

For PGCE trainees

Physical and sensory impairment

Handwriting

Self-study task 14

Introduction to the self-study tasks

These self-study tasks are designed to help trainee teachers on PGCE courses learn more about teaching pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. They can be used as stand-alone activities or to supplement and extend taught sessions on SEN and disability provided by the school or local authority.

There are 17 self-study tasks in all. Each task will take about two hours to complete, excluding practical activities.

Every Child Matters	
SST1	Inclusion and Every Child Matters
SST2	SEN and disability legislation
SST3	English as an additional language and SEN
SST4	Children's needs and development
SST5	ICT and SEN
Cognition and learning	
SST6	Moderate learning difficulties
SST7	Dyslexia and specific learning difficulties
SST8	Working memory
Behavioural, emotional and social needs	
SST9	Behavioural, emotional and social difficulties
Communication and interaction	
SST10	Speech, language and communication needs
SST11	Autistic spectrum disorders
Physical and sensory impairment	
SST12	Visual impairment
SST13	Hearing impairment
SST14	Handwriting
SST15	Developmental coordination disorder/dyspraxia
Working in partnership	
SST16	Working with colleagues in school
SST17	Working with parents/carers and other professionals

How to use the materials

This is an online resource. Some of the tasks are for you to do on your own; others are particularly suitable to do working with a partner.

Where some of the tasks ask you to record information you need to print out the relevant material first. Other tasks may involve using the internet, which gives you access to rich sources of information about SEN and disability and online forums for additional advice.

Each task includes the following elements:

- the professional standards addressed
- learning outcomes
- an opportunity to explore the concepts, definitions and research findings most relevant to the topic
- ideas for implementing the national curriculum inclusion statement in relation to the topic, including target setting, practical strategies, the role of additional adults and pupil grouping
- practical activities – including action research, child study and class observation
- resources – including books and websites
- an opportunity to evaluate your progress against the outcomes and plan your next steps.

A useful resource to support your studies is **Implementing the Disability Discrimination Act in Schools and Early Years Settings (DfES, 2006)**. It is available free to all schools and there should be a copy in your training institution or school. (If you haven't got a copy, you can order one using the link.)

It should be read in conjunction with **Promoting Disability Equality in Schools (DfES, 2006)** – which you can view, download or order by following the link.

Evidence and sources of information

As you work through these self-study tasks, try to keep a critical and evaluative attitude. Much of the understanding we have of what works, or doesn't work, in relation to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities has not been fully researched.

Remember:

- many interventions suggested for one group of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities will often benefit other groups of pupils, including those without SEN and/or disabilities
- the quickest way to find out what to do is often to ask the pupil or their parent/carer what they think works.

Literature reviews of 'what works' in relation to literacy and mathematics for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities, which has been investigated in some depth, are available at: www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR554.pdf

Other sources of information are listed at the end, under 'Resources and references'. You can use these to follow up and learn in greater depth about the material covered in this self-study task.

Self-study task 14

Handwriting

Professional standards addressed

- Q10** Have a knowledge and understanding of a range of teaching, learning and behaviour management strategies and know how to use and adapt them, including how to personalise learning and provide opportunities for all learners to achieve their potential.
- Q19** Know how to make effective personalised provision for those they teach, including those for whom English is an additional language or who have special educational needs or disabilities, and how to take practical account of diversity and promote equality and inclusion in their teaching.
- Q25** Teach lessons and sequences of lessons across the age and ability range for which they are trained in which they:
- (a) use a range of teaching strategies and resources, including e-learning, taking practical account of diversity and promote equality and inclusion
 - (b) build on prior knowledge, develop concepts and processes, enable learners to apply new knowledge, understanding and skills and meet learning objectives
 - (c) adapt their language to suit the learners they teach, introducing new ideas and concepts clearly, and using explanations, questions, discussions and plenaries effectively
 - (d) demonstrate the ability to manage the learning of individuals, groups and whole classes, modifying their teaching to suit the stage of the lesson.

Learning outcomes

You will understand:

- the importance of handwriting for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
- the difficulties they might experience, and
- optimum teaching and assessment methods.



