



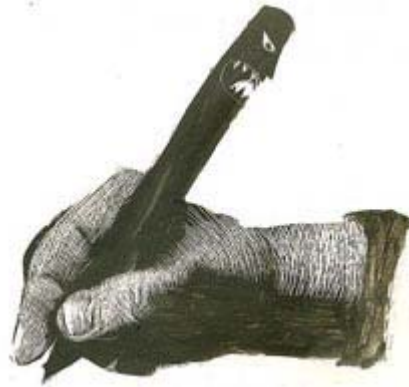
## Tracing the roots of illegible handwriting

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By Peter Leo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

### Can you make this out?

Today we will dwell on the deplorable state of penmanship in a computer-driven world. Let's begin by putting the problem in the most nightmarish terms: If The Morning File came directly from the pen of its author, its contents would be even more incomprehensible, and you poor people would be missing a lot of funny, interesting stuff. Also, I'd be unemployed. Age, the toll of fast note-taking over the years and keyboardism have rendered my writing barely legible. That's a far cry from those halcyon Cold War days with the nuns at Holy Trinity elementary in Hackensack, N.J., where the Palmer Method was enforced with Mafia-like discipline. The result was handwriting of florid conformity, character-free but clear, and, as any Palmerite knows, it was all in the arm, not the fingers. We felt we could compete with Declaration of Independence signers in any given revolution.



Stacy Innerst, Post-Gazette

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### What happened?

Some blame fluoride, but the roots of illegible handwriting, also known as cacography (from the root "kaka"?), can be traced to the mid-1960s, when handwriting disappeared from the elementary-school curriculum, according to the Columbia University News Service. "In third grade, teaching handwriting comes to an end," says Steve Graham, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University. In his survey, nine out of 10 elementary school teachers said they felt unprepared to teach handwriting.

Katrina Erickson of Handwriting Without Tears, a national program, said schools have shifted away from the intensive penmanship drills of previous eras. By third grade, when cursive is usually introduced, most educators are focused on building up students' skills in reading and math -- not reviewing penmanship.



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## Killer handwriting

Kate Gladstone, a handwriting instructor from Albany, N.Y., teaches doctors, whose lousy penmanship can kill. In seminars, Ms. Gladstone asks physicians to write a prescription and exchange it with their neighbor. "They usually cannot decipher it," she said.

In 1999, a ground-breaking lawsuit drew national attention to the implications of doctors' handwriting when a cardiologist was fined \$225,000 by a Texas jury. A prescription he had scrawled for Isordil, a drug for heart pain, was misread by the pharmacist as Plendil, used for high blood pressure. The patient took an overdose of the wrong medication and died of a heart attack.

Medication errors resulted in more than 7,000 American deaths in 1999, although how many involved bad handwriting isn't clear. A study by Trinity College in Dublin in 2003 concluded that 5 percent of doctors had illegible handwriting. With 3.6 billion prescriptions written last year and so many drugs with similar names, more and more physicians are turning to handwriting courses, Columbia reports. Extra incentive: Six states have passed legislation making doctors' illegible handwriting a fineable offense.

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## What a method

If there was a Hall of Fame for penmanship, A. N. Palmer (1860-1927) would hold a prominent place. Observing railway clerks, he saw that the most swift and tireless penmen appeared to keep the arm on the desk at all times and formed their letters with little or no motion of the fingers. Mr. Palmer focused on " ... the movement of the muscles of the arm from the shoulder to the wrist, while keeping the fleshy portion of the arm just forward of the elbow [held] stationery on the desk. This movement should be used in all capitals and in all small letters, except the extended stem and loop, where a slight extension and contraction of the fingers holding the pen is permissible."

Palmer's method caught the fancy of an order of nuns, the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, whose mother house is in Monroe, Mich. With his teachings in textbook form, the Palmer Method grew at an astonishing rate beginning in 1900. In 1912, a million copies were sold. While Palmer had wide acceptance in Catholic schools, he had a harder time with the public schools, but did get a foothold in New York City. At his death in 1927, more than 25 million Americans had learned writing from the Palmer Method of Penmanship. And many more, after he passed on to the Great Classroom in the Sky. (From [zanerian.com](http://zanerian.com).)



