



## MODULE 6:

# WRITING DONE

# WELL

### INTRODUCTION

How do students make the leap from word-level learning to producing high quality written work? By having teachers who build a sturdy bridge. No leaping is required if the bridge has been well made.

## Table of Contents

<b>GRIP AND POSTURE .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>WRITING IMPLEMENTS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>DYSGRAPHIA .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>THE WORD LEVEL .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>THE SENTENCE-LEVEL .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>THE PARAGRAPH LEVEL .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>INTERLEAVING WRITING .....</b>	<b>15</b>

## GRIP AND POSTURE

Reading and writing are not simply opposite sides of the same coin. As was examined in the Simple View of Writing, transcription, especially the mechanics, is a set of processes exclusive to writing.

This is one of the reasons that fluent writing can escape so many if not taught and practised well.

If you were to give a child a sword, you would take great care to teach that child how to use it wisely. You would teach them how to hold it, so that not only would they be comfortable, but so that they would be able to wield it more accurately and for longer periods of time. You would teach them the best way to stand, where to have their feet, shoulders, head and hands for optimal wielding. They say the pen is mightier than the sword, yet similar tuition in penmanship is falling out of favour in modern education.

It is common to see unconventional pencil grip and poor posture in classrooms the world over. It is also notoriously hard to correct this once it has been established.

There are also some who would question the importance of good grip and posture, especially if the child can produce well-formed letters, but we have to consider stamina and pace too. If grip doesn't interfere with that, then definitely it's not something we would spend too much time on. It's not often the case though.

Similarly, if a child has to make a certain amount of effort to form letters well on a page, then transcription has not reached the automatic stage. This will affect written output. Grip and posture are key elements to building automaticity.

There is also research to show that development of the fine motor skills, essential for writing, also helps with the development of typing skills later on. Both are essential in this world.

Before a child even reaches school, they will have begun to develop the larger, gross muscles closer to the core that then develop the finer, more distant muscles. Development of those muscles then lead to postural control, shoulder stability, arm strength, wrist stability, hand strength and finally finger strength and dexterity.

That ongoing developmental continuum can be enhanced or impaired depending on how explicit initial instruction is, how well understood and internalised the language around writing is and the degree of quality that subsequent practice takes.

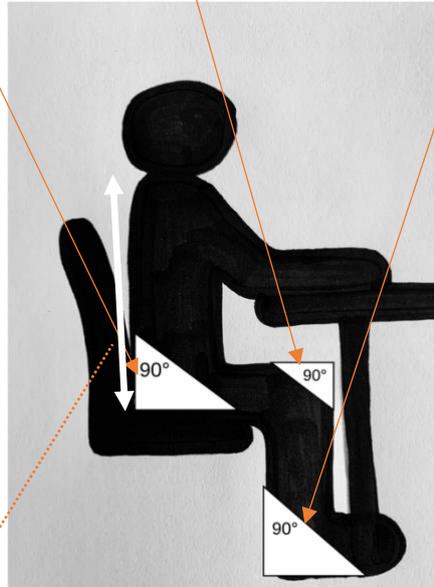
Explicit instruction in grip and posture, and subsequently in letter formation, would be successfully done by teachers if they show how to sit at a desk and hold a pencil comfortably every day before any writing task.

Want some quick and easy tips for explicit handwriting?

Try these:

### 1. Right-angles - THE 3 90s

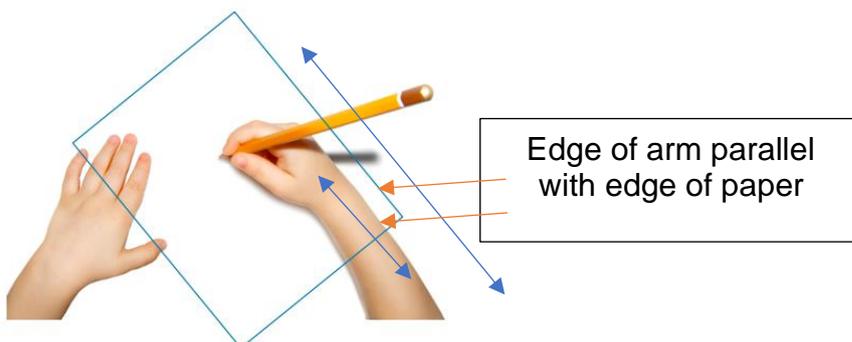
Students should aim for three 90° angles when sitting at a desk for writing. First at the hips, second at the knees and third at the ankles.