Activities

Activity 1	Introduction to handwriting	30 minutes
Activity 2	Handwriting difficulties	20 minutes
Activity 3	Helping pupils with difficulties – assessing the problem	30 minutes
Activity 4	Helping pupils with difficulties – taking action	25 minutes
Activity 5	Points for action	15 minutes

Resources and references

Appendix	Suggested answers and solutions
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Activity 1

Introduction to handwriting



Approximate timing: 30 minutes

What is handwriting?

We convey our thoughts and feelings to others in many different ways, eg through speech, in writing, through song and dance and through drawing. Although keyboards have become more common, handwriting remains one of the most important modes of communication.

Handwriting is often described as a motor or movement skill. However, it is much more complex than a simple motor skill like running or jumping and involves a wide range of cognitive, language and hand-eye coordination abilities as well. Even with expert tuition, handwriting is a skill that typically developing pupils take time to perfect. In almost every class, there will be one or two pupils who find the skill hard to acquire and who need extra help to reach a standard that makes the skill useable across the curriculum.

The importance of handwriting

Despite the increasing use of computers in everyday life, in most schools, pupils spend as much as 50 per cent of their time in the classroom engaged in writing activities and regular assessment is based on handwritten work (Dennis and Swinth, 2001; McHale and Cermak, 1992). As pupils progress from primary school, through secondary, to higher education, the writing demands placed upon them increases rather than decreases. In most professional settings too, handwriting skills are important. A confident, legible and fast hand is therefore a prerequisite for satisfactory progress through formal education and beyond.

Recent research shows a clear link between the physical ability to write rapidly and achievement in the broader aspects of writing generally. For example, Connelly and Hurst (2001) and Graham, Berninger, Abbott, Abbott and Whitaker (1997) have shown that if the hand-eye coordination skills that relate to handwriting have not become automatic, then pupils' written output will be reduced, not only in terms of **quantity** but also in **quality**.

It is only when handwriting is as near to 'automatic' as possible that adequate attention can be devoted to other components of writing, such as creating ideas, planning, reviewing and spelling. If a pupil fails to reach an acceptable level of skill at any point in their school career, their academic success may be affected and self-confidence compromised. Outside school, too, pupils with SEN and/or disabilities may find that difficulty with handwriting has a significant effect on their ability to participate and make progress.

Because of the importance of handwriting, therefore, schools not paying sufficient attention to the skill are failing their pupils.

Expected progress in handwriting

According to the The National Curriculum Handbook for Primary Teachers in England: Key stages 1 and 2 (2000), pupils at key stage 2 should be taught to:

- write legibly in both joined and printed styles with increasing fluency and speed
- use different forms of handwriting for different purposes, eg print for labelling maps or diagrams, a clear, neat hand for finished presented work, a faster script for notes.

With effective teaching, the basics of handwriting can be mastered by most pupils by year 4. In years 5 and 6, they can then go on to develop a faster and more mature hand, which will be of benefit to them not only when they transfer to secondary school but also later in life. The Detailed Assessment of Speed of Handwriting (DASH), a new test of handwriting speed, provides norms for pupils aged between nine and 16, which schools can use to identify pupils who are not writing fast enough (Barnett, Henderson, Scheib, Schultz, 2008).

If a primary school is to ensure that all pupils reach an acceptable level of skill, then a detailed whole-school policy will be necessary so that the teachers can work together to make sure all pupils develop their handwriting skills further, year on year. A handwriting policy should fit in with other policies relating to pupils with SEN and/or disabilities, but there are, of course, no hard-and-fast rules about what must go into a policy; this will vary from school to school (Tiburtius and Henderson, 2005).

Secondary schools do not normally expect to teach their pupils handwriting. They assume pupils will transfer from primary school using a legible, joined hand. Yet, efficient handwriting is essential to cope with the writing tasks of the secondary school curriculum. Taking notes, writing to dictation, drawing diagrams, laying out maths problems, producing reports and writing creatively, as well as sitting exams, all require well-developed handwriting which remains legible when done quickly.

Unfortunately, many pupils do not enter secondary school with adequate handwriting skills. Difficulties can occur right across the ability range. Many pupils, including those who are academically able, can have their progress impeded by slow, awkward handwriting that is difficult to read. Those with weak skills will find that their handwriting deteriorates further as the demands on writing inevitably increase. It is essential to identify such pupils and help them as soon as possible before they fall behind and experience failure.

