

Connecting Handwriting and Drawing for Fluency: You've Got To Do The "O" Dance



The "O" Dance playfully teaches a circular, counterclockwise movement (starting on the diagonal) for efficient handwriting. It creates visual, kinesthetic and auditory memory hooks for the letter "O" (and c, a, g, q.) And so I say to my colleagues,

"You've got to do the "O" dance!"

Activity: Children stand with straight right arm extended upward on a diagonal and index and middle finger pointed; making small forward arm circles. If space is a challenge, the children can sit or kneel on the floor with dominant arm extended. (Left-handed children use both arms together.) The children can stand in place and make large counterclockwise circular movements rhythmically to music while

singing, ♪ "Make an O, and an O, and an O, and an O, and dance around, and around, and around...". Guide their arm if necessary. Once you see children using the correct fluid movement, invite several at a time to move to the music while doing the "O" Dance with you – ♪ "and around and around and around..."

Musical accompaniment helps: Any waltz will do as background music (Straus waltzes work fine). I like to sing along with the Woody Guthrie song *Dance Around*, performed by Bev Bos and Tom Hunter, from their CD *I'll Sing for You and Handed Down Together*.

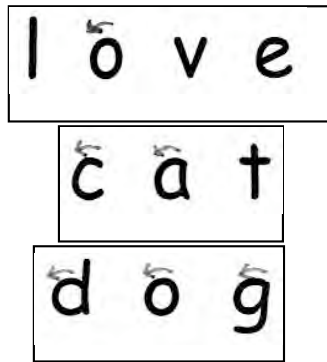
Dance children over to tables where 11"x17" sheets of paper are waiting for them. **Transfer this large muscle movement pattern to paper while the music continues to play.** Invite each child to create an "O" design page with crayons or markers making different colors and sizes of "O." Teacher and class volunteers **carefully monitor that each child is starting on the diagonal, angling up and around to make a counterclockwise "O."** Highlight on your abc handwriting assessment form any child who needs additional practice. Continue active whole arm movements and drawing activities until directional fluency is achieved. **Be very intentional with this instruction. Expect every child to master basic directional handwriting skills early on.**



I asked Leah to underline her best "o" and verbalize why she chose it. I also verbalize my choice and criteria for a well-shaped "o."

Automaticity with this circular pattern is vital to handwriting success. With your high expectation, soon all the children will have the “O” directionality mastered. **It is simply not an option to write a backwards “O.”** If you wait until spring to correct inefficient handwriting practices, it becomes very difficult: **Have a class list with an ABC handwriting grid and make note of any children needing extra help.** Provide that help consistently every day, focusing on the child’s “name tickets” and letters “I” and “O.” We often say, “Don’t let “O” trick you into going clockwise – “O” goes counter-clockwise.”

When you have successfully taught the image, directionality, and fluency with O, **you have taught the foundational muscle memory pattern for o,a,c,d,g,q,** and the high-frequency words love, Mom, cat, dog, etc.). **The more efficient and automatic these muscle memories become, the more easily the child will retrieve the images from their brain and build fluency with letters, words – and reading.**



This girl delighted in filling the chalkboard with “O’s”.

Consider: One problem with handwriting worksheets is that the child can mindlessly copy a letter without actually having to retrieve it from long-term memory. Fluency research suggests it is much more efficient use of time to give children authentic writing practice with actual words (as in writing “love” repeatedly) or practicing letters in sequence (start with a,b,c,d) without referring to an ABC chart. (See Fluency Research page 199.) Short repeated exercises recalling and printing letters from memory builds the automaticity all children need to be fluent writers and readers.

A summary of independent research from the Eric Clearinghouse concludes: “The vertical alphabet is easier to read and easier to write for young children.”

See: **Guidelines for Teaching Handwriting in Kindergarten** at www.nellieedge.com.