

# Tips From an Occupational Therapist

Strengthen the skills that lead to improved handwriting with these effective gross and fine motor development activities developed by leading occupational therapists.

## Animal Charades

**(To strengthen upper body and upper extremities)**

Play "Animal Charades." Ask a student to pick a letter of the alphabet, write it on the board for their classmates to see, and then mime or walk like an animal beginning with that letter. Animal walks are a great way to strengthen the upper body and upper extremities.

## Toothpick Bridges

**(To promote bimanual skills)**

Have students build bridges out of toothpicks. Provide them with scissors, glue, cardboard, and small blocks. Have students stack small weights on the completed bridges to see which one can hold the most weight. Manipulating the small toothpicks with their fingertips will build fine-motor skills, and using both hands will promote functional bimanual skills.

## Back Writing

**(For tactile activity for students with visual perceptual difficulties)**

Have students trace letters on each other's back and guess the letters. Then have students write the letters on a piece of paper. If possible, have students practice words for spelling tests in this way. This activity involves a tactile sensory component and can be helpful to students with visual perceptual difficulties.

## Water Transfer

**(To improve fine motor strength and endurance)**

Gather several different sizes of plastic and glass bottles with small necks, a few turkey basters, metal spoons, and small buckets of water. Instruct students to use the turkey basters to transfer water from the buckets into the bottles. By squeezing the bulbs of the turkey basters, students will improve fine-motor strength, endurance, and precision. Then have students use the metal spoon to gently tap the bottle necks to produce a sound. Challenge students to see if they can play a song on the bottles.

## Stacking With Tongs

**(To improve shoulder strength and stability)**

To help with fine motor control and precision, have students practice stacking cube-shaped blocks with salad tongs. Have pairs of students take turns picking up one block at a time and carefully stacking them to build a tower. Challenge students to build the tallest tower they can. As students use the tongs and try to balance the blocks, they will improve their shoulder strength and stability.

## Strong Scissors

**(To develop small muscles of the hands)**

To develop the small muscles of the hands, have students use scissors to cut paper of varied thickness. Provide students with cardboard, card stock, or index cards. Challenge them to cut shapes out of the paper. They can also use the scissors to cut other materials, such as straws or clay.

Additionally, make a line down the middle of an index card and have students use both hands to tear the card along the line. Start with a thick, straight line and progress to a thin, curved line.

## Letters on a Tray

(Using different media to practice letter formation)

To encourage appropriate letter formation, have students practice forming letters in different media, such as colored sand, shaving cream, bird seed, or corn meal on a cookie sheet.

Additionally, give students hunks of modeling clay and have them press it into the bottom of a small tray so the clay is flat (building fine-motor strength). Then they can use a sharpened pencil to “write” their strokes and letters into the clay.

## Vertical Writing

(To strengthen finger muscles and increase endurance)

To strengthen finger muscles and increase endurance, have students complete connect-the-dots drawings or mazes that are taped to a wall or pinned to a bulletin board. These activities will also encourage students to draw a variety of lines in different directions and stay within borders while writing. By having students write against a vertical surface while standing, they will increase shoulder and arm strength.

## Beading and Lacing

(For bilateral skill development)

Stringing beads onto shoelaces helps students develop fine motor and visual motor skills. This activity also develops students’ bilateral skills, which involve using both hands cooperatively to complete a task. Similarly, students can lace string through holes in pieces of cardboard or through other hard surfaces. For students having difficulty using string, try using chenille sticks or thin wooden dowels.

## Tactile Writing Lines

(To help teach letter size)

Students often have a difficult time forming their letters within the writing space. They may benefit from tactile cues to help size their letters consistently. Try using waxed pieces of string or different colored Wikki Stix® to provide tactile cues for headlines and baselines to help students keep their letters inside the appropriate space.

Students can also use white glue mixed with a few drops of food coloring to form appropriately-colored raised handwriting grid lines on a piece of sturdy paper. When dry, these lines provide tactile reinforcement for remembering the writing lines.

## Cotton Ball in Hand

(To promote proper pencil grasp)

Awkward or immature grasp is evident if a student is holding a writing utensil with more than the thumb, index, and middle fingers. To promote proper grasp, place a cotton ball or coin in the palm of the student’s hand. Then have the student attempt to maintain the item in his or her palm, using only the ring and pinky fingers, while writing short words or letters.

Using short, stubby crayons or pencils can also promote the use of a tripod grasp (using three fingers) on the writing utensil.

## Ball Buddies

(To develop hand arches and increase finger strength)

To develop arches of the hand and increase finger strength, have students create a “ball buddy.” Cut a two-inch slit in a tennis ball to serve as a mouth. Have students decorate their ball buddies with eyes, nose, and hair. Then tell students to hold their ball buddies in one hand and squeeze to open the mouth. To incorporate both hands and a pinch grip, have students “feed” their ball buddies by picking up small beans with their free fingers, tweezers, or clothespins.

## Tennis Ball Partners

(Gross motor activity for eye-hand coordination)

Organize students into pairs and provide each pair with a tennis ball. Instruct them to bounce the ball to one another. Then tell students to catch the ball with their left hand, pass it to their right hand behind their back, and then bounce it back to their partner. This gross-motor activity helps students develop hand-eye coordination and upper-extremity dexterity and helps maintain the arches of the hand.

## Letter Anchors

(Anchoring letters for legibility)

Students who do not “anchor,” or correctly place letters on the baseline, are often considered to have illegible handwriting. These students will benefit from highlighting the bottom line with a marker or highlighter, as this provides a visual cue or reminder of where the letters need to be anchored.