

Using the AlphaBoard to Support Emergent Writing (Musselwhite, 2011)

WHAT

The AlphaBoard is a light tech alphabet display with CAPS on one side and lower case on the other. It is used for students who can direct select, to help them figure out how to spell words that they want to write. This is ONLY a scaffold for very beginning writers, and should be used for a short time, to support students in figuring out what letters to write. We have had enormous success with this scaffold, but it is crucial to know when to fade it!

Make your own AlphaBoard, by printing out the boards attached to this tip, and affixing them to black tagboard. Laminate the board, and make a cover-up, which shows only 4 letters at a time.

Note: For students who don't use direct selection, consider the Alternative Pencils developed by Gretchen Hanser.

<http://www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/available-for-purchase-1/available-for-purchase>

A	B	C	D		
E	F	G	H		
I	J	K	L	M	N
O	P	Q	R	S	T
U	V	W	X	Y	Z
I'll spell	guess	help	wait	let letter	erase

WHY

The AlphaBoard is used for students who know what they want to write (even if it is only a single word), and may even know some letters, but don't know how to encode the word. This is especially appropriate for students who constantly ask adults 'How do you spell pizza?' Use the AlphaBoard to give some support, but not too much! Here's our mantra: **Do not tell . . . help THEM spell!!!**

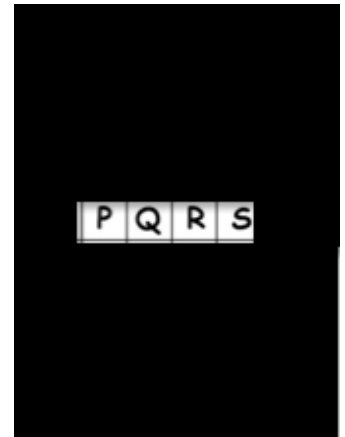
HOW

Evaluative Feedback. The key to using an AlphaBoard is giving the least possible support, and helping students figure it out. For example, this strategy was used for Desiree, a 12-year-old student in a self-contained classroom.

- a) Ask her to say the word aloud, and ask 'what do you hear first?' (If the student doesn't speak, ask her to 'say it in your head'). If she isn't able to do this, we

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- b) Give her the sound, embedded in the word: pizza /p/ - help me find the letter that makes the /p/ sound (offering her the entire alphabet).
- c) If she's not successful, use a cover-up, so she's looking at only 4 letters, as shown in the graphic. If she touches S, you say '/s/ - that would be a sizza!' We need a pizza (emphasizing the /p/ sound). Cover up the R and have her try again.
- d) Give evaluative feedback each way. Thus, if she touches P you say P . . . /p/ . . . pizza! Yes, we need the p to spell pizza!



Supporting Vowels. When students are aware of vowels, use the AlphaBoard to support vowel sounds. Do this for vowels that are relatively easy. Thus, you might help the student find /i/ in 'pig', but not in 'pizza'. Use the cover-up, turning it sideways to show only the vowel. Use the same process as for consonants.



Cautions!

- Please do NOT consider this to be writing instruction. This is only supporting students in encoding words that they want to write. Students **MUST** also have time to scribble using the alphabet!!
- Do not sound words out for students, except at the very beginning. It is better to let students guess, then give evaluative feedback, rather than to continue sounding out words.
- If students are struggling to figure out letters, that means that they need instruction in word study. Samples include: word walls, wordo (Tips: Jan & Feb, 2009); making words, and onset + rime activities. See the chapter on Working with Words in Erickson and Koppenhaver (2007)

Resources & References

Erickson, K. and Koppenhaver, D. (2007) Children with Disabilities: Reading and Writing the Four-Block Way®. Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa.

www.donjohnston.com

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