

Handwriting Is History

By: [Anne Trubek](#)  [Print](#)

At 11 p.m. on Dec. 27, I checked my inbox out of habit. I had 581 new e-mails. All had been sent between 8 and 11 p.m. The days between Christmas and New Year's are not usually a busy time for e-mailing. What was going on?

It turns out that the home page for msn.com had linked to a short article I had published a year earlier. In the article, I argue that we should [stop teaching cursive](#) in primary schools and provide some background on the history of handwriting to back up my claims.

The comments on my piece were hostile, insulting and vehemently opposed to my argument. The onslaught continued for a few more days: Some 2,000 comments were submitted, and editors took down about 700 of the worst. If you check this article online today, you will find more than 1,300 comments. For some reason, people are very invested in handwriting.

If we define writing as a system of marks to record information (and discount petroglyphs, say), handwriting has been around for just 6,000 of humanity's some 200,000 years. Its effects have been enormous, of course: It alters the brain, changes with civilizations, cultures and factions, and plays a role in religious and political battles. Throughout the even smaller slice of time that is American history, handwriting has reflected national aspirations. The comments posted on my article about handwriting were teeming with moralism. ("I'm sorry, but when I see messy handwriting it tells me something about the person; maybe carelessness? Impatience? ... Penmanship is everything. ... Good penmanship shows the world we are civilized.") One might consider handwriting as a technology — a way to make letters — and conclude that the way of making them is of little moment. But handwriting is bound up with a host of associations and connotations that propel it beyond simply a fine-motor skill. We connect it to personal identity (handwriting signals something unique about each of us), intelligence (good handwriting reflects good thinking) and virtue (a civilized culture requires handwriting).

Most of us know, but often forget, that handwriting is not natural. We are not born to do it. There is no genetic basis for writing. Writing is not like seeing or talking, which are innate. Writing must be taught.

About 6,000 years ago, the Sumerians created the first schools, called tablet houses, to teach writing. They trained children in Sumerian cuneiform by having them copy the symbols on one half of a soft clay tablet onto the other half, using a stylus. When children did this — and when the Sumerians invented a system of representation, a way to make one thing symbolize another — their brains changed. In [Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain](#), Maryanne Wolf explains the neurological developments writing wrought: "The



brain became a beehive of activity. A network of processes went to work: The visual and visual association areas responded to visual patterns (or representations); frontal, temporal, and parietal areas provided information about the smallest sounds in words ...; and finally areas in the temporal and parietal lobes processed meaning, function and connections."

The [Sumerians](#) did not have an alphabet — nor did the Egyptians, who may have gotten to writing earlier. Which alphabet came first is debated; many consider it to be the Greek version, a system based upon Phoenician. Alphabets created even more neural pathways, allowing us to think in new ways (neither better nor worse than non-alphabetic systems, like Chinese, yet different nonetheless).

When we think of handwriting, we often assume a script, a regularized way to make letters, to which all writers adhere in order to aid communication. A famous early script is [Roman square capital](#), which looks exactly as you imagine it: monumental u's in the shape of our modern v's and no spacing between words. It was written with a stylus and chiseled onto the sides of buildings.

Proclaiming the virtuousness of one way of forming a "j" over others is a trope that occurs throughout handwriting's history. For instance, early Christians jettisoned Roman scripts they deemed decadent and pagan. In their scriptoria, monks developed [Uncial](#) to replace Roman scripts. An internecine battle ensued when Irish monks developed a variation on Uncial that traditionalists deemed an upstart, quasi-heretical script.

Puritans in England and America also developed a script to distance themselves from the seeming Catholicism of the elaborate scripts popular in the 18th century. They adopted the plainer copperplate, or round hand. The [Declaration of Independence](#) is written in copperplate.

In the American colonies, a "good hand" became a sign of class and intelligence as well as moral righteousness. [Benjamin Franklin](#) was a proponent of proper handwriting, and when he founded the [Academy of Philadelphia](#) (which became the University of Pennsylvania), those seeking entrance were required to "write a legible hand." But very few Americans were eligible to enter Franklin's academy. First, to do so, you had to be male. Second, you had to have been taught to write; many women and non-wealthy men were taught to read, but not write. Only wealthy men and businessmen learned to write. Even when public schooling began, writing was not always included in the curriculum, so many colonists could read but not write. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century — a scant 200 years ago — that schooling became universal. Then, handwriting was finally taught to American schoolchildren.

For many, the prospect of handwriting dying out would signal the end of individualism and the entree to some robotic techno-future. (As one comment on my article put it, "What's next, putting programming chips in our brains?") But when we worry about losing our individuality, we are likely misremembering our schooling, which included rote, rigid lessons in handwriting. We have long been taught the "right" way to form letters. The history of American penmanship is dominated by two true believers, [Platt Rogers Spencer](#) and [A.N. Palmer](#), whose fiercely moral and economic attachments to their scripts nicely sum up much of what we consider essential to American identity.

