



LAMBERT—ARCHIVE PHOTOS

Practice, practice: Penmanship circa 1959, 12 rules to write by (below)

I D E A S

Call the Script Doctor

Have Americans forgotten how to write by hand?

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

DAN LAUFER, A FIFTH GRADER AT the Walker Upper Elementary School in Charlottesville, Va., is the son of one of America's few remaining penmanship teachers. To please her, he writes in cursive script exactly three times a year—on the cards he gives her for her birthday, Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. Otherwise he laboriously prints letter-by-letter everything that he writes by hand, and uses a computer for the rest. He was taught cursive back in third grade, and he remembers seeing the illustrations of correct penmanship on the wall in fourth, but, like most of his friends, he doesn't use cursive now and has no plans to in the future. "I'm not really comfortable with it," he admits.

Once the outward show of a graceful personality, cursive script has landed on society's discard pile, done in by the technological assaults of the typewriter, the sloppiness-inducing ballpoint pen and now the computers that have found their way into 40 percent of American homes. "Penmanship today pretty much stops at the printing level," says Rose Matousek of the American Association of Handwriting Analysts. In pockets of the country, like

computer-philic Silicon Valley, printing has actually overtaken cursive writing, according to Dorothy Hodos, a San Jose-based handwriting analyst. Elsewhere in the country, her colleagues report, print and cursive are in a virtual dead heat. Only 15 percent of all handwritten addresses received by the post office are written in cursive script nowadays, according to Fargur Srihari, a SUNY Buffalo engineer who helped design the automated system that tries to read it. Another 15 percent are hand-printed, and the rest are a mixture of the two. Even the signature is now being printed about 10 percent of the time, says handwriting analyst Dr. Willa Smith, based on her survey of 58 writing samples at the University of South Florida.

Some graphologists, who supposedly can discern what handwriting reveals about character, grumble that the shift reveals a national switch from altruism to narcissism. Unlike the interconnected cursive let-

ters, the separate printed ones consist of vertical strokes that, as one graphologist put it, "all return to the self." More likely, the devolution back to printing reflects the time pressures in the nation's classrooms. Schools still teach cursive, usually the bare-bones style called D'Nealian, but they rarely make time to practice it the old-fashioned way with copybooks and constant repetition. "The curriculum is too crowded," says Marilyn Astore, director of the center for elementary-school programs in Sacramento County, Calif., "and the demands on teachers these days are horrific."

With so many adults printing like grade schoolers, the nation's handwriting speed is slowing to a crawl, but there have been no discernible gains in legibility. Despite considerable improvements, the postal service's automated systems still kick out 60 percent of the handwritten addresses because they are indecipherable. Larger post offices now send images of the messy addresses for specialists to eyeball at 50 Remote Encoding Centers around the country. Still, 10 million pieces of mail a year end up at the dead-letter office because neither machine nor man can make out the handwriting. Perhaps they were written by doctors. One study reported that 58 percent of the information on hospital charts is illegible, and, according to Charles B. Inlander's "Medicine on Trial," pharmacists have to call for clarification on up to 20 percent of all hospital medication orders. Did the doctor order, say, the antihistamine Seldane or the anti-inflammatory Feldene?

Laptops: In an effort to restore a little clarity to the personal touch that handwriting always used to provide, several software companies are now offering "handwritten"

fonts that are based on users' penmanship samples. And now that standardized tests for college entrance are starting to require essays, readable cursive script may make a comeback, since no one wants to risk a college rejection by wasting time block-lettering an exam. Then again, laptops, which are already popping up in upscale schools, may soon replace the number-2 pencil in exam rooms as well.

In some quarters, the pen itself has already become so detached from any useful purpose that it has been re-

duced to a fashion item. The venerable firm A.T. Cross now sells its \$350 Lapis Lazuli fountain pen in jewelry stores. "It's a personal accessory," explains product manager Robin Dorman, "like a handbag or a belt buckle." Now, if only the writing were as pretty as the pen. ■

1. Form
2. Slant
3. Spacing
4. Margins
5. Neatness
6. Organization
7. Arrangement
8. Balance
9. Fluency
10. Judgment
11. Precision
12. Accuracy

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