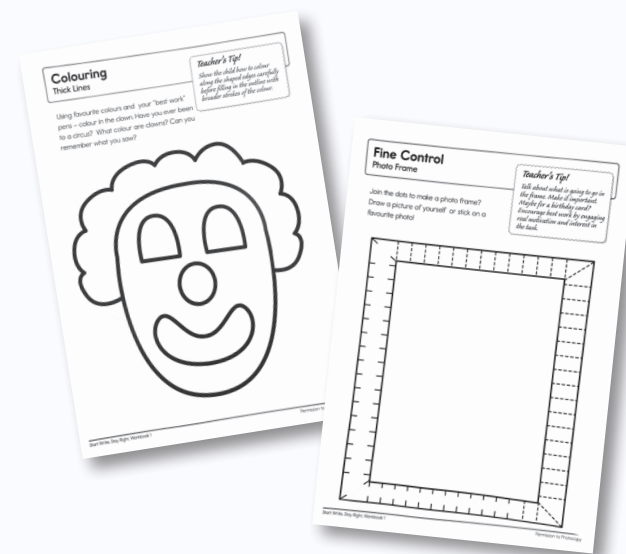
Suggestions:

- A fine motor skills board encourages a lead and a helper hand as well as developing pencil control.



- Try curly wurly pictures. Ask children to draw anything you fancy but with curly lines. This is great for getting fingers moving and practising the circular movement required in many letters. **Start Write, Stay Right** provides additional information on early writing skills and many worksheets are photocopyable from the workbooks.

- Remember the value of colouring. Provide wide edges to allow some room for errors without the child ending up going over the lines. Introduce the idea that colouring movement does not come from the wrist but from the fingers. If the child has managed to develop a good tripod grip, then the movement should naturally be coming from the thumb, index and middle fingers, leaning on the little finger side of the hand. Colouring is a great opportunity to practise this movement which will then enhance fluidity when writing.

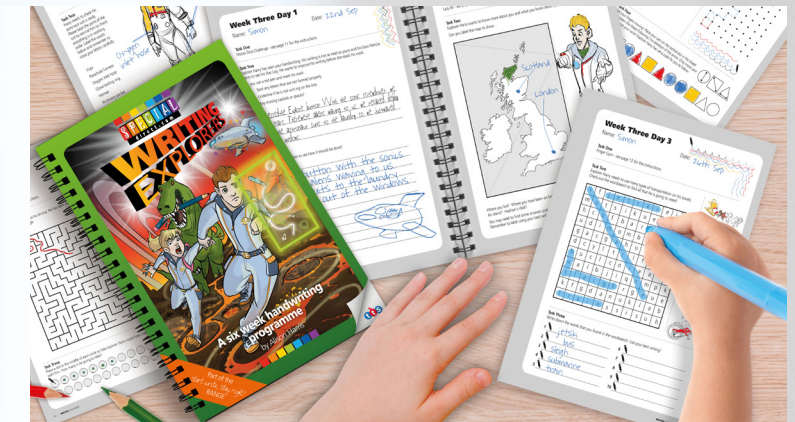


- Dot to dots and pencil patterns worksheets are great staples. If you need lots of ideas for non-writing worksheets – have a look at the **Start Write, Stay Right** workbook for 5-8 year olds and **Start Write, Stay Right** workbook 2 for 5-8 years olds.



For older pupils who have lost interest and confidence around writing – have you seen **Writing Explorers**?

This is a whole programme aimed at older pupils who need to develop their handwriting but this programme offers challenges and puzzles to develop accuracy, fluidity in writing and eye hand coordination, without being overtly about handwriting!



Teaching Left Handers to Write

First things first, sitting space and position of the paper are the first elements of helping a left hander to produce their best work. Left handers need to sit on the left, so that there is space by their left elbow and they are not getting into elbow wars with their right handed neighbour.



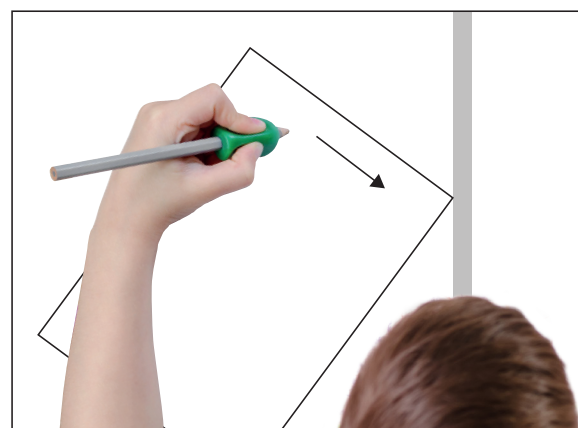
Have you noticed how many left handers end up with a very awkward hook grip? They do this to enable themselves to see what they are writing and not cover it with their hand.