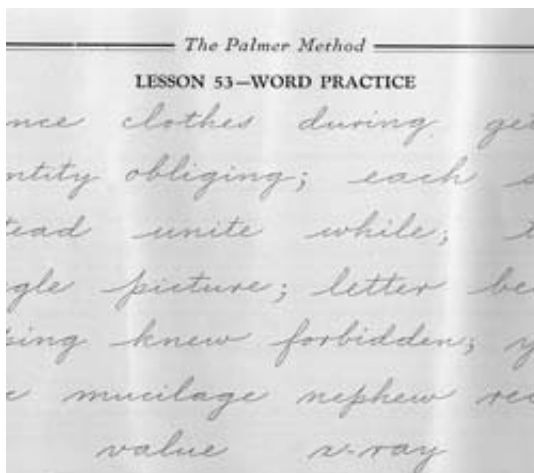
Spencer, "the father of American handwriting," was a fanatic who was obsessed with script even as a child. He made it big when he established a chain of business schools — the slogan was "Education For Real Life" — to teach his script, [Spencerian](#), which he based on natural forms: leaves, trees, etc. Spencerian was the standard script taught from the 1860s to the 1920s. This transcendentalist move toward a script that better followed the human



body's movements is belied by his insistence on rigor and standardization. He advised his students to practice six to 12 hours a day. Mastering his script would, Spencer believed, make someone refined, genteel, upstanding.

Later in the 19th century, Palmer invented a script that would better suit the industrial age.

[The Palmer Method](#) stresses a "plain and rapid style." He rejected the slightly fey Spencerian for a muscular, rugged script better suited to a commercial culture. By 1912, Palmer was a household word, and a million copies of his (printed) writing manuals had sold. Educators taught his method, and millions of Americans were "Palmerized."



Example of the Palmer Method.



Spencerian script from 1884.

The Palmer Method was gradually supplanted when educators decided to teach children manuscript (or printing) first, and cursive later, to get them started writing younger. Handwriting enthusiasts consider the end of the Palmer Method to be the end of good handwriting in America.

It took the printing press to create a notion of handwriting as a sign of self. For monks, whose illuminated manuscripts we now venerate as beautiful works of art (as they most certainly are), script was not self-expressive but formulaic, and rightly so. When the printing press was invented, the monks were worried about this new capricious technology, which was too liable to foibles and the idiosyncratic mark of the man helming the press. A hand-copied manuscript was for them then the authoritative, exact, regularized text. In his treatise, "In Praise of Copying," the 15th-century monk Trithemius argued that "printed books will never be the equivalent of handwritten codices, especially since printed books are often deficient in spelling and appearance."

Handwriting slowly became a form of self-expression when it ceased to be the primary mode of written communication. When a new writing technology develops, we tend to romanticize the older one. The supplanted technology is vaunted as more authentic because it is no longer ubiquitous or official. Thus for monks, print was capricious and script reliable. So too today: Conventional wisdom holds that computers are devoid of emotion and personality, and handwriting is the province of intimacy, originality and authenticity.

This transition, and the associations we make with old and new technologies, played out while millions of Americans were being Palmerized in school, and the Palmer Method is inextricably linked to a new writing technology that was starting to compete with handwriting: the typewriter.

In post-Civil War America, the [Remington Arms Company](#) needed a new product to boost sales (rifles were moving more slowly). The company unveiled the first typewriter in 1874. It was heavy and loud and looked like a big metal sewing machine, as it was set on a table with a

treadle at the bottom. The machine was cumbersome, the noise it made cacophonous. Worse, you had to write blind: the keys hit the underside of the paper. It did not sell. Businesses wouldn't accept documents written on it because they were not penned. Remington sold only a few of that first model, but Mark Twain bought one. In his autobiography, he claimed to be the "first person in the world to apply the type-machine to literature" when he submitted a typed manuscript of [The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#) to his publisher.

Twain hated blind typing, though, and he gave his Remington away to his friend [William Dean Howells](#), the eminent Atlantic editor and novelist. Howells returned it, uninterested, six months later. But as with personal computers and cell phones, early adopters of a good technology will eventually persuade the rest of us we need it, too. In the 1890s, the typewriter gained a carriage return, and the new models allowed you to see the page while typing. By 1905, it was a curiosity *not* to own a typewriter.

That first Remington introduced the QWERTY keyboard, which separates common letter pairs to prevent bars from sticking when struck sequentially. Although others have developed more efficient, user-friendly and ergonomic keyboards, none has caught on. We seem stubbornly wed to QWERTY, as our thirst for the new new thing accompanies a stubborn grip on the familiar.

