

What is it about

Cursive?

If you are 7 or 8 years old you are probably experimenting with cursive handwriting. Most second graders would gladly give their bubble gum to a “big kid” who would show them how to do it. What is it about cursive that is so compelling for children? Why does a toddler, still shaky with walking, insist on crawling up the stairs? The two questions really are related.

Cursive handwriting offers the same irresistible challenge to a grade school child as the stairs offer to our crawler. Actually, the challenge of cursive writing continues to entice people well beyond those early years. Why is it that so many schools seem to ignore the student interest? Are school policy makers right? Are handwriting lessons no longer deserving of priority in the school curriculum?

At some point each parent and teacher will need to decide on a course of action. Our students are expected to be able to use handwriting every day. Here is some food for thought from someone who has spent over twenty years as a handwriting specialist while doing research on teaching techniques for handwriting skills.

Cursive handwriting offers huge advantages over print writing for practical communication - such as showing what you have learned from yesterday's science lesson. However, this is only true when a person has learned the skills necessary to use it easily. This means it is more accurate to say that it *should* offer great advantages. It fits the way our muscles work for fluent handwriting - *and fluency should be the real objective, no matter what the style of letterform.*



A Bit of History

When the tools for writing were pointed nibs affixed to the end of sticks and feathers cut to become quill pens, the cursive advantage was actually a necessity. These

tools readily produced blotches instead of strokes when a little downward pressure was applied. Cursive shapes were produced by sliding the pen sideways. Our cursive alphabets were an ingenious design allowing us to take advantage of the tools of the time. Without them our Nation's effort to educate the masses might well have failed.

However, each student had to develop a certain degree of physical skill to use the tools with any success. The invention of the pencil changed things dramatically. Ink wells, blotters and nib pens disappeared and the effort for physical skill development was pretty much forgotten as teachers discovered that the pencil allowed kids to function with little physical training. The advantage of cursive slipped away, along with the physical skill for fluency, as the penmanship effort was slowly eliminated from the school curriculum.

The print alphabets were introduced in our schools after the pencil was available. At the time, it was decided that the shape of print letters, very much like those blocks of type used by printers, offered an advantage for learning to read. Children had no trouble learning to draw these letters with the pencil but the task would have been impossible with a nib pen. All of the movements used were downward - a direct route to blotch city.

Does Cursive Offer an Advantage Today?

Student interest aside, are there good reasons to teach cursive today? There are a number of reading specialists who are now convinced that cursive should be taught in the beginning. They believe that it offers advantages over printwriting for reading skill development. However, they and most of the publishers of handwriting books, do not give much attention to fluency as an objective. They simply provide a means for allowing children to learn how to draw letters. Physical training is not really considered so they have not noticed the brain research focused on physical learning.

Which is it, print or cursive?

bat and ball

An understanding of the actual difference between print and cursive will be helpful. It is not what most people think - joining versus not joining. The difference between cursive and print styles lies in the movements used to create the forms (start point and directionality). The difference between the two lies in the production *process*.

It means the decision you face is not really a simple choice of letter shape. What we want and need is fluency. We want our child to be able to use handwriting as a tool - put thoughts on paper quickly and easily. What you really need to decide is which *process* will be best.

Fluency without legibility however, is not the goal. Ask the MD or hospital where audits of unreadable patient files and prescriptions present a serious problem.

A Process for Fluent Legibility

Fluent handwriting is accomplished with a special kind of movement controlled mostly by an internal model residing in the brain. While visual feedback, an external mechanism, does play a part, it is not the main character. As movement patterns for letters and words are internalized, the writer can rely less on the external system and fluency improves due to the special kind of movement.

The fact is, there must be a lateral movement between letters because our language moves from left to right. When the pen is touching the page it causes a stroke no matter what the "style" of letter. When we write fluently we tend to eliminate lifts - the style of letter has little to do with it. Joined print can be difficult to read because print letters are not designed for joining. The extra strokes detract from legibility. With cursive forms, designed for joining, the lateral strokes enhance legibility.

Joining is the "nonvisual advantage" of the cursive style. It lends well to more fluent production because there is less demand for visual feedback to control spacing and size. With practice, responsibility for these qualities of legibility are transferred to the internal model and its special fluent movement.

There is surprising research indicating that the challenge offered by the motor learning activities, actually helps the brain learn how to get its various structures to work together more efficiently as it processes symbolic language.

Another simple advantage also makes sense. Six controlled movements are required to produce legible lowercase print forms. The lowercase cursive alphabet is produced with just three movements. Wouldn't you think that three would be easier to control than six?

There is one fact that educators and parents should recognize. A child who learns how to use the internal control system effectively will have a powerful advantage when it comes to using our symbolic language as a tool for learning. The right kind of handwriting lesson offers the kind of motor-learning activity that stimulates the brain to build pathways for better reading, writing and yes, even keyboarding.

Fluency is the real need. When choosing materials for teaching, look at the *process*. How does the program help you to teach fluency? If lessons consist of *trace and copy* on student pages, **fluency is not addressed.**

If your child is not reading as well as you would like, teach fluency using handwriting lessons designed for that goal. You will be surprised how easy it is. Contact the author toll free at: 1-888-329-1595, or by email to Rand Nelson <mrpencil@peterson-handwriting.com>.

References:

- (From *Endangered Minds*) Dr. Jerre Levy to Dr. Healy: "I suspect that the normal human brains are built to be challenged and it is only in the face of an adequate challenge that normal bihemispheric brain operations are engaged." Dr. Levy goes on to say: "...children need a linguistic (auditory) environment that is coordinated with the visual environment they are experiencing."
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- Shadmir, R. and Holcomb, H. (1997) "Neural Correlates of Motor Memory Consolidation" *Science Magazine*, Vol. 277, 8 Aug. 1997.
- Teulings, H. L., Arizona State University.
- Unpublished, proprietary, "Ballistic Handwriting."
- Contact Peterson Directed Handwriting, Rand Nelson <mrpencil@peterson-handwriting.com>. See "John and Jane are bright. Why can't they write?" Find the link on our Information Directory at www.peterson-handwriting.com