

SIL Early Writing Pathway

Composition Guidance in the EYFS



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Oral Composition in the EYFS

Oral composition in the EYFS refers to children learning to create, order and share ideas through talk before writing.

Through storytelling, role play, rehearsal and discussion, children build the language, vocabulary and narrative structure they need to become confident writers.

Oral composition skills develop as children learn to organise, rehearse and express their ideas aloud through talk, storytelling and play. Through rich talk experiences, children develop oral composition skills that support clear thinking and meaningful writing.

Typical Stages of Development: Oral Composition

Pre-intentional Communication (Birth–2)

- Children use vocalisations, gestures, and shared attention to communicate meaning.
- Narrative foundations form through turn-taking, imitation, and responsive conversation.

Intentional Communication & Early Story Sense (2–3)

- Children begin to express simple ideas orally (e.g., naming, describing).
- They start linking ideas causally: “I do... then...”
- Adults construct meaning through modelling and expansion.

Oral Story Building (3–4)

- Children can tell short, simple sequences of events that recall family events.
- Begin using connectives (“and”, “then”).
- Story language emerges from repeated book talk and high-quality modelling.

Oral Composition for Writing (4–5 / Reception)

- Children orally rehearse full sentences before transcription.
- Able to generate simple independent contributions to a story or description.
- Dictation (adult as scribe) supports structure, vocabulary, and cohesion.



Preparing for Oral Composition



Birth to 1Year



Speaking

Typically, children will:

- Communicate needs and feelings in a variety of ways including crying, gurgling, babbling and squealing.
- Begin making cooing sounds and experiments with simple vocal play.
- Watch faces speaking and may attempt to copy simple facial expressions.
- Develop babbling, which become more advanced, signalling emerging speech patterns.
- Use gestures such as pointing to communicate needs.
- Attempt to copy speech sounds and produces more meaningful early words; e.g. mama, dada.

Ways that adults can support:

- Talk, sing and read and often use simple words, repetition and responsive gestures and sounds.
- Provide face-to-face interaction – eye contact, smiles, and turn-taking games like peek-a-boo.
- Share books and rhymes daily – short, repetitive rhymes with actions to build attention and listening.
- Create calm, predictable routines – familiar voices and routines help babies focus and tune in.

Listening and attention

Typically, children will:

- React to sounds by startling, blinking or quieting.
- Turn head or eyes towards familiar voices and begins to differentiate tone.
- Maintain attention briefly when spoken to or when hearing music.
- Watch speaker's mouth and facial expressions while listening.
- Enjoy repetitive songs and rhymes; anticipates pauses and changes.
- Respond to simple verbal cues e.g. no, bye-bye, and familiar routines.
- Begin to imitate listening behaviours; e.g. pausing, looking, waiting.

4-5 Year Olds



Speaking

Typically, children will:

- Speak clearly and fluently.
- Use a rich and increasingly precise vocabulary, including topic-specific words from stories, learning, and experiences.
- Speak in well-formed sentences, using conjunctions such as and, because, so, then to link ideas.
- Use past, present, and future forms more accurately (“I went...”, “I am going...”, “I will...”).
- Use talk to collaborate in play, taking roles, giving instructions, and maintaining shared narratives.
- Use language to explain, reason, imagine and express feelings.

Ways that adults can support:

- Model and encourage purposeful talk – use rich vocabulary, ask open-ended questions, and value children’s ideas.
- Develop listening in groups – share stories, discussions and games that require the following rules and turn-taking.
- Support sustained attention – clear routines, visual cues and gradually increasing listening demands.
- Promote talk for thinking and learning – encourage explanations, predictions, problem solving and reflection.

Listening and attention

Typically, children will:

- Develop 2-channelled attention e.g. listening to instructions while continuing to play and sustain focus for longer periods of time.
- Be able to follow multi-step instructions independently.
- Be able to listen to longer stories with increasing attention and recall, anticipating key events
- Understand sequencing and cause-effect in spoken narratives e.g. he was sad because ...
- Understand conversational turn-taking and can respond to others’ comments.
- Recognise when attention is needed e.g. quiets down when teacher begins speaking.

Oral Rehearsal Reduces Cognitive Load

Oral rehearsal reduces cognitive load by allowing children to organise and refine their ideas before they write. The Writing Framework highlights that writing places a heavy demand on working memory, as children must manage transcription (handwriting and spelling) alongside composition.

By rehearsing ideas orally first, children offload some of the cognitive demand, freeing up mental capacity to focus on meaning, structure and vocabulary. In this way, oral rehearsal directly supports composition while easing the burden of transcription, aligning closely with the Simple View of Writing.

This makes oral composition not an optional add-on, but a core mechanism for strengthening the Punctuation strand and improving overall writing quality.

Understanding of Language

Understanding language involves:

- Vocabulary knowledge: A wide enough vocabulary to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas.
- Understanding sentence structure: Awareness of how words fit together (subject, verb, object).
- Memory skills: Ability to recall words and ideas to form coherent sentences.
- Conceptual understanding: Grasp of basic concepts like time, size, location, and emotions.
- Using language for different purposes: Asking questions, making requests, expressing feelings.

Spoken language is as important for writing as for reading

The Writing Framework makes this link explicit, stating that “*spoken language is as important for writing as for reading*” and that pupils should compose orally “*even when they can transcribe fluently.*”

This clearly positions oral composition as fundamental to writing development, in alignment with the Simple View of Writing’s strategic, language-based ideation component rather than treating it as a preliminary or developmental stage.

Writing = Transcription x Composition

Transcription

The skills needed to get words down on paper or screen

- Handwriting (or typing)
- Spelling

Lower-level skills such as basic punctuation

Composition

The thinking side of writing

- Generating ideas
- Vocabulary choice
- Sentence construction
- Organising ideas into a coherent text
- Awareness of audience and purpose
- Planning, revising and editing

Considerations for Children with EAL

Language Acquisition Awareness

- Children with English as an additional language may experience the silent period when receptive language develops before expressive language.
- Limited English does not reflect cognitive delay.

Effective Strategies may include:

- Providing structured talk opportunities
- Use modelling, visuals and repetition
- Encourage story telling, role play and talk in play.



The Importance of the Home Language

It is essential that we encourage parents and carers to maintain and develop their language, particularly within the EYFS when pupils are still developing their first language. Children who are able to speak their first language find it much easier to acquire a second language than pupils whose first language development has been halted to prioritise English.

Effective strategies may include:

- Dual language displays and signage providing a powerful message that language is celebrated and of value
- Ensuring staff understand the value of the first language
- Liaising with parents through coffee sessions and drop ins, encouraging them to maintain and speak the first language at home.
- Home learning tasks may be completed in English but all of the talk around the work can be completed in the strong language. It is important for children to hear rich models of language. It doesn't matter what the language is, skills are transferrable.

Supporting Children with SEND in Writing Composition

Some children may experience difficulties with:

- Working memory
- Language processing
- Attention and executive function
- Motor or coordination skills
- Emotional barriers.

These factors can reduce cognitive capacity for forming ideas, sequencing writing, and maintaining stamina.



High-Impact Strategies for Composition

Pre-writing and Idea Generation

- Use visuals, story maps, and graphic organisers to scaffold thinking.
- Provide concrete prompts such as pictures or objects.
- Allow oral rehearsal before writing.
- Use mind-mapping tools to capture ideas without structure.

Structuring and Organising Writing

- Provide writing frames or planning templates.
- Chunk tasks into small steps (e.g., setting, character problem).
- Model planning and composing live.
- Display clear success criteria in pupil-friendly language.



Reducing Cognitive Load

- Use dictation, speech-to-text, or typing as alternatives.
- Provide word banks, sentence stems, and vocabulary mats.
- Allow flexible forms of output.
- Use visual timers and checklists for self-monitoring.

Understanding the Language of Letter Formation

Teaching letter formation effectively requires adults to use consistent, precise language so children understand how letters are formed, where they start, and what movements are needed.

Research shows that letter formation is a key foundation for handwriting fluency, writing confidence, and later composition skills.



Age /Stage	Typical Language Development	Examples of Language Used	Adult Support & Experiences
Babies (0–1)	Begins to attend to words alongside actions.	up, down	Model language during routines (lifting, lowering) use gestures with words.
Toddlers (1–2)	Understands simple positional language linked to actions.	in, out, on, off	Comment on play (“car in box”), use repetition in everyday activities.
Early 2s	Responds to basic direction words in context.	under, out, up	Use in world play, hide-and-find games, model language clearly.
2–3 years	Understands and uses simple positional language.	on top, inside, next to	Encourage talk in play; follow simple instructions (“put it on the table”).
3–4 years	Uses a wider range of positional and directional language.	behind, in front, between, round	Explicitly model vocabulary; barrier games, construction, role play.
Reception (4–5)	Understands and uses language to describe location and movement.	above, below, through, across, before, after	Give multi-step instructions; map work, obstacle courses, story language.
Year 1+	Uses positional language precisely to support explanations and writing.	left/right, first/next/finally	Link to oral rehearsal, instructions, sequencing for writing tasks.

