

# CHAPTER 2

## Getting Ready to Write

### Prerequisite Skills

If a student displays most of the following behaviors, the teacher should consider direct instruction in handwriting. The student:

Has a preferred hand for drawing and painting activities.

Has shown an interest in writing; for example, the student has wanted to trace letters or write his or her name.

Has demonstrated skill in fine motor tasks, such as using paint brushes and crayons.

Can copy simple shapes like circles and squares.

### Pre-writing Activities

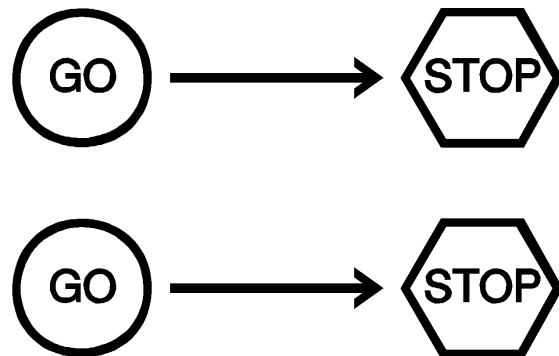
Some activities which may be used to prepare for direct instruction in handwriting include the following:

1. Paint with a large brush with water colors.
2. Trace large, simple pictures to hang when finished.
3. Connect objects on a page by drawing a line from one to the other.
4. Mark a certain object on a page (e.g., put an "X" or mark on the dog).
5. Finger paint, adding sawdust, sand, coffee grounds, cinnamon, etc., for texture.
6. Rub crayons on thin paper placed over corrugated paper, bricks, cement, wood, etc.
7. Arrange pictures in a left-to-right and top-to-bottom sequence.
9. Play dot-to-dot games, scribble, draw, cut,

and paste.

### Introductory Activities

**Left-to-right orientation:** Use games like Looby-Loo and Hokey-Pokey to give practice in left and right discrimination. Have students move play objects from left to right. Draw green "go" and red "stop" signs and have the students draw horizontal lines between the two.



Ask students to complete drawings in which horizontal left-to-right lines are missing.

**Letter formation:** Letter formation is the most important aspect of legibility. The formation of manuscript letters involves vertical, horizontal, and diagonal straight lines; and circles and parts of circles.

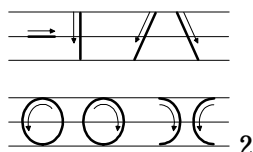
To begin, the student should be given fun exercises drawing lines and shapes on unlined paper to practice the hand movement involved. Later, lined paper can be used. The student can be taught to start and stop on a line for a straight line and to stay between the lines in drawing circles.

Students having extreme difficulty staying within the lines on writing paper may either use commercial paper with raised lines or teacher-made paper with raised lines. Right-Line Paper, produced by Modern Education Corporation, has a raised line superimposed on the printed line so the student can both feel and see the base line.

This raised line paper is available for both wide- and narrow-rule paper (Mercer & Mercer, 1989).

Teacher-made raised line paper may be produced with regular writing paper, glue, and a ruler. The day before the paper is needed, spread a thin line of glue on the desired solid lines of the paper using the ruler as a guide. When the glue dries, it will be clear so the lines are visible.

When using raised line paper, students should be given exercises which allow them to stay within the lines and focus on touching the lines. The shapes shown below represent all the basic shapes that are combined to form manuscript letters.



Introductory activities should be carried out in a relaxed atmosphere and made meaningful for the student by demonstrating how different combinations of the practiced shapes can form different letters. During early instruction, posture and pencil grip should be checked and adjustments made. Particular attention should be given to left-handed students regarding desk height, paper orientation, and pencil grip. For more information on adaptations, refer to Chapter 7, "The Left-Handed Student."

## Evaluation of Readiness Activities

If there is any doubt about a student's readiness for beginning handwriting instruction, a series of well-managed introductory lessons will yield the most valuable data. A significant change in interest and effort may occur when a student realizes he or she is now participating in "real" writing activities.

It is possible to overemphasize readiness activities. In the name of readiness for handwriting, students are often asked to do tasks far more demanding than the writing tasks for which they

are being prepared. The student who spends time doing clockwise and counterclockwise spirals on a chalkboard would be better off writing some of the simpler manuscript letters on paper. The latter tasks would be less demanding in terms of the complexity of the involved motor skills and make infinitely more sense to the student.

## Handwriting Environment and Equipment

Before the student begins formal writing instruction, the teacher should give some attention to the writing environment and equipment. Attention to the environment will maximize the student's learning by reducing stressful body positions, increasing the student's view of the paper, and allowing for free movements of the writing arm, wrist, and fingers.