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When Kitty Burns Florey's [Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall Of Handwriting](#), a nostalgic look at handwriting's history and call to revive it in schools, came out early in 2009, the reviews tended to follow a pattern: The reviewer begins by admitting he or she never handwrites anymore, but thinks that is a shame. He or she goes on to laud Florey's book and ends by promising to do more handwriting in the future. Michael Dirda writes, "After reading *Script and Scribble*, I feel like digging out my beat-up calligraphy manuals. ... Of course, I also need to clean out the dried ink from my italic pen. But before you know it, even Ludovico Arrighi — the great Renaissance master of italic — will be envying my p's and q's." Florey wrote her own version of this genre in an article on the writing of her book. She tells how she always writes on the computer, never longhand: "My last eight books are children of Microsoft Word, and virtually everything I write, from a long book to a short e-mail, is done on the computer." While researching the book, she learned how to do italic script, and became enamored of it. She ends her piece by advising all of us to do more handwriting: "I suggest you set aside half an hour, grab a piece of paper and a pen, and, in your best script (be it Italic, Palmer, or a cleaned-up version of your usual scrawl), write a poem, start a diary, send a note to a friend, or ... compose a love letter."

I doubt whether the critics or Florey have followed up on their pledges to handwrite more. Nevertheless, people seem to think that school kids should be spending more time honing their mastery of the capital G. A 2007 U.S. Department of Education study found that 90 percent of teachers spend 10 minutes a day on handwriting. [Zaner-Bloser](#), the most popular handwriting curriculum used today, deems that too little and is encouraging schools to up that amount to at least 15 minutes a day.

But typing in school has a democratizing effect, as did the typewriter. It levels the look of prose to allow expression of ideas, not the rendering of letters, to take center stage. Florey is aware of this but does not take the time to unpack the assumptions contained in her reason why we should continue to teach handwriting: "Children are judged by their handwriting; if they produce indecipherable chicken-scratching, a teacher will not be sympathetic." Florey mentions that when she was asked to judge handwritten applications for writing positions, she was "drawn to those with legible handwriting and prejudiced against the scrawlers."

Does having good handwriting signal intelligence? No, not any more than it reveals one's religiosity. But many teachers make this correlation: It is called the "handwriting effect." [Steve Graham](#), a professor at Vanderbilt University who studies handwriting acquisition, says that "teachers form judgments, positive or negative, about the literary merit of text based on its overall legibility." Graham's studies show that "[w]hen teachers rate multiple versions of the same paper differing only in terms of legibility, they assign higher grades to neatly written versions of the paper than the same versions with poorer penmanship." This is particularly problematic for boys, whose fine-motor skills develop later than do girls. Yet all children are taught at the same time — usually printing in first grade and cursive in third. If you don't have cursive down by the end of third grade, you may never become proficient at it.

While we once judged handwriting as religiously tinted, now secular, we transpose our prejudices to intelligence. The new SAT Writing Exam, instituted in 2006, requires test takers to write their essays in No. 2 pencil. Not only will those with messy handwriting be graded lower than ones written more legibly, but those who write in cursive — 15 percent of test takers in 2006 — received higher scores than those who printed.

As of 2002, public schools had one computer for every four students, and since then, the number has risen. Despite talk of the digital divide, most high school students, even in low-income schools, are required to type and print out their essays, and they are able to find the means to do so. So assuming access, a standard font and printer paper, typing levels the playing field. Is this egalitarianism not a key value that, like the alphabet, goes all the way back to the Greeks?

When my son was in second grade, he had to stay in for recess almost every day because he could not properly form his letters. I was called in for "interventions," warned that he would fail the Ohio Proficiency Tests if scanners could not read his test answers. ([No Child Left Behind](#) leaves teachers with less time to teach handwriting and fewer means to teach it, yet more tests students must take to prove they have mastered it.) For Simon, homework was always stressful. He would stare at a blank page for an hour. Then he would write one word and then stop; write a few letters and then stop. Soon, he began to fear taking up a pencil at all, and we had nightly battles over his language arts worksheets. Then he began to worry about not having anything to say, not knowing how to say it, or he would come up with ideas that he would not write down because they would take too long and thus write nothing. Perennially being told his handwriting was bad transmuted in his mind into proof that he was a bad writer — a poor student incapable of expressing ideas. He simply hated the physical process of writing. And since handwriting dominated his education in grades 1, 2 and 3, he hated school, too.

