

How Children Learn To Write

It is debatable whether writing is a skill we need in this century but it can be argued that everyone needs to scribble a note for the delivery man from time to time!

There are two aspects we need to consider when teaching children this important life skill. Firstly, we need to ensure they know **how** to write. (We refer to this as handwriting). Secondly, we need to think about **what** they write.

Knowing **how** to write is connected to their physical development. Children have to learn how to hold a pencil and form letters correctly, but they can only do this when they have developed their fine motor skills; their muscles and enough strength in their hands and fingers.

These are some examples of tried and tested activities which develop fine motor skills.

Painting with thick brushes, lacing, threading, playing with play dough, writing in salt or sand, tracing and handling scissors.

This is a fantastic **recipe** for play dough: ***2 cups flour, 2 cups water, 1 cup salt, 4 teaspoon of cream of tartar, 4 tsp.of cooking oil and some food colouring. Mix all the ingredients and boil in a large pan!***

It NEVER fails!

You can make huge batches at a tenth of the price of the shop bought stuff. It has a gorgeous texture and children play with it for hours.



The next step is to give children chunky crayons or marker pens and introduce **writing patterns**.



Tracing along dotted lines encourages good pencil control. They have to try to keep the pencil on the dotted line without removing it before the end. This is known as a pre-writing activity.

Learning to form letters

Learning to write letters can be very difficult and involves lots of practice. Children often reverse letters. They start at the bottom rather than the top; the letter **s** is particularly tricky. They find it difficult to 'sit' letters on the line and have no idea about where to start their writing. Words go from right to left, up, down or diagonally across the page. None of this matters though, as constant practice is the key.

You will find that most children enjoy the **idea** of 'writing;' they often pick up a pen or pencil and write all sorts of squiggles all over the place. This is known as 'mark making,' and if you're lucky your newly decorated bedroom walls will escape this experimental phase that most children go through! Just remember to hide away all indelible marker pens.

Step 1

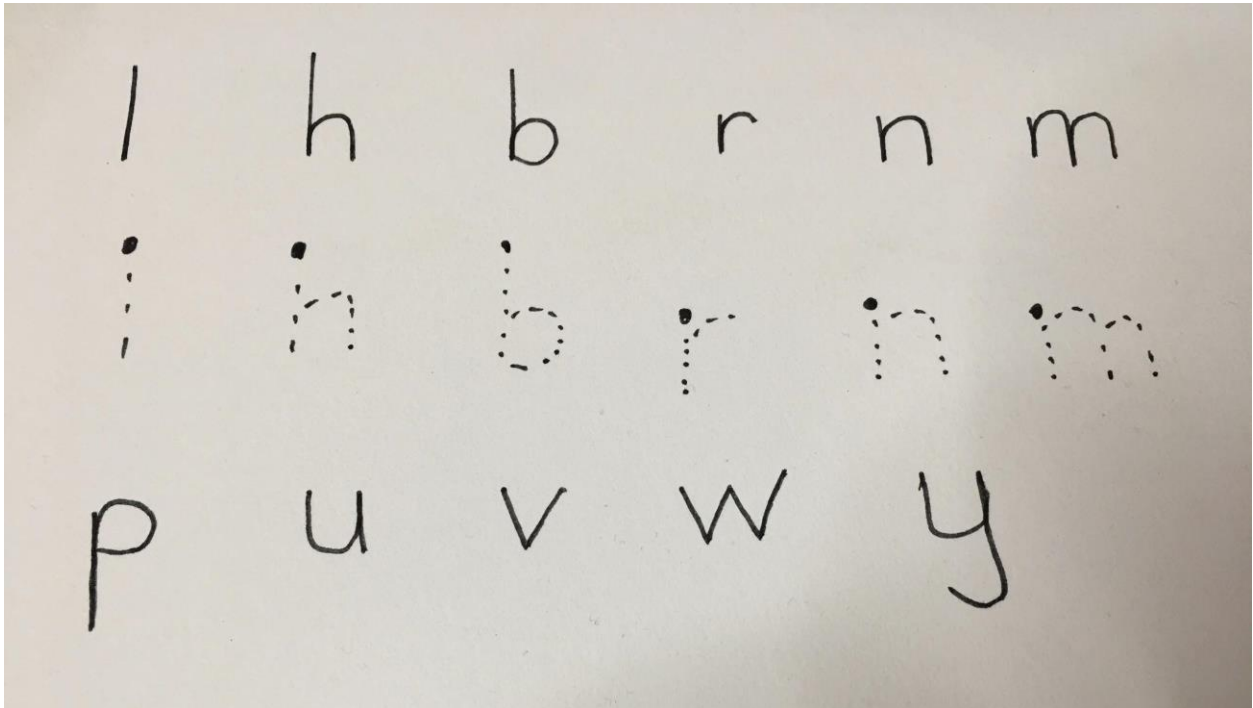
It is recommended that children learn to write the simplest letters first: **l b h r n m p u v w y**

