Overcoming Barriers to Writing

Writing with Alternate Pencils

Writing – putting our thoughts on paper to share with others now or later, in the same space as us, or at a distance – is a complex task. It involves many facets all coming together more or less simultaneously. This includes, but is not limited to:

- thinking about what the message is that we want to convey
- thinking about what words we know that we can use to convey that message, and how to spell them
- following the rules or conventions of writing (punctuation, grammar etc.)
- being able to physically produce the letters on the page

To become writers, students need to be able to practice using the whole alphabet to convert the ideas in their heads to words on paper (or a screen). Having students copy or trace words written by someone else is NOT writing. These are fine motor tasks about forming the letters, or tasks that involve matching letters - they do not support learning about the writing process, why we write, what it means to be a writer, or how to think like a writer.
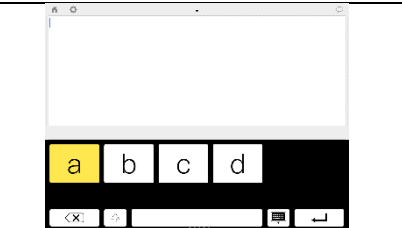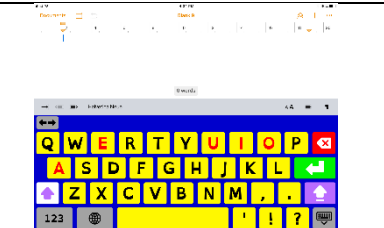
For students with physical impairments or fine motor control difficulties, the ability to physically produce the letters on the page can be one of the biggest barriers. Sometimes so much effort needs to go into thinking about how to form the letters that there is no cognitive space left for the generation or retention of ideas, or for thinking about the 'rules of writing'. Students with more severe physical impairments may not be able to use traditional writing implements (pens, pencils, keyboards etc.) at all. Yet learning to write – to get the ideas in their head onto paper in their own words – is essential.

We need to find alternative ways of giving these students access to the full alphabet for them to be able to 'scribble' with the alphabet, and participate in writing tasks. This is where alternate (or alternative) pencils come into play.

The term 'alternate pencil' covers a myriad of options. Some of these include:

Keyboards

For some students, simply allowing them to use a standard keyboard (or onscreen keyboard on a tablet) will reduce the effort required to get their ideas onto paper. Other students may require specialised keyboards with large keys, high contrast keys, or a key guard to support visual or physical access. There are also some iPad apps (such as AbiliPad https://itunes.apple.com/nz/app/abilipad/id435865000?mt=8 or Keedogo Plus https://itunes.apple.com/nz/app/keedogo-plus/id918496636?mt=8) that can be used to create tailored keyboards by adapting colours, fonts, and layouts.
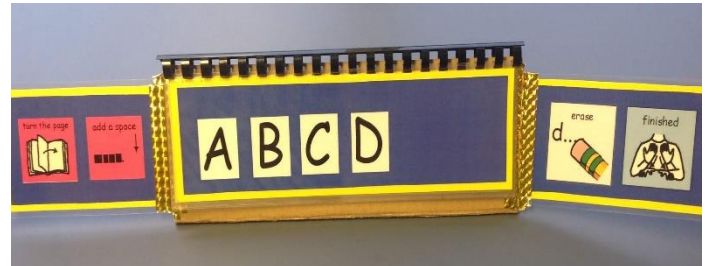
Keys U See – large print, high contrast keyboard.	Screen shot of an AbiliPad keyboard option.	Screen shot of a possible set up on Keedogo Plus

Communication systems

Many of the communication systems available today incorporate some form of access to the alphabet, either within the system itself, or using the built in keyboards on the device or operating system - from alphabet pages in the PODD book, to keyboard layouts on a high-tech system, whether that be accessed via direct selection, switching, or eye-gaze.

Alphabet Flip chart

For students who do not have access to the alphabet via a communication system, and who are not able to use traditional writing tools (pens, pencils, keyboards etc.), the alphabet flip chart is a low tech option, developed and provided by the Centre for Literacy and Disability Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. They can also be a useful tool for students who might benefit from accessing the alphabet in a more controlled and structured way before using a keyboard/on screen keyboard. Students can access the flip chart using direct selection (pointing to the desired letters) or through partner assisted scanning. The chosen letter(s) are scribed by a partner working with the student. The image here is of a print based alphabet flipchart, but these can also be produced using braille, or other tactual elements to meet the needs of the student. Because they can be used with either visual or auditory scanning, they can be used with students who have vision or hearing impairments.

This video shows a writing lesson using a flipchart. In this case, the student uses a YES/NO app on the iPad to indicate her choices. The first part of the video shows how topic selection for the writing task is done. The actual writing portion begins at 2:35.

This video shows a student who is familiar with using a flipchart and uses direct selection to indicate letter choices.

An alphabet board may also be an option for students who can isolate a smaller target and who can cope with having all the letters available on the same sheet.
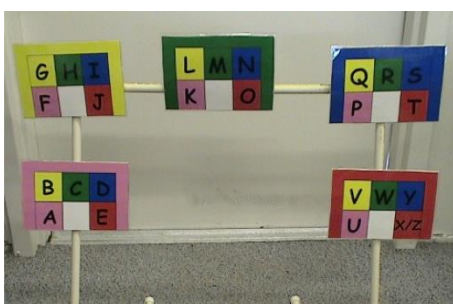
Colour coded eye-gaze frame

Another option for students who have some vision but cannot physically use a traditional writing tool. Students use two eye-gaze selections to let their partner know which letter they want – the first to select the block in which the letter sits, and the second to indicate the background colour of the desired letter.

To see this tool in action, watch this **video**.

Image retrieved from:
https://www.dlmpd.com/alternate-pencil-resources/

You will find templates for a range of print based alphabet flip charts and eye-gaze frames along with comprehensive information on how to make and use them on the "Writing Resources" tab here: https://www.dlmpd.com/instructional-resources/

Whilst on the DLM PD website, you might also like to check out their training module (it will take about 30 minutes) on 'Writing with Alternate Pencils'. This module introduces both the flipchart and eye gaze frame as well as looking at some other alternative pencil options. The module on 'Emergent Writing' may also be useful if your students are just beginning to be able to experiment with using the alphabet.

Other possibilities

Some students may respond to various other options that can be used as alternate pencils to give access to the alphabet. Some ideas include:

- magnetic letters (whole alphabet available) on a baking tray or whiteboard.
- alphabet stamps, blocks, tiles, or beads.
- electronic labellers

Important points

Note these important points:

- Students do NOT need to know how their particular alternate pencil works to start using it! They learn through the experience of using it.
- Students do NOT need to know all the letters of the alphabet, or be able to spell before we begin using an alternate pencil. Again, experience writing will help to build that knowledge.
- Remember that for students just learning to write, we are working on 'writing without standards' (see our previous Tip of Month on this topic here: http://www.talklink.org.nz/index.php/2014/10/02/tip-of-the-month-october-early-writing-for-emergent-communicators/)
- Many of the low-tech options above can be used with students in any position (sitting, standing, lying on back or side).

Useful links

- http://www.janefarrall.com/lots-of-alternatives-pencils-for-everyone/
- http://www.janefarrall.com/abilipad-still-the-write-tool-for-the-ipad/
- http://alternativepencils.weebly.com/

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