Prince Edward Island
CANADA

Education and Early
Childhood Development
English Programs

Guidelines *for* Handwriting Instruction:

Printing and Cursive

Kindergarten to Grade 6

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Guidelines for Handwriting Instruction: Printing and Cursive

Purpose of the document:

The purpose of this document is to provide clarity and consistency to handwriting instruction.
In this document, the term handwriting includes both manuscript (printing) and cursive writing.

Handwriting (manuscript and cursive) is a functional tool for writers to communicate. Practice in hand-writing must be integrated with daily classroom activities. As students see their teachers model manuscript and cursive writing during the writing process, they will learn the necessity for legibility and fluency. Writing for genuine audiences conveys the importance of legibility (*Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum, Grades E – 3*, p.217).

What is the purpose for teaching handwriting?

Handwriting instruction is an essential element of a complete literacy curriculum. Without its integration as part of the overall literacy curriculum, learners lose an important link to the world of learning and communication. Research presented at an educational summit on handwriting indicates that handwriting supports students' cognitive development and overall achievement (Handwriting in the 21st Century?: An Educational Summit, 2012).

Program components in the *Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum Guide, E – 3* include the following purposes of handwriting instruction and practice:

- to develop and use legible handwriting to communicate effectively;
- to develop facility, speed, and ease of handwriting;
- to provide opportunities to use handwriting skills as an integral part of the writing process;
- to enable students to understand the importance of content and legibility in writing for genuine audiences.

A continuum of Handwriting/Word Processing goals can also be found in the writing section of Fountas and Pinnell's (2007 & 2011) *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*, under the Conventions heading.

The goals for handwriting instruction are:

- **for students to print and write letters legibly and efficiently, so that writing becomes fluent and automatic;**
- **for students to develop a sense of pride in their writing.**

Attainment of these goals supports students in communicating effectively. Conversely, the negative implications of students not developing handwriting skills are long-lasting. Handwriting in the 21st Century (2012) research indicates that without the consistent exposure to handwriting, students can experience difficulty in certain processes required for reading and writing including:

- retrieving letters from memory;
- reproducing letters on paper;
- spelling accurately;
- extracting meaning from text or lecture;
- interpreting the context of words and phrases.

Is there a need to teach cursive writing in this digital world?

> Instruction in cursive writing begins in grade 3. Instruction and practice continue in grade 4 and are reinforced and practised in grades 5 and 6 in order for automaticity to occur. (Refer to Appendix A for Curriculum Outcomes.)

Communication and collaboration are identified as critical learning skills for the 21st century (Trilling and Fadel, 2009). Students need to be prepared to do this through a variety of forms. Keyboarding and handwriting need to co-exist and most students should be able to master both skills. According to the research presented at Handwriting in the 21st Century?: An Educational Summit, 2012, "handwriting influences reading, writing, language, and critical thinking" (p.2).

> Good handwriting (i.e., legible writing done by hand whether it is printed or cursive) is an important life skill that all students should develop.
>
> (Brailsford and Stead, 2006 *Kindergarten Writing Guide*, p.127)

The ability to read cursive writing also gives students the opportunity to learn and connect with cultures of the past. It has only been since the development of the typewriter that many of our cultural and historically significant documents have not been created in written text.

Currently, much of a student's school day is concentrated on using a pencil and paper to record content, solve problems, reflect and create. The publishing aspect of documents has transitioned from print to computer generated text. However, for the daily recording of thoughts and ideas in classrooms, technology is not always readily available/accessible. Cursive writing is a fast, convenient way to record such information. There is still a critical need for handwriting in the 21st century classroom as research indicates that handwriting helps to prepare students for college and career "in a 21st century, globally competitive society" (Handwriting in the 21st Century?: An Educational Summit, p.6).

How do we teach handwriting?

Formative Assessment

Formative assessments can identify what students know and are able to do, thus informing the next steps for instruction. Observations of students' skills and behaviours can be made as they write. Some questions to consider are:

> What letters can they form?
> How are students forming their letters?
> How are they positioning their paper?
> Are they holding their writing tools appropriately?
> Are they able to form letters from memory, without visual cues?

These observations will provide the information required to differentiate classroom instruction. (Refer to Appendix B for *Letter Formation Checklist* and *Handwriting Behaviours Checklist* for Printing and Cursive Writing.)

> In kindergarten and grades 1, 2 and 3, students require specific demonstration and instruction on forming letters. Students do not need demonstrations if they already can form the letters.