I transferred him to a private school where he was allowed to dictate his writing assignments. For his fourth-grade assignments, I sat at the computer, my laptop on the dining room table, as he paced the dining room, wildly gesticulating, sometimes stopping to put his hand on his chin in thought, but mainly speaking without stopping. I am a fast typist, but I could not keep up; I had to break his train of words. He spoke aloud in full clauses and paragraphs. What would have taken him about three or four hours (I am not exaggerating) by hand took him about four minutes by mouth.

The moral of this story is not that typing is superior to handwriting, that parents should have to transcribe the stories of their offspring or that private schools are superior to public ones. The moral of the story is that what we want from writing — what Simon wants and what the Sumerians wanted — is cognitive automaticity, the ability to think as fast as possible, freed as much as can be from the strictures of whichever technology we must use to record our thoughts. As Wolf writes: "A system that can become streamlined through specialization and automaticity has more time to think. This is the miraculous gift of the reading brain." This is

what Palmer wanted for his students — speed. This is what the typewriter promised Twain. This is what typing does for millions. It allows us to go faster, not because we want everything faster in our hyped-up age, but for the opposite reason: We want more time to think.

This is how Simon describes why he hates to handwrite: "I have it all in my memory bank, and then I stop, and my memory bank gets wiped out."

Whatever we use to write, there will be a shortfall between conception and execution, between the ideas in our heads and the words we produce. We often insert nostalgia into this gap. Today, writing a novel with a BIC pen and a legal pad is considered as sweetly funny as William Dean Howells composing his first short story in a compositor's stick, upside down and backwards (his father was a printer) or [Gay Talese](#)'s habit of writing on shirt boards (those cardboard panels they put in your shirts at the dry cleaners). Toni Morrison, Jim Harrison, John Updike and others write (or, unfortunately, have written) by hand.

We also make up stories to romanticize the mundane. The Sumerians used writing for accounting — they developed tokens to count sheep. But the Sumerians made up a better story for the invention of writing: "A messenger from the lord of Kulab arrived at a distant kingdom, too exhausted to deliver an important oral message. So as not to be frustrated by mortal failings, the lord of Kulab had also 'patted some clay and set down the words as on a tablet ... and verily it was so.'" (As Wolf points out, this tale "sidestep[s] the awkward matter of who was able to read the lord of Kulab's words.")

Handwriting does have a presence that can be absent in typed prose, I admit. I have a binder of notes my grandmother wrote shortly before she died. She scrawled her life story in thick black felt-tip on the backs of envelopes. I have been slowly typing up her notes to preserve them for the family, and as I squint to make out words, I sense the felt experience of her hand on paper. And I will admit that when I find a smooth expanse of sand or a bark-less tree trunk, I long to scratch my name in them.

I have no desire to lose the art of handwriting, to lose the knowledge retained in archives or to take pencils away from those who seek to wield them: Matthew McKinnon, a freelance writer, re-taught himself cursive at the age of 30 because he had forgotten it, found it useful for his work and wanted to "shake the cobwebs" out of the area of his brain it activates. Kitty Burns Florey is starting a "slow writing" movement, mimicking the slow food movement, to revive the art of handwriting. Each year, the Spencer Society holds a weeklong "saga" where you can learn to master Spencerian script. Handwriting has always been both a way to express thoughts and an art, and preserving the artistic aspects, be it through calligraphy or mastering comic book lettering, is worthy. In schools, we might transition to teaching handwriting as we do other arts, specifically as a fine-motor skill and encourage calligraphers as we should letter press printers or stained glass window makers. These arts have a life beyond nostalgia.

When people hear I am writing about the possible end of handwriting, many come up with examples of things we will always need handwriting for: endorsing checks (no longer needed at an ATM), grocery lists (smartphones have note-taking functions), signatures (not even needed to file taxes anymore). These will not be what we would lose. We may, however, forsake some neurological memory. I imagine some pathways in our brains will atrophy. Then again, I imagine my brain is developing new cognitive pathways each time I hit control C or double click Firefox. That I can touch-type, my fingers magically dancing on my keyboard, free of any conscious effort (much as you are looking at letters and making meaning in your head right now as you read), amazes me. Touch-typing is a glorious example of cognitive automaticity, the speed of execution keeping pace with the speed of cognition.

Do not worry. It will take a long time for handwriting to die, for us to have the interview with

the "last handwriter" as we do today with the last living speakers of some languages. By 1600 B.C., all Sumerian speakers had died, but the writing system that replaced Sumerian, [Akkadian](#), kept aspects of Sumerian alive. It would take another 1,000 years — until 600 B.C. — for Sumerian writing to disappear completely. Even the revolutionary Greeks took a long time to change habits. After they created the Greek alphabet, they spent 400 years doing nothing with it, preferring their extant oral culture. Handwriting is not going anywhere soon. But it is going.

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