

INTRODUCTION

On coming to Cardinal Allen most pupils have adequate or good handwriting skills, including a neat cursive or semi-cursive script. In these cases, there should be no need for intervention. The quality of each prospective Year 7 pupil will be assessed during cross-phase activities. This will be the responsibility of the SEN Department. However:

- Some pupils revert from the cursive style which they used at Primary School, to printing.
- Some pupils have never appropriated 'joined-up' writing.
- Some pupils use a form of joined-up writing which is illegible or incorrectly-formed.

In the above cases, the school policy should be to develop and improve handwriting. We must encourage ALL pupils to use a cursive or semi-cursive script.

CRITERIA FOR INTERVENTION

Checklist of handwriting errors: Intervention may be considered necessary if there is serious fault in any of the following areas:

1. Does the writing fail to start at or 'drift away from' the margin?
2. Is there inappropriate space between the words?
3. Are the letters not written correctly on the line?
4. Are the letters of incorrect or uneven size, height or spacing within the word?
5. Are the letters written incorrectly?
6. Are any letters malformed (e.g., in the letters 'a' and 'd' the 'stick' is often not properly joined to the 'ball' part of the letter).
7. Are the letters incorrectly formed *in the writing*. It will be necessary to watch the pupils writing to ascertain this (e.g., the letter 'o' is often written as a clockwise or anti-clockwise circle – both are wrong), and a note made of the letters which are wrongly written.
8. Are the letters incorrectly joined together?
9. Is the 'slant' excessive?

Intervention may be initiated by any teacher/ tutor/ parent or child. Encouraging good handwriting is the responsibility of every teacher.

PRINCIPLES

HANDWRITING IS AN EXPLICIT SKILL – i.e. it is not appropriated 'along the way' and must be explicitly taught. 'Joined-up' hand-writing has the following advantages:

Speed: pupils are suddenly, at secondary school, required to write almost twice as fast as at primary school. Moreover, the speed demands of note-taking, exams etc. increase as the pupil progresses. Although it may be adequate at the lower levels, 'ball-and-stick' printing increasingly holds back pupils as they grow older.

Spelling: the ability to see 'the whole word' is crucial in learning to spell accurately. Pupils who print reduce the task, not just to letter-by-letter copying/writing, but to a string of meaningless circles and lines ('balls' and 'sticks'). 'Joined-up' hand-writing forces the pupil to appropriate ('visualise') the word as a whole, and to write it as one object. ALSO, writing the word as a whole word, commits the word to the pupils 'motor memory' (as well as his visual and auditory memory) – it adds to the pupil's chances to remember the word, especially if he has a kinaesthetic learning style.

Letter-knowledge: it helps to prevent letter confusions (for instance, dyslexic pupils are confused by 'b' and 'd' when they write them by the 'ball and stick' method – usually, they use capitals instead).

Handwriting involves the following sub-skills:

Motor co-ordination: poor motor skills are typical of dyspraxic AND dyslexic children. This is not 'carelessness'. It is a motor deficit.

Motor memory: letter-formation must be 'automaticised' – the muscles need to remember the shapes-in-formation, and to be able to replicate them without thinking. This holds back many dyslexic/dyspraxic pupils because they often have a motor memory deficit – i.e. they need to practise for much longer to appropriate (if at all) the instinctive movement.

Visual perception: a pupil with a visual deficit is likely to have problems with handwriting, because they find it hard to set out the work spatially.

Left-handed writers have a whole range of extra problems when writing – not least that they cover up the words as fast as they write them. This is particularly relevant for dyslexic pupils, for one indicator of SpLD is left-handedness, or uncertain laterality. 'Left-handed pupils need individual help in handwriting' (Sassoon, 1983). Adjustments to seating to free the body/hand positions can help. Talk to your pupils about this...they made need persuading!

In some cases it may be necessary to re-teach handwriting skills 'from the beginning'.

