Early Childhood Building Blocks

Writing in Preschool

This brief is based on the chapter on writing in the forthcoming book, Knowledge Seekers: Young Children Learning about Literacy, by Neuman, Raskos, Wright, & Lenhart, to be published by Scholastic.

Lisa A. Lenhart
Co-Director of the Reading First—Ohio Center
Associate Professor of Literacy
University of Akron, Department of Education

Introduction

Children first attempt writing by scribbling marks. Around age four or so, they begin to distinguish writing from drawing. But the role of letters as the “true” meaning-markers in writing can still confuse children up to six years of age. In fact, one of the hardest things young children do as emerging readers and writers is learn how to turn marks into real words. Learning to write is hard because it requires children to use several physical and mental processes at once. Their tiny hands have to grasp and control a writing tool. Their active minds must focus attention on making marks that express ideas. But hardest of all, they must follow certain rules to make the marks readable later on and understandable to others.

From studies into early writing over the past few decades, we know that:

- Before children enter school, they have some ideas about the purpose and content of writing (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Mason, 1984; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).
- Social interactions between adults and children and among peers play an important role in helping young children learn to write (Dyson, 1993; Tomasello, 1999).
- Emergent young writers shift from drawing writing to symbolic writing, where the marks (letters) are understood to have meaning (Karmiloff-Smith, 1992; Levin & Bus, 2003; Treiman, Kessler, & Bourassa, 2001).
- Children’s name writing serves as a stepping-stone to alphabet knowledge (Aram & Levin, 2004; Bloodgood, 1999; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Read, 1971).

For all of these reasons, writing should be a regular part of the preschoolers’ day.
Rationale

It’s a long journey from making random marks on a piece of paper to conveying needs, wants, and emotions through writing. Let’s take a look at how a very young child goes from simply making random marks to writing real words.

Random Markings

Children’s first random scribbles seem meaningless, but they are not. They are the foundation of all writing and signal the beginning of the learning-to-write process. Very young children use crayons, pencils, and markers to make random, light markings on a page. They have little control of their writing tools. But before long they begin to understand that marks should have meaning and that they should say something, so they make scribble-like marks, point to them, and “say” what they mean. As writing experiences grow, young children pay more attention to the marks and become more deliberate in their writing actions. They shift from making scribbles to drawing and using letter-like forms that they have discovered in the environment and in their own names.

Drawing and Writing

Before the age of four, most children don’t know the difference between drawing and writing. Their early compositions often contain combinations of letters, numbers, and objects. Around age four or so, children start to use smooth, circular motions when drawing and shorter, smaller strokes while writing. In this way, children’s writing becomes recognizable as writing (not drawing).

Name Writing

Like so much of learning to write in general, learning to write your own name is not simple—but it is always exciting. It starts with memorizing the whole thing and getting a helping hand from someone who already knows how to write real words to make the signature. The following exchange in our family between my daughters illustrates this point. Hannah was six, and Emma was two:

Emma: Mom, can you write my name? (Hannah steps in.)

Hannah: Okay. Make an A, Emma. Make an A. Okay? (Hannah decides to start at the beginning of the alphabet and makes an A for Emma to trace. Then she guides Emma’s hand to make another A.) EMMIE! I helped her! I helped her!

Emma: There. I want to make for you. (She works on the A some more, putting other little marks beside it.)

Before the age of four, most children don’t know the difference between drawing and writing.
**From One’s Name to Other Words**

The name-writing experience thrills children, and they repeat it often until whole-name recognition sets in. They then proceed to take a hard look at the individual letters and try to make and say them. Later, they use the letters in their names to spell other words. Look at the above sample from Emma when she was three. Notice how she used letters found in her name to take down the family dinner order.

Do you see that she has the A figured out now, but her E has too many lines? (see diagram A ) She has a lot of squiggly, letter-like forms and some drawings in there, too. Emma knows that she needs to use letters to write the order, because she had seen this modeled many times in restaurants, so she uses letters she knows from her name to write food words. It’s also interesting to note that she circles sets of letters and letter-like forms, probably setting boundaries around “words.” Clearly she understands that a long order takes lots of letters, that letters can be used more than once, and that they can appear in different sequences (AAE, AE, and so forth). In fact, young children commonly use the letters of their names in pretend writing. Moreover, once children begin to notice letters in their own names, they begin to see “their” letters everywhere in the environment. The concept that name letters can be found in other places, too, begins to make sense.

