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ABSTRACT

As interest in learning centers grows, such questions as "What is a learning center?" and "How does one get started?" are frequently asked. Essentially a learning center consists of designated areas within the classroom where children may go to do a specific activity related to concept development or skill reinforcement. Learning centers are based on four concepts: self-selection, self-motivation, self-pacing, and self-correction. While some children must be directed toward certain needed activities, all students may decide at times when to do required and optional work. Creative and colorful centers and use of manipulative materials greatly aid in motivating the child. With some children working more slowly than others, activities must be left up long enough for everyone to complete all of the required and much of the optional work. Several steps to take in initiating a learning center are as follows: (1) use interest centers after completion of seatwork activities, (2) expand interest centers to include activities to reinforce skills in subject areas, and (3) introduce a sheet of required and optional activities as a guide to the centers each week. Evaluation is made through checking work folders, teacher-pupil conferences, and class discussions. Sample worksheets, activities, and organizational charts are included. (DH)

FORT SMALLWOOD ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOL  
ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MD.

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LEARNING CENTERS IN A SELF-CONTAINED  
CLASSROOM

BY: MARILYN SIMMONS

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Early in the school year, the teachers in Mrs. Evelyn Reed's supervisory area participated in an in-service training day to become better equipped to deal with individual instruction through the use of learning centers. The faculty of Fort Smallwood Elementary School and principal, Mrs. Shirley Gemignani, became very involved with the learning center concept at this time.

With the guidance of Dr. Robert Wilson, consultant from University of Maryland, learning centers became an integral part of the instruction at Fort Smallwood School. As more and more teachers, principals, and supervisors visited the school and asked questions, the need for written guidelines for using centers became evident.

This paper presents several of the methods successfully employed to make individual learning a challenging and interesting pursuit. It is hoped that the contents will answer the multitude of questions that learning centers evoke.

The two most frequent questions concerning learning centers are 1.) What is a learning center? and 2.) How does one get started?

### WHAT IS A LEARNING CENTER

"Learning centers" or stations, as used in a self-contained classroom, are designated areas within the room where children may go to do a specific activity related to some new concept or skill reinforcement. "Interest centers" are non-academic areas where the child's imagination and interests can be explored.

Each center may have one or more activities in a related subject area. Such activities might be sequential in development or multi level, geared to varying abilities within the class.

In self-contained classrooms, these centers are in operation for only part of the day. The remainder of the schedule is devoted to small group instruction and independent study in the upper grades. The primary grades usually use learning centers for a much shorter time each day.

Every activity at each center is basically self-selecting, self-motivating, self-pacing, and self-correcting. The emphasis for learning is put on the child rather than the "all-knowing" teacher.

Directions at the centers are passed to the child in the form of charts. The use of a tape recorder is beneficial to slow readers and to the child in the primary grades.

The child's responsibility is to select the center, read the chart, complete the activity, and check his own paper, making any needed corrections. The teacher's responsibility, aside from planning, is to evaluate the results of each activity.

## CONCEPTS OF LEARNING CENTERS

Before explaining our approach to learning centers, a comment on self-selection, self-motivation, self-pacing, and self-correction is necessary. Complete self selection is possible if everyone in the class is capable of successfully completing the activities at each center. Recognizing that children learn at various rates has led to assigning individual programs to follow while working at the centers.

At the beginning of a new set of activities, each child is given a list of all centers that will be open. Certain centers are designated as required or optional according to individual needs and interests. Centers with multi-level activities can be used by everyone, with each child setting personal goals for the amount of work completed.

Armed with a personal program, the child uses self-selection to decide when to do required and optional activities, keeping in mind that by conference time he is expected to have completed his required work.

Once required centers are complete, he signs up for a conference with the teacher and spends the remainder of his time on optional activities until new centers are available. New activities are displayed whenever the group is ready.

