
Teaching Handwriting



History

The original Teaching Handwriting was released in 1985. Its development began in 1976. Many people assisted in the preparation of the original booklet and it acknowledged the work of E. M. Eggers, N. A. Bracefield, J. S. Sharp, and H. J. Farr, principal of Upper Hutt Primary School, and his staff and pupils.

The book was rereleased as a PDF in 2008 with some modifications.

This release of the updated book is to support the release of the English learning area years 0-6 in 2024.

Published by the Ministry of Education,
New Zealand, June 2025.

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education.govt.nz

Acknowledgments:

The illustrations by Richard Parker are based on the drawing from the original Teaching Handwriting.

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ISBN 978-1-77697-841-0 (Online)



Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

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Introduction

Teaching learners to write letters automatically enhances the quality of their writing. When learners can form letters effortlessly, this frees up mental space to express more creative ideas. When handwriting is not automatic it can occupy all of a learner's working memory making it very difficult for them to focus on, think about, and learn about other things. Practising letter formation is also crucial for reading development.

When learners practice handwriting the letters and words they are learning about during phonics and spelling lessons, it helps them to remember the new knowledge better than using letter tiles or typing. This is because handwriting activates and strengthens the brain pathway used for spelling and decoding, while the other forms of practice do not.

Handwriting boosts confidence and motivation. When learners handwrite with ease, and when their writing is tidy and legible, they feel better about their writing overall. This means that they are more motivated and engaged during writing lessons. Learner writing must be legible for the intended reader. It is also important for the learners' engagement with the writing process; learners must be able to read and check their own writing to evaluate, edit and revise. Writing by hand will benefit learning across the curriculum as it helps to secure new knowledge in memory and supports learners to think deeply about new ideas.

Unfortunately, the significance of handwriting to writing development has been downplayed in recent years. This, combined with increasing use of digital tools in the junior years, has meant that many learners have not received the instruction in handwriting that they require. It is time to address this situation – with urgency. Handwriting instruction is practical, significantly more cost-effective than digital options, and will have a profound positive effect on literacy outcomes overall.

Teaching handwriting is simple and enjoyable. In most classes it will require just ten to fifteen minutes of explicit teaching each day.

The purpose of teaching handwriting

The purpose of teaching handwriting is for each learner to learn to write legibly and fluently, with ease and automaticity.

To realise this intention, the basic script described in this booklet, should be taught to all learners from years 0-8.

Using the same basic script in all schools will lead to continuity and consistency in the teaching and learning of handwriting. Teachers should not rigidly insist on the precise, standardised reproduction of model letter shapes, but should emphasise rather the way the pencil or pen is moved to form the letters. Rather than copying model shapes, learners are learning efficient movements. Teachers can teach movement – a sample alphabet cannot. Instruction needs to be explicit and consistent, providing a base on which individual handwriting may progressively develop.

The development of an efficient, individual style depends on the automaticity of basic skills. This can be achieved only by competent, explicit teaching and regular practice.

Pencil or pen?

Schools are free to decide whether their learners use pencil or pen for writing, although pencils may be particularly useful for two reasons.

1. Pencils create more friction than pen. Friction generated as part of the handwriting process creates feedback which supports learning in handwriting. This friction also aids orthographic mapping.
2. Pencils can do everything a pen can do, as well as being able to be erased. Learners using pencils know that they can correct errors in a tidy way to keep the page readable. (Deleting and replacing are essential parts of a skilled writer's process). Having b/d reversals and similar transcription errors erased leads to learners seeing correct versions as often as possible.

Another medium to consider for novice learners of handwriting is chalk. A blackboard's surface has resistance, which is great for motor memory, strength, and pressure problems. A short chalk supports correct grip. Blackboards that can be used on the mat or at their tables are the best way to maximise the handwriting benefits of chalk.

Position and posture

Handwriting involves coordinated movements of the fingers, hand, and arm. The arm should be lightly supported by the forearm and little finger to enable smooth movement across the page. Avoid keeping the forearm fixed. The fingers should flex slightly to form letters, with the hand moving smoothly ahead of the writing instrument's contact point with the paper. Learners should hold the instrument about 3cm from the end, while left-handers should hold it further back to see their writing clearly. Proper paper positioning is crucial.

