The Peterson Letter Tops Evaluation Process

The objective is to identify specific goals for improvement of legibility. Targeting one specific goal will make it easier to keep that goal in mind during all writing activities. The concept is quite simple and even kindergarten children can learn to do some critical thinking using this technique to analyze their handwriting.

Tools

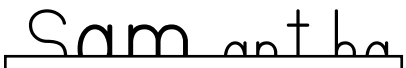
A piece of paper about the size of an index card can serve as a Legibility Analysis Gauge. Use of the gauge is easy to demonstrate and explain to students.

Place the gauge on top of a paper on which the child has written - cursive or print. Slide the gauge to partially cover the letters in a target word. We want the gauge to cover the bottoms of the letters so that the lower half of vowel size letter parts are concealed across the word or words.

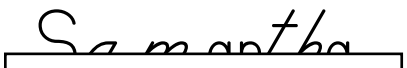
Example:

The primary clues for a reader are the tops of the letters. Four concepts (legibility subskills) can easily be identified and explained with this tool.

1. FORM - are the tops of the letters shaped well enough to decipher the letters in the group.
2. SLANT - are all letters leaning the same direction?
3. SIZE - (proportion) children can understand the word size. Are vowel size tops the same size or do some disappear because they are too small? Are tall tops noticeably taller than small tops?
4. SPACING - Print and cursive goals are different. Print letter tops must be close inside words with larger spaces between words. In cursive we want to slide between letters to control all four skills. For cursive we look for consistent space at the height of vowel size tops.

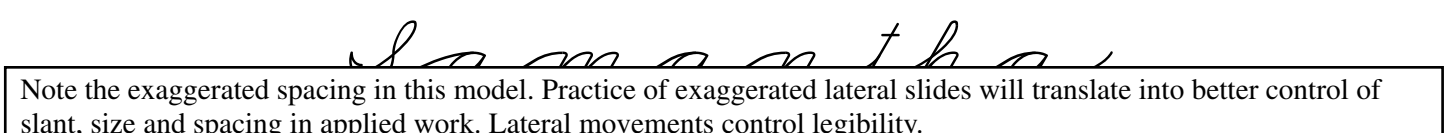


Needs = Size and Spacing



Needs = Slant and Spacing

Good form, slant, size and spacing.



Note the exaggerated spacing in this model. Practice of exaggerated lateral slides will translate into better control of slant, size and spacing in applied work. Lateral movements control legibility.

Teaching Critical Thinking

Initially the problem is that the child knows what he or she has written and can therefore, read it. That may not be the case the following day or even after lunch. The analysis gauge creates a reading puzzle that is easier to solve when the tops are the right shape, consistently vertical or leaning forward, in good proportion, and spaced well. The technique helps the child to recognize the individual legibility issues. That understanding allows you to focus upon a specific skill goal, show the student how to achieve a better result and let him or her concentrate on one goal at a time.

With print levels, size, slant and spacing are all related to eye-hand coordination - a motor skill called "anchoring." Don't let the "continuous stroke" story fool you. A child must use eye-hand coordination to achieve good size and spacing - place in space also - by touching the pencil in a good spot to begin each letter. Improving that "anchoring" skill requires understanding and practice - more for some who might be lagging a bit in coordination development. Students who do not understand the goal cannot practice to improve control.

Printing words in a simple sentence with some fluency demands far more complex mental activity than many people realize. A process called TEXT GENERATION (the process of choosing words) must be advanced to a minimal degree before any real fluency can be accomplished. At first it is common to see size and spacing problems because the children are creating one letter at a time. They are not "thinking in words." They may skip letters entirely when copying from a model and easily forget the goal of keeping letters close together and leaving larger spaces between words. Directed practice of words allows opportunity for improvement of control while enhancing word internalization for text generation. Use the analysis gauge during these sessions to keep legibility skills in focus.

As more word patterns are internalized and text generation begins to improve, the same problems are seen with a different cause. The writing process (transcription) is becoming more automatic - less visual. The muscle memory still needs a lot of driving practice to go it alone. In this case it's a good sign - but we still need to address legibility issues and call attention to goals for form, slant, size, spacing and using the lines (control).

