

CHAPTER 6

Identifying Handwriting Problems

In this chapter suggestions are given for identifying specific handwriting problems and setting remedial priorities. A number of questions are posed; and in seeking answers to these questions, the teacher should cover many of the potential problem areas. In diagnosing problems, no checklist should attempt to replace insightful observation on the part of the teacher. The teacher should also be ready to look past the obvious to underlying problems; for example, it is of limited value to give specific practice in letter formation to a student who is purposely writing illegibly to mask poor spelling.

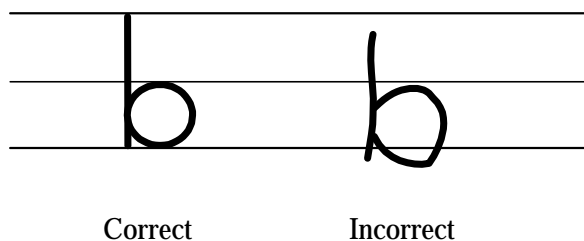
Identifying Problems

Will the student write in an acceptable manner in structured teaching sessions but not in unsupervised settings? The student who is capable of writing legibly but who has developed the habit of not writing legibly requires intervention. Intervention suggestions are discussed in Chapter 8, "Transitions."

What specific information can be obtained regarding the quality of the student's handwriting? A determination of handwriting quality can be made by taking a sample of a student's handwriting under standardized conditions. Collecting samples under standardized conditions allows the teacher to monitor the student's progress and determine the success of intervention procedures through pre- and post-test assessment. An example of standardized handwriting assessment was developed by Hofmeister (1969). This assessment allows the teacher to collect timed samples of the student's ability to name letters, copy letters from a close-range model, and write

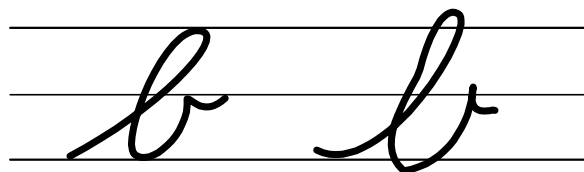
letters without a model. A standardized sample such as this allows the teacher to assess both writing quality and speed. It should be remembered that writing quality is the main concern. Speed, or rate, is a necessary skill but is secondary to quality. In assessing a handwriting sample, the following criteria should be kept in mind:

Correct letter size. The letters should touch the appropriate top, middle, and bottom lines. A letter is considered incorrectly written if the stroke of the letter extends above or below the line so that a space appears between the written stroke and the printed line.



Correct

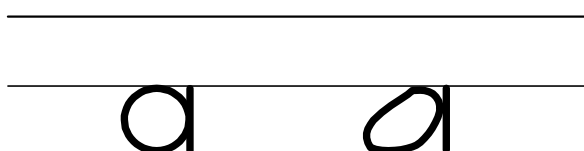
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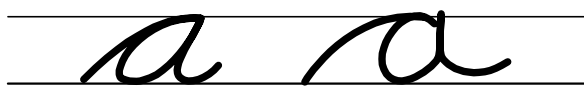
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Correct letter form. Malformation of individual letters is a major source of legibility errors.



Correct

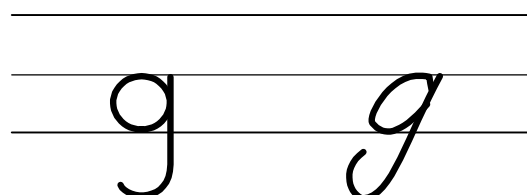
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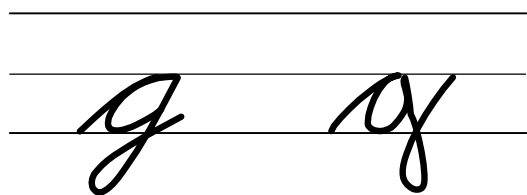
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Correct letter slope. The slope of each letter should closely resemble the slope of the model letters. Variability in slope among the letters in a word is probably more serious than sloping the letters consistently in an inappropriate direction, particularly if the consistent slope is only a mild deviation from the model.



Correct

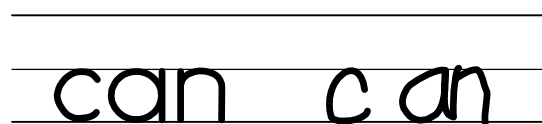
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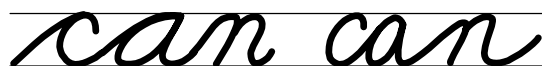
Incorrect

Correct spacing. When writing words, there should be appropriate and equal spacing between letters and words.



