

Introduction to teaching handwriting

The Little Wandle Handwriting programme provides a structured approach to teaching handwriting right from the start of Reception. It has been developed around research into the teaching of writing and national requirements and guidance, including the National Curriculum in England, the Writing Framework and Ofsted findings.

The programme has been carefully designed to support the development of legible and fluent handwriting using an easy-to-follow approach with consistent routines and memorable mantras.

The Writing Framework (2025) highlights the importance of this approach. It states: *Pupils should be taught handwriting precisely, in a clearly sequenced progression, starting from reception, to support their gradual acquisition of skills.*

Little Wandle Handwriting can be taught in a separate lesson alongside Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised, and the programme progression takes account of the children's growing phonic knowledge. It uses the well-loved and familiar phrases from the core Little Wandle programme to ensure children can make links in their learning.

Why is handwriting important?

Handwriting remains a crucial skill in a child's development and daily functioning, even in our increasingly digital world. As educators, it's important to understand why handwriting matters and how to communicate its value to children and parents.

Handwriting:

- **Develops the brain**

Writing by hand activates multiple areas of the brain associated with memory, attention, language and problem-solving. It promotes neural connections that are not fully engaged when typing.

- **Improves fine motor skills**

Handwriting builds strength and coordination in the hands and fingers. This fine motor control is essential for many daily activities beyond writing, like using cutlery and scissors, buttoning clothes or tying shoelaces.

- **Boosts learning and retention**

Research shows that children tend to remember and understand material better when they write notes by hand. The act of forming letters and words helps reinforce learning. The slower pace of handwriting allows time for thinking and processing, aiding comprehension and memory.

- **Supports higher-level writing skills**

Fluent, legible handwriting that requires little conscious effort, allows children the cognitive space in their working memory to concentrate on the content of their writing and higher-level writing skills.

- **Helps with writing quickly and legibly for assessments**

In time-limited assessments – still a common format for formal qualifications – slow or unclear handwriting can hinder performance and limit academic achievement. Fluent handwriting allows children to focus on completing the assessment.

- **Enhances literacy skills**

Handwriting contributes to reading and spelling development. The process of writing letters helps children recognise and remember letter shapes and sounds more effectively.

- **Encourages focus and attention**

Writing by hand requires more concentration than typing. It can help children slow down, organise their thoughts and think more deeply about what they are writing.

- **Is a practical life skill**

Handwriting is necessary for tasks like filling out forms, signing documents, taking notes or writing thank you cards.

Making a strong start in Reception

The Reception year is essential for the early development of fluent and legible handwriting. In the same way that teaching children to decode and blend with automaticity enables children to think about the meaning of what they are reading, when children's transcription skills become automatic and they develop fluent handwriting, then their minds are freed to think about what they are writing. By teaching handwriting right from the start, it means that children do not develop incorrect habits that are hard to break. Direct teaching of handwriting will prepare the children with the skills to develop fluent, speedy writing later on.

The 'Strong foundations in the first years of school' report (Ofsted, 2024) identified that some settings introduce complex tasks too early, leaving children without the foundational knowledge of how to hold a pencil correctly and form letters and numbers. It highlights the importance of building in time to explicitly teach handwriting from the start of Reception.

'Teaching handwriting only in phonics sessions, as some schools do, is part of the problem. It means that children do not learn the basics of letter formation that establish the foundations for speedy and fluent handwriting later on. Further, plans to teach handwriting in Key Stage 1 do not always include important elements that the National Curriculum requires, such as making sure that children understand which letters belong to which handwriting 'families' and that they practise these. Incorrect letter formation then becomes a habit. Even when schools provide explicit handwriting lessons, teachers do not always demonstrate well enough to children what they need to do.'

Strong foundations in the first years of school (Ofsted, 2024)

Writing names

Children will sometimes come to school writing their name. They may have poor pencil grip and letter formation, and some children may write in capitals. You will need to prevent these habits from becoming embedded by correcting their pencil grip and modelling correct letter formation straight away. Schools may wish to take the opportunity at induction sessions before the children start school to show parents the tripod grip and how to achieve this with the 'pinch, pinch, pinch, flip' routine (see the 'Pencil grip' video) and the correct way to form letters.

