

Handwriting – Print, Cursive, Keyboarding, Oh My!
By Susan Dougherty, EdD
Rider University

Often I ask my 20- and 21-year old college students what they think about teaching handwriting. Most of these future teachers are torn. They remember, either fondly or with dread, the handwriting lessons in their elementary classrooms. Most often they share stories related to the teaching of cursive. Some of them loved learning cursive; many of them hated it. And, however they felt at the time that they learned cursive, the vast majority of them report rarely using it. These college students do write by hand, just not in cursive. The idea that keyboards would completely replace longhand forms of writing has turned out to be incorrect. In fact, recent research has demonstrated that taking notes by hand is more beneficial than taking notes on a computer (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). The reason for this advantage seems to be that we write slower than we type, and that slowness requires us to *think* as we take notes by hand, deciding what to write and how to concisely express what is most important about what we are learning. Not surprisingly, *thinking* as one listens and takes notes leads to deeper learning.

While it is true that our youngest learners are not engaged in much notetaking, proficient, fluent handwriting supports the learning of early reading and writing skills. Being able to form letters is connected to the learning of phonics skills and supports spelling development (James & Engelhart, 2012). In addition, proficient, fluent handwriting is related to the length and quality of students' written composition. When students struggle with handwriting skills, they often become disengaged in writing activities (Baker, Gersten & Graham, 2003).

While research leads us to the understanding that some method for writing in longhand is necessary, it does not suggest that it is essential to learn cursive handwriting. Print is just fine. And many schools, aware that students were not terribly likely to use cursive beyond the upper elementary grades and concerned about using instructional time for skills students would certainly use (e.g. keyboarding), put less emphasis on the teaching of cursive. In fact, the amount of time devoted to teaching cursive has been in decline since the 1970's.

In recent years, there has been significant public and political outcry about the decline in cursive handwriting instruction. This outcry seems to have been spurred by other criticisms of the Common Core, which does not mention the teaching of cursive handwriting. One of the authors of the Common Core (Pimentel, 2016) has stated that they didn't include cursive writing not because they advocated for no cursive at all, but because they didn't want to see an increased emphasis on perfecting handwriting at the expense of other literacy skills or a retreat from the use of modern means of communication. Those who advocate for renewed or increased focus on teaching cursive often make arguments based on tradition and history, claiming that children should be able to read historical documents written in cursive and write and read letters to adults who are more likely to use cursive.

These arguments have been convincing enough that a number of states have added standards to mandate the teaching of cursive.

What does research reveal about the teaching of handwriting?

- 1) Students benefit from handwriting instruction, but there is no evidence that children must learn cursive. Print is just as effective for learning. (see Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014)
- 2) Writing letters (as opposed to typing them on a keyboard) does make for more effective learning of letter/sound connections. (see James & Engelhart, 2012)
- 3) Print and cursive writing forms are, on average, completed in similar amounts of time. The argument that cursive writing is faster, and therefore, more useful for notetaking than print, is not supported by research (see Graham, Weintraub & Berninger, 1998)
- 4) Children with dysgraphia need more extended systematic instruction in handwriting skills over a longer period of time to gain fluency and prevent disengagement from authentic writing activities. Some students *may* find cursive writing easier than print; therefore, searching for the best mode of handwriting for individual children is worthwhile. In fact, some advocate for creating “hybrid” writers, who find a personal best system that incorporates print, cursive and keyboarding (see Berninger, 2013)

So what to do about handwriting instruction? First, it is clear that our youngest students benefit from explicit, systematic instruction in some form of print handwriting. Second, given that the majority of adults communicate using digital technologies, instruction in keyboarding is beneficial. Third, cursive, which some students enjoy and adopt as part of a personal writing style, may be incorporated within the elementary curriculum with an understanding that it is unlikely to be essential for many students. In fact, some experts, including Anne Trubek, author of *The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting* suggest it be treated as an elective, something students might choose but not be required to learn (Matthews, 2017, Business Insider). And, finally, as writing expert Stephen Graham reminds us, what really matters is that students are engaged in meaningful, authentic writing and that opportunities to *compose* are actually more important than handwriting practice (Turner, 2014, All Things Considered, NPR).

Recommended commentary:

“So Longhand: Has Cursive Reached the End of the Line?” by Geoff Nunberg on *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, May 31, 2018

<https://www.npr.org/2018/05/31/612197167/so-longhand-has-cursive-reached-the-end-of-the-line>

“Once All But Left for Dead, Is Cursive Writing Making a Comeback?” by Joe Heim in *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2016

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/once-all-but-left-for-dead-is-cursive-handwriting-making-a-comeback/2016/07/26/24e59d34-4489-11e6-bc99-7d269f8719b1_story.html?utm_term=.8f90a4b5281c

“Does the Fight for a Cursive Comeback Miss the Point?” by Cory Turner on *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, March 25, 2014

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/03/25/294212825/kids-these-days-can-type-but-cant-write-cursive-is-that-bad>