



Handwriting Support Document for the 2024 South Carolina College- and Career-Ready ELA Standards

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Purpose of This Document

The purpose of this document is to provide clarity and consistency for handwriting instruction as it aligns to the *2024 South Carolina College- and Career-Ready ELA Standards*. Handwriting encompasses both print and cursive writing, and the South Carolina expectations for both are detailed in Written and Oral Communications Standard 6.1 in the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*.

Purpose of Teaching Handwriting

According to the Subjects of Instruction in the S.C. Code of Laws (S.C. Code Ann. § 59-29-15), “Teaching cursive writing [is] ... required.” Furthermore, it states teachers must “provide instruction in cursive writing to ensure that students can create readable documents through legible cursive handwriting by the end of fifth grade.” This law requires the instruction of cursive writing in South Carolina public schools and underlines the fact that handwriting instruction is an essential element of a comprehensive literacy education.

While the publishing aspect of written work has transitioned from print to computer-generated text in recent years, technology is not always readily available or accessible for the daily writing of thoughts or ideas in class. Therefore, it is vital that students learn the specific and unique ways to write in print and cursive to prepare students for college and career “in a 21st century, globally competitive society” (Saperstein Associates, 2012, p.6). Research supports handwriting instruction at an early age to develop the reading brain. Handwriting instruction also helps strengthen brain systems that play a role in reading acquisition (James, 2010; Vinci-Booher & James, 2020). In students, studies show that tracing out ABCs, as opposed to typing them, leads to better and longer-lasting recognition and understanding of letters. Writing by hand also improves memory and recall of words, laying down the foundations of literacy and learning (Longcamp, et al., 2004).

Research concludes that no fewer than a dozen distinct areas of the brain are involved in written language production (Planton, Jucla, Roux, & Démonet, 2013). Handwriting is critical to academic success and completing classwork in every academic subject. When handwriting is poor, illegible, or effortful, it can directly impact educational success. Especially in the primary grades, handwriting reinforces reading and spelling. Through explicit instruction and repeated and guided practice, students develop automaticity with writing a variety of symbols which allows higher-level skills to be easily applied (Tseng & Chow, 2000). Students must be proficient in handwriting to produce written work to successfully meet the expectations of the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*.

When students can convey thoughts on paper with automatic handwriting proficiency, they are better able to focus on the content of what they are writing, maintain focus on the prompt, and generate creative ideas. When handwriting is not automatic, the written output is often illegible, punctuated poorly, and the content can be unclear or too brief to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge.

The Developmental Phases of Writing

The development of writing follows a clear progression across a continuum of phases (Ehri, 2014). Understanding these phases provides a guide for determining where students may stand in the writing process and the steps to get them where they need to be.

Phases 1, 2, and 3: Prealphabetic (Preschoolers)

In this phase, students do not yet understand the use of letters, and there is no connection between the sounds and letters in their writing. Students are beginning to understand that there is a difference between drawing and writing. While they may recognize environmental print at this stage, they may not yet understand the alphabetic principle. They may be able to recognize their name in writing but are not yet able to state the letters in their name.

At the prealphabetic level, students move from scribbling to mock letters, and then to random letter strings (letters written on paper without any connection to the sequence of letter sounds they are meant to represent and often without space between words).

Phase 4: Semiphonetic (Late Preschool to Kindergarten)

In this phase, students are learning about letter-sound correspondence and are gaining knowledge of the alphabet and phonemic awareness. They begin recognizing familiar, high-frequency words in print and are beginning to become aware of the connections between letters to represent speech sounds. Writing includes words that are written with the most easily perceived letters in the word.

Phase 5: Phonetic (Kindergarten through Second Grade)

At this stage of writing, the words written have a close letter-sound correspondence. Spelling moves along a continuum of words being spelled phonetically without a full grasp of all phonic patterns for appropriate letter-sound sequences to represent phonemes (e.g., “larj bukit” for “large bucket”) to nearly fully complete application of phonic patterns for the correct spelling. At this stage, letter-name correspondence, letter-sound correspondence, and phonemic awareness are well-developed. Students’ reading outpaces their writing ability in that they can read more complex words than they can write (Paulson & Moats, 2018).