National guidance and expectations

Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (revised 2025)

Handwriting features in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework requirements. There are references in the Early Learning Goals for fine motor skills and writing, which are assessed in the final term of the year when children turn five and show the expected level. However, it is important to note that these Early Learning Goals should not be used as a curriculum and are not intended to be used for ongoing assessment or for entry-level assessment.

Early Learning Goal: Physical Development – Fine Motor Skills

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Hold a pencil effectively in preparation for fluent writing – using the tripod grip in almost all cases.

Early Learning Goal: Literacy – Writing

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Write recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.
- Spell words by identifying sounds in them and representing the sounds with a letter or letters.
- Write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others.

Development Matters (revised 2023)

Development Matters, which is intended to support schools with developing the curriculum, gives the following non-statutory guidance for Reception children:

Physical Development

- Use a comfortable grip with good control when holding pens and pencils.
- Show a preference for a dominant hand.

How to support this

- The tripod grip is a comfortable way to hold a pencil or pen. It gives the child good control.
- The pen is pinched between the ball of the thumb and the forefinger, supported by the middle finger, with the other fingers tucked into the hand.
- You can help children to develop this grip with specially designed pens and pencils, or grippers.

Physical Development

- Develop the foundations of a handwriting style which is fast, accurate and efficient.

How to support this

- Encourage children to draw freely.
- Engage children in structured activities: guide them in what to draw, write or copy.
- Teach and model correct letter formation.
- Continuously check the process of children's handwriting (pencil grip and letter formation, including orientation).
- Provide extra help and guidance when needed.
- Plan for regular repetition so that correct letter formation becomes automatic, efficient and fluent over time.

Literacy

- Form lower-case and capital letters correctly.

How to support this

- Teach formation as they learn the sounds for each letter using a memorable phrase, encouraging an effective pen grip.
- When forming letters, the starting point and direction are more important at this stage than the size or position of the letter on a line.

The National Curriculum in England (2014)

Writing

The programmes of study for writing at Key Stages 1 and 2 are constructed similarly to those for reading:

- transcription (spelling and handwriting)
- composition (articulating ideas and structuring them in speech and writing).

It is essential that teaching develops children's competence in these two dimensions. In addition, children should be taught how to plan, revise and evaluate their writing. These aspects of writing have been incorporated into the programmes of study for composition.

Writing down ideas fluently depends on effective transcription: that is, on spelling quickly and accurately through knowing the relationship between sounds and letters (phonics) and understanding the morphology (word structure) and orthography (spelling structure) of words. Effective composition involves articulating and communicating ideas and then organising them coherently for a reader. This requires clarity, awareness of the audience, purpose and context, and an increasingly wide knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Writing also depends on fluent, legible and, eventually, speedy handwriting.

English Year 1: Handwriting

Pupils should be taught to:

- sit correctly at a table, holding a pencil comfortably and correctly
- begin to form lower-case letters in the correct direction, starting and finishing in the right place
- form capital letters
- form digits 0-9
- understand which letters belong to which handwriting 'families' (i.e. letters that are formed in similar ways) and to practise these.

English Year 2: Handwriting

Pupils should be taught to:

- form lower-case letters of the correct size relative to one another
- start using some of the diagonal and horizontal strokes needed to join letters and understand which letters, when adjacent to one another, are best left unjoined
- write capital letters and digits of the correct size, orientation and relationship to one another and to lower-case letters
- use spacing between words that reflects the size of the letters.

Engaging parents and carers

Home learning

Handwriting can be effectively reinforced at home, but it is essential that parents are guided to support and reinforce the letter formation taught in school. Some children may join Year 1 with poor pencil grip and letter formation. It is important that these are corrected straight away.

