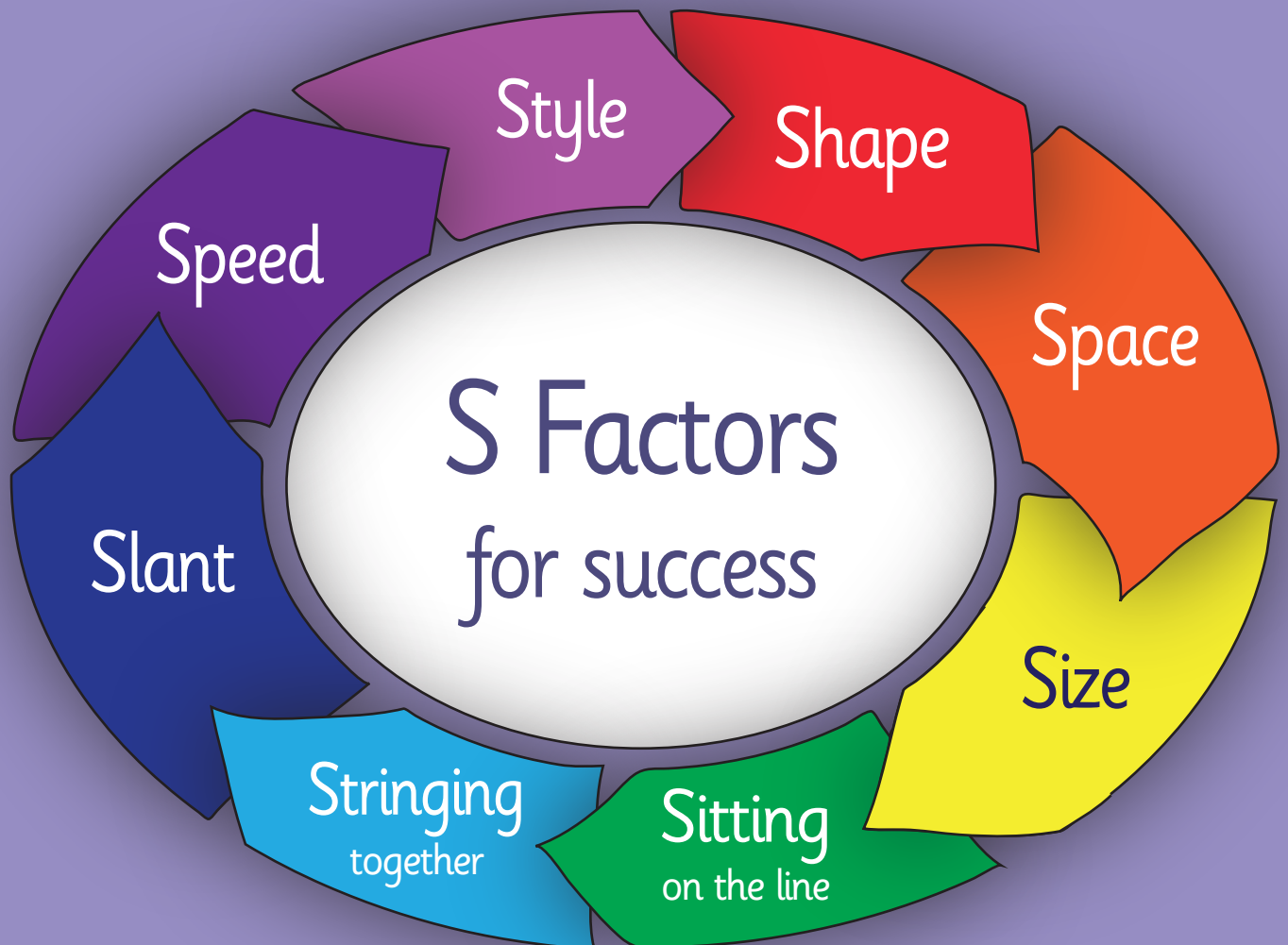
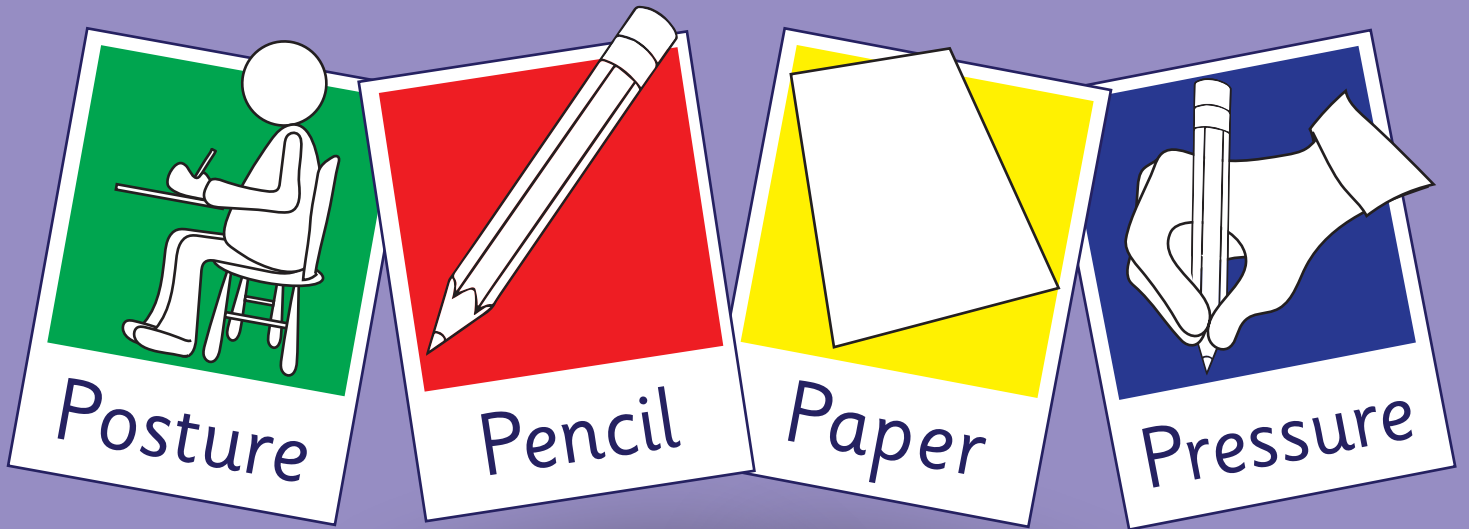


