

TIPS FOR TEACHING

National Handwriting Association 
Promoting good practice

Helping the Older Student

From writing lesson to class work

Teachers and parents frequently ask the question:

“How is it that a student can learn to write well in a handwriting lesson but does not transfer that skill into class work?”

The problem:

Writing involves many processes such as generating and developing ideas, planning how to express thoughts and structuring sentences, as well as spelling, punctuation and legible writing.

This puts great demands on the memory.

A solution:

It will help the student if the transcriptional skills (handwriting – and also spelling and punctuation) are as automatic as possible, enabling him/her to concentrate on the demanding compositional skills.

A possible strategy is to first help him to write legibly and then to undertake a series of tasks of gradually increasing difficulty that will move him towards writing automatically in a series of short ‘hops’.

This has better chance of success than expecting him to transfer improved handwriting skills to class work in one leap.

Hop 1 Assessing the product

Together with the student, assess a sample of the student’s normal handwriting using seven ‘S’ Rules as a guide. (See below)
(Tips for Teaching: ‘S’ Rules for quick assessment gives more detail)

Specific aspects of the script which need to be improved can then be addressed in 4-6 targeted sessions.

	Excellent	Good	OK	Not so Good	Poor
Shape/legibility					
Size					
Spacing					
Sitting on line					
Slant					
Speed					
Style					

Assessing the product:
7 ‘S’s


Hop 2 Assessing the process

It is important to consider *how* the student writes. The four 'P's: posture, paper position, pen grasp and pressure are a useful guide. (See below)

Tips for Teaching: Writing Difficulties and *Writing Grip* give more detail

	Some Common Faults
Posture	Lack of core stability. Not keeping the body still when writing. Leaning on the table/writing hand
Paper Position	Not centred in front of the body. Turned too much to left or right.
Pen Grasp	Gripping too tightly. Wrapping the thumb round the pen. Using an unstable pen grasp. Extreme 'hook' of the hand.
Pressure	Pressing too hard or not enough.

Anything that is making the writing process painful or uncomfortable should be addressed.


Tip  Remember that changing long-established habits is difficult and requires attention and repetition. Support and encouragement are important.

Assessing the process:
4 'P's

Once the specific errors of the handwriting have been corrected at single letter level, begin a series of tasks of graded difficulty.

Hop 3 Bi-and Tri-grams

The student should practice the bi- and then tri-grams, if possible repeating them for short, frequent periods.

Tip  At each stage make sure that the correct handwriting is used and only move on to the next 'hop' when the letters are written correctly with confidence.

Most Common Bi-grams (in order)

th he in en nt ew er an ti
is on at se nd or ar al te
co de to ra et ed it sa em

Most Common Tri-grams (in order)

the and tha ent ing ion tio or
nde has nce edt tis oft sth men

Hop 4 Using whole words

the	and	a	to	in	is	you	that	it	he
Was	for	on	are	as	with	his	they	I	at
Be	this	have	from	or	one	had	by	word	but
Not	what	all	were	we	when	your	can	said	there
Use	an	each	which	she	do	how	their	if	will
up	other	about	out	many	then	them	these	so	some
her	would	make	like	him	into	time	has	look	two
more	write	go	see	number	no	way	could	people	my
than	first	water	been	call	who	oil	its	now	find
long	down	day	did	get	come	made	may	part	

100 most common words

Tip  Preferably use dictation rather than copying as it is a half-way stage to self-generated writing (the ultimate aim)

Hop 5 Single words to sentences

The student writes short dictated sentences well below his level of spelling ability i.e. c-v-c words only.

A good source is Alpha to Omega (Hornsby & Shear 1993) (See right)

1. The pan is hot.
2. The dog can beg.
3. Dan got a gun.
4. Mum has a wig.
5. A rat bit Tom.
6. Len hit the box.
7. Rex has a big mug
8. Tom ran to the red van.
9. Ron met Ted on the bus.
10. Mum hid the pot of jam.
11. Meg and Pam can fit Sam in.
12. Fat Dan cannot get in the van.
13. Ben hid the map in the hut.
14. Pam can get me a pot of jam.
15. Sam sat in the sun and got a tan.

Hop 6 From dictation to self-generated text

The student generates sentences of his own in this format and at this level of simplicity. For example: "The dog has a wig" (humour will always help!). First he says the sentence out loud, the teacher repeats it and then he writes it down.

