

National Schools' Handwriting Competition

Implementing a Handwriting policy

Why is a handwriting policy important for a primary school?

Handwriting is a skill which, like reading and spelling, affects written communication across the curriculum. Given effective teaching, handwriting can be mastered by most pupils by the time they are seven or eight years old enabling them, with practice, to go on to develop a faster and more mature hand ready for secondary school and adult life. The surest way to ensure consistent teaching and the development of legible, fluent joined handwriting throughout the school is to have a written policy agreed and put into practice by all staff. The policy should also include the contributions of teaching assistants and, if possible, parents.

Handwriting is a movement skill. Try writing your name and address with eyes closed, most people are able to do it quite easily, this is because the movements of your hand when writing are firmly established in your movement memory because you have made them so often. This is why children need to practise handwriting movements correctly and often.

The first handwriting lessons are vital and the most important issue is to ensure that the children we teach learn to form the letters of the alphabet with the correct sequence of strokes from the beginning. Children who have been allowed to invent their own ways of forming letters will find it harder to change the longer they are allowed to persist, but unless these habits are 'unlearned' (often at great effort since the movement memory is very retentive and will tend to revert to old habits) it will be impossible for them to learn a fluent, joined hand. The correct formation of all letters needs to become quite automatic and may require a lot of practice.

There are still newly qualified teachers who emerge from their initial training having heard little or nothing about how to teach handwriting and who will need support. Supply teachers and teachers who are new to the school may not always be experienced in the teaching of handwriting. A written policy will be of help to them all and will ensure that the competent teaching of early skills will be consistent across the school.

Setting about developing a policy

All staff, including teaching assistants should be involved in developing the handwriting policy and take part in the preliminary discussion, so that they not only understand why certain decisions have been taken but also subscribe to them. Everybody should be able to 'have their say', with the proviso that opinions have a solid basis in research, reading or experience and are not based on mere personal whim such as, 'I hate the look of loops', or, 'I think writing looks much nicer in fountain pen'.

It is usual for an experienced member of staff to take responsibility for leading the development of the policy. This may sometimes be the Headteacher but is often the Literacy Co-ordinator or perhaps the SENCO, although handwriting is not necessarily a Special Educational Needs issue.

The member of staff who is responsible for the policy should, unless the school is very small, be supported by a small steering committee, possibly a member of staff who teaches Years 5 or 6 and a colleague who teaches the youngest children, so that all age groups are represented. It might also be possible to invite an outside professional with specialist knowledge of handwriting to lead one or more staff meetings or to deliver initial in-service training to raise awareness prior to beginning work on a policy. The National Handwriting Association can help – see the address at the foot of this article.

After a reasonable interval the committee should be ready to present the draft policy to their colleagues so that the staff have the chance to consider it thoroughly and to question any aspect they wish to before it is finalised. It is important for all differences of opinion to be settled amicably and to achieve general agreement on the main points of the policy so that teaching is consistent. The policy should be clear and not too 'wordy' or it will not be read.

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Implementing a Handwriting policy contd.

What might a whole-school policy for handwriting contain?

There are no hard-and-fast rules and this will vary from school to school, but the following are suggestions and possibilities which could be considered. If the school uses a particular handwriting scheme this and the materials it provides should be referred to at appropriate points in the policy.

- A statement describing handwriting as a movement skill and one which is best taught directly by demonstration, explanation and practice. See the first few paragraphs of this article for an example.
- Suggestions for the teachers of the youngest children who are not yet ready to write but who need to be provided with a range of pre-writing activities, together with a list of the activities and equipment available.
- A letter or leaflet addressed to parents and pre-school providers explaining the school policy on handwriting and giving suggestions as to how they can help. (This can often prevent children being encouraged to 'write' before they know how, and thus acquiring incorrect movement habits pre-, school).
- A reminder of the usefulness of handwriting patterns. These can be taught in a handwriting lesson and are a pleasurable and creative way of practising handwriting movements. They can also be used as decorative borders round pictures or written work.
- A requirement that teaching the correct formation of the letters be given highest priority, and that this should be achieved by pupils before any attempt is made at joining.
- A copy of the alphabet organised into stroke-related groups for easy teaching.
- An example of the style chosen by the school with an indication as to whether the letters should finish with a 'flick' to facilitate joining later.
- When will joining be taught and how will this be approached. If the school follows a scheme it might be referred to at this point.
- A sequence of the sub-skills the pupils will need to acquire on the way to achieving legible joined handwriting. This can begin with early pencil skills, straight lines, clockwise and anti-clockwise circles etc. and follow the steps young children typically go through. This sequence could also be used as an assessment tool for younger pupils or as a checklist for those with difficulty.
- A series of assessment procedures for younger children to plot their progress towards legible, joined handwriting.
- A record of progress for older children. This could simply consist of a yearly example of each pupil's handwriting on a task undertaken in class, perhaps a copying and a free writing task. In Years 5 and 6 there should be some mention of speed.
- Suggestions for activities to increase speed. This should not usually be done until Year 5.
- A list of all dedicated resources and equipment available in the school, such as sloping surfaces, special seat cushions, pencil grips, wooden and/or sandpaper letters for tracing over etc.