

Why might my child have poor or slow handwriting?

Handwriting may be influenced by:

- Delays in information processing
- Problems with spelling
- Motor co-ordination difficulties
- Labour-intensive style, which results from lack of tuition in handwriting skills.

Some children will always write slower than others, not because they cannot physically write faster, but because of the time it takes them to process information. Other children need frequent breaks due to pain or fatigue in their hands, often because of a tight grip or heavy pressure.

Should my child focus on speed or neatness?

We write at different speeds and with different attention to neatness depending on the circumstances. A quick shopping list or telephone message will be scribbled down faster (and less neatly) than a birthday card message. When writing in an exam, our aim is to get as much information down, legibly but not neatly, in the time available.

How can I support my child's handwriting?

Before starting anything:

- Review how they sit when writing – their overall body posture, the position of the paper, their ability to copy from another page / something on the TV or computer.
- Review the child's pencil grip. Is it functional? Is it comfortable? Do they fatigue or experience pain when writing? Give them the opportunity to experiment with different writing tools and pen grips.
- Have they mastered letter formation? Speeding up poor letter formation is going to result in a deterioration in legibility.

Targeted exercises

Lots of youngsters with poor handwriting would benefit from exercise to improve **gross motor** skills alongside specific fine motor skills for handwriting. All PE-type exercises, lifting, carrying, cooking and gardening activities would be an excellent starting point. [Heavy work](#) is a useful reference point if you think your child might benefit from improving their gross motor skills.

The following exercises aim to develop **fine motor** skills:

- pincer grip,
- hand strength,
- visual-motor integration,
- bilateral integration,
- memory and perception,
- spatial awareness and planning.

Choose your weapon!

Set out a selection of pens and pencils, for example: gel pens, felt tips, biro, pens with thicker barrels, ergonomic pens (like the Stabilo pen), soft and hard pencils, mechanical pencils, fountain pens, italic pens. Add as many different types of pencil grip as you can find.

Try different pens and grips and ask them to think about:

- What do they feel like to hold?
- How do they affect your finger position?
- Do you have to grip hard or can you grip them lightly?
- What do they feel like to write with?
- Do you need to press hard or lightly with them?
- Do they write smoothly on the paper, or are they scratchy?

Now use some different handwriting papers – different spacing of lines, coloured etc. <https://nha-handwriting.org.uk/shop/printable-line-guides/> for free downloadable papers

Have a go at writing on these different papers with their chosen pen or pencil. What size of writing feels most natural to them? Do the different designs of paper make it easier or more difficult to write neatly?

Resources to get going:

You can buy a whole range of equipment tailored to help handwriting, including pencil grips, shaped pens, writing slopes and hand exercisers. They are all useful, but can be expensive. The good news is, there are lots of everyday household items that do just as good a job for a fraction of the cost!

The suggested exercises below require a variety of bits and pieces that you probably already have and include:

- Tweezers (or chopsticks or clothespegs)
- Small bowls
- Small dried foods such as rice, pasta, cereal
- Beads, small pompoms
- Paperclips
- Bubblewrap
- Pipecleaners
- Wool or string
- Bluetack / playdough
- Tennis ball
- Golf tees
- Sealable freezer bags
- Cheap shaving foam / hair gel
- Cornflour / play sand
- Rubber bands / yoga resistance bands

Pick and choose the exercises based on what you have and what interests the youngster. The exercises towards the end are designed to promote fluency of handwriting so are best done after strengthening exercises.

For specific OT hand strengthening, use theraputty if you can and follow these exercises

[Therapy Putty Exercises.pdf](#)

A variety of hand exercises to build strength first, then fluency:

Warm-up:

Like any form of exercise, warm up first

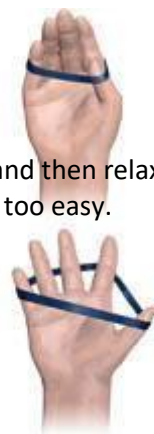
Arm wake-ups

- Shrug your shoulders to your ears then back down.
- Touch the sky, keeping your shoulders down.
- Touch your shoulders – hand to same shoulder
- Touch your shoulders – hand to opposite shoulder
- Push down on the desk
- Hold your hands out, palm up, then palm down
- Push palms together
- Pull hands apart
- Link your hands together and circle your wrists, one way then the other
- Make a fist, thumbs up and give them a wiggle
- Touch each finger to your thumb, one at a time, making a big circle.
- Shake your hands out – you're ready to begin!