Since learning centers are self-pacing, each child will complete his required work at his own rate. The child who works the fastest will naturally complete the most activities, but the slow learner must not be made to feel inferior due to his reduced speed. The activities should be left up long enough for everyone to complete all of the required and much of the optional work. If a child begins to spend an unreasonable amount of time at any one center, his attention can be shifted to another area of the room. For the child who finishes in record time, an evaluation can result in more careful, complete work.

Some children can volunteer to become a "buddy" and help another student work at the centers. Others may want to be a "consultant" at one center, available to answer questions and give assistance. Ambitious and creative children will often offer to make up a learning center for the class to do.

Self-motivation is truly the key to successful learning centers. You cannot put a chart on the wall that tells the child to take a ditto and follow the directions and expect every child to instantly become self-motivated. This approach is necessary in some cases, but we have found that the more manipulative an activity becomes, the more motivated the child becomes. It is also unnecessary for each activity to have a written response. For some activities it is possible for the child to match word cards with synonyms using a dictionary, or put a headline with the correct article without writing the answers. If he learns to use the answer key properly and makes needed corrections, evaluations can be done orally. A written check-up can be done at some time as an instructional group activity. Those who need extra reinforcement can be redirected to the same or to a similar learning center. Learning centers that are colorful and creative are usually the most frequently used, along with those that are relevant to the needs of the child.

Self-correction follows the lines of self-selection, self-motivation, and self-pacing. Self-correction is a skill that must be learned and it's misuse detracts from the concept of learning centers. Seldom in life is a person asked to do a task completely isolated from outside influence. Learning centers, therefore, encourage group co-operation. Answer keys are available at each center to allow the child to check on his progress as he works. If, after doing the activity at a center, the child finds he has made many mistakes, he should be encouraged to find his errors and make corrections. By looking at an answer, he can see where he is wrong, and learn from the mistake. If an activity is too difficult, a child will be tempted to look at the answer key for guidance. If he then goes on to read the chart and do the activity, he learns from it. Care must be exercised by the student to avoid copying from the answer key with no attempt to try the activity. Copying is a result of a too difficult task or poor planning on the part of an individual who does all of the interest centers first and then has to hurry through the required work in order to make a conference deadline. In such cases, at conference time, the teacher can help the child make a schedule for doing the activities so that he takes the responsibility of getting the work done. Another suggestion would be to re-evaluate the amount of work expected of the child and make a more suitable schedule for the next set of learning centers.

If the teacher is unsure of the class's use of the answer keys, several types of checks can be made. The first would be to hold back the answer keys for the first few days that the centers are up and spot check the work folders. Another and perhaps better method is to prepare a check-up on the skills being utilized at the centers over several weeks. Giving this check-up only to those children who have been required to do the work gives a good evaluation of the learning taking place. One other system used with the answer keys is to keep them all in a specified area of the room rather than at each particular center. The child does the work, leaves the center to check his paper, and returns to the center to make needed corrections. Answer keys in a definite place in the room remove the temptation to look at the answers without doing the work. Just as written responses are not always necessary, answer keys are not necessary for each activity. In the areas of creativity, answer keys are not appropriate.

## HOW TO BEGIN LEARNING CENTERS

A good introduction to learning centers is through the use of interest centers. The children select the interest center they want to do after seatwork activities are complete. Since this system may be unfair to slow workers the interest centers might be expanded to include reinforcement activities in curriculum areas. Until such a time when there are enough activities for each child to be occupied and still have free choice, a definite time can be allotted on the schedule allowing everyone to work at the centers.

At this point it should be explained to the class the concept of self-selection, self-pacing, and self-correction. A work folder can be given to each child in order to keep completed papers together for evaluation. Once the class becomes accustomed to working at centers, a group conference can be held for evaluation of total acceptability and progress.

The next step in developing progressive centers is to introduce a sheet of required and optional activities. (See appendix chart #2) The children use this sheet as a guide to the centers each week. It also gives the teacher a check for evaluation and a record of the child's required activities over a period of time.

As the class becomes accustomed to working at centers, the time allowed can gradually be increased and more activities added.

