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Mourning the Death of Handwriting

By CLAIRE SUDDATH Monday, Aug. 03, 2009

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I can't remember how to write a capital Z in cursive. The rest of my letters are shaky and stiff, my words slanted in all directions. It's not for lack of trying. In grade school I was one of those insufferable girls who used pink pencils and dotted their *i*'s with little circles. I experimented with different scripts, and for a brief period I even took the time to make two-story *a*'s, with the fancy overhang used in most fonts (including this magazine's). But everything I wrote, I wrote in print. I am a member of Gen Y, the generation that shunned cursive. And now there is a group coming after me, a boom of tech-savvy children who don't remember life before the Internet and who text-message nearly as much as they talk. They have even less need for good penmanship. We are witnessing the death of handwriting.

People born after 1980 tend to have a distinctive style of handwriting: a little bit sloppy, a little bit childish and almost never in



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cursive. The knee-jerk explanation is that computers are responsible for our increasingly illegible scrawl, but Steve Graham, a special-education and literacy professor at Vanderbilt University, says that's not the case. The simple fact is that kids haven't learned to write neatly because no one has forced them to. "Writing is just not part of the national agenda anymore," he says.

(See pictures of the college dorm's evolution.)

Cursive started to lose its clout back in the 1920s, when educators theorized that because children learned to read by looking at books printed in manuscript rather than cursive, they should learn to write the same way. By World War II, manuscript, or print writing, was in standard use across the U.S. Today schoolchildren typically learn print in kindergarten, cursive in third grade. But they don't master either one. Over the decades, daily handwriting lessons have decreased from an average of 30 minutes to 15.

Zaner-Bloser, the nation's largest supplier of handwriting manuals, offers coursework through the eighth grade but admits that these days, schools rarely purchase materials beyond the third grade. The company, which is named for two men who ran a penmanship school back when most business documents were handwritten, occasionally modifies its alphabet according to cultural tastes and needs.

(See pictures of a public boarding school.)

Handwriting has never been a static art. The Puritans simplified what they considered hedonistically elaborate letters. Nineteenth century America fell in love with loopy, rhythmic Spencerian script (think *Coca-Cola*: the soft-drink behemoth's logo is nothing more than a company bookkeeper's handiwork), but the early 20th century favored the stripped-down, practical style touted in 1894's *Palmer Guide to Business Writing*.

The most recent shift occurred in 1990, when Zaner-Bloser eliminated all superfluous adornments from the so-called Zanerian alphabet. "They were nice and pretty and cosmetic," says Kathleen Wright, the company's national product manager, "but that isn't the purpose of handwriting anymore. The purpose is to get a thought across as quickly as possible." One of the most radical overhauls was to *Q*, after the U.S. Postal Service complained that people's sloppy handwriting frequently caused its employees to misread the capital letter as the number 2.

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