Whole Group, Small Group, and Independent Approaches

As with all literacy components, handwriting should be taught through whole-group, small-group, and independent instruction. This instruction will be guided through classroom observations, work samples, and formative assessments.

- In kindergarten this also includes a developmentally appropriate, play-based environment.
- Students who experience difficulties need proper supports put in place. Some of these students need the assistance of tools such as pencil grips, specially designed line and spaced paper, and/or one-on-one or small group handwriting instruction.

Modelled, Shared, Guided and Independent Practice

The Gradual Release of Responsibility is a research-based instructional model used in effective literacy practices. In this optimal learning model, the responsibility for task completion shifts gradually over time from the teacher to the student.

When cursive handwriting is first being introduced, it is important that the teacher clearly and consistently models the formation of the letter(s). Fountas and Pinnell (2007) suggest that prompts might include:

- "You can make the shape of a letter."
- "You can say words that help you learn how to make a letter."
- "You can check to see if a letter looks right." (p.363)

Students would then move to shared practice with guided support as needed. Time would be allowed for independent practice. Most of this independent practice should occur through authentic writing experiences.

> Printing and Cursive Writing additional teaching information can be found in *Literacy Place for the Early Years:*
>
> Kindergarten - *Writing Guide*
>   pp.127-134
>
> Grade 1 -   *Writing Guide*
>   pp.191-198
>
> Grade 2 -   *Writing Guide*
>   pp.249-256
>
> Grade 3 -   *Writing Guide*
>   pp.262-271
>
> Grade 4-6   Refer to Grade 3 *Writing Guide*
>   "Teaching Cursive Writing"
>   pp.263-271
>
> Proper pencil and paper positioning can also be found in these *Writing Guides*.
>
> (Refer to Appendix C for Printing and Writing Letter Formation)

Student Self-Assessment

Student self-assessment promotes the development of:

- metacognitive ability (the ability to reflect critically on one's own learning)
- ownership of learning
- independence of thought
  (*Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum*, p.51)

"In the process of learning, students need various forms of feedback about their work from their teacher and their peers. However, students learn best when they have frequent opportunities to assess their own learning and performance" (*Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum*, p.51).

> Have students self- assess by asking the following questions:
>
> Do all my letters slant the same way?
> Do my letters sit on the line?
> Are my letters the right size?
> Did I leave enough space between my letters (or words)?
> Can I read my handwriting?
> Can others read my handwriting?
> Which letter did I make best?
> Circle the best letter. Why do you think that one is the best?
>
> *Literacy Place for the Early Years Writing Guide*, Grade 2, p.252

In order for students to attain the maximum benefit of self-assessment, teachers need to model the think-aloud and age-appropriate self-assessment process during demonstrations.

When students master the mechanics of handwriting they can concentrate on higher level thinking and communication skills needed for success in school and in life. According to Fountas and Pinnell (1998), "Fluent writers form the letters (or strike the keys) to make words and sentences without constant attention to the hand movements. They are thinking of the message and have an automatic program of action to produce the symbols….forming letters is an essential part of literacy instruction" (p.88).

In addition to developing higher order thinking skills, handwriting instruction "will not only show students a specific way to form letters, it is important to note that handwriting is an expression of individuality. No two individuals will write the same way. Individuality should be encouraged within the framework of legibility and fluency (*Atlantic Canada Elementary Language Arts Curriculum Guide, Grades E – 3*, p.217).

Handwriting instruction needs to be specifically taught and monitored. It is after students develop an effective and efficient motor memory individualization of their letter formation that handwriting will occur. It is the same as in physical education class or a sports team. The teacher directly teaches the skill and after a person has efficiently mastered the skill, he/she adds his/her uniqueness to the skill (Thompson, 2011).

> "Letter knowledge is basic to literacy. Most important for children is their recognition of the features of the letters and then their ability to make the connection between letters and sounds. Recognition of the visual feature is key; the student's ability to look at print or to notice the unique features of each letter when it is embedded with other letters in a word will be important in the reading process."
>
> (*Word Matters, Teaching Phonics and Spelling in the Reading/Writing Classroom*, Fountas and Pinnell, 1998)

Looking at and understanding the features of print

Students need to use detailed information to differentiate one letter from another. Readers and writers need to recognize and use letter information that is embedded in words in print.

Students need to recognize that letters:
- have special features such as sticks, curves, and tails;
- can be short or tall;
- are formed in specific ways;
- need to be turned in the proper direction, or it could change its name (b, d);
- have names;
- have an upper case and lower case form;
- have sounds, and they may make more than one sound when combined;
- may be different sizes, colours, and styles.