Sequential centers can be developed from resource materials such as Weekly Reader, Continental Press, and Scholastic Press. Teacher made materials can come from dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Areas other than textbook materials can be utilized in learning centers. For instance, food store ads can be used to reinforce arithmetic concepts, telephone books aid alphabetization, and catalogs can produce order forms and check writing. Greeting cards can be used to spark interest in writing rhymes and poetry, magazine ads for critical thinking, and Sunday cartoons for reading in sequence and writing conversation. To develop listening skills, directions can be put on tape for filling in a map grid, and stories can be taped for comprehension. Many activities can be put in the form of games such as Concentration for vocabulary and Scrabble for spelling words. Rather than use a spelling text each week, individuals can be encouraged to review their own papers for misspelled words, on the basis that they will learn rather than memorize words that have meaning to them.

Science experiments from simple to complex can be taught through the use of charts and tapes. The practice in following precise directions alone is a skill to be developed. Map and globe skills are readily adaptable to the learning center concept as are organizing and outlining skills. The more you begin to gear your thought toward teaching through charts, the more ideas you come up with.

## ROOM ARRANGEMENT

Room arrangement becomes one of the major concerns of teachers experimenting with learning centers. In this area, we began with a trial and error approach. Since our faculty uses learning centers extensively, we have found that the best place to put the multitude of charts required is along the walls, on the back of movable cabinets and bookshelves, and in the halls. Because children need some place to work with the charts, we have found that desks and tables placed along the walls serve as ample writing space. Groups of desks can be placed perpendicular to the walls so that several children can work from one chart.

With the desks facing the walls, it becomes necessary for children to turn around to face the teacher during regular group instruction. One area of the room, usually near a chalkboard, can be kept free of desks and used as an instructional area. When the regular lessons are scheduled, the class can bring chairs up to the front of the room. With practice, this move can be made with a minimum of confusion. Having children bring in small rugs or sit-upons, allows some children to sit on the floor, cutting down on the number of chairs being moved.

Instructional areas can be utilized for reading group meetings, story time, small group instruction, and class discussions. The children then return to their seats for regular seatwork and the open area is free for skits and class presentation.



## EVALUATION

Evaluation can be conducted in several ways. One technique is to have a work folder for each activity at the center. Completed papers are put in the folders and the teacher may collect and evaluate the papers from time to time. Care must be taken not to compare one child with another while checking all of the papers from one center. The advantage of this technique, however, is the instant check to insure that everyone understands the concepts of the particular activity. Seeing an individual or group who has done poorly gives the teacher the opportunity to meet and go over the activity immediately, thus reinforcing correct responses.

Another technique is to have each child carry his own work folder as he moves from center to center. Using this approach, the teacher may evaluate the folder at any time or have a conference with the child. If scheduling can be worked out, conferences are very worth while in setting individual goals and giving each child personal evaluation. Carrying his own work folder gives the child the responsibility for keeping his own work neatly together.

A sign-up system at each center can be used where a child signs his name and marks which activity he has completed. (See appendix chart # 1). In this way a check of who has been to each center can be kept.

We have found that the high achiever in a regular classroom situation is not always the high achiever in learning centers. Children become so accustomed to having everything explained to them and every minute planned for them, that the sudden freedom of choice and shift of responsibility takes time for adjustment.

In another case, you may have a slower student, in the traditional setting, falling into the learning centers with such enthusiasm that he may surpass his previous work. The freedom of movement alone gives them incentive to learn, ability to work in pairs or small groups, and to come up with correct responses gives them added encouragement.

Laziness is easy to spot, and here conferences are used to help the child set personal goals that are within his capabilities. Not all children are going to use learning centers to their best advantage, yet not all children gain each day in a traditional classroom. Close supervision, weekly conferences, and small group or entire class discussions of how to improve the centers and some children's use of them, eventually brings peer group willingness to try for the best. It takes time, but is well worthwhile.

Once the teacher is comfortable with learning centers, the real benefits begin. To see a child, who has previously been lackadaisical concerning school, come on days when he is ill points out the need for interesting classrooms.