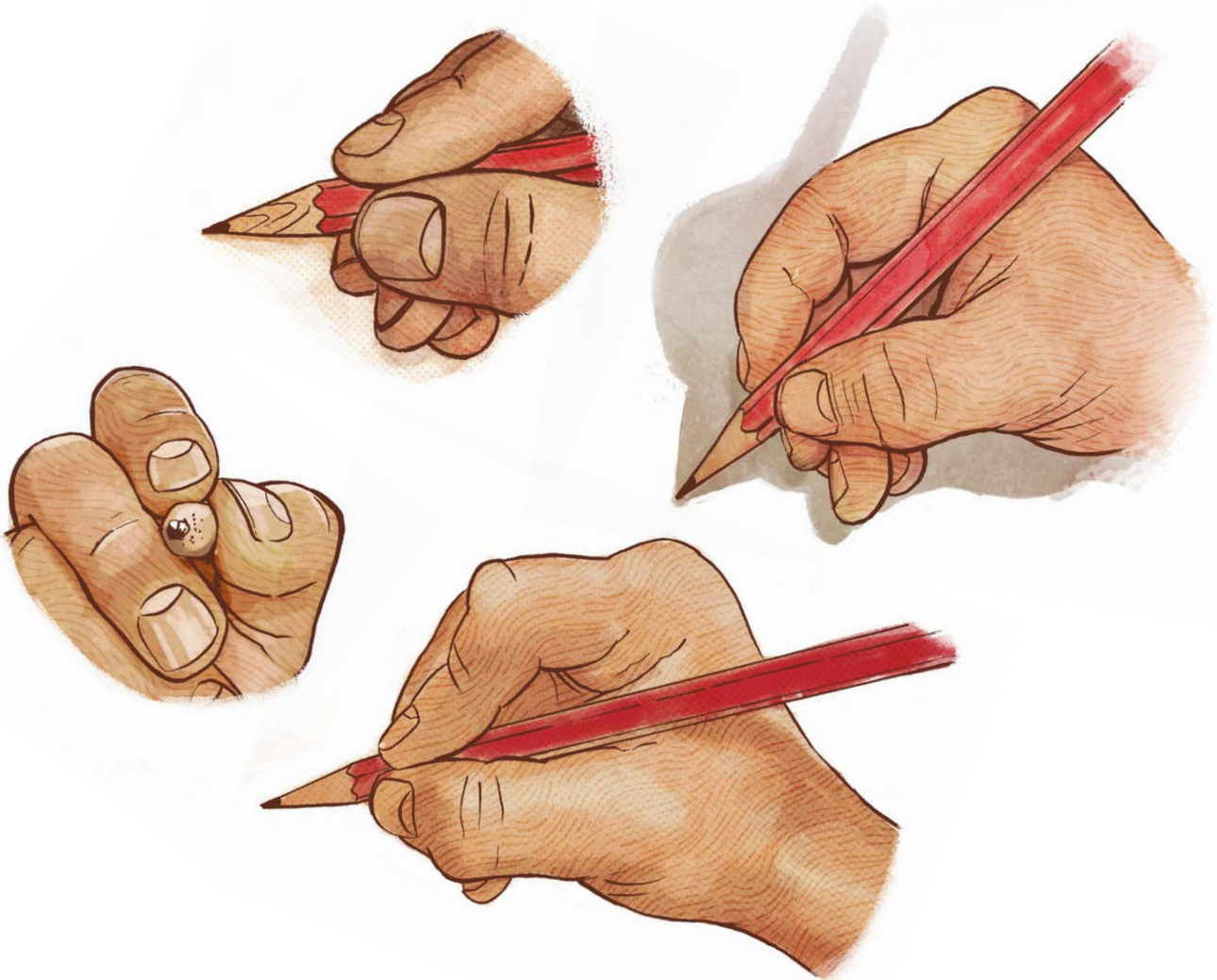
Practise letter shapes can help develop a relaxed handwriting movement. Experimenting with repetitive scribbles and letter patterns can help learners achieve fluency. When teaching linking techniques, it's better to simulate words by writing three to five shapes before lifting the instrument, rather than writing long continuous lines. As writing tasks become longer, learners should use natural pauses to relax their grip. Lightly tapping the forefinger on the instrument or rotating the wrist can help relax the hand, especially when writing at higher speeds.

