



Whatever Happened to Penmanship?

These days, with the rise of email, text messaging, and word processing, it seems to be more important to learn how to use a keyboard than a pen. As a result, the teaching of handwriting has a low priority among educators these days. They believe that handwriting is passe and that in the future everyone will be using a keyboard to do their writing. But students still have to use handwriting in taking notes in a class or lecture hall, although the more affluent students are using laptops for note-taking. But handwriting will still be required for signing things, jotting down ideas in a pocket notepad, writing postcards, birthday greetings, thank-you notes, and other minor communication chores.



But have you noticed how easy it is to make errors when writing an email? Indeed, emailers use all sorts of spelling shortcuts that save time and effort. As long as the email makes sense, no one, except us seniors, seems to care about accurate spelling. Yet, spelling is still considered very important. Remember what happened to Dan Quayle when he supposedly misspelled potato? He added an e, which was not technically incorrect, but archaic (The Oxford English Dictionary lists potatoe as a variant form, the most recent usage cited being from 1880: "She found the parson in his garden ... making a potatoe pie for the winter.") but he became the butt of every comedian on television. It literally ruined his political life. And, of course, there are still spelling bees in which young students show off their spelling prowess. But there are no penmanship contests. I wonder why.

Of course, all children should be taught to read by intensive, systematic phonics. And they should be taught to write in cursive at the same time. The two language functions go together, enhancing the development of both skills.

Homeschooling parents can be quite confused when it comes to the subject of handwriting. So whenever I lecture at a homeschool convention on the second "R," I always ask by a show of hands if parents think that handwriting should be formally taught. Usually the response is unanimously positive. "So you agree that teaching your child to write is an important part of your homeschooling curriculum." The next question I raise is: "If you believe that handwriting should be formally taught, do you believe that your child should be taught manuscript — also known as "ball-and-stick" — first or cursive first?" Most parents assume that ball-and-stick should precede cursive, because that's the way they were taught in school. Besides, it is supposed to be easier that way.

But then I tell them that when I went to primary school in the 1930s, like their grandparents, we were all taught cursive handwriting, or what was then known as penmanship, using pens dipped in real ink. That was before ballpoint pens were invented. We were actually taught in the first grade that there was a correct way to hold a pen so that we would be able write with ease and facility without tiring. Thus, in



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those ancient days, an important part of the primary curriculum was the development of good handwriting, and we were given plenty of drill to make that possible.

This surprises most of today's parents who assume that print script always preceded cursive writing. But when I tell them otherwise, I then have to explain why cursive should precede print script and not vice versa.

If you teach a child to print for the first two years, that child develops writing habits that will become permanent. Thus when you try to get your child to switch to cursive in the third year, you will find resistance to learning a whole new way of writing. That child may continue to print for the rest of his or her life. Some children develop a hybrid handwriting consisting of a mixture of both print and cursive. That seems to have become the dominant form of writing in America. And there are those children who develop a good cursive handwriting because they've always wanted to and practiced it secretly on the side.

Thus, experience clearly indicates that if you teach ball-and-stick first, your child may never develop a decent cursive handwriting, while if you teach cursive first, your child can always learn to print very nicely later on. In other words, cursive first and print later makes good developmental sense.

An important and frequently overlooked benefit is that cursive helps a child learn to read. With ball-and-stick it is very easy to confuse b's and d's. But with cursive, a b starts like an l, and a d starts like an a. The distinction that children make in writing the letters in cursive carries over to the reading process. In addition, in writing print script, the letters may be all over the page, sometimes written from left to right and from right to left. In cursive, where all of the letters connect, the child learns directional discipline. This helps in learning to spell, for how the letters join with one another creates habits of hand movement that automatically aid the spelling process.

Of course, a child can also be taught to print. That can easily be done after the child has mastered a good cursive handwriting. Another important benefit of cursive first is if the child is left-handed. A right-handed individual tilts the paper counter-clockwise in order to give one's handwriting the proper slant. With the left-handed child, the paper must be tilted in an extreme clockwise position so that the child can write from the bottom up. If the paper is not tilted clockwise, the left-handed child may want to use the hook form of writing. This usually happens when the child is taught ball-and-stick first with the paper in a straight up position.

There is also increasing evidence that cursive writing helps the left-brain more easily and effectively develop its language and literacy functions. When the hand acquires cursive knowledge it relates to the brain the same way that the hands of a touch typist or pianist relate to the brain's functions. The automatic harmony between hand and brain increases the pleasure of literary effort, which is why good phonics readers love to read and write, while children taught by the whole-word method generally hate to read. When children are taught to read by the whole-word method and write manuscript, painful discord develops in both brain and hand. They become dyslexic or learning disabled, and their academic future is ruined. This goes on every day in America's primary public schools.

Penmanship should once more become part of the primary school curriculum. The child may not use handwriting as much as we did in the past, but the knowledge and skill acquired helps in the development of reading, spelling, and thinking. And one never knows about the future. Good handwriting will always be an asset in any career, especially one in writing, editing, teaching, advertising, research, and who knows what else.



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The perfect place to teach good handwriting is in first grade where there is plenty of time to devote to the effort. Because it is the age when a child's language facility is growing so dynamically, it requires all the stimulus that a good teacher can provide, aiding the learner's own desire to improve his or her skills.

Children measure their personal power by the skills they develop in the use of language, for knowledge is power and each new word represents additional mental power. Most schools have no idea how to enhance that power, and that's why they fail the children. On the other hand, homeschooling parents know how to increase that power because they see its daily use in the home. Conservative educators in the past understood the importance of those first years in primary school as the time in which to strengthen a child's own natural inclination to master the basic academic skills.

With the American public school system largely in the hands of progressive educators using a dumbing-down curriculum, it's painful to see the harm that is being done to millions of perfectly normal children. That is why I strongly encourage parents to take the matter of educating their children into their own hands. They know their children best, and the homeschool movement has made it possible for them to become better educators than the so-called professionals who are ruining the lives of millions of future American adults.

Much has been written about the need to reform public education. But the simple truth is that it cannot be reformed. Neither the teachers unions nor the progressive educators will permit it. That is why homeschooling is the best form of education reform available. And much to my delight, more and more parents are taking up the challenge, which has also become a great source of family happiness.



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