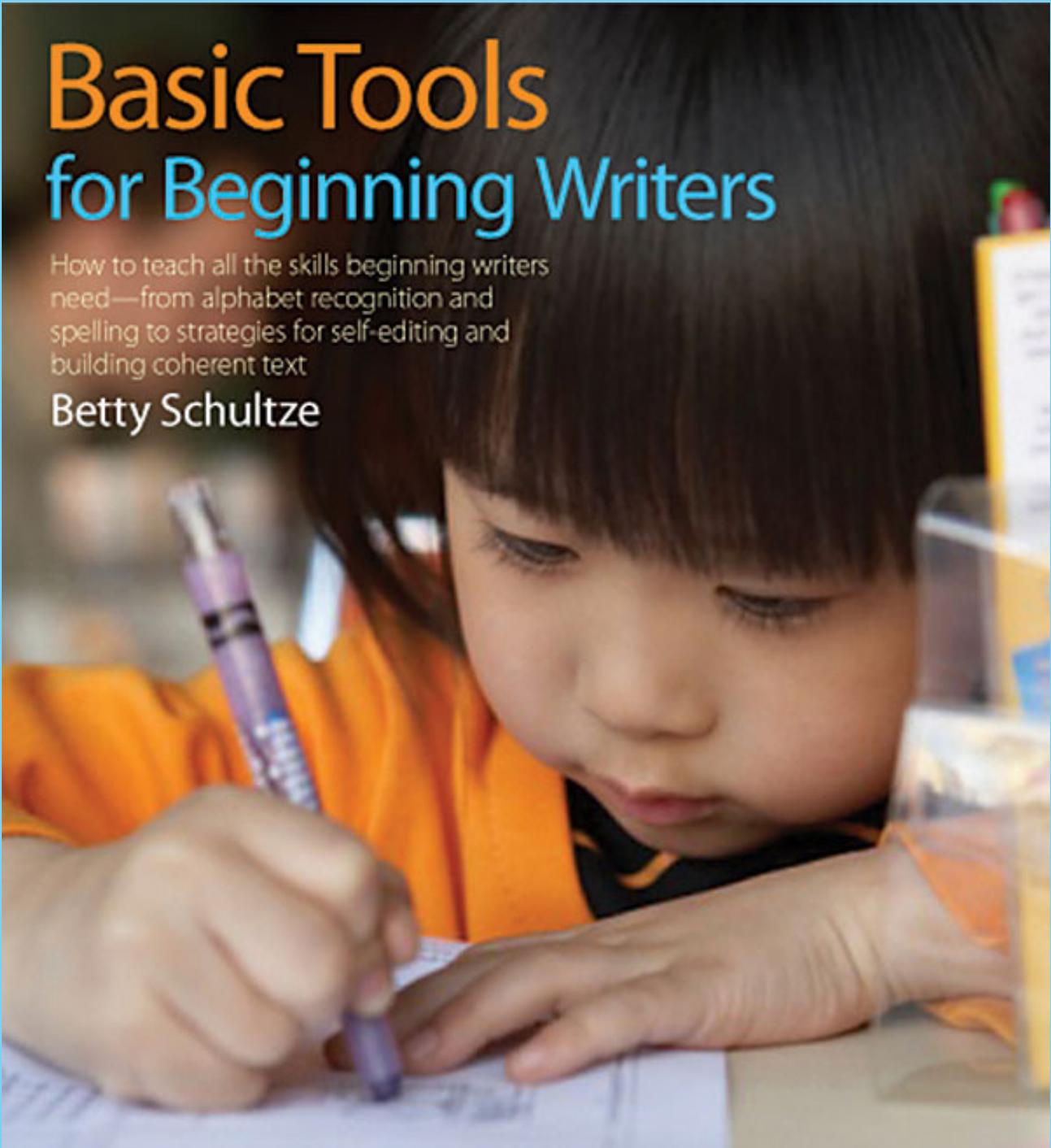


FRIDAY FREEBIE

Basic Tools for Beginning Writers

How to teach all the skills beginning writers need—from alphabet recognition and spelling to strategies for self-editing and building coherent text

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Alphabet Stories

At the end of this chapter, you will find "Consonant Stories" and "Vowel Stories." The brief stories that they provide can be used to teach a similar lesson with any other two or even three alphabet letters that look different from one another.

