

## CURSIVE HANDWRITING IN RECEPTION – OR NOT?

By Ruth Miskin

### What is cursive handwriting?

**‘Cursive’** or **‘joined-up’ handwriting** is any style of writing where letters are joined to make writing faster.

**Formal cursive** joins all letters with strokes leading to and from each letter. Children are usually taught to join letters from the beginning.

**Casual cursive** is a combination of joins and pen lifts. Children are taught individual letters with correct formation, orientation and the correct size relative to one another *before* learning to join letters.

Capital letters are not joined in either formal or casual cursive scripts.

The new National Curriculum promotes casual cursive handwriting.

*“In Year 1 pupils should be taught to:*

- *Sit correctly at a table, holding a pencil comfortably and correctly*
- *Begin to form lower-case letters in the correct direction, starting and finishing in the right place*
- *Form capital letters*
- *Digits 0 to 9.*
- *Understand which letters belong to which handwriting ‘families’ (i.e. letters that are formed in similar ways) and to practise these.”*

### Why have Reception children been taught cursive handwriting?

This may have been the result of the previous National Curriculum: to gain a Level 3, children’s handwriting had to be ‘joined and legible’. Schools therefore began to teach joined handwriting earlier and earlier to make sure it was ‘joined and legible’ by the end of Year 2. Before that, it would have been unusual to see Reception children joining their letters.

### Why is it important to enjoy handwriting?

If we can make the *physical* process of writing – handwriting - enjoyable from the start, children are more likely to see themselves as ‘writers’. If the *physical* process is unpleasant, they are likely to confound the whole process of writing – handwriting, spelling and composition - into one unpleasant experience.

### What do we want children to pay attention to?

It takes **effort** to learn anything new and human beings –whatever their age - can only pay attention to **one new thing** at a time.

Learning to write involves a series of complex processes: thinking about what we want to say and how we want to say it; spelling (and English spelling is the hardest in the world); forming and joining letters correctly to transfer those ideas to the page.

We need, therefore, to prioritise what we want our children to pay attention to at each stage of learning to write. Each process needs to be planned step-by-step so children can focus upon one new thing at a time. New knowledge should then be practised alongside previously learnt knowledge, gradually applying handwriting skills and spelling knowledge to write down their thoughts on the page.

### Why should we *not* teach children a formal cursive from the very beginning?

1. Children learning formal cursive might believe that being a good writer is synonymous with joining letters successfully.
2. Formal cursive takes longer to learn than printing: time that should be spent in learning to read and spell.
3. Formal cursive makes heavy demands on children's fine motor skills. Boys, in particular, find it harder than printing. (Most have spent less time drawing and colouring than girls.)
4. Beginner writers often need to stop to think about each letter-sound correspondence as they write. Children learning formal cursive, however, might think they are expected to write the word in one continuous flow.
5. Children find it hard to read what they have written. Words are buried in a spider web of strokes. Many children add the joins once they have written the word making their writing even more illegible.
6. Joining letters is a separate skill, quite apart from learning how to form letters well. It can be delayed until later, leaving younger children free to concentrate on composition, spelling and correct letter formation. Some children, however, may well discover joins for themselves, if teaching has focused on correct formation and orientation from the beginning. For example, joining an 'i' to an 'n' with a diagonal join (as in 'in') or an 'o' to an 'n' with a horizontal join (as in 'on') are simple, natural joins that children might well use as a matter of course as they learn to write these common words. This should not be discouraged.

This quotation, below, by Hugo Kerr (author of 'The Cognitive Psychology of Literacy Teaching') makes the above points very well.

*"All the [children] I see are at basic level and all religiously join up their letters, at great cost in my view. The cognitive effort involved in joining up is obviously large and also obviously reduces capacity to think...adding a large and difficult cognitive task, like cursive writing, to an already rather difficult task in a highly competitive environment is a costly affair, especially for the weaker students.*

*"It seems to me very clear that [children's] writing behaviours show them struggling very considerably with joining up their letters per se. A great deal of their sometimes limited capacity for concentration seems to be directed at that fiddly, effortful and (to me) rather unnatural motor aspect of spelling... Bear in mind these are the weaker readers, so they are wide open to demotivation, not to say humiliation, faced with these complicated squiggles, so ridiculous when considered in detail.*

*"It seems to me self-evident that if cognitive capacity is so ferociously engaged in one domain, there will be correspondingly less of it available for the other domains we are actually interested in. This seems to me to be indisputable.*

*"If any of this is true, then it may be that we are fetishising joined up writing, or at least perhaps insisting upon it way too early? I find 'joining up' cumbersome and threatening (it looks a mess when I'm done; it feels clumsy and I feel stupid).*

*"What evidence is there that teaching joined-up writing early is necessary or useful? Would we know what it was aimed at?"*