

developmental stages of learning

Early Years Birth–Age 5

Understanding the developmental stages of writing assists educators to monitor learners' growth as writers, identify appropriate teaching focuses, and select teaching approaches to meet different learning needs. The following section describes some of the likely handwriting skills and understanding needed by learners at differing stages of their writing development.

The developmental stages of writing are not to be viewed as discrete, sequential stages. Learners will demonstrate a range of behaviour, attitudes and skills depending on the complexity of the writing task and the degree of support provided.

Educators will need to be aware of possible disparities between the development of some learners' handwriting skills and their ability to compose a text. Some learners may be able to create texts that are well beyond their ability to write by hand. To help avoid frustration, specific handwriting tasks appropriate to their physical abilities can be planned while learners' composing abilities are recognised. Additional methods of recording their writing, such as scribing or using a computer or tape recorder, can be considered.

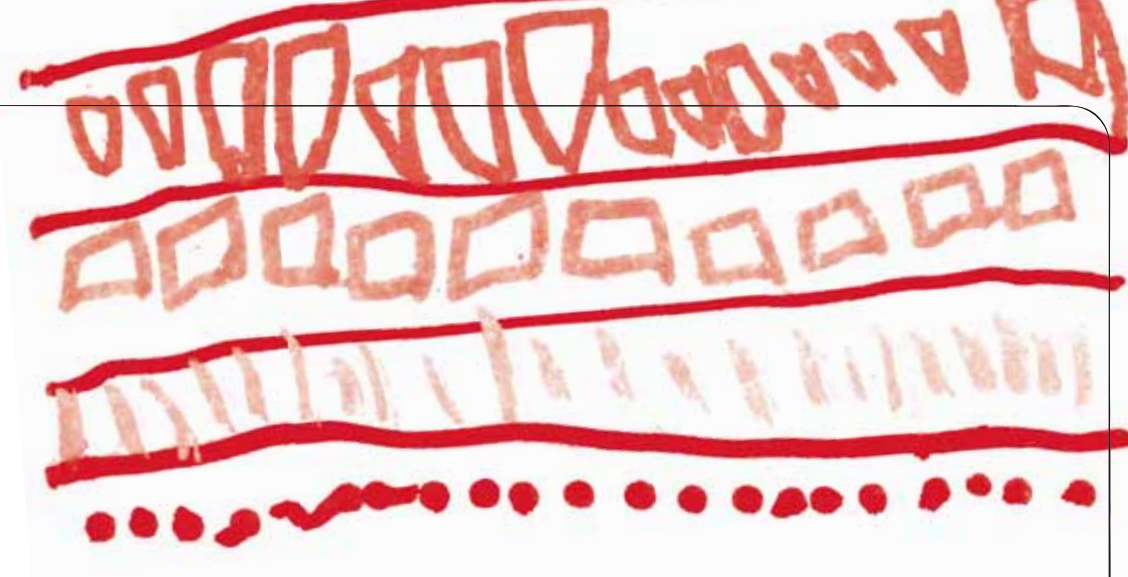
Other learners may develop proficient handwriting skills yet require additional support with the composing aspects of writing.

Hill (2006) describes learning to write or to represent language in written symbols as involving learning to use a writing tool, to hold it properly and to create letters, words and sentences to convey meaning to others.

Emergent drawing and writing skills are crucial in the development of handwriting. Children will make marks on paper from an early age and call it 'their writing'. Marie Clay describes their repetitive squiggles or attempts at adult writing as the 'recurring principle' (Hill 2006, p 281).

Hand–eye coordination is important in the development of handwriting. Young children should be supported in the development of their hand–eye coordination, balance, spatial awareness and fine and gross motor skills.





Children's early ability to grasp and manipulate writing tools will vary depending on their experiences and level of development. When they feel confident they will experiment using a range of grips as they use different tools to make 'marks on paper'. If very young children are forced to hold a writing tool with the correct grip before they are developmentally able to do so, their interest and motivation to engage in the writing process can be impaired.

Experiences that support the development of these handwriting skills include moulding and squeezing materials such as dough and clay, finger painting, finger plays and clapping games, music and movement, pasting, paper tearing, cutting, construction toys, putting together and pulling apart toys and building blocks, jigsaws, finger puppets, ball games, balancing games, climbing, crawling and negotiating obstacle courses.

Children's early drawings and paintings are associated with the need to represent and experiment with different tools and writing surfaces. Their projections of ideas through drawing and writing processes demonstrate their understanding, thoughts and feelings. As educators scribe for children, opportunities are created to model, promote and explore the processes and purposes of handwriting. Young children experiment with and imitate scribbles, shapes, lines, patterns, figures and letter and numeral shapes.

