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Learning Cursive Is a Basic Right

By Abigail Walthausen



Jae C. Hong/AP Photo

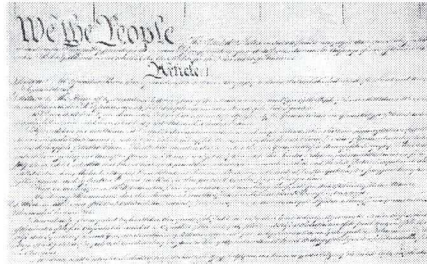
On the back cover of a 1967 album by Robert Pete Williams, beneath a photo of the Mississippi blues musician, appears a signature rendered illegibly in a strained combination of print and script. The lines shake with a careful effort which yields results only a step better than his the X his sharecropper father likely made. Takoma records trumpeted Williams' illiteracy—with the printing of the signature they signaled to the audience the thrill of a hardened criminal life and raw emotion of the primitive musician. But the single line of scrawl is more deeply emblematic of the evils of the segregated society.

The signature, the ability to sign one's own name with grace and confidence, has long been an essential marker of society. Today more and more I meet high school students who, though they can read, sometimes well and sometimes poorly, are ashamed whenever they are confronted with the need to sign a document. Students are sometimes too embarrassed to admit that they can't read a piece of an important historical document or the comments of a teacher who writes in script. Script is not seen by students as some quaint relic of the past. Even among kids for whom academic achievement is hardly "cool," students recognize the pedigree that the knowledge of the cursive alphabet and the ability to write it fluently represent. Cursive has become a status marker.

The mid-sized parochial school where I work provides an interesting view into this phenomenon because the feeder junior highs are so varied. The students who come from the Catholic elementary

schools all know script and write it automatically because that is what was required of them. They possess a neater penmanship in both print and script. And as someone who has looked at a great many notebooks, I have observed that they have much greater mastery of the page and they are more astute with the spatial needs of good notetaking. In addition, they do not appear to have sacrificed learning other important skills—they are just as academically competent as their peers and just as likely to know typing.

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Don't Write Off Cursive

The students who do not know script come from public schools, most often those designated as “failing.” The Common Core has left the teaching of cursive off the standards, but the trend to pass over penmanship instruction has been building for years. Many of the students who I teach had workbooks for learning cursive that were rarely used and never completed. Sustained instruction in handwriting was put off to the side and because script was not required for everyday classwork, students never had a chance to practice. I have a student in a remedial reading class so eager to learn script that she has had friends bring workbooks in for her to use. Another student, a college-bound junior, made it a personal goal to learn script before heading to college. While these autodidacts may be a bit unusual, they exemplify the feeling that students are denied something of value. Most likely these sacrifices were made in favor of are the inordinate emphasis is placed on testing—enough to cut out all kinds of enrichment and even whatever basics are not tested.

If we are thinking about standardized testing, it is important to note that cursive is in fact included in it. On the SAT section for student information, all students are required to copy an oath that they have not cheated, and they must copy it in script. Many students at my school must be instructed to print the sentence first and then connect each letter with their pens. The results look even more terrible than those who struggle through the best pigeon script they know. Now, of course, the students are not graded for the look of their writing, but the ordeal is a terrible note on which to begin a high-stakes test. It sets kids unjustly up for failure to force them to try on illiteracy just moments before beginning a test that is notoriously culturally loaded. Students who struggle through a single sentence feel inadequate. They feel intimidated.

It seems like an especially terrible thing to deny kids, because so many enjoy mastering it. Script not only adds speed to writing, but it adds the intimacy of the personal mark to the writing process and adds interest for students who are artistically inclined or visual learners. Edward Tenner argues that it aids cognitive development and builds character. One of my ninth graders, a very weak student who lacks confidence in all facets of communication, written and spoken, but he is also one of the most careful printers I have ever seen. His letters are embellished with delicate curls. He never learned

cursive, but I am sure that would have been a great, confidence-building opportunity for him.

It is easy to assume that occasions for copying oaths and signing documents by hand will soon be gone, but the fact is that they are not yet. Before getting rid of script, it is important that computers are actually integrated into the classroom to the point that typing does replace handwriting. Many of the first schools to jettison script do so because of external pressures to improve standardized test scores. They are also the “failing” schools that are too poor to support regular, sustained, one-to-one computer use. So many students must still write by hand, just with fewer tools than ever before. Students who are already facing educational disadvantages must not be made to feel that they are living in a netherworld where the most important communications they must make are in series of bubbles, with marks heavy and dark.

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