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# "I Hope You Can Read This": What's Happened to Handwriting

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# “I HOPE YOU CAN READ THIS”: WHAT’S HAPPENED TO HANDWRITING

BY BARBARA APSTEIN

**E**ssay exams are surely among the least favorite college experiences, at least partly because students are not accustomed to writing by hand for long periods of time. The pages of the first bluebook are fairly legible. By the second hour, acute hand fatigue sets in, along with frustration at the tedious slowness of the pen’s movement across the page, and handwriting deteriorates to a scrawl. Submitting their exam books after two exhausting hours, many students offer an apologetic “I hope you can read this.”

Bridgewater students generally echo current national attitudes about handwriting. In theory, they believe that neatness and legibility are important, but most of them regard penmanship as a given, like eye color, something that’s not within their power to change. “I have always had messy penmanship and teachers tried to help me,” one freshman confessed in a recent conversation, “but I was a lost cause.” Some students have given up cursive writing entirely and use print.

**THE DECLINE OF PENMANSHIP** Penmanship is far less important than it once was. With the growth of word processing and e-mail, most people do relatively little writing by hand. More and more examinations involve filling in bubbles or checking off boxes. As early as elementary school, children learn keyboarding and papers are typed. As a result, writing done by hand — such as journal-writing and note-taking — is usually intended for a single reader, the author. As another freshman commented, “a neat handwriting isn’t important since you’re mostly taking notes and you’re the only one who’s going to have to read them.”

Of course, there is no guarantee that note-takers will be able to read what they have written. My husband, who is a physician, belongs to a profession whose members are renowned for illegibility. He can often be seen staring at a page covered with his own strange, inscrutable marks, murmuring “What does this mean?”

A glance at library shelves provides further evidence of the decline of interest in handwriting. Self help guides with titles like *Better Handwriting in 30 Days* are likely to be 30 years old and are greatly outnumbered by guides to Wordperfect, Microsoft Word and the popular “For Dummies” series.

The decline of handwriting, however, preceded the computer era. Historian Tamara Plakins Thornton’s recent book, *Handwriting in America*, records complaints about illegibility beginning in the 1930’s. Increasing use of telephones, typewriters and dictating machines during the first half of the century reduced the need for handwritten documents. During the 1960’s, many educators emphasized self-expression at the expense of rote learning, which further reduced the teaching of penmanship. Reformers argued that there was a better way for children to spend their time than copying the rows of loops and circles required by the Palmer method.

In earlier centuries, however, writing was a carefully-honed craft. People spent as many hours working to reproduce copybook models accurately as today’s self-improvers might devote to the goal of firmer thighs and flatter tummies. However, as Thornton explains, there were several different models, and the particular model an individual was to copy depended on his or her gender, occupation and social class. Some scripts were reserved for women, others for gentlemen and others for middle-class young men preparing for business careers. Professional penmanship teachers helped students learn the appropriate kind of writing.

**HANDWRITING INSTRUCTION** The handwriting instruction books which Thornton has unearthed provide fascinating windows on English and American culture from the Renaissance through the 19th century. For middle class boys, penmanship was a practical skill, taught along with arithmetic and accounting. Penmanship instruction overlapped with learning about ledgers, invoices, and receipts. In 1845, writing master James French published two copybooks, a *Gentlemen’s Writing Book*, in a blue binding, and a *Ladies’ Writing Book*, in a pink binding. The boys’ book provided preparation for the world of business and commerce, as suggested by the model phrases, such as “A neat handwriting is a letter of recommendation,” which they were instructed to copy. Neatness would presumably

indicate to an employer that the young man was trustworthy and hard-working. In sharp contrast, the girls practiced copying sentences like "A fine specimen of ornamental penmanship is a speaking picture." As Thornton points out, for the young women, writing was an accomplishment like dancing, music or needlework. They were being prepared for a life of cultivated leisure, not for the world of work.

### HANDWRITTEN NOTES

Although the speed and convenience of word processing has made neat and legible handwriting far less critical than it once was, writing by hand has not become totally obsolete. It's generally agreed that thank-you notes and condolence letters should be written by hand. Even though some people persist in sending pages of newsy print along with their Christmas cards, these are generally regarded as tacky. Miss Manners declares that "script — even when messy or barely legible — communicates a feeling of personal connection that a laser printed letter cannot duplicate." Knowing this, the authors of computer-generated fund raising letters often try to "personalize" their appeal by including a phony "hand written" note.

And even when computers are easily available, it seems, many people prefer to take notes by hand. According to a recent *New York Times* article, many workers at business meetings, in hospitals and in other job settings would rather write than type on a laptop. Or, to be more precise, they would rather scribble on a notepad and have their jottings appear transformed into print on computer screens. For these people, handwriting-recognition software, which translates handwritten notes into computer text files that can be edited, revised and printed, is being developed. The hand-recognition software currently available, according to the *Times*, works reasonably well if users print carefully in capital letters — which, of course, most users don't. Most people

scribble and then hope that the computer can read what they have written, as they once hoped that their professors could. Thus far, the computer's response often seems to be "I can't" — the new software has even more trouble deciphering handwritings than human readers do. Programs such as the Crosspad, developed by I. B. M. and the penmaker A. T. Cross, can be trained to read a specific user's writing style, but this process apparently takes several hours and the results are not completely reliable.

The willingness to devote hours of practice to achieve neatness and uniformity in handwriting is clearly a thing of the past. Yet as we scribble and scrawl, a still, small voice is sometimes heard, whispering "I hope I can read this."

Name		Grade
School		
Teacher		Date
hphh	hphh	hphh
should	should	should
g g g	g g g	g g g
America	America	America
o o o	e e e	a a a
o o o	e e e	a a a
o o o	e e e	a a a
H H H	H H H	H H H
History	History	History

o o o      e e e      a a a

o o o      e e e      a a a

o o o      e e e      a a a

H H H      H H H      H H H

History      History      History

Life on the Frontier

Once a pioneer family claimed a piece of land, their lives changed.

Their wagon served as their home for the time it took them to clear the land and build a house.