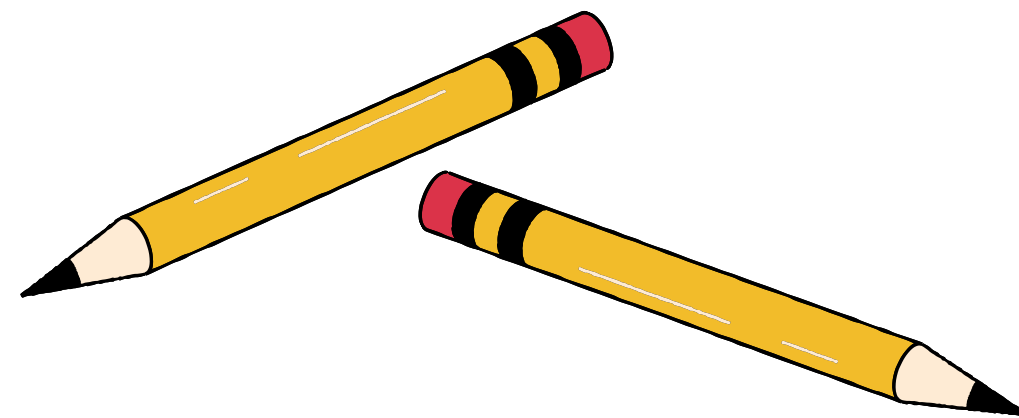


Write Like Zella

An Evidence-Informed Approach for Teaching
Handwriting to Children with Autism

Ashlee Schmitt, MOT, OTR/L



Introduction



Hi, I'm Ashlee!

- Eastern Kentucky University, 2011
- Ohio State University, 2013
- OSU Harding, 2014
- Olentangy Local Schools, 2025
- United States Navy Reserve, 2019
 - Active duty, 2022-2024
- Launched ColorfullyEnthused LLC

Introduction



Meet Zella!

- 13 yrs old, 7th grade
- Preschool - 4th grade
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Verbally expressive: HATED writing
- Goal: Copy her name
- “Tech kid” to writing paragraphs
- Henry x2, Ben, Isaac, and others too!

Objectives

1. **Explain** the role and importance of handwriting development for all children across academic, functional, and communication contexts.
2. **Identify** the motor, visual–perceptual, and cognitive components that impact handwriting performance in children with autism.
3. **Describe** evidence-informed principles that support structured handwriting instruction for neurodivergent learners.
4. **Implement** a systematic instructional framework to teach letter formation and written output using modeling, prompting hierarchies, and fading strategies.
5. **Differentiate** adaptations to the handwriting framework based on individual sensory, motor, and communication profiles.

The Role & Importance of Handwriting for All Children

What do we know about handwriting's role across **academic**, **functional**, *and* **communication** contexts?

The Value of Handwriting

IN COMMUNICATION ?

IN ACADEMIA?

IN EVERYDAY LIFE?

“Skilful writing is a *powerful* means of communication and it is a main goal in educational contexts worldwide.”

(Malpique et al., 2024)

Components that Impact Handwriting Performance in Children with Autism

WRITING: a complex skill involving a foundational letter formation piece + a process and planning piece

FOUNDATIONAL LETTER FORMATION PIECE

letter recognition (*visual perception, cognition, receptive/expressive language*) + **pencil grasp** (*fine motor, hand strength*) + **where to start** (*visual motor, visuospatial skills*) + **pressure** (*sensory processing*) + **direct strokes** (*sensory, fine motor, visual motor, motor planning*) + **where to stop** (*visual motor, inhibition*)

CHILDREN WITH AUTISM: sensory processing differences + fine motor impairment + visual perception and visual motor deficits + executive functioning challenges

Structured Instruction for Neurodivergent Learners

How do children with autism learn?

What are they good at?

Which supports help them succeed?

Structured Instruction for Neurodivergent Learners

- **Visual cues:** Pictures, colors, starting dots, bold baselines, timers, charts
- **Concrete verbal prompts:** Clear, simple, direct; positive behavioral support (Crasta et al., 2024)
- **Rhythms and routines:** Minimized surprises, task-specific repetition

Strengths-Based Intervention for Neurodivergent Learners

intervention for autistic learners should be **goal-oriented** and **contextually relevant** *while incorporating the individual's strengths, interests, and perspectives* to promote engagement and meaningful participation

(Patten et al., 2024)

Structured Handwriting Instruction Matters

Handwriting is a complex, integrated skill requiring **coordination** of motor, visual–perceptual, and cognitive processes, and plays a critical role in written expression and academic participation (Weintraub, 2019).

When transcription becomes more **automatic**, children are able to allocate cognitive resources toward idea generation and composition (Malpique et al., 2024).

Instruction that is **explicit, structured**, and curriculum-based leads to measurable improvements in handwriting performance (Engel et al., 2018).

Structured Handwriting Instruction Matters

Handwriting practice strengthens ***letter recognition, spelling, and reading*** through sensorimotor integration (Kiefer et al., 2015; Ihara et al., 2021).

Effective intervention integrates motor learning principles, structured teaching, and strengths-based engagement to support functional outcomes (Crasta et al., 2024; Zwicker & Harris, 2009).

How handwriting is taught directly impacts how effectively children learn, communicate, and participate.

INSERT > > >

“WRITE LIKE ZELLA”

a strategy that Zella taught me

A FRAMEWORK THAT WORKS

Write Like Zella is a structured, evidence-based, instructional framework that leverages the **strengths** of children with autism and **simplifies** the complexities of letter formation to support accessible and effective handwriting development.