Good Practice for Handwriting

Prepare... for P checks

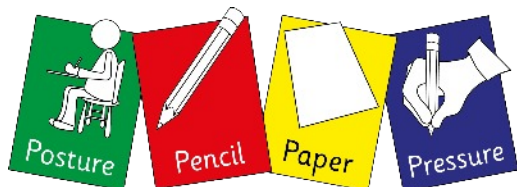


TIPS FOR TEACHING

National Handwriting Association 
Promoting good practice

'P' Checks

Preparing to write



The 'P checks' are used to support the *process* of handwriting and cover **Posture, Pencil grasp, Paper position and Pressure and fluency.**

Posture

Poor posture can be a root cause of common handwriting difficulties such as pain or fatigue and will present as a reluctance to write, poor presentation or legibility, slow writing speed and reduced output.

POSTURE GUIDELINES

- Feet flat on the floor or on a wide based raised surface
 - Knees at a right angle with 2-fingers space behind the knee to avoid compression
 - Sit on the chair so hips are positioned at approximately 90° with the back supported
 - Sit approximately a fist-distance away from the table
- AND
- Table height adjusted so that forearms rest on the top without leaning forward (too low) or raising the shoulders/arms (too high)
 - Surface - clean, smooth and uncluttered

Tip



Establishing good habits of posture and position early is really helpful. Correcting bad habits later is much more difficult.

ALTERNATIVE FURNITURE

Adaptive equipment is available for those that struggle with underlying stability, gross and fine motor skills.

If standing desks are used they should also be an appropriate height .

A writing slope can help with wrist position and posture. The chair height needs to be higher.

TABLE AND CHAIR HEIGHT

If the table is at the correct height the forearm is supported, making it easier to control the movement.

Too High: children may raise their shoulders inducing greater fatigue.

Too Low: children may slump forwards and increase strain on the trunk, neck, arm, wrist and fingers making it more difficult to make controlled precise movements.

Too Far: children will slump forwards if their chair is set too far back from the table, regardless of chair and table height.

Tips



Exchanging furniture with another class can accommodate children who are taller or shorter than their classmates.

At times swop a chair for a ball to sit on or try an air-filled or a wedge cushion. Check the height is correct.





Children and adults can be seen to use a wide range of different pencil grasps, often because they have not learnt differently or as compensation for postural instability elsewhere. An inefficient pen/cil grasp can cause discomfort, impacting motivation, fluency and legibility and create difficulty in sustaining speed.

