

Especially for practitioners working with preschoolers! 

Starting Write

 *Invented Spelling and Writing*

Before children ages 3-5 begin to spell and write like adults, they start to understand that writing uses symbols to carry meaning that others understand. To encourage their exploration and interest in written language, show them how to use invented spelling. This lets them focus on the process of communicating through writing, rather than on a perfect finished product.

What is the practice?

Beginning writers can get frustrated by not knowing the exact spelling of words they are trying to use. This can lessen their motivation to write. Encourage preschool children to write using the letters that sound right to them without insisting on exact spelling or letter formation. This is the best way teachers can help children develop writing skills.



What does the practice look like?

A preschool student may sign his art project with some letters in his name reversed or missing. Another child might make a shopping list with a combination of letters, numbers, and other symbols. These are examples of how children begin to experiment with written language. It is important for children to explore written language this way and talk about their writing with an interested adult. It allows them to gain the important motor and cognitive skills needed for “real” writing skills to develop.

How do you do the practice?

You can find a world of opportunities to use invented spelling in your preschool classroom. For a start, have the children compose a list of class rules at circle time. Post sign-up sheets at popular activity centers. Encourage children to sign their work and write their own descriptions or stories about their art.

- You can arrange your classroom to encourage the use of writing. Include writing materials at every center, not just art and writing. Demonstrate the many uses of writing to groups or individual children. For instance, pads and pencils in the blocks center could be used for drawing roads or maps. Show how writing could also be used to label works in progress. In the housekeeping center, writing materials can be used to make play menus or grocery lists. The book corner can include items for children to make their own books.
- You can encourage children to take their work seriously in many ways. Have them read it aloud to you and show your appreciation. Display functional examples of their writing, such as handwritten cubby labels or welcome signs for class parties. Set up a classroom mail center for children to leave notes and messages for each other.
- Provide plenty of examples of conventional writing all around the room. This can be done in the form of books, posters, the alphabet, and printed labels. When children struggle for the right letter, they will have access to familiar models all around them.
- Some children are more concerned with “getting it right.” This can cause them to be hesitant to write something if they are not sure how it is spelled. Support these children by helping them listen for the sounds in letters and words. Encourage them to work with other children on how to spell something.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the children in your classroom eager and motivated to write?
- Do they understand that what they write carries meaning?
- Does their writing and spelling grow more conventional over the course of the year?

Take a look at more prewriting with preschoolers

Writing “Thanks!”

At circle time in Ms. JoAnn’s preschool class, the children are discussing their recent field trip to the grocery store. Everyone wants to talk about the best parts of the trip and the goodie bags they were given. Ms. JoAnn unrolls a large piece of paper. She tells her class, “Let’s make a list of all the interesting things we saw and learned at the grocery store. Then we are going to write thank-you letters to Mr. Black. We’ll thank him for showing us around his store.” The children take turns talking about their favorite parts of the trip. They all liked going back into the bakery to watch bread coming out of the big ovens. Ms. JoAnn writes all their ideas on her large sheet of paper. She reads and points out the words as she does so. She invites the children to help her with spelling the words. She hangs the list where everyone can see it. Then she sends the children to nearby tables with construction paper and markers. The children make thank-you cards for the store manager using a combination of pictures, letters, and words.



Sign-In Charts

The preschoolers in Mr. José’s class use sign-in sheets every day when they come to school. First they find their pictures on the laminated sheet by the door. Next they use markers to write their names next to their pictures to indicate they are present. Some of the children are not yet making any recognizable letters. Still, they enjoy “signing in” to show others they have arrived. They use this sign-in system during free center time, too. They sign up for the most popular centers by writing their names on the waiting lists at those centers. The children get to practice their writing throughout the day and learn to recognize one another’s names as well.

All Kinds of Greetings

In Ms. Amy’s inclusive preschool class, the children have access to writing materials throughout the day. They also have a mailbox system to leave notes and letters for each other and for their teacher. Many children are in the habit of writing greetings to each other. They will write special birthday messages or notes for an absent child. Some children in Ms. Amy’s class have trouble with fine motor skills. Ms. Amy encourages them to also type messages on the classroom computer. It is equipped with an extra-big keyboard and a microphone. This allows children to speak their messages and watch them appear in print on the screen. Ms. Amy helps the children print out their messages and find the right mailbox. This way all children, regardless of disability, can participate in the composition process and deliver messages to their friends.



