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TEACHING HANDWRITING DEVELOPMENT IN THE SECONDARY CONTEXT



Diagnostic and explicit teaching strategies to assist in the improvement of handwriting in adolescent learners.



TEACHING HANDWRITING

The expectation that handwriting has been taught and automated through primary school, and the understanding that a student entering high school has consolidated their writing handwriting style, leads to the logical assumption that secondary teachers do not need to explicitly teach such writing mechanics.

Whilst this is generally the case, too often students come to high school with illegible, or painfully formed handwriting, but there doesn't seem to be space in the curriculum to teach handwriting nor are many high school teachers equipped to support student development in this area.

Add to this, the increased reliance on technology resulting in the art of handwriting continuing to worsen. Yet students are still expected to have the endurance and skill to handwrite for hours during their senior exams!

It is important to acknowledge when assessing and supporting adolescent writers' handwriting that the focus should be less on changing an individual style into a conformed format and more on reducing fatigue and increasing legibility.

Improving a student's handwriting **IS** possible if you know what the problem is and have a variety of strategies to offer each individual in their development.

DIAGNOSING HANDWRITING ISSUES

Why it is important to diagnose before teaching

Since handwriting is already developed (however poorly!) by the time a student reaches high school, it is important to acknowledge that they do not need to completely relearn the formation of the entire Latin alphabet. Generally, there is a very specific area of handwriting that is causing the issue, so diagnosing the problem area means you can tailor strategies and supports directly and purposefully.

Diagnosing handwriting issues

- 1 Confirm whether a student's current hand position causes any pain or fatigue. If there is no pain or fatigue in their current position, then it is unnecessary to correct their hand position. If handwriting is causing pain or fatigue, then it is beneficial to spend the time correcting a student's hand position (and potentially posture).
- 2 Confirm whether students' handwriting issues are caused when under time pressure or fatigue, rather than the inability to form the letters accurately.
- 3 Confirm what aspect of the student's handwriting is causing legibility issues:

form
sizing
spacing
position

- **FORM:** are the letters correctly formed or do some letters look like other letters (eg: the 'a' looks like 'u' or the 'v' looks like 'r')?
- **SIZING:** Are the letters too small, too large or inconsistently sized?
- **SPACING:** Is there too much, too little or inconsistent spacing between letters or between words?
- **POSITION:** Do the letters all sit on the line, or start/finish in the appropriate place?

HANDWRITING STRATEGIES

04

Once you have diagnosed the problem area - then you can draw from a number of strategies to support a students' focus area.



Handwriting position causes pain

- Ensure the student's feet can rest comfortably on the floor and elbows are resting on the table
- It takes significantly more effort to write in 'straight' writing than 'slanted' writing – tilt the page approximately 45 degrees.
- Play with altering pen position in fingers: ideally the pointing finger will rest comfortably on top of the pen while the middle finger and thumb hold the pen - however, if the student's hand position is drastically different, consider shifting small aspects of the hold to minimise movement required in the wrist and elbow rather than focus on the 'correct' position.



Handwriting gets messier during sustained writing or under time pressure

- Set a timer to see at what point writing starts to deteriorate. Then set a timer to go off slightly before this time and get the student to stretch their hand and reset.
- If the 'stretch and reset' is working, then focus on asking the student to notice when their writing is deteriorating and self-regulate to stop, stretch and reset.
- Begin by removing the time pressure and then slowly build it back in with a focus on handwriting. This will need to be layered: focus on handwriting, focus on content, focus on handwriting and revise for content, focus on content and revise for handwriting - it is taking up valuable working memory and other writing aspects will be lost in the cognitive overload.
- Provide strategies for the student to edit handwriting so it makes it easier for a reader to understand if they fall into old habits.

HANDWRITING STRATEGIES

05



Letters are not formed accurately or legibly

- Identify **which** letters are not being formed accurately and reteach these specific letters. Demonstrate:
 - where the starting point is,
 - what direction to form the letter,
 - where it sits on or around the line,
 - where it ends and
 - how it connects to other letters (if relevant)
- If there is a pattern in the types of letters that are malformed then work on relevant 'doodle' work first:
 - 
 - 
 - 8 8 8 ∞ ∞ ∞
 - + + + X X X
- Initially work with students practicing these letters cumulatively and consistently: firstly, as the individual letter, then starting a word, ending a word and including the letter within a word.
- Ask students to highlight these letters in some passages of their own writing and ask them to rewrite these words focusing on accurate formation of the letters.
- Come up with strategies to 'fix' these letters if, under time pressure, they fall into prior habits.