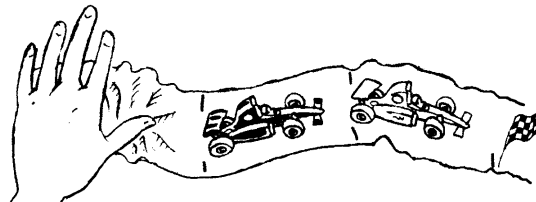
Rubber band stretch

Place a rubber band around the fingers and thumb. Now slowly stretch the fingers out and then relax them back in. Start with five and then build up to ten. Add extra bands or thicker bands if it is too easy.

A loop of playdough can be used instead of rubber bands.

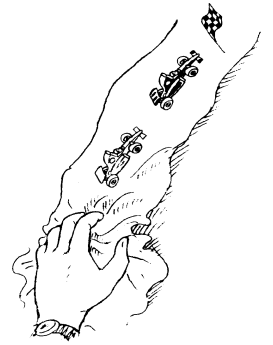


Bandage grab 1



- Use a long thin piece of material such as a bandage. Sit at a table and stretch the material out horizontally (as shown).
- Put your writing hand at on end of the material (right side if right handed, left side if left handed). The palm should be on the table with the fingers resting on the material. Try and gather up the material, tucking it under your hand, using only your thumb and keeping your wrist still.
- Complete 5 times; try to increase your speed each time.

- **Bandage grab 2**
- Sitting at a table, place the material in front of you, stretching it out vertically.
- Put your writing hand on the end of the material nearest to them to anchor it. Try to gather the material, using the fingers of that hand only while keeping the wrist still.
- Complete 5 times; try to increase your speed each time.



Clothes peg tweezers/ tweezer game

Place an empty eggbox or ice cube tray on your non-dominant side and hold it steady with that hand. Using children's tweezers (or clothes pegs as tweezers), pick up one bean at a time and place it in the container. Make sure you are using a good tripod grip, not the sides of your fingers! (You can also play this game with sweets.)

Hungry Horace

In one hand, hold a tennis ball which has had a slot cut in it to make a "mouth". Squeeze the ball to keep the mouth open and then feed Horace with coins, buttons or small pom poms.



Coin moving

Try placing a coin in the palm of your hand and using the fingers and thumb of that hand to move the coin up to your fingertips. Don't cheat by tipping the hand to slide the coin down the palm!

Scissors – cutting up narrow strips of card

Prepare some narrow strips of card, some about 1cm wide and some about 3cm wide. Start with the narrower strips, cut these up using a single cut. Then move on to the wider strips, using two or more cuts. Focus on a good scissor technique, and make sure to steady the card with your thumb on top.

Tearing paper into strips

Take a sheet of tissue or newspaper. Using a pincer grip, try to tear it up into neat strips. Now roll the strips up into little balls.

Threading

thread pasta tubes or Cheerios on to a straw or kebab stick.

Bubble wrap popping

Take some bubble wrap and pop the individual bubbles, using a pincer grip.

Pencil skills – Horizontal Lines

Attach some paper to the wall, or use a chalkboard or whiteboard. Mark some dots or a line or place some stickers along the left-hand side – this will be the starting point. The instructor should demonstrate how to draw the line, verbalising to start at the left and draw straight across to the right. Draw the shape in the sky first, then the board.

Using chunky crayons, markers or chalk, draw horizontal lines. Start at the left and draw right. A line or stickers on the right may help with aim.

Once you have tried on a vertical surface, sit down at the table and repeat the task.

Finger football

Use a small ball or scrunch up some little pieces of paper to make a ball. Set up a goal at each end of the table and play a game of finger football. Use the index finger and thumb to flick the football towards the goal.

Paperclip chains

Hook together paper clips to make a chain.

Pencil skills – Curved lines

Attach some paper to the wall, or use a chalkboard or whiteboard. Draw curved lines. Draw the shape in the sky first, then the board.

Tweezer beans

Hold some children's play tweezers in your dominant hand and place a pot of dried beans on your non-dominant side. Now reach across your body to pick up the beans one at a time and place them in another pot or egg carton. Make sure you are holding the tweezers in a good tripod grip, not using the sides of your fingers!

Doodle loops

Using a large piece of paper (on the desk, wall or floor) and some crayons (or a whiteboard and markers), fill the page with loopy doodles. These should be done fast and freely, without too much pressure through the crayon.

Marble and golf tee balance

Place a bowl of golf tees, a bowl of marbles and some playdough (or a block of Styrofoam or florists' oasis) in front of you, as shown. Pick up one golf tee one at a time and push them into the playdough to make a row, working from left to right.