**Furniture:** The student's desk and chair should be the proper height, allowing the knees to fit comfortably under the desk and the feet to lie flat on the floor. The chair should be placed so the student faces the desk squarely. The desk for a left-handed student should be about two inches lower than for a right-handed student. This helps the left-handed student see what he or she has written.

**Posture:** The student's posture is important for comfort and legibility. He or she should be sitting with feet flat on the floor, back straight, leaning slightly forward, but not touching the desk. The head should be straight, not tilted, with arms resting on the desk about three-quarters of the way to the elbows. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate correct and incorrect posture (see Appendix A for a full page version of each figure). When working with students, model a range of correct and incorrect positions and ask them to identify the correct and incorrect body positions.

Figure 1. Correct Posture

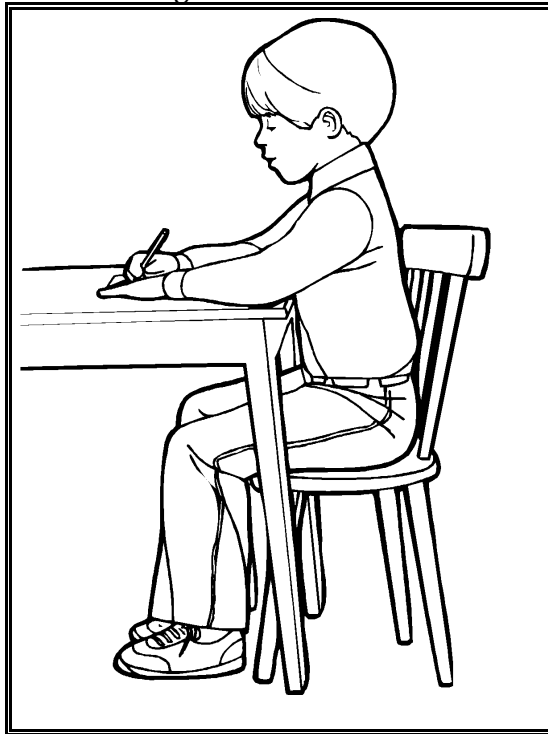
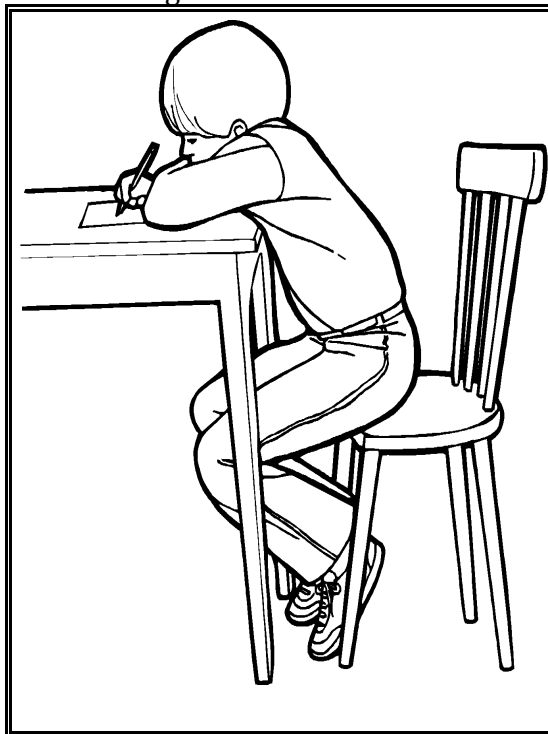


Figure 2. Incorrect Posture



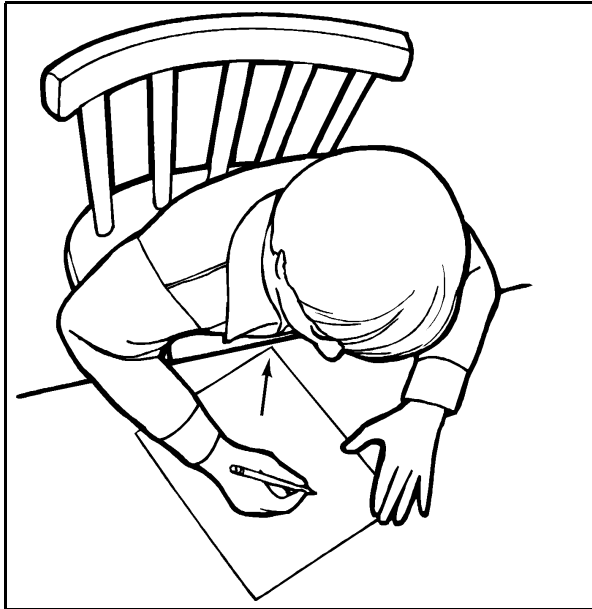
**Paper:** It has been found that oversized writing is not necessary for beginners; for example, writing upper-case letters more than one inch tall has questionable value. Paper with the lines distinctly marked is a help so that the teacher has a guide to use in giving directions; for example, "Start at the top line and go straight down to the bottom line." For a right-handed student, the paper is placed directly in front of the student and slanted to the left. The student should place his or her free hand on the top of the paper to keep it steady on the desk.



