

Ten Reasons People Still Need Cursive

While some argue cursive writing belongs in the archives and Common Core ushers it out of schools, the evidence shows we need it as much as ever.

I am currently writing these sentences in Evernote, something that is highly unusual for me, as I scribble almost all my story ideas down by hand.

Researching cursive instruction—and handwriting in general—has made me realize how utterly dependent I am on pen and paper to boost my creativity. I even have one of those fancy Moleskine Evernote notebooks, so I can take pictures of my brainstorming sessions and file them appropriately in the correct digital cabinet. I wrote my master’s thesis longhand on a legal pad over the course of several months. I also have several hidden notebooks with the next great American novel languishing somewhere between the covers.

In fact, except for the fact paper isn’t free—especially paper inside of fancy Moleskine notebooks—I have decided my method is decidedly superior to staring at a blank screen and a blinking cursor. To wit, the rest of this article will originally have been scribbled in cursive.

Why cursive? Educational policymakers pose this question as they face the increasingly digital and app-based twenty-first century, a world in which the curls and flourishes of longhand seem increasingly outmoded. But I pulled out my favorite pen and thought of ten reasons.

1. Cursive Helps People Integrate Knowledge

According to David Perkins, in his new book “Future Wise,” **we are not**

teaching what really matters in schools. So much of educational focus now is on achieving a significant body of knowledge and expertise, and gaining enough mastery of a subject to answer multiple-choice tests. Eventually, that knowledge fades.

What matters? Skills. How to read. How to write. How to research. How to think. How to learn.

As Dr. William Klemm argues in *Psychology Today*, “Cursive writing helps train the brain to integrate visual, and tactile information, and fine motor dexterity. School systems, driven by ill-informed ideologues and federal mandate, are becoming obsessed with testing knowledge at the expense of training kids to develop better capacity for acquiring knowledge.”

NPR makes this point, albeit arguing the fight over cursive is missing the boat. There is not enough old-fashioned composition being taught in school, whether it is in cursive, manuscript, or typed. Instead, claims Arizona State University’s Steve Graham, there is a lot of “filling in blanks on worksheets” and “one sentence responses to questions.”

Writing, in short, is not being taught at all. Which brings us to:

2. Writing Long-form Teaches Us How to Write

There is a direct relationship between quality of handwriting and the quality of written text. The significant cognitive demands of writing combined with the added cognitive load of physically writing means it is important for a student to be able to handwrite effortlessly. As the author indicates, lacking fluency in handwriting causes difficulty in composition, as thoughts cannot get on the page fast enough. In addition, the student cannot focus on the sequencing and higher-order thoughts essential to composition. The relationship between handwriting and composition quality is even seen

on MRI, with the **brains of those with good handwriting activated in more areas associated with cognition, language, and executive function** than the brains of those with poor handwriting.

The researchers emphasize handwriting **is not just a motor art and requires a knowledge of orthography**, or the methodology of writing a language.

As Dr. Carol Christensen points out, there is a strong relationship between creative and well-structured written text and the orthographic-motor ability. She calls it “language by hand.” And cursive, in general, **is faster than print** if you are fluent in both.

But what if we’re faster typing?

3. Our Hands Should Be Multilingual

Certainly, it is important for students to know how to type, especially as more schools move toward taking tests via computer. One would think then the concern of students not writing fast enough to compose correctly disappears.

However, research indicates there still is a huge benefit to handwriting.

During early childhood, **writing letters improves letter recognition**, and we use the hand and brain differently when writing than when typing. In fact, it is important to teach it all: typing, manuscript, and cursive: or, being **“multilingual by hand”** as Dr. Virginia Berninger states.

According to Berninger, printing, cursive writing, and typing on a keyboard are all associated with **“distinct and separate brain patterns.”** When we write by hand, we have to execute sequential strokes to form a letter—something that brain scans shows activate the regions involved in thinking, language, and working memory. **Cursive accelerates the benefits.** Printing and typing do not stimulate the synchronicity between the brain’s right and left

hemisphere, but cursive does.

But, speaking of typing...

4. We Learn Better When We Write It Down

Even older children and adults benefit from handwriting. Two psychologists ran studies in which they realized students **learn better taking handwritten notes as opposed to typing on a computer**—even with Internet distractions disabled.

One reason is **writing things down is slow**. Therefore, one cannot write down every word a lecturer utters. Instead of a “shallow transcription” process, which requires **no critical thinking and doesn’t require your brain to engage the material being presented**, the student needs to summarize, use keywords, paraphrase, and perhaps even ask questions for clarification. As a result, your Reticular Activating System (RAS) is stimulated, which highlights the importance of what is currently right in front of you, the thing on which you are actively focused. As Business Insider **puts it**, “By slowing down the process of taking notes, you accelerate learning.”