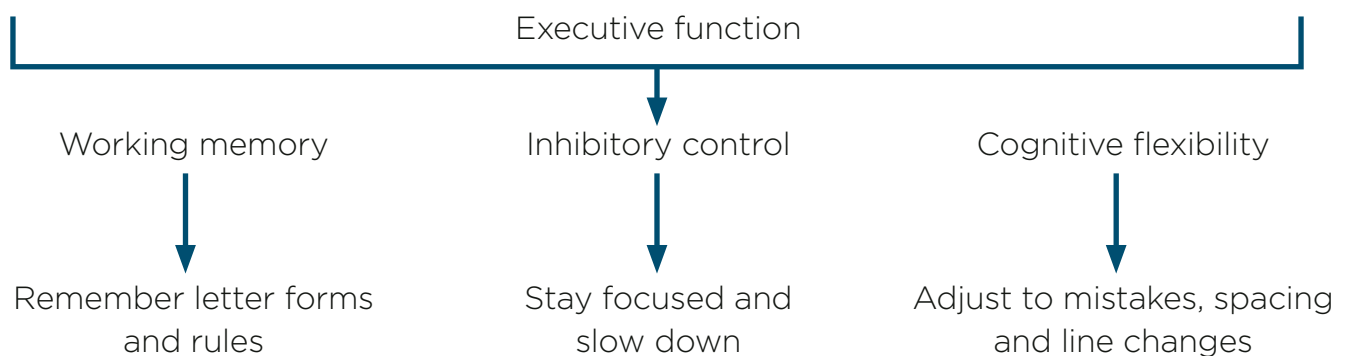
Consider organising parent workshops to introduce the handwriting approach used and to demonstrate correct letter formation. You could include a section on handwriting in phonics workshops for parents. However, it is important to tell parents that handwriting is taught in letter families and the reason for this. (It is easier for children to learn correct letter formation when letters with similar shapes and strokes are taught in groups.)

You may wish to give parents a copy of the formation phrases for lower-case letters, capital letters and digits 0 to 9. The Little Wandle Letter formation practice sheets can also be sent home to further support correct letter formation.

Executive function and handwriting

Executive function, also known as cognitive control, refers to a set of mental processes that begin developing from birth. These skills are essential for learning and play a critical role in a child's cognitive, social and emotional development. Strong executive function skills are linked to better academic performance and overall well-being.

The relationship between executive function and handwriting in young children is significant because handwriting is a complex task that relies heavily on cognitive control processes. Motor skills, attention, memory, planning and self-monitoring are all areas managed by executive function. The three main areas of executive function are: working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility.



Working memory

Working memory is the ability to hold and manipulate information in the mind.

Why it matters for handwriting

- Children must remember letter shapes, stroke sequences and spacing rules as they write.
- Children need to keep in mind what they've already written to ensure consistency in letter size, alignment and orientation.

Inhibitory control (self-control)

Inhibitory control is the ability to resist distractions, pause before acting and avoid impulsive errors.

Why it matters for handwriting

Inhibitory control:

- helps children to slow down to form letters carefully instead of scribbling
- reduces careless errors (for example, reversing letters or skipping letters)
- helps children to stay focused during multi-step handwriting tasks.

Cognitive flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to shift attention or adapt to changing demands.

Why it matters for handwriting

Children must adjust when:

- a letter doesn't fit, and they need to resize it
- they switch from writing lower-case to capital letters
- a new line starts, and they need to adjust spacing or orientation.

Cognitive flexibility also helps when correcting mistakes (for example, erasing and rewriting letters).

Tips for teaching practice

Children can be helped to develop their executive function through:

- breaking handwriting into manageable steps to reduce overload of their working memory
- the use of letter guides and visuals to aid focus and recall
- short, focused practice lessons to sustain attention and embed learning.

Preparing for handwriting

Drawing and forming lines

Before children can begin forming letters, they must first develop the ability to draw pre-writing lines in a specific developmental sequence – vertical, horizontal, circular, diagonal, and intersecting strokes – which serve as the foundational components of all letters and numbers. This is why our Handwriting programme begins with introductory lessons focused on practising patterns containing the strokes and curves required for letter formation. These introductory activities also support the development of fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, visual-motor integration and spatial awareness – all critical for accurate and fluent handwriting.

Tips for teaching practice

- Use multi-sensory methods (for example, tracing in sand, forming lines with playdough or using finger paints) to help children internalise these movements before transitioning to pencil-and-paper tasks.
- The activities can begin in Nursery/Pre-school and go alongside teaching of handwriting in Reception.

The importance of developing core strength and motor control

Core strength helps children sit upright and maintain stability, providing a strong base for movement and fine motor tasks like handwriting. Coordination allows the brain to manage movements across different body parts simultaneously – for example, holding paper steady while writing.

In the early years, developing core strength and coordination is essential for motor control, balance and fine motor precision. These skills support children in becoming confident, agile and physically ready for classroom tasks. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework states:

By creating games and providing opportunities for play both indoors and outdoors adults can support children to develop their core strength, stability, balance, spatial awareness, coordination and agility.