This is the result of poor positioning of both the paper and hand and can lead to reduced fluency in the handwriting. It also means that they are having to work hard not to smudge and drag the pencil or ink so that their work becomes messy. It really does not have to be that way and is easily eradicated by teaching them to position their paper in a way that works best.

As with a child who is right handed, the paper needs to be in alignment with their lower arm. The wrist stays in a central, neutral position and this means there is no stress on the joint and no need to hook their hand. Paper positioning needs to be considered for all subjects, not just English.

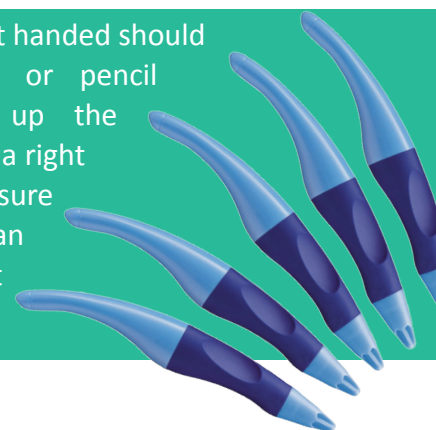
It is also important to consider how practical tasks are constructed for left handers, but that's another story...

TIP!



Edge of paper sheet, or mid line of the book needs to be slightly to the left of the child's midline. A small piece of masking tape can be helpful to give a visual reminder of where to place the book

A child who is left handed should hold their pen or pencil slightly higher up the pencil shaft than a right hander to ensure that they can clearly see what they are doing.



TIP!



Putting a rubber band at the point where they should hold the pen can be a helpful prompt

The child also needs to learn how to make a relaxed tripod grip on the pen, with the thumb and index controlling the movement, supporting the pen on the middle finger and side of the wrist underneath. Shaped and triangular grips are helpful to prompt finger position but be sure that the grip you suggest is appropriate for a left hander.