In what order do I teach the formation of the letters?

There are many options for the order in which students are introduced to the formation of letters. Instructional decisions should always be based on the letters or groups of letters that students know and what they need to know.

Suggested methods for letter introduction would be to introduce letters with a similar formation or features in a group. Once students learn the formation or features of one letter, the other letters with similar formation or features will be easier to learn.

Letters starting by pulling back (counter clockwise)	a, c, d, g, q
Letters you start by pulling down	i, j, k, l, t
Letters you pull down, then go up and over	b, h, m, n, r
Straight lines	E, F, H, I, L, T
Lines and curves	B, D, J, P, R, U

Marie Clay, in *Becoming Literate* (1991), states "it would be reasonable that writing letters contributes to learning about them."

She refers to a series of experiments conducted on children learning to write Russian letters. They were taught in three different ways:

1. After being given just a model for a letter, and instructions to copy it, 50 repetitions were required for an average child to master the task.

2. When the model was presented with the teacher's verbal guidance for the actions for writing the letter, mastery occurred after an average of 10 repetitions.

3. When the student was taught to describe the features and actions for forming the letter, providing direction for himself, mastery was achieved after an average of 4 repetitions.

According to Clay's report of the research, "children trained in this third type of program shifted to writing unfamiliar letters in varied settings without much difficulty."

This process is important in developing "motor habits' for knowing the letters. However, it is not expected that students who are forming their letters properly will continue to rely on verbal pathways.

For additional groupings, refer to the Handwriting section of *Literacy Place for the Early Years Writing Guides, K – 3*.

Why do we use verbal pathways?

Sometimes it helps students to say aloud the directions for "making" a letter. This "verbal path" helps them to understand the directional movement that is essential. It gives the teacher and student a language to talk through the letter and its features. It also reinforces the child's knowledge of the alphabetic principle, and supports acquisition of automaticity in reading and writing. Once automaticity occurs, students no longer require the use of a verbal pathway. (Refer to Appendix D for Verbal Paths and Upper Case and Lower Case Printing and Cursive Letter Formation.)

Suggestions for teaching

- Provide opportunities for students to develop fine motor skills using materials such as puzzles, strings, beads, or play dough.

- Provide opportunities for students to learn how to grasp a pencil, how to use lined paper, and how to sit for handwriting. Provide opportunities for students to explore their own space through movement, dance, and artwork.

- In kindergarten, provide opportunities for students to play with the alphabet. Provide alphabet cards, books, magnetic letters, felt letters, rubber letters, etc.

- Using students' names is a powerful and effective way for students to learn the alphabet. The name puzzle is a focused word work lesson that helps students see their name as a word, as well as individual letters in the word. The task is to place the written letters of their name on individual squares in the correct sequence. The student then points to each letter and names it.

- Word work for the day could be shared, guided or independent practice of individual letters. Students could practise sorting or grouping letters based on their specific features (sticks, tails, loops, etc). It is important for students to recognize these special features in letters.

- Instruction may occur during shared or interactive writing experiences. After the teacher and students share the meaning of the text, the teacher may point out specific features of a letter. If the writing experience is interactive, individual students could practise a particular letter formation, and other students could practise on small white boards (or plastic plates).

- In shared reading, during the second or subsequent reading, students could be directed towards the formation of the letters in a poem or big book. A window mask may be used to locate specific features such as letters, or letter clusters. This isolates the letter so students can look carefully at the letter without the distraction of the other letters surrounding it. Use tag board or a fly swatter and cut the middle out to create a window mask.

- A personalized alphabet book is a book that presents the letters of the alphabet in sequence. As students begin to learn their letters, they record these letters in the book. Students continue to add each new letter learned.

- Literacy Centers could be established to create hands- on experiences using string, sand, wikki stix, or a wet paintbrush on a chalkboard, to practise letter formation. Students would have an opportunity to visit these centers during Reading or Writing Workshop.

- Provide models for students to follow. Letter strips on the corner of students' desks can be helpful and are much easier to refer to than letters posted on a wall across the room.

- Provide opportunities for students to experiment with different types of papers and different sizes/colours of pencils, chalk, or paint.

Further practice opportunities can be found throughout the *Literacy Place for Early Years Writing Guides, K - 3*.

