

advertisement



Special Code: 45069ZWN

SAVE up to **64%**
Plus, get
3 FREE Gifts

To Order:
www.OmahaSteaks.com/print71
or call 1-877-605-0496

Cursive writing is fading skill, but so what?

Fewer schools emphasize 'penmanship' as computer use increases



Bob Bird / AP
A student practices both printing and cursive handwriting skills at a classroom at the Mountaineer Montessori School in Charleston, W.Va..

AP Associated Press

updated 9/19/2009 7:04:37 PM ET

CHARLESTON, W.Va.—

Charleston resident Kelli Davis was in for a surprise when her daughter brought home some routine paperwork at the start of school this fall. Davis signed the form and then handed it to her daughter for the eighth-grader's signature.

"I just assumed she knew how to do it, but I have a piece of paper with her signature on it and it looks like a little kid's signature,"

Davis said.

Her daughter was apologetic, but explained that she hadn't been required to make the graceful loops and joined letters of cursive writing in years. That prompted a call to the school and another surprise.

West Virginia's largest school system teaches cursive, but only in the 3rd grade.

"It doesn't get quite the emphasis it did years ago, primarily because of all the technology skills we now teach," said Jane Roberts, assistant superintendent for elementary education in Kanawha County schools.

Davis' experience gets repeated every time parents, who recall their own hours of laborious cursive practice, learn that what used to be called "penmanship" is being

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



shunted aside at schools across the country in favor of 21st century skills.

Fewer people using handwriting

The decline of cursive is happening as students are doing more and more work on computers, including writing. In 2011, the writing test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress will require 8th and 11th graders to compose on computers, with 4th graders following in 2019.

"We need to make sure they'll be ready for what's going to happen in 2020 or 2030," said Katie Van Sluys, a professor at DePaul University and the president of the Whole Language Umbrella, a conference of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Handwriting is increasingly something people do only when they need to make a note to themselves rather than communicate with others, she said. Students accustomed to using computers to write at home have a hard time seeing the relevance of hours of practicing cursive handwriting.

"They're writing, they're composing with these tools at home, and to have school look so different from that set of experiences is not the best idea," she said.

Text messaging, e-mail, and word processing have replaced handwriting outside the classroom, said Cheryl Jeffers, a professor at Marshall University's College of Education and Human Services, and she worries they'll replace it entirely before long.

"I am not sure students have a sense of any reason why they should vest their time and effort in writing a message out manually when it can be sent electronically in seconds."

Cursive writing is 'a gift'

For Jeffers, cursive writing is a lifelong skill, one she fears could become lost to the culture, making many historic records hard to decipher and robbing people of "a gift."

That fear is not new, said Kathleen Wright, national product manager for handwriting at Zaner-Bloser, a Columbus, Ohio-based company that produces a variety of instructional material for schools.



"If you go back, you can see the same conversations came up with the advent of the typewriter," she said.

Every year, Zaner-Bloser sponsors a national handwriting competition for schools, and this year saw more than 200,000 entries, a record.

"Everybody talks about how sometime in the future every kid's going to have a keyboard, but that isn't really true."

Few schools make keyboards available for day-to-day writing. The majority of school work, from taking notes to essay tests, is still done by hand.

At Mountaineer Montessori in Charleston, teacher Sharon Spencer stresses cursive to her first- through third-graders. By the time her students are in the third grade, they are writing book reports and their spelling words in cursive.

To Spencer, cursive writing is an art that helps teach them muscle control and hand-eye coordination.

"In the age of computers, I just tell the children, what if we are on an island and don't have electricity? One of the ways we communicate is through writing," she said.

Composition skills vs. penmanship skills

But cursive is favored by fewer college-bound students. In 2005, the SAT began including a written essay portion, and a 2007 report by the College Board found that about 15 percent of test-takers chose to write in cursive, while the others wrote in print.

That was probably smart, according to Vanderbilt University professor Steve Graham, who cites multiple studies showing that sloppy writing routinely leads to lower grades, even in papers with the same wording as those written in a neater hand.

Graham argues that fears over the decline of handwriting in general and cursive in particular are distractions from the goal of improving students' overall writing skills. The important thing is to have students proficient enough to focus on their ideas and the composition of their writing rather than how they form the letters.



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that 26 percent of 12th graders lack basic proficiency in writing, while two percent were sufficiently skilled writers to be classified as "advanced."

"Handwriting is really the tail wagging the dog," Graham said.

Besides, it isn't as if all those adults who learned cursive years ago are doing their writing with the fluent grace of John Hancock.

Most people peak in terms of legibility in 4th grade, Graham said, and Wright said it's common for adults to write in a cursive-print hybrid.

"People still have to write, even if it's just scribbling," said Paula Sassi, a certified master graphologist and a member of the American Handwriting Analysis Foundation.

"Just like when we went from quill pen to fountain pen to ball point, now we're going from the art of handwriting to handwriting purely as communication," she said.

Copyright 2009 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.
This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or

redistributed.

Sponsored links