

Why We Need to Teach Handwriting

By T.C. Morris

With the advent of computers, our world has changed. The basic ways we communicate have gone from more formal, thoughtful letters and correspondence to a series of short, spontaneous messages we create and send within seconds.

Curiously, both of my children have struggled with handwriting. Our oldest child even underwent occupational therapy while in grade school to develop his gross and fine motor skills, which were indeed gross!

While I felt strongly that he needed time to develop his physical writing skills, the prevailing feeling of his teachers, therapists and school administrators was that handwriting was unimportant. When he entered high school, most of his work would be on computers anyway, they argued. When he became an adult, he would be an experienced typist or might have a clerical assistant.

But in those intervening years, a series of curious situations began to catch my attention. In the course of daily life, I began to notice that there were numerous situations when handwriting was still important. Taking notes in class required not only legible handwriting, but the ability to write quickly. Standardized writing tests in the 8th grade could only be handwritten. Various other timed tests in school required legible and quick writing skills. Although our son was able to use a keyboard in class, he quit using one in high school: He didn't want to stand out. Although he was just a young teenager, I began to wonder what would happen when he was old enough to write a letter to a girlfriend or instructions to an employee or boss.

Coincidentally, our daughter, who is five years younger than her brother, began to complain about writing her homework. She said that her hands were tired. Although it sounds like a relatively minor concern, any parent who has experienced this on a school night with homework due the next day will tell you this situation is a nightmare. It quickly evolves to the point where a child dissolves into tears just thinking about homework! Since our daughter had never had any trouble with her motor skills, I was shocked. I began to realize that lack of penmanship skills impacts a range of people and communication activities throughout one's life.

When my neighbor began to tell me about how much her kindergartener hated writing, I began checking with other parents and teachers. The reality was apparent. Most parents and teachers struggle with kids and handwriting.

During this time, I was tutoring elementary and middle school students in reading. One day the tutoring coordinator requested that I begin working with a group of 4th graders on handwriting. I laughed out loud. "You don't want me," I said. Neither one of my children can write worth a darn!" She said the teachers were desperate to find someone to work with these kids. I maintained that I had no skills to translate to these students. She said that the teachers had given the kids a practice book. Couldn't I just encourage them? With a very real feeling of dread, I agreed to try. Much to my surprise, the kids felt worse about coming to a "writing tutor" than I felt pretending to be one.

They hated writing, and they hated being called out of class even more. And if that wasn't bad enough, they detested the books they had been given to practice penmanship.

I quickly realized that it was going to be a long, dull year, doomed to failure, if I didn't come up with some way to at least encourage these students. If we happened to figure out a way to improve their writing in the process, that would be an added bonus!

So began a year of trial and error, which again, much to my surprise, ended on quite a positive note. When I was asked to tutor handwriting the following year, I agreed. I took my experiences from the first year and built on them. Realizing that the struggle to write seemed to be affecting a whole range of kids, not just those with slowly developing motor skills, I started to look at handwriting in a different way. And, this new perspective raised a lot of questions.

Why are so many children experiencing handwriting difficulties?

The importance of handwriting in our society has been downplayed for the last two decades. Much as we wrongly believed that the advent of computers would be the demise of printed books, we have wrongly assumed that technology would make handwriting outdated. At the same time, the curriculum and testing preparations at the elementary school level have left little time for focusing on what used to be a basic part of early education.

Why aren't students learning to write effectively using traditional methods?

While in other generations, a majority of the kids could be taught simply because this was the expectation of parents and teachers, children of the last 20 years have been raised in a technologically sophisticated society. Television, computers and electronic games have conditioned our children to be easily bored and easily distracted. Asking these children to repetitively write letters and words is akin to asking a race car driver to test a mini van. They aren't going to like it, and they aren't going to approach these tasks with any drive to master the skills because they see them as stupid and unimportant.

How do we overcome these obstacles to help students learn to write effectively and perhaps even enjoy it?

We can overcome the numerous barriers inherent in our traditional handwriting efforts by using a new approach that allows students to discover their own preferences, and at the same time, illustrates the importance and benefits of writing to each individual student.

Can students learn to write effectively and like it?

Absolutely. Over the course of several years, I have used the "Loops, Hassle-free Handwriting" approach in small groups and in the classroom. The program has been enthusiastically received by the students. I believe that they enjoy it because this program doesn't tell them what to. Rather, it gives them a set of options from which they can choose what works best for them. The first thing we do is throw out all the old rules

of conventional handwriting. Then we learn the fundamentals of the finger, hand and arm movements required for writing. Along the way, we learn about how the muscles, bones and brain work together to produce handwriting. And, of course, we do a bunch of fun activities that capture their imagination.

In essence, we've put handwriting into a new context, one that helps the students see the relevance of what they initially perceived to be an outdated, unnecessary skill.