Correct

Incorrect



Correct

Incorrect

Rate. Speed of handwriting can be determined on a handwriting sample by asking the student to write as well and as rapidly as he can. The rate of handwriting, letters per minute (lpm), is figured by dividing the total number of letters written by the number of minutes of writing.

The best measure of an appropriate handwriting rate can be determined by finding the average rate of a sample of students in the class. Another option suggested by Mercer and Mercer (1989) would be to utilize suggested proficiency rates. Zaner-Bloser, for example, recommends the following handwriting proficiency rates:

Grade 125 lpm

Grade 230 lpm

Grade 338 lpm

Grade 445 lpm

Grade 560 lpm

Grade 667 lpm

Grade 774 lpm

What is the extent and nature of the student's present and past handwriting instruction? In

many cases a student's lack of progress is associated with a lack of intensive individual instruction. A teacher may feel that because a student participates in a group lesson for a few minutes a day, the student has received appropriate instruction.

The student who is not now receiving or who has not received systematic handwriting instruction in the past may require a different approach than the student who has received intensive handwriting instruction. It is important to identify how much time per day of *specific handwriting instruction* the student is presently receiving. Specific handwriting instruction means that specific tasks are set and supervised through the use of appropriate demonstration and immediate feedback.

After determining the extent and nature of present and past handwriting instruction, it is possible to define the severity of the problem and allocate resources accordingly. The student who has received intensive individualized instruction and still has problems will require extensive remedial resources. This student may also have serious attitudinal problems associated with handwriting instruction. A student who has not received intensive instruction may be helped to improve his or her handwriting with a less extensive instructional program.

Is the student using appropriate posture, pencil grip, and paper positions? Refer to the section "Handwriting Environment and Equipment" beginning on page 7. The degree to which this information will aid intervention will depend on the age of the student. There may be limited success in this area with the older student since incorrect handwriting habits may already be firmly established.

What resources exist for a comprehensive attack on the problem? Because handwriting problems relate to a wide range of home and school activities and are often tied to difficult-to-break habits, a comprehensive attack is needed. The involvement of the parents, other teachers (e.g., in team teaching), and possibly peers will be helpful. Chapter 7, "The Left-Handed Student," provides suggestions for involving others in the intervention process.

What is the student's level of discrimination? One of the most critical aspects of good handwriting instruction is training the student to discriminate appropriate from inappropriate procedures. The level of student discrimination can be assessed in the following way:

Ask the students to critique their own handwriting in the absence of a model. If they have difficulty, ask them to critique with a model visible, such as a template.

Ask the students to criticize themselves with the aid of prompting, e.g., "Look at your pencil grip and tell me if there is anything wrong in the way you hold your pencil." The teacher may also model appropriate and inappropriate paper positions, pencil grips, and posture and ask the students to critique.

Developing Discrimination Skills. An effective way to raise interest and develop discrimination skills was described by Westbrook (1976). She identified twelve common handwriting errors and assigned each a "disease" title. The "diseases" were Giantwryitis (very large words and letters that take up too much room); Tinywryitis (writing that is too small); Frillyosis (curlicues and fancy swirls); Slantwryitis (letters slanting the wrong way); "T"sles and Un-measles (neglecting

the dot and cross for "i" and "t"); Broken Letters (upper- and lower-case a's, d's, g's, k's, p's, and s's, upper-case B's, H's, I's, J's, and R's and lower-case f's and q's often appear incompletely written); Looptheria (unlooped letters that should be or looped letters that shouldn't be); Disjointed Writing (words are not written with one continuous motion, which results in spaces between letters).

Also refer to the progressive approximation approach described in Chapter 5, "Instructional Errors and Appropriate Practices." The procedures outlined in Chapter 5 are designed to develop and maintain discrimination skills.

Setting Priorities for Remediation

In preparing a remediation program, priorities will have to be assigned. The objective of handwriting instruction is to develop the ability to write legibly in a relaxed manner and at a useful speed. Clearly, the end product has to be legible since handwriting has value only if it serves as an accurate record. Handwriting that is legible but is produced in a time-consuming and painful manner has limited practical value.

Correct letter formation appears to be the most important factor in determining the legibility of handwriting although regularity of slant and compactness of style also make important contributions to legibility.

Time is always a factor in remediation programs. The teacher must select goals that will have the best long-term payoff for the student. Intervention methods must be selected that are intensive and of proven effectiveness.

The teacher whose instructions reflect a concern for the specific subskills of handwriting will be well prepared to prevent problems and identify those problems that do develop. The ability of a student to identify and correct his or her own errors must be assigned the highest priority. The development of this ability requires a consistent and structured effort by the teacher over an extended period of time.