



## Handwriting: A Key to Literacy By Susan Bowen

In an educational environment that has largely forsaken handwriting instruction, some educators and researchers are rediscovering the importance of handwriting.

Jason, a bright but underachieving 15-year-old sophomore at an “exemplary rated” high school in the Houston area, found himself drowning in his own illegible scrawl. Never adequately instructed in the basics of handwriting in grade school, he couldn’t even decipher his own classroom notes, let alone compose a handwritten report. Jason hated writing—even on the computer, where not even spell-check could rescue his woefully inadequate spelling and grammar. He struggled through the handwritten portions of the state’s standardized test and failed when he had to write a paragraph in cursive on another test.

Unfortunately, Jason is the norm rather than the exception in today’s high schools. Ironically, as handwriting becomes more important for college-bound students, systematic instruction in the skill has all but disappeared in many school districts.

“We don’t expect high-schoolers to do high school–level work with only a third-grade mastery of math, science, history, but we somehow expect them to be proficient at handwriting that hasn’t been reinforced since fourth grade, if even then,” says Kate Gladstone of Handwriting Repair in Albany, NY. “With the new handwriting requirement coming to the SAT in 2005, legible, rapid handwriting suddenly matters. Failure to command this skill could cost a student 400 points on his score,” she explains. Students will have 25 minutes to write a two-page essay and teachers will have four minutes to read and score.

Although many critics blame the demise of handwriting on computers, the true culprits are colleges of education, public school curriculum directors and administrators who dismiss handwriting as an archaic nicety that is no longer relevant. Penmanship education has become inconsistent and unpredictable. Many schools have abandoned organized handwriting instruction to make time for standardized test preparation, computer technology, and, ironically, more reading and language instruction.

“There is a wide-spread misunderstanding among educators, particularly at the policy level, regarding the objectives of handwriting lessons,” explains Rand H. Nelson, vice president of Peterson Directed Handwriting in Greensburg, PA. “If you were to take a nationwide poll of curriculum directors and upper level administrators you would find only a small percentage consider handwriting skill development an important part of the language arts curriculum. There seems to be a perception that handwriting instruction is more of an art form, like calligraphy, and has little to do with the development of written language skills.”

For years, colleges of education have largely ignored methodology of handwriting instruction. When more than 200 primary school teachers were asked if they felt prepared to teach handwriting, 90 percent responded they did not. Very few, if any, colleges of education offer courses in the teaching of handwriting. Education publisher Zaner-Bloser, based in Columbus, OH, says most college students and practicing teachers learn to teach handwriting through a correspondence course it sells.

Compounding the lack of education is poor penmanship on the part of many teachers who never received adequate instruction when they were youngsters. Nelson says that teachers have told him about college professors who advised against teaching children how to write because the instruction process forced all children into the same mold.

This was the theory behind "whole language," which dominated the curriculum of grade schools from the 1960s until its shortcomings became apparent in recent years. Whole language embraces the notion that children should learn to read and write as naturally as they learn to speak. Phonetics and attention to letters were deemed unnecessary and meaningless and skill development was thought of as boring, repetitive, nonsensical and unrelated to the development of reading skills. Although most educators have discredited this theory, its persistence continues to challenge young children who need to learn to read.

Experts agree that handwriting instruction is at the core of excellence in education. "When we teach and value handwriting, we are sending a message to students that we value legibility, attention to detail, neatness, correctness and excellence," says Regie Routman, author of *Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading, Writing and Other Teaching Dilemmas*. University of Missouri professor J. Martin Rochester agrees in his book *Class Warfare: Besieged Schools, Bewildered Parents, Betrayed Kids and the Attack on Excellence*. He writes, "The attack on handwriting represents an attack on the very notion of rigor, precision and neatness—everything we should be trying to imbue in our K-12 students."

Much of the education research now being conducted by universities focuses on technology and literacy—little regard given to the interrelationship of handwriting development and reading, spelling and composition. The prevailing theory today is that children should be taught to read through a structured and protracted process in which they are made aware of sounds and the symbols that represent them, and then learn to apply these skills automatically. What is not usually addressed in these studies is the role of learning to write, also a structured process that must become automatic in order for the student to progress with reading, note-taking and composition. The ease and speed of a child's handwriting have a major impact on how he performs throughout his academic career and beyond.

Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *The War Against Boys*, says that educators should be more concerned about the link between problems with the mechanics of handwriting and overall lifetime literacy. She also notes that boys are more likely to have handwriting problems than girls.

Those who study handwriting issues maintain that the handwriting process offers powerful advantages to children and that time spent on handwriting development improves students' abilities across the curriculum. Although the research on handwriting is woefully inadequate, anecdotal evidence based on some teachers' experiences supports the notion that early consistent teaching of handwriting is crucial to success in school. Ignoring handwriting has been shown to retard fine motor coordination and produce less detail-oriented students.