How handwriting is taught



To help pupils with handwriting difficulties, it is essential to know how handwriting is taught in the UK today. Read what follows and then answer 'Some questions about handwriting', set out in table 1 on page 8.

Unlike reading, there is no solid body of research to guide us on how to teach handwriting. In the UK, many different approaches can be found. Some countries such as France have a national style of writing, which all schools must adhere to, but here, each school is able to choose the style they decide is best for their pupils. There are two main groups of writing styles:

- Those similar to a 'simple modern hand' developed by Tom Gourdie and used in handwriting schemes such as Christopher Jarman's, Nelson and Penpals. These use clear diagonal and horizontal joins, and some letters, particularly those with descenders (y, g, j) are deliberately not joined so that the hand can be moved along the writing line. This style is easy to learn and can be written by a wide range of pupils.
- In recent years some schools have adopted a fully joined style with looped descenders and sometimes ascenders, similar to Victorian copperplate. Each word is written as a complete unit without a break, which is thought to help with spelling and word recognition, especially for pupils with dyslexia. It requires a higher level of skill to be written well. There is also a fashion for beginning each letter on the baseline. This has the simplicity that each letter starts in the same place, but the disadvantage that some letters need to be relearnt when they need to be joined together as letters following 'o', 'v', 'w', 'r' (and sometimes 'f') do not begin on the baseline.

Whatever the approach taken in a school, there are six important steps in teaching handwriting which:

- lead to efficient learning
- ensure that pupils are able to build on previous knowledge that does not need to be relearnt at any stage.

Step 1: Pre-writing experience: To develop gross and fine motor skills. This may be in physical education (PE) (eg ball skills, balancing) or in classroom activities (eg cutting, colouring, modelling). There are excellent sets of exercises in Mark-making and Creativity (Budgell and Ruttle, 2008).

Step 2: Letter formation: This is a crucial step as unconventional ways of forming letters can lead to many problems later, in joining, legibility and speed. Letter formation can be taught alongside letter recognition as part of the phonics programme. At the same time, however, it's often helpful to form letters in the air, or with a finger in sand or foam, especially for young pupils who may not be ready to use writing tools.

When learning to form letters, some pupils need only a visual demonstration and can immediately produce the required movements. Others benefit from manual guidance or work best from verbal prompts. Some can imitate movements made on the board, while others need the teacher or teaching assistant alongside them. Some will remember from only one demonstration; others may need many.

Regardless of how long it takes to learn the movement pattern, once the basic movement trace has been established, practice is needed to refine the skill, to improve consistency of size, slope and spacing, as well as overall legibility and neatness.

Step 3: Arrangement on the page: Pupils need to know the conventions of sitting letters on a baseline, of aligning the letters in relationship to each other and how to space the letters and words. They also need to know about the use of capital letters, punctuation and margins. These are part of the process of writing and pupils' skill in using them needs to be developed gradually as they mature.

Step 4: Joining: This can be taught as letter blends linked with phonic teaching or as a separate stage. There are two basic joins: diagonal as between 'a-n', and horizontal, as between 'o-n'. These can be further subdivided into smaller groups to distinguish between joining to a tall letter, such as 'a-k' and to rounded letters, such as 'a-d'. It is important to realise that pupils need to be able to write a letter with confidence before attempting to join it to another.

Step 5: Fluency: This stage is often not given the priority it needs. The pupil who has just learnt to join letters has to concentrate hard on the new aspects of the task and often cannot move easily and fluently. Quite a lot of practice is needed before this new writing style becomes 'automatic', giving pupils time to think about the content of their work, as well as allowing them to use smooth, flowing movements that will enable them to write with ease and in greater quantity. Expecting pupils to use a joined style at all times, except for very particular tasks such as labelling, will help to achieve this fluency.

Step 6: Speed: For handwriting to be fully functional a pupil needs to be able to write legibly and quickly. Pupils need to understand that increasing the speed of writing often makes it less legible and that different tasks require different levels of legibility and speed, eg personal notes often need to be written quickly and only need to be read by the writer, whereas when producing a piece of work for display, pupils need to take their time and work hard on legibility and appearance.

