

BENEFITS OF CURSIVE WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

TOP 10 REASONS WHY

1. Improved neural connections in the brain. Cursive handwriting stimulates the brain in ways that typing cannot. It improves the dynamic interplay of the left and right cerebral hemispheres, helps build neural pathways, and increases mental effectiveness. According to Virginia Berninger, a researcher and professor of educational psychology at the University of Washington, "Pictures of brain activity have illustrated that sequential finger movements used in handwriting activated massive regions of the brain involved in thinking, language, and working memory. Handwriting differs from typing because it requires executing sequential finger strokes to form a letter, whereas keyboarding only involves touching a key."

2. Increased ability to read cursive. Learning to write in cursive improves a student's ability to read cursive. Many high school students cannot read cursive. They are cursively illiterate in their own language.

3. Increased speed. The connectivity of a simple cursive style is faster to write than the stop and start strokes of printing.

4. Improved fine motor skills. "Cursive handwriting naturally develops sensory skills. Through repetition the child begins to understand how much force needs to be applied to the pencil and paper, the positioning of the pencil to paper at the correct angle, and motor planning to form each letter in fluid motion from left to right. This physical and spatial awareness allows them to write, but more importantly, builds the neural foundation of sensory skills needed for a myriad of everyday tasks such as buttoning, fastening, tying shoes, picking up objects, copying words from blackboards, and most importantly, reading. To quote first-century Roman writer, Marcus Quintilianus, 'too slow a hand impedes the mind,' and we cannot afford to have our children be any slower." Cutting Cursive, The Real Cost. Candace Meyer, Minds-in-Motion, Inc.

5. Improved continuity and fluidity of written communication. Cursive handwriting involves connecting letters, which has been shown to increase both speed of writing and attention span during writing. This increases continuity and fluidity in writing, which in turn encourages greater amounts of writing.

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6. Ease of learning. Printing is more difficult due to the frequent stop and start motion when forming letters. In addition, some printed letters look similar and are easily reversed, like the 'b' and 'd', which is often confusing to children. This is of particular value to children with learning challenges like Dyslexia and A.D.D.

7. Improves reading and spelling ability. When printing, some children write so erratically that it is difficult to determine where one word ends and another begins. Cursive, on the other hand, requires children to write from left to right so that the letters will join in proper sequence; therefore, it is easier to read. It also aids with spelling through the connectivity of the letters. This helps the child to see words as a whole instead of seeing separate letters (as in printing). Additionally, the hand acquires knowledge of spelling patterns through movements that are used repeatedly in spelling. This is the same phenomenon that occurs when pianists or typists learn patterns of hand movements through continued repetition.

8. Self-discipline. Cursive handwriting is complex, and is inherently associated with the development of fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination. Learning cursive prompts children to also develop self-discipline, which is a useful skill in all areas of life.

9. Higher quality signature. Cursive handwriting can improve the attractiveness, legibility, and fluidity of one's signature.

10. Increased self-confidence. The ability to master the skill to write clearly and fluidly improves the student's confidence to communicate freely with the written word.

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Biological

Hand-eye coordination is a major developmental feature. If you Google “developmental benefits of learning cursive” you will find numerous blog and news posts that emphasize the developmental benefits of learning cursive.

Whatever inherited level of sensory-motor coordination people may have, they can always improve on it with practice. Most parents observe this when teaching a child to throw and catch a ball. Think about what is going on in the brain as such learning progresses. The brain is creating new circuitry to evaluate what is seen, the speed of what is seen, the movements required, and the speed and timing of movements. This circuitry becomes a lasting part of the brain. This circuitry can be recruited for use in other hand-eye coordination tasks. That helps to explain why so many student athletes can play more than one sport.

Learning to write by hand has these same features, plus of course there is a thinking element involved that does not occur with simple throw and catch movements. The thinking level is magnified in cursive because the specific hand-eye coordination requirements are different for every letter in the alphabet. Moreover, in handwriting the movements are continuously variable, which is much more mentally demanding than making single strokes, as in printing A, E, F, H, and so on. Even so, because cursive letters are more distinct than printed letters, children may learn to read more easily, especially dyslexics.

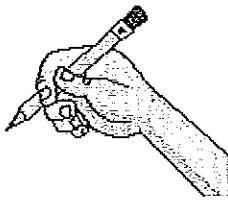
Handwriting dynamically engages widespread areas of both cerebral hemispheres. Virginia Berninger, a researcher and professor of educational psychology at the University of Washington, says that brain scans during handwriting show activation of massive regions of the brain involved in thinking, language, and working memory.³

Learning to type makes little demand on the brain: you just have to punch a key. Learning to touch type (typing without looking at the keys) is mentally demanding, and I encourage that kind of teaching too. One should not be taught at the expense of the other.

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Psychological

I think that attitude and motivation have the greatest impact on a child's success in school. This conclusion is supported by a lot of research literature and anecdotes from teachers. Both are affected by what the child genuinely believes about his capabilities to learn. As a child learns to master academic challenges, self-confidence emerges and provides a drive to learn more because the child knows that achievement is possible. Learning cursive is an easy way for a child to discover important tactics for learning as well as the emotional benefit of being able to master a task.



