

THE Write Connections

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- ▶ HANDWRITING AND THE CCSS..... 1
- ▶ NATIONAL HANDWRITING DAY..... 1
- ▶ THE GREAT DEBATE..... 2
- ▶ WHAT ABOUT CURSIVE?..... 2
- ▶ PENMAN'S POINTS..... 2

Handwriting and the Common Core State Standards

Since the launch of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, there has been plenty of talk about a noticeable exclusion: handwriting. The CCSS include standards for legible manuscript writing in kindergarten and grade 1, but that's where their attention to this essential skill ends. What does this mean for the future of handwriting instruction?

According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative, the CCSS "do not describe all that can or should be taught."¹ States are encouraged to view the CCSS as a basic framework and to expand on them as they deem necessary. This gives states the option to include handwriting in their curriculums, which several states have already decided to do. For example, California has amended the CCSS to include manuscript in grade 2 and cursive in grades 3 and 4. Massachusetts also includes cursive in their standards; they require legible handwriting (either manuscript or cursive) in fourth grade. Other states, such as Ohio and Indiana, allow local school districts to decide whether to include handwriting beyond what the CCSS require.

In recent years, handwriting has gradually become less of a priority, while more and more emphasis is placed on technology instruction and anything that appears on standardized tests. However, current research shows an important connection between writing by hand and learning. One study involving brain scans, training sessions, and behavioral testing determined that participants who wrote out new letterforms instead of typing

them had increased brain activity. An active brain was proven to respond better to the act of learning new letterforms, indicating that information written by hand stimulates the brain and provides an increase in awareness to then retain the written information.²

Dr. Judy Willis, a neurologist-turned-teacher, also advocates writing to learn. In her blog, she states, "The practice of writing can enhance the brain's intake, processing, retaining, and retrieving of information. Through writing, students can increase their comfort with and success in understanding complex material, unfamiliar concepts, and subject-specific vocabulary."³ Research shows that the cognitive process of writing by hand improves both retention and comprehension of information in a way that simply does not occur when typing. While the importance of keyboarding instruction cannot be denied, it appears that handwriting instruction is equally important (or perhaps even more so, as this skill enhances learning across the curriculum).

Despite a noticeable gap in the Common Core State Standards for handwriting, recent research supports keeping it in the curriculum. As studies have shown, denying young learners instruction in this most basic of skills may actually hinder their learning in other areas. Perhaps this new information will encourage states to amend the Common Core State Standards and include handwriting in their curriculums.

Celebrate National Handwriting Day! January 23, 2012

National Handwriting day was established in 1977 as a reminder of the importance of handwriting. We appropriately celebrate National Handwriting Day on John Hancock's birthday; his famously large signature symbolizes the past, present, and future of handwriting!

Get Classroom Ideas! Visit www.upub.net and click on the National Handwriting Day banner to gain access to fun activities, including "Take the Challenge," a unique assignment sure to engage your students!



The Great Debate: *Writing by Hand vs. Keyboarding*

Some educators believe that handwriting is an antiquated skill, rendered obsolete by the advent of the keyboard. The Common Core State Standards, which include technology standards but hardly mention handwriting, only amplify this opinion. An all-to-common argument is, “Why ‘waste’ time on teaching handwriting when that time could be spent teaching computer and keyboarding skills?”

The simple answer is that the connection between writing by hand and learning is too significant to be ignored. Using the above logic, one might also say that, with calculators and spell-check, basic math and spelling lessons aren’t necessary, either. Computers can read text out loud now. Some cell phones read text as well, simply by pointing the camera at the desired text; they can even translate foreign words. Does this mean we should discontinue reading instruction (and the study of foreign languages, for that matter)? The benefit of writing by hand, much like the benefit of learning to read and spell and do math problems the “hard” way, is not necessarily found in the act itself. The benefit is in the workout our brains get while we perform these tasks.

Research shows that writing by hand improves students’ creative writing skills, and elementary students actually write more quickly by hand than when typing. Compositions are also longer when written by hand, as demonstrated in a 2009 study: “Consistently, second, fourth, and sixth graders composed longer essays by pen than by keyboard.”⁴ In a paper published in *Advances in Haptics*, Anne Mangen and Jean-Luc Velay report that, “Brain imaging studies...show that the specific hand movements involved in handwriting support the visual recognition of letters.”⁵ Mangen and Velay also refer to a study that reveals how the brain reacts differently to handwriting than



it does to typing: “fMRI data showed that processing the orientation of handwritten and typed characters did not rely on the same brain areas. Greater activity related to handwriting learning was observed in several brain regions known to be involved in the execution, imagery, and observation of actions.”⁵

More and more research is emerging that supports handwriting as a necessary and highly beneficial element of education. That’s not to say that keyboarding doesn’t have its place as well; in this age of technology, children certainly must learn how to type. However, we must take care to ensure that technology does not overshadow “the basics,” which are proven to be so important to the development of young minds.

But What About Cursive?

While many educators agree that handwriting is still an essential part of education, another debate remains: is cursive instruction necessary, or is manuscript sufficient?

In 2007, the College Board reported that 85% of students completed their SAT essays in manuscript, while just 15% wrote in cursive. However, on average, students who wrote in cursive scored higher than those who wrote in manuscript.

This interesting fact suggests that there are, indeed, academic benefits to writing in cursive!

Penman’s Points by Thomas Wasylyk, “America’s Handwriting Teacher”

A few years ago, at an education conference, I was discussing handwriting instruction with a new elementary-school principal. He seemed genuinely interested in my handwriting program (which uses ball-and-stick manuscript), but I could tell something was bothering him. He finally admitted that, while most of his teachers support ball-and-stick manuscript, his first-grade teacher insisted on teaching D’Nealian. Certain I had misunderstood, I asked, “You mean your first-grade students learn D’Nealian while kindergarten and second grade students learn ball-and-stick?” He nodded his confirmation, looking a bit sheepish.

This story illustrates a very common oversight. Establishing a school-wide philosophy is a critical first step to successful handwriting instruction! When teachers use the same handwriting program, follow the same instruction methodology, and use the same vocabulary, students’ handwriting is enriched from one year to the next. Instead of having to “start over” every year, students move fluidly from one level to the next, easily applying their previous instruction to the development of new skills. When all of the teachers are on the same page, student success soars!

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