

Using the Movable Alphabet

Traditionally when we think of writing, we think of putting pen to paper. But there is more to it than this. Before one can have success with writing by way of the hand, one must be able to build words in the mind. This is the intellectual component of writing. It refers to the ability to put letters together to create a word. It can be done even if one has no muscular control of the hands. As such, this intellectual component of writing may develop even before the hand is able to hold a pencil. The movable alphabet gives children the opportunity to use their minds in this capacity without waiting for the hand. It provides a critical bridge between pencil writing and the intellectual formation of words. With a selection of letters before them, children do not need to sort through their entire memory of written symbols (which include numbers and graphical representations) to find what they seek. There is a limited selection before them which increases their possibility of success. It is this work that directly prepares children for reading.



Before you Begin

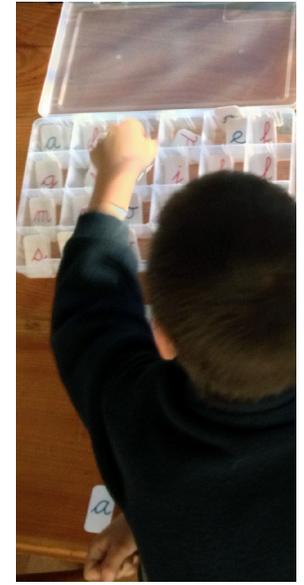
Before introducing the movable alphabet to a child, we must be sure the child has the potential to succeed in its use. For this to effortlessly arrive, we must prepare the child's mind for writing as described in the table below.

Writing Prerequisite	Primary Means of Development
Self confidence	Ongoing experience and success with practical life activities. These include anything children will ultimately learn to do for themselves in order to dress, wash, eat, toilet, clean-up, behave graciously in common social situations, and generally master their living environment. Examples include buttoning, zipping, sweeping, washing a table, hand washing, and role playing how to excuse one's self, greet a guest, apologize, offer help, take turns, etc.
An organized mind (so he can express himself logically)	Exposure to a logically-organized physical environment; Predictable daily routines; Experience with the logical consequences of one's actions (e.g., seeing that a glass breaks if it is dropped and then helping to clean up the broken glass); Also see "Self Confidence" above
Knowledge of words to form complete sentences	Natural conversations where children have the opportunity and inspiration to speak; Reading stories; Hearing poems; Learning rhymes; Playing sound games; Singing songs; Vocabulary lessons via the 3-period lesson
Phonetic Awareness	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of sounds 	Hearing our language; Hearing and singing songs; Hearing and reciting poems; Playing rhyming games; Hearing music; Singing; Enjoying rhythm (via dance, clapping, marching, drumming, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to recognize sounds in words 	Experience speaking and pronouncing words; Hearing words slowly and carefully pronounced; Repeating new words; Singing songs; Reading books; Reciting poetry; Playing sound games like "I Spy"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to recognize the symbols that correspond to different sounds/ associating the sounds with symbols 	Sandpaper letters; Once the child knows 10 or 12 of the pink and blue letters (vowels and consonants), start right in with using the 3-period lesson to teach the phonograms found on the green sandpaper letters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to link letters together to make words 	Experience in sequencing via Practical Life exercises (see "Self Confidence" above) and Sensorial exercises (e.g., ordering blocks from short to tall; matching color tablets, matching fabrics while wearing a blindfold, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The desire to write 	Inspiration, joy, enthusiasm; Witnessing and participating in the magic that is alive in the world

In general, we don't worry about the accuracy of the spelling until around age 6. The point of early writing, of phonetically spelling words, is for the child to practice using the letters of our alphabet and expressing thoughts with written words. The more the child works at creating words, the easier it becomes. We do not wish to discourage her along this path and at the same time, we must guard the child's need for perfection. We must meet the child at her developmental stage. If she wants correct spellings, we give them to her but if she is satisfied with phonetic spellings, that is just fine. Spelling is something that the child will naturally refine as her language abilities grow. It is not our focus at this stage of development.

