

CHAPTER 5

Instructional Errors and Appropriate Practices

Common Instructional Errors

The teacher attempting handwriting instruction without guidance may make some procedural errors which would reduce effectiveness. Among these errors are:

Unsupervised handwriting practice while skills are being formed.

Lack of *immediate* feedback to correct errors.

Lack of emphasis on student analysis of errors.

No close-range models of correct letter formation.

Repeated drill of both correct and incorrect letter formation.

Misplaced emphasis on activities of limited value.

There is nothing in current research to indicate that practice alone will improve the quality of handwriting. In fact, the opposite may be true. Unsupervised, massed practice may perpetuate errors and result in a decrease in handwriting quality.

The act of handwriting involves motor movements, so feedback should be as immediate as possible as in most motor training. A delay in feedback often means that the student is allowed to practice inappropriate handwriting skills, making future instruction even more difficult.

One of the most important skills a student should acquire is the ability to compare his or her efforts with a model and to determine the changes required to conform to that model. This skill should generalize and carry over to writing activities beyond those covered in specific

handwriting lessons.

For many students, using models and demonstrations rather than verbal instructions are the primary instructional vehicles. If the teacher uses the chalkboard for demonstration, the possibility of incorrect letter production is increased. The effort required to copy from a distant model is greater than that required to copy from a close-range model. Many young students are not yet capable of copying from distant models.

Even if the student uses a workbook with a model at the top of the page, the possibility of incorrect letter production is increased if the teacher does not carefully monitor the student's writing to ensure the models at the top of the page are used to guide letter production. Typically students who are not receiving close monitoring attempt to complete the writing task as quickly as possible with little concern given to accurate letter formation. Rather than refer back to the top of the page, the student often works down the page using his or her own work and possibly incorrect efforts as a model.

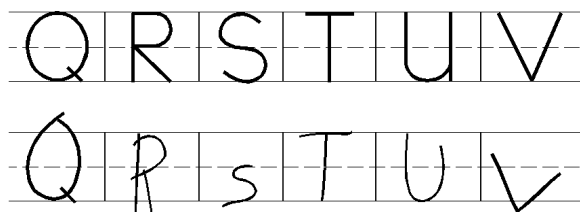
Teachers inadvertently may require the same amount of practice on letters that are done well as on those that are done poorly instead of requiring the student to concentrate only on those letters that require improvement. Therefore, the consequences for the student who is trying to improve his or her handwriting are the same as if the student was not trying at all.

As in all instructional situations, it is necessary to choose the most effective activities to achieve the instructional goal. It is critical that handwriting instruction be intense and effective since there is normally such a short period of time allocated to specific handwriting tasks. In handwriting instruction, demonstration is a more valued activity than unsupervised seatwork. Activities that stress copying are more appropriate than activities that emphasize tracing at the expense of copying.

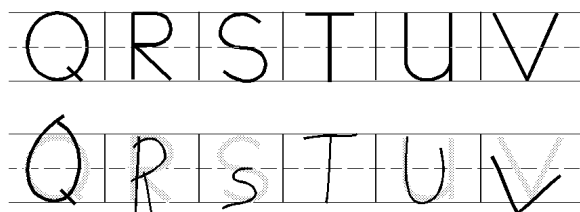
A Progressive Approximation Approach

A program was developed by Hofmeister (1969) to counteract the six procedural errors which can reduce handwriting effectiveness. The program used worksheets with a model at the top and space for several practice lines below. The models were individual manuscript or cursive letters, numerals, words, short sentences, or the student's name, address, or telephone number. The critical aspect of the program was the instructional procedure associated with use of the worksheet. The major effect of the method was to take the student through a series of progressive approximations towards more legible handwriting. The student who discriminated well and made systematic improvement did not use the entire worksheet. Attempts to always fill the page would have destroyed the proper emphasis on qualitative improvement. This procedure had four major steps:

Step 1. The student completes the first line and informs the teacher.

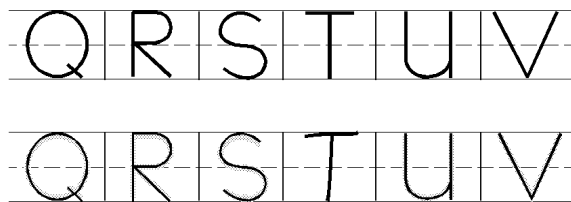


Step 2. The teacher corrects by overmarking with a "high-lighter" (light-colored felt-tip marker). Letters which represent significant improvement are not corrected and the student is not required to repeat them. The teacher tries to incorporate as much as possible of the student's efforts in his or her overmarking.

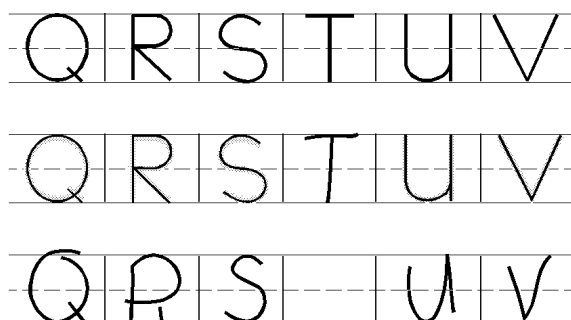


Step 3. The student erases incorrect portions of letters and traces over the teacher's overmarking. The student must trace the whole letter, not just

the incorrect portions.



Step 4. The student moves to the next line and the same procedure is followed except that the student repeats only the letters which had been corrected on the preceding line.



Program Effectiveness: This approach was used successfully with students with moderate and severe disabilities (Hofmeister, 1969). Stewart (1972) conducted a study in which she compared this progressive approximation procedure against a more general motor training approach. Stewart used forty-eight referrals from regular elementary grades and randomly divided them into the two treatment groups. Each group spent the same amount of time practicing its respective methods. The difference in handwriting performance was significant and in favor of the progressive approximation procedure.

Models: The procedures for using the worksheet assume that there is a logical progression in the type of skills modeled at the top of each worksheet. The student will typically begin with individual letters and should progress to words and then sentences as soon as possible so that the writing process is as meaningful as possible. For a complete sequence of skills, refer to pages 16 and 17.

Self-Correction Procedures: The progressive approximation method is well suited to tutorial and remedial activities when extra teacher time is available. The classroom teacher who wishes to use the technique in a developmental handwriting program with a full class should use some self-correcting procedures to reduce demands on teacher time.

Two of the most common approaches to handwriting self-correction are the use of chemical inks and templates or overlays. Where chemical inks are used, the students use a special pen to copy or trace on treated paper. When the students write outside a zone on the paper, the ink changes color. When templates are used, students write on a paper translucent enough that a template will be visible beneath the paper for self-correction purposes. After writing a line of letters, the student places the template under the line of letters and assesses the degree to which his or her efforts were consistent with the model.

Researchers (Stowitschek & Stowitschek, 1979) have determined that the use of self-correction guides increases the quality of handwriting instruction, makes more effective use of teacher time, and increases the development of students' discrimination skills.