

Expert Perspective: From Targeting Handwriting Research to Practice. Jane Pinsker's Vision.

- **How did your background/experience shape your vision for what handwriting instruction should look like?**

When very young children experiment at being writers, imitating the writing behaviour they see modelled from the people around them, they do this by scribbling. Without even realising what they are doing, they are practising the movements and formations needed to produce the correct letter shapes. Hidden in the straight lines, clockwise and anti-clockwise movements of natural scribble patterns, the building blocks for most of our letters are to be found.

For me, many years of teaching children in pre-school and the early years of primary school reinforced the idea that writing instruction should move from the naturally produced scribble patterns of early childhood to letter shapes using those same forms. To teach any other method would fight against the organic nature of writing.

My experience also told me, though, that children did not just organically know how to write the actual letters. For them to know and understand the mechanics of handwriting, there needed to be systematic, explicit teaching of letter shapes through modelling, followed by extensive practice with scaffolding suited to the writing experience of the student.

About the pedagogical approach:

- **What makes your approach to handwriting instruction different from other programs available?**

Learning to handwrite well is a complex, coordinated interaction between motor and visual systems. Knowing how to form letters fluently, neatly, and automatically develops self-confidence, resilience, and cognition. It allows you, as the writer, to focus on your ideas, the problem at hand, and your purpose for writing. I believe there is great power in handwriting.

Children do not develop the good handwriting habits needed for sustained writing without having strong fine motor skills and a clear understanding of how letters are formed.

Targeting Handwriting is a comprehensive, adaptable program for the development of strong fine motor skills and fluent letter formation. It enables students to develop the skills and habits necessary for a lifetime of sustained, legible handwriting and all the benefits that flow from this.

The program begins with fine motor skill development and pattern practice in the early years before moving from simple to more complex letters. Through explicit teaching and modelling, followed by lots of student practice, the program systematically progresses from foundation to cursive script, ultimately leading to the development of an individual writing style. Consistent verbal and visual cues are used, which aid in handwriting confidence. Each book in the series contains purposeful, sequential, and varied activities, engaging and relevant illustrations, and a clear development of skill acquisition.

The activities in both the student workbooks and the TRBs contain facts and ideas that pique the interest of young learners while developing fluency and automaticity in handwriting. The books are filled with Stephen Michael King's timeless illustrations. His lively and enchanting Australian animals, quirky mermaids and adventurous explorers, among others, support and enhance the appeal of the activities.

- **Can you walk us through your philosophy on how children best learn to write?**

Firstly, children need to develop strength and dexterity in the muscles needed for writing, best achieved through lots of play-based fine motor activities. Clear and explicit teacher modelling using visual and verbal cues and consistent terminology is vital when introducing each letter. Children then need to try it for themselves with ample opportunities to practise, using a variety of writing implements and on a variety of writing surfaces, with varying degrees of scaffolding and support.

Targeting Handwriting student books provide this scaffold for the learner writer; patterns to practise the directions and shapes of the letters, tracking with starting points and directional arrows to guide and support, tracing to allow a little more independence, and then finally opportunities to write independently with only a starting point and baseline.

- **What were the "must-have" features you knew you wanted to include from the beginning?**

There were a number of key features that I saw as critical to my approach to teaching handwriting.

I wanted a thorough, varied, and fun program of fine motor skill activities to develop strength and flexibility in arms, wrists, and fingers. I can't stress enough the importance of well-developed fine motor skills. They are *life-long* and *life-necessary* skills which are as vital for everyday living as they are for good handwriting. Imagine never being shown how to tie your shoelaces, open a jar, or hold scissors correctly. And then what if you never had opportunities to practise those skills? Imagine never developing the strength in your hands to squeeze a tomato sauce bottle, or in your wrists to hold a frying pan, or in your fingers to peg out the washing. Developing precision, co-ordination, and strength in the small muscles of the fingers and hands enables these tasks and many others to be carried out successfully. To form letters legibly and consistently, the same precision, co-ordination, and strength in small muscles is needed. Practising and improving fine motor skills can improve handwriting.

Targeting Handwriting needed to have lots and lots of patterning practice to enable direction and the basic letter forms (downstrokes, clockwise and anticlockwise shapes) to become second nature.

Right from the beginning, I wanted a device for showing letter placement, an aid to help when orienting one letter next to another on a line. After some experimentation, the seahorse character proved to be the obvious choice, with its conspicuous head, its rounded body, and its distinctive tail. It became a friendly guide for young learners to dive safely into the ocean of handwriting.

Handwriting, like so many other skills, has to be taught explicitly. I've always taught handwriting by firstly modelling the letter formation, before getting the children to try it for themselves, with and without a supportive scaffold, such as tracking or tracing. Therefore, the Targeting Handwriting program had to include modelled, guided, and independent letter formation activities.