Strokes, Lines and Basic Shapes

Letters are made of component strokes.

Before forming letters, children must master the underlying shapes:

- Vertical lines
- Horizontal lines
- Curves
- Circles
- Diagonal lines

Letter formation relies on recognising and producing these strokes, which are foundational motor patterns.



Pencil Grip and Control Language



Children need language to understand how to hold and use their writing tool:

- “Hold with three fingers—that’s the tripod grip.”
- “Use gentle pressure.”
- “Use small movements with your fingers.”

The tripod grip (dynamic tripod) is identified as the most efficient for controlled writing.

Why the Language of Letter Formation Matters

01

Clear, consistent verbal cues reduce cognitive load — children don't need to guess the next step.

02

Language helps children internalise motor sequences for automaticity.

03

Good letter formation is linked to improved comprehension and story writing, because children can focus on ideas instead of the physical mechanics of writing.





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Transcription in the EYFS Guidance

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Stages of Emergent Writing Development in Young Children



Drawing and Scribbling (pre-literate stage)

Children produce random lines, circles and marks that imitate writing behaviours and they may begin to give meaning to these marks which shows early narrative thinking.

What this shows:

At this stage, children are beginning to understand that marks can represent ideas.

Emergent Letter Use

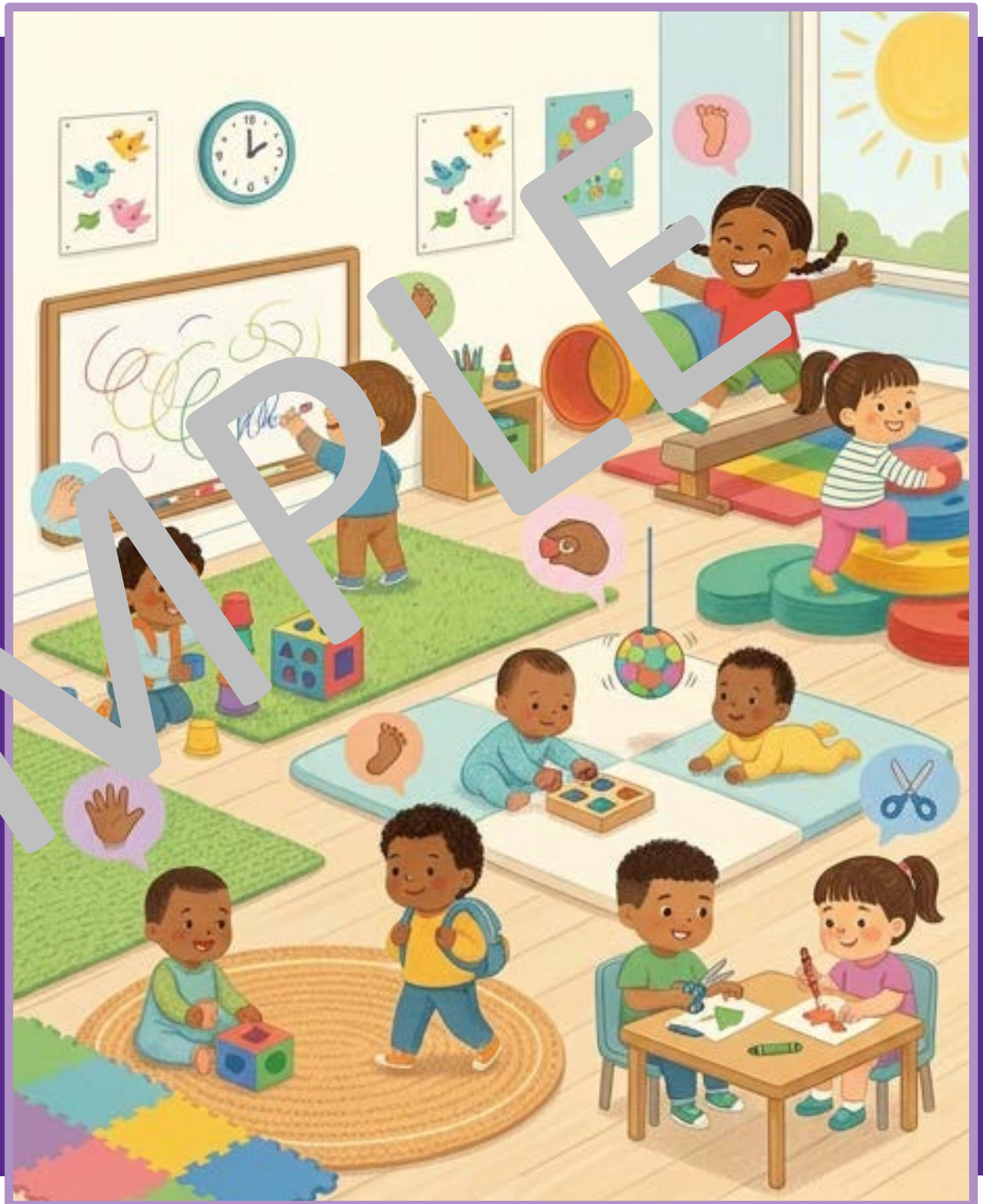
Children begin to use actual letters, often starting with familiar ones

Early writing may appear as strings of familiar letters, especially from their own name. Later on, letters begin to correspond to the sounds in words, often starting with the initial sounds of words.

What this shows:

At this stage, children are beginning to understand the phoneme-grapheme correspondence, an essential component of conventional writing.

Developmental Milestones for Fine and Gross Motor Foundations



Introduction

Gross- and fine-motor development are closely interconnected. Strong gross-motor foundations support posture, stability and shoulder strength, enabling children to develop fine-motor control in the hands and fingers. Through repeated practice, children gain the dexterity, control and stamina needed to use tools, make marks and write with increasing fluency.

Ofsted's Best Start in Life stresses that early investment in physical development is essential for securing strong foundations for writing, independence and later academic success.

Gross-motor development from birth to five is built through movement and physical play, enabling children to develop strength, balance, coordination and body control.

Secure gross-motor foundations support posture, stamina, attention and confidence, underpinning children's ability to engage in learning and develop fine-motor skills, including writing.

Fine and Gross Motor Difficulties



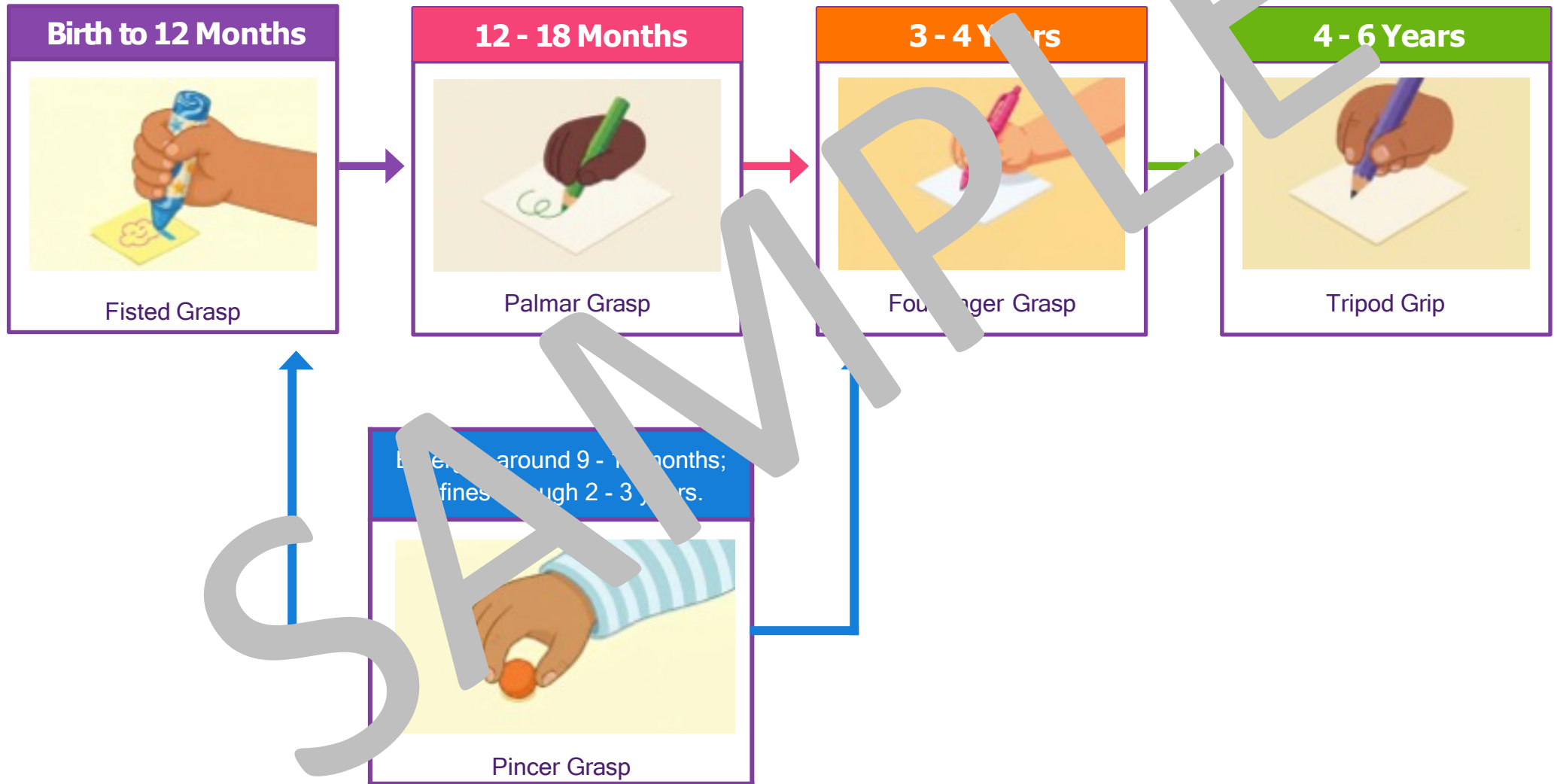
Some children may demonstrate:

