

Reinforces  
Learning

Improves  
Motor  
Skills

Teaching Students

*cursive*

*Cursive  
is an art  
form*



# Teaching Students Cursive

Cursive is an underrated skill. At a time when most schools have increased their emphasis on testing and dropped or cut back school time for basics such as gym and music classes, it's not surprising that administrators and teachers have also backed off their one-time emphasis on teaching students how to write in cursive. The decline started in the 1970s and has progressively gotten worse over time. New national standards don't even require students to learn cursive, and for many school districts, that's reason enough to eliminate it from the curriculum. The fact that teaching cursive is left to the discretion of local school districts is a polite way of saying it is not perceived nationally as a necessary skill any more. Cursive was originally intended as a way to write more quickly, after all, but someone who is typing is generally going to be able to work faster than someone who is writing cursive.

If the only motivation for teaching cursive is the fact that it can be faster than printing, then maybe it's time to forget about teaching students how to do anything much beyond printing letters, and teach them how to type instead. But are there other benefits for students who write in cursive?

The short answer is yes. Good cursive handwriting is far from being trivial.

► *U.S. students are often taught to focus only on the most practical subjects.*

but an education that only focuses on teaching children to take tests is narrow and does not prepare students for the more complicated world they will face after they leave the public school system. The U.S. has cut too many subjects from its curriculum already. The thing we need to cut back on is constant testing, not skills. Students from many other countries, such as India and China, are outperforming U.S. students. Our students are as bright as anyone else's students. What's lacking is a broad, relevant curriculum based on more than the perceived pragmatism of the moment.

► *Cursive is an art form.*

Eastern traditions have calligraphy and western traditions have cursive. By educating students about both, you provide them with a good basis for cross-cultural studies. It doesn't hurt that clear, beautiful cursive handwriting looks good, too. Someone who can write cursive well will make a better impression than someone who can only manage to print ill-formed, hard-to-read letters.

► *Teaching cursive reinforces learning.*

When students study a foreign language, they understand their own grammar better. It works much the same way with cursive. Students who study cursive find that it helps them learn printing better, especially any letters that may have been difficult for them in preschool. Early achievement in handwriting, reading, and spelling skills is made possible when someone learns how to write cursive early in the grade-school experience.

► *Learning cursive develops and improves motor skills.*

This is something that is particularly effective for students who are seven or eight years old. The brain processes printed letters and cursive letters in different parts of the brain, and the evidence shows that

students who write cursive remember more information and can create more ideas from what they write. More than that, children who can write cursive do better when reading or writing. No one knows completely why that is true, but it would be foolish to ignore it.

► *Children with learning disabilities benefit from learning cursive*

because the pen or pencil moves from left to write and because all letters start on a base line. A cursive "b" and "d" are much different from each other, but a printed "b" and "d" look almost the same. If you think there aren't enough children dealing with learning disabilities for this to matter, you should know that learning disabilities affect ten percent of all students, and that dyslexia is a problem for as much as 20 percent of the U.S. Students with dyslexia, reading disabilities, writing disabilities, nonverbal learning disabilities, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) all benefit from learning cursive. The more tools teachers have to reach such students, the more chance there is of successfully teaching these students.

• People who have suffered brain damage sometimes find that they can no longer write or understand print, but they are still able to read cursive. That's assuming someone taught them how to read it.

► *Historical documents are written in cursive.*

For example, think of the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Students who have never learned cursive can't read these important documents. Yes, someone could probably come up with a translator ... but learning how to read cursive would be a much easier way to handle the problem, with less likelihood for making mistakes. These documents alone are reason enough to learn cursive, especially since it is not really that difficult to learn.

► *Older generations write cursive.*

Children who can't read cursive can't read cards or letters from older members of the family, which creates an unnecessary communication barrier between them. Facebook, Skype, emails, and text messages are no compensation. And the problem extends beyond family. Katy Steinmetz wrote an article for Time magazine dated June 4,

2014 about reasons students should learn cursive. According to Steinmetz, a state representative from Tennessee named Sheila Butt reported getting a phone call from a mother whose son could not read cursive. Her son's history teacher was writing homework assignments on the board in cursive. It's hard to learn from a teacher when you can't read what that teacher writes.