These are '**down**' letters where the pencil starts at the top and goes down to form the letter.

(Simultaneously, children can be taught to write their own name regardless of whether or not they have learnt the particular letters).

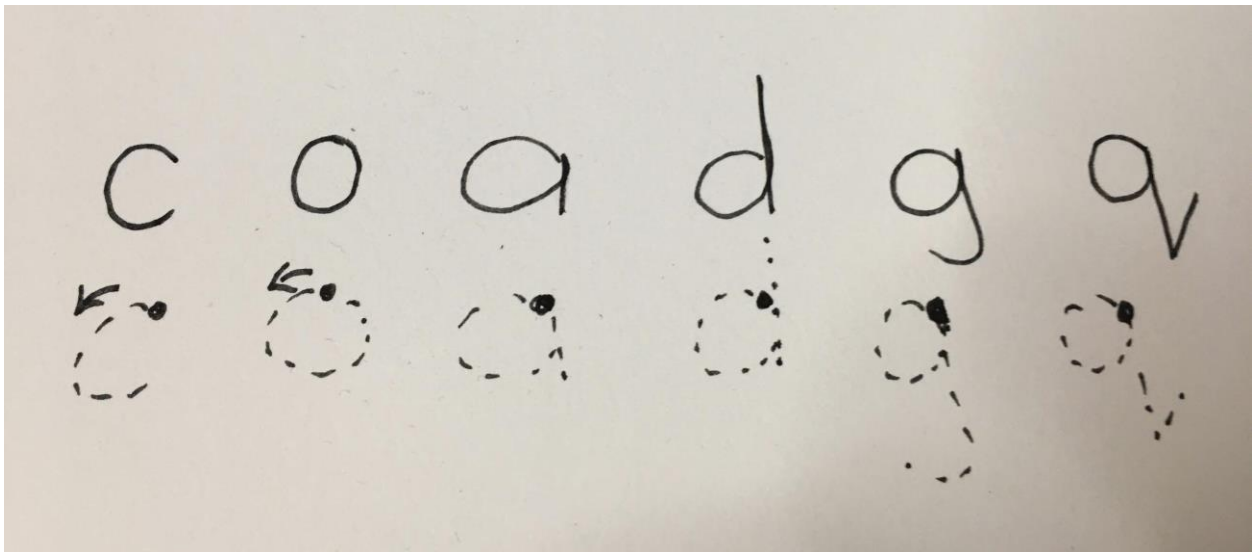
There is no need to buy expensive workbooks; just create your own with marker pens and 'dotty' writing.

There is no need to learn letter formation in alphabetical order and you do not need to link letter formation with the learning of phonics*. **Letters are grouped according to how they are formed.**



