

# Hawa Learns to Write: Strategies for Handwriting Instruction

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## Abstract

I teach the beginning level English as a Second Language classes at the Don Bosco School for Adults in Kansas City, Missouri. We service refugees and immigrants from all over the world. In the beginning level classroom, many refugee students require guidance and instruction when they use writing utensils. They do not know how to draw basic shapes, and format letters by hand. I have developed a methodology for instructors who encounter the same unique challenge of teaching adults how to write. A series of steps for helping adults develop handwriting skills is presented in the following article. This article is written for adult basic education instructors who hope to improve their students' handwriting ability and proficiency.

**Keywords:** refugee, writing apprehension, demonstrated effectiveness, proficiency

Hawa was about 5' 8" tall and wore an African print scarf around her head. She had a contagious smile and said, "Teacher" when I met her. As she entered the classroom for the first time, I attempted to hand her a pen for the classroom sign-in sheet. She put her hands up and shook her head saying, "No, Teacher." I quickly realized she did not want to write her name. I took her student identification card and wrote her name for her. I spelled her name aloud as I wrote, showing her how to write the letters correctly, "H-A-W-A." She grinned, and slowly took a seat.

This was not the first time one of my refugee students had apprehensions about writing. When an adult does not know how to write their name in their native language, they seem embarrassed and display overwhelming anxiety. Their facial

expression is unidentifiable: a mix of fear and guilt. After teaching a beginning level English as a Second Language (ESL) class for refugee and immigrant adults for 4 years, I have come to recognize the unique, non-verbal cues that indicates a person is reluctant to write. I have learned the appropriate response and have become very aware of my facial expressions. I communicate with my students through non-verbal gestures and picture dictionaries. It is important that I am perceived by my students as positive and constantly supportive. I develop trusting relationships with my students so that they may learn in a safe environment and I witness authentic success stories.

I have developed a series of instructional strategies that help my students write English

letters coherently. I know other ESL teachers have encountered this challenge in their classrooms and have voiced their concerns about refugee adult students not writing legibly. Therefore, I would like to share my observations, tactics, and conclusions with the adult education community. Hopefully, others will gain insight into this unique writing issue and use lessons I have created which show demonstrated effectiveness in improving writing skills.

### **Listen Carefully**

I begin each class with a listening exercise to determine my students' writing ability. The first three words my students learn are: white board, eraser, and marker. We listen to a series of 12 English letters, and I ask students to write the upper- and lower-case letters on individual whiteboards with dry erase markers. I use an internet website called, "Learning Chocolate," which randomly selects the letters, and I write each letter on a large classroom whiteboard as students listen and write. The website, [www.learningchocolate.org](http://www.learningchocolate.org), provides a variety of vocabulary activities in several different languages.

I ask the students to listen by cupping my hand and putting it behind my ear while I say "Listen." Then, I motion my hand in pantomime as if I am writing on the white board as I say "Write." We listen to the letters and write each one slowly. This exercise helps them listen for the pronunciation and identify the English alphabet. This "drill" or "warm-up" also prepares students for their formal evaluation test where they are expected to match upper- and lower-case letters.

On Hawa's first day at class, after listening to a few letters, I glanced at her writing. I was shocked to see she was literally scribbling. When given a

pencil, Hawa's writing looked similar to that of a 3-year-old. She looked at me with a sarcastic smile on her face again, and I nodded kindly. I honestly believed she had never written before. It has been my experience that students who write in their own language will attempt the English letters with success. I have also had students who could write but could not shape the letters correctly. Hawa was not even forming a line or circle. I knew I had a unique, and special, challenge ahead of me. I was going to teach an adult, who might be challenged with learning disabilities and personal trauma with no formal education, how to hold a pencil correctly and eventually write her own name.

### **Questions About Students**

Several questions arise as I work with refugee students who do not write or write with distinction. My first thought to ponder is, does the student have a learning challenge of which I am not aware? Secondly, has the student attended school in the past? Third, has the student experienced a physical, neurological, or emotional trauma that is affecting their handwriting? Unfortunately, my ability to answer these questions cannot be answered. When students enroll they do not reveal their past educational experiences. I have to evaluate their abilities immediately and instruct them based on their individual needs.

Research regarding adult handwriting is limited. One study by Drempt, McCluskey, and Lannin (2011) helped me evaluate why an adult might not write legibly by summarizing previous research about adult handwriting performance for therapists working with physically impaired patients. According to their research, there are seven areas that affect adult handwriting: legibility, speed, pen grip, pen pressure, handwriting movements, style, and error corrections (Drempt

et al., 2011). Instructors of adults learning to write should be aware that “pen pressure” and “upper limb movements” make a difference when a person is learning to write. Handwriting students might be gripping a pencil incorrectly. The article also reminds the reader, when writing by hand, a writing surface should be positioned parallel to the forearm. Students should be instructed how to create space in between letters to create words, and how to adjust the size of their letters to distinguish between uppercase and lowercase.

