

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 homeschool conferences on how to teach the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. 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 I explain that many educators now believe that handwriting is really an obsolete art that has been replaced by the typewriter and word processor, and that it is no longer necessary to teach children to write.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 needs their children 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 D'nealian. 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.

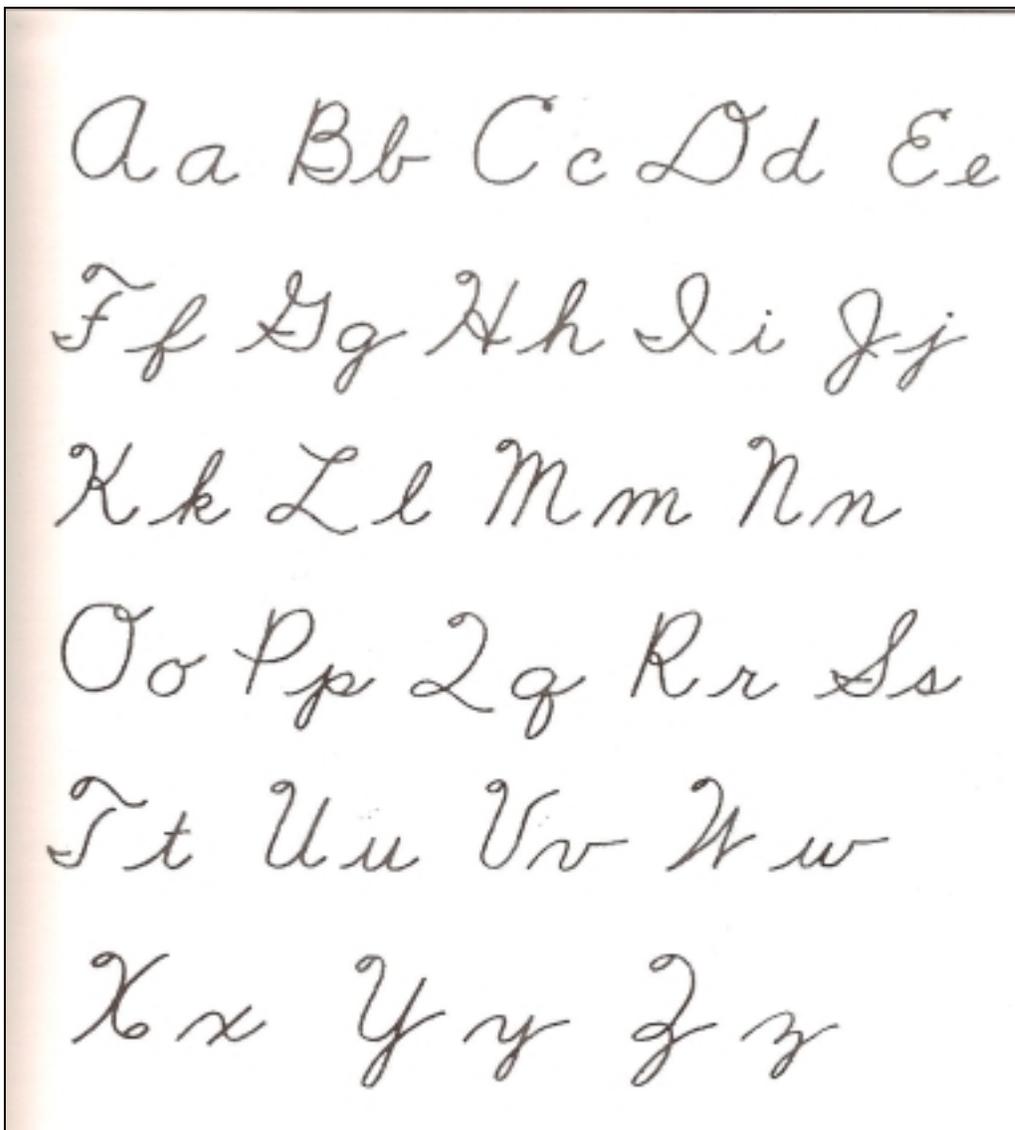
However, if a left-handed child is taught to write cursive first, he or she must then turn the paper clockwise and must write from the bottom up, since it is impossible to use the hook position if the paper is turned clockwise. Right-handers, of course, turn the paper counter-clockwise. But left-handers 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 esthetically pleasant, it helps thinking.

