

Introduction

A CONSIDERABLE PROPORTION of pupils leave primary school unable to write sufficiently well to deal with the demands of secondary school. It may be that they have been inadequately or inappropriately taught, or they may have a physical problem, diagnosed or not, that has inhibited their learning. It may even be that they have made up their minds that handwriting is a redundant skill in the age of computers.

Whatever the reason, it is a great waste of potential. Unfortunately society still tends to judge people of whatever age by the standard of their written trace. To writers themselves the constant reminder of failure every time they put pen to paper is demoralising and likely to result in reluctant learners and under-achieving adults.

Handwriting is still needed for certain important tasks, though perhaps viewed more as a tool for creativity than as an end in itself.

The conventional neat, inevitably slow, writing of the past is not so much of a priority. Most show writing may now be produced by computer. A fast note-taking hand, however, is vital in secondary school, also a slightly more legible but equally speedy form of writing for examinations. It may be quite a while before computers can be used in these and other similar circumstances.

Handwriting problems differ from other educational problems. The written trace is the result of the movement of the hand when it is in contact with the paper. It is a fair indication, therefore, of the state of mind and body of the writer at the time of writing. This is useful for diagnosis but this personal aspect makes it so hard to deal with older pupils already confirmed in their personal mark. To criticise their handwriting can seem like an attack on their very person. If done without sensitivity it may make

matters worse. Without understanding it is unlikely to succeed.

Handwriting problems are seldom straightforward by the time pupils reach secondary school. No two problems are exactly the same, however similar the written sample, and no two pupils' characters or aspirations or capabilities are either. We have definite expectations in our educational system and even in society. Only too often those who do not conform are seen as problems. Moreover our system seems prone to criticise rather than praise which further isolates those who do not or cannot come up to expectation. Some pupils could be just different, and their differences reflected in their writing, rather than their being problematic.

Without underestimating any serious problems that some children may be facing, part of the situation that we find ourselves in today has arisen from the desire to label children. Standardised tests may be used to justify these labels. These are seldom any use to the individuals involved, and with handwriting, seldom result in an accurate enough diagnosis. With complex problems we need to think of the individual not the label. Labelling often precludes further diagnostic techniques, where a solution may be found.

When questioned about their handwriting pupils often answer that there is no problem and they can write perfectly well – the problem is in the eye of their teacher or parent. They say that their handwriting would serve them quite well enough if only they were left alone instead of constantly being criticised. This may or may not be true as it is notoriously difficult to self-diagnose. It is worth, however, taking notice of this because pressure and criticism fuel tension. Tension alone can distort an otherwise acceptable script, thus mimicking many of the symptoms of more serious conditions such as a tremor.

The worries of constant testing during the primary years, and in the case of private schools, intense competition and worries of common entrance, compound this tension. Hands become tense, echoing the tension throughout their bodies, so that pupils can become unable to write. This is a kind of juvenile writer's cramp but indefensible in children so young. Who is at fault? Ambitious parents, who may well think they are doing their best for their children, or schools avid for successful ratings, or once more thinking that they are only trying to get the best out of their pupils? It is hard to tell, but it is obvious who are the victims – the children.

This is why this project has been planned in several parts. In Part 2 the half page, photocopiable pupil material has an innovative purpose (in addition to being helpful to teachers). That is to allow pupils, in the more straightforward matters of letterforms, to see examples of problem handwriting that perhaps is similar to their own. To realise why it might be hard to read, and perhaps to laugh at the faults that appear only too obvious in the illustrations. This may lead them to self-correct without any outside pressure.

As well as the letterform aspects there are matters such as posture, paper position and the vexed issue of pen hold. They are illustrated and explained in such a way to suggest what steps might be taken to benefit individuals and invite experimentation.

In each of these areas it is difficult for older pupils to alter entrenched habits without motivation – and in handwriting perhaps the best motivation comes from within. To understand a problem can be half way to solving it.

The Companion Website

A companion website for this book can be found at www.sagepub.co.uk/sassoon. On the site you will find all of the photocopiable pupil material from Part 2, available in pdf format. This will give you the flexibility to be able to print relevant pages for pupil use, or to print out the whole section and compile it into a booklet for pupils to work through. Pupils can also visit the site directly to access the pages themselves. Also on the website is a range of links to other useful sources of information and help, and more details of Rosemary Sassoon's work.

Part **1**

Part 1

THIS BOOK OUTLINES the various aspects of handwriting problems, offering guidance to teachers on a diagnostic system and techniques to develop their observation and practice.

