

Learning to write - child's play?

How does a child learn to write, what qualifications does it need for this, what method of teaching writing is correct, what new scientific findings should be taken into consideration, what practical help can be offered, how are left-handed children to be treated? Primary school teachers find it difficult to find comprehensive and sound answers to these questions.

It is therefore a particular challenge to acquire basic knowledge, know the children's qualifications and to adapt the theory to classroom conditions. Working together well with parents is just as important. They require an insight into the way the school works, along with practical help as to how they can sensibly support their child as he or she learns to write.



Development of fine motor skills – background information

In order to better understand the starting point for learning to write, it is important to know how fine motor skills develop. The basic principle behind motor development can be displayed in a simplified manner as follows:

from ...	to ...
gross	fine
simple	complex
slow	fast
fast/rhythmical	rhythmically automatic

The development of gripping and holding techniques in a child also follow in a series of steps. Hesitation, disorder or missing developmental steps can make learning to write considerably more difficult later on.

Situation at home – background information

Nowadays, conditions at home for supporting children's motor skills and abilities differ greatly. While many families find time to play, draw and do craft activities with their children and read aloud to them, other families are severely limited time-wise for a variety of reasons. Some pre-schoolchildren already have a very busy schedule. Media such as television or the computer are now an indispensable part of the lives of even young children. This reduces the amount of time for exercise. Different cultural backgrounds can also lead to different educational and activity focuses.

Many seemingly insignificant daily actions are on the decline. Pre-schoolchildren are still often dressed by their parents – jackets are buttoned up, zips zipped, hats and gloves put on, shoes nearly always come with Velcro now. The consequences of this are clear – hardly any pre-schoolchildren can tie bows. Few children are allowed to use knives or spread their own toast, nor can they eat correctly with a knife and fork. Children are seldom allowed to help cook, peel and cut food. And how many children still have the opportunity to try out tools in a workshop? An increasing number of three to four-year-olds have never held a pair of scissors.

Pre-schoolchildren with a good, relaxed pen hold are becoming increasingly rare, as hardly any importance is still attached to correct pen hold. When children start to draw or scribble, parents seldom pay attention to ensuring that they put the pen correctly in their child's hand or encourage them to use it correctly. And yet today there are many writing instruments which have been developed especially for children's hand according to ergonomic principles, e.g. the Trio Scribbi from STABILO. Often enough, parents themselves are unsure of how to hold a pen correctly and demonstrate an incorrect hold which children generally copy. Many parents are unaware whether their child uses their left or right hand as a toddler or even at kindergarten age. They do not recognise the significance of this observation.

Situation at kindergarten - background information

Most children starting school have been to kindergarten. There, the children should be stimulated with a broad range of activities, depending on equipment, location and surroundings. The demands placed on a kindergarten are now very high. Interest increasingly focuses on encouraging intellectual skills and preparing the child for learning at school. At the same time, basic skills, along with fundamental motor skills and abilities are pushed into the background.

Pre-school teachers see an increasing lack of independence in terms of practical skills among children. Children's level of gross and fine motor skill development varies widely and is often lacking – observations backed up by paediatricians, PE teachers and sports coaches. The knowledge of fine motor development as a basis for learning to write is not sometimes conveyed fully enough in teacher training. There is also a lack of knowledge regarding the significance of observing handedness and of left-handedness.

As the demands placed on pre-school teachers continue to grow constantly, there may not be enough time to pay attention to correct pen hold and to hand use in their daily work with children. Pre-school teachers themselves sometimes use an incorrect pen hold without being aware of this. In an "open concept" kindergarten, children can easily avoid tasks that they find difficult or don't feel they are good at. "He/she was always playing with building blocks or running about outside. He/she never spent much time drawing or making things" is a common response when asked about children who display problems coloring, drawing and using pencils and scissors after just a few days or weeks at school.

Starting school and block letters

The most important task for the teacher is first of all to observe the pupils closely, given the variety of starting positions they have. What is the developmental status, where are there problems, can any incorrect pen holds be observed, along with motor and fine motor skill deficiencies? This is the only way to help children in a targeted and individualised manner.



The first type of writing that children learn is block letters. These are made up of basic elements which are to be practised as a preparatory and accompanied measure. Various workbooks, textbooks and handouts offer suggestions on this. Practising extensively, temporarily stopping using lined paper, training finger and wrist dexterity, practising and checking the correct sitting posture and pen hold form the foundation for learning to write.

Help and advice for learning to write

Rhymes and finger games

On the one hand these support phonological awareness, on the other they practise finger dexterity in a playful way.

Movement games for orientation

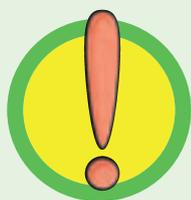
These practise positional awareness (above, below, in front, behind, next to, left and right), and therefore support automatic recognition of reading and writing direction. Easy movement activities in the classroom can be as follows: "Stand in front of the chair, next to the chair, sit under the desk ...", or positioning objects according to instructions: "Place the pencil case in front of you, on your right, hold it above you ...". Activities and games in PE lessons also support and develop spatial awareness, orientation, reactions and coordination.

