

# Handwriting

- there's far more to it than just putting pen to paper

***Q: My child's teacher says my son has a problem with handwriting. Are there any exercises you can recommend that will help with this?***



A: In order to help you, I need to first explain something of how handwriting develops as a skill. I find that most people don't really understand what is involved in this highly complex task, or that it involves far more than just motor skills.

We have all probably heard of [motor skills](#) and know that there are two general types:

- Gross motor - where we perform large or gross movements, and
- Fine motor, where we have refined our gross motor performance and can perform smaller or finer motor tasks.

Handwriting is assigned to the latter category because it requires a high degree of precision (refined motor control.)

While viewing handwriting as only a motor skill is an incredibly limited thing to do, this remains the way most of the world sees it. Most of the interventions designed to improve upon handwriting involve practicing using a pen or pencil whilst drawing, copying or tracing. Such practices ignore the totality of this task and what is actually involved in performing it.



The reality is that all performance begins with [perception](#). If there was nothing here to see and experience, there would be nothing to respond to. All action is performed on the basis of us having perceived something and there is a very deep and intimate

relationship between the function of perceiving and the function of performing those actions, with both utilising the exact same skills, abilities and processes – just reciprocally to one another. At the core of perception and performance is our ability to form [inter-relationships](#) between pieces of [sensory information](#). On one hand we are recognising meaningful patterns of information we are perceive; and on the other hand, we are constructing the patterns of actions we perform in the world. In both we must connect the dots in a functional or useful way, which allows patterns to be constructed and recognised. [Pattern recognition and construction](#) is the natural outgrowth or consequence of forming these inter-relationships.

We can begin to understand the relationship between perception and performance by using symbols such as the infinity symbol, where there is an ongoing flow of performance between these two aspects of our experience of, and engagement in, life.



Refining or improving upon our performance entails [processing](#) and [integrating](#) increasing volumes of sensory information and recognising and constructing ever more complex patterns, and this all breaks down when a child’s brain has been damaged in some way and they cannot deal with the volumes of sensory information in their world. Their processing and integration capacity is limited and, consequently, they are not able to take in and make use of all of the information available to them: they are perceiving a world that is in complete because it has information missing from it.

This impacts on performance because; what is left out of perception is also left out of performance. What we are observing in the child who struggles is the consequence of a perceptual deficit ie: a breakdown in their perceptual performance.

We all process sensory information through all of our senses, however, in human beings our ability to perform those complex task that distinguish us from other animals, all comes down to our capacities in visual perceptual performance. However, we are not born with the same visual perceptual capacity we will go on to demonstrate as an adult. This too must grow and develop and be refined throughout the early childhood developmental sequence.

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1234567890*

It has been my observation that babies and young children move through various [priorities](#) within the early childhood developmental sequence. These priorities are incredibly important because they allow us to receive sensory information from any aspect of life, relate it to all other areas of perceptual performance and make sense of it. However, at around age 3 – 3½ years we must step into the priority of visual perceptual performance if we are going to continue to refine our performance and be able to perform those complex and demanding tasks, such as handwriting.



*I cannot stress enough that all of our performance arises from the exact same place – perceptual performance – and requires the exact same skill base in order to do it. It is the avenues, through which this underlying perceptual performance is expressed, which make it seem as though we have various distinct and different skill bases. It really doesn't matter if we are performing a motor task, a psychological task, a cognitive task, or whatever; at its heart is our perceptual performance, specifically our visual perceptual performance. I tend to refer to those appearances of neurological, cognitive, physiological, psychological, social and emotional performance as existing on the surface of the pond, where, if we want to see where it is all arising from, we actually need to dive beneath the surface.*

We all need to understand that handwriting has a very strong visual component, and that this comes before all else. When children first learning to write, they do so by copying letters and words and, when we apply what we know about the relationship of perception to performance, if a child is missing information because of a visual perceptual deficit, then

- A. They won't be able to connect the dots and make sense of what they are perceiving
- B. This will show up in their performance of the task – they will struggle to some degree or other.
- C. It will seem that handwriting is the issue but it is not.