- ▶ *Legal documents require a signature,* and the assumption is that it will be in cursive. Maybe that requirement will go away, but at some cost to security: a printed signature is easier to forge than a cursive one.
- ▶ *Unfortunately, taking cursive out of the classroom is more likely to affect poor school districts than rich ones,* for the simple reason that poor school districts have fewer resources and are more likely to cut anything that seems unnecessary. Eliminating cursive education from the school system, therefore, is a subtle way to make the U.S. division of money-based classes even bigger than it already is.
- ▶ *School performance suffers when someone cannot write well and smoothly.* Someone who is unaccustomed to writing by hand, and does it badly, has to think too much about it. That makes it harder for such a student to pay attention to content, to expand on the details, and to organize thoughts. Not only that, but handwriting is essential to note-taking, test taking, class work, and assignments done at home. Someone with poor or nonexistent handwriting skills is at a significant disadvantage compared to other students. That student is likely to avoid practicing and, as a result, to spend less time writing.

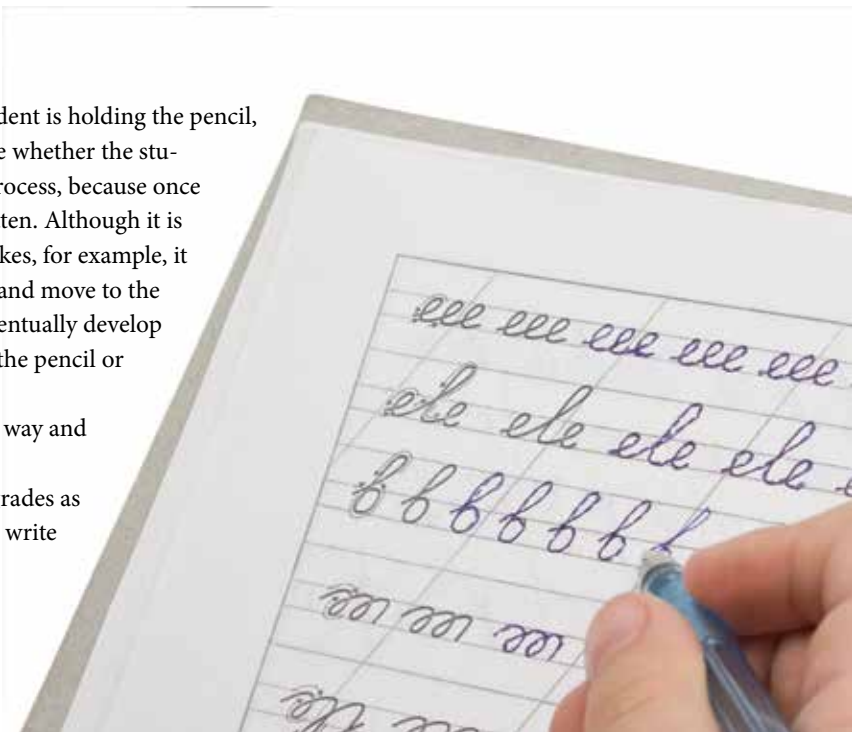


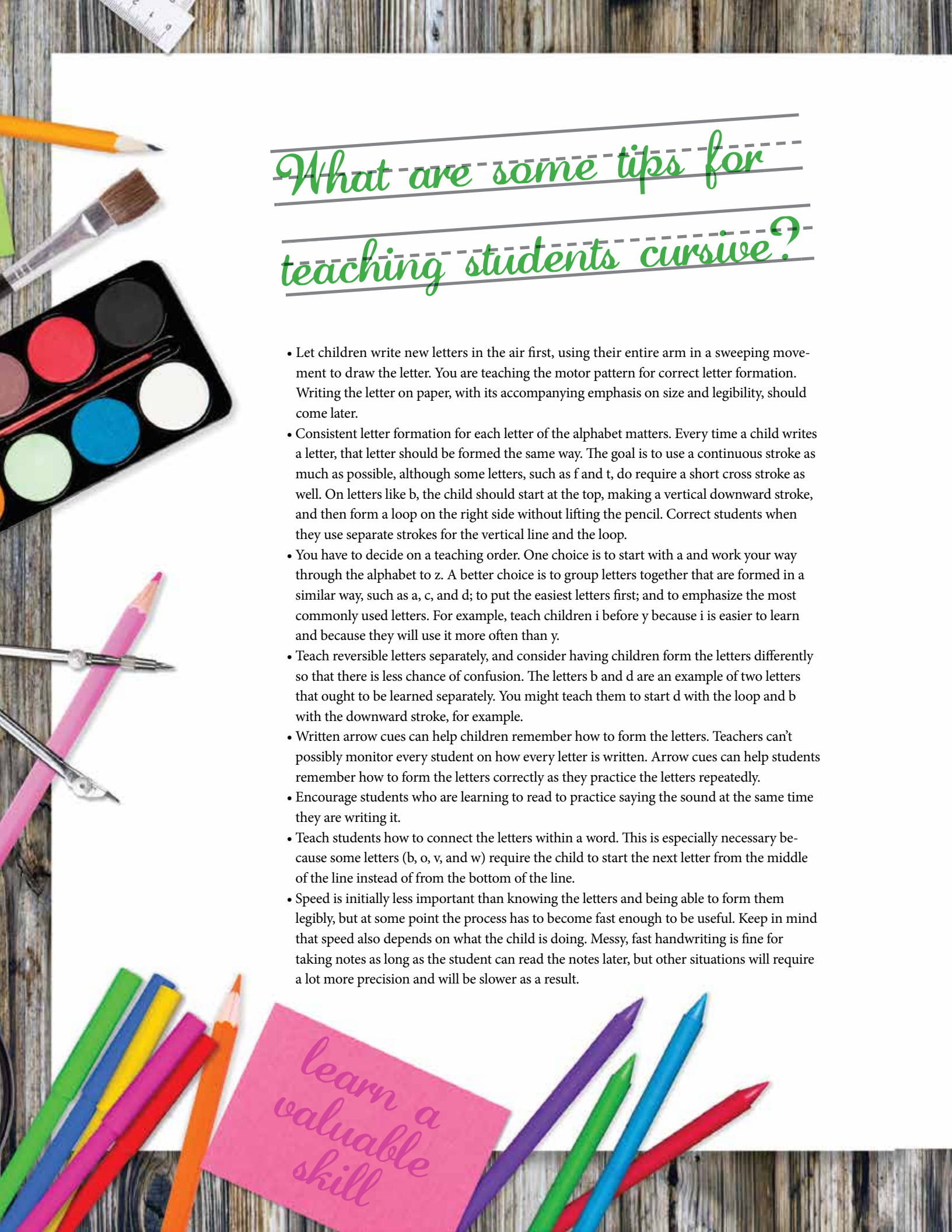
Some educators are already beginning to recognize the importance of handwriting, and to give it more attention in the primary grades.

Fortunately, even a small amount of instructional time from kindergarten to third grade can be enough to make a difference later on and to prevent the development of writing problems. Students who spend 10 or 15 minutes per day on good handwriting skills can avoid developing counterproductive habits such as holding a pencil in an ineffective way or forming letters badly. Emphasis should also be placed on developing the children's motivation to write.

The fact is that printing, writing cursive and typing on a keyboard are all important. It is important that students master at least one of the three skills so they can communicate quickly and without much effort when writing. If an older student is having problems with all three, it is more important to master one than to master none. However, students should be taught, and assessed regularly, on all three. Teachers should examine how letters are being drawn, whether they are legible, and whether they are written quickly and easily.

- To assess how letters are drawn, teachers look at how the student is holding the pencil, sitting in the chair, and forming letters. It's much easier to see whether the student is writing correctly if the teacher actually watches the process, because once something is written, it can be difficult to see how it was written. Although it is possible for young children to draw letters with separate strokes, for example, it is better for them to learn how to start each word on the left and move to the right without lifting the pencil, because that way they will eventually develop more speed. You can't always tell whether someone is lifting the pencil or not between letters unless you actually watch them.
- For letters to be legible, they need to be formed in a uniform way and have appropriate spacing between words and within words.
- Speed comes with practice. It isn't as important in the early grades as it is later on, when the student begins to rely on the ability to write quickly in order to complete work.