Summary

Handwriting instruction is one component of an effective literacy classroom. Students require practice integrated into daily classroom activities in order for it to become fluent and automatic. In kindergarten, this is accomplished through a play-based environment.

Although the debate exists as to whether or not handwriting still has a place in the digital age, it should be noted that experts agree both handwriting and keyboarding should not be mutually exclusive. "We do not live in a handwriting world, and we do not live in a digital world. We live in a hybrid world" (Zubrzycki, p.2).

Manuscript printing instruction begins in kindergarten and is continued into grades 1 and 2, while cursive writing instruction begins in grade 3 and grade 4 and needs to be continued, practised, and supported in grades 5 and 6. "Handwriting allows students to perform more efficiently the hierarchy of skills required in other subjects, which ultimately leads to better grades, better test scores, and better academic performance" (Peverly, 2012).

Curriculum Outcomes

- Kindergarten

    Writing and Representing

    It is important that educators demonstrate correct letter formation during modelled as well as shared and guided writing (i.e., top to bottom). It is not intended that children make rows of letters but that they have ample opportunity to write every day. Providing children with opportunities to engage in meaningful writing reinforces that they are writers as well as allowing them time to practice letter formation in the context of writing.

    (*Prince Edward Island Kindergarten Integrated Curriculum Document*, pp.53-54)

- Grades 1-6

    Writing and Other Ways of Representing

    (Please refer to Specific Curriculum Outcomes which accompany these GCOs.) In order for students to meet each specific outcome, students should develop good handwriting (legible writing done by hand whether it is printed or cursive [Brailsford & Stead, p.262]).

    GCO 8: Students will be expected to use writing and other forms of representation to explore, clarify, and reflect on their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and learnings; and to use their imaginations.

    GCO 9: Students will be expected to create texts collaboratively and independently, using a variety of forms for a range of audiences and purposes.

    GCO 10: Students will be expected to use a range of strategies to develop effective writing and media products to enhance their clarity, precision, and effectiveness.

Pages 266-271 of the *Literacy Place for the Early Years Grade 3 Writing Guide* by Anne Brailsford and Tony Stead © 2007 Scholastic Canada Ltd. Reproduced with permission.

Letter Formation Checklist

Student's Name: _____ Date: _____

Printing ☐   Cursive Writing ☐

Place a checkmark next to those letters that the student can form correctly.

Lower-case Letters	Correct Formation	Upper-case Letters	Correct Formation
a		A	
b		B	
c		C	
d		D	
e		E	
f		F	
g		G	
h		H	
i		I	
j		J	
k		K	
l		L	
m		M	
n		N	
o		O	
p		P	
q		Q	
r		R	
s		S	
t		T	
u		U	
v		V	
w		W	
x		X	
y		Y	
z		Z	

Instructional Needs

Handwriting Behaviours Checklist

Student's Name: _____ Date: _____

Printing ☐   Cursive Writing ☐

| Handwriting Behaviours	Observations
Positions paper appropriately	
Holds writing tool appropriately	
Writes on the lines	
Starts at left margin	
Leaves appropriate space between letters	
Leaves appropriate space between words	
Forms letters fluently	
Writes legibly	
Slants all letters in the same direction	
Takes pride in handwriting	
Uses upper-case and lower-case letters where appropriate	

