

In Praise of Good Penmanship

By Brenda Rishia, former OCHEC editor

Is good penmanship dead? In my parents' day, penmanship was an art, and those who had a beautiful script were greatly admired. In fact, one of the requirements of qualifying for the temporary job of census-taker was that the person has "good penmanship". While researching family genealogy, I discovered many old documents written in a most skilful and artistic hand, with flourishes abounding. Attractive, elegant handwriting was essential for success in business, even during the 17th century. There exists an annual World Handwriting Contest, sponsored by the Albany, N.Y.-based Handwriting for Humanity club, for enthusiasts of the hand-lettered word.

When I attended elementary school, the progression was to learn printing first, then cursive by grade 3. Today, some private and home schools are choosing to teach cursive immediately beginning in the first grade. Penmanship was in a transitional state, as some of my friends had learned to form their letters in a slightly different way than I had. The shape and style of the letters was not always consistent. As I was home educating my children in their younger grades, the penmanship book we were using did not form the letters in the same way as I had been taught. The Palmer method is considered the "standard" for schools now, but other styles, such as D'Nealian and Spencerian, an elegant 19th century form, also exist. So many students have trouble with cursive writing that educators are to a simpler style known as Italic or "print cursive", whose printed letters are "semi-connected" with small tails. Does it matter if the formation is not consistent from one school to another? Not really, so long as it is taught at all!

Good handwriting is fast becoming a lost art. With the large usage of computers at home, school, and in the workplace, a student need not ever learn how to write cursive lettering. A nearby public school is completely eliminating the teaching of any penmanship at all this year, citing that the proliferation of computer keyboarding as a substitute for the "modern child's" need to do any writing at all. It is generally felt that cursive writing especially is completely unnecessary in this age of technology. In fact, educators are requesting that all written material to be submitted by the students is to be typewritten, not hand written, due to such poor legibility.

Good penmanship is important not only for children in their developing years, but for adults as well. Bad penmanship contributed to one man's death. In 1999, a Texas jury awarded a woman \$450,000 after her husband died when his pharmacist misread "Plendil" (a

medication for high blood pressure), for "Isordil", a medication for heart pain. The jury concluded that his physician's poor handwriting was responsible for the error. An analysis by the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Quality of healthcare in America, a unit of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, concluded that medical errors, including prescription errors caused by poor handwriting, might be partly or wholly responsible for as many as 98,000 deaths per year (L.T. Kohn et al., *To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System*, 1999). Several US hospitals are now encouraging medical staff to take classes to improve their handwriting skills in order to avoid lawsuits such as the above. One student lost valuable grade points at his college due to poor handwriting. In criminology, a person's particular style of handwriting can be used to identify the writer in order to solve a crime. Handwriting experts are specially trained in the art of comparison and detail of hand lettering. They can tell if a signature is fraudulent or genuine.

Are there any instances when a person would need to actually *write* rather than *type* some words? Indeed. We cannot jot down a list of groceries, or fill out an application form without knowing how to print. Telephone messages are usually hand-written, but not often legible! The post office has no end of grief trying to decipher bad handwriting on letters and packages, resulting in the mail landing in the "dead letter" bin. What about a bank cheque? It requires a person to write, in cursive or print, and include their signature. If one never learns to write with a writing implement, they don't develop a signature. What fun we used to have back in school, creating our fancy signatures! How envious we were of girls who had the letter "i" in their name, so they could draw a heart above it, rather than the plain old "dot". Teachers were loath to allow this surge of creativity until high school level, where they apparently felt they no longer had any control over this individuality.

Not only is writing important, but spelling too. Our over-dependent use of the spell-checker program allows student to become lazy, not thinking for themselves about how to spell something. Studies have shown that by searching a dictionary to find how to spell a word actually helps to improve language skills: i.e., just by scanning the pages, looking for the right word, the person must read other words in order to eliminate the wrong ones.

Learning to write properly helps the child with important hand-eye-brain development, and contributes to a skilled hand at creative artwork as well. It develops proper forearm and hand musculature, seated posture or mental discipline.

Recently, while shopping locally, I observed the clerk holding the pen in an unusual way. I was astonished that they could achieve a legible handwriting, in spite of the number of extra fingers holding

onto the pen. Teaching the student how to hold the pen correctly, with the right fingers, sitting straight, both feet on the ground, may seem like a tiresome ritual until the parent realises the long-term benefits of such posture and discipline. Learning to obey in little areas help the child to learn to obey in bigger, more important areas. Penmanship is a skill that is never forgotten, and always useful. It's safe, convenient, and most of all, you don't need a battery or power supply to make it work!

We will always need to write things down on paper at some point in our life. The letters and cards we write to people are beautiful, and they'll cherish them forever. Anyone can learn to write neatly, if they will take the time to learn. It reflects our personality, and a careful regard for matters of form. There is nothing more personal than someone taking time to sit down and write, by hand, some thank-you cards, party invitations, or personal letters as correspondence to loved family members and pen-pals.

Learning good penmanship can be fun. There are a wealth of resources at every book fair and book store, and on the internet. Lessons online are also available.

If you are interested in promoting the art of ornamental penmanship, check the following web sites:

<http://www.zanerian.com/>

For authentic old styles:

www.texashero.com/overview.html

For a brief history:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penmanship>

This article originally appeared in the OCHEC Winter 2003-04 newsletter.

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