# What are some tips for teaching students cursive?

- Let children write new letters in the air first, using their entire arm in a sweeping movement to draw the letter. You are teaching the motor pattern for correct letter formation. Writing the letter on paper, with its accompanying emphasis on size and legibility, should come later.
- Consistent letter formation for each letter of the alphabet matters. Every time a child writes a letter, that letter should be formed the same way. The goal is to use a continuous stroke as much as possible, although some letters, such as f and t, do require a short cross stroke as well. On letters like b, the child should start at the top, making a vertical downward stroke, and then form a loop on the right side without lifting the pencil. Correct students when they use separate strokes for the vertical line and the loop.
- You have to decide on a teaching order. One choice is to start with a and work your way through the alphabet to z. A better choice is to group letters together that are formed in a similar way, such as a, c, and d; to put the easiest letters first; and to emphasize the most commonly used letters. For example, teach children i before y because i is easier to learn and because they will use it more often than y.
- Teach reversible letters separately, and consider having children form the letters differently so that there is less chance of confusion. The letters b and d are an example of two letters that ought to be learned separately. You might teach them to start d with the loop and b with the downward stroke, for example.
- Written arrow cues can help children remember how to form the letters. Teachers can't possibly monitor every student on how every letter is written. Arrow cues can help students remember how to form the letters correctly as they practice the letters repeatedly.
- Encourage students who are learning to read to practice saying the sound at the same time they are writing it.
- Teach students how to connect the letters within a word. This is especially necessary because some letters (b, o, v, and w) require the child to start the next letter from the middle of the line instead of from the bottom of the line.
- Speed is initially less important than knowing the letters and being able to form them legibly, but at some point the process has to become fast enough to be useful. Keep in mind that speed also depends on what the child is doing. Messy, fast handwriting is fine for taking notes as long as the student can read the notes later, but other situations will require a lot more precision and will be slower as a result.



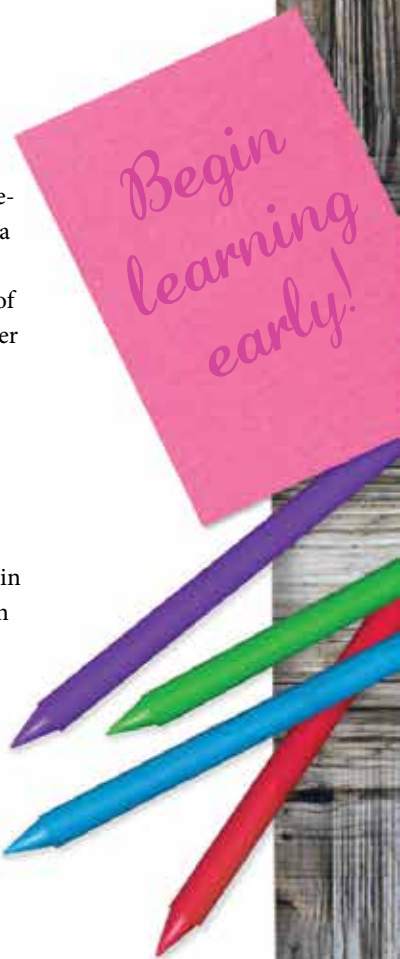
learn a  
valuable  
skill

# *When should cursive be taught?*

The traditional method has been to teach printing in first grade and cursive in third grade. However, it actually might make more sense to reverse this and to teach cursive before printing. What are the reasons for making this kind of change?

- Young children learn cursive more easily than older children.
- Children who learn cursive first don't have to unlearn any bad habits.
- It helps children internalize the left-to-right movement of written language. Since the brains of young children are learning to process symbolic language, cursive is an effective way to prepare the brain from a developmental point of view. Later on, reading, writing, and typing on a keyboard are all more fluent for good cursive writers.
- Children learn words as words, not as letters. The emphasis is on the beginning and the end of each word, with correct spacing between words. Children learn to blend the sounds each letter in a word.
- Cursive encourages a flow of thought and the ability to think ahead.
- All lowercase letters have the same starting point, which makes them less confusing than the reversals and inversions of printed letters.

Eliminating cursive instruction from any school's curriculum is shortsighted. Caring parents don't have to cooperate with the national trend; they can advocate for their children, in this as in so many other ways, to guarantee that their students have all the advantages cursive instruction can provide.



Improve  
Motor Skills!

Improves  
Communication

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee  
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It's  
important!