- Weak core stability impacting writing posture
- Poor hand strength or dexterity
- Difficulty with pencil grip and control

Strategies to support:

- Provide sloped writing boards or alternative seating, as developmentally appropriate
- Use pencil grips or adaptive writing tools
- Incorporate fine-motor strengthening activities into daily routines and continuous provision

Typical Developmental Stages of Grip



Typically emerges around 9 –12 months; refines through 2 –3 years

The pincer grasp emerges as children gain increasing control of their fingers and hands through everyday experiences.

The pincer grasp develops through play, sensory exploration and everyday routines.

Sensory and Exploratory play

- Picking up soft balls, fabric pieces or textured objects using thumb and finger
- Exploring treasure baskets with small, safe items to grasp and release
- Scooping and pinching sand, water, soil or dry materials
- Pinching, squeezing and rolling playdough, clay or dough

Adult Role

Adults support pincer grasp by:

- Modelling careful finger movements
- Providing time, repetition and encouragement
- Ensuring resources are age appropriate and safe valuing exploration rather than outcomes



Everyday Routines

- Picking up small finger foods (e.g. soft fruit pieces) during mealtimes
- Helping to turn pages in board books
- Pulling wipes from a box or tissues from a packet
- Using fingers to pick food from plate or tray
- Helping to place snacks into a bowl or cup

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness – leading to phoneme-grapheme correspondence.

Phonological awareness is a foundational element of early writing development and underpins children's ability to link sounds to written symbols. Through songs, rhymes, stories and sound play, children learn to notice and distinguish sounds in spoken language.

As this awareness develops, children begin to recognise that spoken words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes) and that these sounds can be represented by written letters or letter groups (graphemes).

This growing understanding supports children to make meaningful connections between speech and writing, enabling them to attempt early spellings, encode words phonetically and understand that writing carries meaning.

Within the EYF, phonological awareness is developed alongside physical readiness and oral language experiences, ensuring that phoneme-grapheme correspondence emerges naturally within play, talk and purposeful writing opportunities rather than through formalised instruction alone.



Sound Discrimination

Sound discrimination is a crucial skill in early phonics, as it helps children recognise and differentiate between sounds in spoken language.

This ability lays the foundation for reading and writing by enabling children to connect sounds (phonemes) to letters (graphemes).

Activity ideas:

- **Listening Walks** – Encourage children to identify different sounds in their environment.
- **Sound Sorting Games** – Sorting pictures of objects by initial, medial, or final sounds.
- **Rhyming Game** – Matching words that rhyme (e.g., “sun” and “fun”).
- **I Spy with Sounds** – Saying “I spy something that starts with /b/” and letting child guess.
- **Clapping Syllables** – Clapping out the beats in words to identify syllables (e.g., “but-ter-fly” = 3 claps).

Alliteration

The repetition of the same initial sound in words (e.g., “Silly Sammy slipped on soap”).

It helps young children develop phonemic awareness, which is essential for learning to read and write.

Activity ideas:

- **Silly Sound Songs** – Sing songs with alliteration (e.g., “Bouncy baby bunnies”).
- **Sound Sorting** – Gather objects (ball, banana, book) and say, “These all start with /b/!”
- **Alliteration Storytime** – Read books with alliteration (e.g., *Sheep in a Shop* by Nancy Shaw).
- **Tongue Twister Fun** – Start with easy ones like “Tiny tigers tickle turtles.”
- **Alliteration Art** – Draw a “Silly Snake” or “Happy Hippo” and talk about the sound.
- **I Spy with Sounds** – “I spy something that starts with /s/!” and let them find an object

Considerations for Children with EAL

Phonics and Phonological Awareness

Children with English as an additional language may:

- Not recognise English sounds that do not exist in their home language
- Struggle to distinguish similar phonemes e.g. b, p
- Need additional modelling of new information and articulation

Strategies to support:

- Explicit teaching of sound discrimination
- Visual cues and actions
- Over-learning of key grapheme-phoneme correspondence

Phonological Awareness Challenges

Some children may demonstrate:

- Difficulty segmenting and blending sounds
- Inconsistent spelling patterns
- Confusion between similar graphemes

Strategies to support:

- Use structured phonics interventions
- Provide colour-coded grapheme cards
- Allow speech-to-text support where appropriate

Early Spelling Behaviours



Introduction

Early spelling develops as children begin to connect sounds in spoken language with letters and letter patterns.

In line with Development Matters in the EYFS, early spelling is developmental and reflects growing phonological awareness rather than accuracy

What Early Spelling Behaviours Show

Early spelling behaviours demonstrate that children:

- Understand that writing carries meaning
- Are beginning to segment spoken words into sounds
- Are experimenting with the sound–symbol relationship
- Are applying phonological knowledge independently

These attempts provide valuable assessment information, revealing what sounds a child can hear, which phonemes they recognise, and how they process spoken language.

How Early Spelling Develops

Typically

- Early spelling develops through talk, play and experience, not memorisation
- Children’s spellings should be valued and discussed, not corrected prematurely
- Adult support should focus on modelling and expanding, rather than fixing errors

Handwriting and Letter Formation



What Handwriting Looks Like in Reception

Children are supported to:

- Hold a pencil using an effective grip
- Sit with appropriate posture and stability
- Form recognisable lower-case letters, mostly correctly
- Use consistent starting points for letter formation
- Write letters that are generally correctly oriented
- Develop stamina to write words and simple sentences

Children may still show variation in size, spacing and consistency, which is developmentally appropriate.

How Handwriting is Taught Effectively

In line with the Writing Framework, effective practice includes:

- Explicit modelling of letter formation by adults
- Linking letter formation directly to phoneme-grapheme correspondence
- Regular, short opportunities to practise writing
- Teaching handwriting as part of real writing, not isolated drills
- Revisiting formation frequently to build automaticity

The emphasis is on fluency over speed and consistency over perfection

Teaching Letter Formation

Effective letter-formation teaching in the EYFS prioritises physical readiness, consistent modelling and meaningful, play-based practice.

Children are supported to develop core foundations such as gross and fine motor strength, control and spatial awareness before being expected to record formally.

Adults model accurate letter formation through shared writing and everyday mark-making, ensuring consistency in language, directionality and expectations.

In line with the *Writing Framework for England: Foundations in the First Years of School*, fluency and confidence are built gradually over time, recognising that secure handwriting emerges from repeated, purposeful experiences rather than an early formalisation.

This approach avoids pushing children towards age-inappropriate outcomes and instead values developmentally appropriate progression that supports long-term success in writing.