Gross motor skills provide the foundation for developing healthy bodies and social and emotional well-being. Fine motor control and precision helps with hand-eye coordination, which is later linked to early literacy.

Before fine motor dexterity can be refined, children first develop gross motor control (large movements involving the arms and shoulders). This stability provides a base for precise hand movements. Activities aimed at developing gross motor control should be intentionally integrated into the broader curriculum, ensuring that children have daily opportunities to engage in movement-based tasks that support the development of these essential skills.

Tips for teaching practice

To help children build strong foundations for handwriting:

- Observe and reflect on the physical development milestones of the children in your care. Collaborate with colleagues to compare observations and identify any gaps.
- Evaluate your curriculum to ensure it supports all children in building core strength and coordination through age-appropriate activities.
- Ensure planned learning experiences include opportunities for movement, posture and fine motor development.
- Share effective strategies and practices with others to promote core strength and coordination in your Early Years setting.
- Regularly review your curriculum to ensure alignment with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) requirements for physical development.

Gross motor control

Gross motor development is essential in the early years, building strength, coordination, and physical confidence. Activities like climbing, balancing, pushing and pulling engage key muscle groups including the legs, core, arms and back, supporting whole-body development through play.

Tips for teaching practice

Gross motor control activities for Reception age children can include:

Climbing and swinging

- Climbing low playground structures, tree stumps or safe climbing frames.
- Using swings to develop core strength and balance.
- Climbing up and down safely with supervision.

Balancing activities

- Walking along balance beams, lines on the floor or low logs.
- Practising standing on one foot, then the other.
- Navigating simple obstacle courses involving stepping over soft blocks or crawling under ropes.

Throwing, catching and kicking

- Throwing and catching soft balls or beanbags with a partner.
- Kicking balls towards targets or into small goals.
- Rolling balls back and forth to practise hand-eye coordination.

Jumping and hopping

- Jumping over small hurdles or ropes on the ground.
- Hopping on one foot in short bursts.
- Playing hopscotch or jumping in and out of hoops.

Running and movement games

- Playing tag or simple chase games.
- Dancing freely or following movement songs that involve jumping, spinning or stomping.
- Bear crawling, crab walking or frog jumping across a soft surface.

Gardening activities

- Helping dig small holes for planting.
- Carrying small watering cans or wheelbarrows.
- Pulling up weeds and transferring them into compost buckets.

These activities promote the development of strength, coordination, balance and confidence in movement, all while keeping children engaged and having fun.

Fine motor control

Our Handwriting programme begins with introductory lessons focused on practising patterns containing the strokes and curves required for letter and join formations. These introductory activities also support the development of fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, visual-motor integration and spatial awareness – all critical for accurate and fluent handwriting.

Developing dexterity

Dexterity primarily involves fine motor skills, which are developed through repeated use and practice of small muscle movements. Precise movements of the wrists, hands, fingers, feet and toes are essential for everyday tasks such as picking up small objects using a pincer grasp, buttoning clothes, using scissors and writing with care. Sustained writing tasks are supported by strong hand and finger muscles.

Isolated finger movements, such as those used in finger play, playing the piano or typing, help develop greater control and dexterity by encouraging the use of individual fingers independently.

Developing coordination

Dexterity often requires coordinated use of both hands, such as stabilising paper with one hand while writing with the other. This bilateral coordination develops with practice. A key part of developing coordination is learning to control how and when to release objects. This skill helps children refine their motor control, enabling them to perform tasks that require accuracy and precision in daily life. Developing fine motor skills requires good hand-eye coordination, muscle strength and control. These abilities allow children to manipulate objects with accuracy and perform detailed tasks independently.

Building on gross motor skills

- Importantly, fine motor skills build upon a foundation of gross motor skills. Strong core muscles and overall body coordination gained from larger movements help stabilise the body, making it easier for children to focus on the smaller, more delicate hand and finger movements needed for fine motor tasks.

- In summary, fine motor skills are crucial for academic tasks like writing and drawing, as well as daily living skills. Supporting their development helps children become more confident and capable in both school and everyday life.