They enjoy writing signs and messages related to their play, drawing and writing to represent and make meaning. Children will begin to write by imitating what the adults they see are writing and how they are writing and will produce their own shopping lists, notes, telephone numbers and other messages relevant to their everyday context.

Hill (2006) refers to the 'sign principle' that develops when children realise that letters and symbols stand for something. Children begin to understand that the drawing of a car represents a car, but that the word 'car' has none of the actual features of a car.

Hill (2006) also refers to the 'linear principle' which is about directionality – young children learn that English is written from left to right in lines that go across the page. Children learn that the same letter can be written in different ways, such as upper case and lower case. They will develop interest in and experiment with other forms of writing such as Chinese calligraphy and music notes.

Young children need a range of quality materials to experiment with and time and support to practise their emerging handwriting skills. Access to a wide range of books and written texts from different cultures supports their understanding of drawing and writing for different purposes.

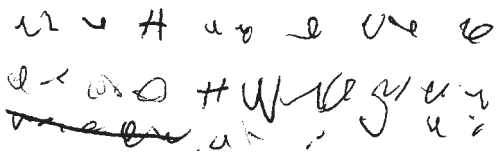
Hill (2006, pp 283–286) proposes the following developmental model that represents stages in young children's writing:

- Beginning writing
- Early emergent writing
- Emergent writing
- Early writing
- Transitional writing
- Extending writing.

The first four stages, which are applicable to the birth to age 5 group, are described below. It is important to remember that children will progress through the different stages at different rates and ages, depending on their experiences and developmental abilities.



1. Beginning writing



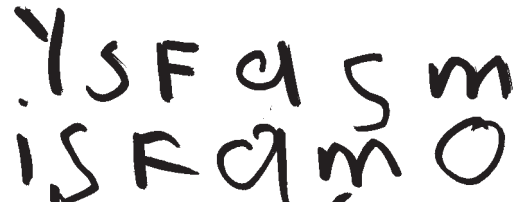
This stage is where young children use drawings to represent and communicate a message while 'reading out' their narrative relating to the drawing. The writing can occur as different shapes or in scribble-like lines that may follow a left to right pattern. As children engage with the writing process, they are exploring the process they have observed adults engaging in.

2. Early emergent writing



In this stage, children begin to explore the use of symbols (both drawings and letters) to represent words. The child may draw a picture and then write below some of the letters that represent that picture. By doing this, the child demonstrates an understanding of directionality and placement of the picture and understands the concept of a written word as a separate entity.

3. Emergent writing



In this stage, children begin to create more letter-like shapes, with spaces between the letters. Children may begin to use sequences of letters such as those in their own name, and repeat each letter several times as they refine the way that letters are made.

4. Early writing



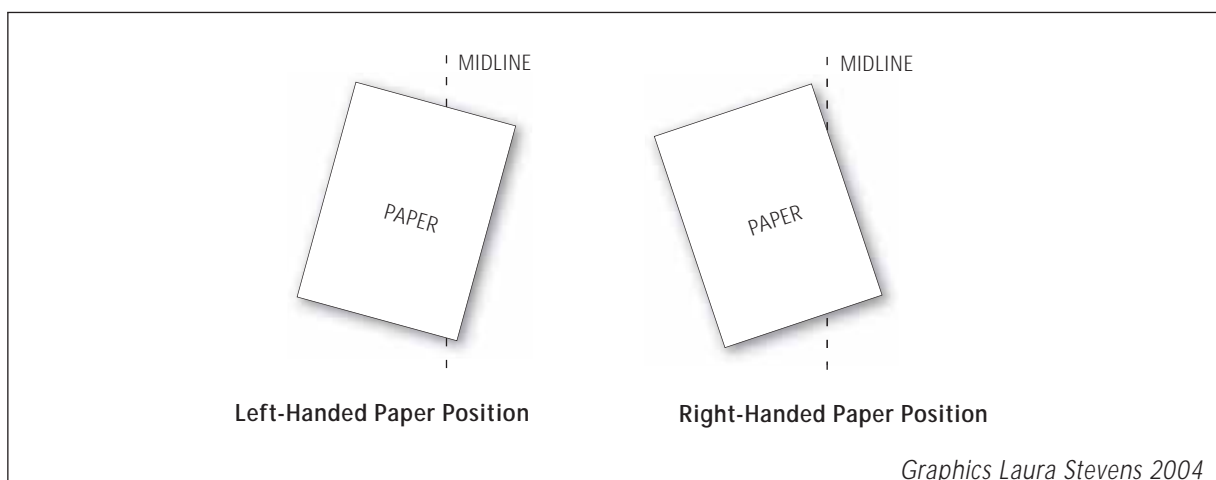
In this stage, children continue to create or invent spellings of words. Differences between capitals and lower case become apparent. Spacing between words becomes more consistent. As they continue to explore their understanding of the concepts of written language, they enjoy copying letters, words and sentences.