Practising sitting posture and pen hold

The correct sitting posture and pen hold are demonstrated, checked and corrected by the teacher. Exercises to assist with this can be found, amongst other places, in chapter "Writing movements".

Working direction

This is necessary for fast and reliable orientation when writing, but also when reading and counting. "We write, read and count from left to right, top to bottom." Frequent verbalisation and corresponding movements (demonstrating at the same time) when standing up help the working direction become automatically recognised. If problems occur here, the left and right edge of the jotter or exercise sheet can be marked different colors, e.g. green on the left side and red on the right. Mental aid: "Green for go, stop at red!"



Tip: The terms "top and bottom" when referring to a worksheet or a jotter page are too abstract and unclear for many children. Get them to hold up a sheet of paper in front of them vertically by the top edge and place it on the desk – it will then become clear why "top or bottom" is used.

Basic elements and direction of movement in writing

Writing consists of relatively few basic elements, which letters are made up of: vertical lines, horizontal lines, diagonal lines, ovals, arcades and garlands. Loops join these elements in joined-up writing. Today, children are urged to expressly themselves in writing at an early age. A few weeks after starting school, they can use a phoneme desk to write simple words, short sentences or even little stories. In order to avoid restricting the children, little attention is paid to the correct formation of the letters, which at this stage has not yet been learned in detail. Incorrect direction of movement may, however, already be creeping in, making it difficult to correct later.

That is why, as a preparatory and accompanying measure for learning letters, the basic elements of writing should be practised clearly. The uniform movements provide security and orientation, and makes sense from the perspective of learning to join up writing later on: Vertical lines are always to be written from top to bottom (this generally makes it easier to write straight lines).

- Writing horizontal lines from left to right.
- Diagonal and zigzag lines e.g. in the letter A are written from the bottom left up to the middle and then down to the right.
- Zigzag lines as in the letters V and W are written from the top left down to the middle right.
- Ovals are practised as left-slanting ovals.
- Arcades and garlands are practised with large movements, as children often have problems changing direction.
- Link arcades, garlands and loops in groups of 3 at the most when writing.



The children practise the individual elements first as large movements in the air, accompanied by rhythmical speaking or suitable music. They then use their finger to write, for example, on the desk, with their eyes closed, on their neighbour's back etc., then if possible on unlined paper. Here they can try out different sizes and writing instruments.

Directions of movement for letters and numbers should be set, with checks to see if this is being correctly followed. This saves confusion when forming joined-up letters and makes it easier to connect the letters. Tracing exercises which demand particular precision should be avoided where possible. Workbooks for learning to write generally do not leave sufficient room to practise, additional exercise books or jotters are recommended. If workbooks are used, it must be ensured that the letter or word to be copied is written on the left and right (left-handers!).

Lines

If a child has real problems with lines, a change to simpler lines should be made, or they should be temporarily avoided all together. During initial use of lines, children can mark the spaces in-between with colored dots at the left side; left-handers can also do this at the right. If necessary, the line with all capital letters and almost all lower case letters can additionally be marked with a color.

For example:

●		●
●		●
●		●

Particular problems

Children who are noticeably clumsy and who do not draw in as much detail require targeted observation and assistance. A meeting with the parents should be held, in some cases the nursery should also be spoken to (with the parents' permission!), in order to gain an insight into the motor development, any treatment already tried, and whether a repeat visit to a paediatrician would be advisable.

Children who switch hands when working, or who mirror-write their own name, individual letters or numbers or who suddenly start to write from the right towards the left, must be observed closely. In there is any doubt, they should be tested by a trained left-hand advisor, in order to be able to reach a clear conclusion on their handedness.

Development of joined-up writing

Some teaching plans shift the focus of teaching joined-up writing to the third year of primary school. In order for children to become well-practised writers, however, they need plenty of time and sufficient opportunity to practise in a meaningful way. It therefore makes sense to make children familiar with joined-up writing in their first year at school. This allows enough space for intensive practice. After all, in addition to proper writing technique, children's third year at school starts to require them to deliver well-thought-out content with correct spelling and punctuation.

Simplified cursive could make the transition to joined-up writing easier. There is a high level of similarity to block letters, especially in the capital letters, as well as a uniform connection principle between letters. The middle line where all lower case letters begin and end provides a clear point for orientation and stopping. This allows letters to be "pushed together" and joined in this way.

The same principles as for block letters apply to the preparatory exercises. Basic elements which have already been practised such as lines, arcades, garlands and ovals, are also used in joined-up writing and are now repeated.

New features include:

- Connection of letters must be demonstrated and explained.
- Special attention is to be paid to the stopping points. They make orientation easier, especially when changing direction, and give left-handed writers an opportunity to move their hand with their writing – almost "skipping along" – so that it comes to rest again under what has been written.
- Plenty of practice on unlined paper initially, possibly with only the middle band.
- Letters with the same elements should be practised together in groups.
- In general it is sufficient to write letters, or even a combination with letters already learned, on the board, and to demonstrate the shape and order of the individual elements using large movements, drawing them in the air, on the desk etc., in order for them to then be written in the jotter and practised initially without the restriction of lines.

