

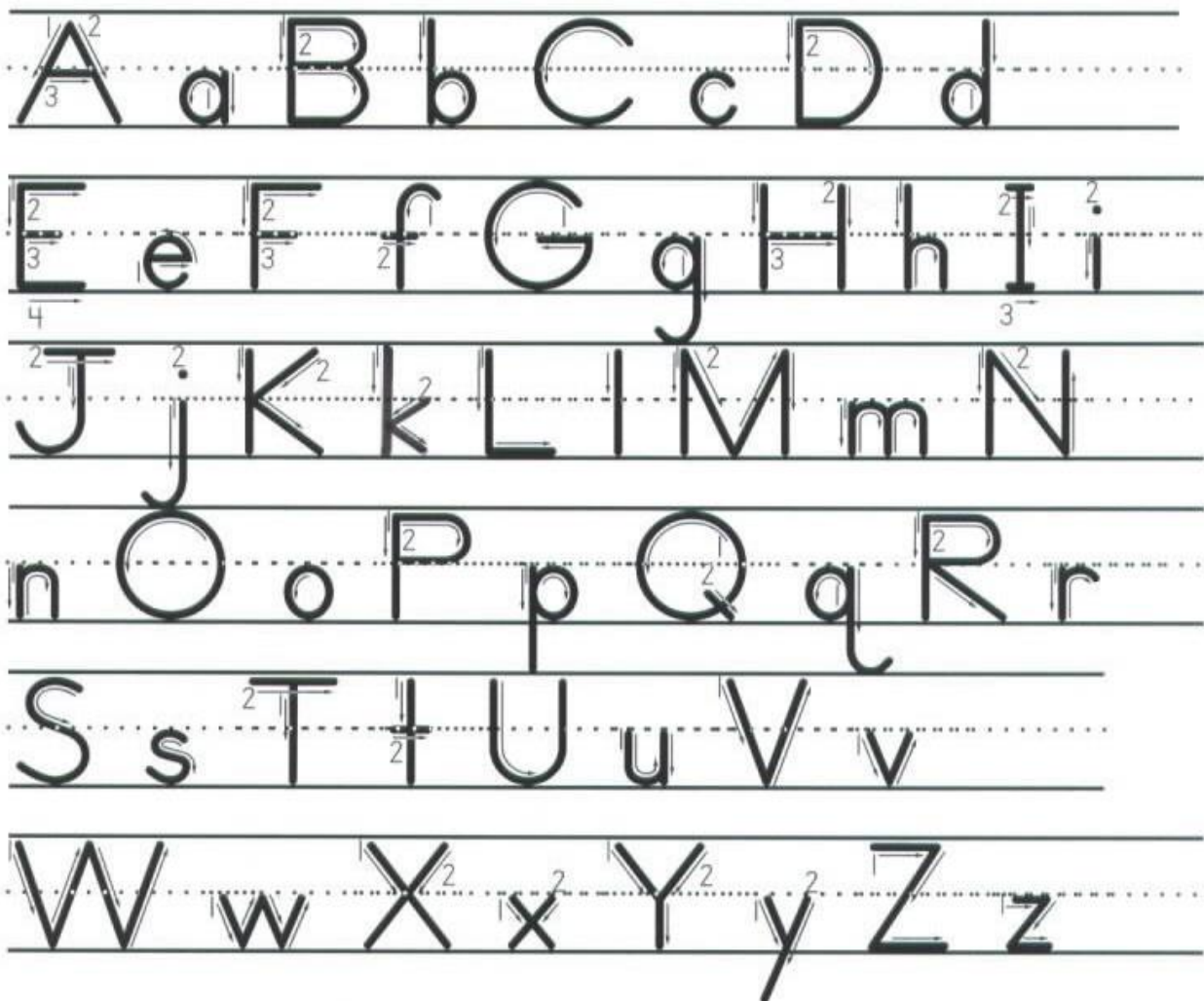
Teaching Letter Recognition

Many children have problems mixing up letters like *b* and *d*, *p* and *q*, *m* and *n*, and other letters. How do children learn letters?

The common-sense view that we learn letters by memorizing their shapes turns out to be wrong. A letter is recognized by its sequence of features, not as a whole shape. For example, letter *m* is made with a short line down, followed by two humps to the right.

Attached is the Zaner-Bloser directions for printing letters.

How to Print Letters



As the diagram indicates, letters are usually drawn from top to bottom and from left to right. Top-down and left-to-right are the easiest motions for the hand. Right and left are important concepts about print for learning letters. Using the directions indicated by the arrows in letter formation puts the hand in position for the next letter.

Using primary paper with guidelines helps children learn the relative size and position of letter features. Using plain paper is not "creative"; it makes it harder for children to learn the relative sizes and positions of the features.

