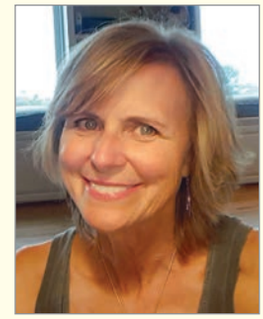
The Importance of Handwriting in Today's Classrooms



By Debbie Diller

"It's hard to read my students' writing, but there's no time in the day for me to teach handwriting," is a lament I often hear when working with elementary teachers across the U.S. Our days are packed with so much to teach that it can feel overwhelming to try to "fit it all in." So, what's a teacher to do?

To start, I have found that we make time for things we value. Most teachers agree that teaching reading is a priority. Ditto for teaching writing. But handwriting? Do we even need handwriting in an age of technology? Ray Reutzel's article "Early Literacy Research: Findings Primary-Grade Teachers Will Want to Know," in the peer-reviewed ILA journal, *The Reading Teacher* (2015), grabbed my attention a few years ago—and I've been thinking about and noticing children's handwriting ever since. As a result, these five research-based reasons for teaching handwriting in today's classrooms sold me:

1. Handwriting speed and legibility, or *transcription fluency*, predicts a student's quality and quantity of written compositions (Peverly, Garner, & Vekaria, 2014; Peverly et al., 2007). Fluency is developed by practice.
2. Students who lack transcription fluency from kindergarten through college level often struggled with writing their ideas quickly enough to remember what they were trying to write (Berninger, 1999; Graham & Wientraub, 1996).
3. Four-year-old children's fine motor writing skill (the ability to form letters, numbers, and shapes) is an indicator of stronger academic achievement in later grades. Academic achievement by those with better handwriting is seen in both reading and math, and it is reflected in both teachers' grades and standardized test scores (Dinehart, 2014).
4. There is a correlation between handwriting speed and typing speed (Connelly, Gee, & Walsh, 2007). Children learn to write with their hands before they learn to type.
5. People who take handwritten notes process information better than those who type notes on a laptop (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). Students who type notes tend to record what they hear verbatim, whereas those who take handwritten notes are more apt to write more reflectively as they translate what they are learning into their own words.

In addition, I have witnessed firsthand how lack of handwriting skill can impede children as they try to get their ideas on paper. Some children do not know how to hold a pencil comfortably, which makes writing difficult for them; their hands tire as they clutch writing implements tightly in their fists. Especially when working with struggling readers, I notice that many of them "draw" letters, moving the pencil from bottom to top and from right to left. This impedes their *transcription fluency* and makes writing difficult for them. And then there's the legibility factor. Sometimes children's writing is so hard to decipher that the reader can't comprehend what the student author has written.

Once we understand the importance of handwriting, the key is to work smarter, not harder, when including instruction and practice for this skill throughout the day. Begin by making it a habit to consciously tell kids how you are forming certain letters as you compose a message in front of them. Be especially fastidious about letters you see them having difficulty forming, such as lowercase *e*. Just the other day, I did this in a fourth-grade classroom. I was modeling how to write my story during writer's workshop, and I quickly interjected how I was forming the letter *e* as I composed in front of the class using a document camera. As I modeled, a student commented, "I have trouble writing the *g*. Could you show us how to do that?" I didn't teach a 10-minute stand-alone handwriting lesson. I simply included a few seconds that clearly targeted the needs of students during writing time.

After you've modeled handwriting, find ways for students to practice correct letter formation in relevant ways during the day. An effective way to do this is at literacy work stations where kids engage in partner practice with activities you've already taught (Diller, 2003, 2016). The key is to be sure

you've first modeled proper letter formation—top to bottom, left to right. Young children love to write lists and make cards at the **writing station**. Here kids can practice using their very best handwriting (think *transcription fluency*) to write their friends' names and messages to their classmates. At the station, provide Alphabet Cards or an Alphabet Strip to show correct letter formation.

Post expectations for legible handwriting at the **writing station**, too. Include samples of easily read student work there. Encourage children to form letters correctly as they write across genres. They might write letters, personal narratives, informational text, and persuasive pieces over time at this station. You might have students show their best work to the class during a sharing time after stations and small-group instruction. They can take a photo of their writing with an iPad® or other device and show the class (and their parents) through an app like Seesaw or Dojo.

I recommend starting with children's names when working on handwriting. A child's name is the first thing she learns to read and write. You might have a **names station** where students can practice writing their names using correct letter formation. If needed, prepare a name template for tracing. Laminate the page or place it in a clear plastic sleeve protector so students can reuse it. Again, be sure to provide models that show correct letter formation.

A **word study station** is another place where children can practice handwriting. When working with spelling patterns, have them use two different colored pens—one color for the pattern in each word (such as *ee* or *ea* for long *e* patterns) and a black pen for the rest of the letters. Encourage students to write the words fast and fluently, forming letters correctly. Again, have them quickly show the class their best work and what they learned during sharing time following stations and small-group time. A document camera or iPad casting works well for this.

At the **buddy reading station**, you might add what I call a community journal—a place where students can record what they're learning to share with others. Simply add a spiral notebook and label it "Community Journal" on the front cover (using your best handwriting, of course!). Students should write legibly in this notebook so that their peers can read what they wrote. Remember to include that all-important Alphabet Strip, giving kids a scaffold to remind them how to form letters correctly.

Finally, model, model, model. Remember that children, especially those who struggle, will only do what they see you modeling. If you missed out on handwriting instruction when you were a child, it's not too late to teach yourself how to hold the pencil and form letters legibly. The key is practice. Grab a pen and some paper (or some dry-erase supplies), and have fun learning to form letters from top to bottom, left to right. Our handwriting is distinctly ours. As I read a recipe handwritten by my grandma, I picture her clearly and dearly; and I'd recognize my dad's script anywhere. Invest in teaching a bit of handwriting to your students…and help them make their mark on the world!

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