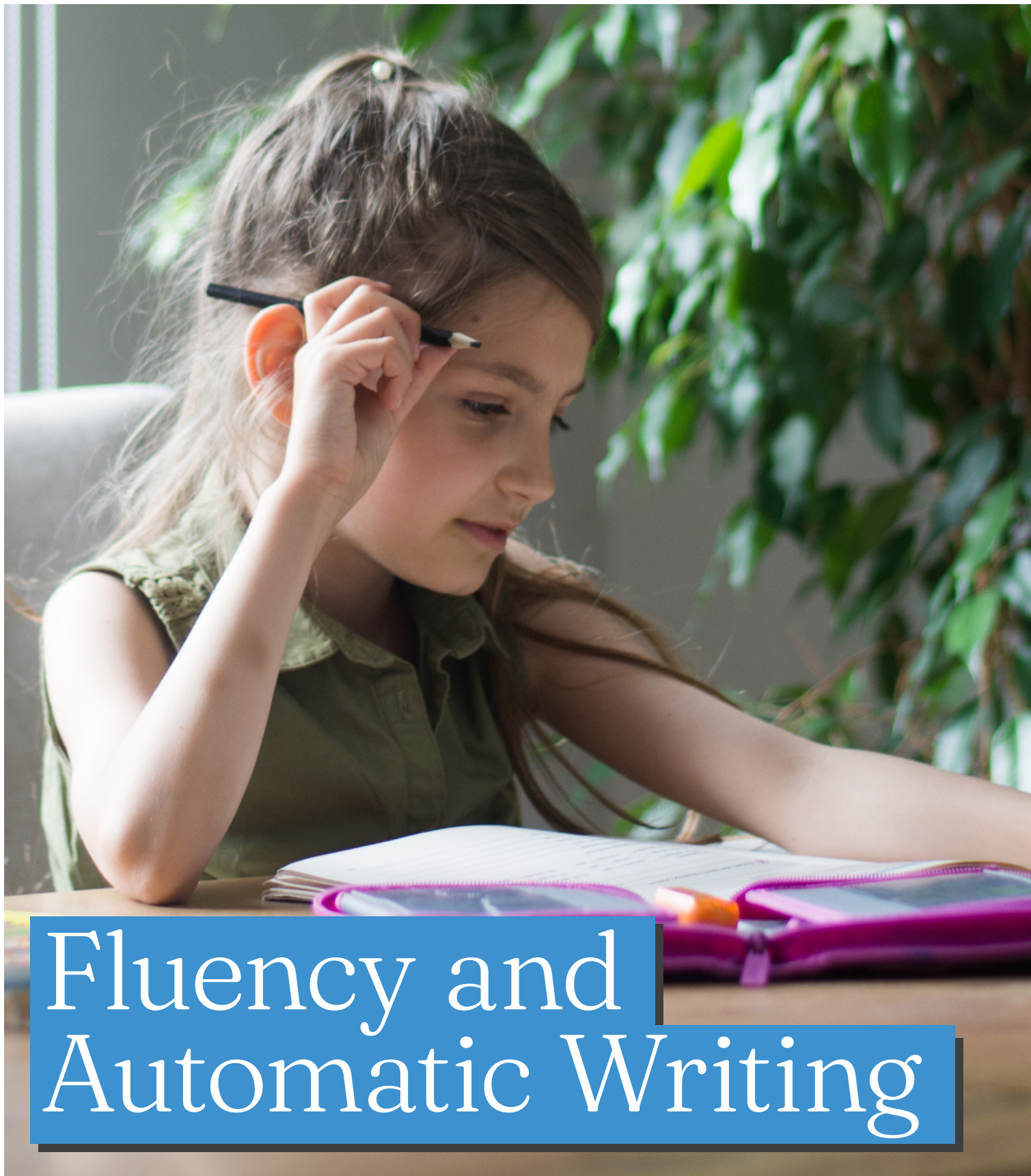


Now, with the child and their paper in a good position, you need to consider how you actually teach a left hander to form letters.

Some left handers can be more likely to mirror write – starting at the right hand side of the page and working to the left. They can also be more likely to form letter reversals. If you observe this, you can help by simply adding a highlighted line to the left side of the page to give a visual prompt of where to start. It is really important to avoid errors being repeated as the brain will see these so often that it can be much more difficult for the left hander to spot. Be vigilant all the time and check on pupils who you know are finding this hard!

It is also important to understand that left handers tend to form certain letters differently to a right hander – for example they tend to draw an 'o' anticlockwise, or to form the cross line for letters from right to left, such as on f and t. They also tend to use a ruler to draw a line from right to left. This is all ok, but be aware this can be problematic when moving onto cursive joins.

It is important that you teach by modelling how to form the letters as a left hander would do. Show the right handers of course, but also demonstrate to the left handers – using your own left hand and positioning your hand and the paper correctly for a left hander. You may need to practise first!



Fluency and Automatic Writing

The long term aim when teaching handwriting is to enable children to write legibly, automatically and with minimal fatigue. This requires so many foundation skills to be in place including hand dominance, letter formation, working memory and many more.

In this section, we focus on the automaticity of handwriting skills.

This requires the child to:

- Maintain a good postural position and be able to give their full attention to the cognitive task (research shows that when a child has postural instability, this takes away 'brain energy' from the learning task and means their attention is affected negatively).
- Be able to coordinate their eyes and writing hand without conscious thought.
- To be so familiar with letter formation (and cursive joins) that they do not need to consciously form a plan or motor sequence in order to write.

The previous articles have focussed on the first two points and time spent working on these areas massively strengthens a child's foundation skills for the actual task of handwriting.

In fact, we did some studies with classes of 5-7 year olds, working on underpinning tasks of posture and motor skills and measured the improvement in their handwriting without formally working on their handwriting!

It really works.

If you are interested in other studies that worked on whole class handwriting development, there are some more examples in the [Start Write, Stay Right](#) book.

Let's now look specifically at the art of fluency in writing.

As has been said before, children practising incorrectly is a major obstacle as they get stuck in a particular way of doing things.

Pencil grip is a great example of that – if they learn properly to have a tripod grip from the start, this feels normal:

Tripod Grip



If they have a three finger grasp on the pencil from the start, that feels normal too and more comfortable as it is familiar:

Three Finger Hold

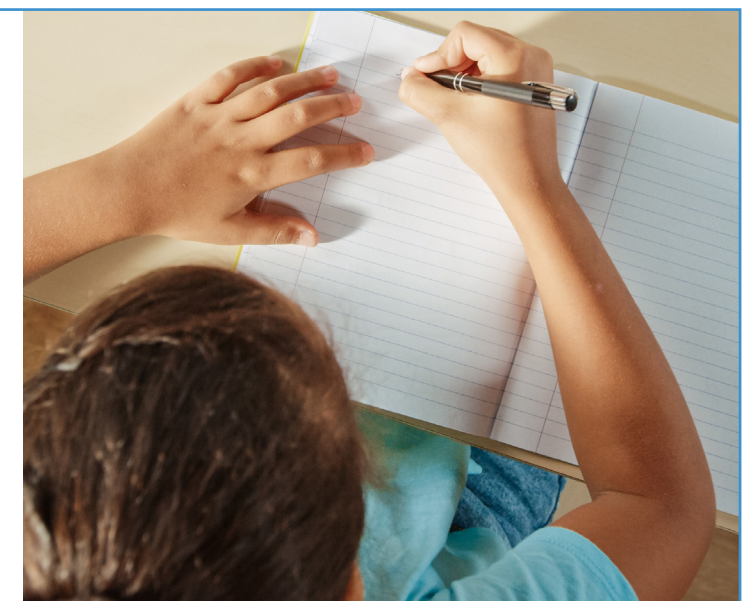


However, a three finger hold on the pencil (thumb, index and middle on the pencil shaft, resting on the ring finger) significantly limits the movement of the fingers, is more tiring on the muscles and makes writing harder work in the long run.

