
Australian school handwriting

What handwriting style should students be taught? It depends on the state.

While the [importance of handwriting](#) is well-known, [Australia's Curriculum 9.0](#) is hilariously vague about it. After a year at school, children are expected to "... correctly form known upper- and lower-case letters". Which letters are expected to be known is unknown. Eight Handwriting and Keyboarding sub-elements are listed [here](#). The first one says:

- produces simple handwriting movements (writing, or drawing?)
- experiments with pencils, writing implements or devices (up noses? down socks?)
- writes letters which resemble standard letter formations (how closely? what standard?).

Leaving handwriting style decisions up to the states has worked out about as well as letting states decide [railway gauges](#). Australia now has five approved handwriting styles for beginners, most with manuscript, pre-cursive and cursive versions. This must be confusing for the thousands of young kids who move interstate each year. It must drive early learning publishers insane.

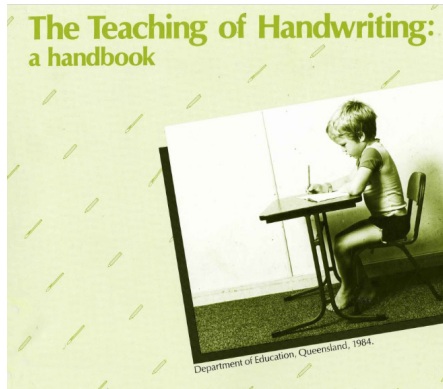
Since foxes are helping send our native wildlife towards extinction, I've devised my own every letter sentence to demonstrate our five beginners' handwriting styles, while promoting adorable marsupials.



**Alison
Clarke**

State/Territory	Population	Font
VIC, WA & NT	10,087,500	<i>Six fit phascogales wanted to jump over a lazy quoll's back.</i>
NSW & ACT	8,905,000	<i>Six fit phascogales wanted to jump over a lazy quoll's back.</i>
QLD	5,528,300	<i>Six fit phascogales wanted to jump over a lazy quoll's back.</i>
SA	1,866,300	<i>Six fit phascogales wanted to jump over a lazy quoll's back.</i>
TAS	574,700	<i>Six fit phascogales wanted to jump over a lazy quoll's back.</i>

The first style comes from my state. I'm not a fan. Beginners' versions of Victorian Modern Cursive often make the letter 'n' look like 'm', 'r' look like 'v', 'k' look like 'R', and put a vertical line on top of letter 'o'. Children don't see writing like this in books, or much beyond school. I wonder if it's based on the same teach-novices-to-imitate-experts logic as 'whole language'. Does research show that learning to write cursive 'p' and 'b' helps you read non-cursive p/q and b/d in books? I'd prefer kids start with simpler letters and get plenty of instruction about how to form and place them as they say and spell words, so that [visual information](#), [motor plans](#) and [articulation](#) fuse nicely in their brains. Joiny bits can come later.



Educational Psychologist [Murray Evely](#) (a nice fellow, we once both worked at Footscray School Support Centre) led the development of [Victorian Modern Cursive in 1985](#). NSW's Foundation Style was [devised two years later](#). Queensland's 1984 handwriting handbook, with the above glorious cover photo, can still be downloaded [here](#). South Australian Modern Cursive was devised in 1983 [and updated in 2006](#). Tasmania's 1985 style has been updated a few times, most recently last year, when [Tasmanian Handwriting Guidelines](#) were developed with the help of academic and consultant [Dr Noella Mackenzie](#). I wonder why different conclusions about shape, size, spacing, slant and joins were drawn from (presumably) the same mid-1980s research?

Every state teaches cursive eventually, mainly because it's considered more efficient. However, US handwriting expert [Steve Graham et al.'s 1998 research](#) found that mixed handwriting was faster than both cursive and manuscript, and that a mixed style containing mostly cursive letters was also the most legible. [Canadian research in 2013 by Bara and Morin](#) also found that "cursive handwriting was the slower style, whereas mixed handwriting seemed to be more efficient" (p. 601).

Steve Graham recommends teaching beginners traditional manuscript letters for four reasons (see pp. 21–22 of [this article](#)):

- 1 Most children start school already knowing how to write some manuscript letters.

- 2 There is some (rather dated) evidence that manuscript is easier to learn (Researchers! This topic!).
- 3 Once mastered, manuscript can be written as fast as cursive, and possibly more legibly.
- 4 Manuscript may facilitate reading development, as kids' reading material is manuscript, not cursive.

UK handwriting expert [Dr Rosemary Sassoon](#) (who [Wikipedia says is 93 and now lives in Busselton, WA](#)) researched handwriting styles children find easy to read in 1993, and based [her fonts](#) on this research. I wonder if any of the Australian font designers also had the novel idea of asking children which fonts they preferred. Sassoon wrote [a book](#) about teaching handwriting, which is now freely available online.

[The Victorian Phonics Lesson Plans team](#) is preparing early years systematic, synthetic phonics resources for our local schools. Great! They will be in Victorian Modern Cursive. Hmm. A free version of this font is downloadable [here](#), but it's pretty clunky so I hope the lesson planners have a better-quality version. There's also a free Queensland handwriting font [here](#), but otherwise Australia's official school fonts aren't freely available.

I rang Kevin Brown at [Australian School Fonts](#) and wasted about an hour of his time asking about handwriting styles, fonts and related topics. (It's OK, I then bought his fonts.) He said since we've had a National Curriculum (first drafted in 2010), schools can use whatever handwriting style they like. Judging from the orders he receives, many schools are using a different state's style. He also said it's not possible to copyright a handwriting style, only font installation files, which are difficult to write and need updates as software changes. Australian handwriting fonts are also available [from the School Fonts website](#).

Sticking to a specific beginners' handwriting style promotes consistent teaching about letter formation, sizing and placement, and I doubt teachers ask kids who move interstate to unlearn their original handwriting style. Over

time we all develop our own style.

Explicit instruction and lots of practice seem to be the main things that lead to efficient, legible handwriting, whatever the starting style.

For times when kids say keyboards make handwriting obsolete, I like [Bec from Talkin' Chalk's](#) recommended reply: "When the Zombie Apocalypse comes, there'll be no tech. You'll need handwriting." And for an extra start-of-the-week laugh, here's an AI generated version of my favourite handwriting cartoon: the Doctor's Strike (OK, the eyes and fingers are weird, and the bot doesn't understand 'scribble on placards', but the cartoons are all copyright, and you get the idea).



Links

Phascogale picture and information: <https://animalia.bio/red-tailed-phascogale/1000>

Quoll picture and information: <https://www.animalia.bio/eastern-quoll>

This article originally appeared on the author's website [Spelfabet](#).

Alison Clarke [[@spelfabet](#) on X] has over 35 years' experience as a speech pathologist in schools, the disability sector, hospitals and private practice, and holds a Masters in Applied Linguistics. Her Spelfabet website promotes evidence-based literacy teaching and intervention. She was 2015–16 Vice President of [Learning Difficulties Australia \(LDA\)](#), and has been a City Councillor and Mayor. She received LDA's 2018 [Mona Tobias Award](#) and a Medal of the Order of Australia in 2022.