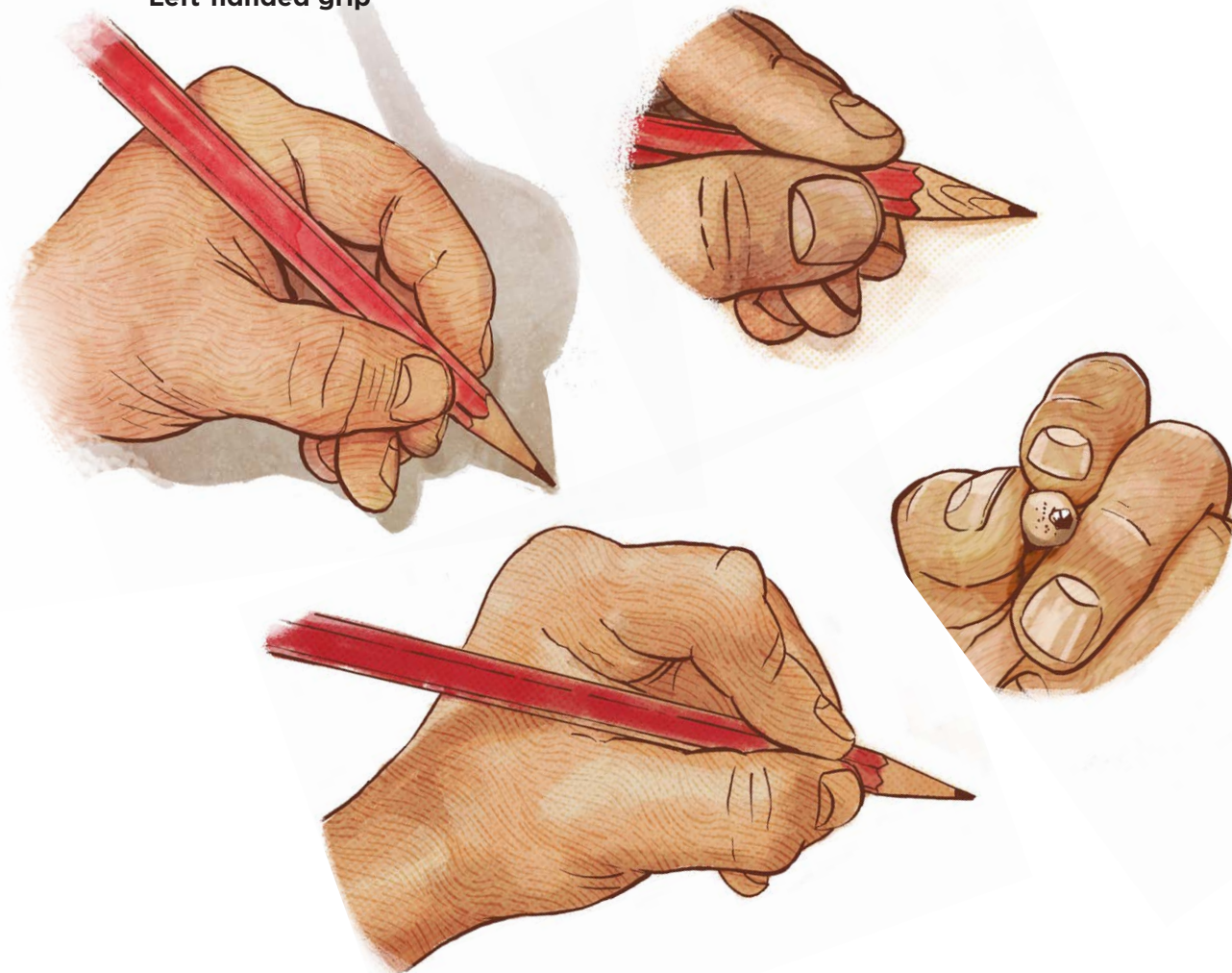
Ideally, learners should write while seated at a desk for comfort. Emphasise good posture during handwriting lessons and other writing activities. Teach learners to maintain a stable position by sitting comfortably with their feet on the floor, the writing arm resting on a table or desk, the opposite hand holding the paper, and their shoulders relaxed.

Grip

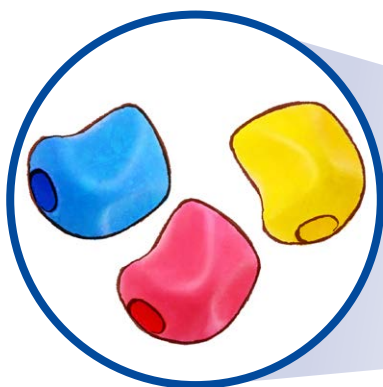
There are physical differences in learners' hands and fingers which cause some variation in the way learners hold a pencil. In general, however, they should hold the pencil between the thumb and forefinger with the middle finger supporting the pencil from below. This makes a tripod grip.

