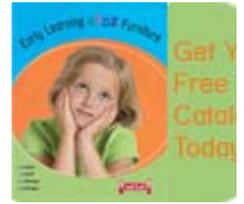




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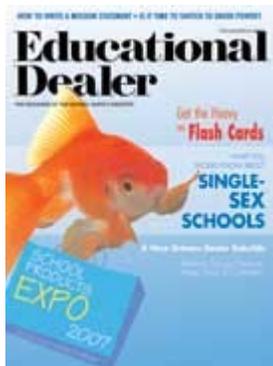


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Handwriting Counts!

Why Good Penmanship Will Never Go Out of Style

by Kari Anderson

Unlike many subjects taught in schools today, handwriting is not an exact science. That's because teachers can choose to teach a style from among a wide variety of educationally acceptable manuscript and cursive approaches including traditional manuscript, modern manuscript, transitional cursive, simplified cursive, traditional cursive and italic. The difference between the styles lies in the slant of the letters and the elaborateness of the loops. Styles range from stick-straight to slanted print to easy cursive (with fewer loops) to elaborate cursive (with lots of loopy letters, especially capitals).

"Having so many handwriting styles to choose from makes it more confusing for parents," says Carolyn Hurst, president of Barker Creek, publisher of the Draw Write Now series. Even though the choice of styles can cause confusion, the purpose remains the same. "The fundamental goal of all handwriting approaches is to teach a rapid, legible hand," Hurst says. "As long as schools and parents pick an alphabet style and stick to it, that goal is likely to be realized."

The benefits of being legible

Today more critical tests, such as high school exit exams and the SAT, include an essay component, and the clarity of a student's handwriting can have a direct impact in her score. "There is evidence that students who write legibly receive higher scores," points out Marcia Gresko, senior instructional designer for Educational Insights. "Having legible handwriting also frees a student to focus on words and ideas, instead of laboring over letter formation."

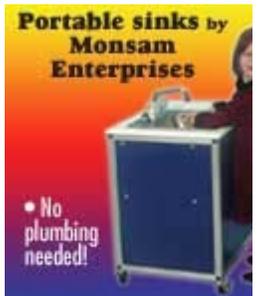
The benefits don't end there, according to Carolyn Hurst. "Numerous studies have found that handwriting is an important cognitive skill. Many researchers feel handwriting is to reading and writing as crawling is to walking. The additional skills gained in the process of learning to write – including fine-motor development, attention to how lines meet and intersect, hand-eye coordination, the ability to follow directions – are essential skills that are included in a solid handwriting program."

Obstacles to overcome

As students work toward the goal of legible handwriting, there are plenty of challenges along the way. The biggest is the lack of time teachers have to spend on handwriting in the classroom. Joanna Robinson, Ph.D., editorial manager for Learning Horizons, explains, "The recent emphasis on proficiency testing, accountability and school performance has interfered with the amount of time spent on handwriting instruction, the quality and investment in this type of instruction, and consequently, student mastery of essential handwriting skills."

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"Despite the notion that literacy is important, more emphasis has been placed on reading and reading comprehension, and less focus has been placed on writing as an integral part of literacy and communication. This need to teach to the tests and to prepare students for test success has diminished handwriting expectations."

Robinson also believes that computers have had a profound effect on handwriting instruction. "Although knowledge about computers is critical for children in this digital era, the introduction of this technology has limited the focus and attention on some of the more traditional skills like reading and writing. Children may have more experience with dexterity or coordination through computerized tasks, but computer skills do not always translate to writing situations."

Social and environmental influences have also affected children's ability to produce legible work, according to Robinson. "Over the past several years, more and more children have been diagnosed (accurately or inaccurately) with social and/or mental health disorders, or learning disabilities, which can severely impact the child's ability to perform handwriting tasks. In my opinion, the bar of expectations is often lowered, and children may not be encouraged and supported through the challenges that lead to mastery of the necessary handwriting skills. For other children who may be considered 'unmotivated,' any level of investment in a handwriting task is welcomed as success, and less attention is given to the accuracy of the skill or to any direction about how to improve."

Marcia Gresko agrees that the attitudes of teachers have changed when it comes to handwriting. "With the presence of computers at home and in school, some teachers disagree on the importance of teaching handwriting, specifically cursive handwriting, feeling it may be of less value these days," she says.

However, poor handwriting makes more work for teachers. "Busy teachers spend a lot of time deciphering illegible writing, on tests and in compositions," continues Gresko. "Legible work helps teachers who would prefer to concentrate on the content of a student's work."

Whether it's because of increased testing, time constraints, changing attitudes or socio-emotional concerns, children are not being drilled in handwriting. Consequently, they develop habits that are hard to kick. Kim Stitzer, coauthor of the series *Draw Write Now* has witnessed this. "What I'm seeing today are children who learn to form letters on their own, without adult help, and they develop strange motions that are terribly slow and cumbersome," she says. "From the starting gate, these children are at a disadvantage and may give up on handwriting, left to rely on the computer. I've talked to plenty of students and adults who tell me how it is a disadvantage not to be able to write using a pencil."