Considerations

Physical readiness comes first	Secure letter formation depends on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">posture and core stabilityshoulder, arm and wrist strengthfine-motor control and strength
Fluency over correctness	Priority is: <ul style="list-style-type: none">smooth, controlled movementrecognising lettersincreasing ease and automaticity
Fluid practice is correct	Children may: <ul style="list-style-type: none">reverse lettersvary size and orientationuse different grips
Teach letter formation alongside phonics	In line with the Writing Framework, letter formation should be taught: <ul style="list-style-type: none">in connection with phoneme–grapheme correspondenceusing lower-case letters firstwith a focus on consistent starting points
Consistency matters	Children benefit from: <ul style="list-style-type: none">consistent formation language (e.g. “start at the top”)consistent models from all adultsa shared handwriting approach across the setting



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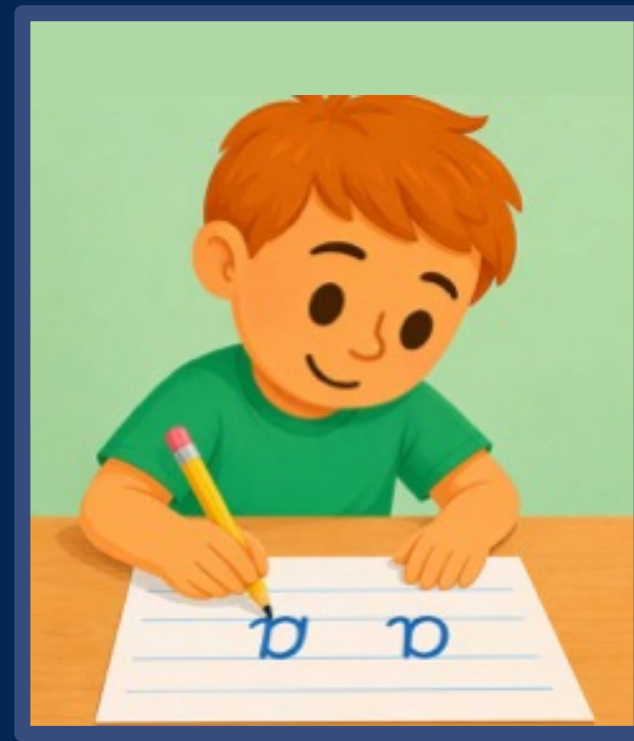
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Handwriting in the Reception Year

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Introduction

The Writing Framework (DfE, July 2025) is explicit that: Handwriting (as part of transcription) should begin early in Reception, but it must be developmentally appropriate. It should be focused on foundations first, and taught alongside oral language, talk and physical development rather than replacing them.

Handwriting is not treated as a discrete “skill” but as part of securing transcription so that writing can become fluent and automatic.

Reception is About Building Foundations

The Writing Framework states that Reception is a foundational year:

- Children are not expected to produce extended writing
- Teachers should prioritise letter formation, spelling and sentence foundations
- Quality practice matters more than quantity
- Building the foundations for writing: transcription and composition, are fundamental

Handwriting Progress and Readiness



Before formal handwriting, children may need:

- Strengthening of shoulders, elbows and wrist pivots
- Opportunities to practice writing movements at different scales
- Support to hold and control a pencil comfortably

Early handwriting sessions may include:

- Air writing
- Large-scale movements
- Tracing with fingers
- Learning the movement of letters before recording them precisely

Reception Handwriting Progression Overview

To support children to develop the physical, cognitive and motivational foundations needed for fluent, legible handwriting over time.

In Reception, handwriting sits within transition and is developed alongside play, talk, and physical development.

Underpinning Principles

Handwriting in Reception should be:

- Developmentally appropriate
- Explicit but brief
- Physical-first
- Quality over quantity
- Focused on letter formation, not writing length

Stage 3: Introducing Letter Formation

Focus

- Teaching how letters are formed
- Building correct movement patterns from the start

What Children Are Developing

- Formation of individual letters
- Understanding starting points and direction
- Early fluency with taught letters

Practice Expectations

- Letters taught explicitly and in isolation
- Taught in addition to phonic
- Focus on individual letters
- Letters usually grouped by similar movement patterns



Adult Role

- Model agreed handwriting style consistently
- Give specific feedback on formation, neatness
- Correct misconceptions early and gently

Teaching Approach

- Adult models letter formation clearly
- Children practise only letters already taught

Practice may include:

- Air writing
- Large-scale writing
- Short pencil tasks

Shared Staff Expectations

Adults should:

- Model handwriting consistently
- Use agreed formation language
- Reinforce physical readiness
- Protect time for practice and learning through play
- Value effort and engagement





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Strategies for Modelling Oral Composition



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Oral Composition in the EYFS: Why Adult Modelling Matters

Oral composition refers to children's ability to form, organise and communicate ideas orally—using vocabulary, grammar, narrative structure and purposeful talk. In the EYFS, it is foundational: children rehearse language orally before they can write, and their early structures later support reading comprehension and written composition.

High quality adult interaction and modelling is the strongest lever for developing children's oral language, particularly for disadvantaged children and those learning English as an additional language.



Thinking Aloud to Model Oral Composition

What adults do

Adults make their thinking explicit, showing children how ideas are formed and organised.



Examples

- “First I will..., then I might..., because...”
- “I wonder why..., maybe because...”
- This supports narrative sequencing, causal language and explanation — key components of oral composition.

Narrative Modelling Through Story, Play, and Talk

Adults model:

- Story language (“Once..., suddenly..., in the end...”)
- Character perspectives
- Cause and consequence



Narrative competence is a critical precursor to later writing, and adults should intentionally model story structures during play and reading.



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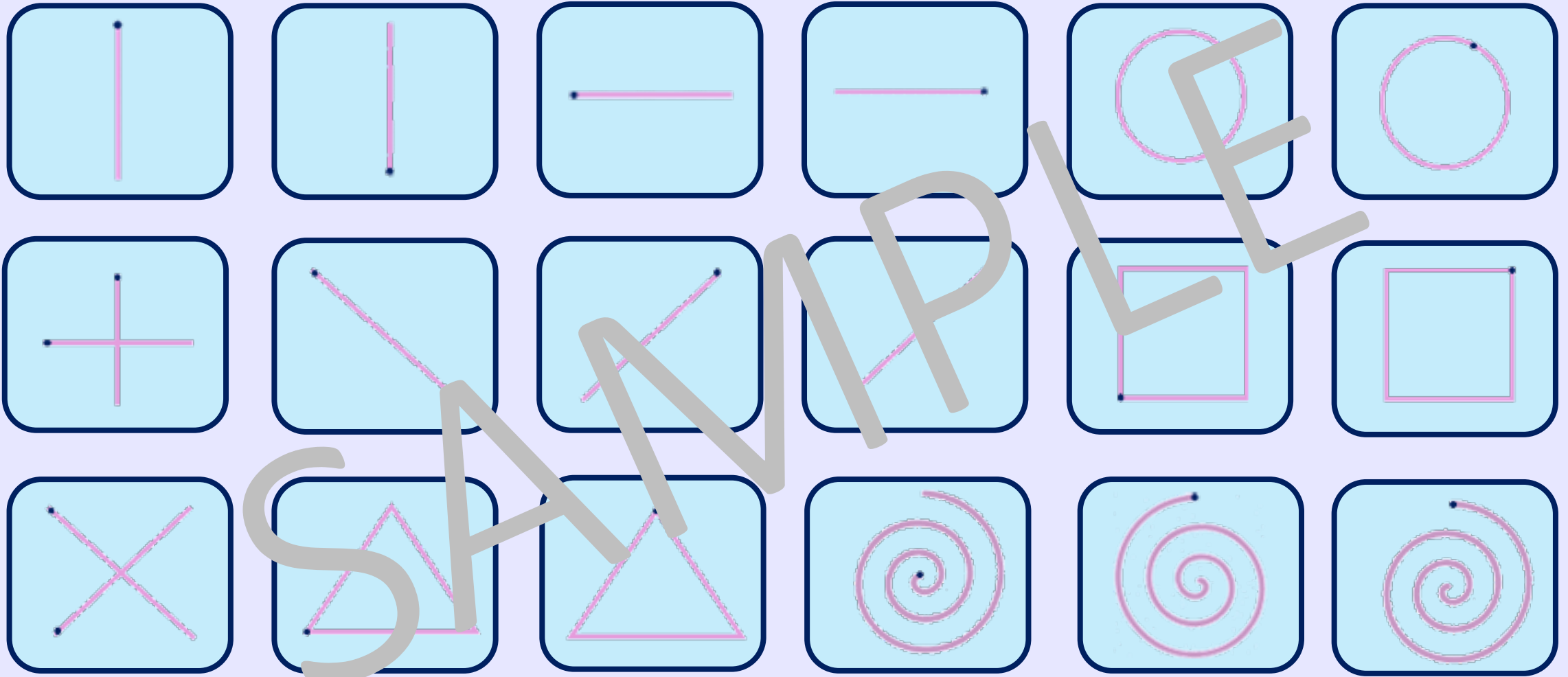
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Pre-Writing Shapes

Handwriting Matters: Keep it Simple. Do it Well.

