

Writing Readiness (Pre-Writing) Skills

What are writing readiness (pre-writing) skills?



Pre-writing skills are the fundamental skills children need to develop before they are able to write. These skills contribute to the child's ability to hold and use a pencil, and the ability to draw, write, copy, and colour. A major component of pre-writing skills are the pre-writing shapes. These are the pencil strokes that most letters, numbers and early drawings are comprised of. They are typically mastered in sequential order, and to an age specific level. These strokes include the following strokes: |, —, O, +, /, square, \, X, and Δ.

Why are writing readiness (pre-writing) skills important?

Pre-writing skills are essential for the child to be able to develop the ability to hold and move a pencil fluently and effectively and therefore produce legible writing. When these skills are underdeveloped it can lead to frustration and resistance due to the child not being able to produce legible writing or to 'keep up' in class due to fatigue. This can then result in poor self esteem and academic performance.

What are the building blocks necessary to develop writing readiness (pre-writing)?

- **Hand and finger strength:** An ability to exert force against resistance using the hands and fingers that allows the necessary muscle power for controlled movement of the pencil.
- **Crossing the mid-line:** The ability to cross the imaginary line running from a person's nose to pelvis that divides the body into left and right sides.
- **Pencil grasp:** The efficiency of how the pencil is held, allowing age appropriate pencil movement generation.
- **Hand eye coordination:** The ability to process information received from the eyes to control, guide and direct the hands in the performance of a task such as handwriting.
- **Bilateral integration:** Using two hands together with one hand leading (e.g. holding and moving the pencil with the dominant hand while the other hand helps by holding the writing paper).

- **Upper body strength:** The strength and stability provided by the shoulder to allow controlled hand movement for good pencil control.
- **Object manipulation:** The ability to skilfully manipulate tools (including holding and moving pencils and scissors) and controlled use of everyday tools (such as a toothbrush, hairbrush, cutlery).
- **Visual perception:** The brain's ability to interpret and make sense of visual images seen by the eyes, such as letters and numbers.
- **Hand dominance:** The consistent use of one (usually the same) hand for task performance, which allows refined skills to develop.
- **Hand division:** Using just the thumb, index and middle finger for manipulation, leaving the fourth and little finger tucked into the palm stabilizing the other fingers but not participating.

How can I tell if my child has problems with writing readiness (pre-writing) skills?

If a child has difficulties with writing readiness they might:

- Have an awkward pencil grasp.
- Have difficulty controlling a pencil for colouring, drawing or writing.
- Show a tendency to use their whole hand to manipulate objects rather than just a few fingers.
- Have poor endurance for pencil based activities.
- Display messy and/or slow handwriting.
- Have difficulty staying within the lines when colouring.
- Apply inappropriate pressure to the paper for pencil based activities (either too heavy and frequently breaks the pencil, or too light and 'spidery').
- Have poor upper limb strength (weak shoulders).
- Have difficulty coordinating both hands together for two handed tasks.
- Have poor hand-eye coordination.
- Be verbally skilled but has difficulty showing this on paper (i.e. writing, drawing or colouring).
- Not meet the pre-writing expectations outlined below.

Age	Pre-writing expectation
1 -2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Randomly scribbles • Spontaneously scribbles in vertical/horizontal and/or circular direction • Imitates a horizontal/vertical/circular direction
2 - 3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imitates a horizontal line • Imitates a vertical line • Imitates a circle
3 - 4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies a horizontal line • Copies a vertical line • Copies a circle • Imitates + • Imitates / and \ • Imitates a square
4 -5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies a + • Traces a line • Copies a square • Copies a / and \ • Imitates X • Imitates Δ • Grasps pencil in writing position

5 -6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies X • Copies Δ • Recognises between a big and small line or curve
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What other problems can occur when a child has writing readiness (pre-writing) skill difficulties?