1

Before children are asked to write, it is important that they are developmentally ready to do so. The teacher will be able to assess when a child has developed the essential skills. In Early Years, most children will manage pre-writing tasks only, which are designed to introduce the basic movements and 'feel' required for writing. Asking a child to hold a pen or pencil and write before they are developmentally ready can create difficulties.

PENCIL GRASP GUIDELINES:

- Check the child is developmentally ready before asking them to write.
- A dynamic tripod pencil grasp is the most efficient and is expected by end of Year 1.
- Address an inappropriate grasp in the early learning stages and later if it is causing discomfort or impacting speed.
- Consider corrective action using adaptive grips or specialist writing tools, but always trial several options to find the most appropriate.
- Encourage a 2 cm gap between finger tip and pencil point – and slightly greater for left-handers.

5

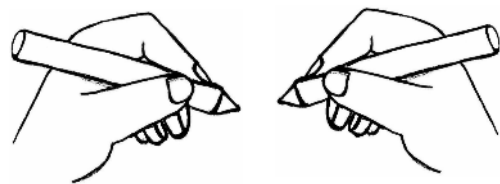
When developing handwriting skills, the child needs to see the pencil nib to monitor their writing. This is more difficult for left-handers.

Holding the pencil too close or too far from the tip or holding too tightly can cause tension and thereby difficulties with handwriting.

2

Introducing an effective pencil grasp, when appropriate, is beneficial for developing fast, efficient, legible handwriting in the longer term.

A **dynamic tripod grasp**, with the pencil held between thumb and index finger with the middle finger supporting is considered optimal as it provides stability, but allows the precise movements needed to form letters. To be effective, this grasp must be supported by a stable wrist resting on the writing surface and positioned below the writing line.



3

Changing a writing grasp can be challenging for an older child and should only be attempted if there is discomfort or other difficulty.

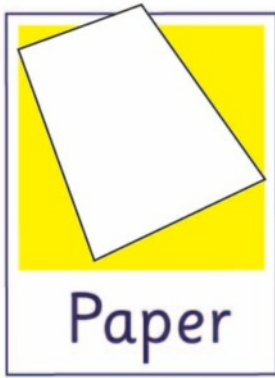
(See *Tips for Teaching – Writing Grip* from www.nha-handwriting.org.uk for more detail)

4

There is a wide range of specialist pencils, pens and adaptive grips available to purchase.

However, focusing on the writing tool alone will not solve handwriting difficulty – take care when recommending specialist pens and pencils and trial several options as what helps one writer may cause greater discomfort for another.

See NHA booklet '*NHA TOOLS*' (available soon from www.nha-handwriting.org.uk) for more details



Correct paper position is vitally important during the early years of handwriting development as bad practice can lead to compensatory strategies, such as a hooked-wrist in left-handers, that are difficult to remedy in later years.

TILT

When writing, the wrist and hand will naturally step along a path across the paper, but at an angle to the body. The writing paper should ideally be positioned so that the hand follows this natural path. For a right hander the top left corner of the paper is angled down to the left.

For a left-hander, the opposite is best, having the top right corner angled down to the right.



PAPER GUIDELINES:

- Tilt and offset the paper according to the writing hand.
- Move the paper up or down to facilitate a comfortable reach and keep it in place with the non-writing hand.
- Consider glare from paper and overhead lighting.
- Consider a specialist vision assessment if visual stress continues.

LIGHT ON THE PAPER

TOO LITTLE

Make sure that the children's work is well lit - sometimes there is a dark corner of a classroom where lighting levels are low

TOO MUCH

Direct sunlight tends to reflect brightly off white writing paper

Eyes have to work hard to compensate for fluctuating light levels. It is better to try to keep light levels as constant as possible. Artificial light or window blinds can be effective as can writing on coloured, rather than white paper.

OFFSET

The paper should not be directly in front of the child but slightly offset, to the right for a right hander and to the left for a left hander.

NON-WRITING HAND

Encourage the use of the non-writing hand to stabilise the paper. (This enables the writing hand to move freely and also balances the body). Encourage writers to move the paper and adjust the position of the holding hand as writing progresses down the page.

VISUAL STRESS

Ocular motor (eye movement) difficulties tend to be fatiguing, especially when having to be focussed on an extended writing task. If a child rubs their eyes frequently or complains of headaches when writing, it can be a sign of visual acuity or ocular motor difficulties. An eye test will detect visual acuity difficulties, but other factors can make the eyes work harder than they need to, causing fatigue.