In summary, pupils need to develop a functional form of writing that is flexible, easily read by others, but can be written quite quickly.

Some questions about handwriting



During a school placement, arrange to observe an experienced teacher working with a class. Make notes on the questions in table 1.

Table 1: Questions about handwriting

What style of handwriting is being used in the classroom?	
What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a joined-up script from the start?	
What is multi-sensory teaching and why do teachers use it in teaching handwriting?	
How does the teacher make handwriting fun?	
How does the teacher assess pupils' progress?	
How does the teacher make sure that all pupils are working at an appropriate level?	

[Click here for some possible answers](#)



Activity 2

Handwriting difficulties



Approximate timing: 20 minutes

Who has difficulty with handwriting?

The national curriculum test results published in 2008 showed that only 60 per cent of boys and 74 per cent of girls reached the required standard for writing at 11 years of age. The figure for all pupils has remained constant at 67 per cent for the last three years (DfES, 2006, 2007, DCSF, 2008). These figures include pupils for whom handwriting, a major component of writing, is a cause for concern.

Like any other school activity, pupils vary in the rate at which they learn to write. Some have very little difficulty and may be using good joined handwriting while they are still in infant school. Others need much more practice and take longer to write fluently. Pupils' handwriting difficulties show themselves in different ways:

- handwriting may be difficult to read
- some letters are formed in an unconventional way
- the pupil has difficulty controlling the pen/pencil
- the pupil looks awkward and uncomfortable when writing
- the pupil writes much more slowly than most of the other pupils in the class.

Such difficulties occur for many different reasons. Sometimes these are linked to a disability, which may or may not have been identified; but for others, the difficulties are confined to handwriting alone. Broadly speaking, we can think of a pupil's difficulties as coming from two interconnected sources:

- problems that lie within pupils and which have a direct effect on how easy it will be for them to learn a complex task such as handwriting
- problems that lie within the learning environment and the experiences that a particular pupil might have had in relation to writing.

Within-child factors that affect handwriting include:

- **Motor and coordination difficulties**, which make the physical act of handwriting difficult. Pupils with progressive movement disorders, such as muscular dystrophy, will need extra help as they become weaker. Physiotherapists and occupational therapists can give good advice on how to maximise the chances of success for such pupils. For some, handwriting may not be a realistic expectation and use of a computer as an alternative to handwriting must be considered.
- **Sensory difficulties** – adjustments can be made to help pupils with these difficulties, eg visually impaired pupils might benefit from paper with much heavier lines than normal. If you suspect that a pupil's difficulty with handwriting stems from a sensory impairment, you should consult the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) or a specialist teacher.
- **Cognitive difficulties** that make learning to write difficult or impossible.
- **Low confidence** as a result of previous failure or poor performance on tasks such as handwriting.
- **Isolated difficulties with handwriting** – there may be certain pupils whose difficulty with handwriting is not connected with any other discernible problem. Some, but certainly not all left-handers, for example, may find it hard to learn to write legibly and fluently. Others may have missed out on crucial phases of teaching. On rare occasions, pupils who have a highly specific difficulty with writing symbols can be encountered. This is sometimes called 'dysgraphia'.

Within-school contributory factors

Within-school factors that can affect handwriting include:

- **Inadequate teaching in the very early stages:** Because handwriting has a strong movement component, it is essential to teach the basics, particularly letter formation, correctly from the start. Some pupils may need much more careful and systematic teaching than others to ensure that they understand and can make the right movements for each letter. These pupils will almost certainly need more practice than others.
- **Failure to consolidate efficient writing routines:** For some pupils, the day-to-day activity of handwriting in lessons gives them enough practice to use handwriting for the range of academic purposes. For others, much more structured practice is needed and it may be necessary to arrange for this outside the classroom.
- **Variation in practice:** Although teaching handwriting is now compulsory in primary schools, there is still a great deal of variation from school to school and from classroom to classroom. Whereas a pupil who finds learning easy can cope with such variation, a pupil with SEN and/or disabilities may be adversely affected by change. When planning a programme for a pupil, make sure they are not exposed to 'mixed messages' with different styles of writing being taught – eg if a teacher has started without lead-in strokes, and an occupational therapist introduces them, then this might be unhelpful. When special aids are needed – eg pencil grips or raised boards – make sure these are available in every lesson. Pupils who move from one school to another may find the transfer very difficult because the handwriting being taught is different.
- **Failure to recognise the movement component of a complex set of problems:** Sometimes there is such emphasis on one aspect of a child's difficulty – eg speech and language, reading, autistic tendencies – that lack of coordination is overlooked or not given a high enough priority. This can cause considerable difficulty with a skill like handwriting.