Phase 6: Conventional (Third Grade and Beyond)

At this phase, student writing is orthographically and grammatically correct. Most students achieve basic handwriting proficiency by the end of second grade. However, this proficiency level may vary depending on the individual. As students approach third grade, they are typically expected to have developed legible and efficient handwriting skills. At this point, students have the freedom to focus more heavily on those important academic aspects of writing. This is why the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards* shift to focus on cursive writing beginning in third grade.

Teaching Handwriting

Key aspects of handwriting instruction include pencil grip, letter formation, legibility, and metacognition.

Pencil Grip

While handwriting is often thought to be specific to the hand, it is important to appreciate that handwriting requires coordination of several parts of the body. For the fingers to execute the small fine motor movements that differentiate an “n” from an “l,” the student must first have appropriate posture and control of their “trunk” (the area of the body from the neck to the hips).

Students must also have appropriate visual perceptual skills (the ability to organize and interpret the information that we see and give it meaning) and visual motor skills (coordination of the eyes with motor control to regulate movement).

Students should be taught to hold the pencil between the thumb, index, and middle fingers with the remaining two fingers tucked into the palm. This is referred to as a “tripod” grasp. The reason this type of grasp is important is that it allows for greater efficiency in moving only the fingers when writing, as opposed to involving the whole hand, wrist, or arm. Efficient writing ensures that writing tasks can be completed neatly with limited fatigue. The tripod grasp is only one aspect of handwriting, and it is not the only type of grasp. Students should be taught this grasp, but if the student has a similarly shaped and functional grasp that allows them to write efficiently then the student should be allowed to utilize the grasp that is unique to them.

Letter Formation

The use of verbal pathways is one important teaching strategy for handwriting. Verbal cues help students learn the sequence of movements required to form a letter. When introducing handwriting, teachers can model the formation of each letter and prompt students to notice the shape of each letter, the pathways that help students learn how to make a letter, and to check to see if a letter looks correct. The high-quality instructional material adopted by your district or school may include verbal pathways as part of their curriculum.

It is helpful for students to say aloud the directions for producing a letter. For young students, teachers may use examples of sayings, rhymes, or stories which can help students to remember how each letter is formed. This verbal pathway helps them to understand the directional movement that is essential. It gives the teacher and student a language to talk about the letter and its features. Once automaticity occurs with letter production, students no longer need to use verbal pathways.

Explicit instruction for letter formation in handwriting is essential. An example of a lesson on how to form a letter may follow a routine as described below:

1. Explain the Skill/Concept
2. Model Skill with Examples
3. Model Skill with Non-Examples
4. Practice the Skill

Legibility

The following elements affect legibility: letter formation, letter spacing, alignment, size, and word spacing. Teachers should provide specific feedback to students about how they can improve the legibility of their writing. To support letter formation, alignment, and size, provide specially lined paper. For each line of print, there is a horizontal, dotted line in the middle. For problems with word spacing, students can be taught to use a space between words by placing a popsicle stick or a finger after one word and before starting another.

Metacognition

Metacognition is a strategy to support improved handwriting by teaching the student to review written work and consider whether it meets the expectations for writing. For example, students can circle all the letters they cannot recognize in their own writing and correct them before submitting. In addition, prompt students to use a student friendly handwriting evaluation checklist to review their work before submission.

Evaluation of Handwriting

Evaluation of Ability

Handwriting samples can identify what students know and are able to do regarding handwriting, thus informing teachers of the next steps for instruction. Observations of students' skills and behaviors can be made as they write. Some questions to consider are:

- What letters can students form?
- How are students forming their letters?
- How are students positioning their paper?
- Are students holding their writing tools appropriately?
- Are students able to form letters from memory without visual cues?

After collecting handwriting samples and conducting observations, instruction should be explicit and take place in short, focused sessions. In kindergarten through third grade, handwriting should be taught in short sessions several times a week with 50-100 minutes per week devoted to mastery (Graham, 2009). These lessons can often be embedded into the ELA instructional time through word work or writing. Teachers should focus ten to fifteen minutes daily on the instruction of handwriting and an additional five minutes on composition to support handwriting development (Berninger, et al., 1997).

Evaluation of Handedness

Being left-handed in a predominantly right-handed world presents unique challenges, particularly with handwriting. One strategy to determine a student's handedness is to observe the student by placing an item in front of them and asking them to pick it up repeatedly. Handedness is demonstrated when a student uses one hand 70% of the time or more (McManus, 2019).