The teacher will be able to identify the best measures for each child, but ocular motor difficulties should not be ignored, as left unaddressed will tend to demotivate children to writing regardless of lighting levels.



The act of writing should leave a clear trace on the paper, neither too faint nor too dark, and flow along the line rhythmically.

Tip



The shape of the writing tool and the way it is held impact the amount of pressure exerted onto the paper. Trialling a range of pens, pencils and grips can be a good place to start.

LIGHT PRESSURE INDICATORS

- Faint, shaky script
- The fingers are often more extended at the joints and higher up the pencil

HEAVY PRESSURE INDICATORS

- Marks that go through to the next page
- Raised ridges on the back of the paper that can be felt with the fingertips
- Red marks on the skin because of contact with the pen
- White knuckles

SUGGESTIONS TO HELP

- Use carbon paper underneath layers of writing paper and challenge the student to aim for: p2 - copy, p3 - shadow, p4 - invisible.
- Use a 2H pencil for increased sensory feedback so there is less need for hard pressure.
- Use a mechanical pencil (0.5mm) that will break under heavy pressure.
- Use a B/2B pencil or a pen to improve the visibility of writing for those who have light pressure.
- Use light up pens: the light is activated to correct light pressure and deactivated to correct heavy pressure.
- Use a lead pencil to shade in a picture using light, medium and dark grey. Discuss how different amounts of pressure alter the shade.
- Write on a single sheet of paper when at a desk or table. A firm surface can limit the amount of pressure the child can use.

EARLY WRITERS

When learning to write, pencil pressure is likely to vary depending on the demands of the task and stage of development. Most children will learn through experience how much pressure they should exert through the pencil onto paper.

PRESSURE GUIDELINES:

- The just-right pressure eases writing across the page, which is important for fluency and reducing the risk of pain during handwriting.
- Use teaching tools such as carbon paper, mechanical pencils, 'light-up' and 'squiggle' pens to demonstrate appropriate pressure.
- Try some gross and fine motor warm ups before and during the handwriting task. Actions which include squeezing and deep pressure, resistance and/or vibration will increase body awareness.
- Check that posture/issues with postural control are not the causative factor here.

FLUENCY

- Write to rhythms / beats of music
- Pattern repeated letters and encourage flowing movements
- Think of skating / gliding on the paper
- Use gel crayons or pastels to increase ease of flow when patterning at a larger scale and on bigger blank paper

See also - NHA posters: '**P**' Checks and '**S**' Factors and *Tips for Teaching: The 'S' Rules*

Adapted from an article '**P**' Checks explained' by Catherine Elsey, Joanna Moore and Michelle van Rooyen in *Handwriting Today* 2016, the journal of the National Handwriting Association.

Edited by Gwen Dornan

TIPS FOR TEACHING

National Handwriting Association 
Promoting good practice

'S' Factors for success



Shape, Space, Size, Sitting, Stringing, Slant, Speed, Style Useful as:

- 1 A **GUIDE TO TEACHING** handwriting and a **CURRICULUM RESOURCE** showing development of handwriting skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the National Curriculum (NC) KS1 & 2.
- 2 An **ASSESSMENT TOOL**: a checklist for quick evaluation of handwriting by a student or teacher (see p 3)

Part 1 'S' Factors as a GUIDE TO TEACHING handwriting

1 Shape

EYFS: Reception
NC: KS1

Once a child is ready to write, the first important task is to learn how to form the letters correctly - best taught as a motor skill. (This will save many problems at later stages.)

Children learn best by:

- 1 Watching the letters being made and hearing a simple patter.
- 2 Making the letters themselves in developmentally appropriate ways using just fingers - sand, paint, sandpaper, air-writing etc. - before pencils.

Letters can be put into groups or teams according to the movement needed to make them. When children learn to write a new letter, the 'lead' letter of its team will help them to start.

The 'l' team

l i u t y j

The 'c' team

c a d g q o e s f

The 'r' team

r n m h b k p

The 'zig-zag' team

z x v w y k

N.B.

These letters have exit flicks to support joining but **no entry strokes** which complicate the basic letter shapes and use diagonal lines that many young children find difficult at this stage.

A basic lower case alphabet in letter formation families

2 Space

NC: KS1

Children need to understand that spaces need to be left between words so they can be easily read.