Activity 3

Helping pupils with difficulties – assessing the problem



Approximate timing: 30 minutes

To obtain a picture of a pupil's handwriting skill which is comprehensive enough to lead to an effective teaching programme, it is essential to:

- observe the pupil writing
- study the finished product – eg analyse the handwriting.

Only then can you take action.

Observing and assessing a pupil's handwriting



During school placement, identify a pupil whose handwriting is causing concern.

Carry out the following assessment. Depending on the age and ability of the pupil you may or may not wish to involve him/her in this process. If you do not have the time or opportunity to work with a pupil, then move on to activity 4.

(a) Observing the pupil writing

Make notes on the following questions. Does the pupil:

- Sit well, squarely facing the work with the upper body reasonably upright and steady?
- Place the non-writing hand on the writing surface?
- Hold the pencil so that the tip is clearly visible?
- Control the pen/pencil well and form letters easily?
- Move the pen/pencil with a smooth, fluent and confident movement?
- Press too hard or too softly? Is the grip tense or too slack?
- Have any tremor or press too hard on the paper?
- Have difficulty forming any of the letters? If so, note which ones are unconventional.

Now ask the pupil if:

- his/her hand aches after he/she has been writing for some time
- he/she suffers from headaches at school, or
- his/her eyes feel uncomfortable after he/she has been writing for some time.

(b) Assessing handwriting

Ask the pupil to write:

- A sentence using all the letters of the alphabet, eg **the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog**.
- A piece of free writing in a legible, speedy hand, taking approximately five minutes. Choose a subject which the pupil can easily write about.

Since some pupils have more pronounced difficulties with particular writing tasks, it is sometimes valuable to obtain samples produced under different circumstances. The DASH, a new test of handwriting speed, provides norms for pupils aged between nine and 16. It contains five tasks which can be used with pupils of nine years and older.

Now make an assessment of the writing using the 'S' rules below.

The sentence using all the letters will probably be the better choice to study carefully, but reference to the free writing might be worthwhile as it could show some differences.

The various factors to take into consideration when making an assessment can be grouped under seven 'S' rule headings:

- **Shape:** Are all the letters legible? Note those which are not.
- **Sitting:** Do the letters sit on the baseline with the ascenders clearly taller (in letters such as d, h, k) and the descenders below (in g, y, p, etc).
- **Size:** Are the letters the appropriate size relative to each other? Make a note of those that need attention. More generally, is the writing an appropriate size for the paper used and the age of the pupil?
- **Spacing:** Is the spacing between the words appropriate? This should not be too large or too small – about the width of a letter 'o'. Are the letters in each word evenly spaced? They should be close together but not touch.
- **Slant:** Is the slant of the ascenders and other down lines parallel, or do they wag in all directions? Note which letters differ from the majority.
- **Sequence/string:** Is the pupil joining all the letters that should be joined according to the style used? This may not be relevant to pupils who have not yet learnt to join their writing or whose disabilities make the joining process too difficult to attempt. However, there are many pupils who do not see joined writing as their goal, even though they are well able to develop the skill. This is partly because so much of the writing they see is in separate print form, in books, on a computer screen or in text messages. They do not appreciate that in handwritten form, 'joined-up writing' has considerable advantages:
 - it is potentially quicker because there are fewer pen lifts
 - the joining line helps to space letters effectively and evenly
 - a group of letters written in a string helps to reinforce correct spelling, eg -tion, -ing, -able.
- **Speed:** Is the pupil writing at a speed appropriate to his/her needs?

These observations can be used as the basis of a remedial programme, tackling one difficulty at a time. See activity 4.