Left-handed students often face issues like smearing ink or pencil marks and complex hand positioning, leading to discomfort and reduced legibility. To address these challenges, several teaching tips can be helpful:

- **Paper Placement:** Tilt the paper so the left corner is higher, encouraging a natural wrist position. If needed, allow for a more exaggerated slant if it improves writing comfort and legibility.
- **Cross Strokes:** Left-handed students might naturally write from right to left for cross strokes. Demonstrate and model these strokes to help them practice correctly.
- **Lefty-Friendly Materials:** Use worksheets and books that cater to left-handed writers, with models and directions positioned for easy viewing without awkward or uncomfortable hand positioning.
- **Pencil Grip:** Ensure left-handed students hold pencils correctly, which may differ from right-handed grips, to avoid wrist strain.
- **Writing Position:** Experiment with different writing positions, like writing on a vertical surface or lying on the floor, to encourage proper wrist alignment and reduce fatigue.

These strategies aim to make writing easier and more comfortable for left-handed students, supporting their development of effective writing skills.

Difficulties in Handwriting

Letter reversals are common in young students and are not necessarily an indication of a disability (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020). Reversals may occur because of inadequate memory of how to form the letters, poor understanding and connections between letter-sound correspondence, difficulties with visual processing, or other reasons. As students improve their automaticity with letter-sound correspondence and reading, reversals occur with less frequency.

As students with handwriting difficulties are developing their skills, it is important that teachers not take points off from work for a lack of neatness. Teachers can also reduce the speed with which written work is expected to be completed by allowing more time for written tasks like notetaking or providing a partially completed notes set where students fill in details. Students can be allowed to begin assignments or projects early, or teachers can build time into a student's day for them to catch up on handwritten tasks or assignments.

Another way to support the success of students with handwriting difficulties is to reduce the volume of written work. This can be accomplished by allowing the student to dictate some assignments, tests, or parts of tests using a scribe. Finally, allowing students to use a variety of writing tools, methods, and instruments can support their success in handwriting across disciplines. Allow the use of a preferred line width of paper or allow the use of graph paper for math writing assignments. Allow the use of a preferred pen or pencil as well as grips at the end of the pencil. These supports can allow students with handwriting difficulties to access all grade-level assignments.

Grade Band Support

Kindergarten through Second Grade

By the end of kindergarten, it is expected students will be able to print all uppercase and lowercase letters. The indicator that outlines more specifically those expectations can be found in ELA.K.C.6.1 in the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*.

ELA.K.C.6.1 Print all uppercase and lowercase letters, focusing on pencil grasp, letter formation, legibility, and pacing; use appropriate spacing for letters, words, and sentences.

By the end of first grade, it is expected students will be able to print all uppercase and lowercase letters with more automaticity than in kindergarten. The indicator that outlines more specifically those expectations can be found in ELA.1.C.6.1 in the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*.

ELA.1.C.6.1 Print all uppercase and lowercase letters and use appropriate spacing for letters, words, and sentences.

By the end of second grade, it is expected students will be able to print all uppercase and lowercase letters with more automaticity than in kindergarten and first grade. The indicator that outlines more specifically those expectations can be found in ELA.2.C.6.1 in the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*. This is an extension of the handwriting expectations from first grade, intended to be assessed with increasing fluency and volume of writing.

ELA.2.C.6.1 Print all uppercase and lowercase letters and use appropriate spacing for letters, words, and sentences.

Terms Defined from Indicator

Term	Definition
Formation	How the student goes about forming letters, beginning with straight lines, and moving on to curved lines.
Legibility	How clearly letters are formed and spaced.
Pacing	Deals with the use of correct pencil grasp and press to help students sustain an appropriate writing pace.
Pencil Grasp	The index finger and thumb hold the pencil against the middle finger.

Often, digit strength must be developed in kindergarten students to produce fluent, legible handwriting. Strength training for small digits can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Students can improve their fine motor skills by squeezing a squish ball, building with small block pieces, buttoning and opening/closing snaps on clothing, picking up small objects with tweezers and tongs, and doing jigsaw puzzles. This fine motor work can help develop the digit strength needed for handwriting success.

Order of Teaching the Formation of Letters

There are options for the order in which to teach students the formation of letters. Implementing this concept helps students categorize letters by shape, as well as practice recurring letter formations with like-shaped letters. These decisions should always be based on the letters that the students know and those they need to know, as well as the curriculum adopted at the district and school level. Instruction around the formation of letters also supports the instruction and mastery of ELA.K.F.3.1 that requires students to identify, name, and form all upper and lowercase letters with automaticity. This is the first instance of “form” as a skill pertaining to handwriting.

