

UTILISATION OF HANDWRITING FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS FOR MANPOWER

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Abstract

Handwriting is undeniably a very important means of communication in the literate world, considering how often we use our hands in writing. It serves urgent and numerous purposes. Through writing, we keep ideas ready for use including those that occur to us on the spur of the moment which we would have forgotten soon after their conception. Handwriting helps us to jot them down instantly and remember them even later. Despite the ease of communication in the computer age, handwriting remains a necessary skill for everyone. It is unfortunate that in spite of its outweighing importance, it has been overlooked in many of our contemporary literate circles. The study examined the letters of modern European alphabet and the appropriate conventional usage to be made of the symbols. It also examined the suitable approach to be adopted for developing good handwriting skills in children at all levels of education and to avert the prevalent distortions inflicted on handwriting. These glaringly promote misconstruction of what we write and consequently hinder effective communication.

Introduction

Human communication is broken down into two great parts recognized as vocal and non-vocal communications. The two broad forms are achieved through several means. For example, languages of the world are vehicles for vocal communication. Though all means of communication are of paramount importance, handwriting which is a transformation of meaningful sounds through symbolic representation on paper and other possible surfaces is obviously one of the most important means.

People of the world have different legends about how writing began. The Egyptian legend, for example, has it as contained in *The New Book of Knowledge* (1976:317) that:

Men first learned to write from the great god Thoth. Thoth had the head of a long-billed bird called the ibis. The story goes that by scratching his bill in the sand, Thoth showed people how to make the signs with which to record their thoughts.

All the legends have something in common. They consider writing a precious gift from the gods and they uphold that by learning to write, man can pass on what he learns and can constantly widen his knowledge,

The Encyclopaedia Britannica (Vol. 19) (1981:1034) reveals however that writing started from drawing pictures - a kind of shorthand using signs that looked like things they represented. The signs became a kind of code which unlike pictures, had to be studied before any one could understand it and write it. This kind of writing had signs for ideas as well as for objects and was later called ideographic writing. The simple pictures, as we have learnt, did not correspond in any way possible to any linguistic element. (Ronald, 1974) attests too that the early state of writing has undergone some transitional modifications to this present stage where signs of writing, whether pictorial or linear, have become visual substitutes for the signs of the oral language, such as words, syllables and distinct sounds. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol. 19) (19:1039) defines writing as "a device for expressing linguistic elements by means of conventional visible marks" now based on the famous alphabetic writing. Ademiluyi (2003:2) too opines that:

Full writing started about 5000 years ago. Before this time, man used to draw or paint pictures on the walls of his dwelling place or on rocks. Writing with alphabets, which is the modern way of communication was pioneered by the Greek. Later Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, English and other alphabets followed as we have it today.

ii. Small Letters

a b c d e f g h I j k l
m n o p q r s t u v w x
y z

Manuscript writing, even though poorly inscribed by a beginner, is likely to be more readable than cursive writing.

Cursive writing requires more mastery and skill than manuscript writing. Generally, letters in cursive writing whether majuscule or minuscule possess connecting strokes. There are four types of connecting strokes that help in spacing out letters evenly in a word. *The New Book of Knowledge*, 1978:32). Small letters are joined together by the connecting strokes or are run together in cursive writing unlike manuscript writing where letters are isolated or separated one from another. For cursive writing, small letters are categorized into three groups as seen below. And in a paragraph of this form of writing, words should fit well on the lines of the paper so that each letter rests on the base line to maintain writing in straight lines. In the course of teaching, the grouping of letters here must be taken into cognizance. And the teacher should be slow and gradual so that the pupils will be able to cope with fashioning the letters out correctly and without deviating too much from their conventional forms. Capital letters in cursive writing are nearly full space high. But small letters are not as tall as capital ones when they appear together in a paragraph except letters of the first group that possess *ascenders* as categorized here *The New Book of Knowledge*, 1978:32)

i. Group 1: Letters with Ascenders

b, d, h, k, l, and t.

This group comprises six letters and when written out, they rest on the base line and seem to have "horns" that are called "ascenders", The ascenders extend to the line above the letters but they are approximately of the same proportion and height.

ii. Group 2; Letters with Descenders

f, g, j, p, q, y, and z.

These seven letters possess "tails" otherwise known as descenders. When written out, their heads or loops rest squarely on the baseline on which writing is directed while their descenders go below the baseline extending close to the line underneath.

iii. Group 3: Letters without Ascenders or Descenders

a, c, e, i, m, n, o, r, s, u, v,w, x, and z.

The letter z has appeared in the second and last groups because it has two accepted forms.