Letters are too small/large or inconsistent

- Similar to malformed letters, notice the specific letters that are inconsistent and where in the word they are inaccurate
 - eg: 'C' or 'S' looking like a capital at the start of a word
- Draw a small line at the start of each line where you want most of the letters to reach (eg *the middle of the line*) and see if students can maintain this size all the way to the end of the line. Recheck at the start of the next line.
- Ask students to physically highlight these inconsistencies in short passages of their own writing and come up with strategies to fix these errors during writing tasks.

HANDWRITING STRATEGIES

06



Spaces between letters/words are too small/large or inconsistent

- Ask the student to slow down and concentrate on consistent and accurate spacing. Then slowly build pace where appropriate.
- If the **letters** are too close: concentrate on either not touching or only touching one part (*the cursive for example*)
- If the **words** are too close (or far apart): start by putting a small dash between each word, then just pretend to put the dash, or place the tip of the pen after the word and write on the other side of the tip.
- Ensure the student has strategies to fix these errors in their writing when under time pressure.



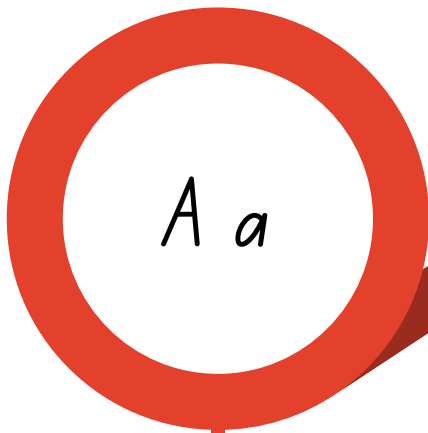
Letters don't sit on the line

- Explicitly teach *descenders* (letters that descend below the baseline: f, g, j, p, q & y) and which part is on the line and which is below.
- Explicitly teach *ascenders* (letters that reach above the midline: b, d, h, k, l & t) and which part sits on the line and how high the letters reach towards the above line.
- Start with sentences that only require on-the-line letters:
 - eg: *come over our mouse is worse now.*
- Then add ascenders keeping the height consistent (3/4 of the way from the baseline). An indicating line can be drawn if helpful.
 - eg: *how does the kite lift into the barn?*
- Finally add descenders and focus on control/consistency. Use pangrams to ensure ALL letters are controlled accurately.
 - eg: *The five boxing wizards jump quickly.*
- Start slow and focus on accuracy, then build pace.
- Provide strategies to ensure the student knows how to fix these errors in their writing under time pressure.

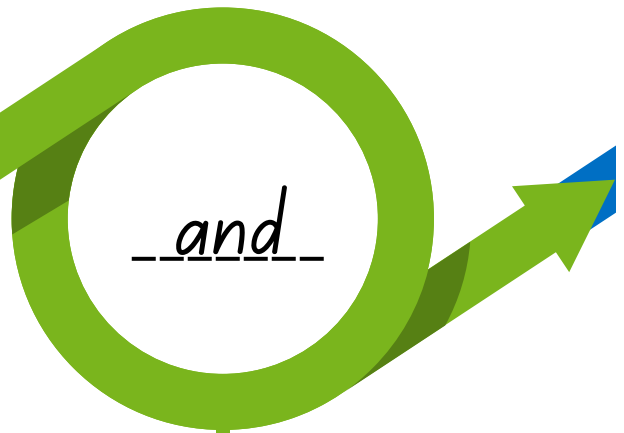
Panagram:

(noun) a sentence containing every letter of the alphabet

Neat handwriting can look different but always has...



Clearly
formed letters



Letters placed
on the line



Even spacing
between letters



Even spacing
between words

QUESTIONS?

The added layer of complexity to such information is that every student requires different strategies and levels of support to improve their handwriting, which makes teaching across an entire class overwhelming at best and a logistical nightmare at worst!

If you would like to discuss different ways to diagnose, teach and support handwriting in your specific school context, provide professional development for your staff to confidently promote handwriting development or embed handwriting practices in your curriculum, please feel free to reach out on any of the platforms below and we can 'connect' the teaching and learning of handwriting together.



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