In reality, there is a whole lot going on within handwriting and a child will be struggling long before they ever picked up the pencil and attempted to write. The motor component of handwriting is always the 'straw that broke the camel's back.'

I've begun a list below, of **a little** of what is actually involved in writing, just to demonstrate something of what is going on before that pencil ever touches the page. We need to be able to do the following:

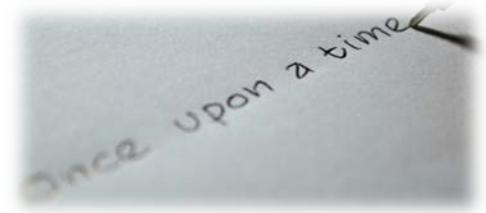
- Conceptualise our experience
  - ie: break that experience down into pieces or ideas and convey them to others, whilst explaining how each concept relates to all others.
- Understand the relationship of receptive language to expressive
  - ie: understanding (comprehending what we hear) and being able to express this verbally - expressing this in written form will only ever add yet another layer to this.
  - Being able to relate what others have conveyed about their experiences to our own experiences.
- Use symbols (letters and words) to convey our experiences to others
  - This is an extraordinarily complex and refined thing to be able to do. We have to understand our world and our experience, understand language, relate all of this throughout all areas of perceptual performance. We then need to be able to construct those symbols and relate them to everything else.



- Position ourselves relative to the task, position the pencil on the page, and construct the symbols relative to the lines on the page and to each other and to the edges of the page.



Handwriting is an incredibly refined and sophisticated task and, if anything, we should be amazed that children ever have the capacity to perform such a task. But they can, if their visual perceptual performance is intact and functional. However, if we attempt to address a child's struggle on the basis of what I have just outlined, it would be an impossible task and this is why a solid understanding of visual perceptual performance is so critical in enabling a child to overcome their struggles. Everything involved in writing arises from the exact same core place within our performance – visual perceptual performance. Therefore, we only have to address the child's visual perceptual issues and everything else immediately starts to fall into line. This is the power and beauty of this therapy, we don't have to engage in complex therapies nor have children practice the things they have already demonstrated they cannot do. Instead, we can go to the core of their performance, see what has gone wrong, correct this and just sit back and watch as it all comes together for them. Consequently we will not only see the child's handwriting improve, we will see the content of their stories grow, along with the amount they write and the maturity of their writing. And we will see motor function improve across the board, in everything they do. Not only that, all of the child's performance will naturally and spontaneously grow. It is not uncommon for parents to remark that the child who began the therapy and the one who finished it are definitely not the same child. And life suddenly gets a whole lot better for all concerned.



Ultimately, issues with handwriting reveal themselves to be the consequence of a visual perceptual deficit, where the child was unable to step into the priority of visual perceptual performance, resulting in an inability to engage in the earlier developmental tasks, which would refine motor performance. Because they could not understand these task or perform them, therefore they avoided them; and it is at this point that a lot of parents realise that their child's choice of activities in early childhood had more to do with their capacity to perform them than it did with their 'enjoyment' of them.<sup>1</sup>

It is typical to see a child's performance improve profoundly within 1 - 2 months, and to do so without having them repeatedly practice stuff. If we address a child's core skills, they will naturally go out into the world and use them because that is what kids do.

<sup>1</sup> Enjoyment of a task is always predicated on the capacity to perform the task and succeed. If one cannot do something there is naturally no ability to enjoy that task. So, the idea that a child is choosing any task on the basis of enjoyment needs to be rigorously questioned. Ultimately we will find that the child who avoided tasks in early childhood will struggle in school.



You can find out more about the *Visual Perceptual Therapy* and what I do here at [www.visualperceptual.com](http://www.visualperceptual.com) *VisualPerceptual* provides the ground-breaking *Visual Perceptual* Therapy around the world via Skype. This is a highly effective therapy that does get results, and the first step is to talk to us about your situation and discover how we can help.

*Welcome to my world, the world of visual perceptual performance*

*Natoya Rose*  
*Occupational Therapist*

