

Getting Started with Early Writing

Getting the “Write” Tool, Meaningful Activities & Responding To “Scribble” Writing

(Hanser, 2010, updated 2014)

Many students with complex communication and physical challenges have had little or no meaningful opportunities to write. Given that writing is a critical and necessary component of literacy, the lack of writing experiences will hinder overall literacy development. Beginning writers may have limited understanding of what it means to be a writer. In addition, such beginning writers may write things that might not make sense and/or can't be read. For these students, it is not developmentally appropriate to work on correct spelling. The question is: when a student writes unreadable things i.e. “scribble,”- what do you teach? How do you teach it? Where do you start? Below are some ideas for getting started.

1. Before Writing-GET the WRITE TOOL!

Get the student the best and easiest way to write. You will most likely need to find an alternative way to write—you may need an “alternative pencil.” For students who have motor challenges, handwriting may NOT be the best way. Find an alternative that: 1) is physically easy; 2) results in recognizable print, 3) allows students to focus their brainpower on learning about the what and why of writing. Unfortunately, students with poor handwriting (defined as poorly formed letters, simple marks or circles) will spend too much time on the act of forming the letters—not learning about what writing is for and why you write. Don't wait for students' handwriting to get better. Using an alternative method of writing should not be a last resort. It will only delay their ability to learn about the writing process. Find an alternative pencil and if necessary—work on handwriting at a SEPARATE time. It is important to note that early writing is not always about using an alternative pencil independently—it is about the interaction around the writing. Many students who are put in front of a computer to work independently may show little interest due to their limited knowledge about what writers do. “Alternative pencils” which contain the alphabet are frequently used in combination with students AAC devices where they can generate words. Check the Center for Literacy & Disability Studies, UNC-Chapel Hill, for detailed resources about alternative pencils: www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clids

2. Before Writing-GET FOR A REAL REASON & ANYTHING GOES!

Before writing, it is essential to establish a meaningful reason. It could be something such as an addition to a meaningful classroom activity, a journal entry a picture caption, cards, emails, signs. This teaches that writers write for a purpose and it also provides a context for teaching students. Can use photos, objects, movies, remnant/memory books, academic topics, or verbal choices to help students choose a topic. Be sure to record the reason/topic before writing and use their “alternative pencil” to do so. **During** writing-There is no time limit on their writing or length; writing could be 10 seconds with 1-2 letters long or even 5 minutes with a half page of strings of letters. Whatever the student writes—it needs to be very motivating and involve fun interactions and “fireworks!” For something so new and perhaps challenging, students need to get tons of interaction and feedback.

3. After Writing-GIVE FEEDBACK

Giving praise, such as “great job,” or “awesome writing,” is important feedback, to give during and after writing. However, it does not teach students about their actual writing and the meaning of commonly seen random letters. That's where “instructional feedback” comes in. Instructional feedback simply means that you give students instruction through your feedback to the student after their writing. This is the teaching part. When trying to figure out what students' writing means, it's important to minimize 20 questions about what the writing might be and quickly move to teaching. Below are ideas for teaching points, i.e. “instructional feedback.” Choose 1 and give it when the student is done writing. Be thoughtful of time—it doesn't need to take long. It could be as long as 5 minutes or as short as 30 seconds. Gauge the interest of your student.

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Instructional Feedback Ideas (Erickson & Hanser, 2010)

- You've written a lot of letters—let's see if we can count them
- Point to one of your letters—let's see if it is in your name
- You have a lot of "c's in your writing. Let's find all of them. (or other letters)
- Pick a letter and let's find something in the room that starts with that letter
- Pick a letter and let's write a letter book with it
- Pick some letters & write a tongue twister
- Pick 3 letters and see if they are in someone's name
- Find some letters that are up on the word wall

Instructional Feedback for Students on the Run

Some students aren't able to attend to the instructional feedback listed above, so something even shorter can be helpful.

- Pick a letter and we'll clap and chant it
- Pick a letter and we'll play the action man game
- Pick a letter and I'll write it on your back
- Pick a letter and I'll whisper a secret word that starts with the letter
- Find a letter and let's see if it is in the name of a favorite song
- Find some letters that in the name of a favorite food
- Pick a row of letters and we'll play "spin and say." Spin the student once for each letter; say the letter while the student is spinning. Can do this with other OT/PT equipment, e.g., bouncing on a therapy ball, jumping on a trampoline, rocking, or swinging.

More Structured Instructional Feedback

Stealing Letters: This is useful for students writing with the full alphabet.

- Before: Student uses their remnant book to pick topic.
 - Example Topic: Going to the beach
- During: Student writes freely: aabbcuoieufdsaitt
- After: Adult gives instructional feedback
 - "You have written alot of letters! I can use some of them to write a word about beach. I'm going to steal some of your letters!!!"
 - "I can use your "a" to write the word "sand." There is sand at the beach. I like to walk on the sand."
- Partner models writing the word with the student's pencil.

****DO NOT correct the student's attempts. DO NOT have the students copy your model.

Modeled Writing: This may be useful for students using their AAC device to write with words.

1. Student sets a topic for writing
Adult supports student in topic-setting using methods described in previous sections.
 2. Adult chooses a SIMILAR topic—however not the same as student's (don't want student to copy)
Adult models writing using the student's "pencil."
While writing, adult does "think outlouds" to show what is going on inside their head.
After finished, adult reads their writing, and then puts it away.
 3. It's the student's turn to write. The adult might say, "I can't wait to see what you are going to write!"
During writing, the adult does nothing—no hints, no cues.
- ****DO NOT correct the student's attempts. DO NOT have the student copy your model.

Instructional Feedback on Steroids

Use APPs to give feedback. Explain Everything is a great App to use! Check out cheat sheet about Explain Everything on Caroline Musselwhite's fabulous website: www.aacintervention.com