







## Avoiding and Addressing Handwriting Hassles



*A practical paper exploring how to help children with an ASD achieve handwriting competency*





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## Handwriting... What's the big deal anyway?

-  A framework for looking at handwriting difficulties;
-  How to understand and address your child's handwriting;
-  5 Top Tips for improving handwriting;
-  An overview of handwriting programmes.



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## Handwriting – What we see and why?

### Sample Quality

Memory

Orientation – check for reversals

Placement (in relation to lines)

Size

Start

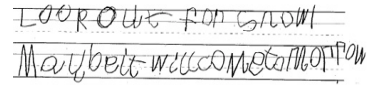
Sequence (letter formation)

Control


Spacing (within and between words)

Speed

**Consider multiple samples** – Test, workbooks, speed, dictation, copying, creative...



The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

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## Handwriting – What we see and why?

**Thinking Skills**

- Visual perceptual skills (i.e., discrimination and spatial relations)
- Planning and organisation skills (especially motor planning)
- Language and literacy skills
- Memory (letter knowledge and motor memory)

**Biomechanics and Motor Skills**


- Pencil grip and pressure
- Posture
- Bilateral coordination
- Handedness
- Muscle Tone
- Control and coordination of finger movements

**Psychosocial Considerations**

- Confidence
- Anxiety
- Motivation
- Behaviour
- Attention


**Sensory Abilities**

- Tactile processing
- Proprioceptive and kinesthetic awareness



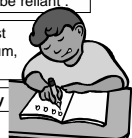
**The Environment**


- Learning Environment (style, curriculum, expectations)
- Physical Environment (seating and table set-up)
- Sensory Environment
- Social Environment and Demands

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## Handwriting Planning

- 1. Analyse your child's handwriting and consider their specific needs** – Identify handwriting issues & your child's strengths & needs in relation to thinking skills, motor skills, sensory abilities & psychosocial concerns?
- 2. Consider the environment and supports** – Who can support you in planning for your child's educational needs (teacher, OT, psychologist, speech and language therapist)? What curriculum options are available to you and what specialised / additional programming will need to be put in place?
- 3. Set Clear Goals** – What is possible long term and short term goals for your child? Include as part of an IEP if possible. Consider keyboard use and other communication tools, script type. Write name  $\checkmark$  fast, fluid & neat cursive script. Independent writer  $\checkmark$  keyboard and scribe reliant.
- 4. Develop a plan to achieve your goals** – Consider specialist support, OT, TA availability, modified or alternative curriculum, resources.
- 5. Monitor progress and review plans & programs regularly**



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### Handwriting Top Tips

- 1. Understand your child's difficulties and set goals** – Make sure that goals are handwriting specific e.g., Consider specifically what he will write and how, script type, capitals v's lower case, speed and legibility factors etc. Use interventions that include handwriting practice. Research has demonstrated that sensory motor therapies are not effective in isolation.
- 2. Make Preparation a Habit** – Ensure an upper limb warm-up is part of your child's preparation. Aim for a short, simple warm-up that can become automatic. Ideally it should promote body awareness and build UL tone and strength in preparation for writing. You could also include finger exercises (e.g., pencil aerobics) and use a visual prompt on the desk.

3 EASY EXERCISES TO GET MY ARMS READY FOR WORK

1 Hand squish my friends: 1-2-3-4-5

2 Thumb squish my friends: 1-2-3-4-5

3 Arm circles: 1-2-3-4-5

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### Handwriting Top Tips

- 3. Develop a Functional Pencil Grip** – Teach a tripod grip ("OK to Go" Pencil Grip Training, Driving Tip etc), use pencil grips selectively, use small writing pieces and vertical surfaces to promote the component skills needed for a grip that combines both mobility and stability. Component skills include – wrist and shoulder stability, control and fluidity (arm slide), intrinsic in-hand movements.

"OK To Go" Pencil Pick Up

STEP 1 - Make an "OK" sign

STEP 2 - Drop the fingers and open the "OK" sign

STEP 3 - Pinch the pencil and pick it up. Pluck on the palm, just above the wrist.

STEP 4 - Hold the eraser and twist the pencil around.

STEP 5 - Voilà! A perfect tripod.

Ref: J. Olsen, HWT 2003

Step 1 - Pick Up → Step 2 - Aim and Scribble → Step 3 - Colour-Trace-Draw-Write

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### Handwriting Top Tips

- 4. Mass Practice** – Mechanics and organisation must become automatic. Children require extra practice that is specific and appropriate with attention to quality.
  - Letter Formation;
  - Sizing and placement on the lines;
  - Spacing – within and between words;

**Letter Formation** – Consider script (slanted Qld script is very challenging for many children, capitals v's lower case), starting points are crucial, as is sequence and orientation.

