



## The Write Stuff

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By Christina Hoff Sommers *The Women's Quarterly*, September 4, 2001 There are exceptions, but here is the rule: Boys are graphologically challenged. That males have many more problems with penmanship than females is "not even a question," according to University of Maryland special education professor and distinguished scholar Steve Graham. "It is one of the better established facts in the literature." Handwriting is a basic skill that serves us all our lives. Unfortunately, a problem that primarily affects boys is rarely on anyone's list of educational priorities. This one could be solved readily enough, if schools would take the pains they once took to inculcate good handwriting. Two powerful groups have opposed the teaching of penmanship: the techno-enthusiasts and the progressive educators. The former regard handwriting as a quaint relic of the past; the latter believe handwriting instruction inhibits a child's creativity and spontaneity. The techno-optimists have been around a long time. Since the invention of the typewriter in the 1870s, experts have predicted the imminent demise of handwriting. With each new innovation - the telephone, the Dictaphone, the tape recorder - technology enthusiasts have declared the end of penmanship. "Hand-writing nowadays is as out-of-date as the hand-lettered book," according to a 1956 article in *Look* magazine. Thirty years later, in a 1986 article in *Classroom Computer Learning*, a middle school teacher wrote, "Right now we may be living in the last days of the pencil-and-paper age." But here we are in the new millennium, and the last days of pen and paper have not yet arrived. Children are still required to bring pencils to class. Adults continue to fill out forms, address letters, and sign their names - all by hand - on a daily basis. Prospective employers look at handwriting samples for signs of instability. College entrance exams now include a handwritten essay. Even technology is going in the direction of making more demands on handwriting skills. The latest generation of cyber notebooks and Palm Pilots includes a radical innovation that requires the user to enter information, not with a keyboard or joystick, not by talking to the machine, but by using a small writing instrument - a pen. "I have no idea what I meant," said my bewildered sixteen-year-old David, struggling to decipher class notes he himself had written, but which now appeared to him like something in ancient Akkadian. My son is untroubled by his messy handwriting: "It doesn't matter," he assures me. "I do most of my work on the computer." But whenever I look through his notebooks, I see page after page of class notes, homework assignments, and in-class exams in his manic scrawl. Even in the information age, penmanship remains a basic and essential skill; but it is not a skill that my son was ever trained to master. And he is far from atypical. Techno-enthusiasts can be reasoned with. Show them evidence that children are harmed by poor handwriting and they will relent. Progressive educators are the more steely-minded opponents of teaching handwriting. For they quite sincerely believe that the "penmanship regime" is stultifying for children. They favor a "whole language" methodology that discourages instruction on writing skills such as phonics, grammar, spelling, and penmanship. They want children immersed in a rich and exciting language environment that will stimulate their curiosity and imagination and lead them naturally toward literacy, clarity, and legible writing. Here is an early (1957) expression of their philosophy from a Brooklyn College professor, writing in the journal *Elementary English*: "When he feels deeply about his experience patterns, he will not only write well he will want to write correctly. The habit of correct writing is best achieved when the child wants desperately to communicate experience" (his emphasis). This is the kind of wishful jargon we were to hear for the next forty years. How the habit of correct writing can be achieved out of a desperate desire to communicate, but without training, is not explained. Nor does it happen. If the improvement of boys' penmanship depends on their "feeling deeply" about their "experience patterns," most will remain maladroit, if not illegible. By the early 1980s whole language theory was dominant in schools of education and professional associations, and the direct instruction of phonics, grammar, spelling, and penmanship was out of favor. The unhappy effects on children's reading skills are familiar. Less known are the effects of the lack of handwriting instruction on writing skills. The progressive prejudice against teaching handwriting was many times articulated. Here is whole language proponent Professor Donald Graves in a 1978 "research update" for the National Council of Teachers of English: "Handwriting was one of those early school experiences I have tried to repress.... [I]t was punishing, mindless, and mechanical whereas composing with ideas was lofty and worthwhile." A few years later a first-grade teacher would write, "I know Donald Graves says not to worry about handwriting; it will come. But I can't help wonder if it really will, so I teach handwriting.... I just see these kids struggling, almost making marks instead of letters. How can they learn to write legibly?" In fact, many of them, especially boys, do not learn to write legibly. There are, of course, many examples of great men with questionable penmanship. Try deciphering a handwritten line from Sir Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or John F. Kennedy. But these men had compensating assets, including great wealth and distinguished schooling. What about the average boy? Handwriting is not correlated with IQ. (One 1985 study of second graders found a negative correlation!) But it does appear to be strongly correlated with



