



Saturday Spelling Symposium

Teaching the Alphabet and Handwriting

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Teaching the alphabet

The first thing I ask children to do when they come to see me is tell me the alphabet. Inevitably I get a song, and sometimes a very beautifully sung one too, with lots of expression and tunefulness. But it's not the alphabet. What it is, is a string of notes with virtually meaningless speech sounds attached.

The song begins fairly distinctively, with all the letters separated out, but the middle letters often suffer from a bit of a collision, sounding something like 'Elmo pee' or what have you. The letter following q often sounds like <i> and sometimes we even get "<q i x>" instead of <q>,<r>,<s>. The grand finale usually reflects a surge in confidence, with "<w x y>...AND...<z>!" and even sometimes the "Now I know my ABC, next time won't you sing with me" refrain. I then tend to burst into wild applause.

"Fabulous effort!" I say. "Now I'm going to set you a new challenge. I want you to take some time over the next few weeks to learn the alphabet backwards. Yes, I really mean backwards! You might think that's impossible, but it's not. I'm going to show you some steps you can take to get there, and then your job is to master each step. Before you know it, you'll be able to say the alphabet backwards and you'll probably be the only person in your class who can do this."

It seldom fails to intrigue them.

Intriguing or not, just a cute alphabet backwards party trick is not I have in mind. Children often learn the alphabet as a stream of musical notes with no reference to the names the letters represent. Children also go through stages of alphabet knowledge. My middle daughter used to sing, "<a b c d e f g...w dot..." before she got the hang of the whole thing. All of this is fine, but we mustn't assume that all children will just implicitly grasp it.

At school there is very little explicit teaching of each separate letter. Along with irregular verbs, this is something most children develop an understanding of independently, and schools move right along, leaving behind those who didn't.

Why do we care? The realisation that letters have names and exist in a specific order is useful for the following reasons:

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1. The world is alphabetised. From favourite songs to reference materials, from a wine list in a restaurant to a simple filing system at the office, alphabetical order matters.
2. Knowledge of the alphabet helps bridge the gap between pre-reading and reading.

3. Spelling out loud requires the rapid naming of alphabet letters in sequence. No one spells out their name to someone on the phone by sounding it out, “My name is /l/-/ɪ/-/n/”. No, “My name is <l>-<y>-<n>” is what we say.
4. Naming the letters of the alphabet is important meta language when discussing spelling.
5. Vowel letters can represent their alphabetic name, depending on various orthographic signals. Knowing the vowel names is therefore important.

In sum, a child will have a more solid foundation for reading and is likely to be a better speller if they properly know the alphabet. Later on, they will be able to use reference materials and alphabetized lists more efficiently.

The steps

1. If the alphabet is known only as a song, praise this achievement.
2. The next task is to *learn the alphabet like a robot*. Instead of singing the song, children now have to learn to say the letters in sequence with a small pause in between each letter, especially at the troublesome areas. They also have to use a robotic voice, rather than a sing-song one so that transfer of this sequence takes place and the song, which is essentially a meaningless stream of sounds, is left behind.
3. With the robot alphabet, teach the child to not say the word ‘and’ any more. This word is not in the alphabet and needs to be extracted.
4. To help with this, children are given an alphabet chart and have to touch each letter and say the letter name from <a> to <z>. Distributed practice is ideal here, that is, short, sharp practice over a longer period of time. So perhaps at the beginning of short, daily literacy sessions is best.
5. The child moves from touching and saying the letters to writing the letters in the air and on paper. More details about air-writing can be found in the handwriting chapter. For the youngest beginners, writing is not introduced yet.
6. Make sure the concept of *beginning*, *middle* and *end* are known to the child and then play The Position Game. Say a letter name and have the child locate the letter as quickly as possible on their chart, telling you whether the letter is close to the beginning, middle or end of the alphabet.
7. Play The Position Game with finer and finer grain, using the mind’s eye instead of the alphabet chart and asking for clearer descriptions of exactly where the letters are.
8. Move from The Position Game to The Before and After Game, where you name a letter and the child has to rapidly call out the letter before and the letter after.

