

Reasonable Answers to Commonly Asked Handwriting Questions

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How can I help the left-handed writer from developing an awkward grasp (where the wrist is flexed)?

Those children who prefer left-handed writing should be encouraged to do so. They should be encouraged early in their writing to use a good pencil grasp. Typically the very awkward looking “hooked” grasp with a flexed wrist develops because a child is striving to write quickly and has never been coached on a more appropriate way to write. It must be remembered that as children write left-handed, they are not able to see what they have just written, as it is under their hand. Because of this they have a more difficult time monitoring what they write. This is frequently why children go to the “hooked” position; to see what they have already written.



For the young child who has not yet developed a “hooked” grasp, the child should be taught to hold the pencil just as a right-handed person would, but the pencil is in the left hand. Here the thumb and index finger pinch the pencil barrel and the middle finger rests under the pencil barrel. The wrist should be slightly extended as the child writes. The hand that holds the pencil should be below the writing line, not above it. *Paper positioning is important.* The paper should run in the same direction as the child’s forearm, that is slanted toward the child’s left side.

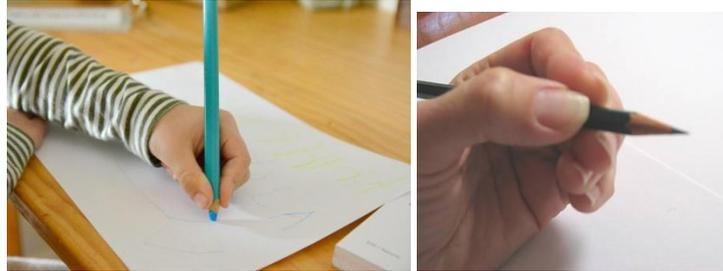


The teacher should attempt to demonstrate writing to the left-handed student using the left hand, though this may be difficult for some of us. Insure that the student learns the correct process for forming the letters so that they will not need to monitor closely what they have just written. Help the child learn to form the letter based on the direction that you go from the start point of the letter and not by trying to figure out what the right-handed writer’s hand is doing. Remember that learning this process may be difficult for the left-handed child at first, especially if the teacher is right-handed. *Having left-handed writers help one another in class may also be helpful,* especially if you have left-handed students with good writing habits.

What do I do for the child who keeps the fingers right on the pencil lead when writing?

Here the child typically has poor control of the pencil and difficulty planning the pencil movement. These types of problems are generally easy to fix if the child already has a good grasp (uses the thumb). Typical activities you can do to help the child learn what it feels like to hold the pencil up on the paint, instead of near the lead, include: put a rubber band around the pencil about

one inch above where the paint begins and prompt the child to keep his or her fingers on, or just above, the rubber band. You can also initiate a reward program for holding the pencil properly and cue the child to assume the grasp at the appropriate place on the pencil before starting writing. Dots, or other marks, on the pencil barrel to cue the child as to proper finger placement will also help.



Ideally, how should paper be positioned as a person writes?

Paper should be angled toward the side that the person writing with. The angle should be anywhere from 20 to 45 degrees from the vertical. If the person is right handed, the paper should be angled to the right and if left handed, angled to the left. Frequently this important aspect of writing is overlooked by teachers. Children can be helped to remember this by having them tape their papers to the desk at the appropriate angle or marking the desk with a slightly slanted square of masking tape as a guide to keep their paper in while writing.

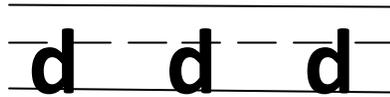
What is going on when all of the child's writing is very jagged especially when writing in cursive?