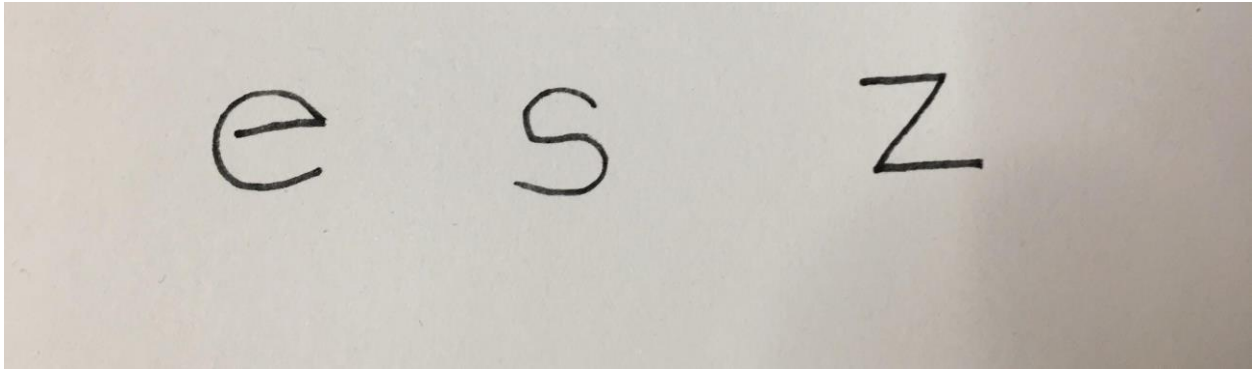
Step 2

Next, teach letters which start at the top and go **round** from right to left. Many children have difficulty with these and want to go the wrong way round. It's all about getting the 'flow,' and being able to form the letter in one movement.



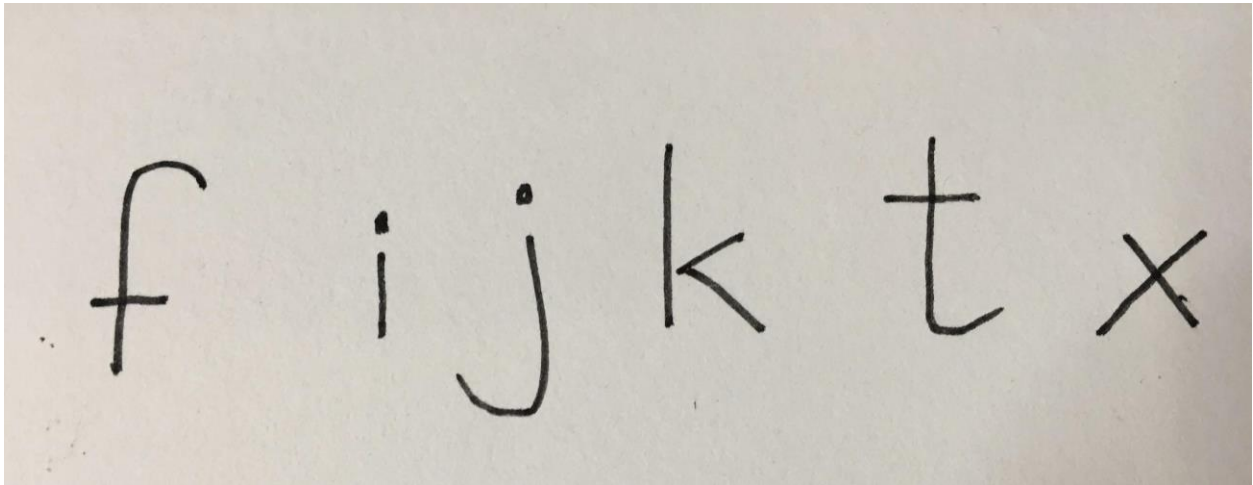
Step 3

Next, introduce letters that are formed with one movement of the pen or pencil.



Step 4

Finally, teach letters where it is necessary to use **two movements**. For example **j** is formed by moving the pencil down with a hook to the left. A dot is then added. Letters **f i k t** and **x** are formed the same way; by taking the hand away and finishing with another stroke or dot.