Activity 4

Helping pupils with difficulties – taking action



Approximate timing: 25 minutes

Some pupils will be aware of their difficulty and will be eager to make an effort to improve. Others will be less concerned and more resistant to change. Regardless of attitude, all pupils need to be approached discreetly and carefully bearing in mind that after years of feeling disappointed or embarrassed by their own written efforts, they can become quite sensitive to comment. Before beginning to work with an individual pupil, teachers should:

- find out how pupils feel about their handwriting
- talk positively about improving it
- explain that changing handwriting is not very easy and improvements don't occur overnight
- reassure pupils that regular short practice sessions can make a difference
- explain that decisions about problems and their solutions will be made together
- explain that it's usually best to set priorities and work on one problem at a time.

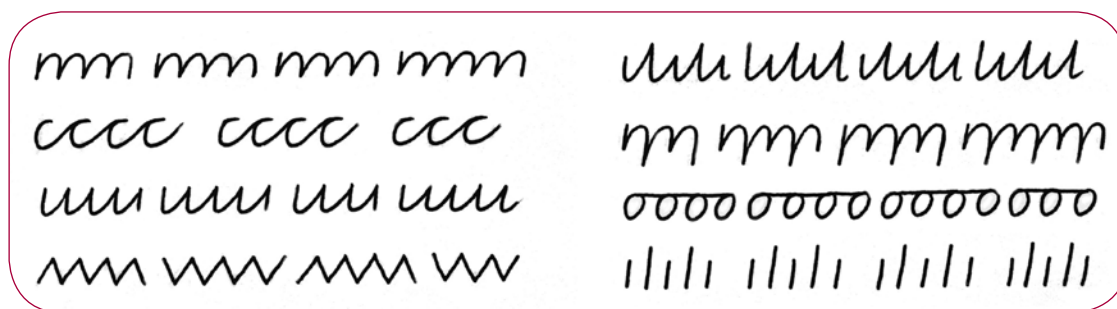
The following principles and strategies for solving problems might help you develop a plan of action.

Basic principles

The basic principles for rectifying handwriting difficulties are:

- Decide exactly what is going wrong. Sometimes correcting quite a minor matter will bring about a marked improvement in appearance and increase the pupil's confidence.
- Discuss improvements with pupils, in a very positive way, avoiding negative comments and focusing on the improvement to be achieved.
- Short, frequent periods of practice are much more effective than long, widely spaced sessions. This might mean gaining cooperation from the pupil's parent/carer to help with five to 10 minutes of daily practice at home, or fitting a small amount of practice into the school day, monitored by the SENCO, class teacher or a teaching assistant.
- Demonstrate exactly what pupils need to do and help them to achieve the necessary action.
- When pupils can do this, ask them to repeat it over and over again until the movement becomes easy and automatic. The number of repetitions varies for each pupil – there is no set number. However, the four or five repetitions allowed for in the average handwriting scheme is unlikely to be enough.
- Ask pupils to incorporate the join/new formation/higher ascenders, or whatever they are working on, into words and then into short sentences, still maintaining the improvement.

- Handwriting patterns can be a very useful tool in remedying writing problems as the patterns simplify the practice and remove complications of spelling. For example, Christopher Jarman (1995), an expert on teaching handwriting, suggests the following basic patterns:



- Repeated letters or pairs of letters can be used to practise many aspects of writing and give an opportunity to think about pen hold and the other 'P' considerations mentioned below. Suggestions for using patterns can be found in the National Handwriting Association's Tips for Teaching leaflet – 'Patterns'.
- Make sure there is a carry-over into the real writing situation. It is of little use to go to some trouble to improve features of a pupil's handwriting if it is not then put into practice so it becomes automatic. Support from all the pupil's teachers is particularly useful so that small efforts can be recognised immediately and vital encouragement supplied.

Some tips for improving posture, paper, pen/pencil and pressure

If observation suggests discomfort as the pupil writes, it is worth checking some preliminary points with him or her.