Not convinced?

Try an experiment for yourself.

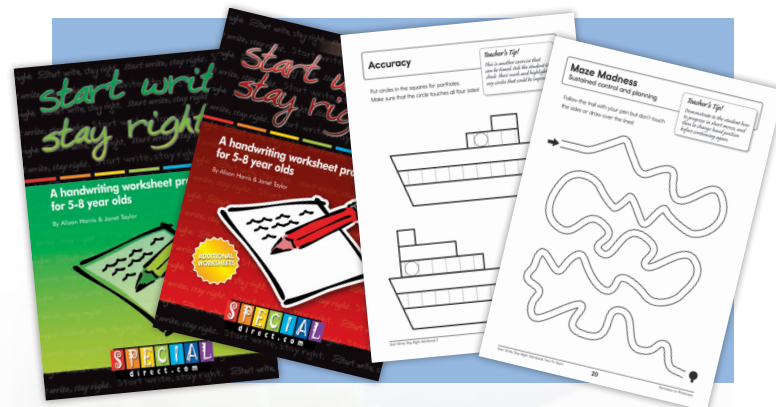
Hold a pen with the three finger grasp and anchor your wrist and side of hand on the page. Now try drawing an **O** and a **X** as large as you can. Your hand position limits the movement of your fingers, the arch on the back of your hand is smaller and the web space between your thumb and index is pinched closed. Now try with a correct tripod grip and feel how much more movement and fluidity you can achieve and how much larger the shapes you can draw without moving your hand off the surface.



So, for now let's work on the basis that children have a good pencil grasp and know how to align the paper at the best angle (if not, take a look at the 'Readiness to Write' article).

In order to work on accuracy in handwriting, it's essential that children can make careful marks on their page. They need to learn that taking care is important, and that working at a speed that allows them to be careful is the best. A good way to practise accuracy is to initially use activities that are not about handwriting!

For example, the **Start Write, Stay Right Workbook for 5-8 year olds** provides many activities that work on different pencil movements with accuracy.



Pencil patterns also offer time to practise spacing, placing the pencil carefully on the lines and keeping regular shaped marks. It's good to do these large too, for example on the class whiteboard, on individual whiteboards as well as on paper.

Let them practise copying different patterns and then challenge them to do it with their eyes closed! Can they feel how their hand is working? Can they keep the shape the same? What about asking pupils to write a single letter or their whole name without looking at their hand? How easy is it?

This is actually a really important skill to learn.

Stop and notice just how often you write without looking at what you are writing! This helps later with the art of being able to copy from the board. Copying shapes without looking at the hand develops motor memory as well as being fun!

Some children who are finding letter formation difficult will often go back over what they have written to add bits – to complete letters and add parts that they missed out. This is a real red flag! This is where hawk-like teaching assistants are so helpful – watching everyone carefully and spotting these errors so they can intervene and implement a multi-sensory strategy for the child to practise a certain letter.

Practice is only helpful when it's correct!



Print or *Cursive*?

A question that often arises is: "Should we teach cursive writing from the beginning or transition to it from print?" That's a tough question. It can work well both ways, but to get the best results, both are very labour intensive for the adults supervising and helping the pupils to get it right from the beginning.

Teaching printing means that letters start in different places – some above the line, some on the line. Many children find this confusing and it affects how they size their letters and how they place them on the line (or not!).

If you teach how to add ascenders and descenders on letters (or lead-ins and tails)

then all letters start ON the line. That can be easier for some children to master as the start point is always the same, but of course, this makes the letter action more complicated when they are initially learning. This then is where additional time is needed for teaching and ensuring correct letter formation at the start.

The alternative is to teach printing and then teach how to transition this on to cursive and of course, that then takes time too and can also slow children's writing speed and lower the production of work while they focus on the mechanics of how to learn joins. Whereas if you teach ascenders and descenders on the letters from the beginning, this can eliminate many difficulties when fully transitioning on to cursive as the majority of joins are simple.

This is where a whole school focus on handwriting really helps and a decision on how to actively teach the mechanics of handwriting is shared throughout the school. There are always issues to overcome, with some pupils having pervasive coordination or attention difficulties which affect their writing, and also pupils joining the school later who have learned in different ways.