"Handwriting should not be taught just for the sake of teaching handwriting as an isolated skill," says Virg Berninger, Ph.D., professor of educational psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle. "It should be taught as a tool for written communication. Every time a child practices letter formation as a warm-up, he should also be given the opportunity to compose and use the tool for a purpose." Steve Graham, Ed.D., professor of special education at the University of Maryland, College Park, says that fluent, legible handwriting goes hand in hand with the ability to write strong compositions. Numerous studies conducted by Graham, Berninger and others underscore the need for handwriting competency in grade-school children. "Non-proficient handwriters cannot keep up with their ideas," explains Graham. "The composition process becomes disrupted with the mechanics of letter formation and spelling, and the result is a composition that lacks coherency, content and sufficient length." Results of a recent study of first-graders conducted by Graham showed that after only seven hours of handwriting instruction, there was a measurable improvement in both speed and sentence structure, although he admits that true fluency requires more than seven hours. "It takes time to acquire handwriting fluency," says Graham. "The point at which kids write fast enough so that it doesn't interfere with composition and class taking usually doesn't occur before sixth grade. Students gain fluency by practicing writing."

Graham doesn't buy the excuse that there isn't enough time for regular handwriting instruction in the crowded curriculum of today's schools. "It only takes 15 minutes of handwriting instruction daily for a child to gain legibility and fluency." If more teachers replaced "busy work"—such as making maps out of pizza dough—handwriting instruction, their students would benefit, and the teachers would benefit by being able to read students' handwritten assignments.

Private schools are more likely to make handwriting instruction a high priority. At St. Martha Catholic School in Kingwood, TX, for example, kindergarteners and first-graders spend 30 minutes daily on handwriting instruction. In keeping with Graham's findings, the school reports that as handwriting skills strengthen, sentence structure also improves.

Nora Chahbazi at the Ounce of Prevention Reading Center in Flushing, MI, finds most of the children she sees and observes in schools not only don't know how to form letters but cannot even hold a pencil properly. She attributes the growing number of children who have difficulty with handwriting to a lack of hand motor experience from watching too much television. "If pre-schoolers were provided with more opportunities to work with their hands by coloring, playing with clay and manipulating blocks and other small objects, they would be much better prepared to begin handwriting in kindergarten," notes Chahbazi.

The handwriting process is crucial to reading, she adds. "Forming the letters from top to bottom and then left to right on the page follows the same pattern as reading. This helps to visually organize a beginning reader. Instilling the rhythmicity of writing fosters fluency, which in turn helps the writing to become automatic. If the process is right, the child will learn to write well."

Learning disabilities expert Betty Sheffield ("Handwriting: A Neglected Cornerstone of Literacy," *Annals of Dyslexia*, Vol. 46, 1996) says handwriting allows access to kinesthetic memory, the earliest, strongest and most reliable memory channel. Put more simply, when children write what they have learned, they learn it better.

Legible handwriting needs to be at a spontaneous level so that the student is free to concentrate on spelling and to focus on higher-level thought and written expression. According to White Plains, NY, learning specialist Perlman, a good handwriting program involves three simultaneous processes: listening to the sounds of the letters (the auditory component); looking at the letters (the visual component); and making the movements necessary to form the letters (the kinesthetic component). "With this multi-sensory approach, you are helping the brain to associate the sound, look and shape of the letter, so when the child starts to read, all the connections are being made," explains Perlman, who co-authored *Preventing Academic Failure*.

Libby Rhoden, a veteran schoolteacher at Kruse Elementary School in the Houston-area Pasadena Independent School District, took the initiative a few years ago to put her kindergarteners on the positive path to writing and reading. She introduced what she calls the "magical sixth element"—writing fluency instruction—into her program. She soon discovered a powerful correlation between printing fluency and reading ability. When her children reached a printing speed of 18–20 words a minute, their reading took off and so did their comprehension. By the middle of the school year, most students were printing an average of 39 words per minute, and by the end of kindergarten, more than one-third of the students were reading above first-grade and nearly another third were above kindergarten level. This magical element is all the more powerful, given that her students are almost entirely from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Most of them come from non-English speaking homes and often have no exposure to books or pencils prior to entering school. Her former students who are now in first and second grade consistently outperform students who have not participated in her handwriting fluency program.

She attributes her success to creating a stress-free and fail-proof environment for her students and to a kinesthetic or hands-on approach to learning. "By writing, the images are burned in their brains," she explains. Rhoden encourages other teachers to implement her writing program. "Skill-building is so important," she says. "Any child can bang on a piano, but it takes consistent training and practice to become a musician. It's the same way with learning to write."

It is undeniable that teachers must judge and grade students on the appearance of their written work. So many students do not receive adequate instruction. It is a hope-inspiring trend that in just the past few years more and more teachers are beginning to recognize the importance of fluent, legible handwriting and are making an effort to get training and begin to teach handwriting once again. According to educational publishers Z. Bloser and Peterson's *Directed Handwriting*, over the past few years, there has been a steady increase in handwriting instruction among grade-school teachers. Computers have had a powerful influence on education but they can never replace handwriting as the pathway to mental growth and academic success.

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