

# Articles – p and q confused

Many students confuse letters that are similar. Here is one way to help students remember which letter is which. Sometimes, students have trouble knowing what sound to make when they see a letter, some have trouble knowing which letter to write when they hear the sound. This method solves both problems.

Note: When I'm referring to a letter, I'll write the word *letter*, and then write the letter e.g. letter p. When referring to a sound, I'll write the word *sound*, and place the relevant letter between slash marks e.g. sound /p/.

Note: Sound /p/ is a quiet sound. This sound is the one you can hear at the end of the word cop. It's really just the lips popping open. Be careful to say sound /p/, and not sound /puh/ – which has a bit of a grunt at the end.

In these examples, the student will be male.

Before beginning, you will need:

- 2 “wrist markers” – one for your left wrist/thumb, and one for the student's. Suitable wrist markers are: a watchband; a loose, thick elastic band; or a colourful hair band. Suitable markers for a thumb are: a ring, or a band aid;
- a piece of paper with a printed (not cursive) lowercase letter p at the top of it, with a line below it (where the student can write the letter p a few times);
- a piece of paper with a printed (not cursive) lowercase letter q at the top of it, with a line below it (where the student can write the letter q a few times); and
- a pen or pencil for the student to use for handwriting.

## Step 1

The first step is to help the student differentiate between left and right, without having to think. It's essential that the student doesn't have to think about this. To achieve this, position yourself next to the student at a table so you are both facing the same way; it will then be easier for him to copy your movements.

Place one marker around your left wrist/thumb, and get the student to copy you by placing the other marker around his left wrist/thumb. Check that sleeves are not hiding the markers.

Say, When we read and write, we always begin on the “marked” side and work across to the other side of the page.

Get the student to place his hands a little apart on the desk.

## Step 2

Tell the student you're going to show him a way to remember which sound to say when he sees letter b.

Place the paper with the lowercase letter p in front of him, between his hands.

Point out that the letter is made up of two shapes, a line and a circle. Ask him which of those shapes is nearer to the marked side. He should answer, *line*. Tell him that since the line is nearer to the marked side, that means his lips should make a line first, then they should pop open to form the circle. Let him watch your lips as they make sound /p/ a few times, so he can see they begin by making a line, then make a circle. Let the student make a few /p/ sounds.

## Step 3

Tell the student he can use what he's just seen to remind himself how to write letter b. To write letter p, the student should make the sound (so his lip position reminds him that the line comes first), draw the line, then (keeping the pencil on the page) make a circle on the unmarked side. Then get him to write letter p as he makes sound /p/. Let him do this a few times. Check he is forming the line and circle in the correct order.

## Step 4

If your student is easily confused, you might need to do the following steps another day.

Tell the student you'll show him how to remember which sound to say when he sees letter q. Both of you should sit side by side at the table, with your wrists marked. Your student should have some space between his hands.

Place the paper with lowercase letter d between his hands. Point out that the letter is made up of a line and a circle. Ask him which of those shapes is nearer to the marked side. He should answer, *circle*.

Tell him that since the circle is nearer to the marked side, his lips should make a circle first. Let him see your lips making sound /q/ a couple of times, so he can see your lips form a circle. Let the student make a **few** of these sounds.

If you student asks why his lips don't make a line after they make the circle, say that once lips make a circle, they usually go on to make another sound straight away, so they don't have time to make a line. If he doesn't ask, don't mention this to him.

## Step 5

Tell the student he can use what he's just seen to remind himself how to write letter q. When letter q is to be formed, the student should make the sound (so he recalls that the circle comes first), draw the circle, then (keeping the pencil on the page) make a line on the unmarked side of the circle. Let him do this a few times. Check he is forming the circle and line in the correct order.

NOTE: Many students confuse letters p and q because they write – line, then circle for both letters. When they do this, the only difference between the two letters is which side they write the circle. This minor difference does not sufficiently differentiate the letters for students who are unclear about left and right. For most students, the only way to write letters quickly and easily, is to automate distinctly different steps for forming each letter.

Following the steps in this article helps the brain separate p and q so that each is linked to its own initial lip position, its own sound, and the formation of its own letter.

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