

# TIPS FOR TEACHING

National Handwriting Association   
Promoting good practice

## Writing Grip

Children hold their pens and pencils in a number of different ways and some grips tend to arouse adult concern. Important considerations are:

Children need to have a stable hold of the tool to control it effectively but also need to maintain freedom of movement.

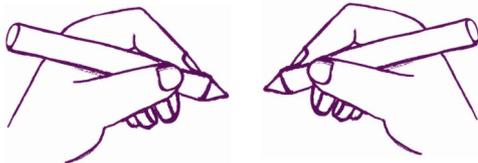
Research evidence that an odd pen-hold affects legibility or speed is inconclusive.

However, an association with pain, fatigue and discomfort is often reported so encouraging a good grip from the outset is important.

### Some grips for both stability and freedom of movement

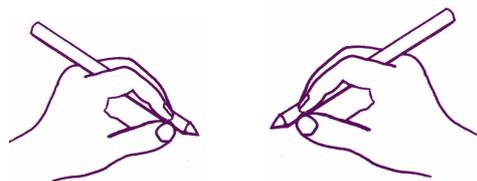
These all use 3 digits only and allow flexible movements to be made with a minimum amount of muscular effort. Most of the movements when writing are made with the fingers whilst the whole hand and wrist mainly move horizontally along the writing line.

1



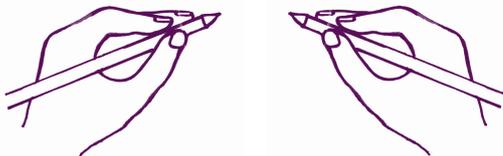
The pencil is held between thumb and first finger with the middle finger placed behind for support. This provides a good balance of stability and freedom of movement (*dynamic tripod*).

2



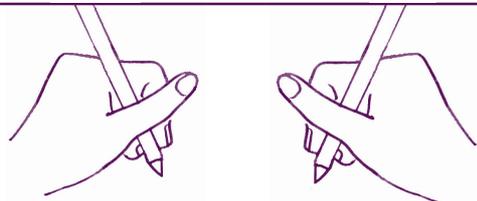
The pencil is held between the forefinger and middle finger with the thumb placed underneath for support. This allows the tool to be held more upright which better suits some modern pens (*alternative tripod*).

3



Some children place their middle finger on the tool instead of holding it underneath. This adds a little more stability but does limit freedom of movement (*static tripod*).

4



This grip is controversial. Some researchers claim it is equal in terms of control, speed and legibility but others suggest it does limit the range of movement and fine motor control (*lateral tripod*).

Ideally, children should be encouraged to develop a tripod grip in their early years of writing.



**Tip** A child who is unable to pick up objects in a pincer grip between forefinger and thumb is not ready to use a dynamic tripod grip.

## Tips for making a dynamic tripod grip

### Quack quack - making the dynamic tripod

- Put the pencil on the table pointing to the right (if R-handed) or left (if L-handed).
- Make a 'duck beak' with thumb and fore finger.
- Pick up the tool with the 'beak'.
- Allow the pencil end to flick back so it sits in the groove between thumb and forefinger - or gently steer it with the other hand.
- Put the middle finger underneath.

### Six Pencil Game

Choose 6 pencils.

- Pick one up - perhaps using the 'quack quack' sequence, or a modification for an older child.
- Check the grip is correct.
- Draw a smiley face.
- Repeat for each pencil in turn.

### Frog on a log -

checking the dynamic tripod

The frog's eyes are the tips of the thumb and forefinger as they grasp the pencil and the 'log' is the middle finger sitting underneath.

## Special tools that can help



### Shaped or moulded pencil grips and pens with shaped grips

There is a wide range of commercially available grips that can be slid onto a pencil.\* Most encourage a tripod grip, some position the fingers away from the pencil point, some direct the shaft of the pencil into the web space.

Many pens have integral shaped grips for the same purpose. Allow a child to trial a number of different ones before deciding which suits best.



### Very short pencils, chinks & crayons



They encourage the use of a 3-fingered grip.

### A woolly pompom held in the hand

This makes it difficult to hold the pencil with more than 3 digits.



## Some less efficient grips

These grips have either: additional fingers on the tool; it is held too tightly and/or the fingers are placed very close to the point. They definitely limit the range of movement of the fingers so that more of the movements needed for writing have to be made with the wrist and the whole hand. This can lead to fatigue and discomfort especially when there is need to write quickly or for long periods of time.

5



There are a number of variations that use 4 or even 5 fingers to control the tool.

6



The 'thumb wrapper'- the thumb is wrapped over the forefinger.

7



The thumb is tucked under the forefinger.

8



This stab grip is commonly used by very young children.

\* See p 4 for suppliers

## Changing a grip?

Changing an established grip needs to be approached with care as the change will almost certainly involve much practice and motivation.