Tips for teaching practice

Progressive activities for developing fine motor control could include:

Early skills	Picking up small objects (beads, buttons) with fingers or tweezers	Hand-eye coordination, pincer grasp
	Finger painting	Finger movement, sensory exploration
	Modelling clay manipulation (rolling, squeezing or pinching)	Hand strength, dexterity
	Threading large beads onto a shoelace or a pipe cleaner, moving on to threading small beads onto a pipe cleaner	Coordination, grasp control
Developing skills	Cutting with scissors (straight and curved lines)	Hand strength, control, bilateral coordination
	Buttoning and zipping up clothes on dolls or themselves	Finger dexterity, independence
	Lacing cards with shoelaces	Precision, hand-eye coordination
	Using tweezers of different sizes to pick up and sort small objects (pom-poms, seeds), starting with larger tweezers and moving on to smaller tweezers with more resistance	Fine motor precision, concentration
	Cutting round simple lines on paper to following curly lines	Hand strength, control, fine motor precision, concentration
Advanced skills	Writing and drawing letters, shapes and simple drawings	Pencil grip, control, handwriting readiness
	Using small tools (screwdrivers, pliers or tongs)	Dexterity, tool manipulation skills
	Bead weaving or jewellery making with smaller beads	Precision, fine motor coordination
	Origami or paper folding crafts	Sequencing, precision, bilateral hand use
	Opening a box with keys to practise wrist action and clockwise movement	Dexterity, tool manipulation skills

The relationship between handwriting and writing

The National Curriculum requires children to ‘write clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences’. The writing curriculum should give children opportunities to develop proficiency in two interrelated areas of writing: transcription (handwriting and spelling) and composition (articulating ideas and structuring them in speech and writing). In the early stages of writing, it helps if transcription is taught separately from composition, to avoid overloading the working memory and enable the children to develop fluency in their writing.

Transcription

Transcription combines:

- pencil grip
- letter formation
- spelling – at least one way of writing each phoneme

Fluent transcription skills are the foundations of writing. Children will not pick up letter formation and spelling through discovery; they need daily instruction and planned opportunities to practise what they have been taught.

Teaching letter formation separately with strong direct teaching, focusing on correct pencil grip, and teaching letters in families that have the same starting point and orientation, will enable children to achieve success.

When children develop fluency with their writing, it frees up cognitive space in their working memory to concentrate on the content of their writing.

Oral composition

Oral composition combines:

- sentence structure
- rich vocabulary
- story language
- story structures.

Oral composition helps children to develop their understanding of language structures which will enable them to compose writing. If we ask children to compose a sentence or even remember a sentence with the features we have taught in oral composition, and expect them to hold their pencil correctly, start in the correct place, form their letters with the right orientation and have a go at spelling the words, we will overload their working memory. They may struggle with letter formation and spelling, and could be discouraged from writing.

Teaching letter formation separately with strong direct teaching, focusing on correct pencil grip, and teaching letters in families that have the same starting point and orientation, will enable children to achieve success.

References

The authors acknowledge the following sources:

EEF (2021) 'Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1'. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks-1>

The National Handwriting Association (NHA) for recognition of their role in disseminating the four Ps model of teaching handwriting, named 'P checks' by the NHA.

Graham, S. and Harris, K.R. (2000) 'The Role of Self-Regulation and Transcription Skills in Writing and Writing Development', *Educational Psychologist*, 35, 3-12

Graham, S. Harris, K.R. and Adkins, M. (2018) 'The Impact of Supplemental Handwriting and Spelling Instruction with First Grade Students Who Do Not Acquire Transcription Skills as Rapidly as Peers: A Randomized Control Trial', *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, volume 31 issue 6, 1273-1293

Puranik, C.S., Al Otaiba, S. (2011) 'Examining the contribution of handwriting and spelling to written expression in kindergarten children'. *Read Writ* 25, 1523-1546

Extracts from *The National Curriculum in England: Framework Document* (DfE, 2014), *The Reading Framework* (DfE, 2023), *The Writing Framework* (DfE, 2025), *Development Matters* (DfE, 2023), *Early Years Foundation Stage profile* (DfE, 2023), *Help for Early Years Providers: Physical Development* (DfE, 2022) and *Strong foundations in the first years of school* (Ofsted, 2024), which are reproduced under the terms of the Open Government Licence (OGL) v3.0 www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3