Now, using a pincer grip, pick up one marble at a time and balance it on the golf tees, working from left to right. Make sure you use your dominant hand to pick up the tees.

Try picking up two marbles at a time, and keeping one in your hand while you place the other on the golf tee. To make this extra challenging, use a mixture of marbles and mini pompoms so you have to adjust the amount of force you use.



Handwriting patterns to music

Give each child a sheet of their preferred paper, their preferred pen or pencil and a sheet of handwriting patterns to copy [Handwriting Patterns 1.pdf](#) [Handwriting Patterns 2.pdf](#) [Handwriting Patterns 3.pdf](#)

Put on some music with a discernible beat and encourage the child, first of all to tap along to the music so they have identified the beat, then to complete handwriting patterns in time to the music.

Now were onto writing...

Pencil aerobics

- Hold onto the pencil as if you were going to write – using your fingers only, walk up the pencil! And when you get to the end walk back down. Try this 5 times.
- Put your pencil down facing right, pick it up and be ready to write.
- Put your pencil down facing left, pick it up and be ready to write.
- Don't forget, only use one hand – try this 3 times each side.
- Place your palm facing up with your pencil on it. Roll your pencil from your palm into your fingertips 10 times – using movement of your fingers and wrist only.
- Pick up the pencil so you're ready to write. Draw a dot on the paper. Now, using just that hand, turn the Pencil round and rub out the dot. Repeat five times.

Feel the pressure

- How different does it feel, writing heavily and writing lightly?
- How does it affect how tightly they grip the pencil? How does their hand and arm feel?
- If the heaviest they can write is scored 10 and the lightest they can write is scored 0, how heavily do they think they write normally?
- Does this score change, for example, when trying to write quickly or really neatly?

Tip to tail

Start by holding the pen/pencil as close to the tip as possible and writing. Now, hold the pencil as far from the tip as possible and try writing.

Experiment by holding the pencil at different places along its length. Where feels best to hold it? What happens to your grip and your writing when you change the position?

Alphabet write

Using the preferred writing paper and pen/pencil, write out the alphabet in lower case for one minute.

How many correctly-sequenced and correctly-formed letters were produced?

Letter lists

Pick a letter and write as many words as you can think of beginning with it in one minute.

Try this with different categories, for example, animals, food, towns, sports, names.

Dictation

Choose a short passage from a book that the children will find interesting. Read it out loud, at a pace that the children can copy it down.

Their work needs to be legible, but does not need to be overly neat. Explain that there is a trade-off between speed and neatness – some work needs to be very neat, and some work needs to be written down quickly, but so it is still readable.

Encourage them to appraise their own work. Can they read what they have written?

Eyes-shut patterns

Choose a handwriting pattern [Handwriting Patterns 1.pdf](#) [Handwriting Patterns 2.pdf](#) [Handwriting Patterns 3.pdf](#)

First, they should copy the handwriting pattern with eyes open. Encourage them to think about the movement their hand is making to form the pattern.

Next, ask them to copy the pattern with their eyes shut.

Repeat, using the same or different patterns, encouraging them to feel the movement of writing.

Eyes shut writing

Make sure each child is set up in a good sitting position, with their preferred pen/pencil and paper. Explain that they are going to be writing with their eyes shut.

Start by writing with eyes open:

- Name
- Alphabet
- A sentence (for example, what you had for breakfast) Next, repeat with the eyes shut.
- How did writing with the eyes shut feel different?
- What changed about their writing?
- Were the letters formed better or worse?
- What about where on the page the letters were placed?

- What information is their vision giving them when they write?

Free-writing

This task adds in the demands of composing what to write, rather than copying something that is already there.

Present the children with a suitable (enjoyable!) topic. For creative children, this could be a story or description of something, or a letter to someone. Some children find creative writing more difficult and are better off with a more concrete subject, such as an account of something that happened recently, or a list of some sort. It is important to find a subject that interests each child, to maximise the motivation and reduce the cognitive demands.

It may help to have an egg-timer or clock visible, so that children have an idea of how long they will be writing for.

Start by giving the children one minute to plan what they are going to write. This might be thinking of key words, events or characters. Get them to jot these down on a piece of paper – they could also draw a quick picture if that helps.

Now give them a set number of minutes to write for. You may want to vary this, depending on the age of the children. If you like, you can record how many words they have written in the time available. Notice who keeps writing steadily, who ran out of ideas quickly, who had to stop to stretch their hand.