When a child has writing readiness difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- **Behaviour:** They may avoid or refuse to participate in pencil and other fine motor tasks.
- **Self esteem:** when they compare their work against that of their peers.
- **Academic performance:** They find it more difficult and be slower completing these tasks, contributing to slower skills acquisition (e.g. learning to write their name, or draw a person).
- **Self care:** The ability to (age appropriately) master independence in everyday life activities (such as dressing, eating, cleaning teeth, brushing hair).
- **Avoidance:** Preferring to get others to perform fine motor tasks for them under their direction, rather than actually doing themselves (e.g. "Daddy, draw me a house", or "build me a rocket", with refusal to do it themselves).

What can be done to improve writing readiness (pre-writing) skills?

- **Hand dominance:** Determine and reinforce the dominant hand use in precision task performance.
- **Experience:** Encourage participation in activities that involve grasping and manipulating small objects such as drawing, puzzles, opening containers, threading or other related tasks.
- **Poking and pointing:** Practice tasks that use just one or two fingers (not all at once) e.g. poking games.
- **Praise** and encouragement when your child engages in fine motor activities, especially if they are persistent when finding an activity difficult.
- **Hand and finger strength** (e.g. scrunching, paper, using tweezers, play dough, pegs).
- **Sensory play** activities (e.g. rice play, finger painting) to assist the development of tactile awareness.
- **Hand-eye coordination:** Practice activities that involve hand-eye coordination (e.g. throwing and catching) and crossing the mid-line (e.g. reaching across the body to pick up items).
- **Upper limb strength:** Encourage play activities that develop upper limb strength (e.g. climbing ladders, wheelbarrow walking).

What activities can help improve writing readiness (pre-writing) skills?

- **Threading and lacing** with a variety of sized laces.
- **Play-doh (playdough)** activities that may involve rolling with hands or a rolling pin, hiding objects such as coins in the play dough or just creative construction.
- **Scissor** projects that may involve cutting out geometric shapes to then paste them together to make pictures such as robots, trains or houses.
- **Tongs or teabag squeezers** to pick up objects.
- **Drawing or writing** on a vertical surface.
- **Every day activities** that require finger strength such as opening containers and jars.
- **Pre writing shapes:** Practice drawing the pre-writing shapes (I, —, O, +, /, square, \, X, and Δ).
- **Finger games:** that practice specific finger movements such as *Incy wincy Spider*.
- **Craft:** Make things using old boxes, egg cartons, wool, paper and sticky or masking tape.
- **Construction:** Building with duplo, lego, mobilo or other construction toys.

Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with writing readiness (pre-writing)

skills in my child?

Therapeutic intervention to help a child with writing readiness difficulties is important to:

- Improve ability in, and persistence with, fine motor tasks for academic performance.
- Increase school readiness skills for your child's emotional comfort and ease of transition into school.
- Help a child to develop age appropriate self care tasks such as doing up buttons and zips.
- Avoid my child becoming disengaged in an academic environment due to difficulties completing colouring, drawing and writing.
- Avoid frustrations experienced by parents, teachers and children when the child is struggling to remain engaged in academic activities.
- Help develop and maintain my child's positive sense of well being through belief in their pencil skills for academic and play tasks.
- Ensure that my child doesn't fall behind their peers in development of handwriting or drawing.

If left untreated what can difficulties with writing readiness (pre-writing) skills lead to?

When children have difficulties with writing readiness, they are might also have difficulties with:

- Meeting (preschool or school based academic criteria due to poor pencil skills and rapid fatigue.
- Difficulties mastering letter and number formation.
- Learning to write their own name or draw age appropriate pictures (pre-school age).
- Excessive pressure and anxiety in a school-aged child due to difficulties 'keeping up' in class.
- Completing worksheets or tests due to difficulty answering all written questions within the allocated time.
- Poor self esteem when a child compares their abilities with their peers.
- Difficulty manipulating items for construction (puzzles, lego).

What type of therapy is recommended writing readiness (pre-writing) difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with writing readiness (pre-writing) skills, it is recommended they consult an Occupational Therapist.