Preparing the Alphabet

The letters are sized to fit inside our craft box or a container you can make yourself from egg cartons. If you use our craft box, set it up as shown in the picture (*previous page*). For egg cartons (*see photo below right*), use two clear plastic cartons with clear lids: one that will hold 12 and another that will hold 18 sets of letters. Fill the smaller carton with the first 10-12 letters your child knows (including at least two vowels). Place the remaining letters in the larger carton. Decide whether you will treat “y” as a vowel (blue) or consonant (pink). Store the “y” you are not using (do not keep it with the alphabet). Keep the cartons next to each other on a shelf.



I. Finding and Replacing Letters in the Box

1. Find a clean workspace that is free from distractions. Show the child how to carry the alphabet box and place it before her.
2. Say, “This is how you open and close the box.” Show the child carefully and then give her a turn.
3. Say, “Let’s get it ready.” Open the box and straighten the letters by using your index finger to push each pile all the way to the left of its compartment.
4. Say, “Let’s see if we can find the ‘m’ sound.” Start scanning through the letters, starting at the top left and proceeding to the right, row by row. Using your index finger and thumb, carefully take the top letter m and place it in front of the box.
5. Encourage the child to find a few more sounds, remove them, and place them in front of the box (each in its own space). This is your test to make sure the child knows enough sounds to proceed to Lesson II (*below*).
6. Say, “Now I’ll show you how we put them back so carefully.” Demonstrate carefully and then give the child a turn with the other sounds.
7. Say, “You’re so careful with these letters! You can take them out and put them back as much as you like.”

II. Writing the First Words

1. Find a clean workspace that is free from distractions. Place the alphabet just above the top left corner of your work rug.
2. Say, “I want to write a story about what I did last weekend. Last weekend I was blowing bubbles with my niece. Let’s write the word bubbles.” Slowly articulate each sound in the word. Say, “Let’s see if we can find that first sound.” Sound out the word again and isolate the “b” sound. Look at the letters slowly, discover the b, and place it on the work rug, just below the alphabet box (*see photo*). Continue with the rest of the word.
3. Say, “Oh, I liked doing that. Let’s write some more of my story. Last weekend I was blowing bubbles with my niece. Which word should we write next...” Pause to give the child a chance to think of a word. If not, you can suggest one like, “How about niece.” Then say, “This time you can do it!” Help the child if she needs it. When looking for the “ee” sound, help the child remember that they need two letters to build the phonogram. Be careful to proceed slowly enough so that the child is able to step in but quickly enough to maintain attention.
4. Continue to write as many words as the child would like but be sure to stop before fatigue sets in. You want to leave her loving this work and wanting more. When you’re done, celebrate the accomplishment, “Look at how many words we’ve written!”
5. Clean up by saying, “Which one is your favorite sound? Let’s put all of those away first.” Do this for each letter.
6. Say, “You could do this again tomorrow and write even more words. I wonder what you’ll write...” If the child is not ready to work independently, work with her again until she is able to do it alone. Slowly make your presence less and less necessary.



II. Writing the Child’s Words

As soon as the children know enough sounds, you have the critical and essential task of encouraging and inspiring them to use the alphabet to write what THEY want to write. You might notice how much they love eating snack and you could say, “I wonder if you could write down the names of all of your favorite snacks.” Encourage them to do this with all kinds of categories of things. If they are telling you a story, you might say, “Oh this is so interesting but I just don’t even have a moment right now. Can you write it down for me so I can read it later? I don’t want to miss it!” Set an example by using the alphabet to write notes for the children who have begun to read.

IV. Writing the Child’s Topics

This is the same as Exercise III above but now frees the child to work with phrases and complete thoughts. Instead of just writing sneaker, you can encourage her to write, “I have new sneakers.” How exciting! This is when you can start to correct spelling. Say, “That is how that word *sounds* like it is spelled. This is the way it is spelled. Everyone got together and agreed on one way to spell every word in the whole language. When you spell it this way, everyone knows which word you mean.” Then, gently correct the spelling. Don’t do too much at once!