9. After all this, you can teach the backwards alphabet in seven steps using distributed practice techniques:

zyx
wvut
srqp
onm
lkji
hgf
edcba

Transition to the next stage

To maximise learning, it is advisable to help students transition to the next stage of literacy during these exercises. Nothing recommended here or in any good literacy program is done in isolation, but instead should part of the weft and warp in the tapestry of skilled reading and writing.

There aren't many foundation classrooms that don't have an alphabet chart on the wall but these charts vary greatly in their usefulness.

The most common charts depict lower and upper case letters and a picture reminder of a common sound that the letter represents, e.g. A a and a picture of an apple next to it. Some charts have no pictures at all. Others have extremely elaborate pictures.

There is promising research which shows that simple embedded alphabet pictures facilitate letter-sound association. In one experiment, designed to ease the task of learning foreign alphabets, the authors concluded:

“Embedded letters were mastered in fewer trials, were less frequently confused with other letters, were remembered better 1 week later, and facilitated performance in word reading and spelling transfer tasks compared to control letters.” (Piasta & Wagner 2010)

The Read-Write Inc. program is one such resource. The cards used to teach letters and sounds to children are double-sided. One side has a letter with a superimposed picture on it. For instance, the letter <d> is curled round a dinosaur. Instructions about how to write the letters also form the shape of the pictures.

Alphabet teaching checklist

The checklist below contains all the different ways of knowing the alphabet from simple to complex. New students in my practice have their entry point noted and each level checked off as part of their ongoing progress monitoring.

Task	Date started	Date mastered
Partial alphabet song		
Full alphabet song		
Full alphabet <i>like a robot</i> (with no 'and' in it)		
Reciting the alphabet and writing it in the air		
Reciting the alphabet and writing it on paper		
Position Game (gross) pointing to the chart		
Position Game (fine) pointing to the chart		
Position Game (gross) in the air		
Position Game (fine) in the air		
Before and After Game		
Backwards alphabet		

Alphabet teaching checklist

References

Piasta, S. B., & Wagner, R. K. (2010). Learning Letter Names and Sounds: Effects of Instruction, Letter Type, and Phonological Processing Skill. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 105(4), 324–344. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2009.12.008>

Teaching handwriting

Handwriting lessons are an opportunity to establish habits for life. It is our responsibility to try to establish the best habits possible. This is why activities 1-5 below have longer-lasting, positive effects when practised daily for at least the first term of school and practised weekly for the whole first year.

Like phonological awareness, phonics and vocabulary, handwriting develops best through explicit instruction. Dr Laura Dinehart of the University of Miami has done much research into early, explicit teaching of children from high-risk environments and says:

“If handwriting – a skill best taught through explicit instruction – is only emphasized when the students have failed to ‘catch’ the skill, students are likely to fall behind early and develop poor habits that require remediation.”

Parents can be recruited to follow through with activities 1-3 at home. Both left and right-handed students will benefit enormously from such guidance.

Left-handedness

Left-handed people comprise around 10% of the population. Despite popular opinion, there is little evidence that left-handed people differ in creative, spatial or artistic skills from right-handed people. They do, however, have more trouble with correct posture and pencil-grip if not taught consistently from a very young age. Special care should be taken to show left-handers how to sit and position their pencils.

Screenwriting

This is a visual-kinaesthetic framework based on using an imaginary screen where words are written and manipulated.

Activities 1-7 below are designed to help establish a visual framework. After that, the concept of the ‘screen’ and the visualization of words can be used in spelling.

Screenwriting activity 1 - Setting up the screen

Ask students to draw in the air in front of them, a rectangular screen, like a TV or computer screen. It mustn't be too big or too small, because on that screen, they are going to do lots of writing of letters and words.

All drawing, including the drawing of the screen, is done with the index finger of the hand they use to write with.

To enhance visualization, I often ask students to decorate the frame of the screen.