Basic Components

- Evidence-informed, reliable instructional methodology
- Ordered and intentional introduction of letters
- Gross-to-fine motor progression
- Clearly defined starting and ending positions
- Color-coded stroke sequencing
- Concrete, consistent verbal prompting
- Repetitive, rhythmic, and structured rehearsal

Ordered Introduction of Letters

- **Function First:** Name Always

- **Capital Letters**

- Down & Over Letters: L F E H T I U J
- Big C Letters: C O Q G S
- Big & Little Curve Letters: D P B R
- Slide Letters: A K N M V W X Y Z

- **Lowercase Letters**

- Little c Letters: c o a d g q
- Down, Up, and Over Letters: r n m h b p
- Go-under Letters: g q p y j
- Tall Letters: l t h b d f k
- Short Letters: a c e i r n m o s u v w x z

one letter at a time, one group at a time

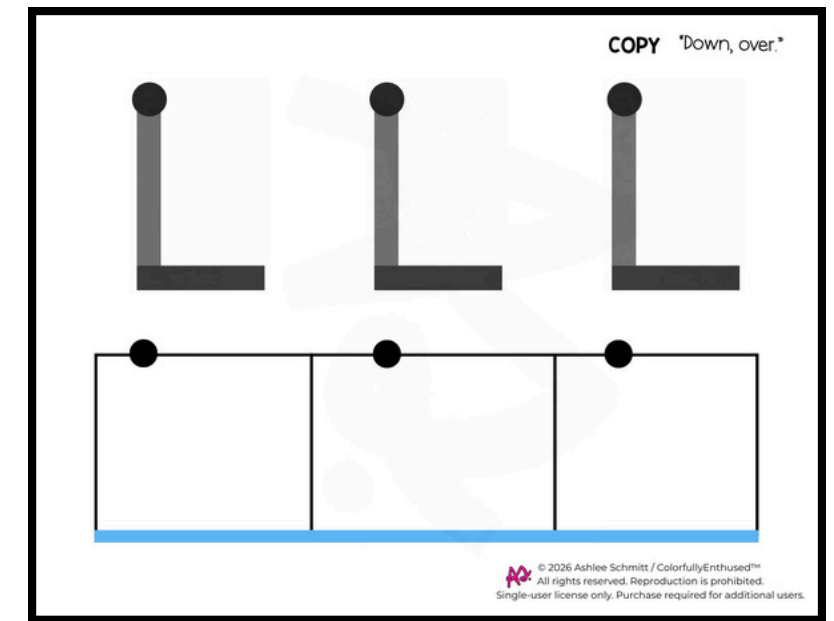
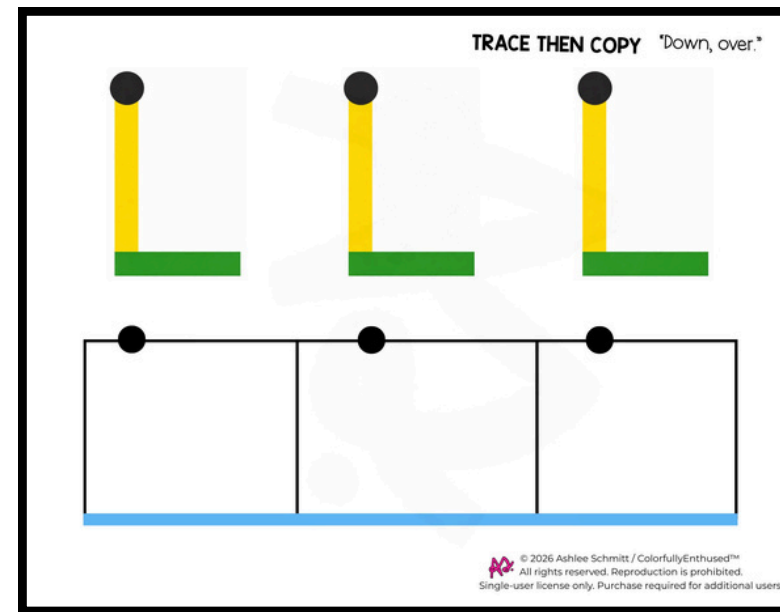
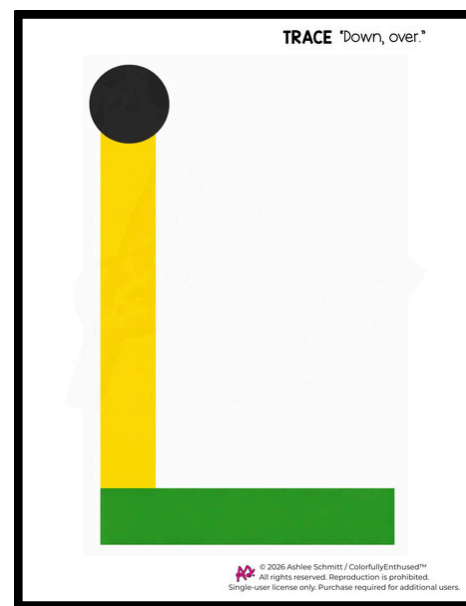
REPEAT until mastery.