I also wanted each page of the student books and the Teacher Resource Books to have as many opportunities to practise the letter as possible, with lots of examples to track, trace, and write independently.

- **How did you decide on the progression and sequencing of skills throughout the series?**

I wanted a thorough and comprehensive approach to handwriting lessons, where teacher modelling was followed by hands-on student practice using developmentally appropriate written activities that guided and supported correct letter formation.

Once all the letters have been introduced during the initial year of school and the formations and movements involved have become familiar, the student books that follow are designed to reinforce this knowledge, develop automaticity through practice and repetition, and to build upon this foundation by introducing new skills.

New skills in the Year 1 books include: using lines to aid the development of consistently sized letters and practising letters in words, sentences, and as capital letters.

New skills in the Year 2 books include: opportunities to replicate letters, words and sentences with only lines as scaffolds to develop independence when writing (and the introduction of entries and exits in the Queensland books).

New skills in the Year 3 books include: practising letters, words, and sentences with less and less scaffolding, the introduction of narrower lines, and the introduction of entries, exits, and joins.

New skills in the Year 4-6 books: practising cursive script and the development of a fluent and independent writing style.

- **What role do specific features - like visual cues, practice formats, etc. play in your overall approach?**

Using the visual props, such as the seahorse, apple, frog, and fish, is a really simple way of demonstrating the basic movements contained in letters. The integration of stories and language accompanying these movements provides the essential cues students need to write the letters independently.

The Targeting Handwriting program is designed in a structured and systematic way, with each lesson following a similar format. Each lesson begins with a teacher-led modelling of the letter, explicitly demonstrating its correct formation using both visual and verbal cues. Then student practice follows, again, supported by verbal cues, on paper, mini whiteboards, or some other writing surface. The final step is for the student to have lots and lots of practice writing the letter using the workbook. Consistent verbal cues are important here, too, enabling students to internalise the process and giving them the model to develop their own cues for independent writing.

In the first year of school, an added component of each lesson is a short fine motor activity as a warm-up for the muscles in hands, wrists, and fingers, before the sequence of instruction given above begins.

- **How did you test and refine the materials during development?**

When the opportunity came up to work on the Targeting Handwriting series, I already had a pretty clear idea of what did and didn't work to engage students in handwriting lessons. Over many years of teaching experience, I have developed a lot of resources for use in my classroom that formed the basis of this series.

I had been using variations of the props (seahorse, apple, etc) for a long time in my classroom and knew they worked to visually support the terminology I was using and the handwriting movements I was modelling. I initially tried a few other animals with long tails but in the end, I settled on the seahorse because most children are intrigued by a seahorse (that it's the male that carries the eggs until they hatch into live babies, that it's a fish, that it swims with its body held upright) and the sea theme that runs throughout most of the series (K-4) provided a rich mine of illustration possibilities. It helps anyone to learn, of course, if they can be easily engaged – and who doesn't like a seahorse? Plus, my husband is a marine biologist!

As for the workbooks, I knew I wanted them to contain a lot of practice examples. As a teacher, I was often frustrated by the commercial series available. They contained too few practice activities and too much empty space or illustrations for 'colouring in'. Time is so precious in the classroom; I wanted to make every page count. I did not want the books to be 'busy work'. So, I started to make my own worksheets that eventually led to the ones included in the workbooks and TRB.

- **What do you hope teachers will find most valuable about using this series?**

The Targeting Handwriting series can augment the practice students do on whiteboards or paper.

Together with explicit teaching, modelling of letters and the use of consistent terminology, the workbooks provide another opportunity to revisit, revise and practise both letter sounds and names. This will ensure fluency and ultimately automaticity. Without having to think about the mechanics of forming each letter correctly as they write it, the writer will have greater available mental space to compose their thoughts and ideas.

- **How do you envision this fitting into different classroom contexts or teaching styles?**

Whilst initially designed for students in their first year of school to progress from less difficult to more difficult letters, with the letters grouped according to the three main patterns (downstroke, clockwise or hopping pattern, anti-clockwise or wave pattern), there are other ways to implement the program. Because all the letters are based on natural scribble patterns, it is not difficult to alter the order of instruction to take other priorities into account. For example, if you follow a Synthetic Phonics approach, it is easy to adapt the program to reflect this, simply by completing the pages in the order of letter-sound introduction.

We all understand that writing is an essential, compelling form of communication. Handwriting plays an important part in the effectiveness of our written communication, even if we're just writing a shopping list or scribbling down a telephone number.

It is all too easy to underestimate the power of handwriting in this increasingly digital world. To me, fluent, legible handwriting should be seen as a super power. Like a fingerprint, it is part of your unique identity. But more than this, research is now showing us the many ways proficiency in handwriting competency impacts memory and learning, the acquisition of reading skills and the ability to write complex texts. I think handwriting is an enduring and vital skill. Long may it continue.