

Is writing redundant?

By Alexandra Cain



Is the pen still mightier than the sword?

I've read a lot recently about how people don't use handwriting any more, that it's a skill that's all but disappearing. Well, not in my world.

In my line of work, I can write pages and pages each day and go through notebooks faster than they can cut down the trees to make them.

I'll often interview up to seven people a day, all the while taking copious notes. My writing is a combination of my version of shorthand and longhand, and there's no way anyone else could understand it.

But I don't just use handwriting for interview purposes. I write out all the structures for my stories by hand before I type them up. In fact I practically write out the story word for word before turning on my laptop. Doing this helps me think.

If I go straight to the computer to write out a story, it takes me a lot longer to get it right. There's something about physically writing down a story that allows me to order my thoughts. It's a process I've used all my life.

I clearly remember learning to write. Before I went to school, I would pretend to write letters on a page, really just producing scribble. I'm sure most kids do this and that it's an important part of learning how to form words on a page, especially in terms of being able to control a pen.

When I was taught to write at school, I remember first learning to print and then learning cursive in about third class. It all seems so old-fashioned now – when I was taught to write, capital ‘Q’ in cursive was written like a 2. I reckon if you wrote a Q like a 2 these days, no one would know what you meant – except maybe an ancient relative.

Interestingly, we were never taught to type at my school, and I understand today, touch typing is a standard part of the curriculum. But writing things down is part of the learning process, as research shows.

Do you use writing to think? Or do you rarely write and almost always type?

Psychological scientist Pam Mueller of Princeton University says her research, which explores university students’ use of writing or typing in lectures, has shown typing tends to involve mindless transcription of the lecture content verbatim. Interestingly, the more accurate a student’s typed lecture notes, the less the student remembers from the lecture.

“The people who take notes longhand are forced to process the content more deeply, because they have to be more selective in what they write down. In deciding what to write down, their brains were more engaged with the material, and therefore it was remembered and understood better,” says Muller.

So what's the difference in the thought processes between writing and typing? Mueller says at least in the education context, handwriting makes people process the content more deeply as they are listening to it, since they know they cannot write it all down.

“This is better in the long run than having the content in your notes and trying to study from them later, when you haven't engaged with the material during the lecture.”

Which is interesting, because we often have a choice over whether to write or type something. Often in meetings I see people bring in their laptop and use it as a note-taking device (presumably they're also using it to check Facebook when things get boring).

But if you really want to remember what was said in a meeting, perhaps a better idea would be to take in a notepad and write down important information, instead of typing it into a laptop.

As for whether we're ever likely to lose handwriting as a skill, Mueller says handwriting probably won't disappear any time soon.

“I think this is very unlikely, especially as stylus technology is getting better and better. Certainly if we did lose this ability, our brains would change. I am not an expert in this area, so I cannot say exactly how they would change, other than that the motor cortex would probably develop differently.”

There's obviously a place for both typing and handwriting in our world. But maybe we should try to write things down more, rather than use a computer, to help the quality of our thinking and work.

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