

CHAPTER 4

Starting Formal Handwriting Instruction

This chapter will consider the two major requirements for an effective handwriting program--resources for individual instruction and a systematic instructional sequence.

Resources for Individual Instruction

Handwriting is a combination of visual-motor and cognitive tasks, and effective instruction requires that classrooms be organized for individual attention while new skills are being taught. Just as a tennis coach tries to supply suggestions immediately to the student learning a new skill, so the handwriting teacher must be prepared to do the same. Correcting handwriting papers after school and handing them back the next day is highly inappropriate for this type of learning.

The classroom should be managed in such a fashion that the teacher is working with no more than five students who are in the critical introductory stages of learning a new handwriting skill. The other students may be practicing handwriting tasks involving consolidation of skills previously introduced.

It is better for the teacher to reduce the amount of handwriting instruction to ensure intense supervision of initial skill development than to conduct poorly supervised instruction in the critical beginning skills. Poorly supervised instruction means that future instructional efforts will require the correction of bad habits--a time-consuming process for the teacher and an unpleasant process for the student.

A Systematic Instructional Sequence

A teacher needs to have a very clear step-by-step sequence of instructional tasks. The following suggestions will help identify procedures and materials to ensure a clear progression of activities that will meet the needs of all students.

Assessment and Monitoring of Beginning Skills:

A process is needed that will facilitate the identifying and monitoring of specific habits (posture, pencil grip, paper slant) for the beginning writer. Lack of attention to these habits leads to poor writing and results in difficulties for the student and time-consuming remedial activities for the teacher. An inappropriate handwriting habit may be so ingrained after one year that remediation may not be practical. The result may be a student who carries a handicapping handwriting habit for life. With the left-handed student this occurrence is all too prevalent. The use of a checklist, like the *Handwriting Environment and Equipment Checklist* found on page 10, is an excellent way to monitor the development of those important habits related to posture and pencil grip.

Teacher Description of Letters: The teacher needs to facilitate learning by determining a consistent vocabulary to use when describing letters of an alphabet to students. For example, using the words "tall letter" or "big letter" may cause students to wonder if the reference is to an uppercase letter or a very large-sized lowercase letter. Also confusing can be the terms "capital" and "small." Use of the terms "uppercase" and "lowercase" is recommended when describing letters of the alphabet to beginning writers.

Handwriting and Written Expression: Care should be taken to remember that handwriting differs from written expression and therefore instruction in each area should differ. Since handwriting is basically a visual-motor task that does not require complex cognitive abilities, instruction in that area should concentrate on the visual-motor tasks which include learning to form basic strokes, copying models, and writing without a model.

Written expression, on the other hand, is one of the highest forms of communication. It is a communication process which involves not only handwriting, but spelling, punctuation, language, and organizational skills. It reflects a person's ability to comprehend information, organize thoughts, and convey a message utilizing handwriting as a medium rather than oral language.

Handwriting Skill Sequences: Handwriting instruction involves the relatively simultaneous emphasis on two skill sequences:

An *application sequence* stressing the transfer from close-range models to everyday written expression assignments utilizing the chalkboard and texts.

A *motor sequence* in which the student moves from making simple strokes to demonstrating fluency in manuscript and cursive writing.

The Application Skills Sequence: This sequence moves from specific, structured instruction in the preskills required for forming letters to the point that handwriting skills are automatic enough they may be incorporated into higher-level written expression activities. Major steps in the application skills sequence include the following:

1. Copying specific shapes and letter forms from a close model, e.g., a model at the top of the page.
2. Copying letters from a distant model, e.g., a model on the chalkboard.
3. Writing with verbal prompts but without a visible model.

The Motor Skill Sequence: In this sequence the teacher helps build the student's motor skills for handwriting. Major steps in the motor skill sequence include writing the following:

1. Basic manuscript strokes (vertical, horizontal, and slanted), circles (clockwise and counterclockwise), curves, and dots.
2. Simple lower-case manuscript letters (l, i, t, o, c, x, and v).

3. Complex lower-case manuscript letters (a, b, d, e, f, g, h, j, k, m, n, p, q, r, s, u, w, y, and z).
4. Simple manuscript words.
5. Simple manuscript phrases.
6. Numerals (0-9).
7. Manuscript upper-case letters that are similar to lower-case letters (C, O, P, S, U, V, W, X, and Z).
8. Manuscript upper-case letters that are different from lower-case counterparts (A, B, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, Q, R, T, and Y).
9. Simple manuscript words with initial upper-case letter.
10. Punctuation marks (.,!?).
11. Simple manuscript sentences.
12. Manuscript sentences and paragraphs.
13. Basic cursive strokes.
14. Simple lower-case cursive letters (similar to manuscript--a, c, d, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, t, u, v, w, x, and y).
15. Complex lower-case cursive letters (not similar to manuscript--b, e, f, r, s, and z).
16. Cursive connections (bottom and middle of line).
17. Simple cursive words.
18. Simple cursive phrases.
19. Upper-case cursive letters similar to their lower-case counterparts (A, C, M, N, O, P, U, V, W, X, Y, Z).
20. Upper-case cursive letters that differ from their lower-case counterparts (B, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, Q, R, S, and T).
21. Simple cursive words with initial upper-case letter.
22. Simple cursive sentences.
23. Cursive sentences and paragraphs.

Progressing Through the Skill Sequences: As

shown in Figures 1 and 2, a matrix can be used to better understand how the skill sequences are applied in manuscript and cursive handwriting.

The point where the teacher initiates instruction would be the box in the upper left of the manuscript handwriting matrix, which would be a combination of Skill 1 from the application skill sequence and Skill 1 from the motor skill sequence. The resulting combination would be the copying of the basic manuscript strokes.

Figure 1. Manuscript Handwriting Matrix

MOTOR SKILL SEQUENCE	APPLICATION SKILL SEQUENCE		
	1. COPYING close model	2. COPYING distant model	3. WRITING without model
1. Basic strokes			
2. Simple lower-case letters			
3. Complex lower-case letters			
4. Simple words			
5. Simple phrases			
6. Numerals			
7. Simple upper-case letters			
8. Complex upper-case letters			
9. Simple words			
10. Punctuation			
11. Simple sentences			
12. Sentences and paragraphs			

The final skill taught would be the box in the lower right of the cursive handwriting matrix, which would be a combination of Skill 3 from the application skill sequence and Skill 23 from the motor skill sequence. The resulting combination would be the writing of cursive sentences and paragraphs without a visible model.

Figure 2. Cursive Handwriting Matrix

MOTOR SKILL SEQUENCE	APPLICATION SKILL SEQUENCE		
	1. COPYING close model	2. COPYING distant model	3. WRITING without model
13. Basic strokes			
14. Simple lower-case letters			
15. Complex lower-case letters			
16. Cursive connections			
17. Simple words			
18. Simple phrases			
19. Simple upper-case letters			
20. Complex upper-case letters			
21. Simple words			
22. Simple sentences			
23. Sentences and paragraphs			

As new visual-motor skills are taught, the teacher should always be alert to ways of applying these skills in everyday activities. The teacher should provide opportunities to apply skills and monitor students closely enough to ensure that new applications are associated with teacher recognition and praise.