Gross-to-Fine-Motor Progression

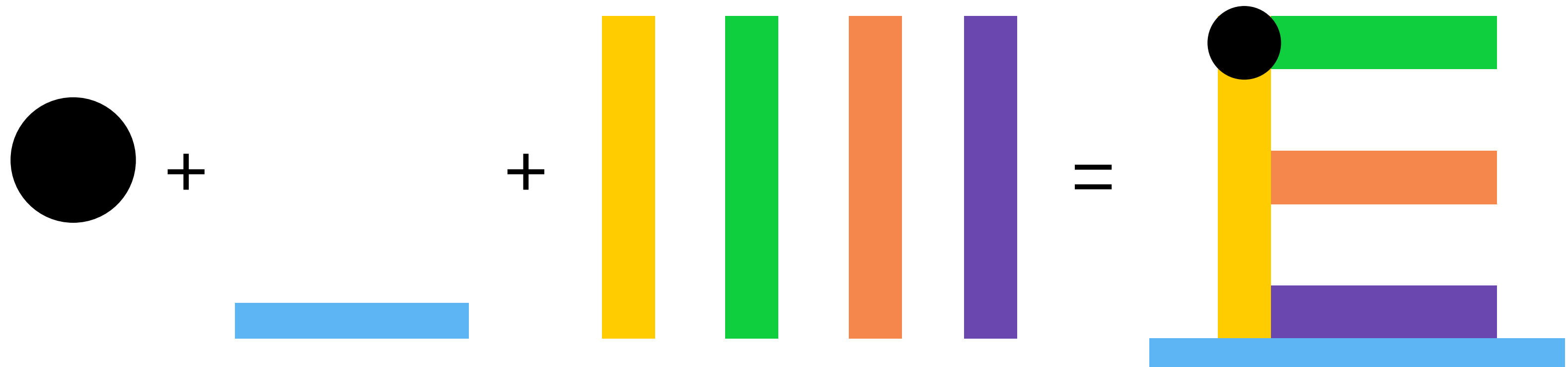
For each letter of each group

- Full-page Tracing Page
- Half-page Tracing Page
- Trace Then Copy Page
- Copy Page

*Master Big, then
Try Smaller*
REPEAT until mastery



Clearly-Defined Starting Positions & Ending Positions + Color-Coded Stroke Sequencing



Concrete, Consistent Verbal Prompting

DOWN & OVER LETTERS

Rather than fun, cute, and abstract, they provide clear direction.

L

“Down, stop. Over.”

T

“Down, jump! Cross the top.”

F

“Down, jump! Over. Over.”

I

“Down, jump! Cross the top. Cross the bottom.”

E

“Down, jump! Over. Over. Over.”

U

“Down, curve, up to the top!”

H

“Down, jump! Down, jump! Over.”

J

“Down, curve, jump! Cross the top.”

Concrete, Consistent Verbal Prompting

BIG C LETTERS

C

“Around to the bottom, and stop.”

G

“Big C to the bottom, up, [stop,] in.”

O

“Big C to the bottom, keep going to the top!”

S

“Big curve around, curve the other way.”

Q

“Big C to the bottom, keep going to the top! Kick out.”

Concrete, Consistent Verbal Prompting

BIG & LITTLE CURVE LETTERS

D

“Down, jump! Around to the bottom.”

B

“Down, jump! Around in, around in.”

P

“Down, jump! Around a little.”

R

“Down, jump! Around a little, kick out!”

Concrete, Consistent Verbal Prompting

SLIDE LETTERS

A

“Slide down, jump! Slide down, jump! Over.”

K

“Down, jump! Slide in, kick out.”

N

“Down, jump! Slide over, up.”

M

“Down, jump! Slide over, slide up, down.”

Concrete, Consistent Verbal Prompting

MORE SLIDE LETTERS

V

“Slide down, slide up.”

Y

“Slide over, jump! Slide over, jump!
Straight down.”

W

“Slide down, slide up, slide down,
slide up.”

Z

“Back, slide down, back.”

X

“Slide over, jump! Slide over the
other way.”

Concrete, Consistent Verbal Prompting

LOWECASE LETTERS

Little c Letters

- c = "Around to the bottom."
- o = "Around to the bottom, keep going to the top."
- a = "Around to the bottom, up, and down."
- d = "Around to the bottom, up to the top, and down."
- g = "Around to the bottom, up, down under, and curve."
- q = "Around to the bottom, up, down under, curve the other way."

Down, Up, and Over Letters

- r = "Down, up, and over."
- n = "Down, up, over, down."
- m = "Down, up, over, down, up, over, down."
- h = "Down, up, over, down."
- b = "Down, up, around to the bottom."
- p = "Down under, up, around to the bottom."

Go-Under Letters

- g = "Around to the bottom, up, down under, and curve."
- q = "Around to the bottom, up, down under, curve the other way."
- p = "Down under, up, around to the bottom."
- y = "Slide down, jump! Connect, keep going."
- j = "Down under, curve."

Tall Letters

- l = "Down to the bottom."
- t = "Down, jump! Over"
- h = "Down, up, over, down."
- b = "Down, up, around to the bottom."
- d = "Around to the bottom, up to the top, and down."
- f = "Around, down, jump! Over."
- k = "Down, jump! Slide in, kick out."

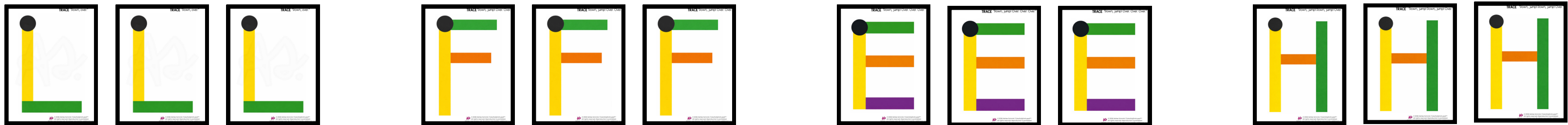
Short Letters

- a = "Around to the bottom, up, and down."
- c = "Around to the bottom."
- e = "Over, up, around to the bottom."
- i = "Down, jump! Dot the top."
- o = "Around to the bottom, keep going to the top."
- s = "Little curve, curve the other way."
- u = "Down, over, up and down."
- v = "Slide down, slide up."
- w = "Slide down, slide up, slide down, slide up."
- x = "Slide over, jump! Slide the other way."
- y = "Slide down, jump! Connect, keep going."
- z = "Back, slide down, back."