Screenwriting activity 2 - Practising big and small

Have students practise drawing big and small shapes and lines on their screens, whilst gaining mastery of the following terms:

- circle beginning at 2 on the clock
- tall line
- short line
- horizontal line
- diagonal line
- dot
- the direction that we read and write (left to right)

Screenwriting activity 3 - Start with what you know

If your students already know some words, have them write them on their screens for you. This could be a range of words, from their names to simple words they've seen and memorized.

Handwriting

When doing handwriting lessons, first have students practise the letter components on their screens, talking through their actions as they do them.

Handwriting activity 1 - Positioning

I'm often surprised, when visiting schools, to see children doing handwriting lessons in odd positions. Sometimes they are seated at an angle to the whiteboard. Sometimes they are sitting cross-legged on the floor. Sometimes their sitting position is never established or checked.

The way children sit when they are writing is extremely important, even during lessons when handwriting is not the focus. If they are seated improperly, they tend to get uncomfortable and can exhibit fidgeting or bodily aches and pains from incorrect posture.

Think about your preference, as an adult, when you have to hand-write something or take notes. Do you lie on cushions? Do you sit on the floor or facing away from the source of the information? I've yet to go into a professional development

seminar laid out like an open-plan, progressive classroom. Instead, lecture theatres, seminar rooms and spaces where groups of people read, write and listen to an instructor are laid out in rows, facing the front. Why would that not be the case for classrooms?

During handwriting lessons especially, it is vital to establish the correct sitting position by requiring the following:

1. Students face the front of the classroom where they can clearly see the teacher.
2. Students sit with high heads, straight backs and both feet on the floor or footstool if they cannot reach the floor.
3. Both forearms rest on the table.
4. The wrist of the writing hand is straight and sits below the line they are writing on at all times. This is true for both left and right-handed children. If established early enough in left-handed children, difficulties with left-to-right direction of writing should not surface.
5. The non-writing hand anchors the paper and moves it as needed.
6. The edge of the paper and the writing arm should be parallel, like train tracks.

A school I consult to invented this song to help with positioning:

“One, two, three, four,
Are your feet on the floor?
Five, six, seven, eight,
Is your back nice and straight?”

Practise this positioning daily before any writing task until automaticity is achieved.

Handwriting activity 2 – Pencils and grips

All students should start out using a pencil that is easy to grip, erasable and light in weight. There are also some pens on the market which are erasable. Be careful, though. The ink in those pens fades due to heat brought on by the friction produced when using the ‘eraser’ part. But heat can come from other sources. I once had a student who used a pen like that. He took great care to do all his notation and homework in a big A4 book. He left that book on the dashboard of his mother’s car one day in the sunshine, and when he brought the book to the lesson and opened it up, all his work had disappeared!

Pencils are good for handwriting practice. I myself used to press very hard on the paper in an effort to control my handwriting. It wasn’t until I went to a school in the Netherlands that I encountered fountain pens. In continental Europe, fountain pens were a standard writing implement back then and I fell in love with them from the

first moment I used one. The softness and relative weakness of the metal nib forced me to press less heavily on the paper and as a result I had to consciously develop neater handwriting by means other than pressure.

1. Practise opening and closing the middle finger and thumb. These will form the grip on the pencil.
2. Practise holding a pencil and using the muscles of the finger and thumb ONLY to move the pencil back and forth.

Handwriting activity 3 - The lines and the direction in which we read and write

In English, we read and write from left to right. At the beginning of every handwriting lesson, it is a good idea to orient students to this fact.

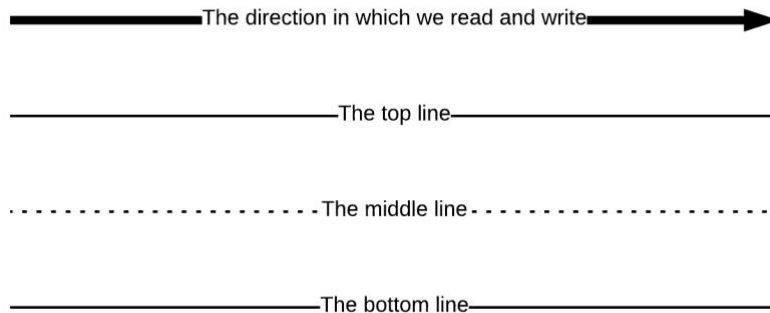
It is also necessary to familiarise children with the lines on their page. Most primary schools provide special handwriting books with guide lines already printed in them, but it's important to establish names for these lines so that explicit instruction can take place.