Young children learning letters need vivid, concrete language to remember the abstract features that make up letters. It helps to name the lines on primary paper. I like calling the top line the "rooftop," the dotted crossing line the "fence," the bottom line the "sidewalk," and the space beneath the sidewalk the "ditch." Others like to use indoor names, such as the ceiling, windows, floor, and basement.

Since letter recognition depends on understanding a sequence of features, the best way to teach children the sequence of features in making a letter is by guiding printing practice. For instance, it is extraordinarily helpful for children confusing letters *b* and *d* to practice printing *d* in the sequence, "First little *c*, then little *d*." Sue Dickson, creator of the program *Sing, Spell, Read, and Write*, has developed many such helpful adages to guide printing practice with letters. I have transcribed her list below.

The script below suggests ways to use vivid, concrete language to guide children as they form letters. For example, to make the lower-case *b*, start at the rooftop, drop straight down to the sidewalk, and then b-b-bounce back up to the fence and around. Briefly, you drop down, bounce up, and around. After making a few letters with the teacher's guidance, children need to talk themselves through the formation of letter features, saying to themselves, "Drop down, bounce up, and around."

The following examples show the kind of concrete and colorful talk that make letter forms memorable to children and guide their printing and letter recognition:

For capital **A**, start at the rooftop, go down the slide to the sidewalk, then down the slide the other way, and cross at the fence.

For lowercase **a**, don't start at the fence. Start under the fence. Go up and touch the fence, then around and touch the sidewalk, around and straight down.

For capital **B**, go straight down to the sidewalk, around for his big chest, and around for his big tummy.

For lowercase **b**, start at the roof, go down, b-b-bounce up and around.

For capital **C**, start just below the rooftop, go up to touch, around, and up.

For lowercase **c**, start like little *a*: Go up and touch the fence, then around and up.

For capital **D**, start at the roof, go straight down, pick up, and go around.

For lowercase **d**, first little *c*, then little *d*.

For capital **E**, go down for a strong backbone, over for his hat, over for his belt, over for his shoes.

For lowercase **e**, get in the center of the space below the fence; go toward the door (or window), up to touch the fence, around and up.

For capital **F**, go down, over for his hat, over for his belt (but no shoes).

For lowercase **f**, start to make a little *c* up in the air, then straighten it out, go down, and cross at the fence.

For capital **G**, form a big *C*, then come back to the line to give him a tray to hold straight.

For lowercase **g**, first make a, then, gee, that's a good idea: If the ball falls, it falls into the basket.

For capital **H**, down for a wall, down for a wall, then cross at the fence.

For lowercase **h**, start at the rooftop, come down, and hump over.

For capital **I**, start with a straight back, then give him his headdress and his moccasins.

For lowercase **i**, go down from the fence, and give him a feather.

For capital **J**, go down, and turn to make a basket, and put his hat on.

For lowercase **j**, start at the fence, go down through the sidewalk, and turn the same way, and give him a dot.

For capital **K**, go down, come out here, into the center, and down to the sidewalk.

Lowercase **k** is just as tall as his daddy. Start at the rooftop, go down, pick up at the fence, into the center and down.

For capital **L**, go down and turn the corner.

For lowercase **l**, just a straight line down from the rooftop to the sidewalk.

For capital **M**, go down straight, down the slide, up the slide, and down straight.

For lowercase **m**, go down, hump around, hump around.

For capital **N**, go down straight, down the slide, down straight.

For lowercase **n**, go down, up, and hump over.

For capital **O**, always form a C first, and then close it up.

For lowercase **o**, same way: first a little c and close it up.

For capital **P**, go down, pick up, and around to the fence.

For lowercase **p**, start at the fence, go straight down into the ditch, come up and put his chin on the sidewalk.

For capital **Q**, first make a big O, and give the queen her walking stick.

For lowercase **q**, start with an a, come down, and give the queen some curly hair.

For capital **R**, down, pick up, and around to the fence, then slant down.

For lowercase **r**, down, up, and hook over.

For capital **S**, first form a c up in the air between the rooftop and the fence, then swing back.

For lowercase **s**, form a tiny c up in the air, and then swing back.

For capital **T**, go down and cross at the top.

Lowercase **t** is just a teenager, not as tall as his daddy, but not short either; cross at the fence.

For capital **U**, down, curve, and up (no stem).

For lowercase **u**, down, curve up, and straight down for a stem.

For capital **V**, slant down and up.

For lowercase **v**, slant down and up.

For capital **W**, slant down, up, down, up.

For lowercase **w**, down, up, down, up.

For capital **X**, down on a slant, pick up, back in the other direction.

For lowercase **x**, down and back.

For capital **Y**, start with a v up in the air, and put a stem on it.

For lowercase **y**, go down on a slant, pick up your pencil, slant down, touch, and on into the ditch.

For capital **Z**, make a 7, and then go back.

For lowercase **z**, make a little 7, and then go back.