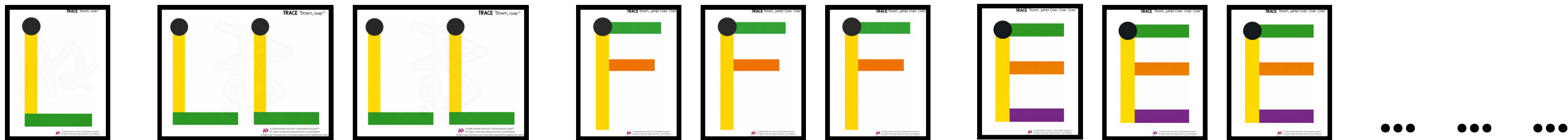
Repetitive, Rhythmic, and Structured Rehearsal

OPTION A: a group of letters are learned as a set (L F E H) — as mastery occurs, pages are replaced

Full-page Tracing Page x3 of each letter within a set



With mastery, replace **Full-page** with **Half-page Tracing Pages** x2

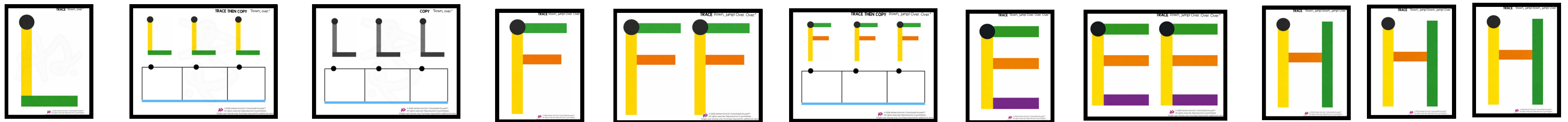


With mastery, incorporate **Trace then Copy Page**

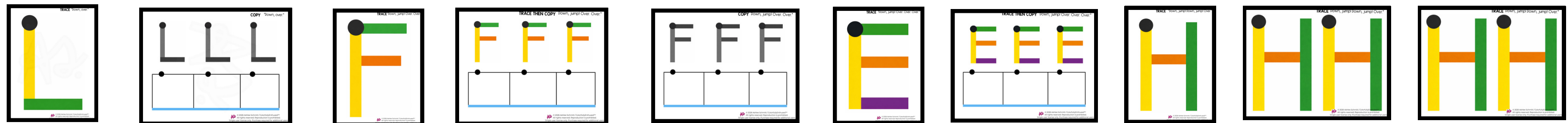


Repetitive, Rhythmic, and Structured Rehearsal

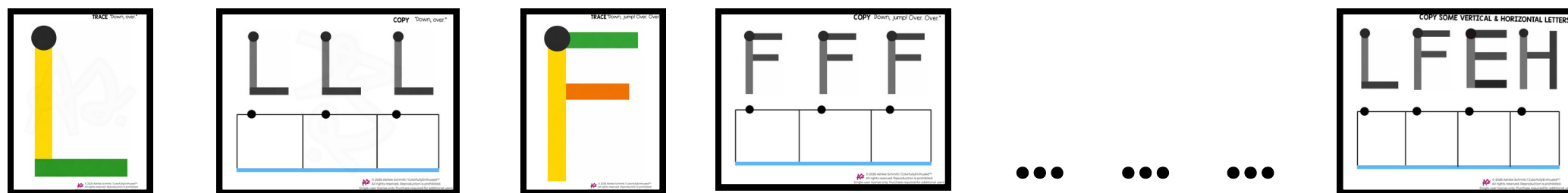
With mastery, incorporate **Copy Page**



With mastery, continue to replace pages to reduce tracing rehearsal prior to copying



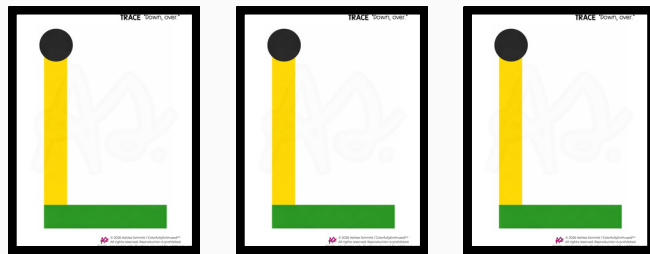
Once all letters are being consistently rehearsed like the “L,” above, copy the group of letters altogether



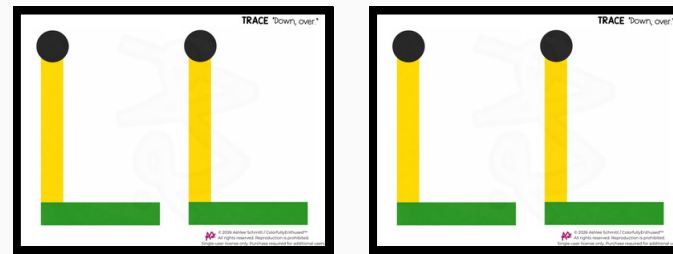
Repetitive, Rhythmic, and Structured Rehearsal

OPTION B: each letter is learned in this sequence — as mastery occurs, new letters are added

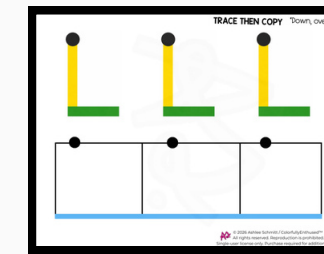
Full-page Tracing Page x3



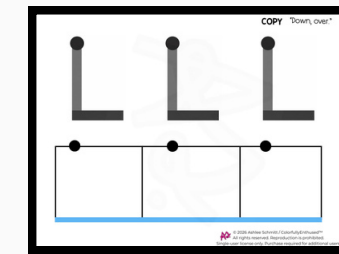
Half-page Tracing Page x2



Trace Then Copy Page



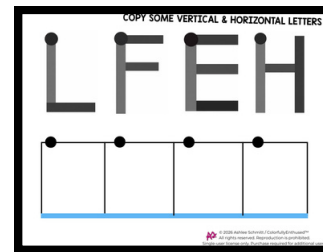
Copy Page



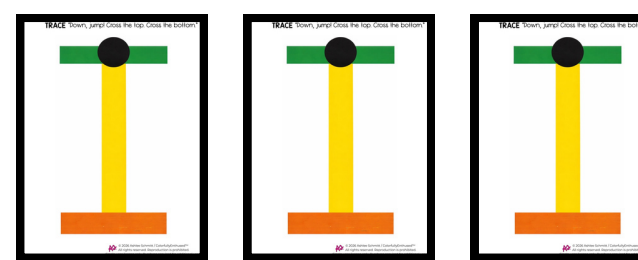
repeat with each
letter within the set

... ..

