



# Overcoming Writing Difficulties

By Elizabeth Bardos, Occupational Therapist and Sarah Maybury, Speech Therapist

**C**hildren with written expression difficulties are often seen as untidy, messy, slow and/or reluctant writers. Homework can be a real challenge and school projects or story writing a nightmare.

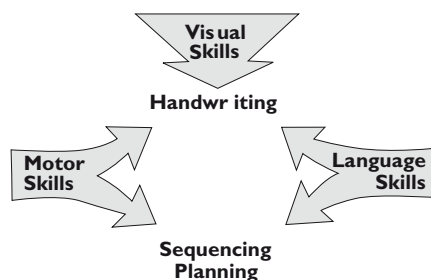
Writing problems can have a significant impact on any student, as approximately 60% of the school day involves writing and the majority of examinations depend on the ability to reproduce your thoughts on paper. Presentation and handwriting in examinations, projects and schoolbooks can also influence the final mark.

## Why do children have difficulty with written expression?

Writing is a complicated process that involves the interaction of motor and language skills. It relies on good fine motor functioning, visual-motor planning, attention, sequencing, thinking, memory, and knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary and the purpose of writing. It also involves visual monitoring with the co-ordinated use of both eyes.

Difficulties in one or more of these areas can inhibit written expression. Children who experience problems with writing or find writing an effort often try to avoid the task and their self-esteem may suffer.

## The Complex Task of Handwriting



## Muscle Tone and Fine Motor Co-ordination

Low muscle tone and poor fine motor co-ordination may influence the mechanics of writing. Body posture, pencil grasp and forearm movement may contribute to poor letter formation and/or slow writing.

We need adequate postural control of the body to free our arms for fine motor activities. Children with low muscle tone may fatigue quickly when writing and may slump, lean their head close to the table and spread their arms for support.

Lack of finger co-ordination is often seen in children with messy writing and an awkward pencil grasp.

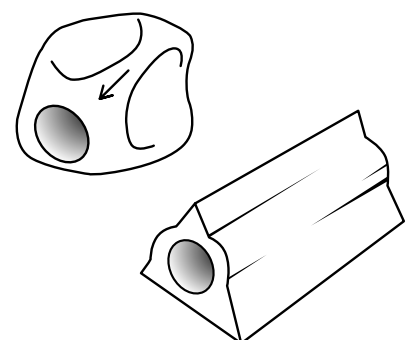
## The Pencil Grip

A mature grasp for writing is the dynamic tripod, as shown below.



This grasp allows adequate movement of the fingers to form letters accurately. An immature grasp tends to be more fistful and tight, and finger movement is restricted. Sometimes a pencil grip can be placed on a pencil to encourage a dynamic tripod grasp. These can be purchased at newsagents or specialist education suppliers.

## Pencil Grips



**Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.**

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

**Early Childhood Services** for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

**School Age Services** for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

**Family Services** helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
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**Professional Development** for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

**Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.**

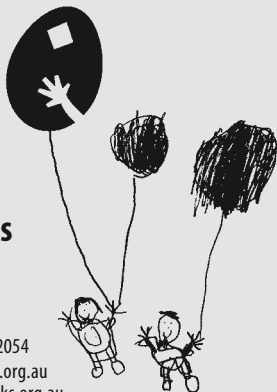
## Learning Links

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## Visual-Motor Planning

We rely on good visual-motor planning to copy, organise and space writing on a page. We need to know both how a letter looks and how to reproduce it on paper.

Poor visual-motor skills can lead to difficulties with copying, reversals of letters or numbers, inconsistent letter formation and poor layout of writing on the page.



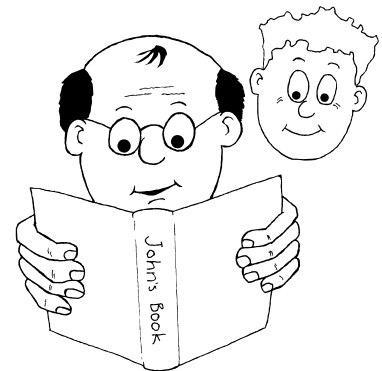
**Writing so that someone else can read it.**

## Oral versus Literate (Written) Language

Oral language is a large part of everyday communication.

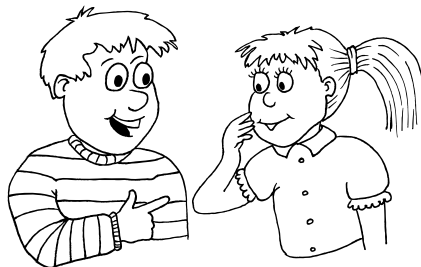
Communication through oral language usually involves two or more participants, with an exchange of information between the participants. This means that there is a shared context between participants and an opportunity to ask questions, ask for further explanation, etc. The speaker gets feedback from the listener such as a questioning look or a clarifying question.

Forms of oral language interaction include conversation, giving and following instructions, and telling news.



- using specific vocabulary (avoiding words such as 'thing'); and
- using appropriate grammar so that the information makes sense, as there is no immediate opportunity for the reader to ask questions.

This can be a big ask. Some children need to be specifically taught about writing structures. Bright children can have difficulties with this even though they are verbally competent.



