

Beginning handwriting

Most little children at some point have a go at forming letters, often around age 3 or 4 though some, especially boys, take longer to develop the fine motor skills involved. When your child attempts to write independently/creatively, don't be over critical about spelling and grammar at this point or he may become discouraged; keep your spelling programme separate - all the strands (spelling, letter formation and composition) will come together eventually, usually by the age of 9-10.

Due to the extra challenge of having to spell and punctuate correctly, it makes sense to base actual handwriting tasks on copying existing texts ('copy work' as it's known), rather than asking your child to write creatively when he'll need to be bringing all the writing strands together and may not manage any of them well. It's a good idea to base handwriting lessons on words and sentences he is already using in other lessons - spelling words, for example, or lines from scripture or poems or books he is currently reading/memorising/listening to. If you want your child to really try to make his writing presentable, giving him something meaningful and even beautiful to copy is likely to be more inspiring.

If your child chooses to write original pieces (see Beginning Composition), try not to be too critical of his handwriting, spelling etc. Gently remind/correct if he misspells a word he has been learning, or forms a letter backwards, but at this stage it is more important to encourage him if he writes independently. Remember that for very young children, the idea that they can convey their thoughts to you via scrawling shapes on a piece of paper is actually quite exciting. Don't destroy their wonder at this by focussing on the mistakes - there will be plenty! Focus on the message your child is trying to get across and praise any correct spellings. If you keep up his copywork/letter formation lessons, this will start to show in his independent writing.

Pre writing/letter formation

When children do start to form letters, there is no need to use pencil and paper at first. Children usually start off by tracing letter forms with their fingers. Maria Montessori encouraged children to form letters with their finger in a tray of sand; she also used letters cut out of sandpaper for the children to feel and learn the shapes before introducing the added complication of pens, paper and line placement of letters. If your child is keen to write 'properly', try a felt tip on paper or a whiteboard marker. There is no need to use lines at this stage; line placement adds an extra complication and can be taught later, once the forms of the letters are automatic. The same is true of the size of letters. At first, using lines would restrict the size too much. The bigger the letters, the better the child can see and feel how they are formed. Don't worry, this stage won't last long: children's writing always grows smaller as they grow older.

Moving on to 'proper' writing

Once your child is familiar with the sound and shape of the letters, you can move on to the next stage (this could be at 4 or 7, depending on your child's readiness). Many programmes start off with practice in the basic patterns involved in letter formation; this is a better approach than some books (such as CGP) which have children copying random patterns for 'pencil practice'. If you use the Christopher Jarman book (see Resources, below), you can photocopy a page of patterns, stick it on card and laminate it. Your child can go over the patterns, letters or words with a whiteboard marker as many times as is needed before starting on a 'proper' lined book. Working through these patterns lays a good foundation and avoids establishing bad habits which can be difficult to correct later on.

You can make your own worksheets; simply draw the letters for your child faintly and have him go over your writing, making sure he is following the proper order of the strokes (this is important so that later when he comes to join the letters, they are ending in the correct place on the line). It's a good idea to write the letters in families rather than in alphabetical order, or as a series of one letter repeated across a whole line. Learn for yourself about the 'letter families' (those which are formed with similar strokes) and point this out as you teach. The letters are commonly grouped as follows for writing (not reading) purposes:

r n m h b p c o a g d q e i u y l t v w x

(the remaining letters s f j k z are taught separately, though some schemes include them within families).

As soon as he has mastered enough individual letters, have him copy whole words (much more interesting!) and then short sentences. If you are making your own lessons, it is fun to write sentences which mean something to him (about his family, interests etc.). Once he's finding going over letters easy, move to the next level. Go back to writing individual letters but this time, instead of having him go over your letter, have him copy the same letter on to the next line. Carry on like this, again moving onto words then short sentences.

Writing on lines

When your child is quite confident in forming letters, introduce placing letters on lines correctly. For this, you can use pre-cut cardboard letters and simply draw well-spaced lines on a sheet of paper if you want to make it more tactile. Show how the letters form groups: most sit right between the two lines but some have ascenders and descenders.

When he's used to this, start off with quite wide handwriting lines (i.e. with two bold lines for the central body of the letter and dotted lines for ascenders and descenders). You may

need to print these off (or just make one of your own and copy as many sheets as you need) as most shop-bought books have very narrow lines. Most children will write p, y, j, g etc. with the bottom of the 'tail' on the line rather than the central body of the letter, and will probably need lots of practice to write these in the correct place.

Resources

All the main educational publishers offer handwriting practice books. Just be sure to use one that suits the level your child is at (letter formation, print, cursive etc.) and don't move onto the next stage before providing plenty of practice at each level.

With handwriting, it is a good idea to stick with one programme as they will all have a slightly different approach and you don't want to confuse your child. Once he's writing confidently you could try introducing a more complicated hand if you wanted to. American handwriting programmes tend to teach a much more complex script than the UK books. [Here](#) is an example from a Catholic website (you may not want to copy the hand used, but it might give you ideas for generating your own versions of these prayers etc. in a simpler script).

Christopher Jarman's [Improve your English Handwriting](#) is very thorough and explains the principles of good handwriting as well as giving plenty of pages of practice. You can also download a font for this writing called [Jardotty](#). This is a dotted version of the Jarman font, and once installed can be used to generate your child's own personalised handwriting copy sheets. The book teaches simple print letters matching each pattern, then practises letters with 'hooks' leading up to a simple cursive; each type of join is dealt with separately.

Schofield and Simms produce a very reasonably priced set of two books which take your child from print to cursive. [Handwriting practice Book 1](#)

If you prefer something a bit more colourful with gold stars and a story to keep your child interested, try [Lett's Hilarious Handwriting](#): despite the name, the actual hand is very attractive and neat. This book teaches cursive (joined) writing

For free resources online [Teach Handwriting](#) has plenty of advice and worksheets