### 2. Straight back

The head is a heavy thing. It contains a dense skull and a great big meaty brain. If the spinal column isn't straight, bodily discomfort is sure to follow.

### 3. Parallel lines



#### 4. Tripod grip



The ultimate factor in pen control. Don't let the grip slip!

Thumb and forefinger are the main controllers.

Writing implement rests on middle or ring finger.

Not too close and not too far away from the end point.

All action done by fingers. Not wrists, not elbow, not shoulder.

#### Some exercises:

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 (make like a woodpecker).
3. Try this chant at the beginning of every writing exercise:

1 2 3 4  
5 6 7 8  
9 10 11 12

Are your feet on the floor?  
Is your back nice and straight?  
This is how your pencil's held!

## WRITING IMPLEMENTS

By the end of the 18th century, people in positions of authority began to want to write more. Writing for pleasure and self-expression began to expand in addition to writing for record-keeping and accounting. Being in authority, those people had artisans at their disposal to help develop writing implements that were more efficient and comfortable than the traditional quills that didn't need constant dipping in inkwells. This led to the invention of fountain pens.

For the next 150 years, the fountain pen continued to evolve, and it wasn't until the World War II that the race to develop the best instrument was halted. Mass fountain pen production slowed, materials became scarce, and some of the larger pen manufacturers crossed over into producing military equipment.

This is where the young pretender, i.e. the ballpoint pen began to creep in. Smart fountain pen companies (most notably in Europe) began manufacturing their own ballpoint pens alongside their fountain pens, and managed to stay afloat. Others, not so smartly tried to resist the rise of ballpoints and as a result, went broke.

So for 150 years, every adult and child learned to write using a fountain pen. It is not unusual, even to this day in Continental Europe, for children to be given fountain pens in their first years of schooling. There are still plenty of reasonably high quality, cheaply manufactured fountain pens that allow them to do this.

The advantage of fountain pens for novices is that their relatively soft nibs don't require much pressure to make marks on the page. This then allows the development of the finer motor skills required for legible, fluent writing. The softness of the nib also allows for minute changes in its shape in response to the writer's unique angle and pressure profile, so that it becomes moulded by its writer's hand. That's why you must never lend your fountain pen to others.

Pencils, of course, especially the larger, hexagonal type have similar moulding qualities, but getting a graphite pencil to that 'sweet spot' where the point is just as you like it, is a fleeting pleasure. Soon the graphite wears down and the writer has to sharpen and start the process all over again. The advantage of pencil is that it is not indelible, so erasers can be used to correct mistakes.

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.

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!

Personal preference, of course, wins the day. There are so many writing implements on the market and yet in primary schools, it often comes down to a 'choice' of two; and not even a choice. A popular primary school trend in recent decades has been the race towards a 'pen licence' – or at least toward being permitted to use a pen instead of a pencil.

I beg you, if this is something your system does, please consider the following view:

Children who come to see me at my practice often express feelings they would normally hold back at school. This is because in a 1:1, non-school environment they are no longer subject to peer scrutiny or to the inevitable power structures that a teacher-student relationship can bring.

Mostly these students struggle with the task of writing. There are two things in primary school systems that they consistently report as a source of ongoing humiliation and anxiety:

1. Cold-writing exercises, when all scaffolds are removed and only a stimulus is provided and they are expected to write.
2. Being made to work towards discarding the pencil and being permitted to use pen (we will call this 'pen licensing' from now on).