Secondary teachers may not have covered much about handwriting issues during their training. It is first necessary to begin by explaining the factors involved in the initial teaching of handwriting because some pupils may not have been taught enough about handwriting and have to go back to basics before they can improve. This part will have the following sections:

Issues concerning letterforms:

- Movement
- Height differentials
- Two sets of letters
- Word or letter spacing
- Handwriting models
- Speed
- A balanced view of joining

Issues affecting how we write

- The effects of school furniture on posture
- Pens and pen hold and paper position
- Understanding left handedness
- Tension
- Vision and pain

Other issues

- Presentation
- Talking to parents
- Severe problems ignored or misdiagnosed
- Handwriting in a multicultural context

■ Issues in letterforms

Movement

The movement of writing refers to the way letters are formed, their point of entry and direction of stroke. This is sometimes called the ductus of letters, from the Latin 'to lead'. It is also referred to as the trajectory. These terms emphasise the dynamic aspect of letters rather than just their static shape.

The correct movement of letters enables handwriting to remain reasonably legible even when written at speed or carelessly. It also enables the hand that writes to move smoothly and efficiently across the page.

Ideally, children should be taught the correct movement of letters when they first learn to write. Unfortunately this vital part of skill training is often ignored in the rush to literacy and in the interest of getting children to express themselves on paper.

Once an incorrect movement becomes automated it is increasingly difficult for the writer to alter the habit. This is the consequence of writing being a motor skill. It is unlikely that movement faults will be corrected by themselves. That is why the first check for secondary school pupils must be for letters with an incorrect movement.

Height differentials

The different height of letters and their relationship to each other affects the word shape. This contributes to the way mature or fast writing can be easily deciphered.

Where letters have inadequate ascending or descending strokes, or where they are not correctly aligned in relation to each other pupils deserve an explanation of why it is important for them to

change. Like all aspects of personal letters it may not be easy for the writer to alter an entrenched habit.

Two sets of letters

Capitals and small letters may still confuse some pupils, or they may purposely be using them inappropriately. They need an explanation in the context of usage in our writing system. It is all too easy to forget these different discriminations that we as adults take for granted. Few people can give pupils a logical explanation as to why there are two sets of letters in our writing system. The history of our alphabet is a long and complex story. If you are interested you can find all about it in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Children, however, deserve a simple explanation as to why the shapes of our two sets of letters are different. Our hand written letters have developed gradually during the past two thousand years from the Roman cursives. These are very hard to decipher today unless you are a paleographer. The form of capital letters has remained virtually unchanged from the formal letters inscribed on the Trajan Column in Rome in AD 114. Their straight strokes had evolved to make it easier to inscribe letters on stone or marble. We write them with pencil and pen today.

Word and letter spacing

Word spacing is related to writing size so there cannot be a general rule that dictates what is optimum to make a text easily legible. There is, however, one factor that often needs addressing that is the direct consequence of a practice often used when first teaching young children. Infants are often told to use their thumb to measure the space between words. This may be a convenient explanation at the age of five, but thumbs grow and writing gets smaller. Surprisingly the concept seems embedded in some older pupils' consciousness. The consequence of extra wide word spaces results in rivers of white space down the page.

Today, most pupils are familiar with keyboards, where a word space is the same size as a letter. It is more or less the same rule for written letters.

There are no specific rules concerning letter spacing. It should be a matter of common sense but there still can be a few problems that continue into the teenage

years. These are usually caused by the forms children learned when young. If they learned straight print script letters and then taught themselves to join, their joining strokes might always be jagged and uneven, affecting letter spacing. At the other extreme some pupils, usually with poor coordination, may have developed exaggerated joining strokes which space letters very widely, sometimes suggesting an additional letter.

Quite a different problem arises when pupils have never learned to join their letters. Instead, they may pack them close together to disguise the fact.

This can make certain words difficult to decipher. Uneven letter or word spacing is one of those indicators that help us to understand a pupil's particular problem. It can indicate hesitation sometimes caused by difficulty over spelling, for example, or maybe extreme tension from any other cause in the school or home environment.

Other factors

There are two other aspects of our writing system that may contribute to handwriting problems. Usually they have been dealt with before reaching secondary school, but occasionally they persist. One is the actual direction of writing – from left to right. The easiest movement for most left handers is from right to left. You can observe this from watching the way they usually cross their 't's. For a few left handers this poses a considerable problem, although the majority learn to adapt. The difficulty can manifest itself in several ways. One is the slowing down of writing as the writer has to fight the tendency to write each word from right to left. This may also show in certain letters being reversed, usually at the end of a word as the writer relaxes.

The other factor is mirror image. Some of the letters in our alphabet are mirror images of each other. Those pupils with perceptual troubles may be unable to perceive and produce the differences between such letters. It is not only the usual confusing pair of 'b' and 'd' to be aware of. Some pupils find the same difficulty with 'u' and 'n'. None of these problems should be confused with dyslexia, and should be treated sympathetically.

All of these issues are dealt with separately in the next section.