Printing: Lower-case Letter Formation

Student's Name: _____

a b c d e

f g h i j

k l m n o

p q r s t

u v w x y

z
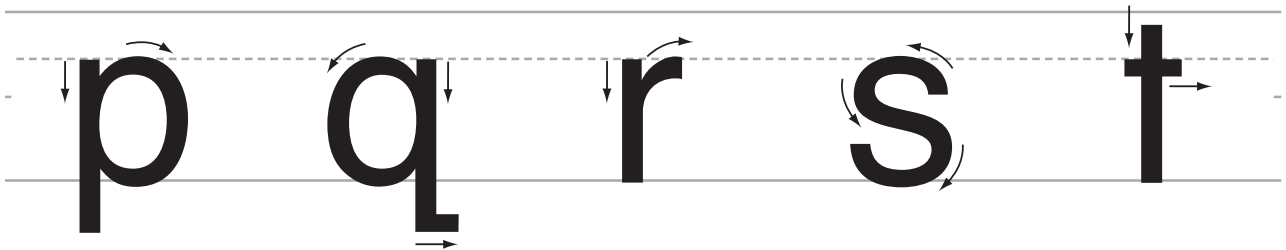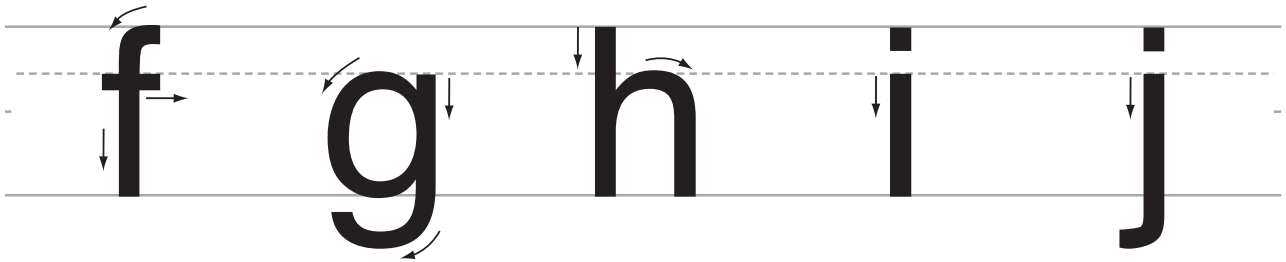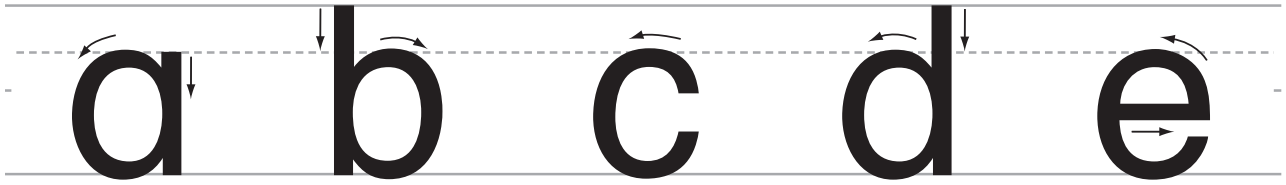
Printing: Capital Letter Formation

Student's Name: _____ Date: _____
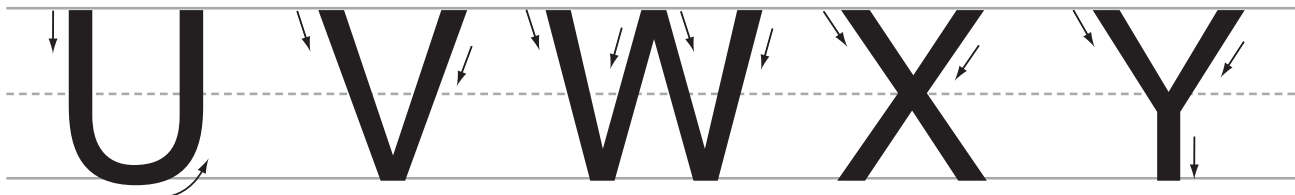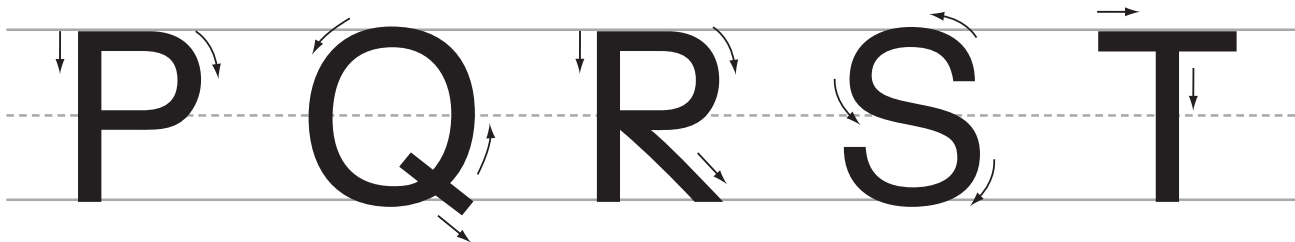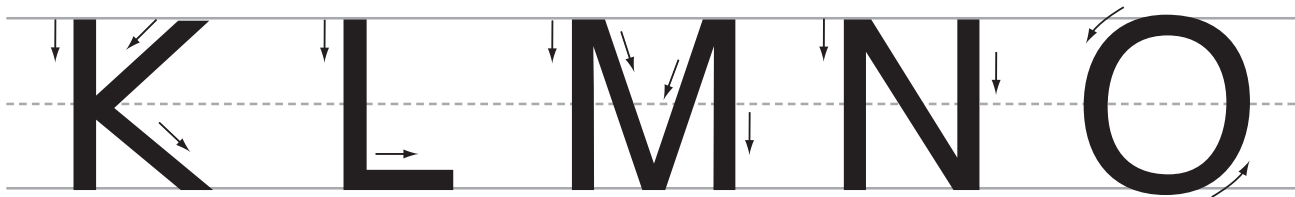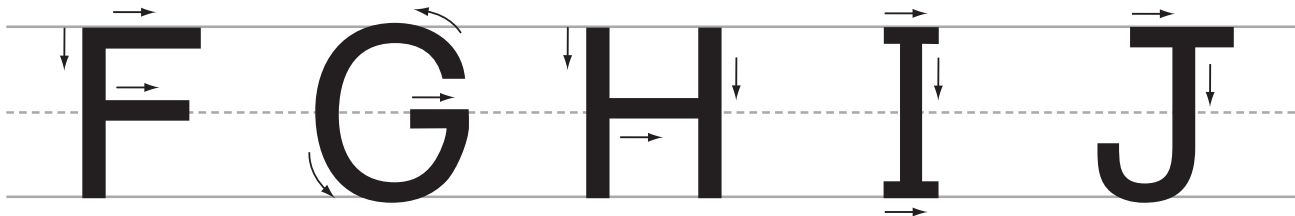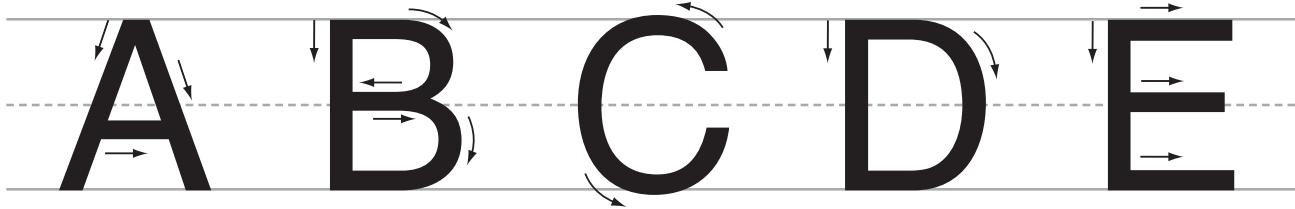
A B C D E