Alphabet Stories

There are so many resources and ways to teach letters of the alphabet and all of them work! Using alphabet stories is just one that is effective. The use of stories is an excellent teaching tool which makes those syntactic connections come alive in a student who needs help in matching the shapes and names of letters. Teaching a lesson using two letters that are varied in shape is a good way to start.

EXPLORING THE PURPOSE

Students need to be able to recognize letters of the alphabet and make them correctly. For students to be able to print quickly, it is helpful for them to start at the top and then go to the bottom of a letter; establishing this pattern early will help to ensure that the students won't develop habits that are hard to break. How do students remember what a *C* looks like when they are given its name? One helpful way to remember is to know that *C* is "a cookie with a bite out of it." By relating the word *cookie* to both the picture of a *C* and the sound at the beginning of *cookie*, shape, sound, and name of letter are incorporated into one simple story. Since most students can remember stories easier than symbols, teaching a story helps trigger a visual picture that corresponds to the letter *C*.

When students learn to read, they need to not only identify letters in words and match phonemes with those letter shapes, but do it quickly. Fast responding is an often overlooked, but important skill in both reading and writing. The goal is for students to make letters quickly, with automaticity, or without the need to think about the shape. Although neatness is important too, and quickly made letters may not be made as accurately as letters that have been carefully drafted, experience proves that teaching fast responding is more important.

GETTING READY

Make sure that you have a good-sized space on your chalkboard for demonstrating how to form letters. If you lack a chalkboard, have a large piece of chart paper ready. The students will need either individual chalkboards or paper and pencil for making their letters. Since they will make many letters which will easily fill a page, I recommend using cheap scrap paper rather than notebook pages.

If possible, have magnetic letters on a magnetic board or a number of cut-out letters or letters on little cards on a flat surface for students. There should be at least six of each letter: *T* and *S*, both lowercase and capitals. If you don't have magnetic letters, you can print a number of capital and lowercase *T*'s and *S*'s on small squares of manila tag or construction paper (5 cm square), and have them ready in an envelope.

HOW TO TEACH IT

Begin by telling the group that you are going to share a story about two letters of the alphabet. The story is about the shape and sound that each makes.

For an initial lesson, I recommend saying, "S is a snake that says ssss" because this is an easy picture for students to visualize, although not the easiest shape to make. Furthering the story, you could tell more about the snake's shape and trace your finger around the picture of it, starting at the head.

Many teachers have found that individual chalkboards cut up from old chalkboards being torn out of classrooms are invaluable. Check with your school board or other teachers to see if you can find some.

Don't expect children to be exact in sizes of letters, but they should know that capitals are big and most lowercase letters are half the size of capitals. I have often described tall lowercase letters, such as *f*, *t*, *p*, *b*, and *d*, as teenagers in the letter family. Like all children, they are still "little," but they are as tall as their parents, the capital letters. This analogy helps students distinguish between capital and lowercase letters. It is best for them to be able to do this at the beginning of their writing practice.

"He likes to lie in the sun and his body follows a path that goes to the left and then around the rock, and loops around the next rock, which is just under the first one. We say the *s* goes around the rock and around the rock. The rocks in this picture are imaginary, but they would look like little dots one on top of another."

You could put little dots where the rocks would be and make the *s* around them, saying: "When we make a capital *S* it is big, and when we make a lowercase *s*, it is about half the size."

It is helpful to have students make the *S* large in the air with their pointer fingers first. Encourage them to verbalize while they make the *S*, as speaking aloud helps them remember where to start and how to proceed. "*S* goes around the rock and around the rock."