As Francis Bacon once said: "Reading maketh a full man. . . and writing an exact man."

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Cursive Alphabet Style Recommended by Dr. Sam Blumenfeld



Addendum A

Should people with dysgraphia use cursive writing instead of printing?

For many children with dysgraphia, cursive writing has several advantages. It eliminates the necessity of picking up a pencil and deciding where to place it after each letter. Each letter starts on the line, thus eliminating another potentially confusing decision for the writer. Cursive also has very few reversible letters, a typical source of trouble for people with dysgraphia. It eliminates word-spacing problems and gives words a flow and rhythm that enhances learning. For children who find it difficult to remember the motor patterns of letter forms, starting with cursive eliminates the traumatic transition from manuscript to cursive writing. Writers in cursive also have more opportunity to distinguish b, d, p, and q because the cursive letter formations for writing each of these letters is so different. (Excerpt from an article on handwriting problems on The *International Dyslexia Association* web site, www.interdys.org. The fact sheet is by Diana Hanbury King and is the summary of work by Ruthmary Deuel, M.D., Betty Sheffield, and Diana Hanbury King.)

ADDENDUM B

*From Teaching Language-Deficient Children:
Theory and Application of the Association Method for Multisensory Teaching*
by N. Etoile Dubard and Maureen K. Martin
Educators Publishing Service,
Cambridge, Ma. 1994, pp. 47f

Cursive Script

Another distinctive feature is the use of cursive writing from the beginning level and throughout the entire program (McGinnis 1963). The rationale for using cursive writing is that it gives the child a way of knowing that the letters for which he/she learned speech production can be arranged to become a word representing a thing. Manuscript does not offer such a means of informing the child that certain parts form a whole. The normal child's central nervous system adequately processes information so that this awareness exists. In aphasic and other children with language learning disabilities, the processing is not adequate to the task. Almost all of the professional literature related to children with learning difficulties indicates there are common reversals, inversions, and confusions regarding such written patterns as *b/d*, *d./g*, *m/w*, and *saw/was*, etc. While cursive script may not eliminate all difficulties, it helps reduce them. The fact that some schools for the deaf have employed cursive writing from the beginning of the instructional program indicates that the merits of cursive writing over manuscript have been recognized.

Heyman (1977) promoted cursive writing in this way:

Mastering cursive writing has many benefits for special children. It permits the child to see each word as an integral unit, helps solve spatial problems for stu-

dents who run all words together, and eliminates serious letter reversal He learns immediately that in cursive writing letters are not isolated, but are always connected to form words. (106)

Stasio (1976) reported these results from a study on severely and profoundly retarded children:

1. Children functioning at a severely and profoundly retarded level could use cursive letters more effectively than they could manuscript.
2. When using cursive letters, less errors were made In right-to-left direction than with printed letters.
3. There were less errors made in letter reversal among cursive letters than with printed ones. (55)

In relation to his own teaching experiences, Stasio also reported that:

I noticed in printing the letter A a child must use three different motions as well as relocate the starting point of the printed letter in order to complete it. In cursive writing the A can be formed in one continuous motion. This continuous motion is related to all cursive letters except for the letters t and x, which require the child to remove his pencil from the paper twice. But this does not involve relocating any given point to complete the letter. When writing the printed alphabet, a child has to remove his pencil from the paper and relocate the starting points no less than 55 times. (55)

In a study conducted with profoundly deaf children, Martin (1987) found a significant difference in the children's recognition of cursive letters and words over the same in manuscript.

Serio (1968, 67-68) promoted the use of cursive for these reasons: (1) the rhythm involved in cursive writing lends itself to a more efficient use of movement, (2) proper pacing is aided in the writing of words, (3) a single method approach eliminates the problem of retraining, and (4) the forms of individual letters in cursive writing seem to be more independent of confusion due to directionality. Early (1973, 105) suggested that with the use of cursive writing "the child more readily experiences the total form or shape of a given word as he monitors the kinesthetic feedback from his writing movements."

When implementing the Association Method, the letter formations of cursive script should be as simple as the teacher is able to produce. Simple, clear letter formation which restricts the use of unnecessary loops and carefully avoids fancy letters will reduce the possibility of confusion which might stem from known or undetected visual perceptual differences. Children are taught to read print. The time at which this is begun varies according to their needs and abilities. Concern that the children may encounter difficulty in learning to read manuscript later is unjustified. Many teachers using the procedures have reported that their pupils made transitions from reading cursive to manuscript without any difficulties. Prior to 1925, it was common practice to teach cursive writing exclusively in regular education classrooms. This did not hinder the development of reading manuscript.