Letters of the last group are fourteen in number and are of the same proportion and have neither "horns" nor "tails" (ascenders nor descenders). The basic principle of realizing the three categories of letters on paper, for example, is that the curving of the letter f starting from the "cross" up and the curving of h, k, y and z from up and down to the baseline are approximately equal to the roundish parts (loops) of b, d, g, p and q. *The New Book of Knowledge*, 1978:32). Another principle of realizing them is that the curves and the roundish parts of the letters of the first two groups above are not taller than letters in the last group as indicated below:

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n
o p q r s t u v w x y z

Approach to Teaching Handwriting

Handwriting is a skill that can be acquired through learning. It is also an innate tendency that is inherent in every individual. It manifests itself in children at different levels and stages. This becomes evident when we watch what children do when they come in contact with the ground. They make marks on the ground with their fingers, marks that are meaningful only to their world. Handwriting is something that is naturally interesting to almost every child to whom it is newly introduced. So teachers as well as parents should try to encourage and maintain the strong interest children normally show for their readiness to learn handwriting.

Learning to write starts at the primary school. For a start, a child at this level has to do colouring, drawing and plays using the left and right arms to build the control of the eye, hand and arm to be able to maneuver paper and pencil. When learning to write is geared towards this control, learning is rendered functional because the learner puts handwriting to work at once. But the teacher must equip the learners with something ready to append on paper - something they are able to read after marking it down because according to *World Book* (nd.:50) "readiness to read is usually an important clue that readiness to write will soon appear". By this the *World Book* means that the learner should be introduced to drawing before he is introduced to writing using the alphabet. A child should be taught the verbal reading of the ABC and the identification and recognition of each letter of the alphabet before following it up with writing them on paper. This, when properly taught, enables a child to make correct association of sounds and their corresponding letters of the alphabet. The child is able to determine correctly the letter with which he begins his manuscript. And as he builds his academics on a rocky foundation, he learns to read and spell words correctly right at the beginning and later on in life. When a child pronounces the letters correctly, identifies them and is able to distinguish one from the other, the situation at the tertiary level where students demonstrate their inability to use the letters as it is conventionally accepted and understood is remedied.

From here, the teacher proceeds to the teaching of manuscript writing that is less difficult to learn. Stanfield (1975:121) recommends that:

The single-stroke Roman capitals are the most suitable for school use, and the children should be taught how to draw them. It is advisable for the teacher to prepare a chart of the complete alphabet, each, capita! being about four inches high (...) the aim of this lesson is to teach the children how to write the alphabet, drawing each letter in the correct, traditional proportion.

Manuscript writing is done in two phases. The first phase should involve capital letters which Stanfield (1975) too talks about. The phase may not always be too easy for beginners but as handwriting remains a very important skill in modern living, its teaching and learning become and remain a necessity. After ascertaining the child's mastery of the first phase then learning should proceed to the second phase of manuscript writing with the small letters made with straight lines and parts of circles:

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	mn
	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

These two stages must be handled thoroughly with much expertise and patience until the child is able to identify each letter of the alphabet and is also able to distinguish capital letters from small letters.

When work on the two phases is fully accomplished, learning should glide on to cursive writing which should also be done in two stages. The first stage should aim at realizing individual letters in separation with strokes:

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	⚡	■	m	n
	O	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	

This stage is somewhat involving because cursive writing carries connecting strokes that make its learning a bit complex and a bit difficult. The learner will have to be subjected to practice periods on letters as long as necessary just to help him learn the difficult shapes and strokes required for all letters. He then learns to join two letters and three letters before finally graduating into the next stage. This stage demands connecting letters in every unit word during which the pen is not lifted from the paper until at the end of each word. The i's and j's are dotted and the t's are crossed also after the whole word has been written out. It is pertinent to form individual letters correctly in all kinds of writing to avoid mistaking some letters for others. Carelessly formed letters may make writing illegible or make letters look like others. If we should write, we must write legibly for effective communication because according to *World Book* (nd.:48):

Just being able to write is not enough. A person must also write legibly, so his words can be read. Handwriting that no one can read is useless, and can create serious problems. For example, a student may write the correct answer to a question on a test, but if the teacher cannot read the answer, she may mark it wrong.

Letters should also be spaced evenly within a word and between words and the spaces in the roundish parts of the letters need be equal to make the general appearance of the writing attractive.

The last stage of learning to write is for speed and accuracy. For this stage, it beholds on the learner, as a prerequisite, to maintain a proper posture of himself and the materials he has in use. So the teacher has to ensure that:

- i. The learner sits up straight facing the desk squarely with both feet flat on the floor, leaving adequate space between his body and the desk.
- ii. The paper on which to write is kept straight before him in the case of manuscript writing.
- iii. The learner grasps the writing material involved loosely between his thumb and the middle finger about half an inch above the print. He then rests his forefinger on top to help control the movement and adequate flexibility of the hand.
- iv. The hand not used for writing holds the paper in place so that it will not slide. This hand also pushes the paper upward as the writing progresses toward the bottom of the page.
- v. The shape, size and spacing of letters are regular and approximately uniform.
- vi. For cursive writing, the paper in use slants to the left for right-handed persons while for the left-handed ones, the paper tilts slightly to the right.