Pre-Writing Shapes





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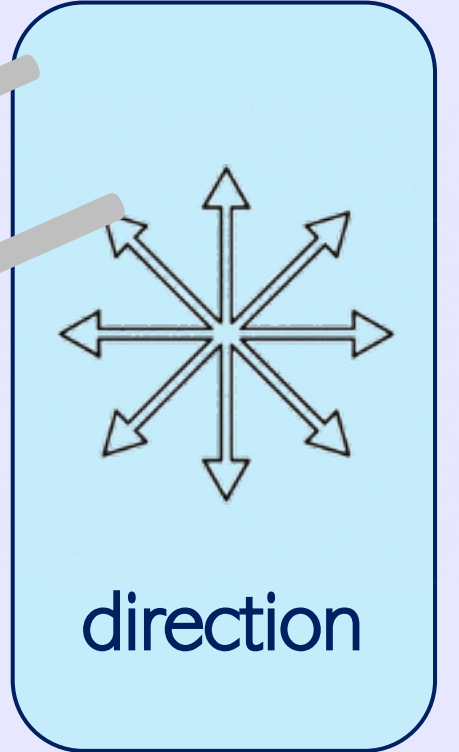
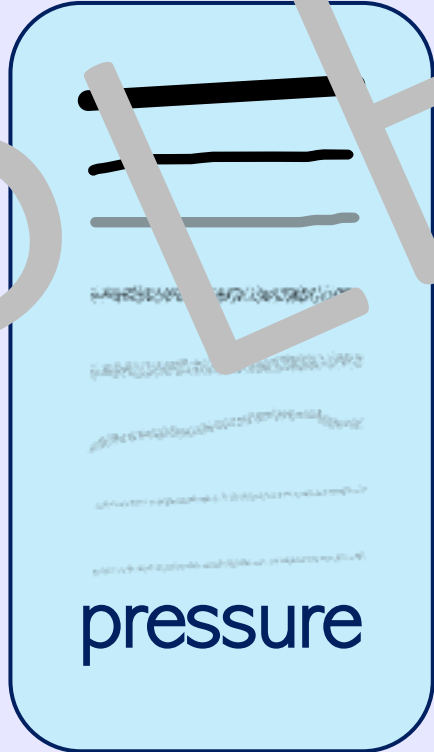
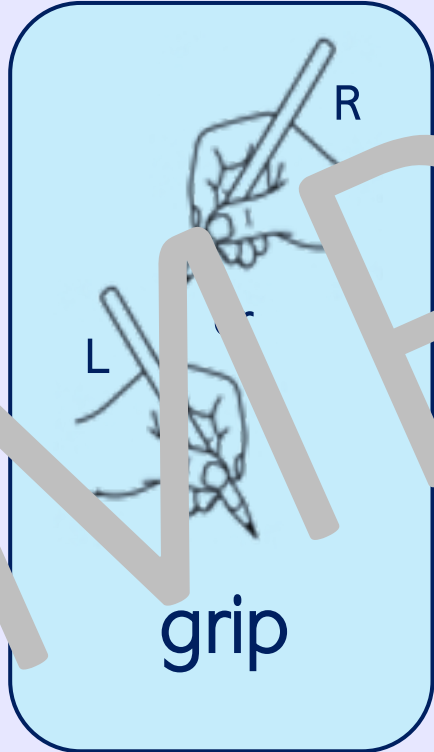
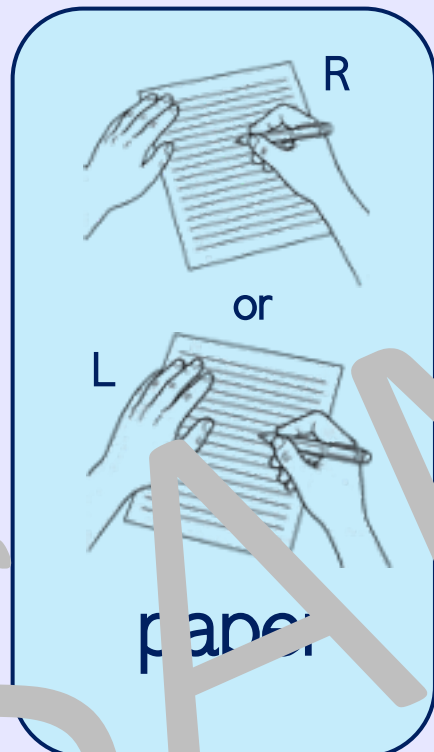
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Pre-Writing Patterns

Handwriting Matters: Keep it Simple. Do it Well.

Get ready...





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Create...





SAMPLE



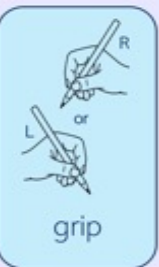
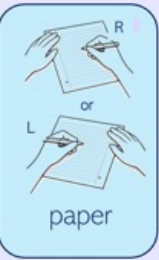
C C C C C
SAMPLE

Accurate Formations: Lowercase Letters

Handwriting Matters: Keep it Simple. Do it Well.

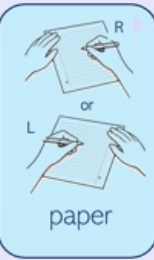
The Down Family





SAMPLE





lit lit

SAMPLE



SAMPLE

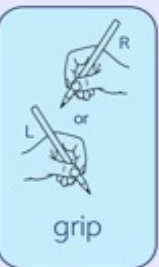
Accurate Formations: Numbers

Handwriting Matters: Keep it Simple. Do it Well.

