

**Montessori School of Fort Myers**  
Position Statement on Worksheets

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The use of worksheets in Montessori schools is an unsettled issue amongst Montessori educators without a general consensus on what the best practice is. In this position statement, we outline the best arguments for and against their use, and we outline how our school uses worksheets so our families know what their children are being exposed to.

**Types of Worksheets**

There are several different words used somewhat interchangeably for worksheets and individual Montessorians may disagree on the definition and usage of the various types of worksheets. Our school uses the word “worksheet” very generally to include all of the documents outlined below. We define a worksheet as any document that requires a student to cut up, color on, write on, or manipulate in any way that demonstrates knowledge of a concept.

1. **Blackline Masters (BLM)** - This term comes from the habit of Montessori teachers who keep a folder of master documents (never to be written on) that they make black and white copies of. A blackline master is a worksheet printed out on regular printer paper with only black ink (hence “blackline”). This allows students to color in drawings, label parts of the drawing(s), fill out math problems, and otherwise write on the paper as directed. This simple 8.5” x 11” piece of paper can be used in many ways including cutting it into smaller pieces and turning it into a booklet for the child to create. The blackline master should match as closely as possible to the related nomenclature cards or branded (e.g. Neinhuis) Montessori material and they are often offered by the vendor with the corresponding activity. The drawing(s) should ideally match exactly what is in the Montessori material - for example, a blackline master of a turtle should exactly match the turtle from the Neinhuis animal puzzles, not a cartoon drawing of a turtle or any other differently drawn turtle. This is to aid the children in the passage from concrete to abstraction. Once the child has completed the puzzle several times and has orally mastered the names of the turtle’s body parts, then the blackline master can be introduced for the student to color the turtle and label its body parts for a child who can write. The goal is to reinforce the concepts learned from the concrete materials and to start encoding that knowledge in writing, which is abstract knowledge. Most of our loose worksheets are blackline masters.
2. **Montessori Material Worksheets** - A simple internet search reveals that there are many websites from which one may download various types of worksheets that have drawings which closely match the Montessori materials. This is advantageous to the students since the familiar materials printed on the worksheet can help a student when transitioning from the concrete materials to abstract concepts on a two dimensional piece of paper. These worksheets vary in quality since anyone can create them. We use a limited number of Montessori worksheets.
3. **General Worksheets** - There is no shortage of vendors who sell worksheets and workbooks that are used at a wide variety of schools. We aim to not use these at all.
4. **Workbooks** - These are simply a compilation of worksheets that are often presented in an organized fashion, are sequential, less messy than single worksheets, and ensure a consistent aesthetic. We use the following workbooks:
  - a. Primary Phonics Series - We offer the Primary Phonics early reading and writing program starting around PreK4 and continuing through the end of kindergarten.
  - b. River Education Montessori Workbooks - We use (1) the math workbook and (2) the science and geography workbook.

**Not a Worksheet:**

5. **Printables** - There are a wide variety of websites that sell printable materials. Our school primarily uses Trillium Montessori and MontessoriPrintShopUSA.com as our preferred vendors who offer high quality printables created by trained Montessori teachers. These materials are printed on thick cardstock, laminated, trimmed, and replaced as needed. These printables are an important part of our materials list for certain topics which simply do not have

enough materials available for purchase from other vendors, e.g. the science and geography monthly themes. These printables are used in nearly every area of the classroom and do not allow the student to write on them - they are materials to be physically moved and sorted. Examples include, nomenclature three part cards and sorting activities. We currently have approximately 2,000 pages of these that are used on an annual basis.

6. **Extensions** - These may not allow writing or coloring on them like a blackline master. Extensions are simply an alternate set of instructions for how to use a Montessori material which can be used once the more simple way of using a particular material has been mastered. An extension document or set of cards can have a variety of activities for a child to do that should (1) ideally match the Montessori materials (e.g. ETC Montessori's Knobless Cylinders Patterns Kit 1) or (2) at least be clear which activities it should be used with (e.g. ETC's Visual Discrimination: Color Box 1). There are many high quality extensions made from companies like ETC Montessori which are used almost exclusively in the sensorial area of the classroom with exact pictures of the Montessori materials.

