



Teaching Handwriting

by Emma Caulfield, Talk for Writing Primary Expert

Many people believe that handwriting is becoming a lost art; children of the 21st century don't need to handwrite when it is highly likely that they will spend all their adult lives writing on computer keyboards. However, it is statutory to teach handwriting so whatever you may believe, you must teach children to handwrite.



Teaching children to handwrite alone is not enough, however. Children need to be able to handwrite fluently so that they can write at length. Fast forward to when your pupils are sitting GCSEs, and some will need to handwrite long answers and essays for up to two hours at a time. It's vital to their success for us to put in the groundwork in Early Years and the Primary school.

Studies have shown that the quality of handwriting influences the marks that students achieve at Secondary school and beyond. Think about how you feel when you have to mark a barely legible piece of writing; think about how a child feels when they struggle to record their ideas legibly. Children deserve to be taught this vital skill as handwriting is their shopwindow.

In this article, you can find:

- Handwriting Policy – what should be in one
- FAQs
- Examples of handwriting development in Talk for Writing schools
- Links to useful resources

If I have missed anything vital or you would like further information or training, please don't hesitate to contact me via the Talk for Writing Trainers page.

Handwriting policy

Every school should have a policy on teaching handwriting. It should set out your school's aims and approach so that everyone teaching handwriting knows what they should be teaching and how they should be teaching it.

Your handwriting policy could contain:

1. *Definition* – define what handwriting is. It is worth including here that it is a complex process that requires mastery of multiple skills.
2. *Rationale* – summarise your rationale for teaching handwriting so that everyone understands *why* they have to teach it.
3. *Aims* – explain what effective handwriting is and what you would like your pupils to be achieving by the time they leave the Primary school.
4. *Curriculum content* – this is the largest part of your policy. It could contain: what font you use; expectations for teaching in Early Years (for e.g. relevant ELGs and guidance from Birth to 5 Matters); and statutory requirements and relevant non-statutory guidance for Years 1 to 6.
5. *Teaching approach* – this provides an overview of your teaching approach. It could contain: which scheme you follow (see FAQs); what children write with (pencil, pen, other?); when joining is taught; the language of teaching handwriting; the process children are taken through to achieve legibility and fluency, from EYS to Y6; expectations of how long per day or week children will be taught handwriting; inclusion of children who have handwriting difficulties; teaching children who are left-handed.
6. *Assessment of handwriting* – how and when you will assess children's handwriting and what you will assess.

Handwriting FAQs

1. Does my school need a handwriting scheme?

Yes! The sequence of teaching handwriting can be complex. Teachers need a guide and schools need to ensure that there is progression during the year and across the school. I would recommend Cambridge Penpals or Nelson. You may only need the teachers' guides so have a good look at the resources before spending lots of money! Once you have chosen your scheme, you will need to choose your handwriting font (see next FAQ).

2. What font should I teach?

To secure the best possible handwriting teaching across a school, everyone should be teaching the same font (letter shapes and style). The simplest letter forms that have no curls or flourishes are the best for children to learn. Letters that naturally have an exit flick, for e.g. a e should be taught with the exit flicks.

There is no requirement for copperplate or calligraphy – keeping it simple is best. Don't forget to display your font in any classrooms or spaces where children and adults will be writing.

3. Should we teach continuous cursive (every letter in a word is joined) handwriting?

No. The perceived wisdom is that keeping each letter separate and simple when learning to handwrite is best. Once children have learned the individual letters, they can be taught to join them together.

N.B. The British Dyslexia Association recommend that children with dyslexia learn to write using continuous cursive handwriting.

