In the digital age, cursive handwriting is a lost art

By Seattle Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.18.16
Word Count 683

Fifth-grade student Andrea Boravong uses her cursive skill while working on action verbs at Highlandtown Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland, Nov. 23, 2011. Photo: Lloyd Fox/Baltimore Sun/MCT

OLYMPIA, Wash. — After she heard from his teacher that her son’s handwriting needed some work, Suzi Allan sought help. She asked when his class would learn cursive writing, but like many schools, her son’s doesn’t teach it.

Allan was offered an online packet, if she wanted to teach her son at home.

No doubt about it, cursive is dying. Around the country, school districts have been dropping it. The reasons they give for its decline include teachers who are already pressed for time, a need to focus on Common Core and other state standards, and the fact that we’re in the digital age when many students use computers in the classroom.

Others argue, and not just out of nostalgia, that cursive is still necessary for some of the most important things: a signature, or the ability to read historical documents in their original form, like the Declaration of Independence.
Pro-Cursive Bill Unable To Attract Support

The merits of teaching cursive have been debated nationwide, and the discussion reached lawmakers in the Washington state Capitol building this session, if only briefly. The pro-cursive debate was unable to attract support.

Republican State Senator Pam Roach sponsored a bill that would require the teaching of cursive in Washington schools. But the bill didn’t get to a vote, and no one showed up to offer testimony in favor of the bill.

“We’re creating this chasm where the first generation can read our history, and the other cannot,” Roach said.

Roach was amazed, she said, when she handed her grandson a grocery list written in cursive and he couldn’t read it.

Only 15 States Require Cursive Instruction

Fifteen states require cursive to be taught in their schools. In some states, the decision whether to include cursive instruction is made by individual school districts, sometimes by individual teachers.

That’s what happened at Victor Falls Elementary in Bonney Lake, Washington, where Allan asked about penmanship lessons for her son.

“Cursive is no longer required,” said Sarah Gillispie, communications manager for the Sumner School District. Teachers can choose to teach it but “the system has moved away from handwriting to be more digitally based.”

Virginia Berninger, a University of Washington professor of educational psychology, was part of a team that undertook a five-year study of student development. They tested for relationships between types of writing and learning outcomes. They also explored whether those relationships differed by grade level.

University Researcher Favors A Hybrid Model

So which writing form should be taught?

“We’re arguing for a hybrid model,” Berninger said, meaning a combination of handwritten printing, cursive and typing.

But many teachers worry there already isn’t enough time in the day to teach all the material they need to cover. How can they provide students with instruction on all three forms of writing?

Ingraining a writing style doesn’t take a lot of time. The study discovered that working on any form of writing for five to 10 minutes a day, maybe three times a week, is just as effective as dedicating a half-hour to an hour.
Different Ways To Write Are All Tools

Berninger finds handwritten print connects to better reading skills because much of what is read is in that format. Studies show it is best that children learn handwritten print from kindergarten to second grade.

Cursive specifically helps with spelling and forming sentences because of the way it connects letters together, Berninger said. It helps students recognize letters as whole-word units, she added. A study of 99 children between third and seventh grades showed it's best to teach cursive in third and fourth grade.

Typing correctly, using both hands without looking at them, strengthens communication between the left and right side of the brain, according to the study.

While students are moving from middle childhood to early adolescence, that kind of brain communication is the most efficient. Therefore, typing should be taught as early as fourth grade and continue through eighth grade.

“It's not about teaching handwriting in isolation, or keyboarding,” Berninger said. “It's always about teaching it as a tool for the really important thing: idea expression and communication.”
Quiz

1 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops a central idea?

(A) She asked when his class would learn cursive writing, but like many schools, her son's doesn't teach it.

(B) In some states, the decision whether to include cursive instruction is made by individual school districts, sometimes by individual teachers.

(C) Teachers can choose to teach (cursive) but "the system has moved away from handwriting to be more digitally based."

(D) A study of 99 children between third and seventh grades showed it's best to teach cursive in third and fourth grade.

2 Which of the following details is MOST important to the development of a central idea?

(A) the possibility of learning cursive outside of school

(B) a description of cursive writing compared to print writing

(C) the disinterest among lawmakers to pursue a cursive law

(D) the results of Berninger’s study about cursive’s benefits

3 Which of the following statements BEST represents many teachers’ reluctance to teach cursive?

(A) They view cursive as a skill that is too difficult for most students to master.

(B) They doubt that learning cursive will provide any unique benefits to students.

(C) They feel that they are already required to cover more material than is possible.

(D) They believe that all forms of handwriting are becoming unnecessary in a digital era.

4 Which of the following answer choices would BEST describe a key finding of Berninger's study?

(A) The ability to write cursive would have a larger impact on students' learning than other writing forms.

(B) Writing cursive benefits students by developing their literacy skills in particular ways.

(C) The ability to write cursive provides satisfaction to students, but no distinct learning outcomes.

(D) Writing cursive should not take priority over learning more useful forms of writing such as typing.
Answer Key

1 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops a central idea?
(A) She asked when his class would learn cursive writing, but like many schools, her son's doesn't teach it.
(B) In some states, the decision whether to include cursive instruction is made by individual school districts, sometimes by individual teachers.
(C) Teachers can choose to teach (cursive) but “the system has moved away from handwriting to be more digitally based.”
(D) A study of 99 children between third and seventh grades showed it's best to teach cursive in third and fourth grade.

2 Which of the following details is MOST important to the development of a central idea?
(A) the possibility of learning cursive outside of school
(B) a description of cursive writing compared to print writing
(C) the disinterest among lawmakers to pursue a cursive law
(D) the results of Berninger's study about cursive's benefits

3 Which of the following statements BEST represents many teachers' reluctance to teach cursive?
(A) They view cursive as a skill that is too difficult for most students to master.
(B) They doubt that learning cursive will provide any unique benefits to students.
(C) They feel that they are already required to cover more material than is possible.
(D) They believe that all forms of handwriting are becoming unnecessary in a digital era.

4 Which of the following answer choices would BEST describe a key finding of Berninger's study?
(A) The ability to write cursive would have a larger impact on students' learning than other writing forms.
(B) Writing cursive benefits students by developing their literacy skills in particular ways.
(C) The ability to write cursive provides satisfaction to students, but no distinct learning outcomes.
(D) Writing cursive should not take priority over learning more useful forms of writing such as typing.