

How Should We Teach Our Children to Write? Cursive First, Print Later!

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

For the last six years or so, I have been lecturing parents at home-school conferences on how to teach the three R's: reading 'riting, and 'rithmetic. I explain in great detail how to teach children to read phonetically through intensive, systematic phonics. But when it comes to writing, I have to explain to a very skeptical audience why cursive writing should be taught first and print later.

I usually start my lecture by asking the parents if they think that their children ought to be taught to write. I explain that many educators now believe that handwriting is really an obsolete art that has been replaced by the typewriter and word processor, and that it is no longer necessary to teach children to write. They imply that if a child wants to learn to write, he or she can do so without the help of any school instruction.

However, I've yet to meet any parents who have been sold on such daring, but questionable, futurist thinking. They all believe that their children should be taught to write. And, of course, I agree with them. After all, no one knows what their children needs will have for good handwriting twenty years hence. Also, you can't carry a two-thousand dollar laptop or a typewriter, everywhere you go. The question then becomes: How shall we teach children to write? And my answer is quite dear: Do not teach your child to print by ball-and-stick, or italic, or Denelian. Teach your child to write a standard cursive script. And the reason why I can say this with confidence is because that's the way I was taught to write in the first grade in a New York City public school back in 1931 when teachers knew what they were doing.

In those days children were not taught to print. We were all taught cursive right off the bat, and the result is that people of my generation generally have better handwriting than those of recent generations. Apparently, cursive first went out of style in the 1940s when the schools adopted ball-and-stick manuscript to go with the new Dick and lane look-say reading programs. Ball-and-stick was part of the new progressive reforms of primary education.

But ball-and-stick has produced a handwriting disaster. Why? Because by the time children are introduced to cursive in the third grade, their writing habits are so fixed that they resent having to learn an entirely new way of writing, the teachers do not have the time to supervise the development of a good cursive script, and the students are usually unwilling to take the time and do the practice needed to develop a good cursive handwriting.

The result is that many youngsters continue to print for the rest of their lives, some develop a hybrid handwriting style consisting of a mixture of print and cursive, and

some do develop a good cursive because they'd always wanted to write cursive and had been secretly practicing it for years without their teachers' or parents' knowledge.

Apparently, all of those schools that introduce cursive in the second or third grade must believe that it has some value, or else why would they teach it at all? The problem is that by requiring the students to learn ball-and-stick first, they create obstacles to the development of a good cursive script.

The reason for teaching ball-and-stick first, we are told, is because first graders do not have the motor skills or muscular dexterity in their fingers to be able to write cursive at that age. But that argument is totally false. Prior to the 1940s virtually all children in public and private schools were taught cursive in the first grade and virtually all learned to write very nicely. All were trained in penmanship and did the various exercises - the ovals, the rainbows, the ups and downs - that helped us develop good handwriting. We were also taught how to hold the writing instrument (or stylus) correctly, cradled between the thumb and the forefinger (also known as the index finger) with the tip of the writing instrument resting on the long finger next to the forefinger, in a very relaxed position, enabling a writer to write for hours without tiring.

On the other hand, when a child is taught to print first, the writing instrument is held straight up with three or four fingers in a tight grip with much pressure being exerted downward on the paper placed in a straight position. When these children are then taught cursive in the second or third grade, they do not change the way they hold the writing instrument because a motor or muscular habit has been established that is not easy to alter. That is why so many children develop poor cursive scripts because of the way they hold their pens. Children do not easily unlearn bad habits. Which is why I tell parents that there are two very important no-no's in primary education: do not teach anything that later has to be unlearned, and do not let a child develop a bad habit. Instruct the child to do it right from the beginning.