Right-handed grip



Left-handed grip

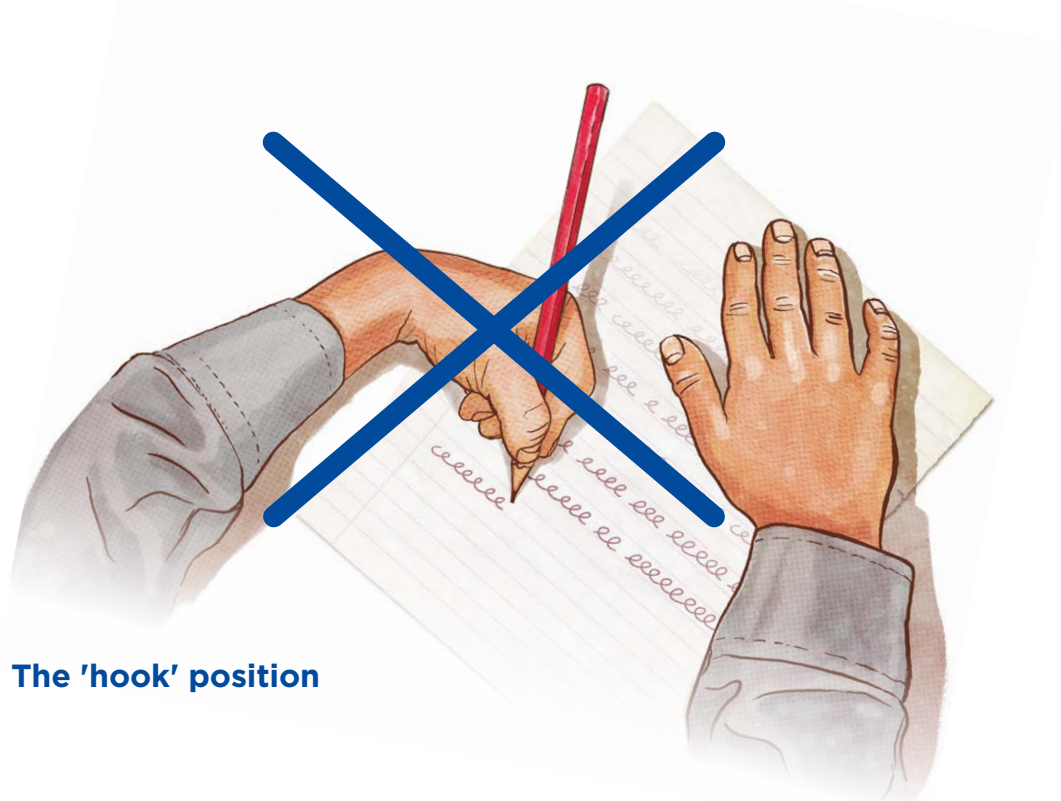
When they are first learning to write, learners who hold their pencil incorrectly should be constantly supervised and helped to hold it correctly. Assistive pen or pencil grips can be obtained which are designed to help learners learn the correct grip. These are most effective when used during the first two years at school since, like any habit, an incorrect grip is difficult to change when it is well established.



Paper positioning

Right-handers should turn the paper slightly from the vertical in an anticlockwise direction.

Left-handers will find it easier if they turn the paper in a clockwise direction at more of an angle than for right-handers. It is important that the correct position be taught from the beginning to prevent left-handers adopting the “hook” position.