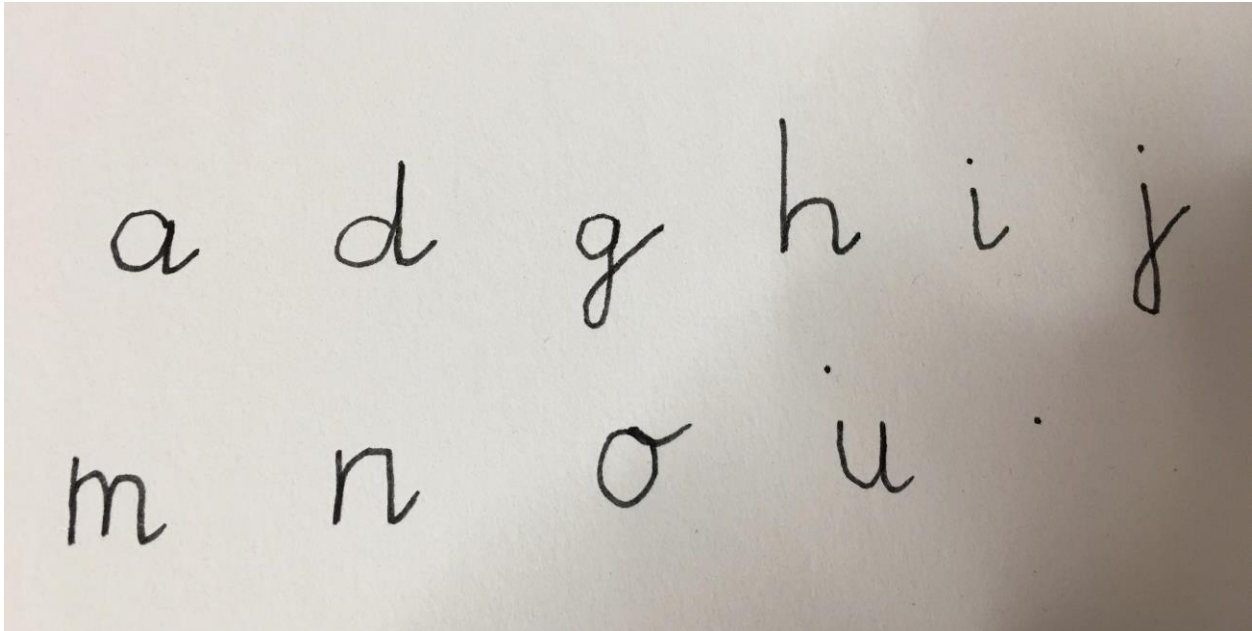
Step 5

When children can **print** letters and they are legible, the next step is to encourage them to 'sit' the letters on a line.

When they are able to write whole words, encourage them to leave a space between each word. You can call this a 'finger space' and show them how to use their fingers as markers between words.

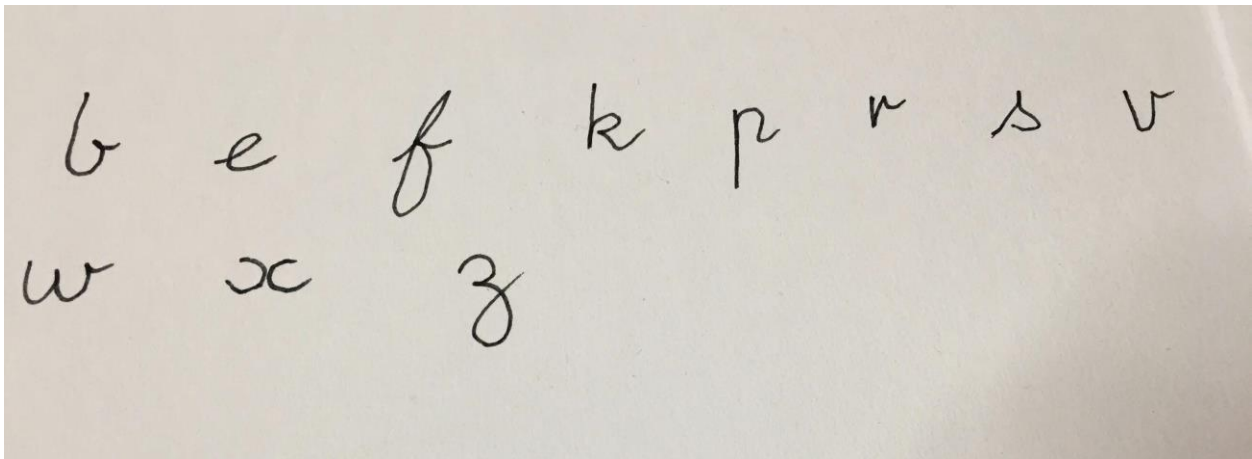
Step 6

When children are able to print neatly, encourage them to put a **'flick'** on the end of these letters. They are actually known as 'exit strokes!'



Step 7

Make complete changes to the following letters in preparation for **cursive** (or joined-up) writing: **b e f k p r s v w x** and **z**



When children can print neatly with 'flicks' encourage them to **join** the letters. This is important in developing **speed** when writing.