These conveniently all begin with the letter 'P':

- **Posture:** The pupil needs to be comfortable to write well – sitting at a table or desk of suitable height so that elbows and knees are at a right angle, the feet are flat on the floor and the body is balanced by the non-writing hand holding the paper.
- **Paper:** Pupils need to find a paper position that is comfortable – this usually means it should be tipped so that the side of the paper is parallel to the writing arm.
- **Pen/pencil hold:** Pupils hold their pens and pencils in many different ways. There is often concern about the way pupils hold their writing tools and yet current research (Dennis and Swinth, 2001) does not support the idea that the type of grip is closely linked to the quality of handwriting. What we do have to care about, however, is that the grip is comfortable, gives adequate support and allows freedom of movement. This is crucial if the pupil is to be able to write fluently and quickly later on.

The recommended method is to hold the pen/pencil:

- between thumb and forefinger, so that the side of the middle finger completes a triangle, or
- between forefinger and middle finger, with the thumb below completing the triangle.

But changing a long-established habit takes much hard work. So, if the grip does seem to be causing problems, look to see if a small change that will not be too difficult to achieve would give greater freedom of movement. A left-handed writer might need particular help in finding a position that is comfortable as it is more difficult to avoid smudging the writing. It is especially helpful to encourage a left-hander to hold the pen/pencil approximately 2cm from the tip so that the writing is more easily visible. See *Writing Left-handed* (G Dornan) for more specific help on working with left-handers.

- **Pressure:** Many pupils grip the writing tool very hard and/or press hard on the paper. Both of these make writing a tiring activity and encouragement to hold the tool more lightly and press less heavily can have a beneficial effect. Putting sheets of carbon paper between three or four pages of the exercise book, and challenging the pupil to make a mark on fewer pages, can be helpful.

Some tips for improvement using the 'S' rules

- **Shape:** The shape of a letter may need revision because it is illegible or because it is formed incorrectly. Correct formation is important for the writing to be joined properly and also for legibility, especially when the pupil writes more quickly (a letter written slowly can often be perfectly legible, but when it is written at a high speed it can degrade to an unrecognisable shape). The letters of the alphabet can be grouped into 'families' according to their shape. Understanding this can help in forming the letters – for example, a pupil who can write the letter 'a' successfully can use that knowledge to write a letter 'd'. A useful explanation of letter families can be found in Section 3 of Developing Early Writing (DfES, 2001). A 'lead letter' is assigned to each 'family' that pupils find easy to remember and has a strong visual image – eg a curly caterpillar – 'c' is the lead letter for the group including d, g, q, o, s etc, which all start with the same movement. (This can be useful even if you are working in a school that starts each letter on the baseline.)

Changing the shape of a letter or the way it is formed can be hard work and may need the shape establishing by guiding the pupil's hand as he/she writes, finger-writing in the air and tracing, before it is familiar. A programme of considerable repetition and practice, as explained above, will be necessary before the pupil can use the newly formed letter automatically in his/her normal work.
- **Sitting:** Sometimes simply encouraging a pupil to think about sitting letters on the baseline will lead to improvement. Other pupils might need more direct help – writing all the letters that have descenders on a line, for example. The idea that each letter is a cat sitting on a wall, some with their tails hanging down and others with the tail curled up, appeals to some pupils. Another strategy is to give the pupil double-lined paper, preferably with a firm, well-defined baseline and a dotted or fainter 'magic' line (or imaginary line for older pupils) as below.

The 'magic' line delineates the top limit for the 'x height' letters (those without ascenders or descenders) and the ascenders of letters such as d, t, b, etc should be clearly seen above the line. The function of the two lines should be clearly explained and an example of the alphabet, correctly placed, provided. The pupil should then be given practice in writing the alphabet, placing the letters correctly on the baseline. Later the pupil can practise writing words containing letters such as j, p and k which often cause problems as some pupils consistently write these letters in their capital form, standing on the baseline.

Younger pupils can be given a large sheet of paper with lines drawn on it and a wooden or plastic alphabet, so that they can practise placing the letters correctly on the baseline.

- **Size:** Whether correcting individual letters written at the wrong size (s and k are frequently written too large) or writing that is inappropriately large or small, the pupil can use the double-lined paper described above.

A clear visual image that helps pupils understand the alignment of the letters is suggested by Kath Balcombe.¹ Three horizontal zones are:

- the sky (blue) for the ascenders
- the forest (green) for the bodies of all the letters, and
- underground (brown) for the tails or descenders.