Even when students were given a full week to study the material, the laptop users did worse on the ensuing test than the handwritten note takers.

Moreover, adults learning a graphically new language (such as Korean or Arabic), **learn the characters of that language better if writing them down by hand**. The specific pen strokes, therefore, aided visual identification. And if it affects adults, imagine the children.

5. Handwriting Leads to Cognitive Development, Self-Esteem, and Academic Success

Failure to create fluency in written script has negative effects on both academic success and self-esteem. Even though typing seems ubiquitous, handwriting is still “**the most immediate form of graphic communication.**” In addition, no other task taught in school requires as much synchronization as handwriting.

Simply put, handwriting uses more of your brain. The brain has to develop “functional specialization,” integrating thinking, movement, and sensation. As Klemm says, the brain must “**Locate each stroke relative to other strokes; learn and remember appropriate size, slant of global form, and feature detail characteristic of each letter; and develop categorization skills.**” He highlights cursive writing as even more beneficial because the tasks for each step are more demanding.

6. It May Help Those With Special Needs

Although cursive may be difficult for those with dysgraphia or dyslexia, educators have realized cursive could be good exercise in using kinesthetic skills. Both Montessori and Waldorf schools use handwriting as part of their curriculum for its kinesthetic benefits. According to Rand Nelson of Peterson Directed Handwriting, exposure to cursive writing allows a child to overcome motor challenges. Physically gripping a pen and practicing cursive with its swirls and connections “**activates parts of the brain that lead to increased language fluency.**”

Even those who do suffer from dysgraphia or dyslexia may benefit from the “**connected letters and fluid motion**” of cursive handwriting. As *The New York Times* **points out:**

In dysgraphia, a condition where the ability to write is impaired, sometimes after brain injury, the deficit can take on a curious form: In some people, cursive

writing remains relatively unimpaired, while in others, printing does.

In alexia, or impaired reading ability, some individuals who are unable to process print can still read cursive, and vice versa — suggesting that the two writing modes activate separate brain networks and engage more cognitive resources than would be the case with a single approach.

Cursive may aid in letter recognition. In a 2012 study, preliterate students were given a letter shape and asked to reproduce it (either by typing, tracing, or writing freehand). They were then put in an MRI and shown the letter again. Those who wrote in freehand showed increased activity in their left fusiform gyrus, inferior frontal gyrus, and posterior parietal cortex—all activated in adults when they read and write. The very messiness of writing the letter may be a learning tool, teaching students that “**each possible iteration of the letter a**” is an a.

7. It Reduces Distractions and Inspires Creativity

Educators know writing, especially cursive writing, acts as a **grounding** and **sensory integration exercise** for those with behavioral or sensory processing disorders. It likely even **calms neuro-typical adults and children** and **can train self-control**.

8. It Keeps Our Brains Active in Old Age

Keeping the brain busy **lowers the rate of cognitive decline**. Handwriting is a **good cognitive exercise** for all those who wish to keep their minds sharp. Speaking of old folks:

9. We Need to Be Able to Read Cursive

Primary sources, anyone? What about grandpa’s old letters? As a blogger on

HuffPo **lamented**:

It suddenly hit me, however, that if my grandchildren never learn to write in cursive, they will also be unable to read it. They will never be able to decipher things I wrote by hand and saved to show them. My old recipe cards will also need to be translated for them. They will never be able to read the stash of WWII letters my parents wrote to each other. If they do original research that involves pre-21st century documents, will they need an interpreter for the handwritten ones?

All of this makes me rather depressed. Someone has decided that our schools shouldn't waste much time teaching things that don't matter like cursive writing or art appreciation or literary classics. There won't be a test on these things and they won't get kids the jobs of the future. Ours is a disposable society and we are fine with tossing aside the things that are not practical for the college or career.

10. We Can Create Something Beautiful and Unique

Cursive may not be required for a signature, but our printed name is so much less unique. Signatures aside, **“personal style and ownership”** is beneficial to students. Handwriting business **Cursive Logic points this out** beautifully (Disclaimer: I know its founders and have donated to their Kickstarter campaign):

Cursive has the added benefit of being both artistic and highly personal. Children no less than adults long to express their individuality and creativity. Developing a cursive hand—epitomized in the signature and carried through in a unique form of writing that others can identify and associate with a particular individual—is an important step in developing a personal style and voice.

Students are not automatons, and education should include tools that encourage the individual personality.

Not every state has thrown out cursive with the Common Core bathwater (the national mandates do not include cursive, leading many schools to drop it). Utah, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Kansas, North Carolina, and Idaho all emphasize some sort of cursive education in the early grades. And this is a good thing.

Otherwise, Moleskine is *totally* going to go out of business.

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