This is caused by the child having poor finger control for fine manipulation of the pencil. In these children you will typically see the finger joints move as the child writes. Children with these difficulties should be given writing paper with larger spaces and should be encouraged to write larger until they develop better finger control. They also need daily activities to enhance their finger skills. Craft activities that involve the manipulation of small parts are frequently effective, as are clay activities. Activities to strengthen the muscles of the thumb are also very helpful, such as pinching clothes pins with the thumb and index fingers, forming an "O". Squirt bottle activities where the child squeezes the handle are also good for hand strengthening, as are hand grippers with the child using the thumb in the grasp. Another good activity is one-handed knot tying and other one-handed activities. Other activities, if done with only one hand, that can help improve finger dexterity include: putting washers on bolts, slipping a rubber band off of a pencil, making a coin move between the fingers, making a coin disappear behind the hand, and picking up large quantities of small items such as beans or pennies one at a time while holding those already picked up in the hand.

How can I help the child who frequently reverses letters (writes them backwards), especially "d" and "b" or can't remember how to form letters?

This can be a common problem through the first grade, but should be seen less frequently during the second. The problem can be caused by the fact that the child has not really learned where to start the specific letters and what the first movement is from the start point. As we write, we see a "mental video" of our hand writing the letter a split second before we actually write them. If we really don't have a good idea of what all the steps in this video are, then we will use the wrong process to form the letters. Children frequently confuse "b" and "d" because they were not taught that the two letters start in different places in the writing place. The "b" should always be started on the top line and then go down, forming a "baseball bat" and then the "ball". The "d" should always

begin on the middle line of first and second grade paper. The child should first write a “c” shape, “making a dog dish,” and then go up for the “dog’s leash”. Children should be continually drilled and watched to insure they form all printed letters beginning with a ball shape (a, c, d, g, o, q), with the “c” shape starting from the middle line on the writing paper and in the one o’clock positions, as if the circle shape they make is on a clock face. The first movement from this start position should be to go up slightly and then around in a counterclockwise direction.



A structured system, such as the box and dot laminated writing handouts, will help if done on a daily basis. This simple system provides the child with enough structure to learn the start points of the lower case letters. With consistent, daily use of this sheet, the child will quickly develop a mental template that he or she can use to think back to when they can’t remember the start point of a letter. Children with severe letter reversal problems or those who don’t know the alphabet have typically benefited from the use of the box and dot sheet, usually in a one month period. They quickly learn correct letter formation. It is important that the teacher watch the children as they use the sheet to ensure they are using the correct process and going the proper direction from the start point. *Insuring that the child uses the correct sequence of steps in forming a letter is essential to good penmanship.*

What do I do about the student who likes to make “y,” “g,” and “p” up in the air instead of on the line?

Here again, the student is confused as to the start point for the letter. Have the student put a dot on the middle line of the writing paper before they form the letter to remind themselves that it needs to start there and sit on the line. The student should be encouraged to go under the line. Some children are initially hesitant to do this and just need some prompting and a few activities that emphasize going down throughout the writing line.

What do I do to help the child who does not close the letters such as in cursive “a,” “p” and “d?”

These children frequently are not using the correct writing process, sequence of steps in writing, or they are not completing the initial wave “c” shape when starting these letters. Daily practice making a series of wave shapes that are well formed is very helpful for this child. Also, have the child practice making the wave shaped on the board. It is important for the child to write these shapes slowly and correctly so that they are round. The activity is useless if the child is not critiqued as her or she forms the letter shapes.

What do I do to help the child who confuses and mixes upper and lower case letters?

This problem is usually caused by the child not really learning the letters. Because they don’t know how to form all of the letters, they will substitute the capital for the lower case or vice versa. Frequently, the upper and lower case letters are taught together, which can be quite confusing for some children. The best solution to this is to only teach the lower case letters first and then, once these are mastered, moved on to the capital letters. Why? If you think about it, the lower case letters are used more frequently in writing than upper case, so it is more important that they be mastered first. Teaching the capital letters can then be integrated and reinforced in the lessons on capitalizing sentences, names, etc.

What do I do about the child who can't remember to put capital letters at the start of the sentence or for proper names?

This is not really a penmanship problem, but more of a learning problem. Here the child can't remember the rules for writing. You might try cueing the child that whenever they see a period, the next letter is usually a capital one. Then have the child carefully correct his or her own paper. Make sure that the child really knows what the words "capital" and "upper case" mean as opposed to "lower case."