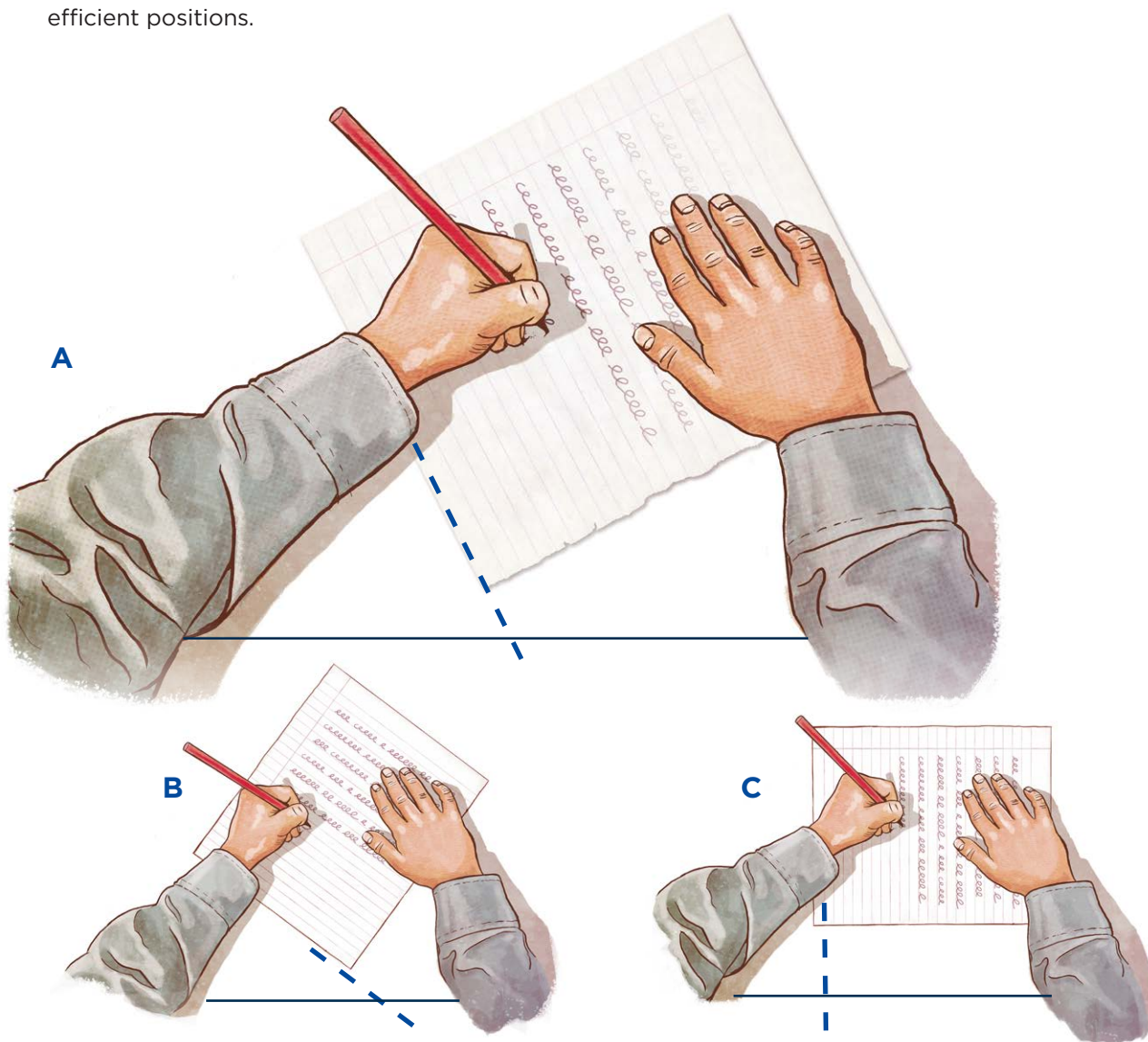


The 'hook' position

Left-handed learners must overcome two major challenges. First, they must push the pencil rather than pull it and, second, their left-hand tends to obscure their writing as it moves across the page. Right-handed adults can experience something of the left-handed learner's difficulties by trying mirror writing, beginning at the right-hand side of the page. Potential difficulties for both right-handers and left-handers in holding a pencil can be avoided by early and regular teaching. Given this, left-handers are just as capable as right-handers of high achievement in handwriting and should on no account be forced to use their right hands.

Left-handed learners may be helped in the following ways.

- › They should turn the paper from the vertical in a clockwise direction (the opposite direction from the right-handed position). Diagrams **A**, **B**, and **C** show, in order, the three most efficient positions.



Left-handed students must be taught the correct hand position from the very beginning. Encourage them to position their left arm below the line of writing and to hold the pencil slightly farther from the tip than right-handed students, which can help improve visibility of their work. It's also important to seat them in a way that prevents their writing arm from being bumped by others, creating a more comfortable and effective writing environment.

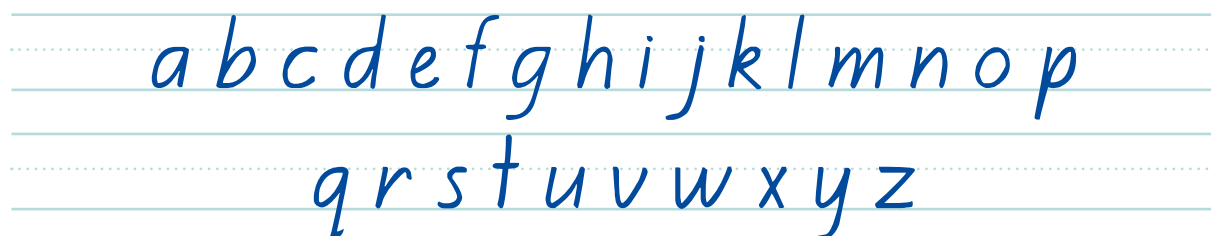
Lowercase Letters

(Free downloadable versions of these fonts can be found online by searching 'kiwi school handwriting font').

Lower case letters are the priority for the first 6 months of school and will continue to be the focus until they are learnt.

The term 'basic script' used in this booklet refers to an alphabet that is simple and practical. It can be written at speed and with an ease which allows some variation without loss of a consistent appearance. Basic script also provides a sound foundation for later expression of individual preferences.

The lowercase letters of basic script are:



Capital letters

Block capitals are used in basic script. Capitals are used to mark proper nouns and sentence beginnings, as well as acronyms, headings, and as a design choice on some published work.

Some block capitals look the same as their lowercase counterparts e.g., c, p, s, u, x and z. However, most do not. All will need to be learned as distinct from their lowercase counterparts. Quick corrective feedback should be given where learners use capital letters incorrectly. (This is often done with B and D as they are easier to distinguish than b and d.)

The capital letters of basic script are:



Numerals

The numerals of basic script are:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Consistency of movement and shape

The two most important elements of handwriting are movement and shape. The most important consideration is to teach the way that the pencil should be moved to form the letters.

Rounded 'c' shape:

c a d g q o e

Curve start:

s f

Straight down start:

l t i j r n m p h b k y u

Slants:








v w x z

Formation guide



A possible simple explanation for each letter and numeral formation.

