

‘Ready to write’ checklist: the four Ps

It is important to establish routines for getting ready for handwriting lessons. The routines of warming up fingers, having the correct posture and holding the pencil correctly so that children are ready to write are key. These routines need to be a common policy in the school, and have clear expectations that are established right from the start and reinforced so that they become embedded and automatic.

The Little Wandle ‘Ready to write’ checklist ensures children are well prepared to start handwriting with confidence and control. The children are taught and reminded of four elements prior to starting their handwriting lesson.

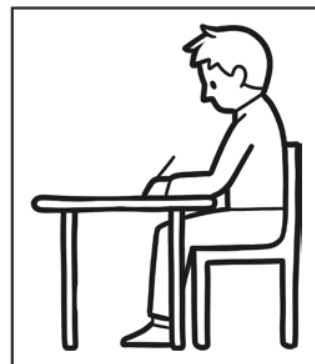


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Posture	☒
Pencil grip	☒
Paper position	☒
Pressure	☒

Posture

If children have a poor posture when writing, it can result in pain and fatigue, causing poor presentation, handwriting that is difficult to read, slow speed and lack of motivation to write. By modelling, monitoring and reinforcing good posture from the beginning, poor habits can be prevented from developing and children can be supported in building the stamina and speed needed for fluent writing.

- **Feet** are flat on the floor or supported on a wide, stable raised surface.
- **Knees** form a 90 degrees angle, with about two fingers' space behind the knees to prevent pressure on the lower thighs.
- **Hips** are positioned at approximately 90 degrees, with the back fully supported by the chair.
- **Seat position** with the back against the chair maintaining a small gap (about the width of a fist) between the stomach and the table, so there is sufficient space to breathe comfortably.
- **Table and chair height** should allow the forearms to rest comfortably on the surface – without leaning forward (too low) or raising the shoulders (too high).
- **Work surface** must be clean, smooth and clear of clutter to promote proper hand and arm placement and allow arms to move freely to write.



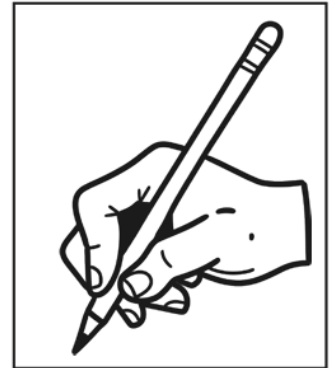
Pencil grip

Children need to learn how to hold their pencil correctly from the outset, as grip affects the flow, speed and overall quality of handwriting. Without a proper grip, children's hands can tire more quickly, their writing can become harder to read and they may struggle to write for extended periods – an essential skill as they progress through school.

Young children need to develop the muscles in their hands to build the strength required for a proper pencil grip. For some, this will take longer and require additional practice. Children initially start to hold the pencil within their fist (age 1–1.5 years), progress to holding the pencil shaft with all their fingers (2–3 years) and then move on to a static, then dynamic tripod grasp. Children typically progress through a series of grasp patterns before developing a tripod grip.

Tripod grip

The tripod grip is typically the easiest for children to learn. It can be modelled by showing how to pinch the pencil between the ball of the thumb and index finger – about a finger's width from the pencil tip – while resting the middle finger underneath for support, and the other fingers tucked into the hand. Using a small sticker to mark the correct grip position can be a helpful visual aid. The ideal location of the fingers is about 3cm from the pencil tip. For children who find pencil grip challenging, timely intervention and additional practice are essential to prevent the development of incorrect habits.



For children who continue to have difficulty with fine and gross motor skills, adaptive equipment can be used to support their development.

Writing implements and equipment

- Pencils are an ideal tool for introducing letter formation as they provide a smooth glide across the page helping young children develop control during the complex process of learning to write. Some children may benefit from using thicker, triangular pencils to support the development of a tripod grip.
- However, the size of the pencil should be appropriate for the child's hand. While some children may initially find a chunkier pencil easier to grip, as they develop pencil control, it's important to ensure the pencil is not too large, as this can hinder comfort and proper grip development.
- There are pencil grips commercially available that promote a good tripod position. An elastic band placed at the tip of the pencil will prevent the fingers from slipping forwards onto the point.



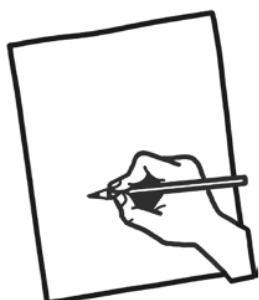
- In addition to using a pencil for letter formation, Reception children should have regular opportunities to experiment with a variety of writing tools such as chalks, crayons and paint, and to write on different types of paper and surfaces to build confidence and fine motor skills.