How Cursive Helps Reading

A question most often asked by parents when I assert that cursive should be taught first is: won't learning cursive interfere with learning to read printed words? The answer is: not at all. All of us who learned cursive first had no problem learning to read print. In fact it helped us. How? Well, one of the biggest problems children have when learning to read primary-school print and write in ball-and-stick is that so many letters look alike - such as b's and d's; f's and t's; g's, q's, and p's - that children become confused and make many unnecessary reading errors. In cursive, however, there is a big difference between a b and a d. In cursive writing, a b starts like an l while a d begins like writing the letter a. In other words, in cursive, children do not confuse b's and d's, because the movements of the hand make it

impossible to confuse the two letters. And this knowledge acquired by the hand is transferred to the reading process. Thus, learning to write cursive helps learning to read print.

Another aid to reading is that cursive requires children to write from left to right so that the letters will join with one another in proper sequence. The blending of the sounds is made more apparent by the joining of the letters. In ball-and-stick, some children write the letters backwards, and often the spacing is so erratic that you can't tell where one word ends and another begins. Cursive teaches spatial discipline.

Another important benefit of cursive is that it helps the child learn to spell correctly since the hand acquires knowledge of spelling patterns through hand movements that are used again, and again in spelling. This is the same phenomenon that occurs when pianists or typists learn patterns of hand movements through continued repetition.

Another question often asked by mothers of six-year-olds is what will their children do when asked on a job application to "please print." My answer is that I don't advocate not teaching a child to print, I simply say teach cursive first, print later. Besides, that child will have plenty of time to learn to print between the first grade and applying for a job as a teenager.

The Ease of Cursive

I am often asked: "Isn't cursive harder to learn than print?" No. It's just the opposite. It is difficult, if not unnatural, for children to draw straight lines and perfect circles, which is required in ball-and-stick, when they would much rather be doing curves and curls. In fact, all of cursive consists of only three movements: the undercurve, the overcurve, and the up and down. That's all there is to it.

Another important point is that it takes time and supervision to help a child develop a good cursive script, and one has that time in the first grade, not the third grade. The first grade child may start out writing in a large scrawl, but in only a matter of weeks, that scrawl will be controlled by those little fingers into a very nice manageable script. Practice makes perfect, and children should be given practice in writing cursive.

If you've wondered why your grandparents usually have better handwriting than you do; well now, you know the answer. If you teach cursive first, you can always develop a good print style later. But if you teach print first, you may never develop a good cursive style. Thus it is absolutely essential to teach cursive first.

Also, by concentrating on the development of a good cursive handwriting, you eliminate the nonsense of first starting with ball-and-stick, then moving to slant

ball-and-stick, or some other transitional script, finally ending up with cursive. Children will only make the effort to learn one primary way of writing which they will use for the rest of their lives. They don't need to be taught three ways, two of which will be discarded.

Incidentally, I have no objection to children drawing letters on their own when learning the alphabet. But once they start learning to read, formal instruction in cursive should begin.

Cursive Helps the Left-Handed

Also, it may surprise the reader to learn that left-handed children gain special benefits from learning cursive first. When left handed children are taught ball-and-stick first, their tendency is to use the hook position in writing since the stylus is held straight up and the paper is also positioned straight. This means that, as the child proceeds, printing from left to right, the child's arm will cover what has already been written. This can be avoided if the left-handed child learns to write from the bottom up, the way right-handed children write. But this is difficult, if not impossible, to do when printing ball-and-stick.

However, if a left-handed child is taught to write cursive first, he or she must then turn the paper clockwise and must write from the bottom up, since it is impossible to use the hook position if the paper is turned clockwise. Right-handers, of course, turn the paper counter-clockwise. But left-handers are quite capable of developing as good a cursive handwriting as any right-hander by writing from the bottom up. (In fact, the secret of good handwriting may be in the position of the paper.)

All of this must lead to one simple conclusion: teach cursive first and print later. There are few things that help enhance a child's academic self-esteem more than the development of good handwriting. It helps reading, it helps spelling, and because writing is made easy, accurate, and aesthetically pleasant, it helps thinking.