Writing instruction books available from retailers provide structure and assistance regarding the order letters can be practised in. However, the space for practising provided in the workbooks is too limited. The instruction book can therefore act as a model for further practice in other jotters with or without lines.

Checklist for teachers, year 1

General

- Know which pupils in the class are right- and left-handed.
- Give left-handed children appropriate support and help with paper position, hand position and seating posture.
- Establish the correct seating plan for right- and left-handed neighbours.
- Know which children wear glasses and when they are to be worn.
- Look out for any sight defect in the children – if they have problems recognising or staying within lines, this often points to an undiscovered sight defect (discuss with parents!).
- Important: check desk size, the children's feet must be firmly on the floor when they sit at the desk. As children are increasingly younger when they start school, sometimes even the smallest desk is still too big. Consider the use of footrests where necessary.
- Encourage sensible organisation of the workspace.
- Demonstrate sitting posture and pen hold correctly and check constantly.
- Use soft graphite and colored pencils, and/or triangular pencils e.g. the STABILO 's move easyergo.
- Give the children the chance to draw and color freely often – children's drawings often provide a great deal of information about potential problems when learning to write.
- Investigate problems with homework – if the children avoid or refuse to do written homework, the reason for this should always be looked into. Often they require a very long time and a great deal of effort to complete the tasks set. In general this is not stubbornness on the part of the child, but rather an indication of a problem with motor or visual-motor skills. Sometimes an undiscovered vision defect or undecided or retrained handedness is the cause.
- Look out for children who switch hands when working. In individual cases an investigation into handedness by a specially trained expert (Left-hand advisor) is advisable.
- Hold a parents' evening with information on learning to write.

Especially for left-handers

- Left-handers should always sit to the left- of right-handed neighbours.
- Organising the workspace: no pens or pencil case etc. are placed on the left.
- Special paper position must be shown separately.
- Use desk mats designed for left-handers where possible.
- Always also include instructions on the right side of the jotter or worksheet.
- Inform other teachers, especially for hands-on subjects such as craft, design and PE.
- Ask parents to check paper position and pen hold at home, too.
- Boost left-handers' confidence – left-handedness is just as normal as right-handedness.
- Observe closely whether the left hand is always used to write, in case children inadvertently retrain themselves by copying their right-handed fellow pupils.

Cooperation between parents, school and kindergarten

Furthering the development of motor skills and the fine motor skills which accompany them is a core topic for both kindergarten and school, but also for parents. Parents' evenings, for example, held together with the kindergarten, or meetings with pre-school teachers can make it clear not only how important it is for children to be raised to become independent, but also how important practical tasks are, and how indispensable coloring, drawing and making things are for children's development. The fact that the right pen hold must be practised from the start, with particular input from the parents, cannot be emphasised often enough. Practices that have been established over several years to the extent that they become automatic are difficult to correct at school, if at all.



As soon as a child picks up a pen or pencil, they can be shown the right way to hold it – without force – allowing them to properly develop and establish the correct pen hold. Sometimes, however, it is necessary for adults (be they parents, pre-school or primary teachers) to look critically at themselves – at least in situations where they are observed writing or drawing by the child, they should attempt to correct the wrong pen hold.

If a child has never drawn or colored, or only ever rarely, or if they are quickly satisfied with the most basic pictures – people without hands and feet, hair and ears etc. – they often have difficulty recognising and recreating shapes and letters. When coloring and drawing they also unconsciously learn about different paper formats, how the page can be divided up so that the drawing fits, and much more. They are free to try out writing instruments, colors and shapes without any guidelines and can discover how much they enjoy this. They learn playfully how to look at themselves and their environment and how to recreate this on paper.

The following should be discussed at the parents' evening at the school/kindergarten:

- Workspace at home
 - Lighting
 - Seating position using image/photo as an example: always ensure that the feet are placed firmly on the floor/footrest or similar
 - Correct pen hold using image/photo as an example
 - Left-handers and assistance
 - Overview sheet with block/joined-up letters and numbers with direction arrows
 - Evaluating homework – parents should not correct, only teachers can decide if they are satisfied with homework (parents sometimes tend to misjudge their child, overwhelming them with constant correction and removing any enjoyment of work)
 - Reporting problems with homework
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Pattern for an invitation to parents' information evening

Invitation to parents' information evening on:

Learning to write - how can I help my child in the best way?

At pre-school age, your child already gains important motor skills required for learning to write. You can help contribute at home to your child's future success in this area by paying attention from an early age to which hand your child uses, playfully encouraging fine motor skills or practising correct pen hold right from the start.

At the parents' evening we wish to discuss the following points, amongst others:

- A relaxed hold when drawing and writing
- Arrangement of workspace and the correct writing instruments
- Significance of which hand your child uses
- Difficulties facing left-handed children and how to help

I look forward to an interesting evening with you!

Best wishes,

Please give your child the completed slip to be returned by _____ .



Name: _____

Yes, I'll be there.

No, unfortunately I cannot attend.