*Name writing has many benefits for writing development at preschool, such as drawing attention to letter names and sounds and providing a set of words that can be a focus of instruction.*

**The child’s name becomes a kind of decoder used for spelling new words.**

*Diagram A*
Word Writing

Families and teachers can help young children not only by writing their names but by naming the letters and helping them link sounds to letters. By doing this, they teach the basic skills involved in invented spelling. This helps children gain letter knowledge and begin to develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle. They use the letters of their own names to “spell” new words. Children know the sound of the first letter of their names, and being quick learners, they recognize it in other words and can correctly represent it in a new word. This letter-sound awareness opens the door to invented spelling. In some ways, a child’s name becomes a kind of decoder used for spelling new words. Once children discover this, their use of invented spelling spreads out in all directions, and the number of letter-sound matches increases.

Early Phonemic Period

Children continue to develop the basic skills of word writing through the primary grades. At first they use one or two letters to represent an entire word (often the first letter, just as they did a while ago in their own name), and usually represent the most prominent sound or sounds of a word. Children are showing that they know some letter-sound relationships.

Letter-Name Period

Before long, children start to “sound their way through a word” and identify a letter for each sound they hear. Children begin to make a one-to-one correspondence between sound and letter. Thus children can segment phonemes in the word and identify the correct letter for each one. It’s amazing that now they can attend to and represent these tiny sound bits when just a few years before they could hardly control the marker to scribble.

Creating Opportunities to Write

The early childhood teacher plays a crucial role in supporting and pulling forward children’s developmental writing. The literacy routines, environment, and modeling you provide help children learn the basics of writing. These include concepts and skills related to writing processes (e.g., writing for a purpose), writing applications (e.g., labeling), and writing conventions (e.g., spelling). Consider incorporating the following three instructional approaches in your program: name writing, shared writing, and play-based writing. Each offers plenty of learning opportunities to help children acquire the knowledge, skills, and motivation necessary for learning to write.
Name Writing

Name writing draws attention to letter names and sounds and provides a set of words that can be a focus of instruction (one's own name and those of classmates). A preschool classroom should have many name-writing activities. Here are a few suggestions:

**Signing In**

Signing in, just like adults do for appointments, provides a routine way for children to practice name writing and letter formation. Some teachers have a clipboard outside of the classroom for signing in even before the children enter the room. Others have children sign in on chart paper or loose-leaf unlined paper. You can have children sign in each day, and then later you can put the pages in a binder to demonstrate writing development over time.

**Labels**

When children are just beginning to learn to write their names, create computer-generated name labels for each child and put them in a pocket chart. Each child can have his or her own pocket with one of the labels on the front. Inside the pocket place a stack of name labels for the children to attach to artwork and writing samples as a way of independently labeling their work. Since identifying their name is difficult for some three-year-olds, one teacher I know assigns an animal to each child and puts a picture of the animal on the label next to the child's name for easy identification.

**Class Photo Book**

You can use a digital camera in the classroom to help children recognize names, too. Glue children's photos to name cards, and then bind the cards together in a book. Place it in the writing center along with blank paper for copying and a set of uppercase and lowercase plastic letters for matching. Children love to practice writing their friends' names, and this activity promotes skills such as practicing left to right progression, letter formation, and horizontal letter placement. It also meets each child at an individual level.

**Letter Hunt**

This activity helps children to recognize letters in different font styles and to learn the uppercase and lowercase forms of each letter. Gather empty food boxes such as cereal boxes, pizza boxes, toothpaste boxes, and so forth that the children might already be familiar with. Show them the boxes and remind them that letters go together in special ways to spell not just their names, but names of foods and other things. Explore a few boxes together, and make discoveries such as, “Lucky Charms starts with the same letter as Leona's name” or “There's a Z in pizza just like in Zoe's name.” Then let them explore on their own.
Early childhood teachers need to show good models of writing. You can model many concepts of print, such as correct spacing, letter formation, punctuation, and directionality, through the shared writing experience. Shared writing also provides an opportunity for teachers to think aloud while modeling how to compose different kinds of messages (such as a letter to an author or a sign advertising a performance) or how to listen for sounds and spell words—skills they will eventually incorporate into their own writing.