Early Years R-2

Educators of beginning and emergent writers learning to recognise, form and name letters and numerals emphasise the purposes of legible handwriting. They focus explicitly on handwriting in their teaching programs, including specific lessons on correct letter and numeral formation, posture, paper placement, seated position and pencil grip.

Depending on learners' needs and their developmental stages, educators focus on particular aspects of handwriting to support:

- the purpose of legible writing
 - the ability to differentiate between drawing and writing
 - an understanding that writing can represent thoughts, ideas, messages and speech
 - the development of fine motor coordination
 - a writing-hand preference
- awareness of the terms and concepts relating to written and printed material—spaces, words, letters, direction
 - letter formation (see Appendix 1)
 - starting and finishing points, and direction and number of strokes
 - slope, size, shape, proportion, placement and spacing of letters
 - letter links (hooks and kicks) if appropriate
 - the equal-size relationship of heads (ascenders), bodies and tails (descenders)
 - numeral formation
 - appropriate pencil grip
 - paper placement and hand, arm and sitting positions (relating to left-handers and right-handers)
 - a visual memory of letter shapes
 - movements that form the basis of later automatic processes in handwriting
 - the ability to identify and correctly form lower-case and upper-case letters.



Learning to write is a physically and mentally demanding activity. Educators can help beginning and emergent writers by using warm-up activities to prepare learners

physically, and the 'language experience' approach to create links between spoken and written language.

Crocodile
snaps

Desk p

Air-traffic
controller

Pia

Pencil Olympics

Warm-up activities

The warm-up activities described below are based on the work of Laura Stevens, occupational therapist, in *Hands up!* (2004), a description of a handwriting project for Torrensville Primary School.

Finger warm-ups

Put on imaginary writing gloves: Pull on the 'gloves', applying firm pressure to the fingers and back and palm of each hand. This exercise provides proprioceptive and tactile feedback and prepares the muscles for movement.

Spider push-ups: Place finger tips together and bend and straighten the fingers while pushing the finger tips against each other.

Pencil Olympics: Twirl the pencil like a baton, spinning it both horizontally and vertically.

Inchworm: Using a tripod grip, move the fingers along the pencil from one end to the other. Do not use the other hand to hold or support the pencil.

Piano: Drum the fingers on the desk as if playing a piano. Ensure each finger tip touches the desk.

Shoulder warm-ups

Shoulder warm-ups prepare the arm for writing and may help to release tension in the neck and shoulders.

Shoulder shrugs: Shrug shoulders forwards, then backwards.

Crocodile snaps: Start with one arm straight above the head and the other extended down one side of the body, then snap the hands together meeting above the head, like a crocodile snapping its jaws. Repeat with reversal of arm positions.

Air-traffic controller: Start with the elbows bent and the hands in a fist in front of each shoulder. Then straighten the elbows, moving one arm out to the front of the body and the other arm to the side of the body. Alternate the movements.

Butterflies: Begin with arms extended straight in front of the body. Link the thumbs to make an 'x' and turn the palms to face out. Using the shoulders to move, make small circles with the hands, moving the hands to the left and right in unison (the fingers lie side by side and are not moving—the movement is coming from the shoulders).

Chair push-ups: Begin by sitting up straight in the chair with hands gripping the sides of the chair, thumbs facing forwards and fingers pressing against the underside of the chair. Using the strength in the arms, push the bottom up from the chair. The feet should come up from the floor.

Desk push-ups: Start with hands flat on the desk, with the tips of the thumbs and index fingers facing each other to create a triangle. Bend the elbows to bring the nose towards the triangle and then push up with the arms to straighten the elbows again.

Spider push-ups

'It important to "warm-up"
for the well-being of the
students'

Language experience

Learners' experiences can be used to create links between spoken and written language. The 'language experience' strategy creates opportunities to use learners' experiences and their oral language as a basis for constructing a written text. Learners are encouraged to take an active role in the writing of texts and reading them back.

Learners' early attempts might include making marks on a page to represent their thoughts and drawing to assist in focusing thoughts and expressing themselves—these activities act as a bridge to writing. The educator assists by recording the learner's thoughts on paper. This provides an opportunity to talk about the sentences, words and letters as the learner watches.