### Reasons Not to use Worksheets

The following are common arguments for not using worksheets and our school's comments about how our school seeks to mitigate the problems presented by worksheets.

1. Worksheets have no logical control of error.
  - a. It's true that Montessori materials seek to be autodidactic (self correcting or self teaching) with an obvious "control of error" which allows a child to work on a material for a long time without adult assistance needed after the initial lesson presentation. For example, if you try to put back the knobbed cylinders back in the wrong holes, they simply won't fit. This is especially true of the practical life and sensorial areas of the classroom. It is somewhat true of the science and geography areas of the classroom, and not that true for math and language for which autodidactic control of error is the most difficult to build into the materials. Thus, the majority of the worksheets used are in math and language. Our teachers maintain a three ring binder with an answer key version of each worksheet/workbook which is correctly filled out. Students may check their work once they have completed a worksheet.
2. Worksheets make the work adult-centered, not student lead.
  - a. This is a legitimate problem. Until a student can reliably read worksheets with directions listed at the top, which typically occurs around kindergarten - grade 2, students need help understanding what they are supposed to do with worksheets that have written instructions on them. Some worksheets require more teacher assistance than others. We seek to use worksheets that minimize the amount of additional instruction required for students who can't yet read. The practical result of this issue is that you must have a teacher work with a small group of students helping them as needed when working on worksheets. There are some worksheets that can be done alongside the Montessori materials, which is preferred.
3. The child does not create the work and thus there is no room for creativity.
  - a. This is true in some cases and not true in others just like the Montessori materials themselves. Most Montessori materials have very clear goals and there is not much room for creativity. The best outlet for creativity in a 3-6 year old environment is the art area, sensorial extensions, and activities where language is used (e.g. research booklets).
4. Right answers receive praise or incentives; wrong answers require correction.
  - a. It is a common misconception that Montessori teachers never correct a student's work. While this is a lengthy nuanced topic, a short summary is that our teachers use their judgement about when and how to correct a student's work, usually in an indirect and positive way. Correcting a worksheet does make the correction more direct and most students enjoy this clear feedback most of the time.
5. The nature of a worksheet, matching/fill-in-the-blank/unscrambling does not lead to real thinking skills.
  - a. We disagree. Worksheets are not necessarily the best way of teaching a concept, but they are great for demonstrating mastery of a concept. An example would be that a child may learn how to count from 1-100 using the hundred board, and once they have completed the activity correctly several times, they may be asked to write the numbers out from 1-100 on a corresponding hundred board worksheet. Children are clearly learning and reinforcing knowledge when working on worksheets. If it were true that

they are not learning, then children would not be learning at traditional schools who use worksheets heavily.

6. It can be meaningless busy work.
  - a. Yes, it can be busy work if low quality worksheets are chosen. An example of busy work is any worksheet where the child is asked to just to color a drawing, and the child is well beyond the age where working on their writing utensil grip is valuable. A worksheet with just coloring teaches little, but it can be valuable for a young child or approximately 3-4 years old who is simply working on their pencil grip. A worksheet with some coloring and labelling parts of an object can be valuable well past kindergarten. We use high quality worksheets that are tied to our scope and sequence and materials list with as low repetition of concept as possible.
7. It creates a source of unhealthy competition ("I'm on work book #5, which one are you on?").
  - a. This can be true with older students, starting around kindergarten, but we do not see this as a significant problem in our 3-6 year old program. A mild amount of this behavior can be motivating to many students. Some students may offer to help out another student who is struggling with a less advanced worksheet, which is encouraged. Comparing progress is usually the biggest problem when everyone is working through the exact same worksheets or workbook at the same time. Our students are given free choice of which worksheets subjects to work on, so they are not usually working on the same worksheet at the same time.

