

Learning to Write

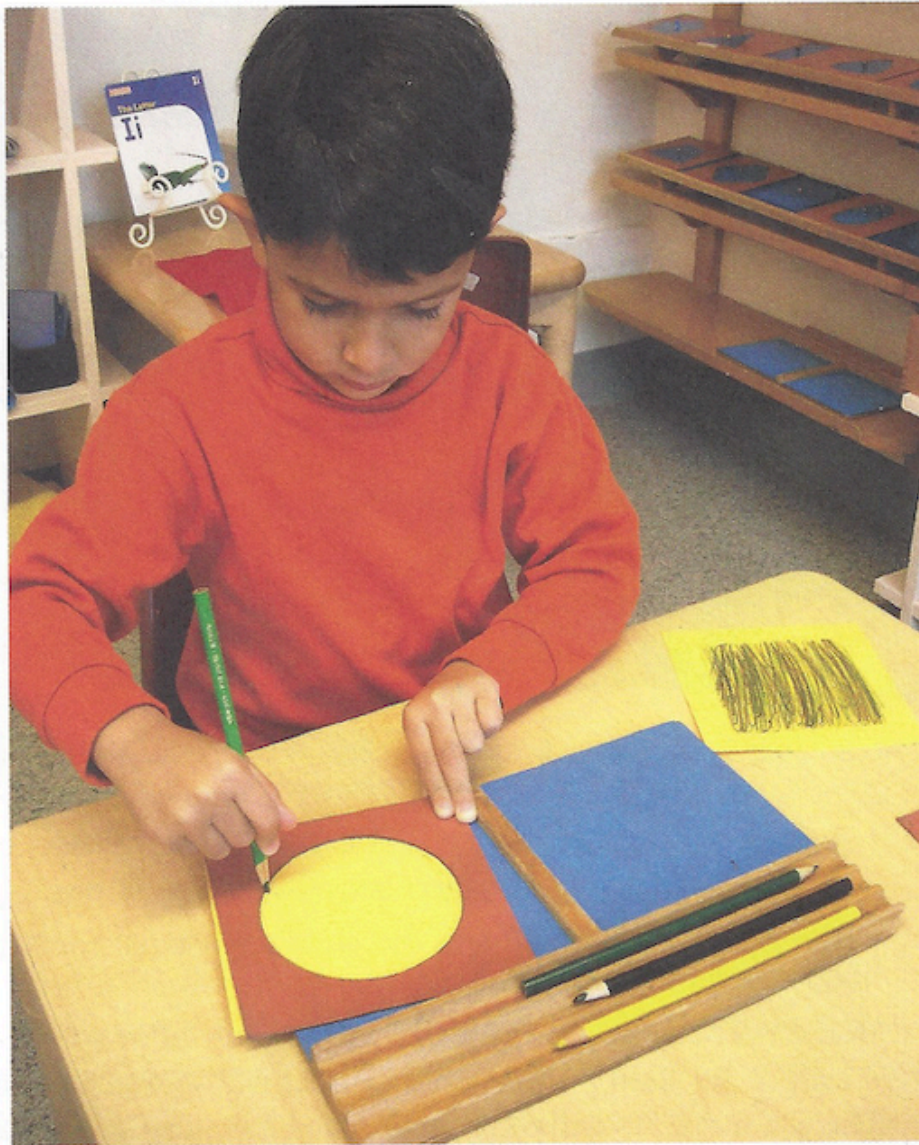
To be able to write, a child must develop a two-fold skill. He must commit to memory the shape of the letters and their corresponding sounds, and he must develop the muscular skill necessary for using the pencil with control.

To clarify this distinction, look carefully at what happens when either phase of this skill is not perfected. A child may wish to write **dog**. He has good control of his hand, but his perception of the shapes of the letters is hazy. He writes **bog** very neatly.

On the other hand, a child may know all the letters perfectly, but his hand is not practiced. He wants to write **dog** but he actually puts **dog** on the paper.

For a child to try to acquire both aspects of this skill at the same time is often discouraging and frustrating. It is extremely difficult for him to try to learn the path for making the letters at the same time that he is trying to learn how to move the pencil with control.

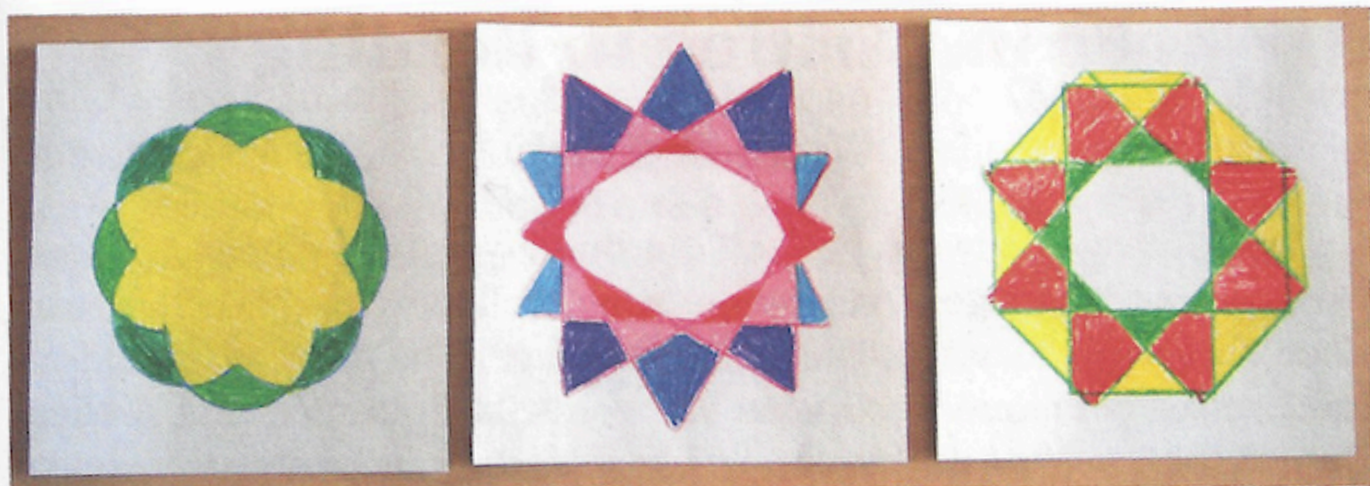
The materials that Dr. Montessori designed offer the child the opportunity to learn the shapes and sounds of the letters in a way that is completely independent from his perfection of the motor skill. Therefore, the child in the Montessori classroom learns to write not by writing per se, but by performing a number of purposefully structured activities that prepare him both indirectly and directly for success in handwriting.



THE METAL INSETS

A child in a Montessori classroom learns to control a pencil by filling in outlines—an activity that does not weary him because he enjoys it. To make the outline, he uses equipment known as the Metal Insets. Each inset represents a different geometric shape. After selecting a figure and tracing it on paper, the child fills in the outline with a colored pencil of his own choosing.

At first his strokes are erratic and often extend beyond the outline. By degrees they become more accurate and uniform. Progress in muscular control can be noted by comparing the child's designs from week to week and from year to year. Eventually he makes more intricate designs by superimposing two or three other shapes on the original figure. When colored, this effort resembles a stained glass window.



The designs shown above, made by children using the Metal Insets, illustrate various stages of progress in this activity. Although work with the Metal Insets gives the child an opportunity to experiment with color and design, it is not considered creative art. Crayons and paints are not used for this activity because the purpose is always pencil control.