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Author! Author!

 *Invented Spelling and Writing*

What is the practice?

Writing is a way to communicate ideas in print. Opportunities to write focus children's attention on print. It helps them learn that letters go with sounds, and contributes to their emerging reading skills. When given writing opportunities, 3- to 5-year-old children can use drawings and symbols to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Children can print or copy their first names. They can use letter-like approximations to "write" words or ideas.

What does the practice look like?

Early writing by young children combines drawing, invented spelling, copying, and repetition of familiar patterns. Drawing helps a child communicate his thoughts and interests through pictures. He can "read" them back just as if the page contains real words. Scribbling is often used by young children, with scribbles going from left to right and sometimes looking like cursive writing. Young children will sometimes put letters together in random order, and might even use the letters in their name. Invented spelling happens when a child writes by using his own made-up spelling for words. Sometimes a single letter stands for a word, as in "h" for "house." The beginning and ending letters may also be used, as in "hs" for "house."



How do you do the practice?

Writing should be a routine part of a child's day. Activities at home and in the classroom provide lots of opportunities for putting young children's writing skills to work.

- Young children can draw picture reminders or use their own way of writing to fill in events and dates on a classroom calendar.
- Teachers, family members, and classmates can leave each other special notes at a message center.
- When preparing for an activity, children can be asked to write out a list of materials that they need. Preschool children often enjoy "reading" their lists aloud to others.
- Children can add a picture or note to letters written to grandparents, family members, or friends in their early childhood classroom. They can use scribble writing or invented spelling to write the note.
- Children make the connection between spoken and written words when they draw a picture and dictate a story about it. You can write the story exactly as the child tells it and then read it back to him.
- Children should be encouraged to write and illustrate a story. You can make a simple book from paper folded in half and stapled in the middle. Fancier books can be made with a cardboard cover. These books can be bound by lacing thick yarn through holes made with a hole puncher.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is the child spending more time "writing"?
- Does the child seem pleased about his letters, notes, or stories?
- Has the child shown interest in trying different ways to write, or is he trying new ways to spell?

Take a look at more fun with emergent writing

Preschool Publications

At circle time in Mr. John's preschool class the children are making books. They decorate a large sheet of construction paper in the color of their choosing using stickers, markers, crayons, and glitter. Once they finish, Mr. John and his assistant help the children write their names on the decorated paper. This will be their book cover. The children take white paper and their favorite writing tools and begin to write a story about whatever they choose. The children talk happily about their stories as they make lines, dots, squiggles, letters, and other writings across their pages. Mr. John encourages them to draw pictures to go along with their stories. As they finish, the children take turns "reading" their stories to the group. Mr. John writes down what each child says, and adds the words at the bottom of each page. He then places the cover around the pages and staples it together for each child to take home.



Lines in the Sand

One afternoon some of the preschoolers in Ms. Anna's class are playing "school" on the playground. Sara pretends to be Ms. Anna and the others are her students. Sara gives the others bits of sticks. She has them write their names in the sand the way their teacher has shown them. Some of the children know how to write their names correctly, while others use invented spelling. Sara looks over their writing, saying, "Good job!" to each of them just like Ms. Anna does. Then, she tells them to write familiar words that she calls out, "Dog. Sara. Mom. Dad." The children write letters in the sand for each word. "Very good!" says Sara, looking at the lines they made in the sand. "Time for snack."

Making Their Mark!

In Mrs. McLean's inclusive preschool class children are encouraged to write down their thoughts and story ideas throughout the day. They use materials in the writings bins that are found in every classroom center. They use sign-in sheets at the popular centers. They are encouraged to make a mark next to their printed names and pictures when they arrive in the classroom each morning. The children have begun recognizing not only their own names, but some of their classmates' names. Some children in the class have difficulty with fine-motor activities. Mrs. McLean helps them type stories on the classroom computer using the oversized keyboard. They can "sign in" using adhesive labels pre-printed with their names. Some children also enjoy telling stories into a tape recorder. They play them back when it is time for the class to share their stories.



