

# Help with handwriting

By Nikki Soames

Despite the advent of computers, handwriting is still the primary tool of communication. Some would say that handwriting is a critical life skill! It is the means by which we express and present our thoughts, opinions and ideas, but it is also the means by which we are judged!

Poor handwriting is a very real disadvantage. Someone who is unable to write legibly is often judged as having limited intellectual ability. At school and in life generally, written work can be assessed according to its appearance rather than its content. Handwriting can even make the difference between passing and failing examinations and being successful in job applications!

Proper guidance must be given at an early age if children are to learn to write well. The correct pencil grip, posture and letter formations need to be *taught well right from the start* and internalized by regular practice. This is how good habits become 'automatic' and progress into a fluent, comfortable, flowing style of handwriting. The movement patterning from habitually sitting incorrectly and forming letters incorrectly is much harder to fix once it has become ingrained over many years. The good news, is that although it is quite a challenge, bad habits *can* be put right at any age if the writer is determined to practice better methods consistently.

Parents and teachers (especially of very young children) need to know the correct approach, what to teach, how to teach it, what problems to look out for and how to guide their child properly. It is important to emphasise that learning to write is not an overnight process and this is even more applicable when teaching a child with special needs or who learns differently.

The formation of letters needs to become both legible and fast – it needs to be practiced so often that it becomes 'automatic' – so that the writer no longer has to think about how to form letters and words. Practice increases the accuracy of fine motor control and as this increases, it opens up a whole new world - the writer is now free to focus on the content – that is to write their thoughts and ideas, to write what they want to write about without being distracted by having to remember *how* to write each letter of each word as they go along!

Research has shown that it is best for both right-handers and left-handers to

begin in a relaxed way with the rhythmic patterns that underpin handwriting. This approach avoids muscular tensions stemming from anxiety and results in the child developing a personal style that is legible, fluent and fast so that they can write quickly enough to get down what they want to say while it is still in their head.

Last year **LeftHand N.Z.** introduced a step-by-step learning programme for parents and teachers to teach handwriting skills to LEFT-handed children. This begins with the rhythmic patterns and once these are mastered the child moves on to trace and form the letters of the alphabet that relate to each pattern. Through short, frequent practice sessions the child progresses to the stage where they are able to form each letter of the alphabet on their own. Starting with these rhythmic patterns also solves a problem many SPELD students have with 'left to right direction' and letter reversals.

Our handwriting workbooks have laminated 'write-on wipe-off' (abbreviated to WOWO) worksheets because learning how to write is all about practice and this way parents and teachers always have available the worksheet required without having to photocopy more for each handwriting session. Our WOWO workbook is written by a left-handed NZ registered teacher and it includes **LEFT-handed letter formations**.

Many teachers do not know and therefore do not teach left-handed children the subtle differences in letter formations that allow the left-handed child to develop faster handwriting, nor do many of them know how a left-handed writer should position their paper, their wrist and forearm to be able to write in a fluent, comfortable left-handed style. Thankfully it is now almost universally accepted in our schools that left-handed children should not be forced to write with their right hand. But this has resulted in a sort of "hand off" approach to left-handed children they are not being taught **how** to write unless they are fortunate enough to have a left-handed teacher in their formative years.

Consequently, the left-handed child is left to figure out handwriting on their own. They try to copy what their right-handed peers are doing and often the awkward "hook" writing style and variations of it, is the result. This style of left-handed writing is clumsy and uncomfortable, leading quickly to muscle fatigue and even arthritis in the wrist

later on in life. But the major drawback is that it is very **slow!** The writer thinks much faster than he/she can write frequently resulting in sentences with words missing or words mis-spelt and with the writer repeatedly losing their train of thought. Another distressing disadvantage of the "hook" style is that the writing hand moves over the freshly written work, resulting in smudging and thus untidy bookwork!

The progressive effect is that a left-handed child can:

- \* fall behind in their schoolwork because they write too slowly)
- \* loose self esteem (because they are continually growled at by teachers for producing smudged/untidy work and for taking longer than others to copy things down from the board.)
- \* find writing uncomfortable and physically tiring (muscle fatigue of the contorted shoulder, arm and wrist)
- \* grow to dislike anything that involves writing because it has come to be an unpleasant experience. Over time writing has become associated with a whole raft of negative outcomes.

If there are also other issues such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADD, ADHD etc – then being left-handed as well can seem overwhelming for both the child and the parents!

Step-by-step help to teach the left-hander how to write fast and well as a **left**-hander is here at last! Following our learning programme for just 10 minutes every day will lead to the development of legible, fluent and fast handwriting in a comfortable and flowing left-handed style.

Feedback received from a SPELD teacher using the programme:  
**"Nikki, this resource is awesome! As a right hander, I was pretty ignorant of the challenges faced by left-handers. The instructions and tips included in the front of your book are truly eye-opening."**

In fact, this programme has been so successful that we've been urged to create a similar handwriting workbook for right-handers! These will be available soon. You will find a lot more information for parents and teachers of left-handed children on our website including more details about the content of our WOWO Workbook, sample pages and the different formats currently available. There is a whole section covering "Teaching Resources" for left-handed children and you can even order online!