A younger child may find it easier to use a new grip. Once a grip is well established a change should be considered only if the child is experiencing significant difficulty : illegibility, pain, fatigue, slowness or an impaired view of what is being written.

### Some special cases:

**Children with a physical difficulty** that affects their coordination or strength (e.g. cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, hypermobility). A conventional grip may not be the best for them. Consult an occupational or physio-therapist for advice.



**Left-handers with an extreme hook that is causing pain.** They can be encouraged to either make the 'hook' less extreme by placing the forearm parallel to the writing line - or keep their hands below the line.

**Children who missed out early teaching.** Some children adopt a grip which gave them stability early on but which limits their fluency when they need to write faster. These children may be keen to work on a new pen hold.

### Should you decide to attempt a grip change:

- Work with the child to find the best grip for him or her. The ideal is some form of tripod grip but sometimes a compromise has to be made between the ideal and what can realistically be achieved.
- Explain, demonstrate and allow the child to experience, perhaps by writing in the air, the advantages of the new grip you are recommending and so appreciate the additional freedom of movement/uncluttered view of the writing/comfort the new grip could give.
- Encourage and praise effort - changing well-established habits is not easy.
- Be aware that handwriting quality may deteriorate for a time until the new grip is firmly established.

### Additional ideas to make writing easier and see p4

**Move the paper** to the right (if R-handed) or the left (if L-handed)

**Change how upright the pen is held.**

### Use an angled writing surface\* - perhaps with a non-slip surface\*

This can help to promote a more efficient grasp and wrist position. There are commercially available writing slopes or they can easily be made. Alternatively use a lever arch file. The angle of slope is usually between 15-22°. Writing, drawing and painting on sloped or vertical easels, chalkboards or white boards also helps to promote a functional position.

### Keep the side of the hand resting on the paper

Put a sticker/mark below the little finger. Can the child keep it hidden?

### Change the writing tool

Offer a fatter/thinner/ heavier/ shorter pen/cil, or with a rough or rubberised surface - whichever the child prefers.

### Tip Try the new grip for 2 weeks



Perhaps start by drawing, doodling and scribbling with the new grip before writing. If children have not been able to change the grip after a couple of weeks of genuine effort it is unlikely that they will succeed.

\* See p 4 for suppliers

## Taking the pressure off

Discomfort and fatigue can be the result of holding the tool too tightly. Reducing this pressure can be helpful and might not be as difficult as changing the grip.

### Tip



Look out for the curved fore-finger. If accompanied by a white knuckle this probably means the tool is being held very tightly.



### Make sure the pupil knows about holding the pen tightly and loosely:

What does it feel like when squeezing a pen or pencil as tightly as possible, then with the fingers loosened? Practise a bit, saying "loose" and "tight" as s/he holds the tool appropriately.

Some children like to imagine that the tool is animate and can feel pressure (like a cat's tail). They might 'join' the imaginary SPCPP (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Pens and Pencils).

### Reduce pressure on the paper:

- Use a padded writing surface
- Put layers of carbon paper beneath so the child can check how many layers the writing shows through.
- Feel the back of the paper for bumps after writing.

Scribbling can loosen tension.

Write with a soft pencil.

Try soft rubber or foam grips\*.

Use a mechanical lead pencil - it will break if pressed too hard.

### Leave about 2 cm between the finger tips and the pen point

Holding the fingers close to the point limits their freedom of movement and can hide the words just written.

- An elastic band can be wrapped around a pencil just below where the fingers should be positioned.
- Some specialised grips position the fingers away from the point.\*
- Many pens have shaped barrels to site the fingers in a good position.\*

### Tip



This is especially important for left-handers as it helps to keep the writing visible.

**Suppliers** - a few suggestions but there are many more:

**Pencil Grips** - [www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com) and [www.taskmasteronline.co.uk](http://www.taskmasteronline.co.uk)  
dexball aid for severely handicapped - [www.handyhealthcare.co.uk](http://www.handyhealthcare.co.uk) -

**Left-handers** - [www.anythingleft-handed.co.uk](http://www.anythingleft-handed.co.uk), [www.lefthand-education.co.uk](http://www.lefthand-education.co.uk)  
*Writing left-handed* published by NHA [www.nha-handwriting.org.uk](http://www.nha-handwriting.org.uk)

**Sloped Boards** - [www.backinaction.com](http://www.backinaction.com)

**Carbon paper** - Ryman stationers

**Dycem** - non-slip surface - [www.nrs-uk.co.uk](http://www.nrs-uk.co.uk) [www.idalearning.com](http://www.idalearning.com)

**Specialist pens** - shaped grips: Stabilo Easy pens, Pelikan Griffix range, Lamy ABC and other fountain pens for students. Non-smudge: Edding Easy writer

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