Research on how malnourishment or emotional trauma affects handwriting in adulthood is also difficult to find. There are several different aspects of handwriting that can be addressed so students do not repeat the same mistakes. Not all seven factors that affect a person’s handwriting is applicable for adult students learning to write by hand. Style and error corrections do not apply to a person who is learning to write for the first time.

In a modern educated society, we grow up with crayons, pencils, and markers to help us develop writing skills early in life. In contrast, refugees or immigrants with limited writing utensils or resources available throughout childhood could miss the opportunity to learn how to write legibly. This is shocking, and maybe even appalling to people of western society. I have come to learn, even in the year 2019, there are adults who do not know how to write.

### **Right- or Left-Handed?**

When Hawa wrote on the whiteboard for the first time she used her right hand. Adult students might not be aware if they are right- or left-handed for writing purposes. I observe students who are learning to write closely. I pay attention to see what hand they use to lift a cup to drink, or we might play a bean bag toss game so I can

observe what hand a student is choosing to use. Simple tactics like this can clarify for me what hand a student should use to write. Deciding if a student is right- or left-handed is the first step in developing handwriting skills. This might seem arbitrary, although it is important because it will take longer for a student to learn how to write if they are forcing themselves to use the wrong hand.

### **Write a Straight Line**

The next step in teaching writing skills is guiding students to write a straight line. I use lined paper and model tracing lines using a pencil. I like to use pencils because students can erase, and a pencil is the primary writing utensil they will use in school. The lines cannot be too close together, so I use a black marker to trace the lines creating adequate space. Then, I take another thin sheet of paper (tracing paper works best) and cover my black lines. Hawa always appreciated when I would deliberately help her write straight lines. She started to develop a vocabulary quickly saying, “Good Hawa.” This was a phrase I used often, and students would laugh in class when she would repeat my encouraging words.

### **Draw Shapes**

The English alphabet is a series of lines, curves, and circles. If a person cannot draw a straight line, a half circle, and a full circle, they cannot write an English letter. Therefore, after a student becomes comfortable drawing straight lines, I introduce the vocabulary for shapes and colors. I will display three shapes in different colors: a red circle, blue square, and yellow triangle. I ask students to practice writing the shapes and then have them identify the shapes and colors. Hawa, like other students, enjoyed this activity because they use crayons and learn what it is like to create an art piece. I might say, “Write three red circles.”

The students are allowed to draw the circles anywhere on their construction paper. Then I might say, “Write four blue squares.” The squares are placed all over the paper, and the art that is created is fascinating and lovely. Instructors will be surprised how difficult it is for people to draw shapes for the first time.

## Writing Letters

After Hawa began to create shapes with distinction, I decided to use an alphabet tracing book. I think adults can learn the upper- and lower-case letters simultaneously. They learn the letters faster and can identify them more easily. Specifically, there is a tracing letters sheet published by the Ventures textbook series that has uppercase and lowercase letters along with the numbers one through nine. Plastic sleeves can be placed over the page so a thin white board marker can be used for practice. Again, blackened letters with tracing paper also works well.

## Spell Your Name, Please

The first word adults want to write is their own name. Students want to feel a sense of independence for practical reasons. They want to write their name when they enter the classroom, fill out a form when they go to the doctor, or sign a money order. Our name is a part of who we are and indicates from where we came. Therefore, the first phrase my students learn is, “Write your name, please.” I recite this phrase often in class, and my students consistently practice writing their names on assignments, whiteboards, and forms. The second phrase my students learn is, “Spell your name, please.” The word, “spell,” is important

because English speaking people will be asking my students to spell their foreign names each time they state their name.

## Conclusion

In my morning beginning level ESL class, I had 21 students who are described by the state as having a low level of literacy and cultural barriers during the 2018-2019 year. Students take the state mandated standardized post-test after 40 hours of instruction. Each year, the overall class statistics are evaluated. The state expects 63% of my students should show improvement. Hawa’s class demonstrated a 67% increase in test scores. Without conducting a proper observable qualitative study, I cannot attribute my instructional practices directly to the increase of proficiency. Although, I witnessed the individual improvements of students handwriting and letter identification. By the end of the school year, Hawa was signing her name on the classroom sign-in sheet without assistance.

Developing handwriting skills is an act that helps people gain independence and self-esteem. After attending weeks of class, the expressions on my students’ faces became more positive as they learned how use a pencil and improve their handwriting. Writing is a skill that is essential to improving literacy. It should not come as a shock to ESL teachers that they may have students who cannot write. Instead, we should think of non-writing students as a blessing. Their desire to learn is intense and their success directly impacts their quality of life. Students are coming to us for guidance and help, and it is our duty to respond with gratitude, respect, and enthusiasm.



## Reference

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