

Letter-Learning

Letters only hold true meaning when you link them to sounds.

Sure, there are some concepts that are represented by letter names (DVD, CD, USB), but the reason why letters REALLY exist, is to map the sounds of a language onto a written code. This linkage is called the **grapheme-phoneme correspondence** (and it helps us “sound out” for reading), and the reverse is called **the phoneme-grapheme correspondence** (and this helps with early spelling).

Note: A phoneme = a single speech sound

A grapheme = a letter or letters that link to a single speech sound.

This tipsheet is all about letter-learning.

FACT: It helps with literacy learning if the NAME of the letter is included in teaching. This way, learners can talk about what they are dealing with, leading to a deeper and more sophisticated knowledge of phonics.

E.g. “Hey, the letter C (see) sometimes says the /k/ sound as in “cat” but sometimes says the /s/ sound” as in “ceiling”. Without knowing letter names, the discussion above is difficult.

FACT: There are capital and lower case letters. There are also different fonts (including cursive and non-cursive).

If a student is demonstrating a difficulty with letter-learning, focus on lower case letters – and a non-cursive font. This is the type of letters most frequently seen in texts so will be the most useful to target.

There are two goals for early letter-learning:

- 1) Forming the letter quickly and correctly**
- 2) Quickly and accurately recognising a letter and linking it to its most common sound correspondence**



Forming a letter (Handwriting)

What Research Says about Handwriting – And Why it is Important

- The physical act of handwriting benefits early literacy learners because the motor movement contributes to greater recognition and memorisation of letters. Handwriting practice produces better letter recognition in students than those who solely use typing and digital devices (Longcamp, Zerbato-Poudou & Velay, 2005).
- Students who have difficulty with handwriting spend most of their energy directed towards the motor process rather than thinking creatively or developing their ideas. Poor handwriting results in less length and quality of content (Cahill, 2009; Graham, 2010; Medwell & Wray, 2007). Conversely, when handwriting skills become automated, it frees up working memory. The ability to form letters and groups of letters efficiently and automatically is necessary so that higher order cognitive skills can be allocated to the thinking and composing of text (Case-Smith, Holland & Bishop, 2011; Jones & Christensen, 1999; Medwell & Wray, 2007; 2014).
- Knowing the letter name and its sound link assists in the retrieval of the motor-program required to successfully write a given letter (Graham, 2010).

Teaching Letter Formation

It is important that correct letter formation is taught from the START. If students set up incorrect motor patterns, these habits are difficult to break.

For a student to be ready for letter formation, they need to have practised pre-writing activities.

These might include drawing lots of lines from top to bottom (like falling rain), drawing lots of anti-clockwise circles, drawing continuous waves or mountains that move in a left to right direction.

When students are ready to learn about letter formation, **teach each letter formation explicitly. Do this as you introduce** each letter and its sound-link (as per your early literacy scope and sequence).

A note on the sequence of teaching: Some resources will recommend introducing letters in “formation groups”. *For example, first work on all the anticlockwise letters (a, c, d, g, q, e, o, f, s).* This doesn’t work in with many of the sound-based sequences that recommend first introducing letters (*such as s,a,t,p,i,n*) that aim to introduce highly functional letters that will enable early encoding and decoding of common short regular words. Nevertheless, you may notice that certain students have difficulty with a certain formation group, so it is important to know about these groups and to set in place extra pre-writing tasks that target this formation and then later, extra practice within the formation groups.

*One thing that IS important, is to try and separate the introduction of letters whose shapes are very similar (such as n and u, b and d). Master one letter first.



Tips for Teaching Letter Formation

1. Model correct formation, sizing and placement of letters as you give a verbal explanation.
2. Provide lined paper.
3. If pencil grip is problematic, work on it!
4. Make the learning multisensory. Include visual, verbal and tactile cues. Observe the cues that work for each particular child.

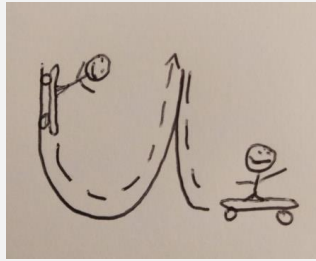
Children may benefit from:

- Feeling the shape of letters as they are traced in the correct formation (using Silishapes, Write n Wipe letters, sandpaper letters)
 - Writing the letter in the air
 - Using apps that work on letter formation (use a stylus pen to practise)
 - Tracing inside outlines of letters or over dotted lines (Provide students with a green dot for each starting point). Many education sites have fonts used in their State or Territory that can be downloaded.
 - Learning a silly verbal prompt and using it as the letter is formed. *For example, with the letter w, one of my students made up “Wally on a wave... down up down up”.* (Be wary about using too much language associated with the verbal prompts to form the letter. Some programs use rhymes that may be too complicated for some learners. Other prompts rely on first sound awareness which may be something slow to develop with some learners). * See LETTER STORIES over the page.
5. Have short daily practice sessions. These are more effective than longer weekly lessons.
 6. Some common themes should be shared with students.
 - Letters that start with lines start at the TOP and the line moves DOWN. (eg. b, t)
 - Many lower case letters share an anti-clockwise motion, that goes in the OPPOSITE direction to the writing of the word (a,c,d, g, q, o, s).