rehearse part of set

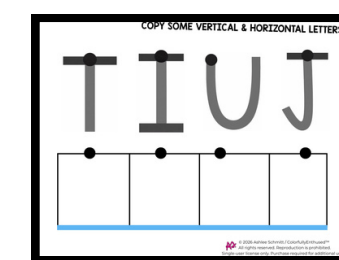


repeat with next letters within the set

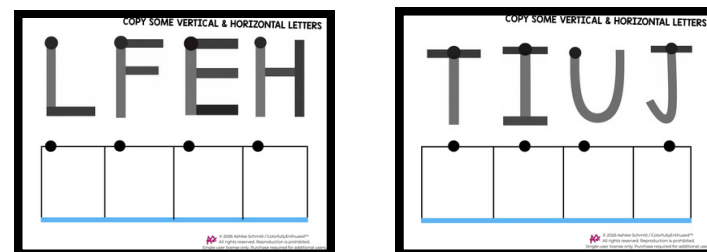


... ..

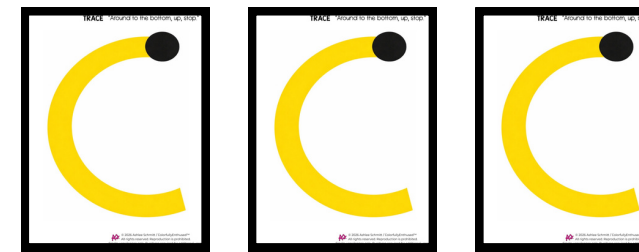
rehearse next part of set



rehearse entirety of set



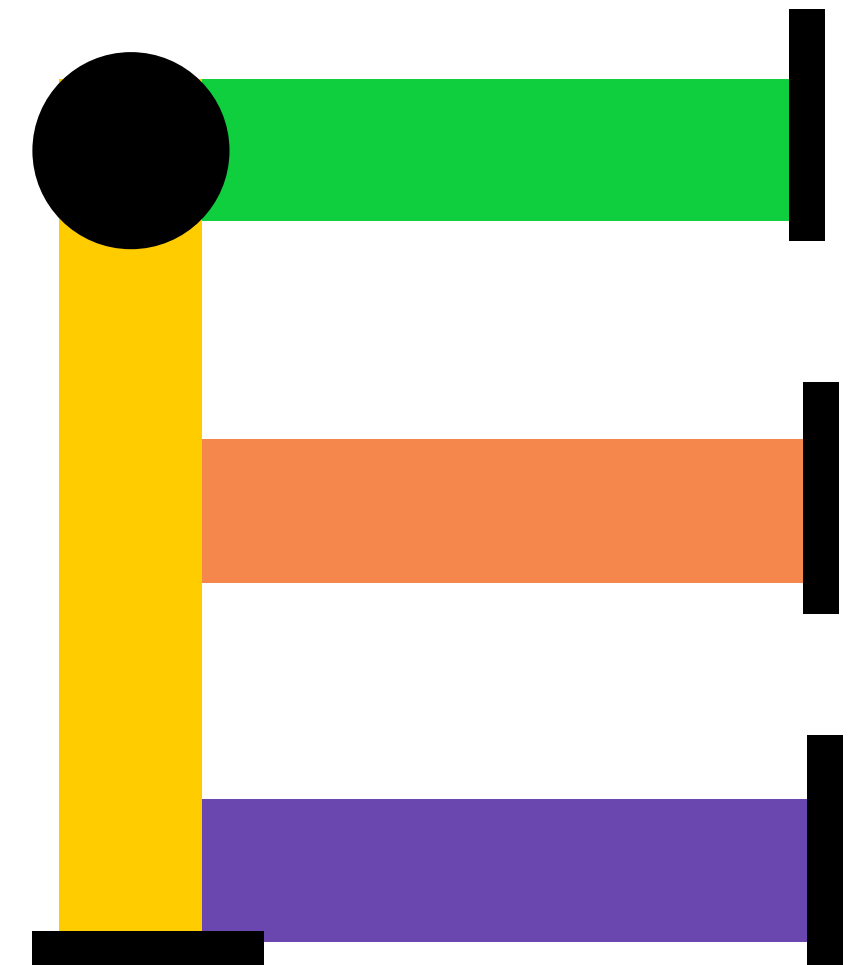
repeat with letters of the next set



... ..

Differentiation & Adaptations

- Start with a **dry-erase board**, with color-coded model
 - increases gross-motor rehearsal (vs “sky write”)
- Add **perpendicular lines for ending positions**
 - supports inhibition
 - (*increase the use of “STOP!”*)
- **Replace verbal prompts** with added visual cues
 - pointing, receptive language
- Remove from page protector, **use pencil**
 - increase resistance, kinesthetic feedback