### Reasons to Use Worksheets

1. **Worksheets are a great method of parent communication.** One inherent flaw of the Montessori method of education is that it is difficult to provide proof of a child's academic development to the child's family since the materials are physically manipulated and then placed back on the shelf when the work is done. There is little documentation produced by the child which can be sent home to the family. We are limited to (1) showing the child's progress in lengthy progress reports from Montessori Records Express (MRX) at parent teacher conferences twice per year, and (2) making best efforts to take pictures of the children as they are working and giving the parents access to them. Both of these parent communication methods have flaws. Feedback from our parents is that the progress reports do not get read by most parents because they are too long. The photos are not great because the parent needs to understand what each activity is to understand what their child is learning. Sending home worksheets on a weekly basis that demonstrate a student's mastery of a concept is valuable parent communication of where their child is at academically.
2. **Completing a Worksheet is a Life Skill.** 99% of the children who age out of our school will be filling out various types of worksheets at other schools in elementary school. Non-Montessori public, charter, and private schools all do the same thing in elementary. The use of worksheets at traditional schools usually starts somewhere around PreK4 with some starting as early as three years old, and some starting as late as Kindergarten. We would be doing our PreK4 and Kindergarteners no favors by shielding them from learning how to complete a worksheet.
3. **Worksheets are a logical step in the passage to abstraction.** One goal of the 3-6 year old program is the "passage to abstraction" which is best understood as a multi-year journey. A three year old who is not yet able to think abstractly benefits strongly from touching three dimensional work. Over the next three years, that child becomes a kindergartner who is able to translate concepts from three dimensional concrete materials by encoding them in writing and decoding concepts by reading. Abstraction (reading) is required to perform well on tests. The abstraction ability to complete a worksheet by writing is strongly correlated with a student's ability to score well on national standardized tests such as the Iowa Basic Skills Test that we give to our kindergartners at the end of the year. Having experience solving written problems makes the test taking experience less stressful. That said, we place essentially zero emphasis on this test to the students. They are not told that the test has any consequences nor is there any way that they can prepare for the test other than just putting in best effort everyday. Our students' strong test scores are strong evidence that they are learning well.
4. **Most students enjoy completing the worksheets.** If a child is joyfully learning and able to concentrate on a task, you are probably doing something right.

Ok, so how does Montessori School of Fort Myers use worksheets?

1. **PreK4+ Only.** Worksheets are made available starting in January of each student's PreK4 year and this continues through the end of kindergarten.
2. **30 Minute Time Limit.** Students are allowed to work on worksheets for a maximum of 30 minutes per day (approximately 8% of a 6.5 hour school day) during the afternoon work period while younger students are napping.
3. **Groups of Five Students or Less with One Teacher.** Students are assigned to a group where each group has approximately five students or less with one teacher. Each group gets 30 minutes with the designated teacher who helps the children get started on the worksheets as needed.
4. **Free Choice.** Students may choose from any of the workbooks (language, math, geography, science) and can complete any exercises for which they have already mastered the corresponding lessons with the Montessori materials. Students are not allowed to work on worksheet problems for which they have not been given a lesson on how to complete the skill.
5. **Control of Error.** All workbooks and worksheets have an answer key which is available for students to check their work once they have completed an exercise.
6. **Less Loose Worksheets, Mostly Workbooks.** A workbook is simply a collection of worksheets with the advantage of (1) being presented in sequential order for subject areas that demand sequence of knowledge (math, language), (2) have a common aesthetic that is pleasing to the child's sense of order, and (3) ensure a level of quality from the vendor/creator. Our school uses the the Primary Phonics series (a program used around the world for learning English) and the River Education, LLC Montessori math workbooks and the science and geography workbook that were created by a credentialed Montessori teacher and match the Montessori materials closer than any other workbook vendor that we have been able to find. We have published a full list of all the worksheets/workbooks that we use on our website if you would like to see a list of materials that may be sent home as they are completed.
7. **Loose Worksheets Fill in the Gaps.** While the River Education workbooks are good, they leave a lot of areas for which we have chosen to use additional worksheets. These loose worksheets are reviewed annually and approved by a committee which consists of the primary department lead teachers and the school administration. Loose worksheets must (1) not cover a concept already covered by the workbooks thus reducing busy work, and (2) must cover a concept that is relevant, age appropriate, and required by our scope and sequence. We have a list of these approved worksheets which is provided to parents.
8. **Work Sent Home on Fridays.** Workbooks and worksheets will be sent home on a weekly basis on Fridays. Loose worksheets can stay at home but workbooks should be returned on Monday morning as a student may work on one particular workbook for many months or even the entire year due to the wide variety of difficulty of the material.