Teaching letters with similar formations is one suggested method of teaching handwriting because once students learn the formation or features of one letter, it is easily transferable to other letters with similar formations.

Examples of letters with similar formations:*

Letters starting by pulling back (counterclockwise)	a, c, d, g, q
Letters you start by pulling down	i, j, k, l, t
Letters you pull down, then go up and over	b, h, m, n, r
Straight lines	E, F, H, I, L, T
Lines and curves	B, D, J, P, R, U

*This is not an exhaustive list of all letters, but those letters that have similar formations.

Spacing for Letters, Words, and Sentences

Spacing is an essential skill for legible handwriting. Spacing between letters is taught after students are taught to properly form letters. As students become more confident readers, they begin to develop a sense of where one word ends and the next word begins. Exposure to print builds this awareness. Therefore, this awareness should coincide with the ability to leave appropriate space between words and sentences when writing.

There are a variety of strategies to support spacing instruction in handwriting. If students are not leaving adequate space between letters, highlight spaces on lined paper for the proper placement of letters within words. If students are not leaving adequate spaces between words and sentences, allow students to place a finger or popsicle stick in between words as they are writing or review a piece of produced writing and model placing a smiley face in the space between each sentence. Allow students to practice this strategy with their own writing. One could read a model text aloud to students where the author did not include spaces between words and sentences. Model how the text sounds confusing without the use of spacing between words and sentences.

Third through Fifth Grade

Instruction in cursive handwriting can be successfully accomplished in short, 15-minute sessions 3-5 times per week, similarly to the expectations outlined for earlier grades. By the end of third grade, it is expected that students will be able to write in cursive all uppercase and lowercase letters. The indicator that outlines more specifically those expectations can be found in ELA.3.C.6.1 in the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*.

ELA.3.C.6.1 Write in cursive all uppercase and lowercase letters.

By the end of fourth grade, it is expected students will be able to write in cursive fluently and legibly. The indicator that outlines more specifically those expectations can be found in ELA.4.C.6.1 in the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*.

ELA.4.C.6.1 Demonstrate fluent and legible cursive writing skills.

By the end of fifth grade, it is expected students will be able to write in cursive fluently and legibly. The indicator that outlines more specifically those expectations can be found in ELA.5.C.6.1 in the *2024 SC CCR ELA Standards*. This is an extension of the handwriting expectations from fourth grade, intended to be assessed with increasing fluency and volume of writing.

ELA.5.C.6.1 Demonstrate fluent and legible cursive writing skills.

When beginning cursive writing instruction, it is important to teach students about paper placement. Paper may need to be slanted to the left or right depending on handedness to allow for proper cursive writing. It is also suggested to teach lowercase letters first so students can quickly begin forming words in cursive. By teaching lowercase letters first, students can easily incorporate cursive writing into lessons like word work and spelling. Practice can continue in response to reading by writing in cursive.

Cursive letters are also often taught in a sequence related to the four approaches to the stroke. The four approach strokes in cursive are:*

Letters starting by pulling back (counterclockwise)	a, c, d, g, q
Swing up and stop	i, t, p, s, r, j, u, w
Push up and curve down	n, m, y, v, x, z
Push over and up	a, d, g, o, c, q
Curve up and loop	l, f, h, k, b, e

*This is not an exhaustive list of all letters, but those letters that have similar formations.

Connecting letters in cursive is an integral part of learning to compose in cursive writing. If cursive letters do not connect properly, one letter can look like a different letter. Connecting the letters requires practice and instruction. Fluidity of writing components include writing speed and rhythm, paper position, and experience with cursive writing (i.e., practice).

To support cursive letter connections, teachers can begin with explicit instruction of connecting letters using “i,” “e,” “u,” and “n,” as these are common letter connections in written expression. Teachers can also begin instructing students to connect letters in cursive using combinations of two or three letters. This develops precision in cursive writing connections before tackling longer, trickier words.

Finally, baseline control is another beneficial practice for connecting letters in cursive handwriting. Most of the letters connect at the baseline and a writer will slide into the next letter. The pencil moves along the baseline as it moves up to connect to the next cursive letter. Focusing a writer’s attention on the placement of these connections increases their success with clear, precise handwriting.

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