There is no one answer to what and how to teach, but we can offer you support through the information in the [Start Write, Stay Right](#) manual and of course, through these articles too.



Learning to do cursive writing is a process to be achieved, not a skill to be leaped into without training as this leads to errors which become habitual. Modelling correct cursive joins is essential. Show careful slow writing that emphasises where the joins are. Take care that your wall displays and writing around the school also have correct cursive joins. You would be surprised how many are incorrect.

Remember, letters join at different places depending on what they are joining to. Focus on actively teaching these cursive joins. Don't expect children to make it up and work it out for themselves! Watch like hawks for pupils going back over letters to add joins rather than using the correct motor action. Keep practising large and using multi-sensory opportunities to practise new joins, such as in sand, with chalk, and ribbon writing in the air.



Now at the point of knowing what you are going to teach your pupils (ascenders and descenders, cursive or plain print), you need to consider how to offer multi-sensory learning to establish solid motor memory of shapes and letter forms. It is really important to keep working LARGE, and practise new letters, or new joins on a big scale. Moving your whole arm to experience letter formation sends many more sensory pieces of information to the brain which help to retain the information – coordinating the muscle feedback, along with the visual aspects and the movement. In short, 'doing it large' helps to consolidate how it 'feels' to make the letter. This then makes it easier to get it right when the pupil starts to downsize writing onto a page.

Be cautioned though, don't push for small writing too quickly. This will come naturally once the child has internalised the repetition of making the letter correctly.



The benefits of achieving fluency in handwriting are many. Time and effort for pupil and teacher alike is reduced if pupils are specifically taught rather than just picking it up and having to correct errors later. Fluency also goes hand in hand with literacy as pupils can focus on the content rather than the motor action of writing.

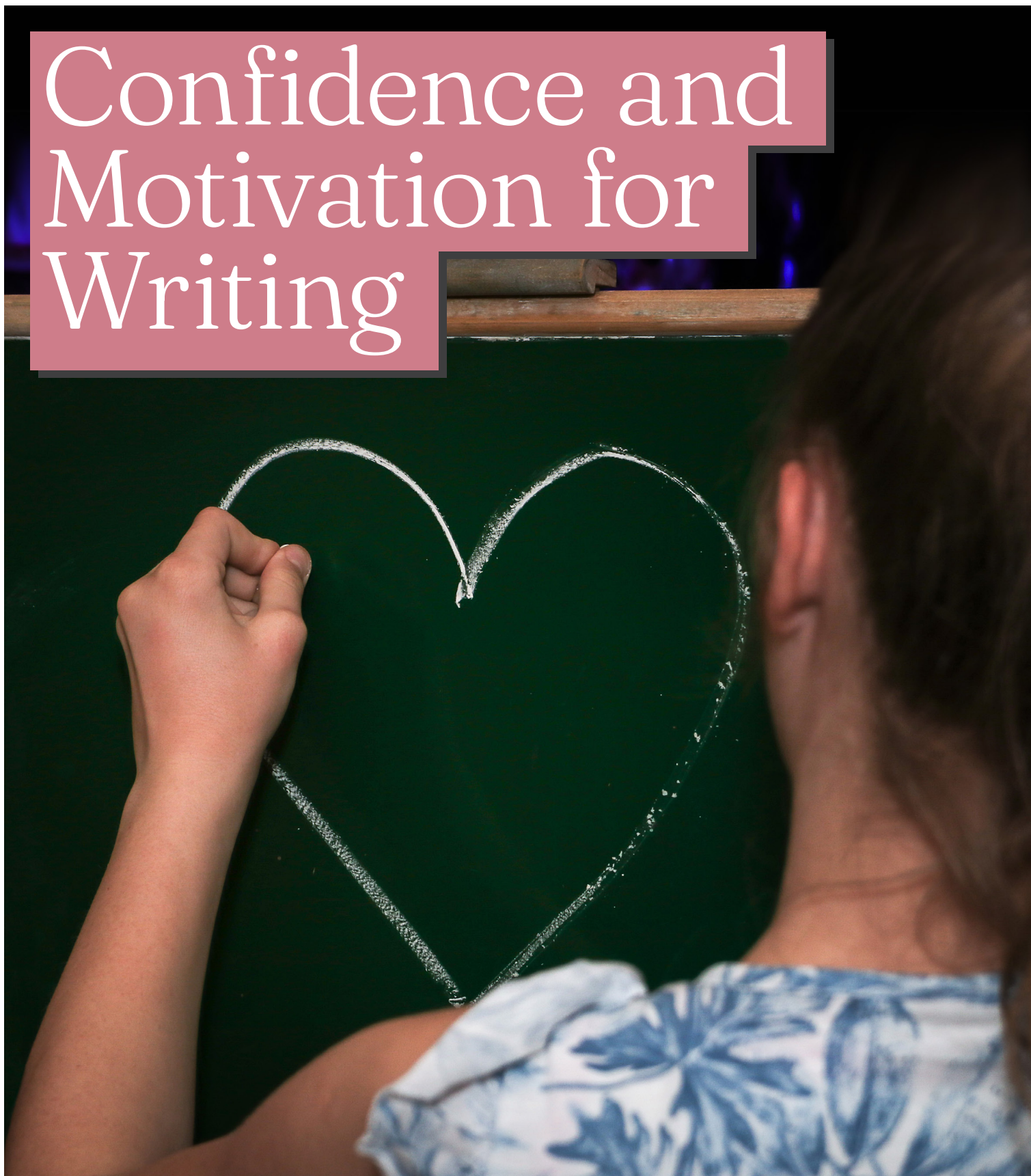
And finally – what about the role of IT?