We will return to cold-writing later, but let us now explore pen licensing. Firstly, a pen licence scheme implies that pencils are somehow childish and undesirable. Yet many people prefer the feel and the impermanence of pencils. Why deny them this?

Secondly, some people find it easier to control a pen. They write more neatly with pen than they do with pencil. If you are trying to get them to achieve neatness so that they are granted a pen licence, restricting the

use of an implement that may contribute to neatness is a pretty horrible catch-22.

In all but the strictest systems, the children who do not gain their pen licence at a certain year level return the next year and go immediately to the implement of their choice once restrictions and pen-licence nonsense is forgotten about. The only overall difference your pen licence scheme made was to the discomfort and shame of some of your students. That's the pen licence legacy. Not neater writing; more shame.

It's a jarring view, especially to teachers who have never questioned pen licences, but please don't shoot the messenger. Instead, I would beg you to raise the demand for higher quality letter formation instruction in the beginning years. So much anguish could be avoided if the whole school takes on a more explicit approach to this activity.

I would also recommend discarding the false pen/pencil dichotomy. Children should be guided in choosing their preferred implement without prejudice.

In an ideal world, fountain pens should be issued after the first year of schooling, with explicit instruction on how to use and care for them. They are relatively inexpensive, especially when bought in bulk, and some manufacturers even have child specific models with built-in tripod grips (see below).



#### LAMY CHILDREN'S FOUNTAIN PEN

## DYSGRAPHIA

If you cast your mind back to the Simple View of Writing, you will remember that there are two critical components to fluent writing:

1. Transcription (the mechanics and conventions of writing)
2. Ideation (text generation)

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 is caused by neurological impairment. This impairment is known as *written expression disorder* or *dysgraphia*.

In simple terms, dysgraphia is difficulty with *both* processes in the Simple View of Writing: transcription and ideation.

### **A quick checklist if dysgraphia is suspected:**

On a scale of never-rarely-sometimes-frequently-always, how often does the child:

- Have messy handwriting?
- Reverse numbers? (e.g. 67 for 76)
- Write letters backwards?
- Have difficulty writing numbers legibly and distinctively from letters?
- Mix up lowercase and uppercase letters?
- Have trouble correctly spacing letters in words and/or between words?
- Have difficulty writing on a line and within margins?
- Have trouble ending sentences with punctuation?
- Have difficulty keeping columns straight when setting up a maths problem?
- Have difficulty writing text from left to right?
- Resist writing tasks?
- Have difficulty getting thoughts down on paper?
- Have difficulty copying text?
- Have trouble completing writing tasks independently?
- Make spelling errors in homework assignments?

If the answer to these questions is in the majority frequently/always category, it is a good idea to contact a psychological professional who can diagnose dysgraphia.

### **Then what happens?**

In confirmed dysgraphia cases, it is important to implement reasonable accommodations as soon as possible. Some reasonable accommodations are:

- Allowing more time for written work (this does not mean keeping them in during scheduled breaks).
- Allowing students to begin projects and assignments early.
- Allow and encourage the development of keyboarding skills.
- Provide excellent writing templates.
- Look into providing a scribe for high-stakes assessments wherever possible.
- Allow dictation software wherever possible.
- Check your marking rubric for neatness or spelling criteria.

## **A note on assistive technology**

When a child is fitted with a hearing aid, a pair of glasses etc., they are carefully shown, after much consultation and fitting, how to use and care for those devices. They are coached, scaffolded, given practice and allowed to build up to prolonged use. They are helped and supported to persevere, even if they are uncomfortable at first, even if they have to get used to a new world with those devices.

Assistive technology requires as much coaching, checking and encouragement as a hearing aid or a pair of glasses. You can't just throw a C-Pen at a child and get them to "try it out".