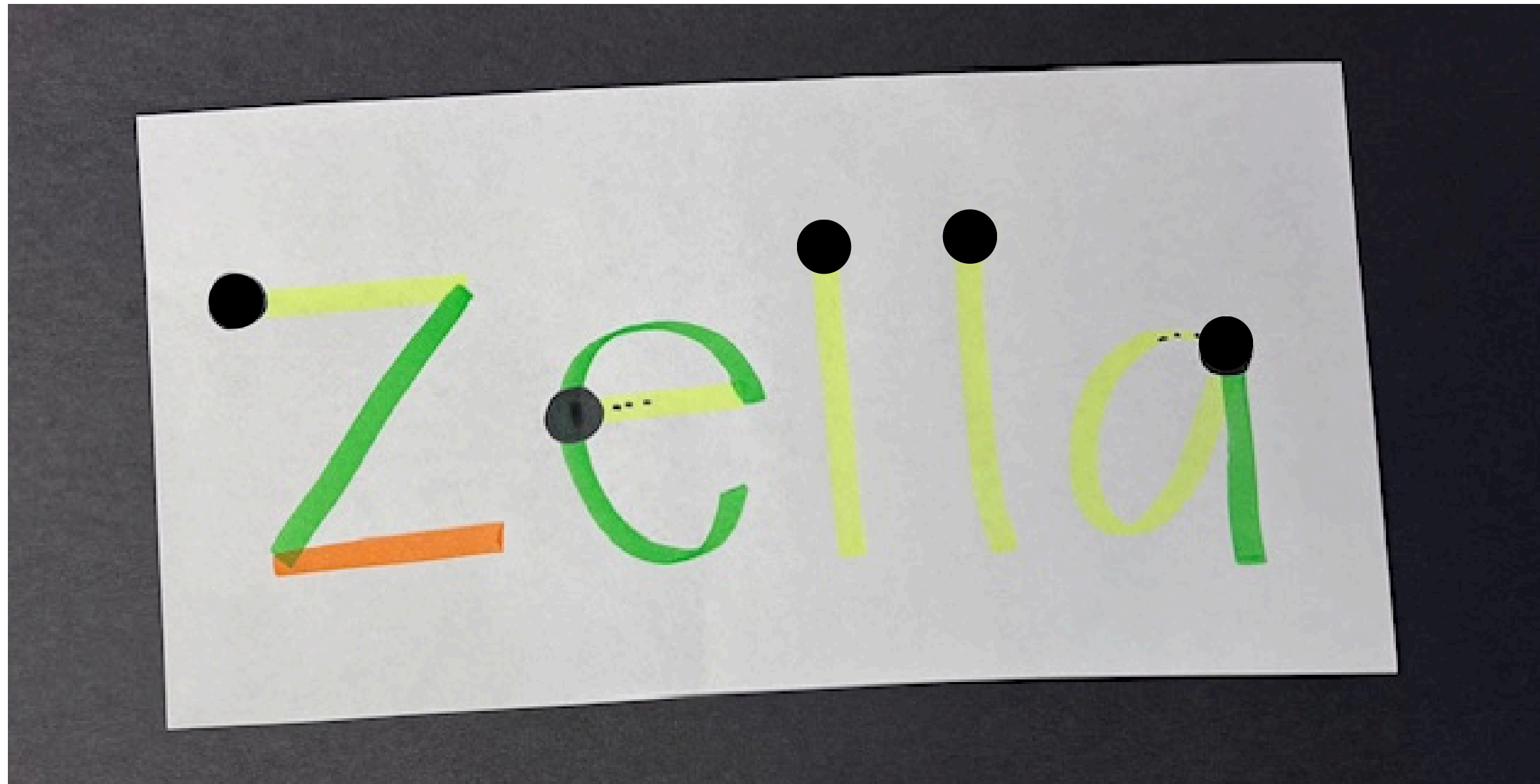


Differentiation & Adaptations

When thinking about a student of yours, what adaptations might they need?

