

## Cursive vs. Manuscript: What Difference Does It Make?

I remember when I first heard the idea to teach cursive first. I had flown cross country to teach a seminar on SWR in Macon, Georgia. I came highly recommended by a respected authority in the community. He advised them to listen to everything I taught except for the idea of teaching manuscript first. I was taken aback. Didn't everyone teach manuscript first? I assumed that cursive would be too difficult for a little child. What research supported such a seemingly radical change in approach?

I noticed other respected programs switching to cursive first. What prompted their change? Intrigued, I studied the history of education. Chancery Cursive developed under Charlemagne, a Frank ruler and education reformer in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. American school children historically learned cursive first. Manuscript was taught in the upper grades merely for labeling. In the 1920's a woman who bears my maiden name experimented with a type of beginning penmanship that might work better with pen and ink system of her day. She learned quickly that her attempt was not good for children and withdrew it. Unfortunately, the Horace Mann School had meanwhile adapted her ideas.

Consider the legacy of Horace Mann on education. He felt that teaching the sounds of the alphabet should be skipped. He said in a lecture in 1841, "When we wish to give to a child the idea of a new animal, we do not present successively the different parts of it,—an eye, an ear, the nose, the mouth, the body, or a leg: but we present the whole animal, as one object." Most of us know of children who have been crippled intellectually by this type of whole language approach and the epidemic failure it has produced. Followers of Mann remained undisturbed by the drop in literacy. They felt it is unnecessary for all children to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic.

It did not concern Horace Mann school that Margaret Wise discarded her form of penmanship that they modified and embraced. Textbook publishers had already printed books and were not interested in losing money retracting them. Within twelve years the majority of American schools introduced manuscript first. By 1950 almost 90% of them had accepted that approach. The standard practice of centuries was discarded almost overnight without any research or support for such a shift.

Is manuscript easier as some suppose? Cursive letters all start at the baseline while manuscript letters have at least six starting points (a, l, e, u, x, z). Cursive letters all end with a connector. Manuscript has eight final strokes. Cursive is best designed for the fluid communication of ideas without constant stops and starts. Words are built as units rather than fragmented thoughts. The Kauffman study (1979) showed that children who learned cursive first has "fewer problems learning cursive than manuscript, evidencing less confusion, fewer reversals and transpositions, a better developed sense of spatial orientation, and greater overall academic success. George Early (1976) found that cursive writing first improved children's spelling and reading. Children who wrote in cursive did not have trouble identifying the matching letters in print as long as they had been shown the connection as we suggest on SWR

pp. 39-40. George Early concluded that “cursive writing properly taught is a powerful tool for upgrading academic achievement.”

What has been the result for SWR teachers using cursive for initial instruction? Many educators are amazed at how cursive helps nip dyslexia, improve spelling, and lead to neater penmanship. The movements needed to write cursive letters are more natural and flowing. One confesses, “As a parent of children who started with print, I was disgusted with my children’s penmanship and thought after several years they should show some improvement. I now know it is hard for kids to write in print. My kid’s handwriting has excelled with cursive. I could not be more pleased.

