

Teaching Left-Handers to Write

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Introduction

Teaching a child to write with his or her left hand is *not* just the opposite from teaching how to write right-handed. Languages that are written left-to-right, like English, are more difficult to write with the left hand -- a right-hander writes away from his body and pulls the pencil, while a left-hander must write toward his body and push the pencil.

If a left-handed child is only permitted to write with the left hand but not *taught* how to write, the child may develop a needlessly uncomfortable, inefficient, slow, messy way of writing that will be a lifelong hardship. Therefore, it is especially important for parents and teachers to understand how to teach left-handed children to write correctly.

The most important factors are: the position of the writing paper, the position of the arm and wrist, and the grip on the writing instrument.

The "hooked" style of writing that one often sees in left-handers (see [Figure 1](#)) results from lack of proper training -- this is *not* how a left-hander should write. Left-handers adopt this posture because they are trying to see what they are writing and not smear what they have just written with their hand, while maintaining a right-slant to their letters -- these problems are better overcome by paper positioning and pencil grip (with the understanding that a right-slant is not mandatory, that upright or left-slanted letters are acceptable) ([REFS](#): Clark 1959:7; Szeligo et al. 2000).



Figure 1. "Hooked" writing

Position of Paper

For a left-handed child, the paper should be positioned left of the child's midline, and tilted so that the top right corner of the paper is closer to the child than the top left corner (see [Figure 2](#)). The paper is placed so that the child's hand is to the left of, and away from, the body at the start of the writing line, and ends the line with the hand closer and in front of the body or slightly to the left of midline. The angle that the paper is tilted will vary according to individual children -- the important thing for the child to remember is to keep the arm perpendicular to the bottom of the page or slate writing tablet (see [Figure 2](#)). The wrist should be straight (not bent). And the writing hand should be *below* the writing line.

Teach left-handed children to remember three things as they learn to write :

- **Grip the pencil ~ 2.5 cm (1 inch) to 3.8 cm (1.5 inches) from the point,**
- **Tilt paper so that arm is at right-angle to bottom edge of paper / slate**
(and the top right corner of page is toward writer),
- **Write with the hand below the writing line and the wrist straight.**

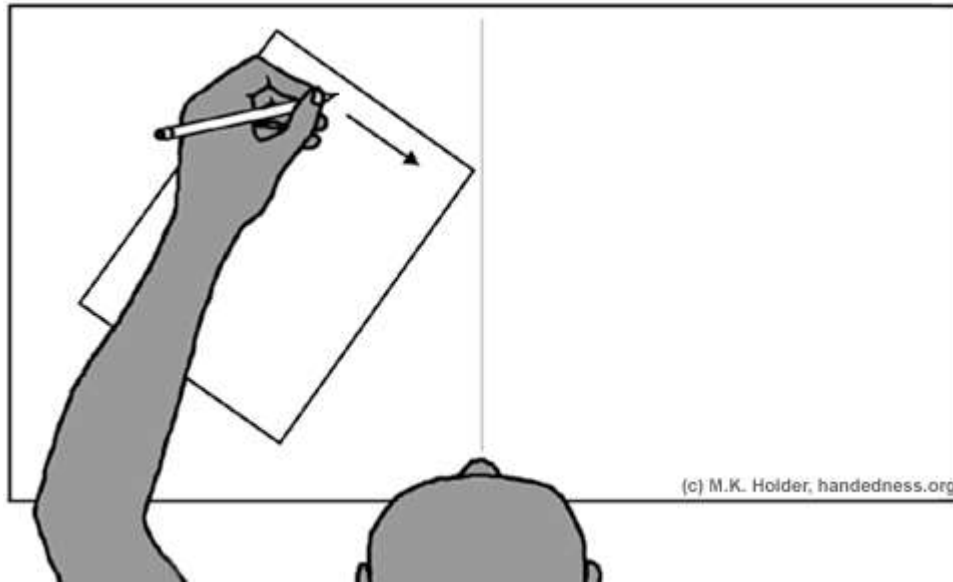


Figure 2. Proper posture, paper position, and grip for left-handed writing

Because the act of writing involves the whole arm, tilting the paper affords a writer the most efficient and comfortable position for the wrist, elbow, and shoulder. Some teachers have found it helpful to let the left-handed child start writing, or practice writing, on a chalkboard mounted on the wall (or on the ground, using a stick in soft, smooth soil). This allows the child to move the entire arm freely, keep the wrist straight, and not worry about seeing or smudging the writing, making it easier for the child to concentrate on learning to form the figures (REFS: Gardner 1945; Clark 1959).

Pencil / Pen Grip

Left-handed writers need to grip the writing instrument far enough back from the point to be able to see what is being written, and also to not smear what has just been written. Teachers and researchers recommend the child grip the pencil around 2.5 cm (1 inch) to 3.8 cm (1.5 inches) from the point (REFS: Gardner 1945; Cole 1955; Clark 1959).

If the child tends to hold the pencil too close to the point, the teacher can make a mark on the pencil at the right distance, to remind the student where to grip the pencil. The wrist should be fairly straight, not bent sharply. A common problem for all young children learning to write is gripping the pencil too tightly, making writing tense and tiresome. Usually the child learns to relax his or her grip as writing develops, but teachers can remind students to hold the instrument gently. Frequent practice and letting the child write large letters, also helps children learn to relax their grip. The child will tend to naturally reduce the size of the writing as s/he attains better motor control (Clark 1959).

Mirror Writing

Mirror writing is writing left-to-write languages (like English) backwards AND also reversing the letters so that the writing only appears normal when held up to a mirror and the reflection viewed (see [Figure 3](#)).

This is an example of mirror writing
 Can you read this?

Figure 3. Example of Mirror Writing

Some people are able to write quite easily and naturally this way (for instance, the Italian inventor and artist Leonardo da Vinci famously kept his notebooks in mirror script). If a left-handed child has a tendency to mirror write, the teacher can help him or her overcome this by making sure the child always begins writing on the left side of the page. This can be done by placing a mark on the left side of child's paper showing which side to start writing from. If the mirror-writing persists, the teacher can try other strategies to help the child establish the correct direction and orientation of the letters. For instance, the child can be instructed to slowly and carefully copy text from a correctly written page. If the child has trouble even copying text, the teacher can have the child trace over correctly written words (in either case, remember to mark the starting point on the left side).

How to Correct Bad Writing Habits

If a child has already started writing the wrong way, a parent or teacher may wish to re-educate the beginning writer. Cole (1955) reported good results re-training young children after a period of six weeks. To be successful, parents and teachers must agree on the process and work closely with the child. During the re-training period, the child should be excused from all regular classroom written work -- otherwise, s/he will revert back to the old style because, for the moment, it is faster than writing the right way. Explain to the child that you're going to show him or her how to write easier, and that it will take a few weeks to master. Demonstrate the proper grip, paper position, arm and wrist position, etc. Work closely with the child for short (10 minutes to start) but frequent (at least once a day) practice sessions. Remember that it is hard to break old habits and replace them with new ones, and that this will be a temporary strain for the child. Therefore, the child should do no writing other than the practice sessions for two or three weeks, or until s/he has become so comfortable with the new writing style that s/he uses this spontaneously. Be sure to give the child lots of encouragement and support during this difficult period.

References Cited

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