



## Handwriting is irrelevant

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[JEN GERSON](#)

They couldn't remember how to write the letter "I."

Is it one loop or two? Does the pen start at the top of the squiggle or the bottom? "I forgot how to handwrite," says 18-year-old Kris Tofer Baker, as he mulls over the execution of a "w."

Don't misunderstand. Baker is an intelligent young man. He just hasn't needed to use cursive script since Grade 4.

"I print out or type the majority of my school work."

He's not alone. On the Ryerson and University of Toronto campuses, few students were able to handwrite naturally, when handed a black felt-tipped pen. After some moments of meditation, most remembered, sort of, how to script — although they couldn't remember the last time they needed to.

Computers have turned cursive handwriting into an archaic and unnecessary form of writing. It has been relegated to an era of calling cards and heartfelt love letters crafted by candlelight and fountain pen.

"One of the comments I got back on a test was 'I don't understand what you wrote.' The teacher had told us to handwrite, but you saw, I had trouble with the T. I don't remember what they're supposed to look like," says Ikram Abdi, 19.

Her friend agrees. What need is there to handwrite? "Everything we do is on the computer," says Fatima Nuzhat, 19.

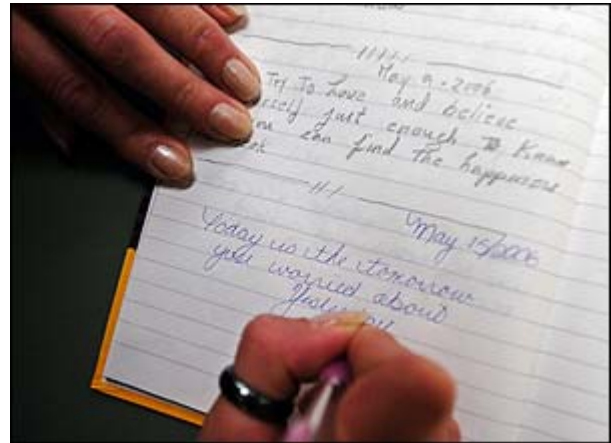
Cursive script is still taught in early elementary school. But distinctive handwriting, the tiny neuromuscular ticks and twitches that form the recognizable style of an individual's script is formed in the late teens and early 20s, says Frank Hicks, a forensic document examiner from California.

"Young people tend to have handwriting with a large amount of variation," he says. "It's still in its formative stages. They still haven't done enough to have fixed the habit."

Anyone with little experience with the calligrapher's pen would, he expects, retain handwriting that has "a wide range of variation ... because they hadn't done much of it."

In other words, too much typing will create a generation of bad scripters. "Teenagers are still experimenting with their handwriting and trying out new things," Hicks says.

The imminent end of cursive, however, is not all QWERTY's fault. "Penmanship skills are not being



Some university students have grown up typing, rather than writing.

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taught properly," says Sargur Srihari, professor of computer science at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He did a computer study that tried to identify age and sex by handwriting samples. Young people, he says, aren't even holding their pens correctly.

Instead, schools are spending time teaching something more practical — keyboarding.

"We did some studies determining age and we did find that handwriting difference between the older and younger people was quite discernable," he says. "Age can be told by the nature of the handwriting."

Srihari is developing a computer program that can objectively analyze handwriting samples to determine their authorship. As a tangent to that research, he said that he has noticed the quality of handwriting become poorer as people come to depend on computers. There are differences in the strokes, connectedness and the slant.

But if an over-reliance on pixels and type is leading to the downfall of ink-connected letters on pulp, no one under the age of 30 seems to be weeping.

"Ninety per cent of my time, I'm usually on the computer," says Amin Khalat, 24, who last joined letters with a pen in Grade 9. "(Handwriting) is not mandatory. Just so long as your writing is legible, it's okay."

Tara Bernard, 18, agrees. "I don't feel I need to handwrite. And when I try to, it doesn't work out."

She can't write quickly enough, and the text turns to scribbles.

"I came here from Africa in Grade 6 and I was never taught how to handwrite," says Shehzad Khan, 17. "Is there any need to handwrite nowadays?"

For note taking and grocery lists, printing seems adequate to the task.

Though Ryerson English professor Jennifer Burwell says that even margin squiggles in notepads are doomed. "More and more students are taking notes on laptops. Writing and printing are becoming more and more irrelevant."

Not that she minds. She only prints as well. "If I could have my students write on a computer and ensure that there is no cheating, I'd do that."

But Toronto-based forensic document examiner Pat Girouard ponders this new trend and remains skeptical. Sure, computers dominate our writing lives. Sure, handwriting seems somewhat anachronistic, but still, cursive seems to be an ironic sacrifice in the digital age.

After all, she says, "printing takes longer (than handwriting) because it's disconnected."

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[ID@thestar.ca](mailto:ID@thestar.ca). But if you feel the need to write a letter in cursive, please send it to I.D. section, 1 Yonge St., Toronto, Ont., M5E 1E6.

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