There are three main points on the handwriting page that students need to be aware of. They are:

1. The bottom line. This is the line on which all the letters sit.
2. The top line. This is the line all tall letters reach towards. Try to encourage children not to actually touch the top line, as this will cause crowding and reduce clarity.
3. The middle line. This has different appearances depending on the handwriting book that children are working with, but take care to establish where it is and what to call it. The shorter letters of the alphabet will reach to there and not past it.

Have students point to these three lines on their paper and say what each line is: "Bottom, top, middle."

Have them use their pencils to mark each line with a dot, saying the name of the line as they mark: “Bottom, top, middle.”



Handwriting activity 4 - The clock face

I have a huge clock on my practice wall with very clear numbers on it. When handwriting is our focus, I have students point to various numbers on the clock to orient themselves to start and end points for letters. The magic number for all letters containing curves is the number 2.

There are certain letters that begin at two on the clock. The lower case ones are:

a c d f g o q s

The upper case ones are:

C G O Q S

All other letters begin with lines.

At first, students practise big circles, starting at 2, going up and back towards 12 and coming back to 2. They can do this by tracing with their fingers on a big clock, writing it on their imaginary screens, both big and small and tracing then writing with pencil on paper until they can do beautiful circles. This is harder than it appears, but mastery of this and of the letters containing circles helps to steer children away from reversals and makes them so much more legible.

It often helps to have them articulate what they are doing while they are practising: “I start at 2, I go up through 12 and I come back up to 2.”

Handwriting activity 5 - Letter parts

All letters contain one or more of the following parts. Practise each part separately and learn the language for each part.

1. Big circles start at 2 on the clock. (C G O Q S)
2. Small circles start at 2 on the clock. (a c d f g o q s)
3. Lines can begin at the top and go straight down to the bottom line. (B b D E F H h I J K k L I M N P R T t U W)
4. Lines can begin at the middle and go straight down to the bottom line. (i m n r u y)
5. Lines can begin in the middle and go past the bottom line (g q y)
6. Tall diagonal lines can start at the top and go in the direction that we read and write. (V X)
7. Tall diagonal lines can start at the top and go against the direction that we read and write. (A)
8. Short diagonal lines can start in the middle and go in the direction that we read and write. (v w x)
9. Short diagonal lines can also start in the middle and go against the direction that we read and write to complete other letters. (v w x)
10. Short, horizontal lines go in the direction that we read and write. (e Z z)
11. Small dots go on top of i and j and at the end of sentences.

Only upper case Y is strange. It starts at the top with a horizontal line in the direction that we read and write, but stops at the middle line and starts again at the top with a tall diagonal line against the direction that we read and write.

Practise the letters at first on the student's visualized screens, nice and big, learning the various words that describe starting points and what comes next. Have them take turns to write letters in the air, using the language you have taught them. Move to large letters on paper and eventually to small ones.

When writing letters as a handwriting focus, naming the letters rather than attempting to connect them to the sounds they make in words will help avoid confusion at first. Our goal, always, is to work towards integrating all the skills, but it helps to be aware of your focus and stick to that in early instruction. Introduce the terms *lower case* and *upper case* too, and talk about where upper case letters are appropriate.

This is the explicit part, but nothing will take the place of daily practice. Children need to be given the opportunity to be prolific writers from day one.

A note on dysgraphia

We all have our strengths and weaknesses, and sometimes, forming letters on a page is a severe weakness for some children. In extreme cases, letter formation and organizing/expressing written information caused by neurological impairment. This impairment is known as *written expression disorder* or *dysgraphia*.