In the very early stages it is only really necessary to teach children that **sentences begin with capital letters and end with a full stop.**

You can also stress that **names** begin with capital letters.

In England and Wales we only teach **lower case letters** (unlike in America) where for some reason they teach children to print in capitals first! I really don't know why as it is so difficult to undo this. Nearly all children start school knowing how to write their first name in capitals and most reception teachers spend hours re-teaching this! I can't think of many books that are written completely in capitals!

Finally it is important to note that the process of learning to write takes about three years so there's really no rush. Just remember everything is sequential and again **practice is the key!**

What Children Write

Assuming children know their letter sounds and can form their letters they should be able to begin the process of writing independently. You may want to start by asking them to write very simple accounts of something they have done, for example: What did we do at the weekend? They might want to write: We went to see Grandma. (Many children will happily draw a picture but if they don't want to, don't insist - some children like many adults don't enjoy drawing). You could write a sentence for them and ask them to

copy your writing.



A much better idea is to encourage them to apply their knowledge of **phonics*** and ask them to write a sentence all by themselves.

Start by asking:

Can you write 'I' by yourself?

Can you spell **went** by yourself? You know it begins with the sound 'w'?

How do we make a 'w'? then an 'e'? Encourage them to really listen to the sounds in the word.

See if they can write all the letters by themselves.

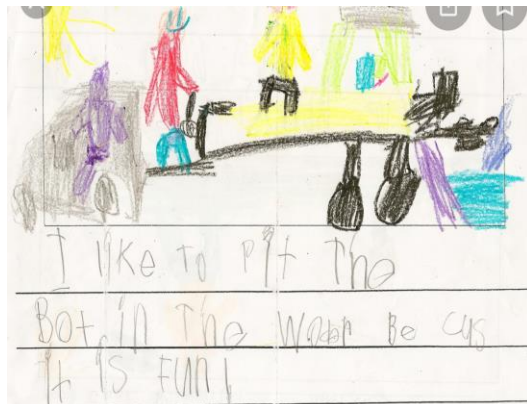
Remind them to keep letters in words close together and leave a space between words.

What sound does the word 'to' begin with?

Now ask 'can you write all the words in the sentence all by yourself?'

And so on

This method encourages children to think really hard about the sounds they have learnt; to recall them and write them independently. Always have an alphabet nearby, ready to refer to. They might know they want to write a letter 'p' but unless they have one to look at, it might resemble a number 9



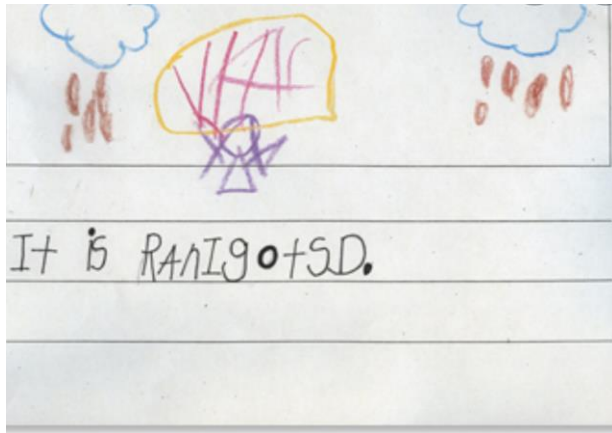
Look
will
their

They have made some great (and often amusing) attempts to spell phonetically. This is called 'emergent writing' and children learn so much through this method. Far more than by simply copying your writing. correct spelling can be introduced later.



at the following examples and you see these children have written stories completely independently.

I like to put the boat in the water!



It is raining outside.

Children between the ages of four and seven should be able to produce this level of writing but please don't worry if your child is reluctant to do so. It's all about motivation and interest in the topic and great results depend upon inspirational input by teachers (or in this case parents, who usually make the best teachers as they have the greatest interest in, and knowledge of their child). If children don't want to write what you want them to write about, then try to find out what they are really interested in.

Apart from writing simple accounts you can encourage children to write:



Captions or labels

Sarah's room
keep out

Shopping lists

Letters

Recounts of stories they have



enjoyed



Cards

Instructions

Invitations

*How to teach phonics is on a forthcoming document called PA framework for literacy which includes a new reading scheme.