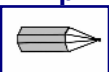
This is the next step towards free writing.

Hop 7 Introducing narrative writing

7A

The student is given a story using a simple text presented in cloze form, i.e. certain key words are omitted and the child chooses appropriate words to give meaning.

Tip



Choose a text that interests the student but the reading, vocabulary and sentence construction levels should be kept below his general language and intellectual ability.

7B

Rule a wide margin down the right side of the page and ask the student to supply the missing words, indicated by the numbers. As he does, you write the words he selects in a numbered column down the page (see right). These words, chosen by him, will serve as memory cues when retelling the story.

Jo had a radio. She got it in a car boot sale. It was a very strange radio. One day when Jo was listening to the six o'clock 1 a very strange thing happened. A hand came 2 of the radio and got hold of Jo's face. Jo was very 3 . She 4 the comic she was reading and 5 her cup of tea off the arm of her chair. Jo picked up the 6 . She stared at it. Then the 7 came out again. This time it got hold of Jo's left 8 . Jo jumped back. Jo got very upset. She grabbed the radio and ran into the kitchen. She put the radio in the sink and turned on 9 taps. The water filled the sink. Jo heard a voice coming out of the radio. It said: "Help me! Help me! Please help me! I'm 10 ."

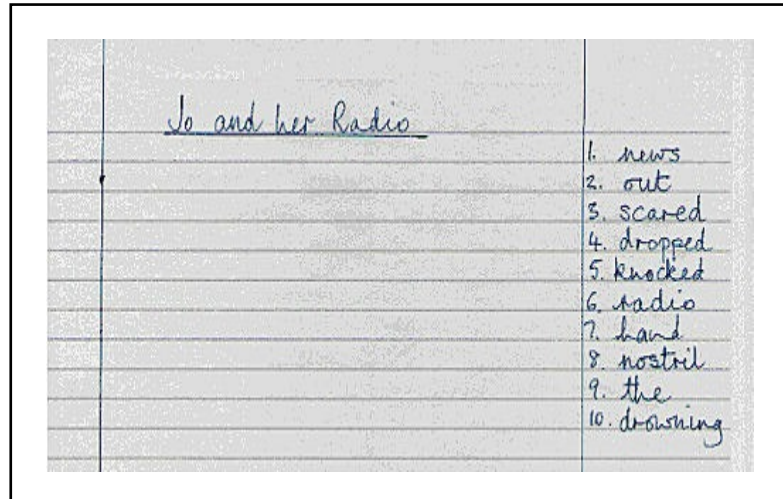
An example of cloze format - taken from the Headwork series, Book 2, (Walters & Culshaw, 1990)

7B

Ask him to retell the story orally from memory, showing him the list of cue words to aid him. Be sure he includes the selected words in the order in which you have written them.

7D

The student then writes the story, ticking each cue word as it is used.



Hop 8 Creating and writing a story

The student creates a short story of his own, orally at first and the teacher writes it out. The student then selects the key words to be the memory cues (to be written in the right-hand margin on the page as before). This list is used as in Hop 7 to help the child write the story.

This exercise reduces the load on the memory for generating the narrative and the word list will also provide support by acting as memory cues. An additional advantage in this method is that a short story with a good structure is a model for future narrative writing.

Timing

This will vary according to the individual student and the length and frequency of the teaching and practice sessions.

The ideal would be a session every day for eight weeks but this could well be impractical.

If practice can be time-tabled for at least twice a week, an average re-integration period would be around 3-4 months.



There are no shortcuts – the greatest success demands both time and intensity – but once the skill properly established, it will be there for life.

Tip



Older students (GCSE/A level) might prefer to write a factual account rather than fiction but the same method could be used.

Adapted from an article 'Handwriting to class-writing: one leap or several hops?' by Dr Angela Webb in *Handwriting Today 2014*, the journal of the National Handwriting Association.

Publications referred to in the text:

NHA *Tips for Teaching: 'S' Rules, Handwriting Difficulties, Writing Grip, Speeding Up* Hornsby, B. & Shear, F. (1993). *Alpha to Omega: The A-Z of Teaching Reading, Writing and Spelling*. Heinemann.

Walters, D. & Culshaw, C. (1990). *Headwork, Book 2*. Oxford University Press.