

## **Stages of Writing Development in Young Children**

For most of their writing development, braille learners progress through the same stages as their typically sighted peers. The only difference occurs at the very early stage when children who use print draw pictures to plan what they will write. Young braille learners seldom use tactile pictures in this way. Instead, they plan orally or use a simple written list of ideas. (They do, however, enjoy creating tactile pictures as a follow-up to their writing.) Once young children who are learning braille understand the purpose of writing and can braille some letters, they can begin to express simple ideas using invented spelling.

### **Invented Spelling and the Early Stages of Writing Development**

Progression through the stages of early writing is dependent on children's growing ability to apply the *alphabetic principle* in their writing. This is the understanding that oral language consists of smaller sounds and that there is a system for matching written letters to those sounds (Cabell et al., 2013). Young children use this system to write with invented spelling (also called temporary or phonetic spelling), an approximation of conventional spelling that involves segmenting the sounds in words and writing the corresponding letters. It allows children to write independently about any topic of interest to them using a logical system that can be read back by others. As children expand their knowledge of sound-symbol relationships, their invented spelling becomes more complex and closer to conventional spelling.

The developmental spelling sequence on the *BOP-K* Independent Writing Progression form uses content from the series of writing stages by Bear et al. (2016). In this model, children in late preschool through kindergarten typically move from the emergent stage to the letter name–alphabetic stage. Emergent writing may consist of scribbling or random letters, often from the child's name; at this point, there is no evidence of sound-symbol associations. During the early letter name–alphabetic stage, young writers begin to use the alphabetic principle to spell words with invented spelling. For example, they may represent the first consonant sound of a word with a letter: k for cat. As they learn to segment and match more sounds in words—including consonant blends and digraphs, and long and short vowels—they progress through the middle and late letter name–alphabetic stages. By the end of the alphabetic letter-name stage,

children's invented spelling represents nearly all the sounds in a word, phrase, or sentence.

### **The Research Basis for Invented Spelling**

Research has demonstrated the benefits of children's invented spelling for both writing and reading since the 1980s. A frequently cited study by Clarke (1988) found that children who used invented spelling appeared to acquire spelling, decoding, and word recognition skills earlier than those who did not; in addition, their writing exhibited a richer vocabulary. More recent studies support these findings. Martins et al. (2013) reported that children involved in an invented spelling program performed better in spelling and reading at the end of a five-week intervention period than those in a control group. In 2017, Ouellette and Sénéchal found a direct correlation between the sophistication of kindergartners' invented spelling and their progress in reading a year later. The data suggested that children's invented spelling can predict growth in early reading skills.

### **Other Aspects of Spelling Development**

Invented spelling is not a license for children to spell words any way they like, and for most students, it is only appropriate in preschool through approximately the end of first grade. As children move through the letter name–alphabetic stage, they learn to segment words into more sounds and spell words with increasing accuracy.

Starting in first grade, children are expected to spell a growing number of high frequency words correctly—such as the, what, they, goes, and of—and their reliance on invented spelling begins to decrease. English language learners may continue using invented spelling until they have sufficient exposure to English sound-symbol correspondences and conventional spellings.

High frequency words often appear on classroom word walls or are included in individualized student spelling dictionaries that children can reference as they write. In addition, word study (spelling) activities facilitate the transition from invented to conventional spelling by helping children learn common spelling patterns, make connections among words, and apply grade appropriate phonics rules to their writing.

## ***BOP-K* and Writing Development**

Work samples from young braille learners indicate that they proceed through the same series of writing stages as their sighted peers. They also begin incorporating alphabetic wordsigns and other braille contractions into their writing as these are taught and as they appear in their reading. Note, however, that kindergarteners may continue to use invented spelling for alphabetic wordsigns (e.g., can and have) until they have more reading and writing experience.

In *BOP-K*, children participate in supported and independent writing activities that help them acquire the alphabetic principle and develop their ability to express themselves in writing. Strategies to support children as they write include the following:

- **Modeled/Interactive Writing:** After oral discussion of a topic, the teacher and the child share the braillewriter to produce a written message. The teacher writes words, phrases, and/or sentences on the braillewriter, thinking aloud about and modeling specific aspects of the message, such as sound-symbol relationships, spacing, capitalization, punctuation, word choice, or content. The child contributes ideas orally and assumes increasing responsibility for writing previously learned letters, contractions, or alphabetic wordsigns. The result is a message in contracted braille with conventional spelling, capitalization, and punctuation written collaboratively by the teacher and the child.
- **Guided Writing:** During a guided writing activity, the child does all the writing with support from the teacher. The goal is to promote understanding of the alphabetic principle by facilitating invented spelling. After oral discussion of a topic and rehearsal of a word, phrase, or sentence to write, the child writes one word at a time, segmenting one or more sounds and writing a letter to match each one. The teacher supports the child at an appropriate developmental level by providing and then fading out reminders to space between words, modeling sound segmentation, assisting with fingering for unfamiliar letters or braille contractions, and helping to maintain a focus on the message. The result is a message in invented spelling, which may include only a few letters that match initial sounds or a more complete representation of multiple sounds in each word, depending on the child's level.

In addition to supported writing activities, *BOP-K* lessons provide opportunities for **Independent Writing** beginning with Lesson 3. Most lessons include "Child's Choice"

writing on Day 5 where the child selects a topic and writes about it independently. As the lessons progress, an increasing number of writing activities direct the teacher to “step back” after initial discussion of a topic and to encourage the child to work alone. Independent writing samples allow the teacher to identify the skills a child uses consistently and to plan next steps for writing instruction. The Independent Writing Progression, which is part of the assessment materials, is designed to help the teacher analyze independent writing samples. It includes developmental sequences for composition and content, spelling, spacing, and capitalization and punctuation. Examples of children’s braille writing at several different stages can be found in the *Assessment Booklet* (sample filled-in copy of the Independent Writing Progression for Assessment Lessons) and with the [Sample Filled-In Assessment Forms](#) on the BOP Kindergarten Teacher Resources page.

## References

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