Make the letter on the board as students trace it in the air and on their partners' backs and on their hands. Then ask them to make it on their chalkboards very big, and then smaller, slowly first until they have the feel of the shape, and then quickly. Have them practise making lots of big *S*'s and smaller *s*'s. Since a common confusion for *S* is to begin making the letter at the left, stress starting where the snake's head is, at the right, and following the body around the rock and around the rock.

Next, introduce another letter — *T* is a good choice. The story for *T* might be "*T* is a table for two for tea." Show them where the cups go and explain that the lowercase *t* looks different as you describe and demonstrate how it is made. Sometimes, while pointing to the part of the *t* above the horizontal line, you might tell them this:

"It is still a table for two for tea, but on this table you have a place to hang the menu which tells you that you can buy a piece of cake or cookie with your tea."

If you teach in an area where there are still telephone poles, you can create another great visual picture story for *t*.

Follow the same process used for *S* with *T*, having students make it in the air, make it on partners' backs, and make it with their fingers on the chalkboard before they start writing it. Emphasize the top-to-bottom line first and then the left-to-right line to either make a capital *T* or lowercase *t*. Make sure that students have practice verbalizing how the letter is made "straight down and a table top" or "straight down and a telephone pole." They should recognize that each person needs enough space for a teacup so the top line should be centred on the bottom line.

To provide practice in quick recognition of the shapes of the letters, you may use the magnetic letters and show them how to quickly sort all the *t*'s and *s*'s into two groups, and then scramble them — I usually suggest that an imaginary windstorm has come up. Then, ask them to group the letters again. (However, this is an individual game; it may be difficult for every child to have a turn with the magnetic letters.)

To provide individual practice, print the letters on paper squares and have children practise grouping them quickly. You could also have them glue letters into two separate groups after much practice separating them quickly into two piles of *T*'s and *S*'s. Provide many opportunities for them to say, "*S* is a snake" and "*T* is a table for two for tea," so that these stories will stay with them.

A reproducible page, "Vowel Stories," allows students to focus on vowels and add images that relate to the text. See page 54.

Consonant Stories

Here are some of the consonant stories I have used with young children. The stories — simple sentences that relate how to make the letter — may help students who think visually to remember how to make various letters. For example, the letter *b* could be shown as a baseball bat at the left and ball attached to it bottom right, the letter *h* could be shown as a figure sitting on the curved part of the letter with a speech bubble saying, “ha, ha,” the letter *v* could be turned into a heart to represent a valentine, and the letter *x* could be shown with eyes in the top portion. Note that each story includes words that begin with the focus letter. You may of course devise your own.

b is a bat and ball.

c is a cookie with a bite out of it.

d drags a drum.

f is a fireman with his hose.

g is a guppy with a long tail.

h is ha ha happy to be sitting down.

j is a jumping jack with a big nose.

k is a boy ready to kick a can.

l is a lady tall and straight.

m is a set of mountains.

n is a nose with nostrils.

p is a pan with a handle you can hold.

q is a quiet queen.

r is a rooster.

s is a snake.

t is a table for two for tea.

v is a valentine.

w is a weird bird with wings.

x is it.

y is two talking heads going yackety-yak.

z is a zipper.

REFLECTING ON THE LEARNING

Asking the questions below can help you determine if students benefited from the lesson; it will also give you an opportunity to reinforce the names, shapes, and ways of making the letters.

- Tell me about the letters you made. Can you read them to me?
- Do you know the story you can say when you make *S*? (*S* goes around the rock and around the rock.) What is the story for *T*? Can you tell it to me?
- Find an *S* that the student has made correctly and say, “You have made this *S* correctly; it has two loops that go the right way: around the rock and around the rock.” Do the same for *T*, commenting on how straight the line is, how the top part is centred on the line below. By doing this you are reinforcing the criteria for making the letters correctly.

Vowel Stories

a

a is an apple
with a slice
out of it.

e

e is Eddie
who eats and eats
but hates broccoli
and says "egh"
when you feed it
to him.

i

i is a pin
that goes
straight in.

o

o is Ollie
the Octopus
who gets caught
in a net and says,
"ah" in relief
when the fisher
throws him
overboard.

u

u is an upside-down
umbrella.