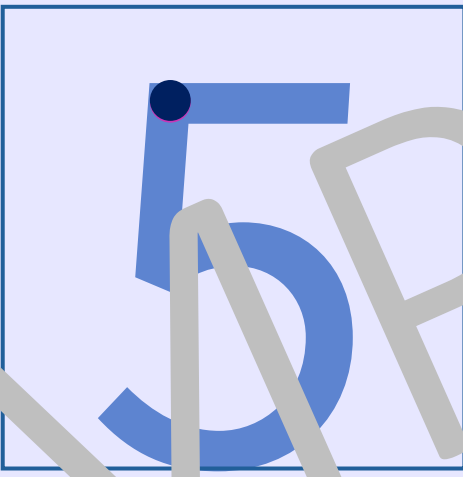
The Down Family



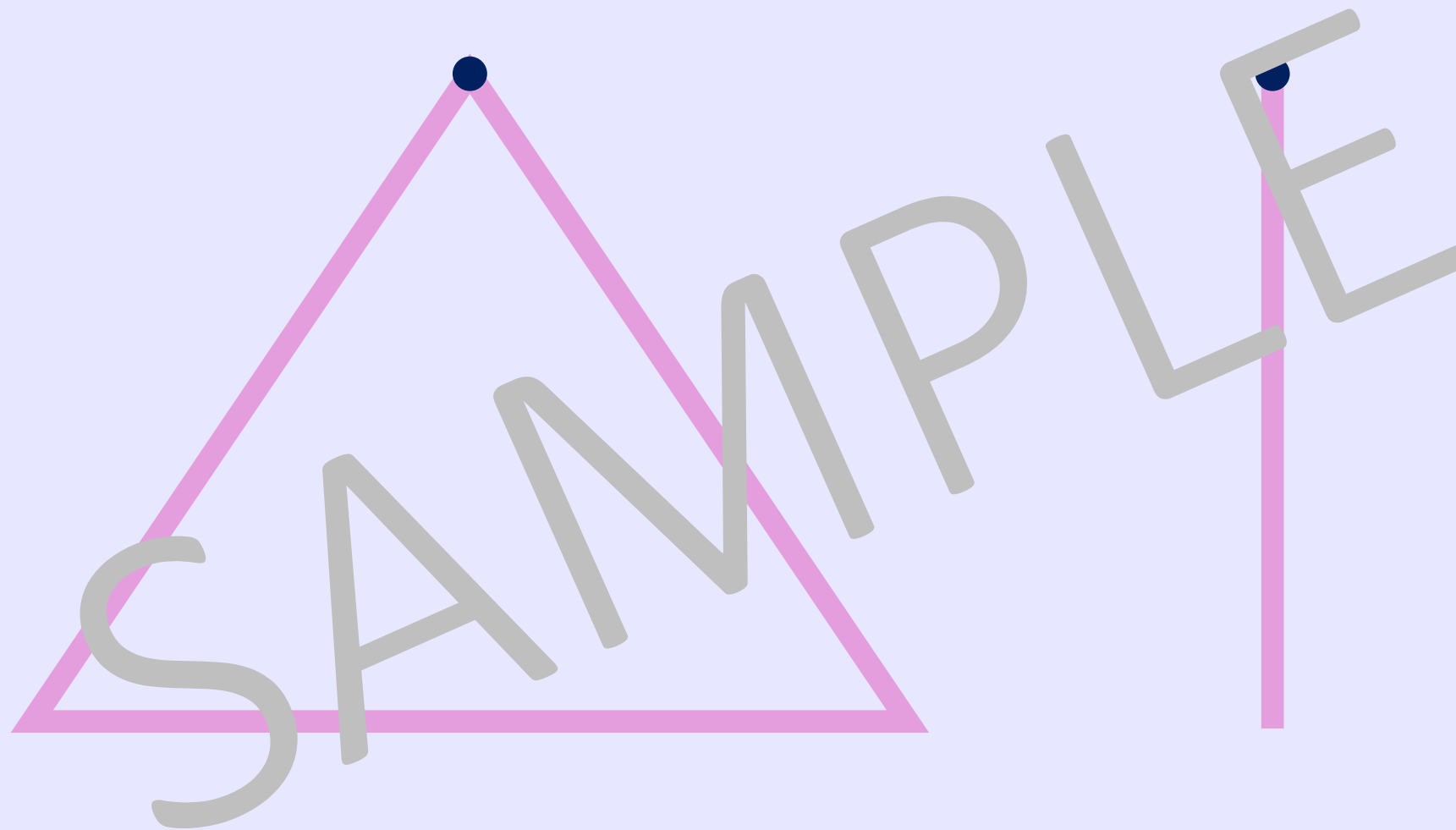
SAMPLE



SAMPLE



Warm up



The Around-to-the-Right Family

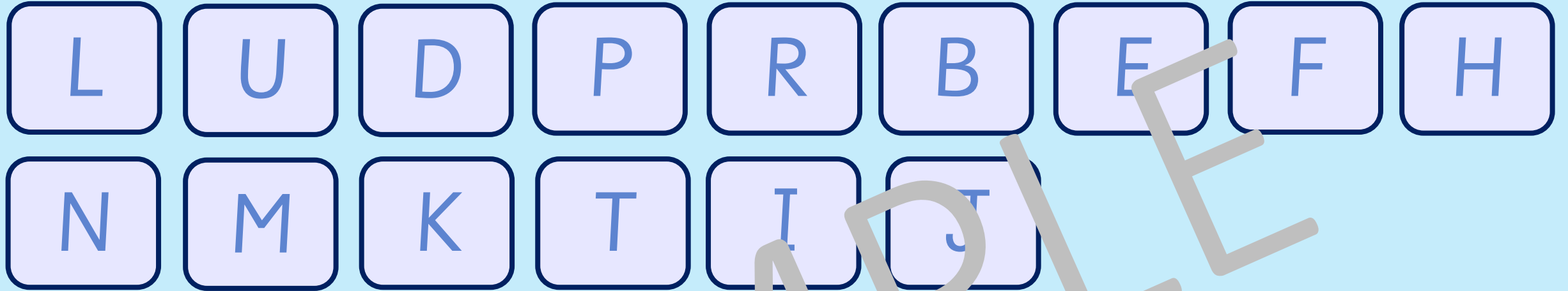


Accurate Formations: Capital Letters

Handwriting Matters: Keep it Simple. Do it Well.