- Teach in **letter families** to promote motor memory (motor anagrams) e.g., "c – stroke" letters and "up and overs". Use whole body movement.
- Teach in familiar **groupings** e.g., "ch" (relate to literacy program)
- Address **reversals**, use mystery letter strategy within letter families (i.e., child starts movement and a letter is then called out and the child completes the movement).
- Emphasis on **starting points** and use clear visual cues and boundaries to support organisation but be wary of dotted letters. E.g., green and red dots, tracks with arrows or grey/ highlighted tracing letters, grey squares.

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### Handwriting Top Tips

- 4. Mass Practice continued...**

**Sizing and Placement on the lines** – Orientate children to the lines and label lines for letter families – ascenders and descenders. Use visuals – e.g., helicopter, emu and possum letters etc. Use verbal and physical cuing to bump the lines.

Consider different types of paper – colours, raised lines, number and size of lines, and spacing between lines. See examples below.

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### Handwriting Top Tips

- 4. Mass Practice continued...**

**Spacing within and between words** – Specifically teach spacings within and between words. Strategies include use of spacers (paddle pop sticks, post-it notes), silly sentences, counters, hop scotch spaces. Stamp between spaces. Teach about space muncher letters e.g., "c stroke family".

Copy the sentence – Remember your spaces!

I print all the letters correctly.

I print all the letters correctly.

Solve this silly sentence

I print all the letters correctly.

I print all the letters correctly.

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### Handwriting Top Tips

- 5. Make Self-Checking a Habit** – Use checklists which are simple and clear, be selective (can be activity specific during remediation phase). Involve your child in developing checklist wherever possible. Checking games can be very motivating – can incorporate points or rewards. Get the child to check your work or peer work.

**Learn and Check**  
Learn letters, words, sentences, and how to check them.  
When you see the box, it's time to check your work.

**Check letter** Teachers: Help children find letter for correct Start, Steps, and Bump.

1. Start correctly. 2. Do each step. 3. Bump the line.

**Check word** Teachers: Help children find letter for correct Size, Placement, and Orientation.

1. Write letters correctly. 2. Place letters correctly - tall, small, or descending. 3. Put letters close.

**Check sentence** Teachers: Help children find sentence for correct Capitalization, Word Spacing, and Ending Punctuation.

1. Start with a capital. 2. Put space between words. 3. End with . ? or !

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Ref: J. Olsen, HWT 2003

## Handwriting Programmes

**Callirobics** – (calligraphy and aerobics) Repetitive, simple writing patterns. Prewriting patterns, straight and curved lines set to familiar music e.g., "Row, row, row your boat". Exercises are 2 minutes each. Relaxing (? depends on sensory profile) and adds rhythm (helpful for organising children with praxis difficulties). [www.callirobics.com](http://www.callirobics.com)

**Letterland** – Letterland is a child-friendly, multi-sensory system for teaching children to read, write and spell. Phonic literacy program leading to good alphabet recognition and used for over 30 years. Pictogram letter characters are strong visual memory aide and popular with many children with ASD. Some targeted resources to reduce confusions e.g., b/d and p/q. [www.letterland.com.au](http://www.letterland.com.au)

**THRASS** – (teaching handwriting, reading and spelling skills) Linguistically sound phonological awareness teaching tool that uses a phonographic, multisensory approach to teach the 44 phonemes or speech sounds as well as the 1, 2 and 3 letter spelling choices. Like Letterland and Jolly Phonics, Thrass's emphasis is on literacy attainment. It uses the Sassoon Primary Infant Font for it's handwriting resources. [www.thrass.com.au](http://www.thrass.com.au)

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## Handwriting Programmes (continued..)


**Jolly Phonics** – Fun, multisensory way to teach reading and writing using a synthetic phonics method based on 42 sounds, which are grouped and have a corresponding action. Literacy is taught in 5 stages, beginning with letter sounds and letter formation and finally spelling tricky words. [www.jollylearning.co.uk](http://www.jollylearning.co.uk)

**Handwriting Without Tears®** – Specific award winning handwriting curriculum, developed by an OT. Mainstream curriculum adopted extensively across USA and Canada, which has evolved from a remedial program. Truly multisensory approach with a wide range of affordable resources from Pre-Prep through to cursive. Uses a developmental sequence and groupings to optimise success, i.e., capitals first and a simple, clean vertical script. The program emphasises review and mastery (recognises the importance of correct motor angrams), as well as "Learn and Check". More than just letter formation – teaches pencil grip, alignment and spacing of letters and words. Some specific elements that are very successful in teaching children with ASD and dyspraxia – physical boundaries (lines, borders and grey boxes). [www.hwtears.com](http://www.hwtears.com)


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**Handwriting Resources**  
Handwriting Without Tears®



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