F G H I J

K L M N O

P Q R S T

U V W X Y

Z

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Writing: Capital Letter Formation

Student's Name: _____

Writing: Lower-case Letter Formation

Student's Name: _____

a b c d e

f g h i j

k l m n o

p q r s t

u v w x y

z

Verbal Path for Lower Case and Upper Case Printing Formation

This language may be used to model proper formation of the letters. Have the students say the language with you as they trace or write a letter.

Lower Case Formation		Upper Case Formation	
a	pull back, around, up, and down	A	slant down, slant down, across
b	pull down, up, around	B	pull down, up, around and in, around and in
c	pull back and around	C	pull back and around
d	pull back, around, up, and down	D	pull down, up and around
e	pull across, back and around	E	pull down, across, across, and across
f	pull back, down, and cross	F	pull down, across, across
g	pull back, around, up, down and under	G	pull back, around, across
h	pull down, up, over, and down	H	pull down, pull down, across
i	pull down, dot	I	pull down, across, across
j	pull down, curve around, dot	J	pull down, curve around, across
k	pull down, pull in, pull out	K	pull down, slant in, slant out
l	pull down	L	pull down, across
m	pull down, up, over, down and up, over and down	M	pull down, slant down, slant down, pull down
n	pull down, up, over and down	N	pull down, slant down, pull up
o	pull back and around	O	pull back and around
p	pull down, up, and around	P	pull down, up, and around
q	pull back, around, up, down and up	Q	pull back and around, cross
r	pull down, up, and over	R	pull down, up, around, down, in, and slant down
s	pull back, in, around, and back	S	pull back, in, around, down, and back around
t	pull down and cross	T	pull down, across
u	pull down, around, up, and down	U	pull down, around, up
v	slant down, up	V	slant down, slant up
w	slant down, up, down, up	W	slant down, up, down, up
x	slant down, slant down	X	slant down, slant down
y	slant in, slant and down	Y	slant in, slant, and down
z	across, slant down, and cross	Z	across, slant down, across

The Fountas and Pinnell Prompting Guide, A Tool for Literacy Teachers, Fountas and Pinnell, Heinemann, 2009. Used with permission by Heinemann.

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