

Could it be more than *messy handwriting*?

A first-look checklist for parents wondering whether their child's writing struggles go beyond a stage they'll simply grow out of.

This is not a diagnostic tool. It cannot tell you whether your child has dysgraphia or any other learning difficulty. It's designed only to help you notice patterns worth discussing with a professional. If several items below feel familiar, the right next step is a conversation with an occupational therapist, educational psychologist, or your child's paediatrician, not this checklist.

For each item, mark how often it applies to your child right now: Never · Rarely · Sometimes · Often · Very often.

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
GRIP, POSTURE & PHYSICAL COMFORT					
Holds a pencil, crayon, or marker in an unusual or awkward grip	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Complains that their hand, wrist, or arm hurts or gets tired during writing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has difficulty with related fine motor tasks: buttons, zips, using scissors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WHAT ENDS UP ON THE PAGE					
Handwriting is difficult to read, even sometimes by the child themselves	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Letter sizes, spacing, or use of print/cursive are inconsistent within the same piece of writing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Leaves out letters or word endings, especially when writing quickly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Misspells words that they otherwise know well or use correctly out loud	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
THE GAP BETWEEN SPEAKING & WRITING					
Can explain an idea confidently out loud, but resists or struggles to put it in writing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Written work leaves out details that would naturally come up if they were speaking about the same topic	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
BEHAVIOUR AROUND WRITING TASKS					
Avoids or shows little interest in colouring, drawing, or writing activities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finds reasons to delay, avoid, or get out of writing assignments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Becomes restless, fidgety, or wants to leave their seat during writing time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
RESPONSE TO PRACTICE OVER TIME					
Has had regular handwriting practice (10+ minutes a day) for at least a month with little to no visible improvement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Writing skills seem noticeably behind same-age peers, beyond what feels like normal variation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What to do with your answers

This checklist doesn't produce a score or a result. It's meant to help you notice patterns, not calculate a verdict. If you found yourself marking "Often" or "Very often" across several categories, especially if it's been a consistent pattern for a month or more, not just a rough week, it's worth bringing this checklist with you to a conversation with a qualified professional. In Singapore, that typically means an occupational therapist, an educational psychologist, or your child's paediatrician via a polyclinic referral or Child Development Clinic (CDC).

Important: This checklist was developed by Strugglesmart as a general awareness tool for parents, informed by publicly available information on written-expression difficulties (including dysgraphia). It is **not a validated clinical or psychometric instrument**, and it cannot diagnose dysgraphia, dyslexia, or any other learning difficulty. Only a qualified professional, such as an educational psychologist or occupational therapist, can provide an accurate diagnosis through proper clinical evaluation. If you have concerns about your child's development, please seek professional advice rather than relying on this checklist alone.

If this feels familiar: *what can help* at home

Practical, low-pressure ideas to try alongside, not instead of, professional support.

Build the hand strength writing depends on

Everyday hand-strengthening play

- Clay, play dough, or kinetic sand with tongs, spades, chopsticks, or cutters
- Squeeze balls for hand and wrist coordination
- Tracing, beading, lacing, and cutting along lines with scissors

Quick warm-ups before writing

- Shake hands out in the air
- Stretch fingers wide, then "crack knuckles"
- Pinch thumb to each finger, one at a time, rhythmically

Make letter formation feel like play, not pressure

Sensory tracing

- Shaving cream, glitter glue, or a thin layer of play dough to trace letters
- Short, fat pencils or add-on pencil grips
- Start with large letters, shrinking gradually to standard size

Explicit, step-by-step instruction

- Say out loud where to start, where to stop, and which direction to move
- Use one strategy at a time and give it a real chance before switching
- A memorable verbal cue can anchor tricky letters (see below)

Try a mnemonic anchor: talking through the strokes as a small story helps automaticity. For example, for the letter "P": draw the princess's long straight hair, then her pretty face.

Protect how your child feels about writing

In the moment

- Praise effort, not neatness. Messy handwriting can still represent real effort
- Offer other ways to express ideas (talking it through, typing) to take pressure off writing itself
- Keep communication trust-based and non-judgemental

The bigger picture

- Waiting too long to seek support tends to make things harder, not easier. Early action helps
- Many children learn to manage or work around writing difficulties with the right support over time
- These are home strategies. They work best alongside, not instead of, guidance from an OT or educational therapist

Wondering about support at school and in exams? Strugglesmart helps parents check reports and plan exam Access Arrangements, such as extra time or a word processor, for PSLE and GCE, in English or 华文.

Free first call: strugglesmart.sg/contact

More free parent checklists and toolkits: strugglesmart.sg/toolkits

Considering a formal assessment? In Singapore, a reasonable starting point is your child's paediatrician or polyclinic doctor, who can refer you to a Child Development Clinic (CDC), an occupational therapist, or an educational psychologist. In Singapore, the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) offers Specific Learning Differences (SpLD) assessments. You can send an enquiry via their website: das.org.sg/services/spld-assessment/.

A reminder: these are general suggestions, not a treatment plan. Every child's needs are different. A Child Development Clinic (CDC) referral, occupational therapist, or educational therapist can help tailor strategies to your child specifically.