## Overheard

"Once while riding a bus in Pittsburgh during an NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] convention, the driver asked what I did for a living. When I replied, 'I direct a writing program,' he responded with a question, 'Do you use the Palmer Method?' " (*Found on Arizona State University forum for university creative writing programs.*)



## A nation of Palmer methodists

Tamara Plakins Thornton, author of "Handwriting in America: A Cultural History," views the proliferation of the Palmer Method in the early 20th century as a way to develop well-behaved citizens and help immigrants assimilate. Legibility wasn't a major goal. "The penmanship drill became an exercise in conformity, and that's what [educators] thought would be a good idea," Thornton, an American history professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo, told the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

"Some of them went so far as to say if you can learn to follow orders in a penmanship drill, then when you go to work on the factory floor, you'll do what you're told." That began to change during the Great Depression. Up until then, most schools taught students to write only in cursive, which is still thought to be faster than print. Educators championed the change. With the introduction of print, even children as young as 5 or 6 could form legible letters. That meant children could learn handwriting to communicate their ideas rather than just obey commands -- a shift Thornton praises.

"I can't get nostalgic about [penmanship]. I'd much rather my children be great keyboarders than great writers. As long as it's legible, it's good enough."



## Don't worry, be sloppy

Some educators, like Vanderbilt's Steve Graham, disagree with Thornton. He worries that schools are not giving handwriting the attention it deserves. "It is not cursive that is critical, but being able to fluently and legibly write," he said. "If everyone had computers and were able to do all their writing on them, this would not be essential."

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* makes the same point: Young people, in particular, can't keyboard their way through life. Sloppy handwriting can hurt academic and SAT performance. Students must still have decent enough handwriting to write essays for tests, fill out school forms or job applications, hand in legible homework and take notes in class that they'll be able to decipher later.



## Helpful hints

Elements of good handwriting -- from how to hold a pencil correctly to how to properly form letters -- must be carefully taught, say the impeccable writers at Handwriting Without Tears. For proper pencil positioning, they recommend this trick: Set your pencil on the table, point facing toward you. Grasp it with your thumb and forefinger and flip the top up toward you. The pencil rests against your middle finger, but should be held primarily with your forefinger and thumb. Although that is the ideal grip, experts says, parents shouldn't worry about their child's pencil grip unless it's affecting their writing or it causes the child pain.



## **An imprint of the self**

Stuart Jeffries excerpted from The Guardian:

"The Sumerians used a stylus and wet clay to record the ingredients for beer. The endlessly inventive outpouring of human writing thus grew out of commercial necessity. Since then, the history of writing is one of a virulent spread of the written word, such as India's 200 different scripts, or Japanese which has three scripts and thousands of characters. In Britain, Latin handwriting styles were popularized in the first writing manual in the 1570s. Only in the 1930s was the semi-cursive or joined-up style known as round hand developed. Most schools now teach a variant of this.

"Today, Latin script's global dominance is intensified not just by the global stranglehold of English but because of computers. Times New Roman is everywhere because it is Microsoft's default typeface. Writing and handwriting have grown apart. If that is the case, what is the future for handwriting? What, really, is the point of teaching our children to write, when most writing can be word processed and voice recognition technology can turn speech into text?

"A persuasive argument is surely that, as students learn this skill, they are building other developmental skills such as sequential memory and fine motor ability. There is also a strong aesthetic argument: We shouldn't neglect the sheer beauty of which handwriting is capable. As Professor Rosemary Sassoon, author of 'Handwriting: The Way to Teach It,' says: 'Handwriting is an imprint of the self on the page.'

"Perhaps handwriting's obituary has been typed too soon."

So, six thousand years on from its Sumerian origins, handwriting remains a human art form with a promising future.

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