I am assuming here that cursive is still taught the way I learned it over 50 years ago. First, the child is taught how to hold a pencil, a relaxed but firm grip where the pencil is held with more or less equal pressure from the thumb and the first two fingers. I see kids these days hold pencils in all sorts of scrunched-up, awkward and hard-to-control ways. Then they are shown how to engage the whole arm in writing movements, not just trying to control all movements with the fingers. I think this important because the motor cortex has such discrete control over fingers that the brain is constantly being confused by all the various options for drawing segments of a letter. Letting the arm participate reduces the cognitive load over finger control. Handwriting becomes easier to generate, less tiresome, and eventually more attractive. There may well be other effective mechanical approaches, but in any case, these have to be mastered first, otherwise the student may become frustrated.

Key principles of learning and memory are embedded in learning to hand write. First, the child learns just one letter at a time. The student is shown a cursive letter and asked to duplicate it. The feedback is immediate. The child sees in one eye fixation both the ideal and the child's version. The child then tries again, and again sees immediately the comparison between the ideal and their current state of skill. With each attempt, the child learns without being told or scolded, how much improvement is occurring. Progress is all under the child's control. The child knows it, and also knows that better results can occur with each thoughtful attempt. The child learns to pay more attention (which in itself is a crucial skill in this age of multi-tasking). The child starts to take ownership over the effort. This is the same thing that happens when children draw pictures. Here, they are drawing pictures of letters and they get to do it where they know what the standard of excellence is and they get to privately assess how well they are doing. Cursive is an art form. If you believe art is important, you just have to support cursive teaching.

Since, reproducing a single letter is rather easy, the child knows that success is obtainable. Positive feedback, instant and specific, comes from the very act itself.

Without realizing it, children learning cursive are also learning self-discipline. I can't think of any school task more important than that.

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As each letter is mastered, the child says "I can do this! I can even do this better!" Then it is just a matter of moving on to mastery of the next letter and eventually to the relatively easy task of joining letters. Maybe the best emotional boost of all is when children learn they have acquired this skill on their own. All the teacher did was show them how to hold and move a pencil and show them the objective. Nobody force-fed this new skill into their brain. They did it themselves.

I might add that once a child learns cursive they no longer have to feel embarrassed over their ignorance at not being able to read notes from Grandma

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The teaching of handwriting has a low priority among educators these days. They believe that handwriting is passé and that in the future everyone will be using word processors to do their writing. But have you noticed how easy it is to make errors when writing an email?

Homeschooling parents can be quite confused by the subject of handwriting. So whenever I lecture at a homeschool convention on the second R, I always ask by a show of hands if parents think that handwriting should be formally taught. Usually the response is unanimously positive. "So you agree that teaching your child to write is an important part of your homeschooling curriculum." The next question I raise is: "If you believe that handwriting should be formally taught, do you believe that your child should be taught manuscript - also known as "ball-and-stick" - first or cursive first?" Most parents assume that ball-and-stick should precede cursive, because that's the way they were taught in school. Besides, it is supposed to be easier that way.

But then I tell them that when I went to primary school in the 1930s, like their grandparents, we were all taught cursive handwriting, or what was then known as penmanship, using pens dipped in real ink. That was before ballpoint pens were invented. We were actually taught in the first grade that there was a correct way to hold a pen so that we would be able write with ease and facility without tiring. Thus, in those ancient days, an important part of the primary curriculum was the development of good handwriting, and we were given plenty of drill to make that possible.

This surprises most parents who assume that print script always preceded cursive writing. But when I tell them otherwise, I then have to explain why cursive should precede print script and not vice versa.

If you teach a child to print for the first two years, that child develops writing habits that will become permanent. Thus when you try to get your child to switch to cursive in the third year, you will find resistance to learning a whole new way of writing. That child may continue to print for the rest of his or her life. Some children develop a hybrid handwriting consisting of a mixture of both print and cursive. That seems to have become the dominant form of writing in America. And there are those children who develop a good cursive handwriting because they've always wanted to and practiced it secretly on the side.

Thus, experience clearly indicates that if you teach ball-and-stick first, your child may never develop a decent cursive handwriting, while if you teach cursive first, your child can always learn to print very nicely later on. In other words, cursive first and print later makes good developmental sense.

An important and frequently overlooked benefit is that cursive helps a child learn to read. With ball-and-stick it is very easy to confuse b's and d's. But with cursive, a b starts like an l, and a d starts like an a. The distinction that children make in writing the letters in cursive carries over to the reading process. In addition, in writing print script, the letters may be all over the page, sometimes written from left to right and from right to left. In cursive, where all of the letters connect, the child learns directional discipline. This helps in learning to spell, for how the letters join with one another creates habits of hand movement that automatically aid the spelling process.

Of course, your child should also be taught to print. That can easily be done after your child has developed a good cursive handwriting. Another important benefit of cursive first is if your child is left-handed. A right-handed individual tilts the paper counter-clockwise in order to give one's handwriting the proper slant. With the left-handed child, the paper must be tilted in an extreme clockwise position so that the child can write from the bottom up. If the paper is not tilted clockwise, the left-handed child may want to use the hook form of writing. This usually happens when the child is taught ball-and-stick first with the paper in a straight up position.