If this is the case, the following strategy will be applied:

TEACHING HANDWRITING

Pen grip: Where pen grip is grossly incorrect, pupils may need to learn how to hold the pen properly: for right-handers, the pen should rest on the side of the middle finger, into the crook of the thumb, while the thumb and first finger clasp it gently, but firmly, into place. The side of the hand rests on the paper. Make sure the pupil is not gripping the pen too near to the tip, or too far from the tip. Left-handed pupils need to hold the pen a little higher up the barrel so they can see what they are writing.

Posture: Where posture is grossly incorrect, pupils may need to be told how best to sit to write: all pupils need to sit more-or-less straight-on to the table, upright, holding the paper with the non-writing hand. Right-handers angle the paper slightly to the left. Left-handers angle the paper slightly more, and to the right. Posture, as grip, should not be too 'tense'.

Developing motor control: The following exercises will develop motor control: Writing much bigger than normal (e.g. on the board), or much smaller than normal. Tracing letter shapes on, say, a piece of velvet. Skywriting, or writing on another pupil's hand or back (and guessing the letters). Tracing over shapes, patterns and letters.

Letter-formation: When teaching letter formation:

1. ALL letters start on the line. this is the essential rule. It relieves the (dyslexic) pupil of worry about where the letter starts.
2. Use a piece of paper with sets of three lines to learn and practise the shapes.

3. Do NOT try too much at once. Learn the letters, and then **practise** writing words which only use those letters, until they are embedded in motor memory.

4. Teach **upper-case letters as printed letters (A, B, C, D, E, etc)** not to 'join up'.

If the pupil is motivated and the home is supportive, it is possible to teach **lower-case letters** easily – and with successful results – in 4–6 sessions:

5. **Teach lower-case letters in the following order, as the following shapes:**

a. **Firstly**, teach the 'up, back and round' letters (*c, a, d, g, q* and – perhaps later – *o*): and write words such as dad, cog, dog, doc, cad etc.

When joining letter-to-letter, 'o' requires the pupil to start the next letter 'half-way up'. This skill may – but it may not – be appropriated automatically. You may wish to leave 'o' out at first, and introduce it later. Whatever you decide to do, the concept of starting the next letter 'half-way up' after certain letters (o, w, r, f and v) **must be explicitly taught**.

b. **Secondly**, teach the 'anti-clockwise' letters (*l, t, i, u, y, w* and *e*): and write words such as cell, wool, loot, gate, lute, well, tile, cool etc.

c. **Thirdly**, teach the 'up, down, up-and-round' letters (*n, m, h, k, b, p* and – later – *r*): and write words such as road, name, robber, hopper, problem, killing etc.

d. **Lastly**, this leaves 'difficult' letters (*s, f, j, v, x* and *z*) to introduce gradually: Of these, 'f' and 's' are the greatest problem (since *j, v, x* and *z* are not used often). Tell the pupil that 'f' and 'x' are the ONLY letters where they are allowed to lift the pen off the page. Excepting 's', discuss/allow alternative forms for these letters. The pupil will now be able to write any words. They can practise writing out the alphabet in joined-up writing; and use these holoalphabetic sentences:

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.

The five boxing wizards jumped quickly.

Pack my box with five dozen liquor jugs.

Samples of cursive script should be provided modelling each letter.

Transfer of Skills

The teacher **MUST** make arrangements with the pupil's subject teachers, to allow/ encourage the pupil to apply the new handwriting skills into their class work (e.g. not requiring as much written work/ extra praise for neatness/ directed marking in every subject). Otherwise there will be a regression because the skill has not become instinctive.

Teaching by Example

The teachers' board-work should use neat, cursive script, and be an exemplar of handwriting.

Cardinal Allen Catholic High School

A Specialist Maths and Computing College

Handwriting: Advice and Intervention

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At Cardinal Allen Catholic High School we want to develop the necessary life-skills of communication, creativity, problem solving and decision-making, as well as the informational framework that will prepare individuals for life in the 21st century.



**Essential reading for all teachers,
teaching assistants and parents**



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