



# Teaching handwriting: observations and suggestions

In this article by **Debbie Hepplewhite MBE**, we are presented with advice for the effective teaching of handwriting which is challenging, sometimes contentious and ultimately compelling.

I have found that the topic of 'handwriting' generates a surprising level of interest at literacy conferences and workshops and during phonics training and consultancy. Many teachers are often very interested to hear what others think – or they yearn for confirmation that they have the right approach: technique, timing and rationale. Sometimes my guidance conflicts with a school's provision, and the advice of others, but some teachers may appreciate what I say because it pretty much fits with their own preferences, findings, and – dare I say – their *common sense*?

Occasionally, teachers are adamant that they have the right timing and method of teaching handwriting, for example: the practice of teaching the pre-cursor steps to joined handwriting – that is, teaching 'lead-in' strokes for individual letters from Reception instead of teaching ordinary 'print' at first. This particular approach has been promoted by various advisers in the field of dyslexia but I argue against it. When is 'print' taught in such schools? Have the teachers considered that their previous approach of teaching print first, followed later by teaching joined handwriting, may not have been

successful for every child because handwriting was simply not taught and practised effectively? It's surely enough for Early Years children to manage a pencil and learn to recognise and write simple printed letters – and they already have to deal with recognising different fonts in wider reading and screen activities.

In many schools, the teaching of handwriting is in a bit of a parlous state for a variety of reasons and although this article includes some worrying observations, being critical is not my intent – far from it. I know the ingredients of teaching handwriting very well – whether print or joined – and I simply want to share my experience and technique for those with an interest. Make of it what you will ...

Not only is there research that shows the benefits of writing by hand linked to learning to read and spell, findings also show other advantages such as writing notes by hand, compared to typing, is more effective for learning generally.

Being a good hand-writer can be truly joyful – for the person doing the writing and the person receiving and reading it. Think of the intrinsic satisfaction for

the individual who is a confident and competent hand-writer, perhaps with an aesthetic flair, from a young age right through the school years and way beyond. As teachers, this should surely be the practical and moral aim for every single child capable of holding a pencil.

I am well aware, however, that for every factor that highlights the importance of handwriting and the teaching of it, there will be an argument, valid in some way, to counter it. When I am invited to provide inset training specifically for teaching handwriting, we explore these often deep-seated pros and cons very thoroughly, fairly and collectively. It's extremely important that this analysis takes place if there is to be a genuinely whole school ethos and policy for changing the approach to teaching handwriting in the school and/or adopting a new style. Ultimately, I suggest, the issue comes down to the simplest principle: infant and primary teachers should discharge their duty to teach print and fully joined handwriting to every child, and to teach handwriting very well.

Although this is the crux of the matter, I know it's not that simple, despite goodwill and professionalism, or surely all schools would be full of fantastic hand-writers – adults and children alike. A quick look online to sites that publish children's written work will show that this is not the case. Take a really close look ... you may find it is not uncommon for the teachers' handwriting (their marking) to be rather scruffy and/or idiosyncratic – not looking anything like a 'school' handwriting style. Having said that, I'm totally aware of years of pressure on teachers to mark in far too much unnecessary depth and detail – causing teachers to write as quickly as they can – and this is much easier in their personal handwriting style rather than any school style. I've long since advised teachers to ask for time management studies to justify onerous marking policies – because they do not exist or have never been presented to teachers.

Ofsted is doing its utmost to counter the myth that inspectors are looking for any type, or amount, of marking; inspectors are urging schools to revisit their marking policies to ones of *reason*. Ofsted will be looking for teachers *implementing* the school's marking policy – so do make sure that your school updates its marking policy to reflect a more simple and less time-consuming approach. Whilst it is high time to re-think the expectation for marking – I do hope that schools don't go from one extreme to the other (as some schools have boasted already) and move to a 'no marking' policy. This is most unfair to children notwithstanding that verbal feedback is provided. When marking children's work, or writing on teachers' boards, try to use the school's handwriting style as neatly as you can – preferably on writing lines as much as possible.

I encourage teachers to do a simple 'look around the class' survey of how pupils sit, and how they angle their paper and hold their pencils or pens when they are writing independently. In response, some teachers report they have identified multiple ways of children holding their writing implements. Many, and sometimes most, have not only *ungainly* but, quite frankly, *grotesque* pencil-holds – by the teachers' own admissions. But so have some members of staff! Have we let down a couple of generations already when it comes to the traditional tripod pencil grip and the teaching of handwriting?

Look around some classes and you will find many children holding their pencils badly, poor posture, lack of space on children's desks to angle paper and books comfortably, perhaps because teachers have taken their eye off these things, or sometimes because of resources piled high in the centre of *grouped tables* (and grouped tables is often not a fit-for-purpose seating arrangement for the subject and task in hand). Desks may be too high or low for individual children. Sometimes I've observed that only blunt pencils or scratchy writing pens seem to be available – or children are scrabbling around to find a pencil or decent pencil crayon – need I go on?