Just about every school has a tech whiz, you know, the person you call on to figure out what's going wrong with this or that cable, or why won't this load etc. Perhaps make them the assistive tech officer, the one with whom the kids get some scheduled sessions on accessing the amazing technology we have to help level the playing field for everyone. It could be life changing.

The Language Arts approach acknowledges the need for assistive technology for transcription, so that struggling dyslexic and dysgraphic students get to express themselves in writing on a level playing field.

## THE WORD LEVEL

If students are to be fluent writers, they need to be proficient at the word level. They have to have an age-appropriate store of words in long term memory that they can effortlessly recall, and sufficient phoneme-grapheme and morphemic knowledge to tackle unfamiliar words.

At the basis of this is phonological awareness. As students mature, phonological awareness becomes a less reliable predictor of literacy success, but if it is not developed to a proficient level, the chances of writing fluency are greatly reduced. This is because writing is a step by step, sequential activity. It relies on putting one grapheme in front of the other according to the phonemes perceived in the word until the word is unitized in long term memory. Even after words are unitized, the ability to check and correct letter strings in writing relies to some degree on phonemic proficiency.

Of course, phonemes matching graphemes are only part of the story in writing. There are multiple ways to spell many sounds, so orthographic awareness at the word level is essential too. This is why teaching the conventions of the writing system, that is, the rules which govern spelling, is an essential part of word-level instruction.

English spelling is an elegant, rule-based writing system, ideal for conveying both sound and meaning. It is not a mishmash of random patterns invented to confuse people. Please don't buy into that myth and please don't allow others to spread it, especially to children who are already fragile in their confidence.

Mastery of the system won't occur in a culture that says it's not possible. It is, but it relies on teacher knowledge at the phonemic, graphemic, morphemic, semantic and syntactic level.

If word study is embedded across subject areas, so much the better.

Taking the plunge towards rich word study is daunting. It takes a whole school system and well-trained teachers to provide the momentum needed to get all children proficient at the word level.

Below is a list of dos and don'ts for a quick audit of your school's word-study system.

DO	DON'T
Show students how to use dictionaries.	Divorce words from their meanings.
Learn how to identify bases.	Give out word lists with inflected forms without covering the bases first.
Learn how to identify syllables in spoken and written communication.	Ask students to spell long words without showing them how to syllabify.
Revisit introduced words	Set whole word memorization work.
Show students how to attack unfamiliar written words by going 'all the way through' the word.	Encourage word guessing from pictures or first letters.
Interleave words through subjects.	Ask for decontextualized written work just for the sake of an example or an exercise.
Teach how to write to learn.	Put emphasis on narrative writing. This leads to knowledge of narrative writing only, not the world.

## THE SENTENCE-LEVEL

The formation of high quality sentences is a key component in increasingly strategic, fluent writing.

For this to happen, a consistent and concise metalanguage has to be established from the very beginning of school.

In the scope and sequence for grammar and syntax, it is suggested that even foundation students be alerted to the fact that stories (and subsequently, sentences) minimally contain a subject and what that subject is, does or has.

The subject + verb construct can then be worked upon to support knowledge of sentence types.

Spoken communication is far more prone to incomplete sentences. Written communication, however is built upon sentences.

Model, dictate and guide the composition of sentences at every opportunity. Tell students that written material is not supposed to be a carbon copy of speech. Too often, children write as though they are speaking and the result is disastrous.

Instead, get the idea across that written material is a series of sentences, each of them containing subjects and verbs, intended to transmit a thought from one mind to another. That thought can be simple. That thought can be complex. The quality of the sentence determines how well that thought is transmitted.

Below are some quick-reference charts:

SENTENCE TYPES		
TYPE	CONVENTIONS	EXAMPLE
Statement	A statement begins with a capital letter, has a subject and a verb and ends with a full stop. It tells a fact.	Honeybees are social insects.
Question	A question begins with a capital letter, has a subject and a verb and ends with a question mark. It asks a question.	Do honeybees only produce honey?
Imperative	An imperative begins with a capital letter, has a subject and a verb and ends with a full stop or sometimes and	Save the bees!

	exclamation mark. It gives an order or instruction.	
Exclamation	An exclamation begins with a capital letter, has a subject and a verb and ends with an exclamation mark. It transmits strong feelings and contains strong words.	Getting stung by a bee is a horrible thing for you and the bee!

