

# Completing Writing Activities with Young Children

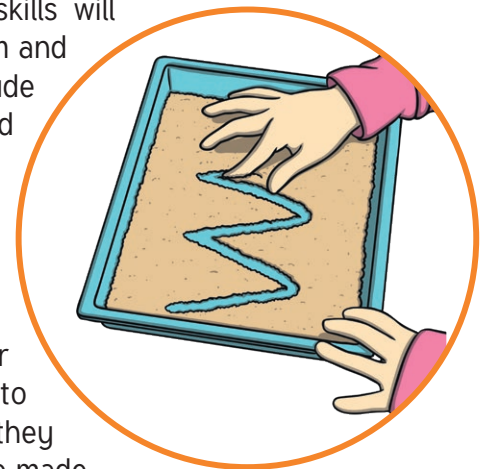
In the early years, young children will be developing many skills, which will help them learn to write. For example, they will be learning to hold and control a pencil, create marks to communicate meaning, about letter sounds and about words and sentences.

Children will initially be expected to write individual words or short labels and captions. Encourage them to write their name on their creative projects, write labels to describe a model they have made or write short messages in a greetings card to a friend or family member. They will then progress to writing sentences. It is useful to get children to think about and say what they would like to write before they begin writing. Ask children to tell you what they would like to write and repeat it back to them. You could count the words and then use other resources and techniques to split up and write each word in turn.

## Fine Motor Skills and Mark Making

Learning to hold and control a pencil can be a difficult skill for young children to master. It requires children to develop the muscles in their arms, hands, and fingers. These skills will frequently be presented in other activities in an early years classroom and are often called 'fine motor skills' or 'finger gym' activities. These include activities such as using playdough, threading and lacing activities and using simple tools, such as large tweezers. These types of activities will be essential in aiding children's writing skills.

Mark making is also an important step in learning to write. Children need to be given opportunities to create marks (e.g. lines, dots and shapes) using a variety of tools. For example, they may enjoy using their fingers to create patterns in a shallow tray of sand, or try finger painting activities to create pictures and patterns, or using a crayon to draw pictures. An important step is asking children to tell you what they have drawn or written - this attaches meaning to the marks they have made.



## Pencil Grip

When completing writing activities with young children, you may find that they swap hands to hold the pencil. This is perfectly normal, young children will be working out which hand is their dominant hand. They may also change how they grip the pencil. For example, they may grip a pencil using their palm and wrap all of their fingers around their hand or they may use their fingertips to hold the pencil. They will need to be shown how to hold a pencil and support to develop a comfortable grip. One way of doing this is the 'nip, flip and grip' technique. Lay a pencil on the table with the point facing towards the child. Ask the child to nip the pencil between their thumb and forefinger. Then ask them to flip the pencil over so that it rests on their hand and then grip the pencil.

Letter sounds, rather than letter names, are taught initially. For example, children would learn the sound 't' rather than the letter name 'tee'. 'Pure sounds' should be used when children are listening to and saying sounds. This means, where possible, the 'uh' or 'er' sounds after letters should not be said, e.g. 'f' should be pronounced as 'ffff' rather than 'f-uh' or 'f-er'. Don't worry if you are unsure - check with a teacher if you are not sure about how to pronounce any of the sounds.

Children will be taught to say, hear, identify, read and write the different sounds. Here is the sequence of letter sounds taught throughout early years.

Phase 2: s, a, t, p, i, n, m, d, g, o, c, k, ck, e, u, r, h, b, f, ff, l, ll, ss.

Phase 3: j, v, w, x, y, z, zz, qu, ch, sh, th, ng, ai, ee, igh, oa, ar, or, ur, ow, oi, ear, air, ure, er.



Encourage children to listen carefully as you say a word. As you speak, emphasise each sound in the word - splitting the words up into sounds for children to hear more easily, e.g. 'b-u-ck-e-t'. Don't worry if children don't identify all the sounds in a long word - just encourage them to write the sounds they can hear. Repeat longer words a few times, emphasising different parts of the word each time. You could use a sound mat to show children how to write the sounds they identify.

## Tricky Words

Some words are not able to be sounded out using phonics, such as the words 'the', 'to' and 'said'. These words are often called tricky words. When a child wants to write one of these tricky words, it is often helpful to point to them on a word mat to show them how to write the word and why it is tricky. Alternatively, they can also be encouraged to write the sounds they can hear in the word, meaning, for example, that the word 'said' maybe written as 'sed'.



## Top Tips

As you work together, give the children lots of praise and positive feedback. Encourage children to have a go at sounding out new words or to write the sounds they can hear. Encourage them to hold the pencil in a comfortable grip, add finger spaces between words and put full stops at the end of their sentences. Encourage them to read what they have written to you. You may like to add some short annotations to their completed written work to aid the teacher in reading it. Praise the children's efforts and thank them for working with you. Ask the teacher about reward systems you could use with the children, such as stickers.



## Punctuation



Once children move on to writing sentences, they will learn about simple punctuation. Remind them to leave a small space between words - often called a finger space. Try prompting the children to place their finger onto their page after a written word as a reminder to leave a space before writing their next word. Also, prompt the children to draw a small dot as the full stop at the end of the sentences, to show they have finished their sentence.

## Some Questions to Ask

This is not an exhaustive list, but it could be useful when thinking of questions to ask while completing writing activities with young children. Trying choosing just a couple of questions to ask.

- Can you show me how to hold the pencil?
- Can you write your name?
- What are you going to write?
- What sounds can you hear in the word...?
- How do we write the letter sound...?
- Can you write the word...?
- Can you put a finger space before the next word?
- What do you need to remember at the end of the sentence?
- Can you tell me what you have written?