For the left-handed student the paper is placed in front of the student's left shoulder and slanted to the right, placing his or her free hand at the top of the paper.



In order to get the student to place the paper at the correct angle, draw an arrow on the writing paper being used. The student is told to keep the arrow pointing at his or her body. For a right-handed student, the arrow is in the bottom left-hand corner.

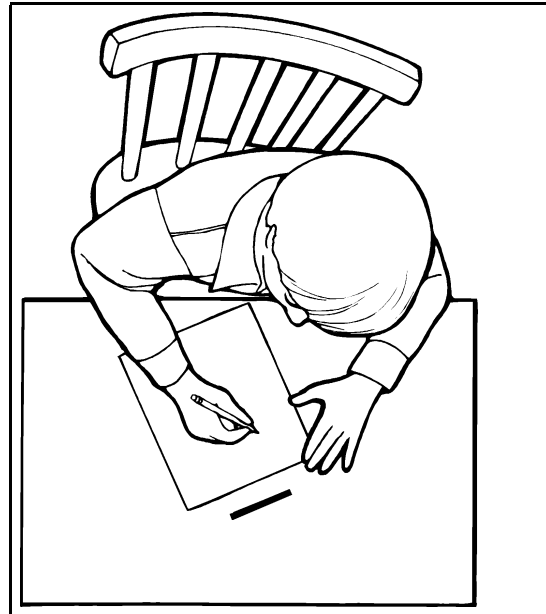


For a left-handed student, the arrow is in the bottom right-hand corner.



This slant is used for *both* manuscript and cursive.

Another method that can be used to ensure the paper is correctly positioned is to place a piece of masking tape at the proper angle on the desk and ask the student to line up the top of his or her paper with the masking tape. This would be particularly useful for the left-handed writer who may not have the advantage of peer models in the classroom.



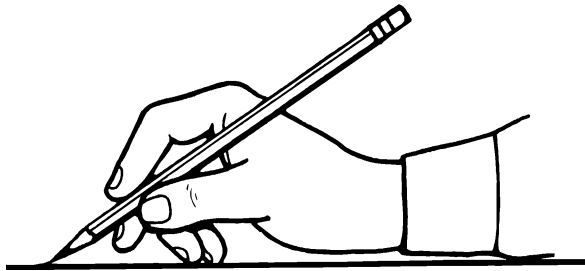
Right-Handed Student



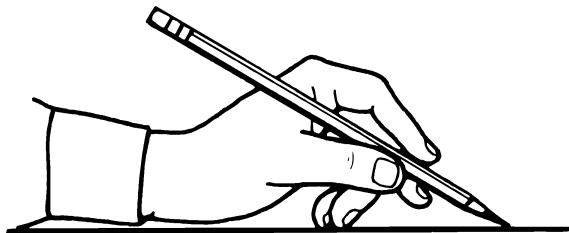
Left-Handed Student

**Pencils and Pencil Grip:** While pencils need to be long enough to be easily grasped, research (Wiles, 1943) has shown that over-sized pencils are not necessary and may even hinder a student's writing. However, soft lead in the pencil may help the student write without exerting undue pressure.

The pencil should be gripped lightly with the forefinger and thumb and should rest on the third finger. The hand should face down. The right-handed student should grip the pencil 1 inch from the point.



The left-handed student should grip the pencil 1 1/2 inches from the point.



The following checklist offers a quick reference guide for determining if the equipment and environment are suitable for handwriting instruction (see Appendix B for a full page version of this checklist). The checklist should be referred to periodically to assure that standards are maintained and to instill habits that will carry over into all handwriting situations.

## HANDWRITING ENVIRONMENT AND EQUIPMENT CHECKLIST

---

**FURNITURE** Is the desk the correct height?  
Is the chair the correct height?  
Is the learner facing the desk squarely?

---

**LIGHTING** Is the light properly positioned?

---

**POSTURE** Are the student's feet flat on the floor?  
Is the student's back straight?  
Is the student leaning forward slightly?  
Is the student's head straight?  
Are the student's lower arms resting on the desk?

---

**PAPER** Is the paper slanted properly?  
Is the student's free hand at the top of paper?  
Is the paper positioned correctly in relation to the learner?

---

**PENCIL GRIP** Is the student gripping the pencil properly?