SENTENCE EXPANSION		
CONJUNCTION	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
AND	Each part of the sentence, before and after 'and' is equal.	Honeybees are social insects and live in hives.
SO	The first part of the sentence caused the second part.	Honeybees are social insects and live in hives so they have to be social.
BUT	The second part is a catch!	Honeybees are social insects but only to one another.
BECAUSE	The second part of the sentence caused the first part.	Honeybees are social insects because large numbers are safer for small creatures.

## THE PARAGRAPH LEVEL

You could say, “Take care of the sentences and the paragraphs will look after themselves”, although explicit instruction and worked examples in any biologically secondary skills stand to benefit everyone.

A paragraph is a sentence or combination of sentences that expresses a main idea. Longer written pieces consist of ordered paragraphs, each with its own main idea, that work together to transmit knowledge on a certain topic.

In larger written pieces, paragraphs become chapters.

Paragraph frameworks are essential tool in every classroom, and should be selected, coached, practised and made constantly available for all children at all times. The Writing Revolution has several basic ones for different genres.

If you are considering taking away paragraph frameworks at any point during written assignments, please ask yourself the following questions

- Whose written work will suffer a reduction in quality if I remove the framework?
- Am I OK with that?
- What will my students gain from having no framework? Could they gain this of their own accord instead?

### **Writing assessment**

It is relatively easy to assess proficiency at the word and sub word level. It is even easy to check for understanding at the sentence level.

However, the paragraph and full written piece level is notoriously hard to assess because there is such a high degree of writer and reader subjectivity. There comes a point in writing where it's no longer possible to look under the bonnet.

Daisy Christodoulou's work on comparative judgement helps with this somewhat, especially in high school and beyond, but at primary school, it's very hard to judge.

## INTERLEAVING WRITING

And so we have it. The end of our Language Arts rainbow. The pot of gold is made of hundreds of small elements, woven together to build knowledge.

Now that you're fully aware of the myriad micro-factors that develop a student's interaction with the printed word, I'm sure you'll join me in expressing a sense of wonder that we ever master it at all.

The final thing that I would beg you to consider is this:

Every time a child writes anything, they are investing an inordinate amount of energy in the task. Writing is the nourishment of knowledge. Make sure that what they write leans towards quality, not quantity. You cannot feed a child on junk (e.g. "what I did on the weekend" and constant narratives). You cannot nourish a child properly with quantity of food, only quality.

### **Some tips to bring language arts alive in your classroom**

- Whatever you are studying, being a subject for a day, a week, a term, a semester or a year, let your students write about it.
- Try not to have decontextualised sentences for the sake of practice take over.
- Interleave writing throughout every activity and subject.
- Do not differentiate the content, only the complexity.
- Ask for quality and the quantity will take care of itself.
- Love and cherish scaffolding and make it an individual choice not to use it.
- If you *are* going to focus on narratives, please teach how to use speech marks.
- Allow free choice of writing implements and do not hold one type of implement above another (unless it's fountain pens, fountain pens rule!).
- Study grammar and morphology together and have high expectations of children's ability to look up and understand words.

What can be said with certainty, is that all students, no matter their intellectual/neurological profile, benefit from high quality, systematic, explicit language arts instruction over time.

From the phonemic, to the graphemic, to the orthographic, to the morphological, the the lexical, to the semantic, to the syntactic components of the writing system, a child whose school approaches each component consistently, systematically, and with intellectual honesty, stands a much higher chance of enjoying, and even excelling at writing than a child whose language arts development has inconsistent, random and linguistically accurate.

Good luck!