In literate or written language there is less or no shared context and the writer needs to pay more attention to how the information is conveyed, particularly the following:

- supplying the necessary background information to the reader;
- explaining the context (e.g. in a story explain who it's about, when and where it happened, etc.);
- structuring the information in a way that makes sense to the reader, grouping relevant information together;
- writing for a purpose (e.g. if writing an information report, the purpose is to convey information about the subject to the reader using facts rather than opinions);

## Helpful Hints to Improve Writing at Home

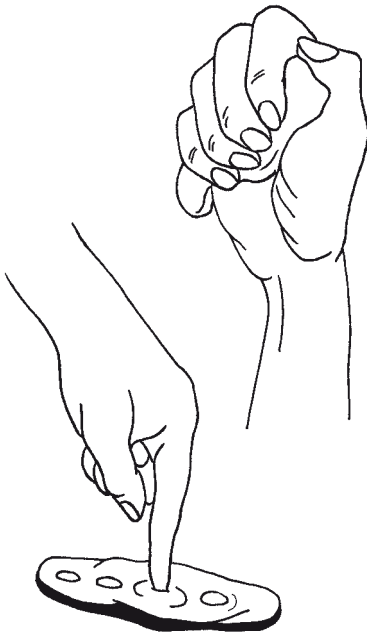
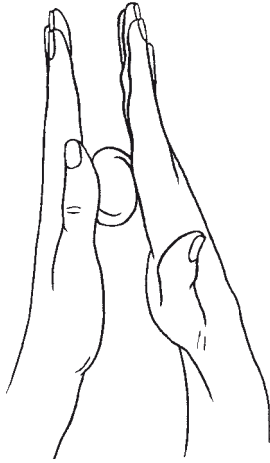
First of all it helps if you can work out why your child has difficulty with writing.

Is it a motor problem, a language problem or a combination of both and has your child's confidence with writing suffered?

The following hints may help you help your child.

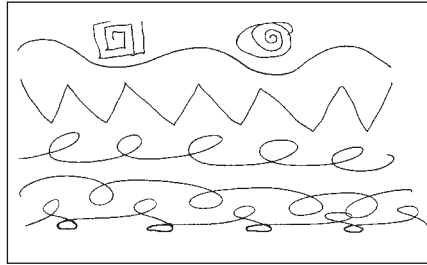
- Don't try to change your child's writing overnight; focus on one step at a time. Try to achieve small goals and encourage all writing attempts by rewarding for effort not results. Perhaps start with encouraging your child to write the family shopping list or their birthday request list.
- Encourage drawing and colouring-in with different writing tools and activity books with dot-to-dot drawings and mazes.

- If co-ordination is a problem, encourage finger movements with playdough or plasticene by rolling, squeezing or poking (see diagrams below).

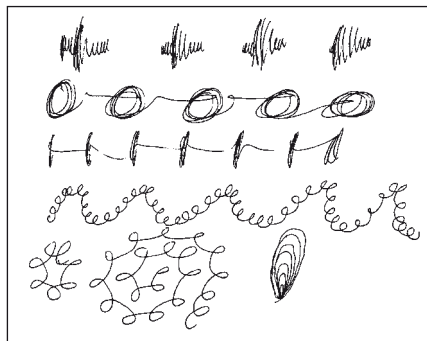


- Practice writing letters with different writing tools and on different surfaces; e.g. chalk on a blackboard, using a “magna doodle”, fingers in the sand, felt pens on paper, and shaving cream on a mirror.
- Begin a writing scrapbook to practice writing patterns and letters and later draft stories. You may also use this to list favourite foods. Children may enjoy writing out recipes they have made at home.

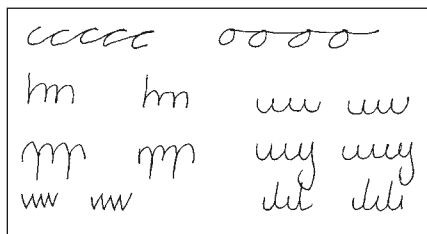
- The following patterns aim to encourage flowing arm movements. Try to do these patterns without stopping; gliding the writing arm smoothly across the page.



- The following patterns encourage finger movement and pencil control. When we write, our index finger and thumb should bend and stretch. These patterns should be completed by bending and stretching the index finger and thumb and gliding the writing arm smoothly across the page.



- As pattern formation becomes automatic and isolation of finger and thumb movement develops, you can focus on letters. Once letters are formed correctly, if the child is old enough to use running writing, letter combinations can begin. Here are a few examples.



- Look through a variety of books to demonstrate that writing structures differ depending on the purpose of the writing, e.g. recipe book, dictionary, newspaper, and children's novels.

- When a writing task comes home from school, talk about the topic and list key words. Ask your child to circle key words that may go together. This will help develop the concept of a paragraph. It is also good to discuss ideas and take turns to write a sentence about each key word. This will help encourage confidence and reduce writing fatigue.
- Never tear up poor writing as this may discourage further attempts, and remember to prominently display pieces of writing that show improvement. Don't fuss about spelling at this stage; develop writing skills first then refine spelling errors.

### Computers and Software

Using a computer for writing can remove some of the stress for a student with poor fine motor skills. Some suitable software programs include:

#### Read, Write & Type

*The Learning Company*

#### Amazing Writing Machine

*Broderbund*

#### Gizmos & Gadgets

#### Writing Blaster 6-9

#### Kid Works Deluxe

*(formerly Kid Works 2)*

#### Creativity & Learning Collection

*The Learning Company*

#### Story Book Weaver

*The Learning Company*

### Where to go for help?

Talk to speech pathologists or occupational therapists if you are concerned about your child's writing.



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– contact your local branch

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