Word processing and typing is certainly here to stay but so is the art of handwriting. Some pupils will need to be considered for additional access arrangements for assessments and these can include additional time or the use of a scribe or a laptop. If IT is going to be required, this is often clear when a child has a specific learning disability such as dyspraxia or a visual impairment for example. In these cases, early introduction is essential for the child to be comfortable and familiar with using their equipment, and regulations state that the adjustments must be routinely used for the pupil's class work and not just for examinations.

However, handwriting remains a life skill that everyone needs to master at some level – and the personal signature on a card or the ability to jot down a reminder or fill in a basic form remain important requirements for most. Working on the foundation skills for writing is an area where teachers play a vital role and may have long term impact on a child's assessment results where automatic and fluent handwriting can be seen to increase cognitive availability for the subject and actually increase grades.



Confidence and Motivation for Writing



Our handwriting is definitely something that we are either rather pleased about and feel that it is pleasant to read, or at the other end of the spectrum, we avoid it as much as possible or make apologies for it!

For children, it can be a real issue affecting their self-esteem too.

You will be aware that some children really dislike it and so try and reduce the amount they write. They therefore do not actually produce the work that they are cognitively able to do. This is particularly prevalent with children who have coordination difficulties such as DCD (developmental coordination disorder) or Dyspraxia. Many children (and adolescents) who are on the Autistic Spectrum – particularly those who are cognitively academically able – almost always dislike handwriting with an intensely negative reaction to tasks where they are required to write down their knowledge.

So, our approach as supporting adults needs to take confidence about writing seriously and to consider how we can help children to develop their self-esteem about the work that they produce on paper.



Firstly, be aware of the children in your class who are not keen or who feel their writing is not very good. Is there disparity between what they produce on paper with what you know they know?

Secondly, it is important to evaluate if there are difficulties with posture, eye hand coordination, remembering letter formation or visual difficulties. Have a look at the other articles available in this series for pointers on how to check these out. The Handwriting ABC checklist in the **Start Write, Stay Right** book is an invaluable prompt to use and the manual also then goes on to give specific information on how to work on areas of need. It is really important to reduce these barriers as much as possible to enable the child to progress confidently.

And then, consider how you can incorporate the following strategies ...

- Always be aware of “unnecessary” writing, such as copying information which could be provided for them, sheets to fill in blanks rather than writing out the whole sentence.
- Be aware of what you are expecting pupils to copy from the board. Some pupils will find this very hard. Children with coordination disorders can look at the

board, read the words and then in the action of moving their neck to look down at their book or sheet, completely ‘lose’ everything they were trying to remember. Make sure that pupils who struggle with handwriting are seated facing the board, and roughly in the middle of the class. This minimises the amount of head movement they have to make between looking up at the board and back down to their paper. Using different colours for each line on the board can also help children find their way back to what they were reading!

- Check out the pupil’s interest and motivation for the topic. Being interested and engaged can be a major springboard into trying to handwrite about their knowledge.
- Not every pupil needs to write the same amount of words – negotiate quality work of a shorter amount if this will help the pupil work positively.

If you are after further advice, **Start Write, Stay Right** contains a whole section on “**How to Motivate the Unmotivated**” where writing is concerned. This provides many further strategies particularly for younger children who are not presenting as ready for or interested in handwriting.