Lowercase









Rounded c shape






Letter	How it is formed
	Start at half height, curve down and around leaving an open shape.
	Start at half height, curve down, around and back to the start point. Then a straight line down.
	Start at half height, curve down, around and up to the top. Then a straight line down.
	Start at half height, curve down, around and back to the start point. Then a straight line down below the line ending in a curve.
	Start at half height, curve down, around and back to the start point. Then a straight line down below the line ending in flick.
	Start at half height, curve down, around and back to the start point.
	Start mid-way between the line and half height. Go out to the right before curving all the way down past the start point and the bottom line.

Curve start





Letter	How it is formed
	Start at half height, curve down to the left, then the right then back to the left.
	Start at the top curve down slightly then a straight line down to the bottom. A small cross line at half height.

Straight down start

Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. A small cross line above half height.
	Start at half height, a straight line down to the bottom. Then a dot above the line.
	Start at half height, a straight line down past the line ending in a curve. Then a dot above the line.
	Start at half height, a straight line down to the bottom, then back up and curve over.
	Start at half height, a straight line down to the bottom, then back up and over and back down to the bottom.
	Start at half height a straight line down to the bottom, then back up and over and back down to the bottom, then back up and over and back down to the bottom again.
	Start at half height, a straight line down past the line, then back up curve all the way round and back to the line.





Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top a straight line down to the bottom, then back up and curve over back to the line.
	Start at the top a straight line down to the bottom, then back up curve all the way round and back to the line.
	Start at the top - down - up - over - in - out.
	Start at half height, straight down before curving around back to half height then back down past the line and curving to end.
	Start at half height, straight down before curving around back to half height then back down to the line.

Slants


Letter	How it is formed
	Start at half height slant down to the line then slant back up to half height
	Start at half height slant down to the line then slant back up to half height, slant down to the line then slant back up to half height.
	Start at half height slant down to the line. Then do the same in the other direction crossing the first line drawn.
	Start at half height straight to the right before slanting down left to the bottom and then straight to the right again.

Capital letters


Rounded C shape

Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top, curve down and around leaving an open shape.
	Start at the top, curve down past the bottom line and up before a small down
	Start at the top, curve down to the bottom and all the way back up to the start point.
	Start at the top, curve down to the bottom and all the way back up to the start point. A second small line slants down through the 'O'












Curve start




Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top, curve down to the left, then the right then back to the left.

Horizontal start







Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top, a straight line across, then slanting back the other way to the bottom before going straight across again.

Straight down start











Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then from the same point a curved line out and in out and in.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then from the same point a curved line out and in.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom then across. Then a line from the start point across. Then a line from the middle across.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then a line from the start point across. Then a line from the middle across.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then another straight line. Then a joining line across the middle.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then a small line across at the top. Then a small line across at the bottom.
	Start at the top, a straight line down curving near the bottom.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then from a the top a slant to the middle then slanting away to the bottom.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom then across.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then from the same start point a slant line down to the right then straight back up to the top.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then from the same point a curved line out and in.

Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then from the same point a curved line out and in then slanting down to the line.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom. Then a line across the top
	Start at the top, a straight line down curving then going back to top then straight down.

Slants

Letter	How it is formed
	Start at the top, a slant down to the bottom. Then from the same point a slant down to the bottom in the other direction. Then a join line in the middle.
	Start at the top, a slant down to the bottom. Then from the same point a slant down to the bottom in the other direction. then a slant back up to the right before back down to the left.
	Start at the top, a slant down to the bottom then a slant line in the other direction back to the top.
	Start at the top, a slant down to the bottom, then back up to the top. Then repeat.
	Start at the top, a slant down to the bottom. Then another slant line top to bottom in the other direction crossing the first in the middle.
	Start at the top, a slant down to half height. The another line starting at the top slant in other direction touching first.

Numerals

Numerals	How it is formed
	Start at the top, curve down to the bottom and all the way back up to the start point.
	Start at the top, a straight line down to the bottom.
	Start at the top, curve around to the right, then down and to the left all the way to the bottom, then a small straight line to the right.
	Start at the top, curve around to the right, then do the same again.
	Start at the top, on an angle down to the left to half height. Then straight to the right and finally a line straight down.
	Start at the top, down slightly to the left to half height, then curve to the left past the bottom. Last a line at the top going to the right.
	Start at the top, slight curve down to the left, at the bottom loop around to join original line.
	Start at the top, straight to the right, then a straight line down to the left.
	Start at the top curve to the left before looping back to the right then back to left.
	Start at the top, loop to the left then straight down.

Handwriting instruction

Separate handwriting instruction should happen every day with the primary focus being on correct letter and numeral formation. Use consistent verbal instructions for how to form each letter and numeral. Model letter and numeral formation and watch closely as learners practise.