Arbitrary 'pen licence' systems that discriminate against children with poor letter formation, regardless of cause, are frowned upon by this author and those of us in the field who work with struggling children. It is a school's responsibility to establish good handwriting techniques from the very start, and it is also their responsibility to monitor and provide understanding and appropriate support for children who struggle with this. Pen licences occupy the same reprehensible territory as discouraging left-handedness, corporal punishment and reprimanding people who stutter.

References

Adams, M.J. (2004). *Thinking and Learning about Beginning to Read*.
<https://childrenofthecode.org/interviews/adams.htm>

Dinehart, L. (2014). *Handwriting in early childhood education: Current research and future implications* (Vol. 15).

Handwriting practice

In the Spalding *Writing Road to Reading* program, the author clearly states that teaching spelling and written handwriting should precede reading from books. This is all very well, but many children are already reading when they enter school and there is nothing to stop reading lessons taking place alongside handwriting.

Handwriting lessons, as a set of activities independent of reading and spelling, are an opportunity to establish habits for life. It is our responsibility to try to establish the best habits possible. This is why activities 1-5 below are practised daily for at least the first term of school and practised weekly for the whole first year.

Parents can be recruited to follow through with activities 1-3 at home. Both left and right-handed students will benefit enormously from such guidance.

Activity 1 - Positioning

Establish the correct sitting position by requiring the following:

7. Students sit with high heads, straight backs and both feet on the floor or footstool if they cannot reach the floor.
8. Both forearms rest on the table.
9. The wrist of the writing hand is straight and sits below the base line on the paper at all times. This is true for both left and right-handed children.
10. The non-writing hand anchors the paper and moves it as needed.
11. The edge of the paper and the writing arm should be parallel, like train tracks.

Practise this positioning daily until automaticity is achieved.

Activity 2 - Pencil grip

All students start out using a hexagonal pencil. They are easy to grip, erasable and light in weight.

3. Practise opening and closing the middle finger and thumb. These will form the grip on the pencil.
4. Practise holding a pencil and using the muscles of the finger and thumb ONLY to move the pencil back and forth.

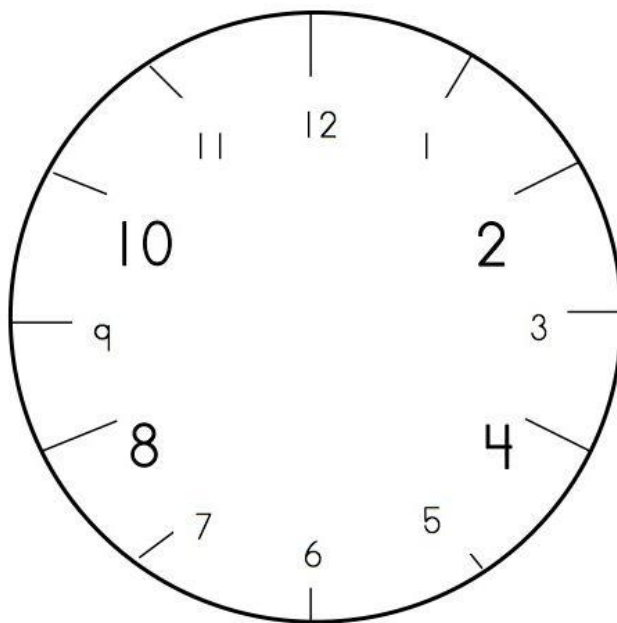
Activity 3 - The three lines

There are three main points on the handwriting page that students need to be aware of. They are:

4. The base line. This is the line on which all the letters sit.
5. The line above. This is the line directly above the base line. Letters don't touch the line above, but tall letters approach it.
6. The mid-point. This is the line that is exactly in the middle of the base line and the line above. All short letters touch the mid-point.

Have students point to these three lines on their paper and say what each line is.

Have them use their pencils to mark with a dot, each line, saying the name of the line as they mark.