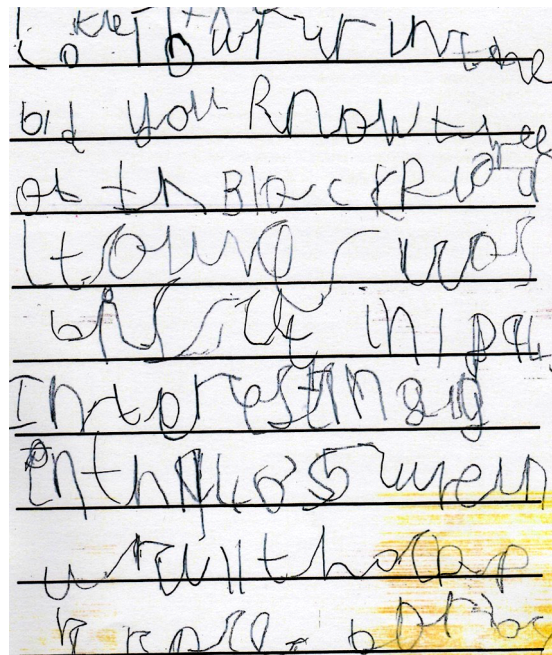
4. My phonics scheme teaches handwriting, do I need a separate handwriting scheme?

Probably! Does your phonics scheme actually teach handwriting, or is letter formation tagged onto the end of some phonics sessions? Handwriting teaching should not be a bolt-on that sometimes drops off. Although letter

formation can be practised during phonics sessions it is best taught independently.

5. When's best to teach children to join, the National Curriculum says Year 2?

To achieve the Greater Depth standard in writing at the end of KS1, children need to be able to join **some** letters. It is recommended that children are taught to join once their letter formation is well established and their letters are sitting on a line. If a child is taught to join too early the following can result:



6. How regularly should handwriting be taught?

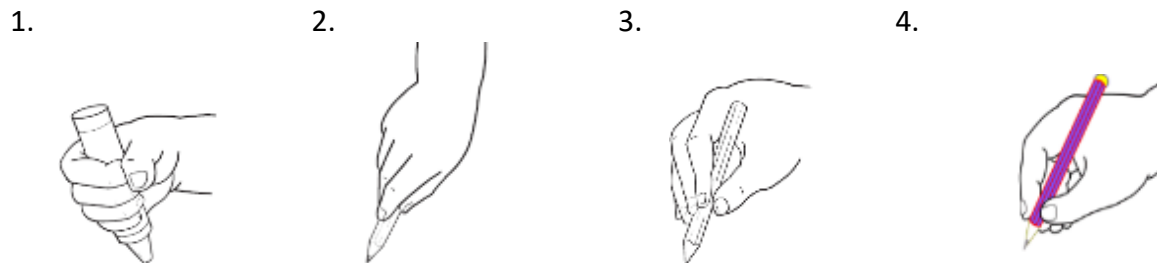
Handwriting is a physical skill therefore it needs to be practised as regularly as possible. If you don't use it, you lose it. When letters, and later joins, are taught they need direct instruction – ideally the teacher would teach the letter or join and then observe pupils applying what they have been taught, adjusting and correcting as children write.

Whole class input should be followed up with small group work so that children aren't left to continually make errors in their letter formation or joins (practice makes permanent). Teaching and practice for 20 minutes 2-3 times a week is ideal. Once children are writing fluently, they should continue to practise on a regular basis so that they can develop their own style. *"Pupils*

should continue to practise handwriting and be encouraged to increase the speed of it..." National Curriculum Non-Statutory Guidance Y5/6

7. What should I do about a pupil's strange grip?

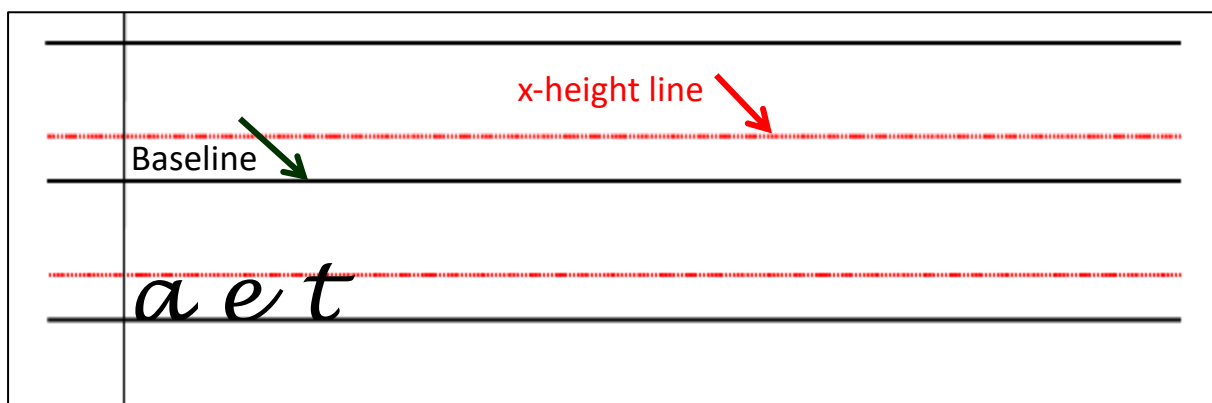
The stages of learning to grip a pencil are usually:



If a child has an established grip that produces legible and presentable handwriting and is comfortable when writing at length, then don't worry about changing it. Often a strange grip leads to illegible handwriting and discomfort in the wrist or arm; this needs addressing. Support with adjusting grip can involve giving the child visual reminders, such as putting sticky dots on a pencil showing where to put their fingers, through to using a moulded grip that trains the child's fingers or hands (see resources below).

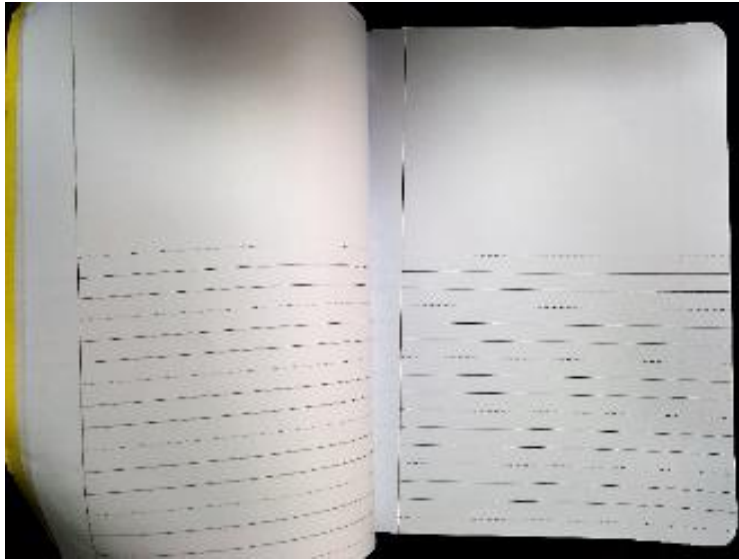
8. Do we need separate handwriting exercise books?

Once children can keep their letters on a line, most need a visual guide as to the height of the letters. Simply telling children or modelling where the letters go up to isn't enough to get the motor plan into their heads. They are likely to need this as support:



The base and x-height lines tend to be enough (4 lines can be very difficult to navigate, particularly for children with eyesight difficulties). Moving from 2 or more lines for practice to a single base line for writing can present difficulties for some children, so it's best to either:

- Provide a specially printed book with handwriting lines for the early days of learning to handwrite. All writing should be done on the same lines, i.e., English, topic, worksheet, display (see resource list below for where you can get these books/paper).



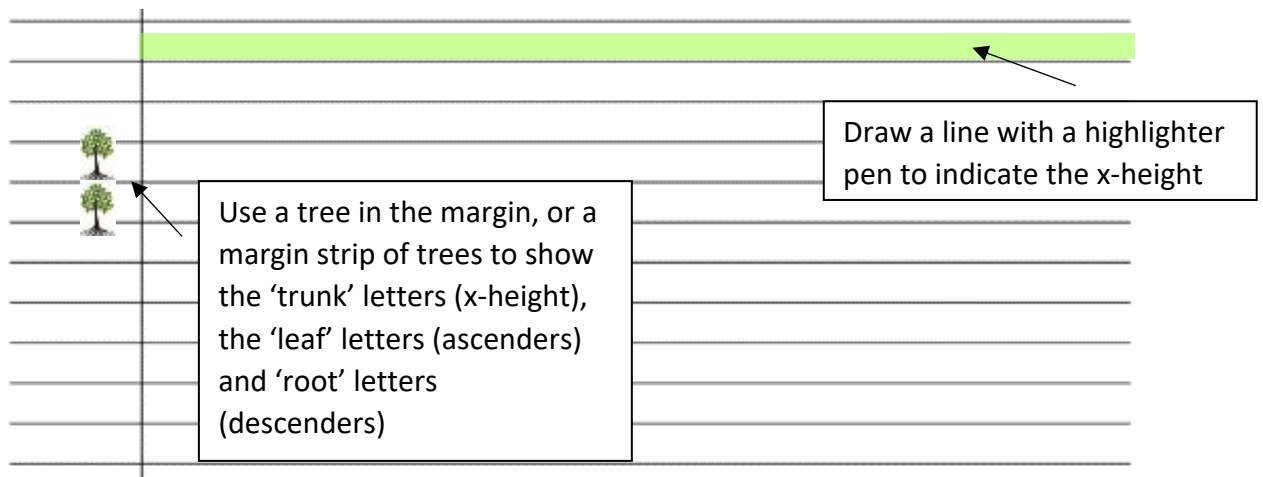
Reception exercise book St Thomas CE Primary School, Blackburn