Bibliography for the *Association Method* Cursive Article

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ADDENDUM C

What is it about Cursive?

by Randy Nelson of *Peterson Directed Handwriting*

If you are 7 or 8 years old you are probably experimenting with cursive handwriting. Most second graders would gladly give their bubble gum to a “big kid” who would show them how to do it. What is it about cursive that is so compelling for children? Why does a toddler, still shaky with walking, insist on crawling up the stairs?

The two questions really are related. Cursive handwriting offers the same irresistible challenge to a grade school child as the stairs offer to our crawler.

Actually, the challenge of cursive writing continues to entice people well beyond those early years. Why is it that so many schools seem to ignore the student interest? Are school policy makers right? Are handwriting lessons no longer deserving of priority in the school curriculum?

At some point each parent and teacher will need to decide on a course of action. Our students are expected to be able to use handwriting every day. Here is some food for thought from someone who has spent over twenty years as a handwriting specialist while doing research on teaching techniques for handwriting skills.

Cursive handwriting offers huge advantages over print writing for practical communication - such as showing what you have learned from yesterday’s science lesson. However, this is only true when a person has learned the skills necessary to use it easily. This means it is more accurate to say that it *should* offer great advantages. It fits the way our muscles work for fluent handwriting – *and fluency should be the real objective, no matter what the style of letterform.*

A Bit of History

When the tools for writing were pointed nibs affixed to the end of sticks and feathers cut to become quill pens, the cursive advantage was actually a necessity. These tools readily produced blotches instead of strokes when a little downward pressure was applied. Cursive shapes were produced by sliding the pen sideways. Our cursive alphabets were an ingenious design allowing us to take advantage of the tools of the time. Without them our Nation’s effort to educate the masses might well have failed.

However, each student had to develop a certain degree of physical skill to use the tools with any success. The invention of the pencil changed things dramatically. Inkwells, blotters and nib pens disappeared and the effort for physical skill development was pretty much forgotten as teachers discovered that the pencil allowed kids to function with little physical training. The advantage of cursive slipped away, along with the physical skill for fluency, as the penmanship effort was slowly eliminated from the school curriculum.

The print alphabets were introduced in our schools after the pencil was available. At the time, it was decided that the shape of print letters, very much like those blocks of type used by printers, offered an advantage for learning to read. Children had no trouble learning to draw these letters with the pencil but the task would have been impossible with a nib pen. All of the movements used were downward - a direct route to blotch city.

Does Cursive Offer an Advantage Today?

Student interest aside, are there good reasons to teach cursive today? There are a number of reading specialists who are now convinced that **cursive should be taught in the beginning**. They believe that it offers advantages over print writing for reading skill development. However, they and most of the publishers of handwriting books, do not give much attention to fluency as an objective. They simply provide a means for allowing children to learn how to draw letters. Physical training is not really considered so they have not noticed the brain research focused on physical learning.

Which is it, print or cursive?

An understanding of the actual difference between print and cursive will be helpful. It is not what most people think - joining versus not joining. The difference between cursive and print styles lies in the **movements used to create the forms** (start point and directionality). The difference between the two lies in the production *process*.

It means the decision you face is not really a simple choice of letter shape. What we want and need is fluency. We want our child to be able to use handwriting as a tool - put thoughts on paper quickly and easily. What you really need to decide is which *process* will be best.

Fluency without legibility however, is not the goal. Ask the MD or hospital where audits of unreadable patient files and prescriptions present a serious problem.

There is surprising research indicating that the challenge offered by the motor learning activities, actually helps the brain learn how to get its various structures to work together more efficiently as it processes symbolic language.

A Process for Fluent Legibility

Fluent handwriting is accomplished with a special kind of movement controlled mostly by an internal model residing in the brain. While visual feedback, an external mechanism, does play a part, it is not the main character. As movement patterns for letters and words are internalized, the writer can rely less on the external system and fluency improves due to the special kind of movement.

The fact is, there must be a lateral movement between letters because our language moves from left to right. When the pen is touching the page it causes a stroke no matter what the “style” of letter. When we write fluently we tend to eliminate lifts - the style of letter has little to do with it. Joined print can be difficult to read because print letters are not designed for joining. The extra strokes detract from legibility. With cursive forms, designed for joining, the lateral strokes enhance legibility.