**Begin by . . .**

- engaging the class in a discussion about the purpose of the task.
- modeling thinking aloud about the task as you point to the paper: “If I’m going to tell the others about our play, I should put the title in big letters across the top.”

**Start writing by . . .**

- writing slowly, commenting on content and conventions. Make sure all of the children can see the print.
- pointing to words while reading and rereading sentences.

**Have the children join in by . . .**

- asking them to add letters, words, or punctuation marks. They can even draw pictures in place of words or illustrate the text at the bottom of the page.
- reading the text chorally a few times.
- posting the text around the classroom. Text created during the shared writing experience should be accessible to children at other times so that they can refer to it and reread this familiar text.
Play-Based Writing

A lot of writing can occur during play, especially when play areas are well stocked with writing supplies such as markers, pencils, paper and note pads, and authentic print such as phone books, magazines, coupons, and blueprints that link to the theme of the play area. In the blocks, for example, you can add rulers, graph paper, and supplies for making signs. The housekeeping area might have phone books, notepads, coupons, and magnets to post written notes on the refrigerator. The vet’s office could have notepads to write prescriptions and poster board to create signs showing the hours of operation. When you create a play area, have the children help you think through what kind of print is needed to sustain the area. For example, you might say, “Now how will I know what time the vet’s office is open?” or “I need to make a grocery list; how will I do that?”

Conclusion

Learning how to write real words presents a long and laborious journey for young children. However, with the purposeful support of families and teachers, children will move from scribbling random marks to writing real words. Several key instructional approaches—name writing, shared writing, and play-based writing—offer opportunities the young writer needs to develop the knowledge, skills, and motivation necessary to create meaningful written messages.

About the Author

Lisa A. Lenhart is an Associate Professor in the College of Education at the University of Akron, where she also serves as Co-Director of the Reading First–Ohio Center. She is the coauthor of several books, including Reading and Learning to Read and Oral Language and Early Literacy in Preschool. She lives in the Cleveland area with her husband, Matt, and her daughters, Hannah and Emma.
# Early Learning Content Standards

## Writing Process Standard

### Pre-K–2 Benchmark

**A. Generate ideas for written compositions.**

- Generate ideas for a story or shared writing with assistance.
- Choose a topic for writing related to shared or personal experience.
- Generate writing ideas through discussions with others.
- Choose a topic for writing.
- Develop a main idea for writing.
- Generate writing ideas through discussions with others.
- Choose a topic for writing.
- Develop a main idea for writing.

**B. Develop audience and purpose for self-selected and assigned writing tasks.**

- Begin to determine purpose for writing.
- Determine purpose for writing.
- Determine audience.
- Develop a purpose and audience for writing.
- Develop a purpose and audience for writing.

**C. Use organizers to clarify ideas for writing assignments.**

- Generate related ideas with assistance.
- Organize and group related ideas.
- Use organizational strategies to plan writing.
- Use organizational strategies to plan writing.
- Use organizational strategies to plan writing.

**D. Use revision strategies and resources to improve ideas and content, organization, word choice and detail.**

- Repeat message conveyed through dictation or writing.
- Begin to use resources to convey meaning.
- Reread own writing.
- Use resources to enhance vocabulary.
- Reread own writing for clarity.
- Add descriptive words and details.
- Use resources to select effective vocabulary.
- Use a range of complete sentences, including declarative, interrogative and exclamatory.
- Proofread writing to improve conventions.
- Use language for writing that is different from oral language, mimicking writing style of books when appropriate.
- Reread and assess writing for clarity, using a variety of methods.
- Add descriptive words and details and delete extraneous information.
- Use resources to select effective vocabulary.

**E. Edit to improve sentence fluency, grammar and usage.**

- Dictate or produce “writing” to express thoughts.
- Use correct sentence structures when expressing thoughts and ideas.
- Construct complete sentences with subjects and verbs.
- Proofread writing to improve conventions.
- Use a range of complete sentences, including declarative, interrogative and exclamatory.
- Proofread writing to improve conventions.

**F. Apply tools to judge the quality of writing.**

- Apply tools to judge the quality of writing.