If problems persist with handwriting, PLEASE consult an occupational therapist who specialises in this area.



LETTER STORIES



Some students have a lot of difficulty learning which letter goes with a sound and/or how to form the letter. These problems are usually evident early on. If there are difficulties, it is important to intervene early. (Sometimes these students are great at sounding out and blending but their letter skills will cause them to be poor readers and writers unless something is done).

For these students start a LETTER STORY book. Focus on the lower case as these will be the most important for fluent reading & writing. For each letter, have a double-spread page in a lined scrap book. Write the letter and discuss what it looks like. It's best if students tell you what **they** think it looks like first. Together, try and think of a "story" that helps with the formation and recognition of the letter.

Examples from my students:

****u - the letter looks like the skate ramp where I go down and u-u-up (see above)***

****m- to get some speed, first go straight down on my motorbike then hoon over the two mountains***

****h – start up at the sun and go down and build Harry a hut he can hide in***

*Note: For this strategy to work, the student must have first sound awareness (e.g *Mountain and motorbike* starts with /m/).

Decorate the letter shapes with pictures that relate to the story.

Learn the letters by doing the following. The adult says the sound and the student says the Letter Story, then says it again as they form the letter. Let the student practise forming the letter again and again on the page.

Recognising a letter.

Some students struggle recognising the shape of a letter. As mentioned previously, writing the letter will help a student recognise it. Also, many of the previous tips for learning to FORM the letter will assist with recognition also. For example, the Letter Stories, when well-rehearsed assist with recognition.

Confusion between b,d and p,q is common in the first year of schooling, so please see article "Confusing b,d, p,q" on the FREE PAGE of the Pelican Talk website.



Tips for teaching letter recognition

(Teaching letter formation assists in letter recognition).

1. Match letters. Provide a focus letter (a card or a magnetic letter, for example) and have students find other letters that are the same. You can also do the same activity using a worksheet. The student must scan the page and underline – or trace, other letters that are the same.
2. Sort letters. Have piles of two letters (or three letters) and sort the letters into two different piles.
3. Three Boxes Game. Have a set of flashcards, each with a letter on it (include only letters that have been studied). Show the card. The student must say the name. If the response is immediate and correct, the card is slotted by the student into the “I know it” box. If the card is named slowly but correctly, it goes in the “I know it... but it’s slow” box. If the card is not named correctly or can’t be named – or is taking more than five seconds, it goes in the “Not yet” box. Go through a whole set of cards and then count up how many cards are in each box. The idea is to take the cards from the middle box (slow box) and practise them at home to get them faster. Also discuss the letters in the “Not yet” box. Discuss with a student why these may be tricky and think of strategies to help. Students tend to love this game.
4. Timed naming. Make a set of flashcards with a letter written on each. Go through and have a student say the name of each letter. See how many they can get through in a minute. Keep a record and try and beat the “score” the next time. Do this also with saying the sound for each letter instead of the name.

If students are having trouble... Students who have learning difficulties may vary in their performance day-to-day and even within one day. These students need MORE work in short bursts. Be aware that, for some learners, letters may be difficult to recognise if they are on cards that are presented in activities at an angle (side-on, for example).

If problems persist with letter recognition, a consultation with an optometrist – particularly a behavioural optometrist - is recommended.

Finally, a note on cursive and non-cursive fonts. Cursive fonts are introduced as the standard letter-writing font in some states. The idea is that these fonts will lead to joined cursive writing in the later years. Unfortunately, these cursive fonts include some letters that are vastly different to their non-cursive counterpart. The latter, of course, is the font used in books. **This can cause problems for some students as it adds to the number of**



letter shapes to be learnt and in these cases, I sometimes recommend focusing only on recognition and formation of a non-cursive font.

Another odd practice I see in some schools is the teacher using cursive font to write on the board, or in typed worksheets (using a downloaded cursive font). Some teachers even make flashcards for sight word practice using a cursive font. **When the purpose of the writing is that it will be READ, it is my recommendation that a non-cursive font is used.**

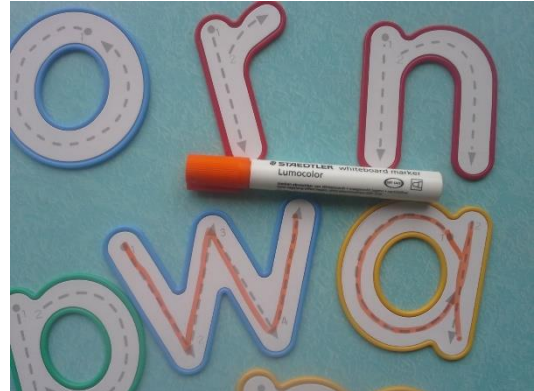
Pelican Talk's Letter Recognition and Handwriting Resources

[Write n Wipe Lower Case letters](#)

[Silishapes – Lower Case letters](#)

[Lower case magnetic letters](#)

[Lower Case Alphabet Pack](#)



Pelican Talk's Alphabet Resources (sound-based)

[The Speech Sound Set](#)

[The Singing Alphabet](#)

These products are available in our online store while stocks last or email with your purchase order.

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