

How to Teach Your Child to Print

Good printing habits are necessary for speed, legibility, and comfort.

By Malkin Dare

One of the many casualties of child-centred learning is penmanship. When it is left up to young children to “discover” how to hold their pencils and form their letters, they frequently come up with some very unfortunate solutions.

One young student, for example, solved his problems with the letter “r” by printing an “n” and then erasing the unwanted section. Regrettably, this slowed down his printing quite a bit.

The way students hold their pencils can also be a problem. To see the surprisingly wide range of methods out there, watch how young tellers and waiters wield their pens these days.

Students with unorthodox pencil grips are at a disadvantage when the time comes to write three-hour exams. They are not able to write as quickly or as legibly, and they are more prone to muscle cramps.

The “tripod” grip is the correct way to grasp a pencil (or crayon), and it should be taught to very young children when they first begin to make marks on paper.

The pencil should be positioned so that there is equal pressure between the thumb, the side of the middle finger, and the tip of the index finger.



There are many excellent web-sites with tips on good pencil-holding practices. One example is www.drawyourworld.com. This website, along with many stationery stores, sells “pencil grips”, inexpensive training tools that can be attached to pencils.

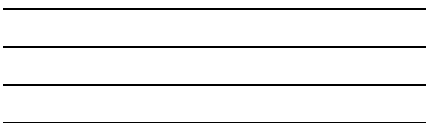
As with so many other things, it is much easier to get it right the first time. Students who have been allowed to establish a non-tripod pencil grip may resist breaking their bad habit, but it is definitely worth the effort.

Once a good pencil grip has been established, the student is ready to begin learning correct letter formation. The same principles apply: correct letter formation is important for speed, comfort, and legibility; and it is better to get it right the first time.

Once again, there are many good web-sites on correct letter formation. Information on the direction the pencil should be travelling in as it forms the various letters can be found at www.psych-ed.org. This site also offers free downloadable lined paper and worksheets.

In general, students should learn to print letters in the same font as they will see in their beginning reading books. Lower-case letters should be taught before upper-case letters.

Printing should be taught and practised on special lined paper, with four guide lines.



The letter “a” will sit in the middle space, while the letter “t” will occupy the top two spaces, and the letter “g” the lower two spaces.

Most straight strokes travel from left to right (the exception being the letter “x”) and from top to bottom. Thus, the letter “b” begins with a downstroke followed by a circle, while the letter “d” is the reverse. (Be sure to separate the introduction of these two letters by at least two weeks to avoid confusion between them.)

Letters that involve circles or semi-circles, should usually be formed using counter-clockwise motions (exceptions are “b” and “p”).

The letters should be presented one by one, in combination with their most common sound. If students say each sound while forming its corresponding letter, their acquisition of reading skills is symbiotically speeded up.

There is no agreed-upon best sequence of letter presentation. Since the letter “l” is the easiest one to form, it is a logical one to begin with.

Once the student is proficient at printing “l” correctly, top to bottom, through the top two spaces, saying its sound every time, it is time to introduce another letter. The letter “i” might be appropriate (first a downstroke in the middle space, then a dot in the top space), in combination with its short sound (/i/ as in “pin”).

When mastery has been achieved, the letter “t” might be introduced (first a downstroke through the top two spaces, followed by a shorter stroke from left to right along the second line).

Once the student is solid on all three sounds, blending can begin. With the letters learned so far, the words “it” and then “lit” can be sounded out and written.

If the next letter learned is the letter “o”, for example, the word “lot” could be added. Then “d”, making “dot” and “tot” and “did” possible. And so on.

The exact sequence is unimportant. What is important is that the student learns to form each letter fluently, legibly, and automatically, so that when the time comes to print words he doesn’t have to squander any of his scarce brainpower on mechanical considerations.

Since children typically start making marks on paper long before they get to kindergarten, their parents are likely to be in the best position to ensure that young children get it right the first time.

(Mrs. Dare is a former teacher.)