Seeing children working together in small groups cooperatively and fairly, is seeing the values we often give lip-service to being utilized. Seeing the bright light of sudden understanding appear behind troubled eyes is ~~one type to say that these things never occur in a traditional~~ *a reward teachers do understand. I'm not trying to say these things never occur* classroom, only that they seem to be multiplied as a result of creative learning.

CHART #1

NAME OF CENTER

Put an X in the box if you do the activity.

If you do the activity over because of too

many mistakes, write your name again and mark it.

Name	Activity			Activity	
	#1	#2		#1	#2

This sheet is put up at each learning center. As the child completes an activity he checks it on this sheet. The teacher can see at a glance who has worked at each activity. It is also possible to refer to these papers when planning an evaluation activity.

CHART #2

(ime \_\_\_\_\_

Learning Center	Required	Optional	Date Completed	Evaluation
Arithmetic				
Phonics				
Reading				
Spelling				
Handwriting				
Dictionary				
Poetry				
Reference				
Listening				
Speaking				
Creative Writing				
Science				
Social Studies				
Language Master				
English				
Literature				
S. R. A.				
Arithmetic				
Flash Cards				
Question Box				
Newspaper				
Art				
Games: Concentration, Reference, Scrabble, Bingo				

Each child is given a copy of this ditto at the beginning of each set of learning centers. Checks are put in the Required and Optional columns to guide each child in his work for the time allowed to do the charts. The evaluation column is used when the child and teacher have a conference and check the work.

Title  
Arithmetic

Number of the center  
6

Activity Number

1

Below is a two page grocery store ad. Someday you may need to read and understand one of these ads.