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Here is what else you will find: use of mini whiteboards and whiteboard markers frequently dominating phonics provision. And yet when I have asked thousands of teachers, ‘What are the most suitable resources, and conditions, for practising handwriting?’ (which is a fundamental part of phonics provision – or should be), after a few seconds’ pause, they all tell me, ‘Paper and pencil activities sitting at a desk’. Haven’t teachers been told by various early years advisers to get rid of ‘desks’ in Reception classes across the land – but isn’t this when we start teaching letter formation in a structured way?

What I am trying to indicate here is that early years and infant teachers are given very contradictory messages by various advisers – some of which are nothing less than irrational. In my field of foundational literacy, I frequently encounter teachers getting mixed messages and ending up not following their own gut feelings – instead doing what they think they ought to do or have directly been told to do. It’s most unfair and, very sadly, this can leave people feeling fearful, frustrated and lacking confidence – and providing less than appropriate provision based only on the opinions and preferences of influential people when all said and done.

It is now very common for children – both left-handers and right-handers – to hook their wrists and arms around so they approach writing from above the words rather than from beneath. Many hold their writing implements bolt upright, or from all sorts of oblique angles, sometimes even holding pencils like a dagger. Children frequently hold their pencils and pens in such a way that they obscure what they are writing. This starts from the earliest stages of pencil-work, when little fingers of the three to five year olds ‘grip’ the pencil down the sloping cone part because that is where they can achieve the strongest and most comfortable grip.

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This may be a consequence of the idea that the littlies should use fat pencils to help them to grip their pencils at first, or they are not yet ‘developmentally ready’ to form a tripod grip. I think this is misguided and the scenario is the other way around, that it is *more* difficult to grip the fatter pencils. Try this out for yourself by holding one of those giant, joke pencils with the tripod grip. It’s not nearly so easy or comfortable as a slimmer pencil. Then try writing something. Some children will never appear ‘developmentally ready’ to hold their pencil with a tripod grip – but the reality is that leaving them to their own devices to hold their pencils ‘any which way’ embeds the children with long term bad habits that can prove difficult or impossible to undo. Please don’t avoid *teaching* children in the early years.

I am frequently asked whether it is worth tackling the pencil-hold issue with older primary children and I admit that I used to fudge my response suggesting “mumble, mumble ... professional judgement”.

I still promote professional judgement of course but nowadays, from experience, I am happy to encourage teachers to raise this issue with the children themselves – many of whom prove capable of holding their pens with the tripod grip but they just don’t choose to because they’ve simply developed a sort of lazy, slovenly grip and posture ‘because they can!’ Occasionally a child will get distressed when you try to alter his or her grip – particularly if he or she really does have a strange, dagger-like hold, so that the change is too far removed from their comfort zone. It is noticeable, though, that this profile of child presents as having some deep-rooted self-esteem issues which, I maintain, may stem from lack of sustained, kind modelling, teaching and insistence in the Early Years. Very, very rarely is this likely to be a matter of physical disability or discomfort as a root cause. In fact, awkward pencil grips can cause discomfort during sustained writing activities. I think teachers are sometimes afraid of children’s early, protesting behaviour as they resist being taught something in a specific way but then this becomes a self-fulfilling scenario. I suggest that the Early Years’ *discovery learning, unique child and learning-through-play* ethos goes some way to creating the fear-factor of teachers providing explicit teaching and kind insistence.

I am fully up for masses of play – and not just in the early years – but I don’t conflate that with the idea that this is the best way for children to develop their full potential. I would be happy to bring back the notion of simple ‘free play’ rather than having to constantly add the qualifying jargon ‘child-initiated learning’ and ‘learning through play’ and so on. For goodness’ sake, what happened to just ‘play’ which is immensely invaluable in many important ways for us all – regardless of age?

And why is there such a prevailing culture in so many schools against ‘worksheets’ or ‘workbooks’ if these can be shown to be more fit-for-purpose and provide ample content for the subject in hand – *in particular* for the teaching of phonics for which you need plenty of printed cumulative code, words, sentences, texts and spelling word banks for each child to practise and revisit, and for handwriting itself? What an extraordinary state of affairs this is! However, I think the tide is beginning to turn regarding such prejudices. The question ‘What is most fit for purpose?’ is always key.

I emphasise *handwriting* as the third *core* phonics skill: 1) **decoding** (synthesizing) – sounding out and blending all-through-the-printed-word for reading, 2) **encoding** – oral segmenting all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling then allotting letters and letter groups for the identified sounds, and 3) **handwriting** – linking letter shapes to sounds, learning letter formation for capital and lower case letters and that both the matched capital and lower case letters are *code* for the same sounds, holding the pencil with tripod grip, orientating letter shapes and knowing their position on writing lines.

Teachers need to distinguish between teaching about the *alphabet* and the *alphabetic code* – and of course there is much overlap – but both concepts, I suggest, should be introduced to rationalise and support the teaching of systematic and incidental phonics teaching and (additional) handwriting from Reception and throughout primary. For letter formation and learning about alphabetical order, alphabet posters ideally would



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show capital and lower case letter shapes on writing lines, their formation starting points and directionality, and the school's joined handwriting style from the year this is introduced – for both main display and tabletop use. I supply a wide variety of free visual aids including Alphabetic Code Charts and Alphabet Posters which help to make these concepts *tangible* – both giant and mini sizes.

