

The Art of Penmanship

Good handwriting is the key to mental development.

By Kathy Feig

Through all time, the pen has indeed proven to be mightier than the sword. Yet how many of us ever really learn to use a pen properly?

In Canada and the United States at the turn of the millennium, two social classes are emerging: the keyboard literate and the keyboard illiterate. An incredible 40% of young adults are functionally illiterate in basic reading and writing.

Does handwriting still count in the age of computers? There is still that most important job application form to fill out. And don't forget taking notes in high school and college!

For over 30 years, the public schools have not taught any form of handwriting that has had long-term value. Do administrators think it is not useful or important any more now that we have computers? Or is it because they were not properly instructed themselves?

The answer may be that it is the result of both factors. But, additionally, it is likely that many school officials do not realize that handwriting is the key to education, just as the written word is the backbone of civilization.

Handwriting is the first step to literacy — the ability to read, write, spell and think clearly. The original purpose of writing was to record events: to remember and also to communicate. Learning to write involves learning to organize one's thoughts so that a message can be conveyed coherently to others.

In Whole Language kindergartens, children are encouraged to write and spell any way they like. Young people are very impressionable, and their teachers can have a powerful long-term effect. While it is fairly easy to guide young children into useful habits, it is often very difficult to correct a bad practice once it is well established.

Writing exercises oblige children to concentrate and control each line of the letterform. So too, do they allow the children to think about and control their actions and thus their thoughts.

"The story of writing is a tale of adventure which spans some 20,000 years and touches all aspects of human life."

Albertine Gaur

Handwriting is an essential teaching tool. Systematic introduction and practice of the letters and numbers help to integrate and consolidate new learning. The confusion between 'b' and 'd', for example, need not occur if stroke sequence is properly explained.

It is never too early to introduce children to quality and beauty. On one occasion, I was overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response a grade 1 class demonstrated while looking at Medieval manuscript reproductions. One student, who had a lot of trouble paying attention to anything at all, came to life and started asking questions and wanting to hold the book and keep looking at it even after the class was over.

As a scribe, I find Italic handwriting to be the easiest and most effective to teach. It offers elliptical, sloped and simple forms that conform to our natural hand movements. It is more legibly, more rapidly and more beautifully

written than the more popular methods, and it is more structurally sound.

Practising Italic benefits all of us with its natural shapes. It calms the nerves, focuses the mind, and develops concentration. Italic inculcates the habits of correctness and precision, just like the disciplines of mathematics, music and dance. It allows the writer to discover rhythm and control his attention while improving his memory. It gives children that quiet moment to think, to reflect and to begin to learn.

With Italic handwriting, the confusing transition from basic printing to cursive is avoided because the two are closely related. Progress varies according to the speed and ability of the individual but, by the end of grade 2, most students have a comfortable and legible cursive writing. This makes all the other subjects easier to learn.

When children produce something beautiful with their hands, their self-esteem blossoms and a true sense of confidence develops. This carries into the lunchroom, out to the school-yard and on out into daily life.

Why would we settle for anything less for our children?

Here are some important references.

Handwriting: A New Perspective

by Rosemary Sassoon

A Book of Scripts

by Alfred Fairbank

The Italic Handwriting Series

by Getty and Dubay

Symbols Signs Letters

by Martin Andersch

(Mrs. Feig is a professional scribe and handwriting teacher. More information about the Italic method can be obtained from School of Extended Studies, Portland State University, P.O. Box 1394, Portland, OR, USA 97207).