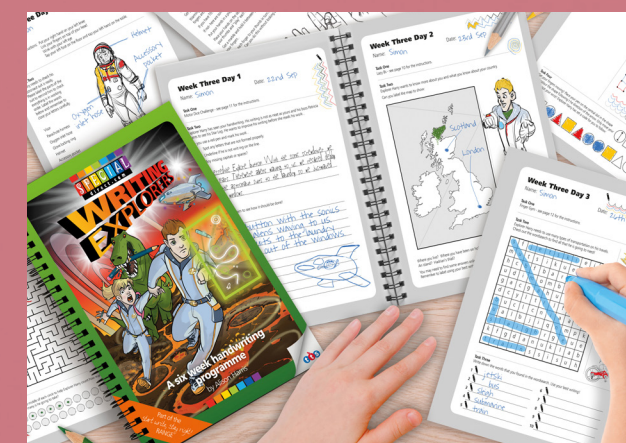
Do make sure that you provide great writing tools for the children to use. Clear out pens that are running out or have poor nibs, and crayons that are not of sufficient quality to provide good work. It is so counterproductive and unmotivating. In contrast having special pens for great writing that children enjoy using, really does help. You know yourself, that you may well write better with a pen that you enjoy using. Children are just the same!

Whilst on the subject of making children feel good about their handwriting, many classes especially around Year 3, use Pen Licences where children need to achieve a certain standard to move from using pencil to pen.

This can be so destructive for children who see everyone else getting their pen licence but not them, despite working hard and doing their best. Can you consider having certain tasks during the week where everyone gets the opportunity to use a pen and show what they can do when given the chance to use a 'grown up' tool?

If we are aiming to promote self-esteem around handwriting, Pen Licences are generally really not helpful!

Some children will clearly need additional help and support to work on their handwriting. These may be older pupils whose cognitive ability is not being matched with the work that they produce on paper. It is hard to maintain their interest and confidence around writing, but it is really worth working on.

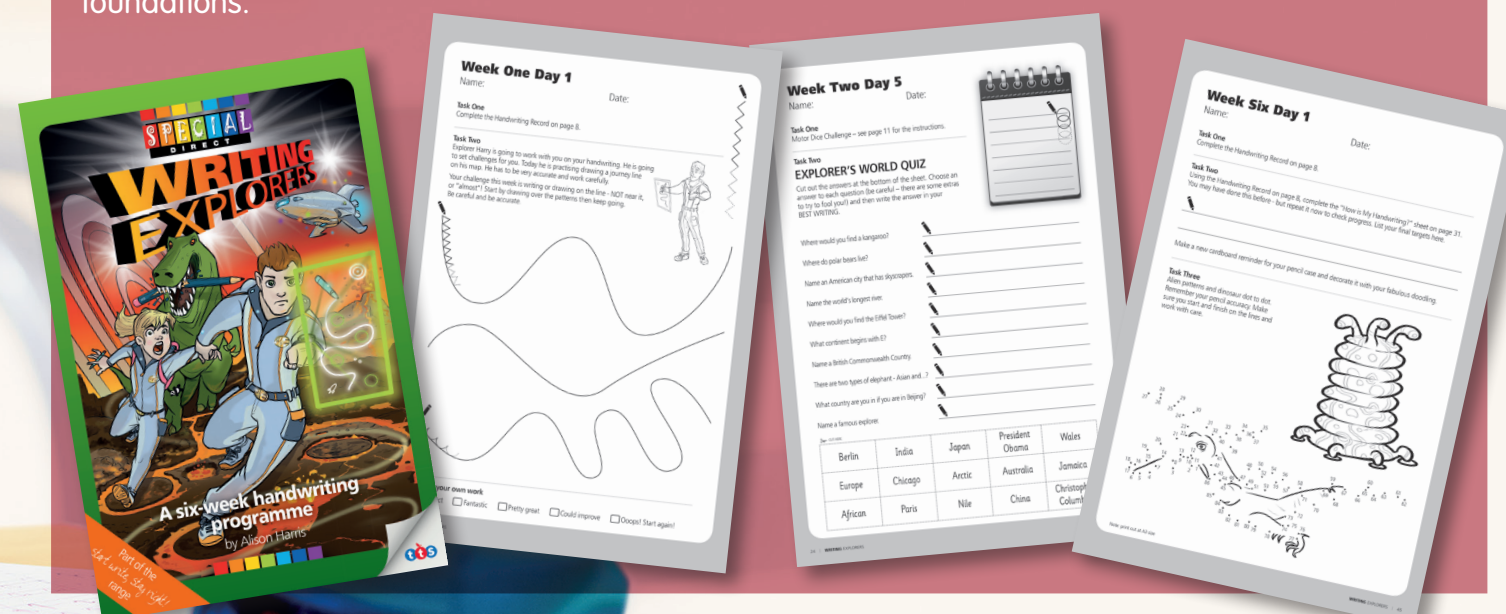


Have you seen the six week programme, **Writing Explorers**? This is aimed at older pupils who need to work on their handwriting and all the underpinning skills. It uses topics that many (often boys – that seems sexist, but is actually statistically accurate) enjoy – dinosaurs, space, coding. The whole programme is set out for you to photocopy and includes many fun tasks that do not feel like they are focused on handwriting yet practise the essential skills. There are clear Teacher's Guides included for each stage to systematically work on the foundations.

