

LET'S GET IT WRITING

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FIVE COMMON INSTRUCTIONAL ERRORS IN TEACHING WRITING

Without guidance the teacher attempting remedial handwriting instruction may make some procedural errors which could reduce the effectiveness of the remediation. Common errors include:

1. *Massed practice without supervision.* There is no evidence to suggest that practice alone will cause handwriting to improve. Just the opposite is a real possibility.
2. *No immediate feedback given.* The handwriting act involves motor movements. One would not wait 20 minutes to correct a tennis player's volley, and the same is true of handwriting. A delay in feedback often means allowing the child to practice the inappropriate handwriting skill and making the remediation even more difficult.
3. *Emphasis on rote practice rather than discrimination.* Perhaps the most important skill the child should acquire is the ability to compare his effort with a model and determine for himself the changes necessary. Such a skill should generalize to writing (or drawing) not covered by the specific lessons.
4. *Failure to provide good models.* For many handicapped children it will be the models and not verbal instruction which will be the major instructional vehicle. The teacher's own chalkboard work may be poor, or the child reaches the bottom of the worksheet, the model is too far away, and the child may be using his own efforts as a model.
5. *No differentiation between good and poor work.* Many times the consequences of trying to improve are the same as not trying. Often teachers reward good work with more work or give the same amount of practice to letters done well as they do to letters done poorly.

■ Today most handwriting instruction is undertaken as an integral part of the language curriculum and generally is on an informal, individual basis. The teacher of the child with severe handwriting problems who decides to provide additional formal handwriting lessons may be limited in resources because remedial handwriting instruction is virtually nonexistent in many school systems (Enstrom, 1965; Horton, 1969).

The progressive approximation approach program was developed to counter the five errors in teaching writing. The program uses typical worksheets with a model at the top and space for several practice lines below. The model could be individual manuscript or cursive letters, words, small sentences, or numbers. In the case of a retarded child the model could be the child's name, address, or telephone number. The critical aspect of the program is the instruction procedure associated with use of the worksheet. This procedure has four major steps, which are outlined in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The major effect of the method is to take the child through a series of progressive approximations towards more legible handwriting. The child who is discriminating well and making systematic improvement may not use the last line or two. Any attempt to always fill the page will destroy the emphasis on qualitative improvement.

Figure 1

Step 1. The child completes the first line and informs the teacher.

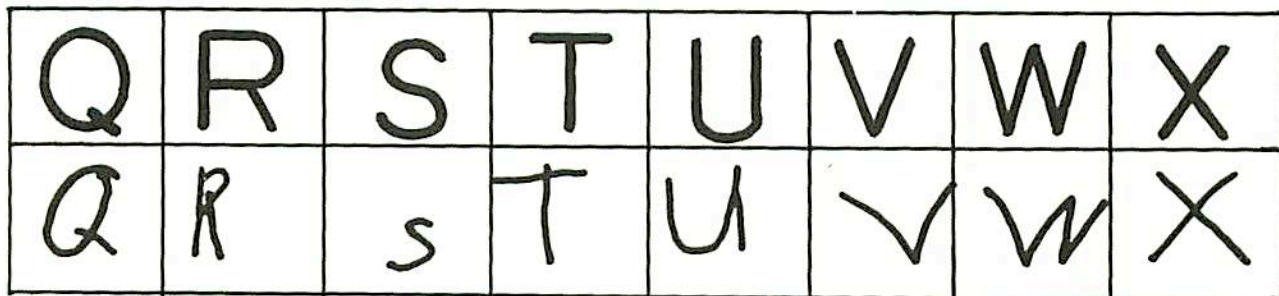


Figure 2

Step 2. The teacher corrects by overmarking with a "high-lighter" (transparent colored felt tip marker). Letters which represent significant improvement are not corrected and the child is not required to repeat this letter. The teacher should try to incorporate as much as possible of the child's efforts in her overmarking.



PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

This approach was used successfully with severely retarded teenagers (Hofmeister, 1969). Stewart (1972) conducted a study in which she compared the procedure against the Frostig Program for Development of Visual Perception (Frostig & Horn, 1964). Stewart used 48 referrals from regular elementary grades and randomly divided them into the two treatment groups. Each group spent the same amount of time practicing their respective methods. The difference in handwriting performance was significant and in favor of the progressive approximation procedure.

The progressive approximation procedure, while easy to develop, is expensive in teacher time and is best suited to the more severe cases. The procedures for use of the worksheet assume a logical progression in models used at the top of a worksheet. To put the writing process in as meaningful a context as possible, the child should move to short sentences as models as soon as possible.

The effectiveness of the program has been demonstrated with two groups of exceptional children. This effectiveness, combined with the program's capacity for individualization and with the inexpensive nature of the materials, suggests it might prove a worthwhile addition to many special educators' programs.