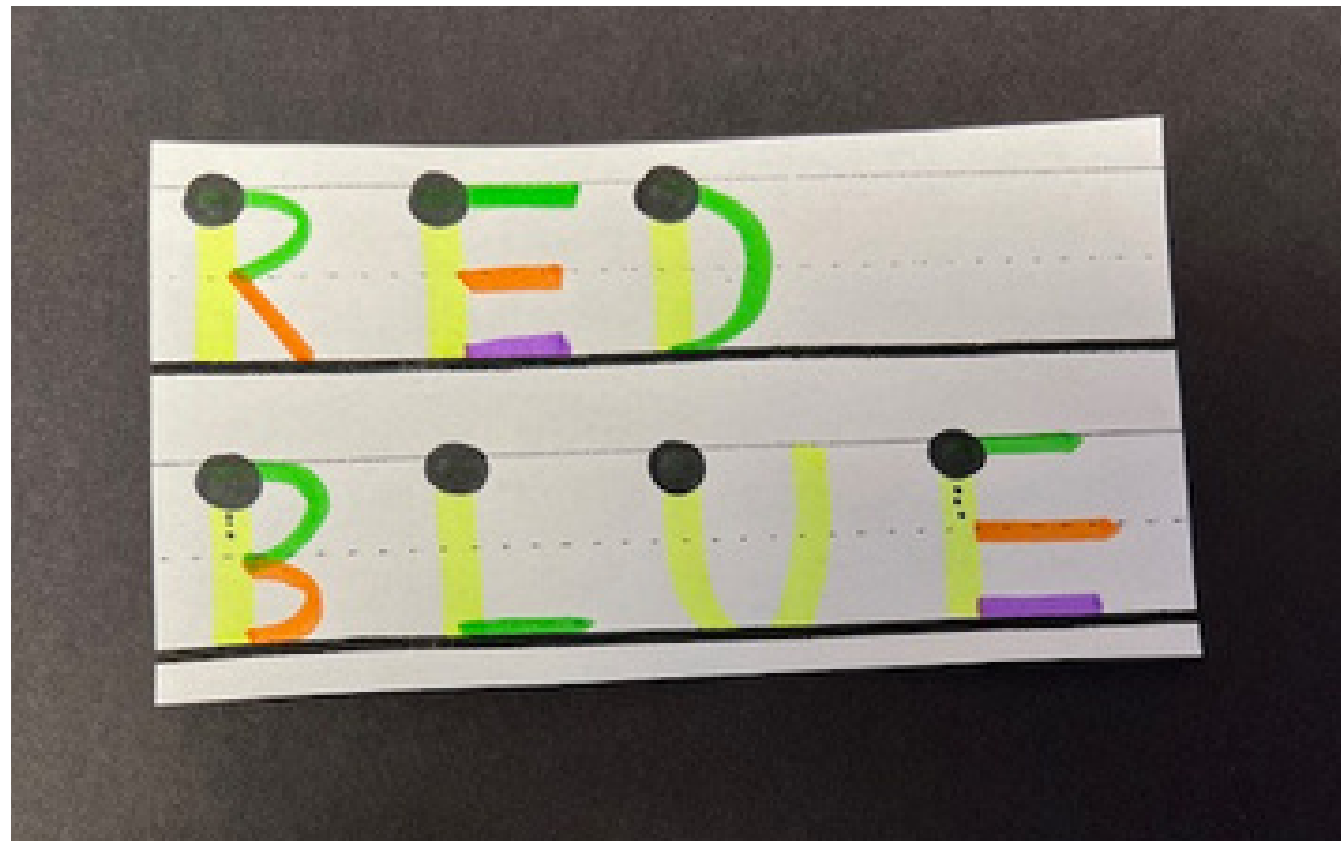
Write Like Zella In Practice

Name
in title
case

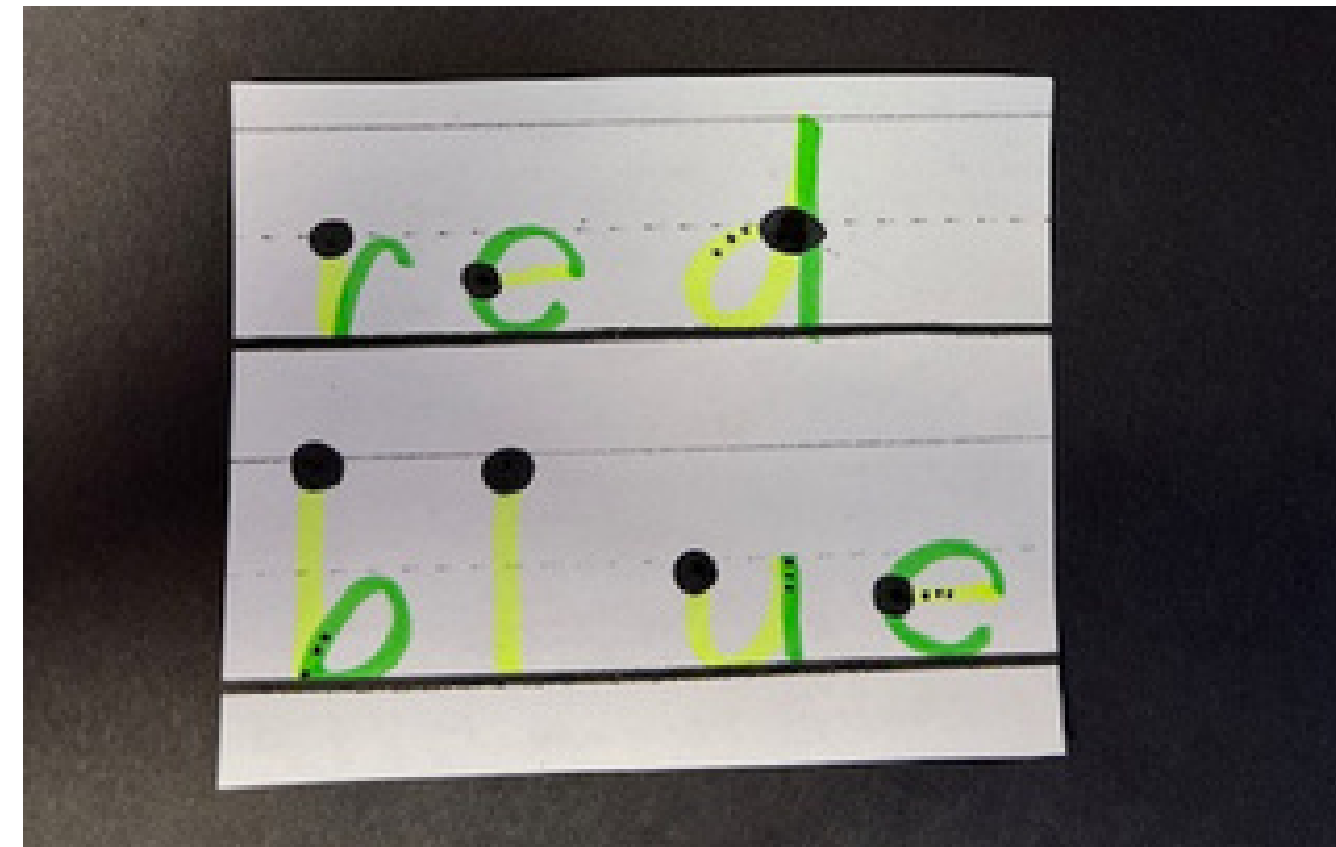


Write Like Zella In Practice

WORDS IN UPPERCASE

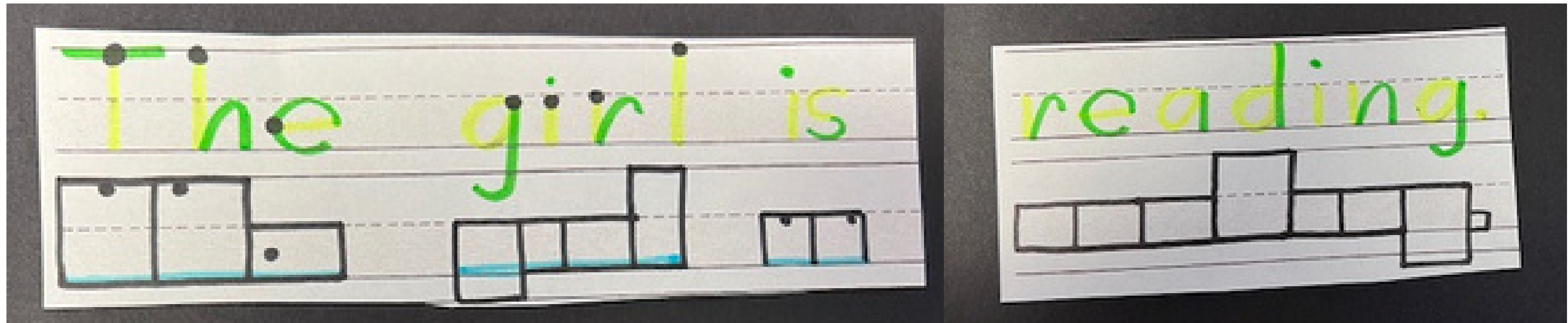


words with lowercase



Write Like Zella In Practice

Tracing and copying a sentence, word-by-word.



Q & A: Review of Objectives

1. What is the role and importance of handwriting development?
2. What are motor, visual-perceptual, and cognitive components that impact handwriting performance in children with autism?
3. What are some evidence-informed components, used within the Write Like Zella approach, that support handwriting instruction for neurodivergent learners?
4. Do you think you could implement the systematic instructional framework that you learned today?