grades. Several studies have confirmed that, when teachers are asked to grade papers of comparable quality, those that are neatly written get higher marks. As education scholar Pamela Farris reported in *Language Arts* (1991), "Illegible or poor handwriting can hinder students in getting fair and objective grades from their teachers. . . . [T]he quality of students' handwriting influences how teachers evaluate papers; students with better handwriting receive higher grades than those with poor handwriting." Standardized tests do not usually include handwritten answers, and boys tend to do better on them than girls. This has led several women's groups to accuse the tests of being gender-biased. But what about all the in-class assignments and tests that require written answers? Shouldn't someone consider the possibility that there is grading bias against boys -- and that by not teaching handwriting, boys are disadvantaged? At every stage of education boys get lower grades than girls. Their handwriting deficits are almost certainly a factor. Some researchers, such as University of Maryland scholar Steve Graham, believe that children who are denied explicit and sustained handwriting instruction can be harmed in a very direct way. In the early grades, when children begin to put down their thoughts in writing, a child who has trouble with the mechanics of writing will be distracted. Instead of focusing on ideas and quickly putting down the two or three thoughts he holds in his mind, he is held up, and diverted by worries about how to form the letters. Most children, says Graham, "plan on line," which is to say, they figure out what they want to say while writing it. Children who are unskilled in forming letters cannot easily form plans: Their attention is elsewhere. This means that for children with handwriting problems, or inadequate training in writing, the earliest experiences with writing will be frustrating. We know that early frustration with handwriting is associated with an abiding dislike for all writing. Computers are not the answer because children are not developmentally prepared for keyboards until third grade. To write legibly, fluently, quickly, a child needs to learn to grip the pencil correctly, to stay on the line, to space words properly, and to form letters. Bad habits can be corrected in the early years; after fourth grade, it becomes almost impossible to correct them. By the time they reach high school, boys are about a year and a half behind girls in reading proficiency. The gap in writing is much worse. A recent Department of Education study found that in writing, "Male eleventh graders score at about the same level as female eighth graders." Some of the disparity can be ascribed to differences in handwriting skills. Isn't it time for educators to be concerned about the link between problems with the mechanics of handwriting and overall lifetime literacy? What are the schools doing about the problem? On the whole, penmanship education is inconsistent and unpredictable. Some schools do it, some do not. There are at least fifty different methods and there is little continuity from teacher to teacher. Handwriting research has not been fashionable in schools of education, and it is very hard to get good information on actual classroom practices. For the moment, we have to rely on estimates and studies by penmanship entrepreneurs. One 1993 study by Zaner-Bloser, a company that manufactures handwriting materials, found that a majority of teachers (70 percent) believe that children's handwriting skills are inadequate. Most (67 percent) believe that there should be more classroom emphasis on handwriting. Unfortunately, few teachers (36 percent) ever received formal training on how to teach handwriting. Teachers are doing their best and it would be wrong to hold them responsible for the sorry state of American penmanship. As usual, the schools of education have not played a creditable role. For the past several decades, schools have been burdened by poorly conceived initiatives from schools of education. Throughout my son's education (he is now in tenth grade), the emphasis has been on creative art projects in English and social studies classes. For one history assignment, David had to make a relief map of Israel out of pizza dough. His grandmother and I spent an entire Sunday afternoon baking it and indicating rivers with blue thread and forests with parsley. Yes, I suppose I should have let him do it himself. But the idea of David alone in the kitchen, frustrated, angry, and covered with flour was more than I could take. And what was the point? I can't count the number of collages David has thrown together over the years. A recent assignment is typical: "Mom, I need pictures from magazines illustrating 'The American Dream' for my Great Gatsby final project." But these things are not what he or any other child needs. What they need is more work on grammar, semantics, essay construction, and vocabulary development. All children, but boys especially, need better legibility and neatness in writing. As education professor Kay Huitt warned in the early seventies, "The current tendency toward incidental instruction in handwriting can soon move toward accidental instruction, and handwriting skills are too important to be left to chance." We have gone from one extreme to the other and now must find our way to a sensible middle. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, penmanship was thought to be crucial to a young person's moral and aesthetic development. In her valuable study, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History*, historian Tamara Plakins Thornton cites penmaster Uriah McKee, saying in 1880 that wayward boys who become interested in "artistic penmanship" undergo a significant change of focus: "Vulgar stories, bar-room scandals, and billiard halls begin to lose their attraction." At a 1910 meeting of a penmanship teachers association, one presenter claimed that the Palmer method "was the initial step in the reform of many a delinquent." There is no solid evidence that handwriting instruction will save boys from the corrupting effects of billiard halls. We do know, however, that penmanship is a basic and essential skill, that it plays a critical role in a child's basic literacy and overall success in school, and that when schools choose not to teach it, it is boys who pay the highest price. *Christina Hoff Sommers is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Her book, The War Against Boys (Simon & Schuster), has just appeared in paperback.*

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