Diagonal and Horizontal Joins: How Year 2 Starts Joined-Up Handwriting

In Year 2, which is when children are aged 6 and 7, the National Curriculum for England begins to introduce joined-up writing, where letters are linked together rather than written as separate shapes. This usually follows once printed-style letters feel secure. It is a normal stage, and it is common for a child's writing to look a little untidier while they learn it. This guide explains what the stage involves, which letter pairs tend to join most easily, and how you can support your child with calm, playful ideas at home.

What this stage is

The National Curriculum is the framework that sets out what children in state schools in England are taught, and when. For handwriting, it asks Year 2 children to start using some of the strokes needed to join letters. A diagonal stroke slants across the page, and a horizontal stroke runs flat from side to side. Joining means linking letters so the pencil moves from one to the next, rather than lifting off after every letter. The word to notice is 'start'. The aim this year is a beginning, not neat joined writing throughout. Before joins are introduced, children are expected to form their printed-style letters correctly and in proportion to one another. Years 1 and 2 together are known as Key Stage 1, the first stage of primary education.

What happens

In most classes, teachers introduce joins gradually. Children often practise one pair of letters at a time, such as 'ai' or 'ue', which tend to link naturally, and then use that join in short words. Some pairs are more awkward. Where a letter has a tail or a tall stroke, a join can feel unnatural, so many schools leave certain pairs unjoined on purpose. The curriculum asks children to understand which letters are best left apart, so this is part of the learning rather than a mistake. The sequence is designed so children can focus first on forming letters correctly, then on how they link. Schools differ in which joins they teach first and in the handwriting style they follow, so practice may look a little different from one classroom to the next. Your child's teacher can explain the school's approach.

What it means for your child

If your child's writing has become less neat over the last few months, this is a common and expected part of learning joins. When a new movement is being learned, attention shifts, so letters that were tidy before can wobble for a while. Your child may also work more slowly for a time, or mix joined and printed letters within the same sentence. None of this means they have gone backwards. It is a transition, and many children settle into it with steady practice. Teachers will still expect some tasks, and some letters, to be written in print, so children are learning to use both. Gentle encouragement and patience help far more than constant correction.

How you can help at home

Keep it short, relaxed and playful. A few minutes at a time is plenty. Try writing with a paintbrush and water on a fence or wall, in sand, or in shaving foam. Drawing long wavy lines that loop and link, like a snake or a ladder, builds the same movements as joins without needing any letters. Chalk on a pavement, or writing a name on a homemade card, can feel like a real task rather than a lesson. Praise effort rather

than neatness, and avoid correcting every letter. Make sure your child is sitting comfortably with a relaxed pencil grip. If you are unsure which joins the school uses, check with the teacher so home practice matches school. Children who are learning English, or who have special educational needs, may need a different pace, so ask the class teacher or the school's SENCo (the special educational needs co-ordinator) for ideas.

Questions parents often ask

Is my child's handwriting getting worse? Usually not. A dip in neatness while joins are being learned is common. Should my child join all their letters by the end of Year 2? The curriculum asks children to start using joins, not to join everything perfectly. Consistent joined handwriting develops over the following years, and expectations can vary by school, so check with the teacher. Should I teach joins at home? It is not required. If you do, keep it light and follow the school's style. Which letters join most easily? Pairs such as 'ai' and 'ue' often feel natural, but this varies by school. What if my child is left-handed? Ask the teacher for advice on paper position and pencil grip, as joins can feel different for a left-handed writer.

Sources

- Department for Education (2013), National curriculum in England: English programmes of study, Key Stage 1, handwriting requirements for Year 2 (GOV.UK)
- Department for Education (2013), National curriculum in England: framework document, explaining the structure of key stages and year groups (GOV.UK)
- Department for Education and Department of Health (2015), Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, including the role of the SENCo (GOV.UK)