

Ysgol Gyfun Emlyn

Helping to improve Poor Handwriting



By the time our pupils start at Ysgol Gyfun Emlyn, their abilities to write legibly have been well and truly established. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that a handwriting programme will improve the mainstream pupil's handwriting especially as the programmes available to us are not 'age appropriate'. With this in mind, we have collated a few pointers that may aide you as teachers/parents of the pupils that find it difficult to present written work that you feel is acceptable.

Why is the handwriting of some of our pupils so untidy? Has this pupil always had a poor pencil grip and weak fine motor skills? Or is their handwriting poor because he/she rushes through their written work?

If the pupil always rushes, then motivation may be more of an issue than fine motor delays. If the pupil is always rushing writing tasks, what is the reason behind it? ADHD or some other un-diagnosed condition? A general dislike of schoolwork, boredom with that particular topic or a need to finish quickly to move on to the next activity?

If the pupil can write neatly on occasion, what is it that motivates them? Answering these questions honestly will help you unlock some keys to help your pupils improve their handwriting skills.

Checklist of handwriting errors: Support may be considered necessary if there is serious fault in any of the following areas:

1. Does the writing fail to start at or 'drift away from' the margin?
2. Is there inappropriate space between the words?
3. Are the letters not written correctly on the line?
4. Are the letters of incorrect or uneven size, height or spacing within the word?
5. Are the letters written incorrectly?
6. Are any letters malformed (e.g., in the letters 'a' and 'd' the 'stick' is often not properly joined to the 'ball' part of the letter).
7. Are the letters incorrectly formed in the writing? It will be necessary to watch the pupils writing to ascertain this (e.g., the letter 'o' is often written as a clockwise or anti-clockwise circle – both are wrong), and a note made of the letters which are wrongly written.
8. Are the letters incorrectly joined together?
9. Is the 'slant' excessive? Intervention may be initiated by any teacher/tutor/parent or child. Encouraging good handwriting is the responsibility of every teacher.

Teaching Handwriting

Pen grip: Where pen grip is grossly incorrect, pupils may need to learn how to hold the pen properly: for right-handers, the pen should rest on the side of the middle finger, into the crook of the thumb, while the thumb and first finger clasp it gently, but firmly, into place. The side of the hand rests on the paper.

Make sure the pupil is not gripping the pen too near to the tip, or too far from the tip. Left-handed pupils need to hold the pen a little higher up the barrel so they can see what they are writing.

Posture: Where posture is grossly incorrect, pupils may need to be told how best to sit to write: all pupils need to sit more-or-less straight-on to the table, upright, holding the paper with the non-writing hand. Right-handers angle the paper slightly to the left. Left-handers angle the paper slightly more, and to the right.

Posture, as grip, should not be too 'tense'.

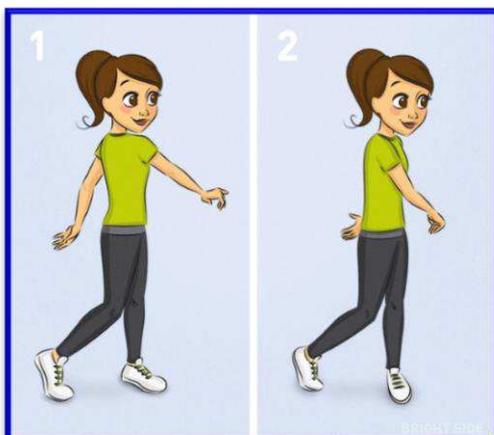
Developing motor control: The following exercises will develop motor control: Writing much bigger than normal (e.g. on the board), or much smaller than normal. Tracing letter shapes on, say, a piece of velvet. Skywriting, or writing on another pupil's hand or back (and guessing the letters). Tracing over shapes, patterns and letters.

Some guidelines to Improve Handwriting - Fine Motor Exercises

A regular, short exercise programme is more likely to appeal to your older pupil than the fine motor activities used for primary aged children. Set aside 2-3 minutes to do one of the 'Fine Motor Skills Activities for Older Pupils' before each writing task, or use them as a break when your pupil starts to lose focus.

Try a Pencil Grip

Encourage the pupil to try different writing implements and/or pencil grips to see if any of those help reduce fatigue. Using a good grip can really reduce fatigue and prevent muscle cramps. Fatigue and muscle cramps are some of the most common causes of poorly presented written work.



Shoulder Girdle Exercises

Encourage the pupil to do shoulder exercises before every handwriting task. These will help strengthen and stabilise the shoulder muscles to free up the hand muscles for handwriting. If your pupil gets tense and tired easily during handwriting, then try these exercises as a break. (I understand that this may not be a viable exercise in a large class!)