Letter Families

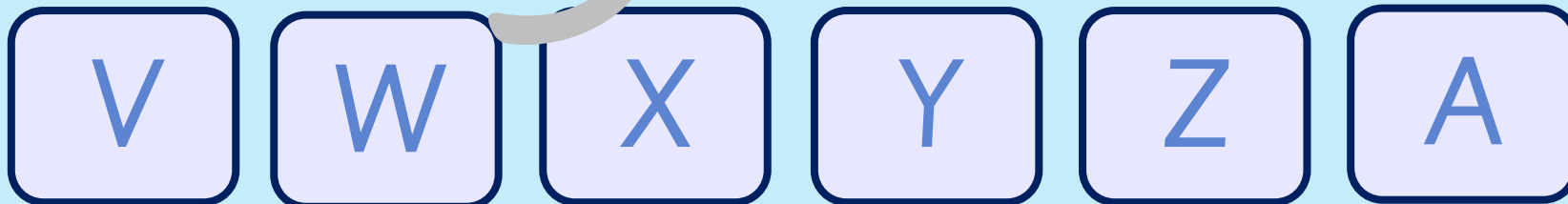
The Down Family



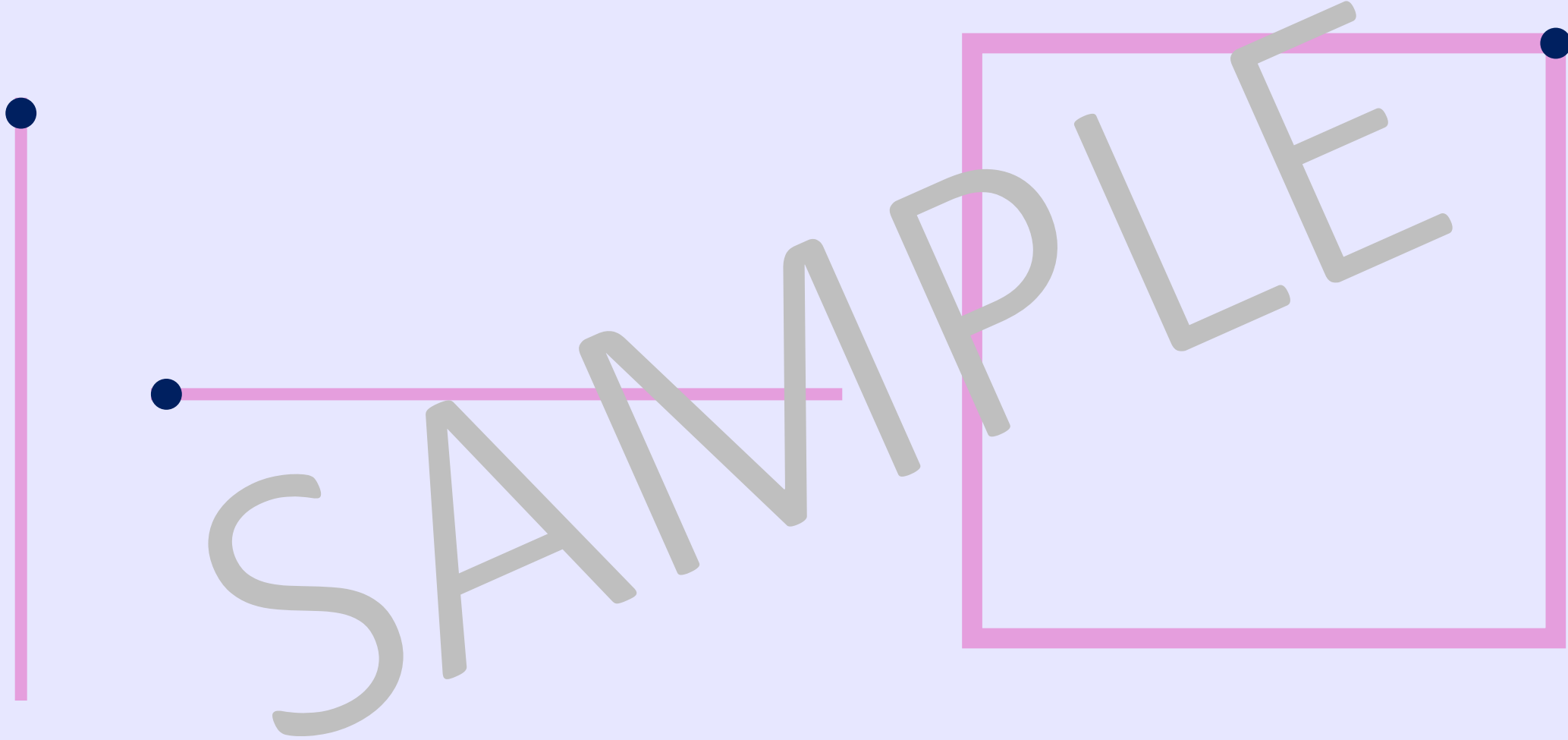
The Around-to-the-Left Family

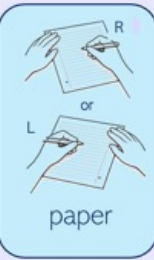


The Diagonal Family



Warm up

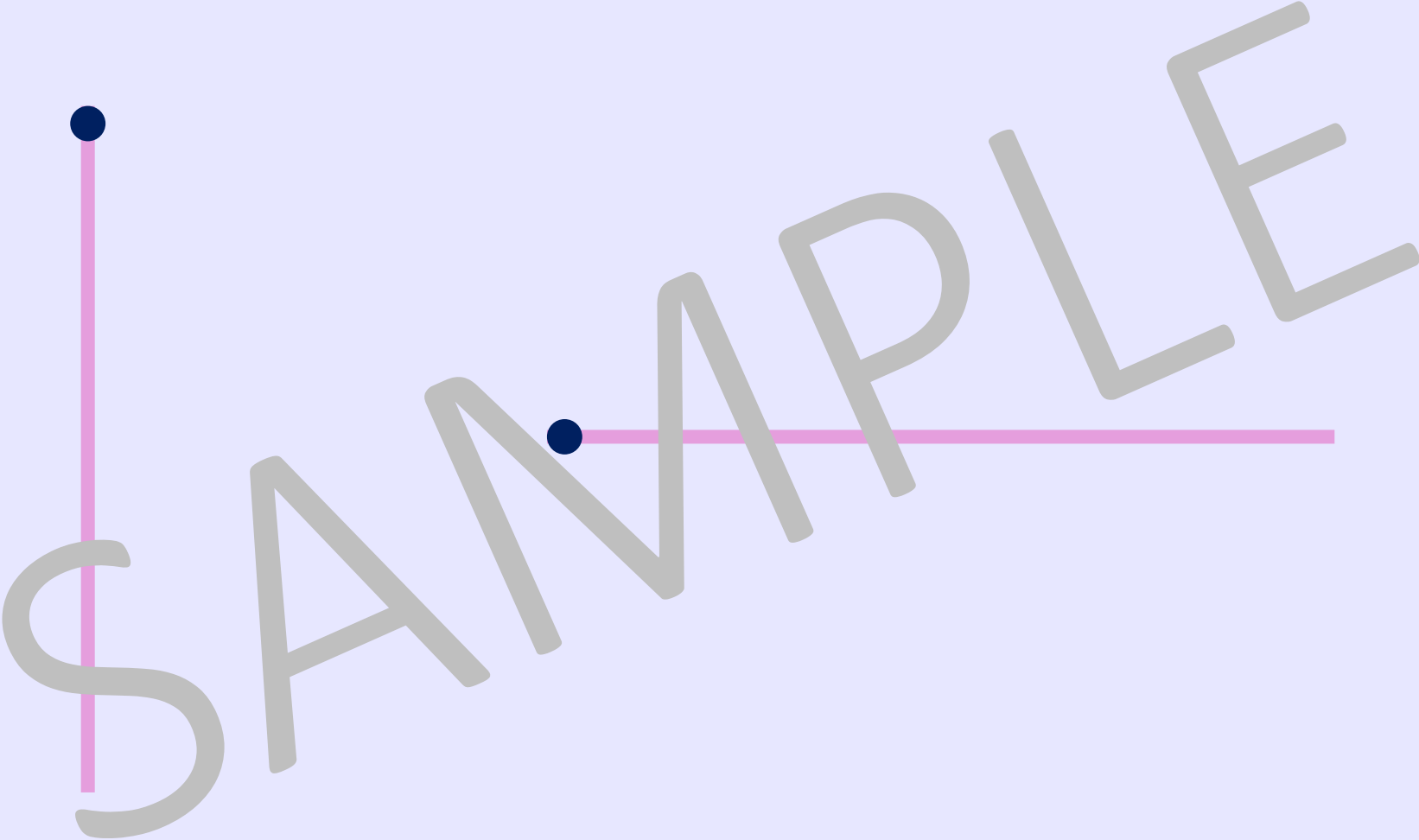


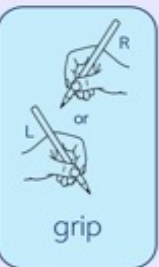


SAMPLE



Warm up





SAMPLE

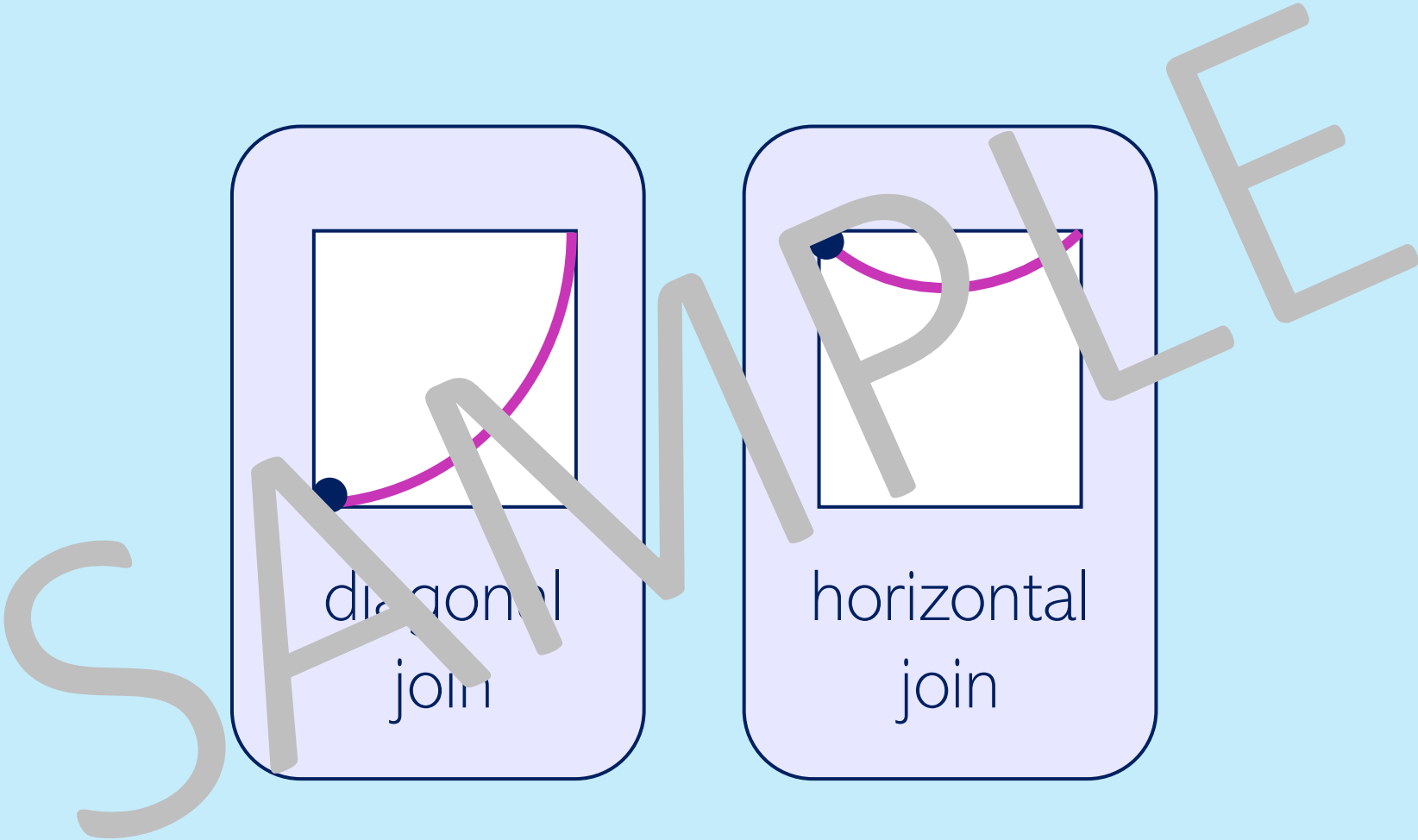


Accurate Formations:

Joined Letters

Handwriting Matters: Keep it Simple. Do it Well.

The two joins



The Down Family





SAMPLE





posture



paper



grip



pressure



direction

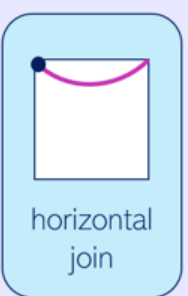
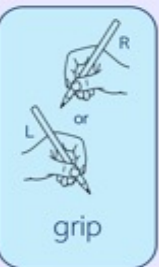