Learners can be involved in tracing or copying the text the educator has written for them. As learners begin to identify individual letters and undertake their own writing, letter formation in handwriting can begin to receive more emphasis. Educators monitor learners' progress by watching them copy the writing.

Small-group sessions, conducted at chairs and tables, enable close observation of handwriting movements and provide optimal conditions for learners to write.

Language experience is an ideal context for the teaching of:

- letter names, the sounds they can represent and their correct formation—starting points, direction, finishing points and number of strokes
- key concepts such as words, sentences, spaces, lines and the head, body and tail (of letters)
- pencil grip
- paper placement and hand, arm and sitting positions.



Primary Years 3-5

Handwriting lessons continue to be important through these years. Learners need time to consolidate and to move from print to cursive writing. They are working to:

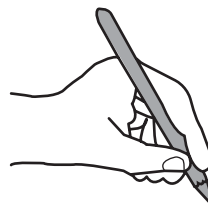
- understand the terms and concepts relating to written and printed material—spaces, words, letters, chunks of letters and directionality
- identify and form correctly the 26 lower-case and upper-case letters
- develop automaticity with letter patterns that appear regularly in English
- develop sufficient legibility and fluency to enable them to focus on the message, form and purpose of the writing
- develop further an understanding of the purposes of legible writing.

Once basic letter shapes and letter sequences have become 'automatic' to the point of legibility and fluency, learners can be shown how the letter shapes that they have learned initially may be joined. Learners are ready to join letters when they:

- can form correctly the 26 lower-case letters to write words, using an efficient pen grip
- show consistent use of slope, size, spacing and letter alignment
- show signs of trying to join the letters together
- have developed an understanding of common letter patterns.

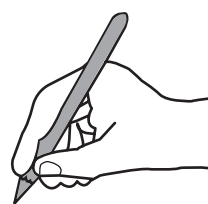
To avoid the development of inappropriate linking techniques, the teaching of linking ought to begin as soon as the learner displays these characteristics, and usually this will occur around the beginning of Year 3. The kicks and hooks (strokes that form the exit from the letter) are the precursors to linking and are usually introduced towards the end of Year 2.

Many teachers introduce the exits (kicks and hooks) at the same time that they introduce the linking of letters.



Fingers should be positioned 3cm from the tip.

Left-Handed Pencil Position



Fingers should be positioned 1.5cm from the tip.

Right-Handed Pencil Position



Middle Years 0-9

Once learners have a well-developed standard form, usually during the middle years of schooling, they may be encouraged to personalise their handwriting.

They may build on the basic style and adapt it to suit their writing purposes. Learners at this stage may be:

- developing a personalised style which is legible, fluent, durable and aesthetically pleasing
- using efficient deviations from the model form, if appropriate
- using embellishments and alternative styles for different purposes, if appropriate
- experimenting with different writing instruments, surfaces and styles, and to note the effects of writing with speed
- practising note-taking at speed with telephone messages, recorded interviews, broadcasts and short lectures
- developing and/or practising speed loops.

Alternative styles

In the Middle Years, learners can be introduced to alternative styles of handwriting which use the same technique as South Australian Modern Cursive, such as Italic, Copperplate and Looped Cursive (see Appendix 3).

If learners are given the opportunity to experiment with alternative styles, they may develop a preference for a particular style or certain characteristics of a style, and incorporate them into their personal style. Awareness of alternative styles can be developed if the educator provides:

- samples of handwriting through the ages, which trace the development of letter shapes
- collections of adult handwriting samples
- Italic, Copperplate and Looped Cursive alphabet cards, copy books or worksheets
- collections of the different pens used for handwriting (eg italic pens, split-nib pens, fountain pens and feather quills). Early handwriting styles have more character when the appropriate materials are used.

When learners experiment with alternative styles, they need to look critically at their handwriting, paying particular attention to legibility and to the maintenance of an easy, relaxed technique.

Once learners are joining the letters correctly, it may be appropriate to introduce the use of speed loops. The purpose of speed loops is to connect letters by the quickest possible means. Speed loops are generally used to join letters that have heads or tails.

The development of speed loops can be seen as a natural extension of a writer's style, although not all writers find their use effective.



Speed loops can be introduced to learners:

- when linking techniques are established
- if the learner demonstrates an interest in speed-looping.

The following example using Victorian Modern Cursive comes from *The teaching of handwriting* (Department of Education and Training 2002).

Signatures

At this time, attention can be given to the development of legible signatures. Learners usually enjoy experimenting with signatures and using them whenever possible. Teachers need to introduce various activities to enable learners to develop an understanding of the legal, commercial and social implications of signing their names.

abcdefghijklmnop

qrstuvwxyz

quiet black yellow

through joke life

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