Explicit teaching will involve modelling to groups or the whole class. Learners will need individual help to reduce the possibility of practising and embedding errors. Some simple verbal prompts while modelling letter formation will help. Too much verbalisation is likely to lead to cognitive overload for learners.

Close monitoring of learner practice is very important. Monitoring must be done by moving amongst learners while they practice checking that formation is correct. Immediate feedback and correction is vital so that learners do not fix incorrect forms in their minds by repeating them. Marking after the lesson is not optimal as letters can look right on the page but may have been formed incorrectly. This is particularly important when learners are first learning to write. When you see an error or confusion developing, re-model for the learner and support them to practise correctly. Support learners with their handwriting during writing time also, to avoid errors and confusions being practised.

Teachers should consistently use and display handwriting models and seize various opportunities throughout the school day to reinforce these skills, for example, when modelling writing at the beginning of the daily writing lesson and when showing learners the spellings of new words during phonics. Learners need clear, focused opportunities to learn and practice proper letter formation. Short, concentrated sessions are more effective than longer ones that attempt to cover multiple aspects of the process.

Sequence of instruction

The main points in teaching learners handwriting at primary school generally are:

- › teaching grip and a stable seating position while forming letters
- › letter shapes and movements
- › increasing speed and endurance without loss of quality.

Handwriting instruction is most effective when teachers actively demonstrate and describe letter formation in front of learners.

The first six months

On school entry, some learners will be able to write their own names. Some may have rarely used a pen or pencil and might need many opportunities to engage in manipulative activities to develop the hand-eye co-ordination needed for accurate handwriting.

During the first six months help learners to:

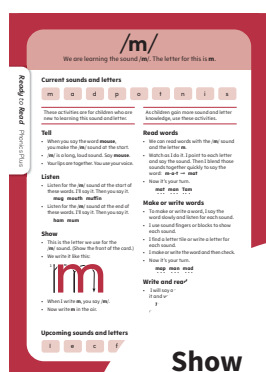
- › establish the correct grip
- › sit in a stable position at a desk
- › begin letters at the correct point
- › form lowercase letters and numerals correctly.

During early handwriting instruction, teach and provide practice with groups of letters that are formed with similar motor patterns. Some examples of this are:

- › rounded 'c' shape: c, a, d, g, q, o, e
- › curve start: s, f
- › straight down start: l, t, i, j, r, n, m, p, h, b, k, y, u
- › slants: v, w, x, z.

Immediate feedback and correction is vital so that learners do not fix incorrect forms in their minds when they are first learning to write.

Some handwriting guidance is provided for each grapheme in the *Ready to Read Phonics Plus Kākano sound cards* and *Tupu phonics cards*.

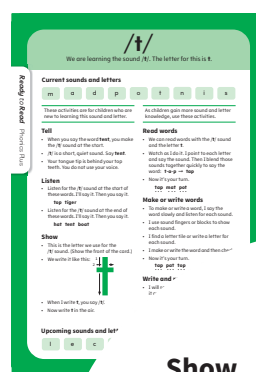


Show

- This is the letter we use for the /m/ sound. (Show the front of the card.)
- We write it like this:



- When I write **m**, you say /m/.
- Now write **m** in the air.



Show

- This is the letter we use for the /t/ sound. (Show the front of the card.)
- We write it like this:



- When I write **t**, you say /t/.
- Now write **t** in the air.

The first year

During their first year, introduce learners to all the letters of the alphabet and the numerals 0-9.

Help learners to:

- › reinforce the correct grip
- › reinforce sitting in a stable position at a desk
- › begin letters at the correct point
- › form letters (**first lowercase and then, once these have been learned, uppercase**) and numerals correctly and legibly
- › attend to size and spacing.

Where possible, handwriting learning should reinforce learning of the grapheme-phoneme correspondences being learned as learners learn to read.

The second year

Learners should be forming all letters and numerals correctly and legibly, attending to size, placement, and spacing. Plan for groups or whole class handwriting reinforcement and practise.

Remember to support learners with their handwriting during writing time, to avoid errors and confusions being practised. This may require individual redirection and going back to how to form letters correctly when legibility is compromised.

The third year

Handwriting reinforcement and practise will continue to be planned for, with the intended outcome of increased ease and automaticity. Reinforce size, placement (on the line), spacing between letters and words, and use of a consistent slope. This will be done in groups or whole class.

Continue to support learners with their handwriting during writing time, to avoid errors and confusions being practised. This may require individual redirection and going back to how to form letters correctly when legibility is compromised.

Year 4

Learners are now expected to be responsible for organising their environment, posture position and grip to ensure they can write without interruption. They are expected to build stamina and fluency while maintaining legibility. Whole class reinforcement and practise will be planned for. Continue to support learners with their handwriting during writing time also, to avoid errors and confusions being practised. This may require individual redirection and going back to how to form letters correctly when legibility is compromised.