sign up

Explanation

1. Take a ditto and use the ads to figure the cost of the items on the ditto

2. Put completed paper in the folder.

8 6  
3 1  
4 5 9 2

Directions

1. Take a ditto and circle all the patterns that are magic squares.

2. Put your completed papers in your folder after checking it.

3. Look at the pattern below. See if you can figure out what the missing numbers are.

4. The answers are in the folder.

answer key

ditto folder

Grocery Store Ads

10	3	8
a	7	b
c	d	e

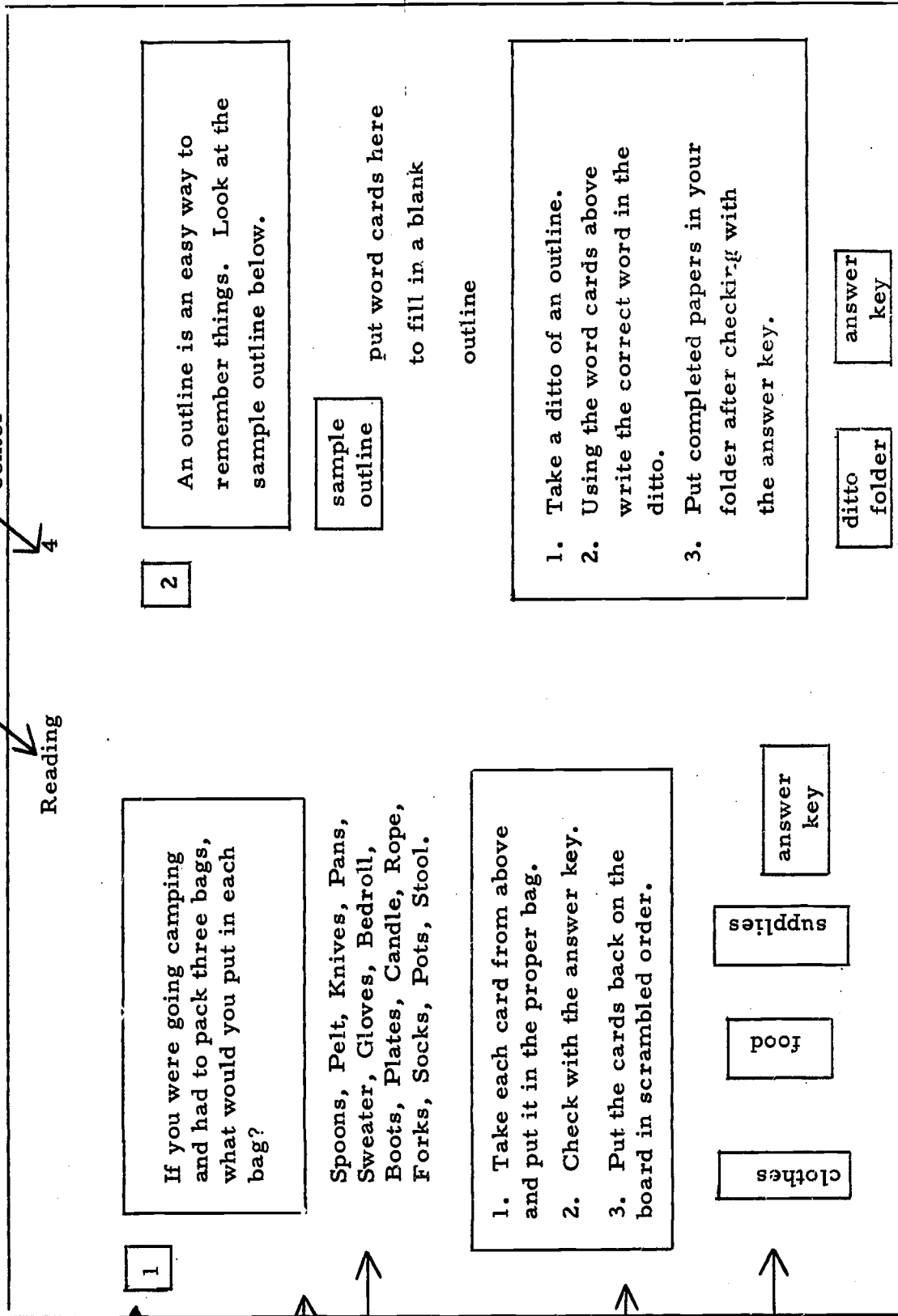
Each of these activities can be used as reinforcement or enrichment. In activity one, skills from simple addition to complex value judgement on bargaining can be used. The basic layout of this part can remain the same with a new skill being introduced each week.