Joining is the “nonvisual advantage” of the cursive style. It lends well to more fluent production because there is less demand for visual feedback to control spacing and size. With practice, responsibility for these qualities of legibility are transferred to the internal model and its special fluent movement.

There is surprising research indicating that the challenge offered by the motor learning activities, actually helps the brain learn how to get its various structures to work together more efficiently as it processes symbolic language.

Another simple advantage also makes sense. Six controlled movements are required to produce legible lowercase print forms. The lowercase cursive alphabet is produced with just three movements. Wouldn't you think that three would be easier to control than six?

There is one fact that educators and parents should recognize. A child who learns how to use the internal control system effectively will have a powerful advantage when it comes to using our symbolic language as a tool for learning. The right kind of handwriting lesson offers the kind of motor-learning activity that stimulates the brain to build pathways for better reading, writing and yes, even keyboarding.

Fluency is the real need. When choosing materials for teaching, look at the *process*. How does the program help you to teach fluency? If lessons consist of *trace and copy* on student pages, **fluency is not addressed**.

If your child is not reading as well as you would like, teach fluency using handwriting lessons designed for that goal. You will be surprised how easy it is. Contact the author toll free at: 1-888-329-1595, or by email to Rand Nelson <mrpencil@peterson-handwriting.com>.

References:

(From Endangered Minds) Dr. Jerre Levy to Dr. Healy: “*I suspect that the normal human brains are built to be challenged and it is only in the face of an adequate challenge that normal bihemispheric brain operations are engaged.*” Dr. Levy goes on to say: “*...children need a linguistic (auditory) environment that is coordinated with the visual environment they are experiencing.*”

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Contact Peterson Directed Handwriting, Rand Nelson <mrpencil@peterson-handwriting.com>. See “John and Jane are bright. Why can't they write?” Find the link on our Information Directory at www.peterson-handwriting.com

Note by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter, Odessa, TX

February 24, 2006

Having successfully taught Dr. Samuel Blumenfeld's intensive phonics program, *Alpha-Phonics*, and his excellent companion cursive handwriting program in *How to Tutor*, I can testify to the practical wisdom of his essay "Cursive First."

I was taught cursive handwriting in first grade by Mrs. Pearl Monroe at the Cass Union Elementary School in southern Indiana back in 1953. She was also my father's first-grade teacher. She carefully taught us how to hold our pen correctly and write with a light grip and good flowing motion that made writing a most pleasant activity. I never used manuscript until I was required to teach it when I began teaching second grade in 1990. All of my high school and college notes are in highly legible cursive and written with a fountain pen. I used to joke about how everyone had a lump on their finger because they gripped the pen as if it were going to get away from them. I have always been able to write for hours without tiring.

When I taught second-grade bilingual, I always taught my students to write cursive using Sam's program, which is practically identical to the one I learned in first-grade. My students loved learning to write cursive. I wrote no manuscript on the blackboard. I teach cursive from the marker board **without** the use of workbooks.

For more valuable essays by Dr. Samuel Blumenfeld, visit the Education Page of my web site, www.donpotter.net.

The **new version** of Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* has just been published. If you would like to purchase a copy, please send a check for \$29.95 plus \$3.50 shipping and handling (total: \$33.45) to Sam Blumenfeld, 73 Bishops Forest Drive, Waltham, MA 02452. Please mention the **donpotter.net** web site on your order.

I have taught the *Herman Dyslexia* method which insists that cursive handwriting is a very helpful in curing or preventing dyslexia.

I would like to note that Sam's *Alpha-Phonics* program is excellent for practicing cursive handwriting because the students practice writing the same forms repeatedly until they become automated thanks to the fact that the program is organized largely by spelling-families. Even if a child learned to read with another phonics program, *Alpha-Phonics* would be a good follow-up for both spelling and cursive handwriting practice.

The *Peterson Handwriting Company* has a fine cursive handwriting program that pays particular attention to handwriting fluency: www.peterson-handwriting.com

Historical Note: Cursive handwriting was brought to the United States from English in 1922 by Marjorie Wise, a specialist in teaching handwriting. She was the first to teach that ball-and-stick should be taught before cursive. (Don Potter).

Addendum B added 9/3/06.

Addendum C added 1/2/07