I suggest the teaching of letter *names* only through alphabet work at first, simply by singing an alphabet song and not through any phonics provision. In phonics sessions or reading practice, talk about the letters and letter groups as *code* for the sounds they represent rather than saying, ‘What sound does that letter make/say?’ and never use letter names in the reading process such as, ‘That letter says its *name* in that word’. Letters neither make sounds nor say their names!

Alphabet work will also include *matching* capital letters to their lower case equivalent letters (with handwriting activities or manipulatives such as magnetic letters) and any reading and writing activities will, of course, include teaching the role of capital letters compared to lower case letters. Many years ago, I used to suggest to parents that they avoid teaching their children how to write in capital letters. I now think differently. Children are surrounded by environmental print including both types of letters and therefore I believe we should address this fully and simply explain the different type of letter shapes and roles to children from an early stage. I would certainly suggest drip-feeding in some alphabet letter shape work linked to sounds for the three- to four-year-olds – some of whom will be able enough, and eager, to start early reading and writing. There should be no expectation for such young children – just exposure and experience.

As indicated earlier, I strongly recommend introducing the tripod grip for this age range – provide constant kind modelling with a child-friendly mantra such as the ‘froggy legs hold’ (or similar) to help them remember:

“Let me help you. Put your froggy legs [*thumb and forefinger*] on the bottom of the painted part of the pencil [*not on the cone-shaped end part*] with the pencil across the frog's back [*back of the hand*], then put the log under the frog” [*middle finger supporting the pencil to complete the tripod grip*].

Please don't labour teaching the sounds the letters represent *at the same time* as teaching the letter names. Letter names are only required for spelling purposes when relaying an exact spelling from one person to another, letter name by letter name. Otherwise, the spelling skill is oral segmenting, sound by sound, from beginning to end of the spoken word, and saying the sounds (aloud or silently) when allotting the letters and letter groups. This means it is also helpful when teaching handwriting as part of the phonics sessions, to say the sounds, and not letter names, when linking letters and sounds. So, the grapheme ‘sh’ will be thought of as the /sh/ sound and not the single letter names of “ess” and “aitch” nor the separate letter sounds of /s/ and /h/. Be very wary of various intervention programmes that are not in line with this mainstream practice when they should be. This means many slower-to-learn children, or learners with difficulties, may get contradictory teaching or lesser teaching than the mainstream teaching – some intervention programmes even avoid handwriting letters and this is worrying unless the child has a specific physical disability.

Still on the subject of teaching handwriting in the early years and infants, air-writing is a very common way of engaging large numbers of children interactively with letter formation (linked to sounds). It is not the same as practising in small-scale with paper and pencil activities. Nevertheless, it is highly engaging and supports the notion of starting points and directionality for letter formation. My advice for modelling air-writing is always face the same way as the children rather than facing the children. If you know of any left-handers, put them on the left hand side of the group.



Model air-writing with your right hand for right-handers and with your left hand for the left handers. If you have a teaching assistant, work as a team with one of you keeping your eye on the children's formation from behind the group or whole class.

Whenever you are writing on your board or flip chart, clear the bits and bobs off from around the board so your work is presented on a clear, clean rectangle – like a page – and organise your work carefully from top left to right. All too often I see teachers' boards and interactive whiteboards surrounded by invasive material (to be honest, I refer to this as 'junk'). If this material is helpful, create a perpendicular barrier (coloured tape for example) on your board to section part of it off so that you still have a clear rectangle to work in. Model any writing with writing lines on your board or flip chart as much as possible. You may find the very fact you're using the lines improves your own letter formation and awareness! Always reflect on your content and quality of provision from the shoes of the children.

If you wish to teach fully joined handwriting, I suggest you teach print at first (thoroughly) and introduce joined letter shapes, with lead-ins and washing line joins at the beginning of Year 2. Teach joined handwriting very quickly and intensively, with normal sized letters on writing lines (not wide writing lines). Approach which joins to use intellectually, and ask children to talk you through each join as you scribe on your board. Avoid computer generated labels with separate letter shapes with lead-in joins (apart from alphabet posters for teaching and supporting handwriting). It is very common indeed to see labels in schools with individual letters with lead-in joins that have not been correctly rationalised when following a letter with an exit washing line join (o, r, v, w, x).

Of course, when teaching a new fully joined style, you may need to share with your pupils that you're having to learn a different style along with them – but reassure them that you actually have several handwriting styles and this new 'school style' is another tool in the toolkit of joyous handwriting style options to call upon. Every child leaving your primary school should have fabulous, fully joined handwriting and very neat print writing – and even though you may personally despair as many will default to a scruffy infantile style in their secondary schools, you have at least *discharged your duty* and equipped them all with the *choice* of how they can hand-write in the future – enabling each and every child to hold their head high compared to others regarding the presentation of their best work.

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Debbie has written many challenging articles for educational magazines. She is also very generous with the resources she makes freely available online, including video guidance, patter, alphabet posters, alphabetic code charts and many other resources.



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