To encourage good opposition of thumb and fingers, practise lots of fine motor activities that develop these skills, for example providing tweezers of different sizes to pick up small objects. As the children become stronger, tweezers with more resistance can be provided. Children will need instruction in how to do this and time to practise fine motor activities which may be in continuous provision. Further examples for development of fine motor control are provided on pages 12-13 of the Handwriting document 'Introduction to teaching handwriting'.

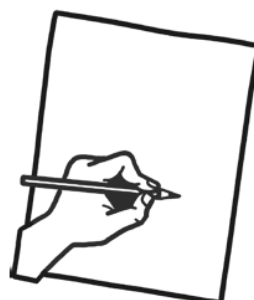
Paper position

- Paper angle helps support natural hand movement and improves handwriting posture. It is important to teach children the optimal paper position for writing. The paper placement should not be directly in front of the child, but slightly offset as follows:

For right-handers: Position the paper slightly to the right. Tilt the paper so that the top left corner angles downward to the left.



For left-handers: Position the paper slightly to the left. Tilt the paper so that the top right corner angles downward to the right.



Holding the paper

- Encourage the use of the non-writing hand to hold and steady the paper. This positioning encourages smoother writing, better wrist alignment and improved visibility of the writing area.

Pressure

- As children learn to write, the pressure they apply with a pencil often varies based on their developmental stage and the nature of the task. With practice and experience, most children naturally figure out the appropriate amount of pressure to use. Excessive pencil pressure can cause hand fatigue and slow writing, while too little pressure can make handwriting faint and hard to read.



Supporting children with light pencil pressure

- These children may have weak grasps, limited finger dexterity, or reduced hand sensory awareness.

Tips for teaching practice: light pencil pressure

- Start with hand warm-up activities before writing to enhance sensory input.
- Build hand strength by having the child press hard with a crayon to colour large areas.
- To prevent pencil slippage, try triangular or larger pencils or pencil grips. Wrapping a rubber band about 3cm from the tip can guide finger placement and reduce slipping.
- Develop upper body strength through weight-bearing activities like wheelbarrow walking, climbing and pushing with straight arms. Writing on vertical surfaces (for example, chalkboards or whiteboards) also helps.
- Use tools like a dull pencil or wooden dowel to write or press into clay for added resistance.
- Use softer leaded pencils such as 2B so their writing can be seen more easily while continuing to work on developing pressure.
- Strengthen fingers with hole punch activities.

Supporting children with hard pencil pressure

- Children may use hard pencil pressure due to poor sensory awareness, weak hand muscles, developing motor control, sensory-seeking behaviour or habit.

Tips for teaching practice: hard pencil pressure

- Begin with hand warm-up activities (for example, squeezing a stress ball, wall push-ups, animal walks) to boost hand awareness.
- Show examples of 'too light', 'too hard' and 'just right' handwriting to help visualise proper pressure.
- Practise shading with crayons or pencils to show how pressure changes colour intensity.
- Try 'ghost writing' by writing lightly and erasing without leaving a mark.
- Use a mechanical pencil – excess pressure will cause the lead to snap.
- Try an angled board (approximately 25 degrees) to support wrist positioning for better control.

Hand warm-up routines

Before engaging in handwriting or fine motor tasks, it is important that children have the opportunity to warm up their hands. Hand exercises help the brain increase awareness of where the hands are, improve coordination, prepare the body for controlled movements and furthermore aid precision.

Hand exercises

Choose four of these exercises for the start of each lesson – try to include a variety each week. See the 'Hand exercises' videos on the Little Wandle website to see how to do the exercises.

1. Rub hands together

Rub hands together until they feel warm. Move them up and down, or in circular motions to stimulate blood flow.

2. Push palms together

Push the palms firmly together and hold for five seconds. Repeat a few times.

3. Finger stretches

Open hands wide, stretching fingers as far apart as you can. Then make a tight fist, hiding fingers away inside the palm.

4. Drumming fingers

Drum fingers on the table, one finger at a time. This can be extended to tapping a rhythm.

5. Squeeze forearms and hands

Use the left hand to squeeze the right forearm and hand firmly, applying gentle pressure to stimulate the muscles and increase awareness. Swap hands.

6. Pulling fingers (like taking off a glove)

With one hand, grasp each finger of the other hand in turn and gently pull downward, as if taking off a glove. Repeat for the other hand.

7. Oppose thumb to each fingertip

Touch the thumb to each fingertip of the same hand in turn. For more challenge, this can be done with both hands at the same time, or with your eyes closed.

8. Finger circle tug

Form a circle with the thumb and index finger. Then form another circle with the other hand, within that circle, and try to pull them apart.