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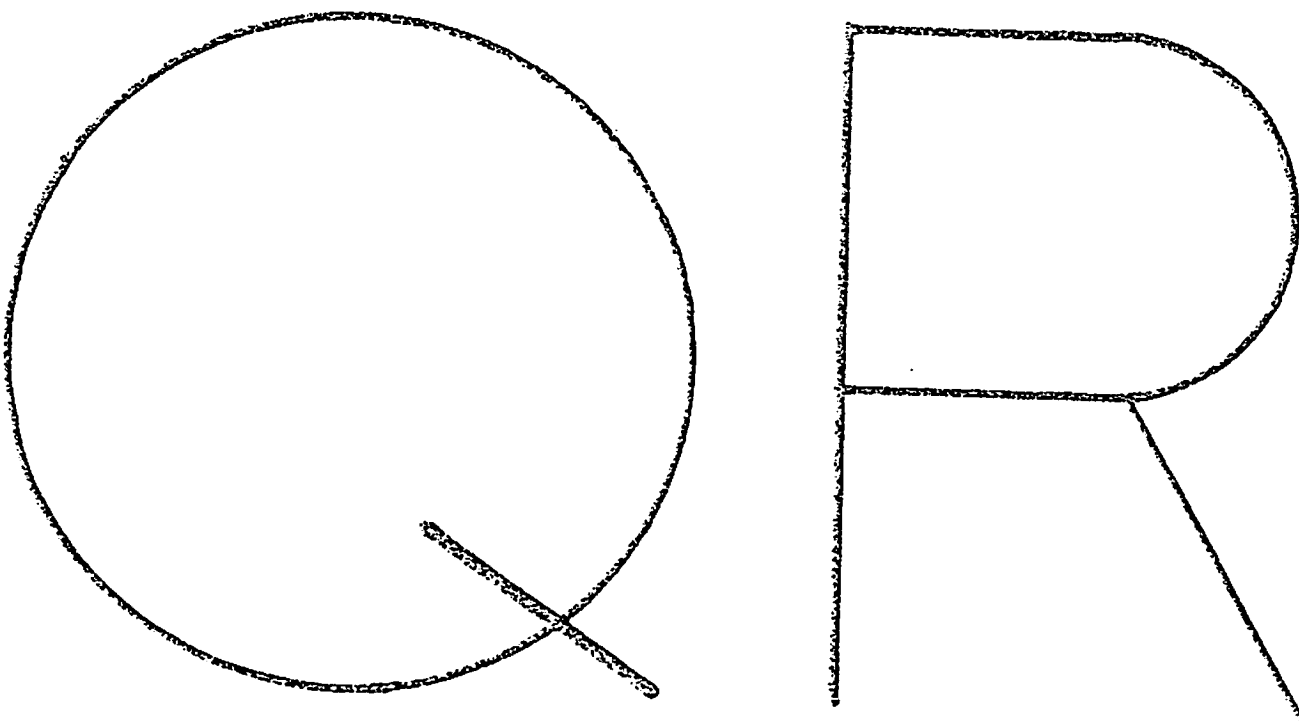


Figure 3

Step 3. The child erases incorrect portions of letters and traces over the teacher's high-lighter marking. Note: the pupil must trace the whole letter, not just incorrect portions.

Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X

Figure 4

Step 4. Then move to the next line. The same procedure is followed, except that the child repeats only the letters which were incorrect on the preceding line.

Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
Q	R	S		U	V	W	X

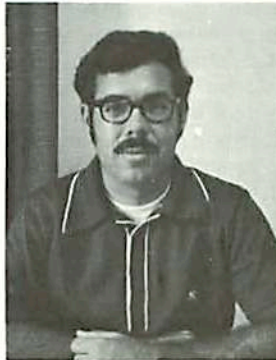
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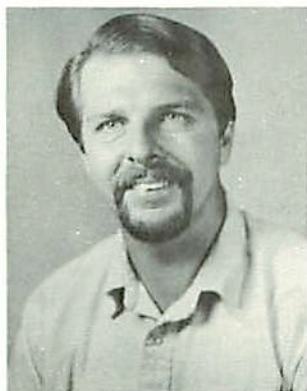
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Alan M. Hofmeister has worked as an elementary teacher, secondary teacher, and as a special education teacher in the areas of learning disabilities and mental retardation. With a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon, Dr. Hofmeister has served as coordinator of the Adult Rehabilitation in the Pearl Buck Training Center in Eugene, Oregon. Presently associate professor in the department of special education, Dr. Hofmeister serves as research director in the Exceptional Child Center at Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

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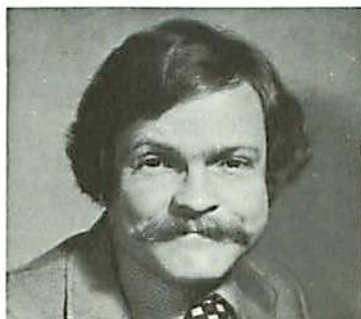


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