**G. Publish writing samples for display or sharing with others using techniques such as electronic resources and graphics.**

- Display or share writing samples, illustrations and dictated stories with others.
- Rewrite and illustrate writing samples for display and for sharing with others.
- Use available technology to compose text.
- Use available technology to compose text.
### Early Learning Content Standards

#### Writing Applications Standard

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**

**A. Compose writings that convey a clear message and include well-chosen details.**

- Dictate stories or produce simple stories using pictures, mock letters or words.
- Name objects and label with assistance from adult cues.
- Play at writing from top to bottom, horizontal rows as format.
- Dictate words or produce writing approximations for a variety of purposes.

**Kindergarten Indicators**

- Dictate or write informal writings for various purposes.

**Grade 1 Indicators**

- Write simple stories with a beginning, middle and end that include descriptive words and details.

**Grade 2 Indicators**

- Write stories that convey a clear message, include details, use vivid language and move through a logical sequence of steps and events.

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**

**B. Write responses to literature that demonstrate an understanding of the literary work.**

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**

**C. Write friendly letters and invitations complete with date, salutation, body, closing and signature.**

**Writing Conventions Standard**

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**

**A. Print legibly using appropriate spacing.**

- Print letters of own name and other meaningful words with assistance using mock letters and/or conventional print.
- Begin to demonstrate letter formation in "writing".

**Kindergarten Indicators**

- Print capital and lowercase letters, correctly spacing the letters.
- Leave spaces between words when writing.

**Grade 1 Indicators**

- Print legibly, space letters, words and sentences appropriately.

**Grade 2 Indicators**

- Print legibly, and space letters, words and sentences appropriately.

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**

**B. Spell grade-appropriate words correctly.**

- Scribble familiar words with mock letters and some actual letters.

**Kindergarten Indicators**

- Show characteristics of early letter name-alphabetic spelling.
- Use some end consonant sounds when writing.

**Grade 1 Indicators**

- Spell words correctly with regular short vowel patterns and most common long vowel words.
- Spell high frequency words correctly.
- Create phonetically-spelled written work that can usually be read by the writer and others.
- Spell unfamiliar words using strategies such as segmenting, sounding out and matching familiar words and word parts.

**Grade 2 Indicators**

- Spell words with consonant blends and digraphs.
- Spell regularly used and high frequency words correctly.
- Spell words studied correctly.
- Spell plurals and verb tenses correctly.
- Begin to use spelling patterns and rules correctly.
- Use spelling strategies.

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**

**C. Use conventions of punctuation and capitalization in written work.**

- Indicate an awareness of letters that cluster as words, words in phrases or sentences by use of spacing, symbols or marks.

**Kindergarten Indicators**

- Place punctuation marks at the end of sentences.

**Grade 1 Indicators**

- Use end punctuation correctly, including question marks, exclamation points and periods.
- Use correct capitalization.

**Grade 2 Indicators**

- Use periods, question marks and exclamation points as endpoints correctly.
- Use quotation marks.
- Use correct punctuation for contractions and abbreviations.
- Use correct capitalization.

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**

**D. Use grammatical structures in written work.**

- Use nouns, verbs and adjectives

**Kindergarten Indicators**

- Use nouns, verbs and adjectives correctly.
- Use subjects and verbs that are in agreement.
- Use personal pronouns.
- Use past and present verb tenses.
- Use nouns and pronouns that are in agreement.

**Early Childhood Building Blocks: Writing in Preschool**
References and Further Reading


Other Useful Websites


Links to online courses

- Online classes on primary writing available at HeinemannU: [http://pd.heinemann.com/hu/schedule.aspx](http://pd.heinemann.com/hu/schedule.aspx)
- Online classes on writing available at PBS TeacherLine: [http://teacherline.pbs.org/teacherline/modules/tICatalog.cfm](http://teacherline.pbs.org/teacherline/modules/tICatalog.cfm)
- Online classes on building children’s writing skills available at Universal Class: [http://home.universalclass.com/i/crn/2848.htm](http://home.universalclass.com/i/crn/2848.htm)

For more information

Contact Nancy Brannon at nbrannon@ohiorc.org or Nicole Luthy at nluthy@ohiorc.org. Visit [http://rec.ohiorc.org](http://rec.ohiorc.org) to see the REC website. Also see other Early Childhood Building Blocks.