Gradually, they need to learn to leave an appropriately-sized space - about the size of 1 or 2 letter 'o's. Lolly sticks make good spacers for beginner writers, followed by coffee stirrers if necessary later. These work much better than the traditional finger-spacing. (Fingers grow bigger while writing becomes smaller so are ineffective when the child is older. Finger spacing is also difficult for left-handers to use).

3 Sitting on the line

Once children are secure in forming letters correctly they need to know where to position them in relation to the base line.

The plan is hot.
mum has a rig.
I hid the map.

Writing on a
single base-line

4

Size

NC: KS1

... and also to their relative sizes:

Small/halfway letters/x-height letters e.g. **a, e, o, s**Tall letters/letters with ascenders e.g. **h, l, b, k** (plus all capitals)Tailed letters/letters with descenders e.g. **p, g, y, j**

A visual image helps children understand the 3 levels. Suggestions are:

- sky/grass or forest/underground
- head/body/legs

While children are learning about size it is helpful to use paper marked with a base-line and a second line above for the tops of **a, e, s, o** etc. The tall letters and tails are written at about twice that size.

(This is preferable to traditional 'tram-line' paper with 4 lines that encourages over-long ascenders and descenders).

l u c a o e s r n m v w x z

l t d f b h k

j y g f q p A B C D

Beginner writers, especially, need widely spaced lines to avoid cramping letters and all children need some flexibility in line spacing rather than 'one size fits all'.

5

Stringing together

NC: KS1 & KS2

Joined or cursive writing is the next step towards fluency.

The NC states that children 'should be taught a joined style as soon as they can form letters securely with the correct orientation' and 'understand which letters, when adjacent to each other, are best left unjoined.'

Basic joins.

These can be taught in a series of lessons with plenty of practice:

- Diagonal (up the hill join) to 'l' team letters, both tall and short e.g.
- Horizontal (washing line join) to both tall and short letters from **o, v, w** e.g.
- Joins to 'c' team letters e.g.

c u i l

o u w h

u c n d

Practice is more fun making patterns from digraphs using felt tipped pens. (See *Tips for Teaching: Patterns* for ideas)

The NC expectation for Years 3 & 4 is that pupils will be 'using joined handwriting throughout their independent writing'. This will encourage joined writing to become automatic. Note: cursive/joined writing can have some breaks - usually after **j, y, g, x, z**. (See Style below)

6

Slant

NC: KS 2

A consistent slant helps the appearance of handwriting.

A slightly forward slant is a natural movement for right-handers and helps to improve fluency and speed. (See 'Slant' in Part 2)

7

Speed

NC: Y5+

Students in KS2 & 3 need to be able to write legibly and quickly.

Students need help in understanding that increasing speed changes writing: it can improve rhythm and fluency but can cause illegibility if allowed out of control. It will help students if they are encouraged to gradually build up the speed of legible writing by repeating words, then phrases, sentences & paragraphs in short regular periods of practice. (See *Tips for Teaching: Speeding up*)

8

Style

NC: Y5+

Students should be encouraged to develop a style of writing that works for them.

Students can consider changes to their writing style that could increase speed and/or fluency, e.g.

- Adding loops to **g, y, j** and possibly **f** to increase speed and flow.
- Consider if there are any joins that do not flow well and would be better left unjoined.
- Be aware that different qualities and speeds of writing are required for different tasks: personal notes, exams, course work, job applications - and adapt accordingly.

N.B. They should also be aware of occasions when an unjoined style is appropriate: for labelling diagrams/data, e-mail addresses etc. and be able to use capital letters for form-filling.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. When she had reached the

These children are developing personal styles

Part 2 'S' Factors as a CHECKLIST FOR QUICK EVALUATION of handwriting by a student or teacher (see also Part 1)

Notes

This is an effective way of giving older students (Y5+) the knowledge of elements of good handwriting and so enable them to make improvements in their own writing.

A good way to begin is for the students to write a few lines or a pangram (a sentence that contains all 26 letters) e.g.

The five boxing wizards jump quickly.

Test

The students look carefully at their writing, and consider each 'S' factor in turn by answering the question. They give themselves a grade for each 'S' Factor separately.

Action

The students, with the guidance of the teacher, might:

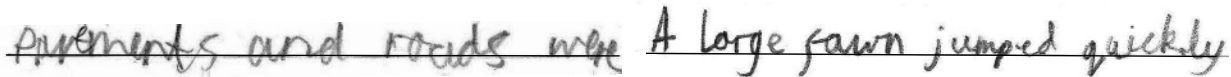
- Repeat the sentence, trying to improve their score for that particular 'S'.
- Set up some practice activities, perhaps repeating a word or phrase to improve the 'S' that needs attention. To be effective, these are best practised in short, frequent sessions.
- Gradually use the improvement in regular school writing. See also *Tips For Teaching: Helping the Older Student*



Q Do all the letters 'sit' on the writing line?

