

SEVEN Sloppy Handwriting Solutions

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There are many components that lead to legible handwriting, which can be overwhelming for many children. As parents and professionals, we need to keep the end goal in mind. Are we there to make sure that every letter is written perfectly? Actually, our goal should be to make sure that they can express themselves in a written format efficiently and legibly enough that others can read it. Handwriting is an automatic skill that many of us take for granted. When you take notes do you think about every letter before you write it? You probably don't even think about how to spell the word many times either. However, for our kids handwriting can be a labor intensive task that only causes frustration. It's best to understand the components of handwriting so that we can address each issue rather than looking at their handwriting as a "whole" problem.

There are several popular handwriting problems that seem to be causing the most illegibility. The following is a sequence of steps and techniques that I typically recommend.

1. The first step to good handwriting is having a good understanding of what the letters look like. Kids need to **VISUALIZE** the letter in their mind and then be able to recreate it using their fine motor and visual skills. For example, when observing your student writing you may notice that they make a letter "y" for the letter "g" or perhaps they make the uppercase "F" for the lowercase "f." In both cases the student may not have a good "memory" of what the actual letter looks like. It is best to practice these letters repetitively using multi-sensory techniques.
 - a. BEFORE actually writing the letters always BUILD the letters, which will help your child improve his/her spatial awareness. Try building letters out of: Wikki Stix/Bendaroos, Popsicle Sticks, Play Doh or Theraputty, Cooked spaghetti, etc. You could even make the letter out of glue and then have your child pinch Jello or Kool Aid sugar on the letters to make a "scratch and sniff" activity! Check out this fun website for other fun, multi-sensory, letter activities:
<http://www.notimeforflashcards.com/2012/05/25-alphabet-activities-for-kids.html>
 - b. Then it's time to draw letters, but not on paper yet! Draw letters with various mediums, including paint, shaving cream, pudding, chalkboards, flour, powder, Kool Aid, or JELLO mix (it is always best to put the powdery substances on a cookie sheet for less of a mess). You could also flatten some modeling clay in a shallow Tupperware container and then draw in the clay with a dowel (such as a chopstick, pencil, or lollipop stick).
 - c. Keep in mind that you should always avoid practicing letters with dot-to-dot. Why? Dot-to-dots are very visually confusing. If a child is not truly aware of what the letter is then they tend to connect the dots instead of making a fluid stroke. If a child really needs to trace in order to understand the letter formation then use a highlighter and have them trace inside the highlighted lines. This will also decrease frustration and increase success because it is easier to stay inside this line than on those tiny dots!
2. Why do kids **START** their letters at the bottom? Well, there are two theories behind this. One is that kids are very self-centered so they often start writing close to their own bodies and draw away. The second reason may actually be our fault! EEK! We often instruct kids to write their name at the top of the paper on that one single line, right? So they then put their pencil on that line and write at the top of the paper. That line encourages them to start at the bottom. A strategy for this is to actually put the line at the very top of the paper so that they touch the line and write down. Another strategy is to put the line at the bottom of the paper. In my experience most kids will touch the line and write down towards the bottom of the paper. In this case we can

also start addressing the size of their letters. As they get better you can bring that line closer to the bottom of the line, thus causing them to write smaller.

3. Letter **REVERSALS** can be a tricky thing to try to correct. Letter reversals are typical up to the end of 1st grade. Keep in mind, if a child is reversing whole words and sentences there may be a more serious problem. The best technique for addressing letter or number reversals is practice, practice, practice! Kids need to repetitively practice those problem letters/numbers so that the direction of each letter is engrained in their brains and it becomes an automatic skill. There are some excellent reversal websites and apps and I highly recommend these: [BlastOfftoReading.com \(https://goo.gl/rwN4Qo\)](https://www.blastofftoreading.com) or [LetterReflex - Overcoming Letter Reversals & Backwards Writing in Early Childhood Development & Dyslexic Children 4+ by BinaryLabs, Inc.](#)
4. Keep in mind that correcting reversals will take time, so we need to provide some compensation techniques for kids that have common letter reversal issues. The most common letters reversed are “b” and “d”. To a child these letters can be confusing because they each have a line with a bubble attached to it. It is very difficult to remember what side the bubble belongs on, so they often will just resort to writing the uppercase letter “B” or “D”. One of my favorite compensation techniques is to attach a little “cheat sheet” taped to their desk. Make sure to teach the child that if you make a lowercase “h” it will change into a “b” if you connect the bottom. Teach them that this is the “honey bee” technique: if you have honey (h) you will get a bee (b). The second technique is to remind them that “d” comes after “c” in the alphabet, so first make the letter “c” and then go up and down and it turns into a “d”.
5. **PLACEMENT** on the line causes a great amount of legibility issues. I usually call these letters “floaters” because they are usually floating above or below the line. This causes legibility issues because the letters will start to mix with the letters in the sentence above or below them. It is very important to teach kids that there are tall letters (such as b, d, f, h, k, l, and t), small letters (such as a, c, e, i, m, o, r, v, etc.), and low letters (such as g, j, p, q, y). 14 of the 26 letters of the alphabet stay between the dotted line and bottom line. When kids truly know the difference between these types of letters they seem to have better placement on the line.

In addition, students may need help with visually seeing or feeling the bottom line. I personally love raised line paper (which can be purchased from Mead or Stage Write), but it can be very expensive and difficult to find. Some make-your-own strategies are to get some glue and trace the bottom line of the paper with glue. When it hardens you will be providing sensory feedback for the kids when they hit the bottom line. Unfortunately this can be time consuming and messy. My favorite technique is to use a wikki Stix and place this on the bottom line. The kids automatically stop at the line if they need to. The Wikki Stix can then be moved and placed anywhere on the paper.

Please check out my webinars related to this topic:

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

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