

4 Overlooked Prewriting Features

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Handwriting is such a complex task and our students are asked to write frequently throughout their school days. Poor handwriting is one of the leading Occupational Therapy referrals in school systems. When assessing handwriting, there are many components that come into play. It is important to realize that skills build upon each other. Each skill is then used to help the next skill. For example, if a child has a poor grip we automatically want to fix the grip. However, sometimes we need to take a step back and look at what is causing the poor grip. There are four very important components of handwriting development that could be the culprit of many sloppy handwriting issues.

1. Posture Police! First take a look at the student's posture. It's really important to make sure that your children are seated at the table with their feet touching the floor. Poor posture can affect your student's attention span because it often leads to fatigue and discomfort. It can also lead to poor grip and handwriting illegibility.

- Try adjusting their table/chair or put something on the floor to rest their feet.
- Attach a piece of theraband around the legs of the desk so that the student can rest his/her feet on it.
- If you have given your "vertically challenged" child something to rest his feet on and he keeps kicking it around the floor, then try this technique: find a top to a copy box and cut two holes in the corners of the box. Then insert the legs of the chair into the holes so that it can't move around. This will stabilize the footrest to the chair.
- Use a lumbar support back rest, preferably one with vibration. What do we know about vibration and muscles? Vibration stimulates muscles! So, if we lean on a vibrating back rest it will stimulate the extensor muscles in our back, which helps increase our posture. Here is an example of a battery operated one that is very reasonably priced:

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00592QCUG/ref=cm_cr_mts_prod_img

2. Shoulder Stability: If posture is under control, take a look at your student's shoulder stability. Shoulder stability is essential in the control of our hand when writing. There are 3 questions you should ask yourself that can help you determine if your student exhibits poor stability in the shoulder area:

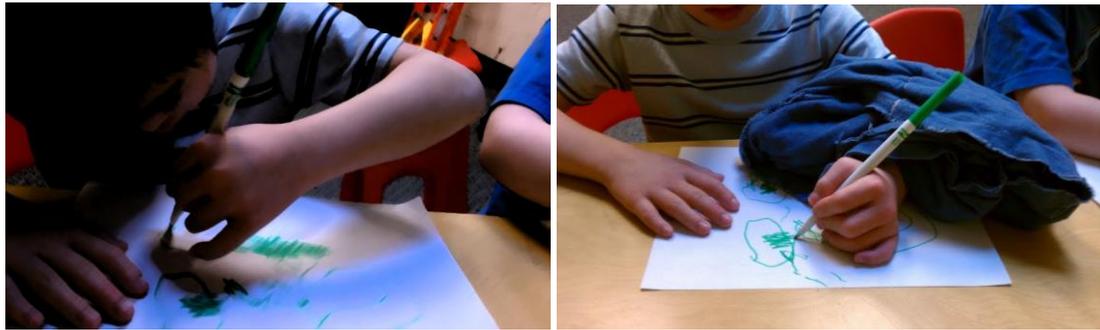
- a. Do you see movement in arm when writing? For example, when coloring, is the whole arm moving?
- b. Are you noticing a slight tremor/shakiness in the arm or hand?
- c. Do they tense up their neck when cutting or doing other fine motor tasks?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, try these suggestions:

- Exercise the shoulder girdle muscles. Encourage your child to perform animal walks, such as bear walking, crab walking, or army crawling on a daily basis. Practice turning a jump rope. Draw on a vertical surface, such as easel/smart board/dry erase board/chalkboard/etc.
- The above exercises will increase shoulder stability over time, but it won't happen overnight. If your child is lacking shoulder stability then we need to provide strategies that provide the stability for him. For example, encourage your student to complete written work while lying on his tummy with his elbows propped on the floor (see picture).



- Provide him with a weighted item that can be placed on his shoulder or forearm. You don't have to go out and buy one of these items; you can easily make one by getting a large thermal sock and filling it with two bags of rice. Tie the sock at the top and lay it over the child's forearm or shoulder. Take a look at this example (*the student is using a homemade weighted lap pad in the right picture, which can also be used if you have one available*):



- 3. The Helping Hand:** It's also important for the helping hand (student's non dominant hand) to be placed on the paper for stabilization. I like to use finger puppets on the helping hand. Talk to the puppet and tell it to make sure that their kid is doing their best and forming their letters correctly. Also instruct the puppet to hold the paper down. Kids think this is so silly, but it is very effective! (See picture above)
- 4. Direction of the Paper:** When you take notes do you write with the bottom of the paper straight against your belly? NO! The majority of us write with the paper tilted at an angle. Just for kicks, go ahead and try writing with your paper completely vertical. It's awkward isn't it? You may have even noticed that you shifted your body to the right or left to accommodate the awkwardness. Although this may seem like a small change, it is very important that we are encouraging students to tilt their paper. The paper should be tilted to the same angle as the forearm of their writing hand. You may have noticed that sometimes left handed students or adults hook their arm over the top of their paper. In fact, take a look at President Obama's pencil grip at some point. If someone taught young Barack to angle the bottom of his paper towards his elbow when writing, this could have been avoided. Here is an easy solution that can be implemented for all students in a classroom. Take two pieces of masking tape or painter's tape and make an inverted L on their desk. The paper can then fit nicely into the guidelines to encourage the student to tilt the paper. Remember, this does not have to be done for an entire school year; 1-3 weeks is usually just enough time.



Remember, these four components can be addressed with everyone in a classroom, not just the kids with poor handwriting!

Please check out my webinars related to this topic:

[Sloppy Handwriting](#) or [iPads in Therapy: Handwriting](#)

<http://www.otkimwiggins.com/webinars-1>