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You've Got Mail

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Create a classroom mailbox to encourage your preschoolers to try their hands at writing. It will help them learn the many uses of print and written language.

What is the practice?

Preschool children need practice scribbling, using “made up” spelling, and experimenting with language before they can write in a conventional way. One way to increase their interest and confidence in writing is to have a classroom post office. A classroom mailbox provides children with a place to leave written notes for each other and for their teachers.



What does the practice look like?

A preschool classroom mail center can be simple to create. Begin with a group of shoeboxes or a large divided box with children’s name labels placed in each section. Place items like paper, envelopes, stamps, old greeting cards, markers, pencils, a small scale, maps, and stickers nearby. Mailbags, mail carrier costumes, and books about the post office can also be helpful resources.

How do you do the practice?

A mail center can be a regular part of your classroom or a rotating dramatic play center. Either way, this emphasis provides lots of chances for writing. Talk about the ways children use the mail center to keep in touch with each other.

- Introduce the mail center at group time. Find out what the children know about the post office and letter writing. You might make a word wall of “mail” terms. Talk with the children about all the reasons people use mail.
- Children often enjoy stamps and stickers. You can explain the purpose of postage stamps and have a few types for them to use. You can also include other objects from the post office such as scales, maps, and types of mailers. This could be a good time to talk about addresses and to help children begin to learn their home addresses.
- You can model letter writing by putting stamped, addressed cards or notes in each child’s box. This will give children who do not know about letter writing some idea of its purpose and convention.
- Let the children explore the mail center by working with different kinds of stationery, envelopes, and stamps. Invite them to bring in supplies from home. Parents might provide the address of family members or friends to whom children can write.
- Change the contents of the mail center from time to time by switching the stationery, stamps, and writing materials. Depending on the time of year, you can find seasonal greeting cards on sale or at dollar stores. Families can often be a great resource for old (even used) cards and other materials.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your preschool students enjoy playing in the mail center?
- Do they leave notes and letters for other children and teachers?
- Has their writing become more conventional and confident?

Take a look at more fun in the mail

Making the Most of Mail

The mail center is a well-liked fixture in Kelley's classroom. Her preschool children often leave scribbled and made-up notes for each other in the cardboard box she made into mail slots. At first the children were unsure of what to do with the mail center. After Kelley shared many books about mail at circle time and modeled letter-writing behavior, the children began to explore more. Kelley brought a mail scale and a mail carrier outfit into her classroom. Both were used daily by children taking turns being the "mail boy" or "mail girl." They passed out letters to classmates who would pretend to "read" them before "writing" back.



Children Create Mail Center

To start their unit about the mail system, Bennett's preschool class takes a field trip to their local post office. They learn about what happens to letters and other kinds of mail once they are dropped off there. They get a behind the scenes look at package processing. Each child receives some souvenirs to take back to the class. These include stickers and mail circulars. Back in the classroom, Bennett has the children help him set up a mail center. They include a scale, shoebox mailboxes, writing materials, and dress-up clothes. He also adds picture books about the mail. Bennett writes new vocabulary the children learned at the post office on the classroom "word wall." The children spend a lot of time in this new center. They "write" messages to each other, put letters in envelopes and stamp them, and "read" them back. Bennett has noticed that their writing is getting more "conventional" and their confidence as writers has grown.

Mail for All

To make the best use of her preschool students' writing opportunities, Ilene uses a mail center in her inclusive classroom. First, the class brainstormed reasons why people write letters. They also talked about whom they might want to write. Ilene set up a mail center to accommodate the range of her children's special needs. The center has adapted writing materials and a computer with an extra large keyboard and a voice recorder. She also added embossed cards and envelopes to help children "feel" the letters. With parents' help, Ilene made a list of people who were happy to receive "real" mail from the children. She taught a lesson about how mail works. They talked about addresses and where stamps go on envelopes. Then, they all walked to the school office to put their real letters in the "out box." When any of the children receives a response letter, he or she shares it with the class.