Number at the center

Title

center

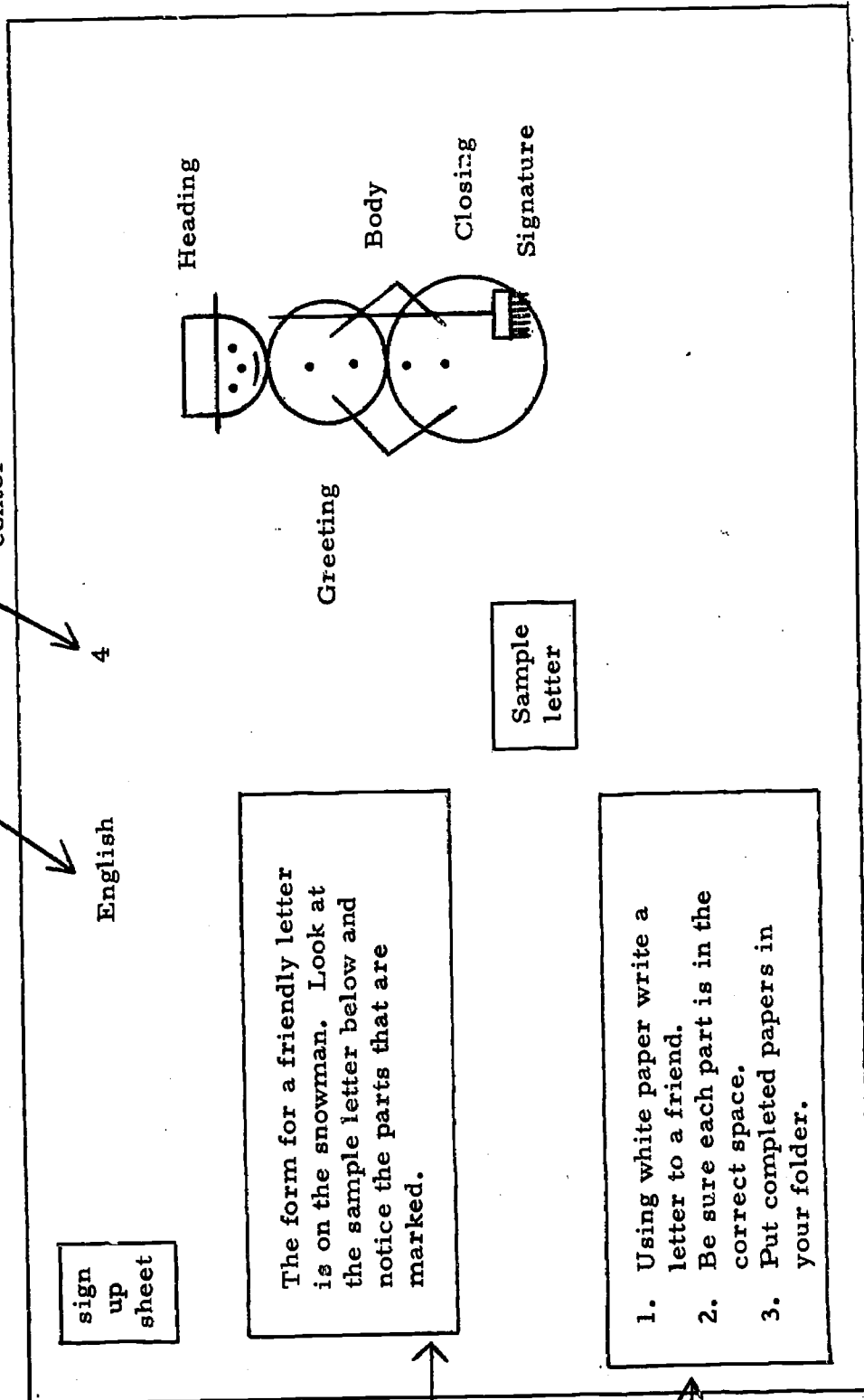
Reading



Here is a sequential center made up of two activities. The first requires no written response and establishes some system of organization. The second builds on that skill and introduces an outline form.

Title

Number at the center



Explanation

Directions

This is the first part of a sequential English Center. The second part is a business letter, and the third is addressing an envelope. The snowman or other appropriate figure can remain up for each of the above parts.

# Handwriting 2

Sign  
up  
sheet

Handwriting is not just for school.  
Here are some ways to use your best  
handwriting outside of school.

1

To order something from catalogs you must fill out an order form. Order forms ask for the following:

1. name and address
2. catalog number
3. name of article
4. number
5. size and color
6. price of article
7. shipping cost
8. total price

sample  
order  
form

page  
from  
catalog

blank  
ditto  
forms

1. Take a ditto and a catalog.  
2. Select a few things to order and fill in the order form.  
3. Put completed papers in your folder.

2

Some people use checks instead of money when paying for things. Checks must be carefully filled out. Below is a sample check.

large sample  
check

1. Take a blank check from the folder below.  
2. Fill it out like the sample using the amount from your order form in #1.  
3. Put completed check in the folder below.

folder  
with blank  
checks

folder for  
completed  
checks

Additional meaningful handwriting activities can include filling out a job application or finding phone numbers from a phone book.

1

1. Look at the cartoon pictures below. They are not complete without words.
2. Select a cartoon. Write its number on your paper.
3. Write what you think the people are saying for each open space.
4. Put your completed papers in your folder.

cartoons

from

Sunday  
papers

2

- Do any or all:
1. Write about what is going on in the pictures.
  2. Write a story about the pictures.
  3. Write about the feelings you get when you look at these pictures.
  4. Put completed papers in your folder.

Put a group of pictures  
here.

A follow-up to activity #1 could be learning to punctuate conversation using what they have written above. A variant to activity #2 could ask the child to explain advertisements or write an ad.