Frequent Breaks

Give frequent breaks if your child tires easily or becomes distracted. If the fine motor and shoulder exercises suggested above are implemented, the pupil may soon need less frequent breaks.

What Motivates Your Child?

One motivator is to use pupil's dream vocation to inspire and encourage – e.g. telling your pupil that if he wants to be an airplane pilot, he has to make sure his numbers are legible, otherwise he will end up at the wrong coordinate on the map!

Explain to your child that if he has to sit an exam for an external examiner who does not know him and does not make exceptions for him, he may score lower than if his handwriting is legible.

Lower Your Standards

Give lots of positive reinforcement for good writing, and **accept that legible can be good enough!** Where possible, allow your child to type assignments and written tasks. On tasks where creative input is being rated, your pupil may be able to write more freely and easily if freed from the effort of writing neatly. A neat final draft may be required, but being allowed to type or scrawl at first may get the creative juices flowing. We now live in an age when 'word processed' composed work is definitely the norm and perhaps we are expecting too much of our pupils.

Let's face it, wouldn't you prefer to mark a piece of work that has been word processed and totally legible or a piece of written work that has taken the pupil an extraordinary amount of time and energy to make their hand writing legible at the cost of its content?

Fine Motor Skills Activities

There are some simple fine motor skills activities in the table below. Understandably, these types of exercises can be a distraction if not done by the whole class, but there is nothing wrong in getting the whole class to take part. Choose one of the activities before starting a writing exercise.

At the end of the lesson, ask the pupils if they felt the activity helped them in their presentation. By getting the whole class involved you are not singling out pupils and they may be more open to using these exercises in the future.



Crumple a sheet of newspaper or scrap paper in the hand until it is a tight ball. Try to do it while holding the hand in the air. That way, the fingers work harder!



Use the fingers to “walk” a tennis ball up and down the legs. You could even go up one leg, across the tummy and down the other leg. A larger plastic ball also works well.



Use modelling clay or “Plasticine” to roll small balls with the fingers.



Using the “tripod” fingers (thumb, index and middle fingers), roll the blob into a neat ball.



If your pupil struggles to isolate those three fingers, have them hold down their ring and little fingers like this, or ask them to hold down a piece of cotton wool with those 2 fingers.



If rolling the balls is too hard, then try making sausages with a simple back and forth motion of the tripod fingers.



Using a beanbag, position the fingers under the beanbag, holding it level.



Keeping the bean bag level, slowly rotate the bean bag 360 degrees, using the fingers and thumb to manipulate it.

Letter-formation: When teaching letter formation:

1. ALL letters start on the line. this is the essential rule. It relieves the (dyslexic) pupil of worry about where the letter starts.
2. Use a piece of paper with sets of three lines to learn and **practise** the shapes.
3. Do NOT try too much at once. Learn the letters, and then practise writing words which only use those letters, until they are embedded in motor memory.
4. Teach **upper-case letters as printed letters (A, B, C, D, E, etc)** not to 'join up'. **If the pupil is motivated and the home is supportive**, it is possible to teach **lower-case letters** easily – and with successful results – in 4–6 sessions:
5. Teach lower-case letters in the following order, as the following shapes:
 - a. Firstly, teach the 'up, back and round' letters (**c, a, d, g, q** and – perhaps later – **o**): and write words such as dad, cog, dog, doc, cad etc.

When joining letter-to-letter, 'o' requires the pupil to start the next letter 'half-way up'. This skill may – but it may not – be appropriated automatically. You may wish to leave 'o' out at first, and introduce it later. Whatever you decide to do, the concept of starting the next letter 'half-way up' after certain letters (o, w, r, f and v) must be explicitly taught.

- b. Secondly, teach the 'anti-clockwise' letters (**l, t, i, u, y, w** and **e**): and write words such as cell, wool, loot, gate, lute, well, tile, cool etc.
- c. Thirdly, teach the 'up, down, up-and-round' letters (n, m, h, k, b, p and – later – r): and write words such as road, name, robber, hopper, problem, killing etc.
- d. Lastly, this leaves 'difficult' letters (**x, f, j, v, x** and **z**) to introduce gradually: Of these, 'f' and 's' are the greatest problem (since **j, v, x** and **z** are not used often). Tell the pupil that '**f**' and '**x**' are the ONLY letters where they are allowed to lift the pen off the page. Excepting 's', discuss/allow alternative forms for these letters. The pupil will now be able to write any words. They can practise writing out the alphabet in joined-up writing; and use these holoalphabetic sentences:

*The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.
The five boxing wizards jumped quickly.
Pack my box with five dozen liquor jugs.*