SAMPLE



horizontal
join





SAMPLE

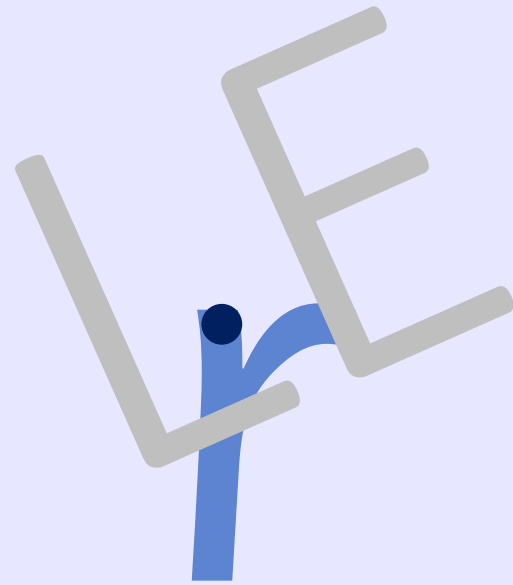
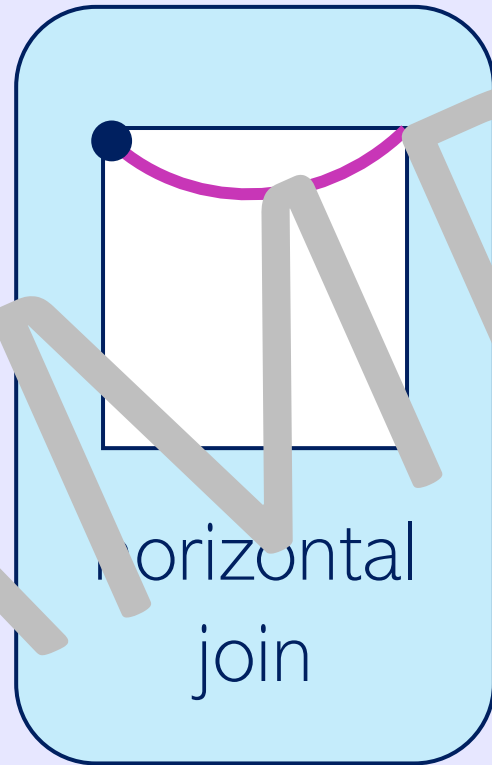
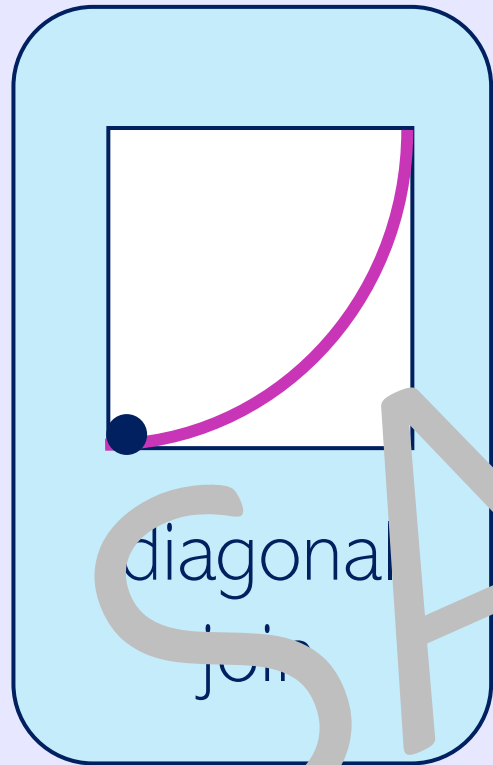


SAMPLE

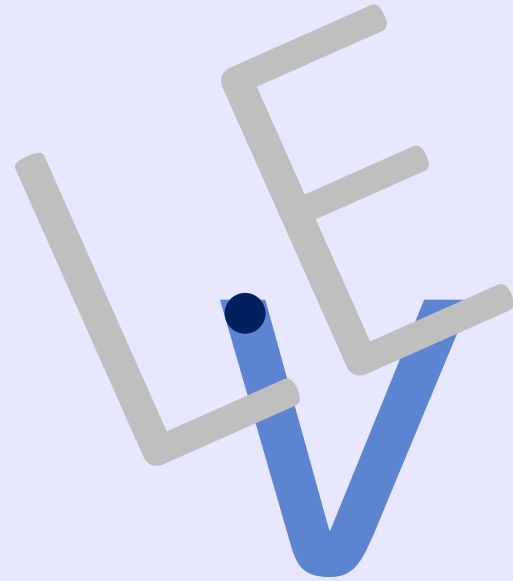
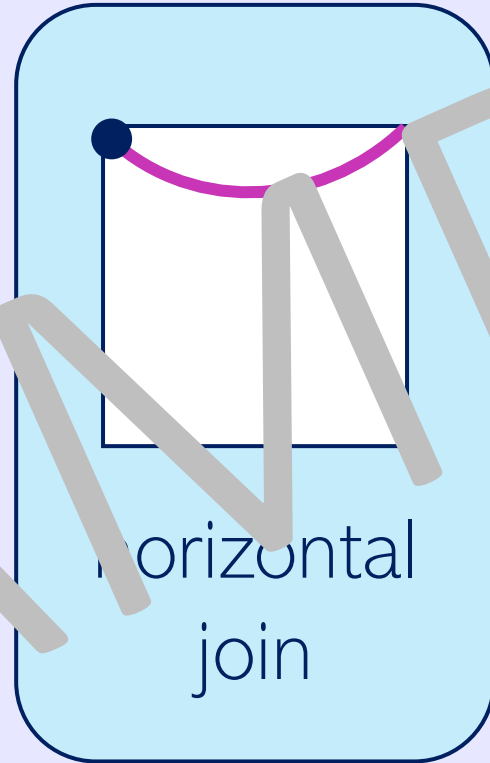
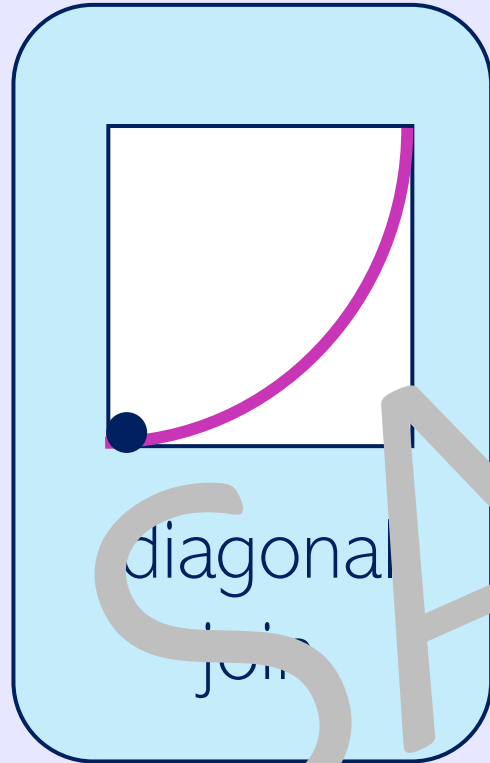
horizontal join

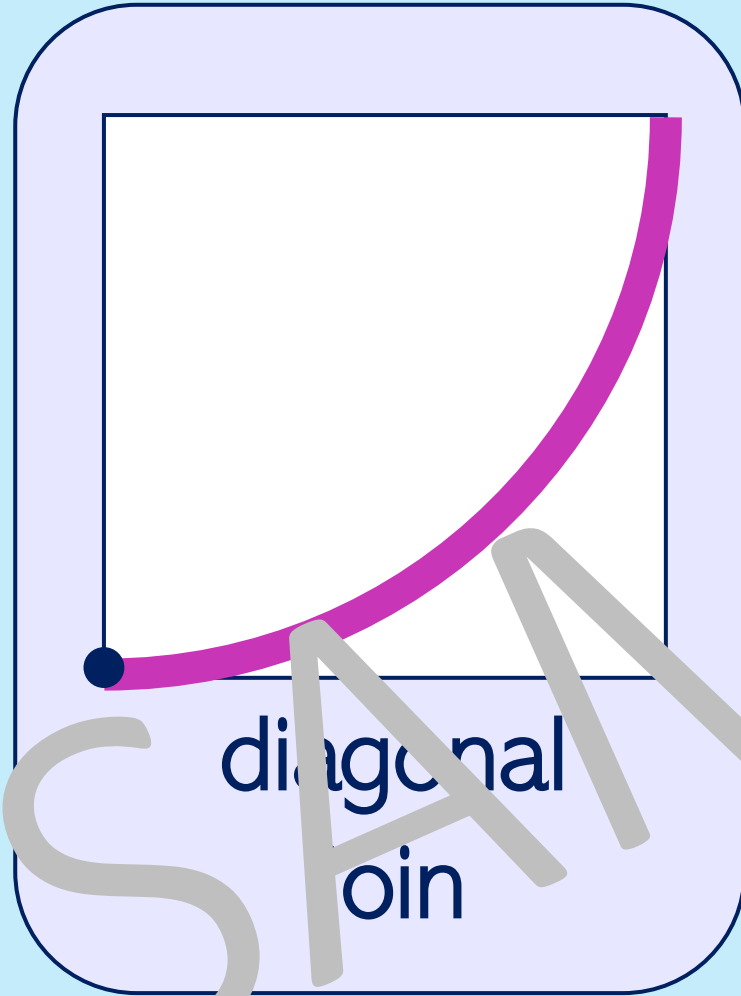


Warm up



Warm up





SAMPLE

Wall Frieze - Join

Aa Bb Cc

SAMPLE

Wall Frieze - Print

T t **U u** **V v**
S A M P L E

Handwriting Matters: *Keep it Simple. Do it Well.*

SAMPLE