Young children develop as writers as they come to understand that writing is a powerful tool for communication. Between the ages of 2 and 6, children observe written messages in the world around them and experiment with making marks on paper. Through these explorations, they make important realizations about writing (see below).

Attention to the mechanics of handwriting (the specific skills necessary to hold a writing tool and form recognizable letters) should never overshadow the primary focus on the child’s joy in writing messages to be read and appreciated by others. It is children’s desire to write—their names, a note, or their stories—that fuels their passage through these five stages of development.

**Stage 1**

**Random Scribbling (ages 2–3)**

- Child makes random contact with the paper and exhibits little muscular control.

**What to Teach:** Encourage continued exploration of making marks with crayons and chalk. Allow time and materials for gross-motor and fine-motor development.

**Stage 2**

**Controlled Scribbling (age 3)**

- Pretend writing is produced as child scribbles across paper in a linear fashion. Patterns may be repeated over and over. Shows increased muscular control.

**What to Teach:** Recognize the value of child’s writing. Show how to secure paper with the helper hand. Blocks, puzzles, and self-care tasks allow development of the arms, hands, and wrists.
Stage 3

Mock Writing (ages 3–4)

Writing includes letter-like forms, often arranged in groups and word-like strings. Mock letters may include characteristics of familiar letters but may be misshapen, combined, reversed, or inverted. Children often write for a purpose, and a distinction is made between drawing and writing.

What to Teach:
- Letter recognition is important. Teach basic writing strokes and directions.
- Demonstrate a good writing grip as explained on page 13 of this Teacher Guide. Working on an easel, stringing beads, and doing simple crafts continue to develop fine-motor skills.

Stage 4

Writing Letters (ages 4–5)

Children name and write recognizable letters, although letters are frequently reversed. They write their names and other words that have personal meaning. These writers show an awareness that letters match sounds.

What to Teach:
- Demonstrate letter formation to avoid self-created and inefficient methods such as writing from bottom to top. Grouping letters that share common strokes will help develop correct motor patterns for writing letters.
- Forestall bad habits by continuing to encourage a good writing grip.

Stage 5

Writing Words (ages 5–6)

Using invented spelling, children group letters to write many words. Mature writing grip has developed. Children write letters, including lowercase letters, more smoothly and automatically. Dominant writing hand and use of helper hand (see page 13) are well-developed.

What to Teach:
- Assess that children have internalized correct, efficient motor pattern to write each letter.
- Monitor writing grip.
- Writing practice should be multisensory and include materials such as play dough, Touch and Trace Letter Cards, and Wikki Stix®.