When you decide to set up a small group for older pupils to work on handwriting, it can be really helpful to:

- Gather together great tools and lovely paper or notebooks to use.
- Ensure that pupils use the writing equipment that enables their very best work. Encourage them to evaluate this for themselves too. Is this the best pencil for the job? Have they positioned the paper correctly?
- Help the children to be self-sufficient and learn what they need to prep for themselves for their great handwriting.
- Make sure they know it is not forever! It is a limited time group which will be fun and will stop after X number of sessions or weeks.
- Encourage able pupils to check out and evaluate their own progress.
- Simply get pupils to write out a funny sentence in their best writing at the start of the sessions and write the same sentence each session so that they can see their progress clearly all on the same sheet.

Here are some examples from **Writing Explorers**:



And finally, have you considered the sensory aspects of handwriting? The need for sensory movement breaks to prepare the children to be well regulated and able to sit and focus?

Movement increases our proprioception which is our body awareness and ability to grade the movement of our muscles. Improving proprioceptive feedback and helping the children to be in their best calm, alert state is also an essential foundation for handwriting.

- Use a movement break before any handwriting tasks – even 30 seconds of shaking their limbs, jumping up and down in their place, or stamping their feet will make a difference.
- Try hand warm-ups such as getting fingers and wrists moving fluidly with stretches, making a tight fist and then stretching out, touching each finger to thumb, or twirling a pencil. **Start Write, Stay Right** also offers some other great examples.

Some children will still really struggle to sit still and focus on the writing task. Increasing their opportunity to get more proprioceptive (body awareness) feedback can really help. Allowing feet to move under the desk can make a big difference.

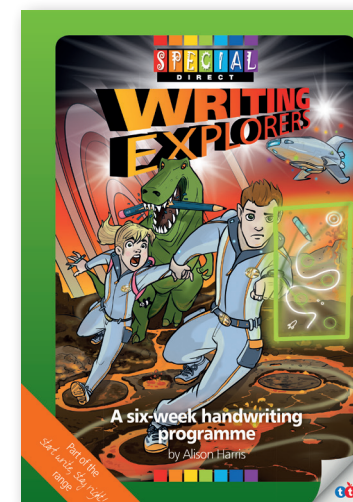
Consider:

- Allowing a pupil to remove their shoes and roll a tennis ball or a prickly ball under the sole of their foot.
- Tie a length of Theraband around the legs of the desk so that the child can push their legs against it.

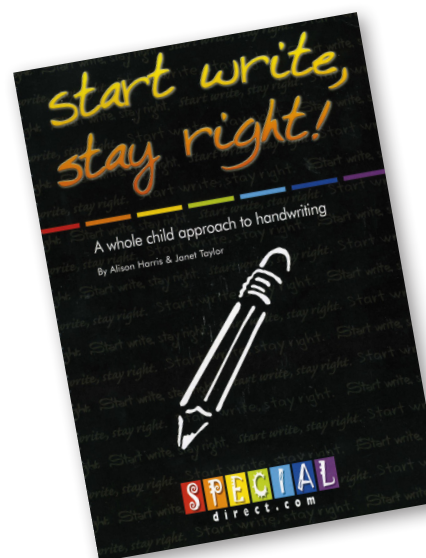


- Resources such as **Fidgety Feet** or **Weighted Wrist Bands** can be excellent options to have in your class either as a motivator or for equipment to help them do their best work. It is always a good idea to have more than one pupil using additional equipment in the classroom to ensure that they don't feel different.

Writing Explorers Handwriting Activity Programme SD12637



Start Write, Stay Right Handwriting Guidance Book SD08044



Start Write, Stay Right Handwriting Worksheets for 5-8 year olds SD09001 SD11005

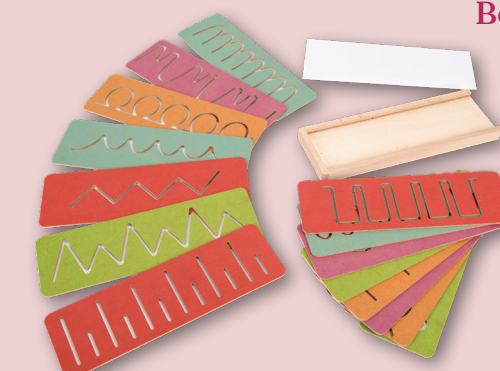


Fine Motor Skills Activity Bag SD10365



Developmental Pencil Grips SD12325

Fine Motor Skills Board Set SD12339



Fidgety Feet Posture Aid SD10004



There are more fun ideas in the **Sensory Movement Breaks** book, which includes a whole chapter on sensory movement breaks for the whole class.