Product selection tips

Here are some tips on the types of handwriting products you should have on hand when parents and teachers come calling.

Start with the proper tools. The first step to good handwriting is having the right grip. "These are products that promote the tripod grip, products like The Pencil Grip and the jumbo triangle grip pencils and crayons by Faber-Castell (*Creativity for Kids*)," says Kim Stitzer.

Engage the parents. Stitzer suggests carrying products that will appeal to parents as well as kids. "Teachers are encouraging parents to work with their children on handwriting," she explains. "The child benefits when the activity engages their parent's interest." A product that appeals to parents is especially helpful when a parent is teaching her child how to write using a different style than the one she learned.

Teach how to teach. "Handwriting products should clearly explain the correct way of teaching penmanship," offers Clair Hayes of Hayes School Publishing. "This would include a description of when children are ready to begin writing instruction, writing

readiness activities, the best way to present the alphabet, the child's position at the desk, and model letters depicting correct letter formation."

Have plenty of styles. Since not every school or homeschooler uses the same style of manuscript or cursive, it's important to find out what styles your customers are needing and stock up. What's the most popular style? That depends on whom you talk to.

Dennis Willams is the national product manager for handwriting at Zaner-Bloser, a company that specializes in handwriting products and a sister company to Essential Learning Products. He says the simplified cursive alphabet is more popular than the traditional. "Having the simplified alphabet actually makes it much quicker and easier for the students. Overall, we really just eliminated some 'decorative' hoops on some letters and changed the formation of another. It only affected a small percentage of the alphabet."

Carolyn Hurst of Barker Creek says that traditional sells better for her company. "Although we've never done a formal survey, I do know that across all of our handwriting product lines, we continue to sell more traditional than modern. Our sales of modern are stronger on the West Coast than the East. Among homeschoolers, the Italic alphabet is very popular, too, so they are trying to choose between traditional, modern and Italic."

Give a reference point. Providing children with a guide to use as they write is always helpful. Of course alphabet borders are a simple way to do that, but individual guides, such as desk strips and charts, give a student an up-close look at letter formation.

Make it fun. Marie Hablitzel, a teacher for over 30 years and coauthor of the Draw Write Now series with Kim Stitzer, learned from personal experience how to get results from her students. "Drawing was an integral part of Marie's daily lesson plans, and it made teaching fun," explains Stitzer. "She also found that it strengthened her connection with the children. After drawing a dog together, she found that the children followed her every move as she showed the correct formation of the letter 'd' and the letter 'g.'"

Customizing handwriting worksheets is another way to jazz up drills that could become tedious. "We like the flexibility of handwriting software for creating custom worksheets that relate to the child's interest," adds Stitzer.

Mix it up. In perfecting a handwriting style, practice is essential. To keep kids motivated, it's important to provide a variety of ways to practice. Thankfully, there are more options now than ever.

- *Electronics* – Ironic as it may seem, electronic learning aids (ELAs) can actually help children learn letter formations through a medium that is familiar to them. "ELAs accurately model the proper formation of all upper- and lowercase letters in manuscript, transitional and cursive styles in a fun and infinitely patient interactive format," says Jim Whitney, president of Educational Insights.
- *Dry-erase boards* – "The most obvious advantage of dry-erase boards is that they can be used over and over again, making them very cost effective for classroom use," notes Carolyn Hurst.
- *Stencils* – Like dry-erase boards, stencils can be re-used and shared, but with stencils, the letters always look perfect.
- *Stamps* – Another fun option for teaching handwriting skills is to let children stamp a letter and then trace along the dotted lines. Transparent handles and pads help a child see where they are stamping, so the letter can be placed accurately on the guideline paper.

Offer sample sheets. Of course traditional guideline paper is a mainstay among handwriting products. "Offer a variety of guideline papers, such as raised-line paper, two-line guideline paper and the traditional three-line paper," advises Kim Stitzer.

She also believes bigger may be better when it comes to practicing handwriting. "Sometimes sloppy handwriting is actually an indication that the child is attempting to write too small for his skill level," she explains. "We've worked with a number of 10-year-old children who saw a huge improvement in their writing when they began practicing on larger guidelines. It would be great if retailers made sample sheets available, so that a parent could take one sheet of several sizes for their child to try out before buying a package of paper."

Appeal to a range of ages. If kids aren't catching onto proper handwriting skills in the lower grades, they'll need to keep practicing as they get older. "The feedback we've received from our customers indicates that children in upper grades need additional practice material to help them further refine their cursive writing skills," notes Clair Hayes. More advanced drills and products that aren't too juvenile will appeal to older students.

"The reality of our daily lives is that most of us still depend on legible handwriting for a great deal of our communication with the outside world," concludes Carolyn Hurst. It's up to publishers, manufacturers and retailers to provide a variety of tools that will make learning handwriting easier. Then it's up to the parents, teachers and students to put these tools to good use.

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