UKS2 topic book St Thomas CE Primary School, Blackburn

OR

- Provide support for establishing the motor plan for those who need it, whilst using the regular single lined books. These could be drawn in by an adult or clipped to the back of a page as a handwriting guide.



9. What do you think about pen licences?

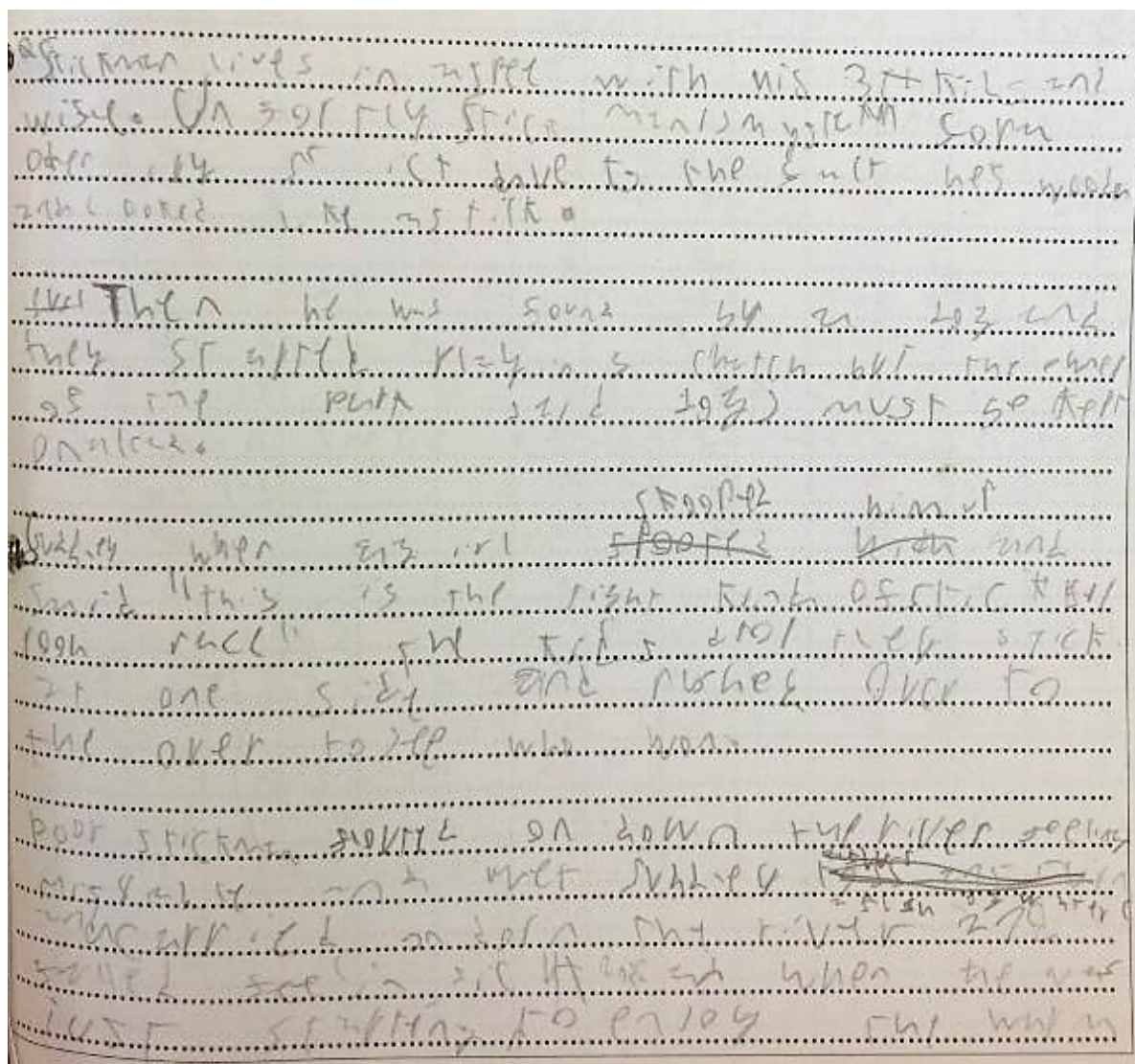
I completely disagree with pen licences if they are given as a reward to children for 'good' handwriting in pencil. Here's why:

- Handwriting is a physical skill, therefore some children will be unable to master handwriting through no fault of their own making. On sports day, we would never stop children from trying the long jump if they were unable to jump on the spot; in PE we would never stop children from playing a ball game if they were unable to catch a ball proficiently. Giving out high-stakes rewards for a skill such as this is exclusive and unnecessary.
- Being able to write in pen isn't the be all and end all, some people write 'better' in pencil.
- Some pens can create difficulties for children with motor issues or children who write with their left-hand – for these pupils, being given a pen isn't rewarding.
- What is 'good' writing? Who decides? This is so subjective that it is impossible to make the awarding of pen licences consistent across a school, unless one adult is responsible for awarding every licence.

See below for a link to a blog written on this subject by a parent.

Handwriting Development in Talk for Writing Schools

Here's an example of progress in handwriting at Selby Community Primary School:



Selby Community Primary School Y5 Writer – Initial Assessment

Another school that significantly improved pupils' handwriting and presentation was Watermoor C of E Primary in Cirencester. Jo Pearce, formerly Head at Watermoor, summarised the main steps that were taken to achieve this:

1. Consult with staff to establish what the barriers to good handwriting and presentation are, and to agree what the vision is for children's handwriting
2. Visit other schools to help to understand how the vision can be turned into reality
3. Agree best practice for modelling handwriting, including the paper that teachers model on and consistency in the language that teachers use when modelling
4. Purchase exercise books with handwriting guidelines for pupils to write in
5. Hold daily handwriting workshops in KS1 including fine motor exercises
6. Agree and monitor presentation expectations
7. Adapt EYS curriculum to allow for more fine motor skill development
8. Model handwriting during Guided writing in EYS & Y1
9. Draw up, implement and monitor a Handwriting Policy

Useful Resources

Grips

TTS have a broad selection, including this box of different ones for children to try out:

<https://www.tts-group.co.uk/the-essential-pencil-grip-kit-20pk/1011910.html>

Pencils & Pens to support learning to handwriting

Stabilo have the best selection: <https://www.stabilo.com/uk/products/learn-to-write/>

National Handwriting Association

This organisation is the only one that is entirely dedicated to handwriting. It should be your go to! On its website there are lots of cheap and free resources to support with the teaching of handwriting: <https://nha-handwriting.org.uk/>

Handwriting Intervention Materials

‘Pegs to Paper’ is a fabulous intervention: <https://learnplaynexus.com/p2p-for-literacy/>

Handwriting Schemes

Cambridge Penpals:

<https://www.cambridge.org/gb/education/subject/english/literacy/penpals-handwriting-second-edition-series>

Nelson:

<https://global.oup.com/education/content/primary/series/nelson-primary/nelson-handwriting-3ed/?region=uk>

Supplier of books with handwriting lines

EPSL Educational Printing <https://www.eprint.co.uk/>

Members of the NHA can download free printable paper with the correct lines: <https://nha-handwriting.org.uk/shop/printable-line-guides/>

Pen Licence Blog

<http://learningfrommymistakesenglish.blogspot.com/2017/04/a-pen-licence-it-is-only-just-stupid.html>

Emma Caulfield

Talk for Writing Primary Expert

Emma is available to deliver training throughout the UK & internationally. Please visit the training page on the Talk for Writing website for more details.