Handwriting has peculiar problems that culminate in mechanical inaccuracies exhibited by almost every writer. Such problems may be deep-rooted as they could be traced back to an individual's early period of learning how to write. It is good that a teacher identifies such handwriting problems at the early stage so that possible remedies will be imposed to ensure easy-to-read handwriting in the individual and to avert the manifestation of these problems in his write-up even at a later stage in life. The problems include:

- i. Failure to dot i's and j's and to cross the t's.
- ii. Using a comma, an apostrophe, a hyphen or a dash in place of the dot on the letter i and letter j-
- iii. Excessive and irregular spacing of letters in words and between words.
- iv. Irregular proportion in size of letters,
- v. Writing some letters that look like others:

a	like	o	d	like	cl
a	“	u	e	“	closed e
a	“	ci	h	“	li
a	“	bi	m	“	w
c	“	l	n	“	r etc.

Candidates are penalized a lot at the SSCE level in English Language for writing out of convention. For example, essays are marked under four headings. They are Contents, Organization, Expression and Mechanical accuracy. And under mechanical accuracy,

candidates hardly score any marks. And this is partly as a result of poor handwriting. Where a candidate intends to write the word "time" or "take" but fails to cross his 't' and ends up with the word 'lime' or 'lake', he conveys a meaning different from the appropriate one in the context. He obviously loses marks. In writing letters that look like others too, a candidate may suffer similar consequences. If his 'd' looks like "cl", he may end up writing "clay" to mean "day" or "clear" to mean "dear" etc. Irregular proportion of letters also affects candidates. Some letters have the same forms for their majuscule and minuscule. The difference is only in size e.g. Ss, Cc, Oo, Vv etc. In writing out of proportion, a candidate may make such letters appear like capital ones in the middle of sentences and be penalized. For example, in a sentence like "He bought Oranges and Cakes at the market", where a candidate begins the common nouns 'oranges' and 'cakes' with capital letters as if they are proper nouns, the marker may penalize.

So these problems must be identified and nipped in the bud as it is very difficult to check and control an already formed habit in human beings at the adult stage.

Aesthetic and Practical Values of Handwriting

The teaching of handwriting has practical values. Good handwriting is an attempt towards the development of aesthetic awareness in the learner. It is undeniable that this exercise brings about the organization of the learner's thinking abilities and the development of his perceptual abilities. All these endow him with the capability of appreciating beauty and the undying desire of striving towards the attainment of beauty in every of his endeavours. Viktor and Lambert (1-975:374) make this remark about beauty that "a thing of beauty is a joy forever". This is a quality every individual must always aspire for. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (19:1042) takes an artistical view of the study of writing thus:

The study of writing from the artistical point of view has been neglected by scholars. Although the chief aim of writing is not the artistic effect but the practical recording and transmission of communication, writing at all times has had elements of aesthetic values, being similar in this respect to photography, inasmuch as both have primary aims of practical value but both can, at the same time, achieve aesthetic effect.

The contemporary Nigerian society has glaringly neglected the artistic point of view in the study of writing so no mastery is made of the imminent mechanical inaccuracies that plague our handwritings. Though writing does not aim at a mere attainment of artistic effect, it aims however at the practical recording and transmission of communication that cannot however be reached except we proffer adequate solutions to these anticipated problems. There is the need to note that writing at all times has had elements of aesthetics coupled with the primary aims of practical value. But at the same time we must realize that the aesthetic feature of writing should not be over exaggerated so that writing would serve the purpose of ornamentation rather than its primary object of communication. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (19:1043) says that Writing is a convention and that the conventionalization of forms of signs and principles has to be standardized so that users would draw the signs in approximately the same way.

People use the same alphabet, but in each case, they make letters in their own way and this sometimes puts individual writings at variance. But just as it is good to maintain some measure of beauty in handwriting and also overcome the unconventional distorting modifications individuals discretionally impose on writing, it is worth noting the harm exaggerated aesthetic features do to manuscript and cursive writings. Such glaring deviations may sometimes appear very beautiful superficially but they render writing difficult to understand and read. So, writing should not be over decorated for simple and easy communication.

Conclusion

Handwriting is an educational fundamental skill whose outweighing importance transcends time, place and people. It needs to be properly inculcated in learners so that they will master its conventionally accepted scope and content and attain its practical and aesthetical values. This is because on it hinges proficiency of the written form of communication. So it must not be overlooked by any literate circle at anytime and anywhere in the world.

Recommendations

1. To curb the problems of handwriting, the teaching and learning of good handwriting should be reintroduced and made mandatory in our primary schools, secondary schools and colleges of education for effective manpower development.
2. The programme should be properly manned by the department of Fine Art in our colleges of education to turn out adequate manpower for the primary and secondary levels.
3. All concerned should conjunctively work towards inculcating in our children proper writing habits to bring about pertinent advantages in their conceptions, perceptions and interpretations of human values.

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