Notes

This is a good 'S' to start with as it is simple for students to understand and many can improve their performance fairly easily. Success can boost confidence and facilitate tackling perhaps more challenging questions.



This boy improved his writing immediately when he concentrated on sitting the letters on the line.



Q1 Are the letters written at the correct size and position?

Notes (see the 'Size' section in Part 1)

Many children who understand the rules write particular letters too large or small; common faults being k and s written too large and letters at the end of a word written too small.

Test

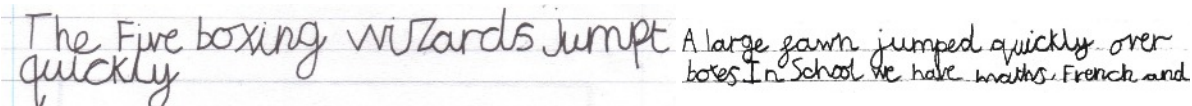
Draw a line along the top of the small letters to show the evenness of size:



Q2 Is the writing a suitable size?

Notes

Some children write minutely small, some write too large for the space so the ascenders and descenders of the letters touch the writing above and below and become less legible. Most students, given encouragement and flexible resources, e.g. paper with different line spacing, can develop an acceptable size.



This was written by the same boy on the same type of paper after encouragement to write smaller.



Q1 Are letters spaced evenly without bumping together?

Notes Letters that touch each other are difficult to read (see below). Irregularly spaced writing does not look good.



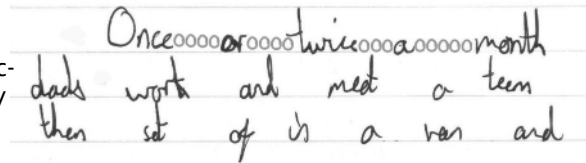
Space cont, Q2 Is the space between words consistent?

Notes

Too little or too much space between words can make reading more difficult. A simple rule that works for any age and both left and right-handed writers is to leave enough space for 1 or 2 letter 'o' s between words.

Test

Children can test the evenness and size of their spacing by using a contrasting colour to draw in as many o's as will fit between words. (see right)



Shape

Q Are all the letters legible and formed correctly?

Notes

As writing matures some letters can lose their legibility e.g. a, g, d, o are not closed

Test

Students sometimes find it easier to spot illegible letters in someone else's writing - perhaps anonymously.

Action

Work out the ideal way to form the difficult letter, then practise it in strings - dddd - and then in words, before attempting to use the new forms in normal work.

Stringing together

Q Are most of the letters joined?

Notes

It is helpful for a student to become confident in writing in a simple joined style before making any adaptations. (see 'Stringing' and 'Style' in Part 1)

Action

Writing patterns made from single letters or pairs of joined letters can be effective ways of practising.

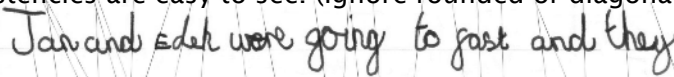


Slant

Q Is the writing slanting/sloping in a consistent direction?

Test

Use a coloured pen to make all the down lines longer so inconsistencies are easy to see. (Ignore rounded or diagonal letters)



Action

Practise writing small words using letters l,h,b,i,u,y: hill, little etc. and concentrate on parallel down strokes.

Speed

Q Is the writing fast enough for the student's needs?

Notes

Trying to speed up poor writing can create real problems. It is therefore advisable to address the first six 'S' Factors and achieve as high as standard as possible before attempting to speed up the writing. (see 'Speed' in Part 1)

Test

Students can time themselves for 1 or 2 minutes or longer when writing words or phrases.

Action

Increasing the speed of functional, legible writing requires regular practice. (See 'Speed' in Part 1) Other ideas can be found in *Tips for Teaching: Speeding Up*.

Style

Q Is the writing consistent and fluent? (See Style in Part 1)

Other *Tips for Teaching* that might be of use: 'P' Checks, Above Year 4, Basic Steps, Speeding Up, Helping the Older Student, Patterns

Revised by Gwen Dornan From *Tips for Teaching: 'S' Rules* and articles in *Handwriting Today*, the journal of the National Handwriting Association, by members of the Association.