Activity 4 - The clock face

Project or print the clock-face below and have students practise starting at 2, going up and around and coming back to 2. They can do this by tracing with their fingers, tracing with pencil, visualizing the clock and writing it on their screens etc.

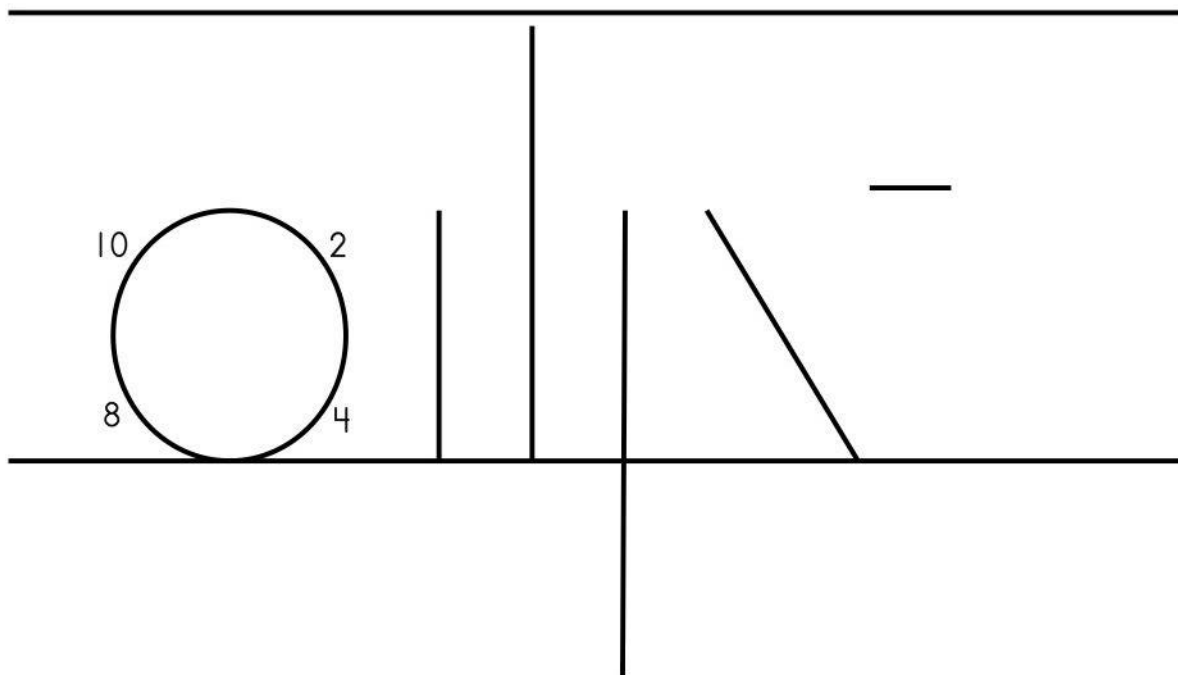
All the time, have them articulate what they are doing: "I start at 2, I go up and around, I come back up to 2."

Activity 5 - Letter parts

All letters contain one or more of the following six letter parts:

1. Circles that start at 2 on the clock
2. Short lines that begin at the mid-point and go down to the base line
3. Tall lines that start nearly but not touching the line above and go down to the base line
4. Straight lines that begin at the mid-point go below the base line. These always go below the base line for the same distance that they go above the base line
5. A line that begins at the mid-point and goes in a diagonal line in the direction that we write
6. A short, horizontal line in the direction in which we write

Practise them on the student's visualized screens, in sand, in clay, with paint and brushes, with all manner of multisensory tools before committing them to paper. Have students articulate the shape and feature of each part as they write them. The six letter parts



Activity 6 - Writing the alphabet

The students will have gone through the alphabet with you in a variety of ways before learning to write the letters:

1. They will have read the phonemes in order of commonality.
2. They will have practised naming the letters in alphabetical order.
3. They will have practised feeling the first sounds of the vowels and all the consonants based on their phonetic features

Once these exercises are underway, it is time to practise forming the letters.