5. What are some ways you can adapt the framework based on students' needs?

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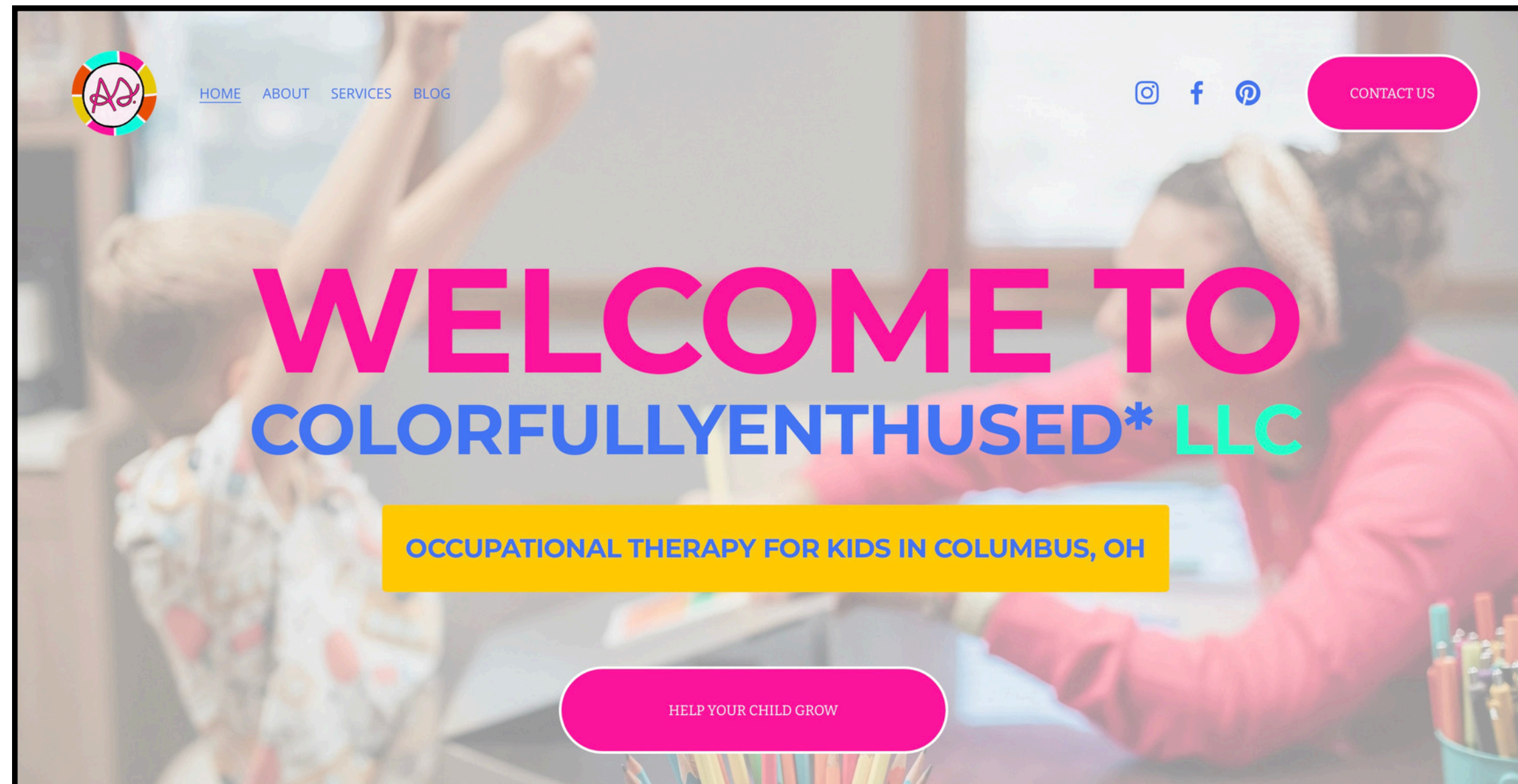
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QUESTIONS



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- Westerville, Ohio
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- ADHD, Autism, Anxiety, and those kiddos who'd benefit from support but don't qualify for school-based services
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Please take
a moment to
provide feedback
on today's presentation.

**EVALUATION: Write
Like Zella: An
Evidence-Informed
Approach for Teaching
Handwriting to
Children with Autism**



***Scan QR code to submit
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