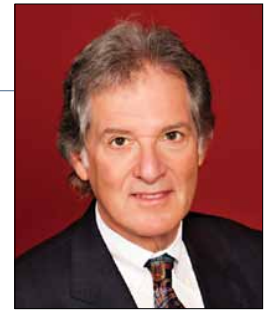


# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



## *The Cursing of Cursive*

"My two fingers on a typewriter have never connected with my brain. My hand on a pen does. A fountain pen, of course."—Graham Greene

A new debate is gaining momentum in blogs and even publications as respectable as the *New York Times* (see "The Case for Cursive" by Katie Zezima, published April 27, 2011) and the *Wall Street Journal* (see "The Handwriting Is on the Wall" by Theodore Dalrymple, published July 9, 2011). Indiana became the first state in which teaching cursive is no longer required in elementary schools, with other states sure to follow. For those of you who have already forgotten, cursive is simply handwriting in which each of the letters is connected to make it quicker to write words and sentences, unlike the more cumbersome (albeit often more legible) block printing. Cursive dates back to ancient Greece, and over the centuries was used to write historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address.

The obvious argument against continuing to teach cursive is that children today don't need to write; they text and Twitter, use keyboards not chalkboards. All that they need to know how to write is their signature, which is, more often than not, illegible.

So why do I defend such an archaic process? The arguments fall into the practical and the creative. Regarding the former, it is harder to forge cursive than block letters. It would put all of those handwriting experts out of business (are there any left other than on *CSI*?). Writing helps with the development of fine motor skills. Cursive also retains a sense of history.

Over the years, there have been attempts to standardize handwriting, such as the Spencerian and Palmer methods. However, it is the individuality of handwriting that provides some of the greatest support for continuing to educate our children in cursive. Cursive can be quite aesthetic and creative. It reflects the uniqueness of an individual. Whereas my initial introduction to penmanship began in elementary school, it flourished in medical school. One method I used to study was to write questions on one side of an index card (3" x 5" piece of somewhat firm paper, with or without lines, also gone from school bags) and the answers on the other. Thus, I would quiz myself on all the biochemical equations, anatomy, etc. Thousands of cards later I became terribly bored with my handwriting, so I purchased two inexpensive

Osmiroid pens with italic nibs and retaught myself to write. I admit, I took it to an excess with my handwritten progress notes, the heading in black italic (who remembers S.O.A.P.?), the text in brown.

To this day, not only do I collect fountain pens, which I fill from a bottle, but I even keep a supply of ink with me when I travel. I maintain this practice even while using a keyboard quite proficiently (having learned to type on a Royal, with white correction paper for all the typos).

The process of writing takes longer than typing, but you are creating something that is distinct from the result of merely hammering on little keys, creating sub-words (the gibberish of all those abbreviations that permeate our lives through Tweets and even within my fellows' progress notes, which have replaced the shorthand that my grandmother knew). Indeed, when writing a manuscript, I often stall on the computer only to find a new approach after I have printed it off and am making my comments and corrections in "longhand." It forces me to think beyond the simple editorial corrections, and to begin creating again.

My fear is that the world of my granddaughter will be devoid of real writing and real books (you can't Pat the Bunny on an iPad). A consequence of all the electronic communication is that language itself may change, thus losing so much of what it takes to share thoughts and feelings.

Perhaps one of the greatest losses if we were to totally abandon the writing of cursive would be the inability to read cursive. The computer and digital ages are mere specks in the grand scheme of literature. What about all those documents that formed the basis of civilization? What about the notes that friends, family, or loved ones created to express how they felt? I know that life keeps moving faster and we all have increasing difficulty in how to expand all those minutes. But, what would be more special—a terse text with cryptic abbreviations or a handwritten note, relating the thoughts and feelings of someone who obviously cares because he or she took time to take pen in hand, find a decent piece of paper, and forward something of value? And of course, without the ability to understand cursive, you would not be able to read this letter.

Until next month . . .

*Bruce D. Cheson*

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