

Bill Rea ? How important is penmanship?

I freely admit I have terrible handwriting. I always have, and I always will.

That caused me a lot of grief when I was a kid, but it's been many years since it has really bothered me; my school teachers be damned.

The reason the issue has popped into my head again is over a news story that was getting some play late last week. It dealt with the fact that today's school kids evidently can't write in cursive.

If you're unfamiliar with that term, don't get too upset. I had never heard of it either, prior to Friday morning's teaser before the 7 o'clock news. And the guy on the radio was issuing the warning that it had nothing to do with cursing.

What it has to do with is handwriting. Or going back almost 50 year to when I was a little kid in school, writing, as opposed to printing.

According to Wikipedia (I do realize that's not the greatest source available for background material, but for these purposes, it will serve), cursive is defined as "any style of penmanship in which the symbols of the language are written in a conjoined and/or flowing manner, generally for the purpose of making writing faster."

Those of you reading this who are 50-something or older probably have memories of your primary teachers, those masters of splitting hairs, who were insistent that the letters in all your written work were properly formed, and there were stiff penalties if your work didn't measure up. Thus I spent a lot of my school time in the mid to late '60s in the proverbial doghouse. And of course my teachers ratted me out to my parents (in some cases, with a certain amount of relish), meaning I got an extra dose of bawling out when I got home.

Even in Grade 1, my printing was nothing to write home about, in the proverbial sense. As I have already alluded, my teacher found it something to write home about in the very real sense. And things didn't improve as time progressed.

In my younger years, I was a little boy who was very eager to please. Thus I had a vested interest in doing my best at all of my subjects at school. It was one of the ways of trying to make sure my TV privileges didn't get revoked. Yet I was never able to master the art of neat printing or writing, at least not to the satisfaction of anyone who counted in those days. One of my teachers once speculated it might have something to do with the coordination within my hands. This guy, my Grade 5 teacher, was also among the most strict when it came to such issues, and this was during a period in history when teachers were allowed to use physical force on their young charges. This teacher did it with an enthusiasm that bordered on being sadistic, although he probably thought it was to his credit that he confined the rough stuff to the boys. He left the girls alone, but the boys (all the boys) got clouted with regularity. I don't wonder why my mother went to her grave with deep misgivings about the public education system.

But in fairness to the man, he may have had a point. I have never been especially good with my hands. I sometimes marvel that I have learned to type as well as I do (and even that is none too good).

The point of the aforementioned news story was that students in the Toronto Catholic District School Board might be losing the ability to understand and use cursive writing, and trustees there think that's an issue that needs to be addressed.

According to the media accounts I have read, instruction in cursive is first addressed in Grade 3, according to the Provincial curriculum. Indeed, it was in Grade 3 that I was first introduced to what I knew as "writing" in those days, and not a second prior to when the teacher decreed. Indeed, I well remember a classmate being soundly reprimanded for putting a bit too much curl into the vertical portion of his "a"s. The coverage I read went on to state that there is currently no requirement that cursive writing be taught. In the midst of this media attention, I find myself wondering what all the fuss is about. There are certain things we have been taught because we need to know them, but I have spent the bulk of my life wondering why it was so all-fired important that my handwriting be a thing of beauty. Granted, any written word is worthless if no one can read it, but that doesn't mean it has to approach the level of calligraphy.

How many of us actually write any more? At work, I have to write the occasional note, usually dealing with a message I have taken for someone. Such notes are very brief, and usually involve little more than a name and phone number. My wife and I seldom exchange written messages, largely because we're still rather fond of each other, so verbal communication works rather well. And we both have cell phones, so we can contact each other in a hurry. I just proved it by calling her on her cell as I wrote this sentence ? it really wasn't necessary, since she was sitting about five feet away from me, and it was also pointless, since her phone was turned off, but you get the idea.

We all use computers and email to communicate if we need to, and most of us have learned to master typewriter keyboards.

There was a time when being able to communicate with handwriting was essential, but those days are basically in the past. There are some people who still send hand-written letters through the mail. I get notes at Christmas from my relatives in Ireland that are

written in pen, while the notes I send are typed (I think too well of the folks across the pond to subject them to my crummy scrawl). The thought of preserving the art of handwriting is nice, but not essential, thanks to technology. There was a time when a person wanting to drive an automobile needed to know how to work a clutch. But thanks to automatic transmissions, that is no longer the case, and standard transmissions are becoming something of a rarity.

It is a reality that some skills become obsolete over time. Many years ago, a woman keeping a home would have known how to churn butter. Er . . . Ladies?

I'm not knocking all education. There are a lot of things taught in school that made no sense to us as kids, but they are beneficial in later life.

Basic work with numbers is a great example. Just try and get through your income tax form in the next couple of weeks without some low-grade math.

I never really appreciated the value of mathematics and the related education until I read Bill Clinton's memoirs. One of the points he made is math is basically about solving problems, and developing a problem-solving mentality can carry one far in life.

There's a better example closer to home.

My late mother used to do volunteer work in the gift shop at her local hospital (the hospital at which I was born). Naturally, flowers were a big-selling item in the shop. From what my mom told me, there was a rather complicated formula for accepting the inventory of flowers from the supplier during a given day (I think disposal of previous days' inventory was involved too). She once related to me a scene she played out with the supplier, as they both went through the formula; he with a calculator and my mom with pencil and paper.

?Seven nines are 63,? she said as she figured.

?How do you know that?? the supplier replied, mystified at my old lady's calculating skills.

Don't worry. I can do such basic calculating too. I just hope you can make out my figures