Year 5 and 6

Learners are handwriting with ease and automaticity, while maintaining legibility, size, spacing, and slope when writing longer texts for multiple writing purposes across the school day. Handwriting reinforcement and practise will be planned for. Individual redirection and going back to how to form letters correctly will be needed if legibility is compromised. Cursive may be taught.

Year 7 and 8

Learners handwrite with stamina and fluency while maintaining legibility, size, spacing, and slope. Handwriting reinforcement and practise will be planned for. Individual redirection and going back to how to form letters correctly will be needed if legibility is compromised. Cursive may be taught.

Notice, recognise, and respond

Noticing and recognising can be observing students as they handwrite and identifying what they can do. These observations can be recorded in formal ways e.g. into a template like one of those shared 'Handwriting student record' or Handwriting class record'. These observations can also be recorded more informally. The most important thing is to ensure that what is observed informs a response. The response should be the next teaching point.

Students can be encouraged to self-assess their handwriting using a rubric that clearly breaks down the skills and knowledge being assessed into student speak e.g.

When I handwrite I:

- › sit at a desk
- › sit upright
- › keep my feet on the floor
- › rest my writing arm on the desk.

Development of an efficient, individual style

As handwriting is highly individualistic, learners will develop individual differences. Individual differences between learners are expected and teachers need to accept modifications of letter forms, provided that the essential form is not distorted. Teaching learners (who can write with ease and automaticity) cursive style is an option to consider from Year 5. Some learners like to join letters as they develop their own style.

Cursive style

“Cursive” is a term that usually refers to handwriting in which the letters within words are connected by ligatures or joining strokes to increase the speed of writing.

This is not a requirement of the English learning area, although it may be explored with learners who want to learn to join their letters as they develop their own personal style. Some learners find this easier than printing and it can feel more age appropriate for older learners. It is also associated with better outcomes for spelling.

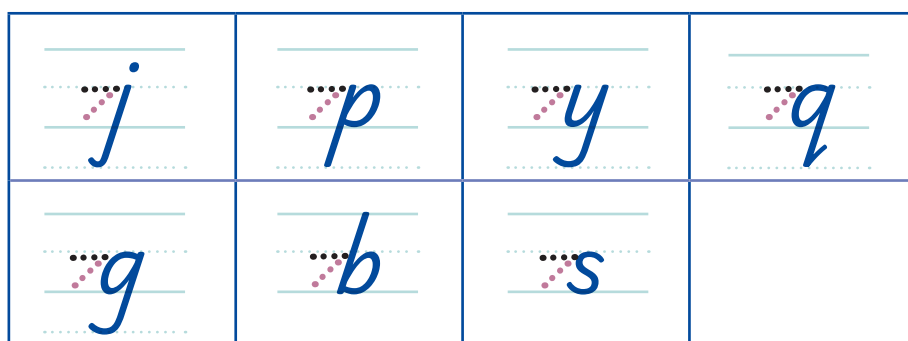
The cursive style here is a progression from basic script and can lead to increased fluency and speed by joining most letters. It has the same slope and letter shape as the basic script and has no unnecessary features such as loops, which may slow the writing.

Letters not joined to or from
















This is shown with a black dotted line for how the letter would be joined to horizontally. A red dotted line shows how the letter would be joined to diagonally. Where the letter can join on to the next letter this is shown as a green dotted line.

Letters joined to but do not join on to any others



Letters joined to and join on diagonally

Letters joined to and join on horizontally

				
--	--	--	---	--

Cursive sequence

Begin with letters that are joined to and join on diagonally

ac cd de hi ka lm mn nu
uc im ma an nc lu ax xc

Next with letters that are joined to and join on horizontally

row vor wov

Then letters joined to but do not join on

naps jam boys jogs quit

Then include letters not joined to

buzz

Then reinforce basic spelling knowledge

Note that, while it is nice to be able to reinforce this spelling knowledge, the primary focus should still be on letter formation and linking.

VC and CVC words

Practice writing two or three letter VC and CVC words, which may include a variety of diagonal and horizontal joins:

on in is can lad fox
met hid lid led

We could also practise some short, irregular words:

of for was my to

We might spend 2-3 weeks at the phase, practising 3-4 words each day.

Long vowel patterns

Practise writing some long vowel patterns and words. For this group, we may have some words which include letters that do not link:

Long a:

ai ay a_e rain day same

Long e

ee ea need leach

Long i:

igh ie i_e might lie time

Long o:

oa ow o_e coat low bone

Long u:

ue ew u_e true blew huge

Other vowel patterns and words

Practise writing some other vowel patterns and words:

ou ow loud down

oi oy coin boy

ar shark mark harp

or corn born horn

er ear ur her learn curl

Practice words with double consonants

Discuss the way in which these double letters often keep the preceding vowel short:

humming bedding running

accent



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