Letter Tops Correlation

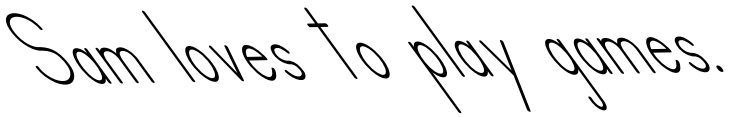
Using the letter tops technique to call attention to a specific objective can offer regular opportunity to keep the child focused upon a goal during applied work as well as during handwriting lessons. Once the students know how to apply the gauge, a minimal amount of time is needed to correlate handwriting goals into all written work.

Choose your activities for correlation to minimize correction time. An activity with spelling or vocabulary would allow you to check one or more words - the same words on every paper. Announce the skill to be assessed at the outset. Strike a line through the words checked when reviewing the papers to show that you have used the technique on the papers. If the skill is demonstrated give a couple of points for handwriting. If not, don't give the handwriting points.

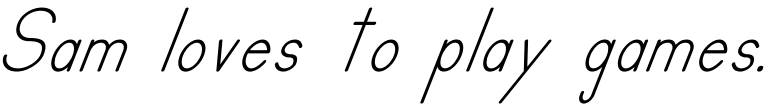
The letter tops technique also can be used as a game for word recognition practice with spelling and vocabulary. Ask students to close their eyes while you create a reading puzzle. Write the word on the board and erase the bottoms of the letters. Who can solve the reading puzzle? Add the bottom of one letter at a time to supply clues if necessary. You will find that directed word practice greatly increases the rate of recognition when playing the game.

The Impact of Slant

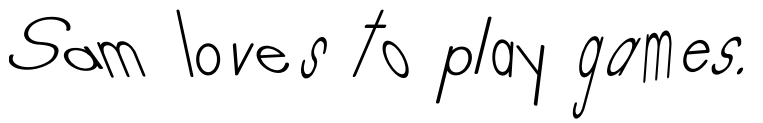
The slope of handwriting involves two considerations for the teacher and students. The concern for legibility is consistency. The other more important consideration is fluency. From a coaching standpoint slant provides important clues indicating a need for prompt attention if the child is to achieve a measure of fluent legibility later on.



Backward slant is a directionality issue for both reading and eventually writing with fluency. The illustration above shows great consistency in form, size, spacing and the downstrokes. But they travel in the wrong direction creating a backward slope that does not flow in the direction of eye travel when reading. You can read it because of the great consistency of all four skills. From the writing perspective however, it will be extremely difficult to maintain that consistency in applied work because it requires multiple muscle groups to create the shapes properly. Vertical cursive presents this same problem. Legibility is much more difficult to maintain at a fluent rate of production because of the need to coordinate multiple muscle groups to create legible shapes. If we don't get the direction of movement corrected quickly, the child will have great difficulty with applied work and with learning how to make cursive forms.



Forward slant is a sign of emerging fluency and cursive readiness! It is the result of good position for fluent application combined with more fluent lateral progression. When you see forward slant begin to happen in first grade, it is a good sign. Don't discourage - work for consistency. The shapes can be controlled by one muscle group and therefore, better legibility at a fluent production rate is achieved. This is particularly true for good left-handed process and for cursive writing. The out-right, back-left movement sequences that result in letters that slant forward, create four different cursive letter top shapes for all 26 lowercase forms using one group of muscles. It just makes sense that better control can be achieved during fluent writing.



Mixed slant makes decoding more difficult but it also indicates a much more troubling movement process that won't allow fluency. Check pencil and paper holding, writing arm position, the height of the table. Something is making it difficult for the child to move consistently in the best direction. Word internalization is being retarded along with spelling and composition skills. Fluent legibility will remain beyond reach until we can solve the problem that is causing the result. Watch the production process for each letter closely. You may find that the child is starting in the wrong place and moving in the wrong direction for some letters. Thousands of digital samples revealed a high incidence of sequence reversals. Many children printed several letters entirely backwards. Two wrote their name completely in reverse moving bottom-up and right-to-left rather than top-down and left to right. This was not mirror writing. All strokes were in place but produced with a reversed movement sequence as if writing in Hebrew or Arabic.