This is easily understood and remembered.

1 www.kber.co.uk

- **Spacing:** Sometimes simply encouraging pupils to think of this aspect of writing will result in improvement. They can test success by ticking letters or words that are spaced properly and counting the number of correct ones. Younger pupils need to understand the concept of a word and a space (or gap). At first a 'spacer' (ie a small strip of cardboard) may be provided to help the pupil measure the width of the space needed between words. For older pupils the best recommendation is to leave enough space for a letter 'o' between words. It is best not to suggest using a finger as a spacer as this is impossible for left-handers and is inappropriate when the pupil grows larger as the writing becomes smaller.
- **Slant:** Improving the regularity of the slant of a piece of writing does not necessarily make it more legible, but it does make the writing look so much better organised and attractive. Some pupils do not find it too difficult to slant their letters evenly if they are encouraged, and if successful it can be a great boost to confidence and pave the way for other modifications.

Pupils can test the regularity of their writing by writing over all the down lines in a few words with a coloured pen and making them longer so the slant is easy to see. Practice using a simple pattern of a few joined 'l's is useful, followed by short words with many ascenders, eg hill, ball, little.
- **Sequence/string (ie joining):** See the explanation for the importance of using joined writing in activity 3. Handwriting patterns created from a pair of chosen letters can be a very useful way of teaching joins that can be colourful and fun.
- **Speed:** It is not a good idea to encourage a pupil to increase the speed of his/her writing if there are other problems such as shape and size that need addressing first. But pupils do need to be able to write legibly and quickly to be able to cope with the pressures of classwork and exams. Short practices aimed at increasing the speed of legible writing are helpful, and the pupils can record the number of words or letters they have written in a set time – perhaps two minutes. There are suggestions for exercises in the National Handwriting Association's Tips for Teaching leaflet 'Speeding Up'.

Remember three very important points:

- Praise and encouragement are vital for pupils trying to make changes to their handwriting.
- Practice should be little and often.
- There may be a time when you decide that pupils are not making, or will not make, enough progress in handwriting and that an alternative mode of communication should be sought. Don't feel that either you or your pupil has failed. Make sure, in conjunction with the SENCO and other relevant professionals, that the alternative is introduced at the right time, with the right support – simply providing a laptop will not be sufficient!

Activity 5

Points for action



Approximate timing: 15 minutes

Spend a few minutes reflecting on this self-study task and record key points for action below.

What do I want to do next to develop my practice?

How will I do this?

What is my timescale for this to happen?

How will I know if I have been successful?

Do I need to involve anyone else in enabling this to happen?

Resources and references

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- Writing Left-handed... write in, not left out – Dornan, G
- Handwriting... Are You Concerned? A guide for parents – Scheib, B, 2008
- Tips for Teaching – leaflets (2008):
 - Above Year 4 – ideas for helping older juniors
 - Patterns – for older as well as younger children
 - Speeding Up – a compilation of suggestions for increasing children's writing speed
 - 'S' Rules for Quick Assessment – a handy checklist for teachers and pupils
- Hands Up for Handwriting – lively, fun and useful warm-up exercises to prepare the hands and arms for handwriting

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Appendix

Suggested answers and solutions

Table 1: Questions about handwriting – possible answers

What style of handwriting is being used in the classroom?	Cursive script.
What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a joined-up script from the start?	A joined-up script is consistent and therefore aids the learning of handwriting and spelling and helps develop 'automatic' writing. It can be tough at first, but pupils respond if teaching is well paced.
What is multi-sensory teaching and why do teachers use it in teaching handwriting?	Multi-sensory teaching uses techniques involving sound, touch, etc to engage pupils and aid learning.
How does the teacher make handwriting fun?	Through multi-sensory teaching, such as pupils tracing letters with their fingers in the air, in coloured sand, on a carpet, writing on large paper with large pens or tracing letters on their friends' backs.
How does the teacher assess pupils' progress?	Weekly independent tests, adapting teaching techniques to individual pupils' needs, and teachers meeting to compare classes and plan weekly objectives.
How does the teacher make sure that all pupils are working at an appropriate level?	Classes are broken into structured groups according to ability.

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