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## The Penmanship Problem in Public and Private Schools

By C. A. Chessman

As far back as ten years ago, the principals, teachers, and school boards were beginning to come to a realization of the awkward attempts they were making toward teaching young people to write. The results were always a source of dissatisfaction to teachers who were compelled to decipher and grade papers. From the lower grades this dissatisfaction grew in proportion as the pupils grew older, with age and practice the instructors naturally expected a rise in proficiency. Yet, as the year went by, the pupils allowed themselves to scratch away in happy (?) abandon, only hoping to be able to portray their thoughts in acceptable English, and never thinking whether or not the legibility would be questioned. During the "copy-hour" as it has been familiarly (and rightly) called, there would generally come to the surface a marked degree of care, and desire to excel. This, however, was but momentary, they lapsed into old habits and scribbled immediately upon taking up their other work.

Thus the inefficiency of the methods used in the grammar grades was brought to the surface in an alarming degree. But how was it in the high schools? There we find the methods of instruction somewhat different the student is allowed more freedom independence of thought and action is encouraged. The course in penmanship is seldom met with in the high schools. Of course, given freedom on this point, it is but natural to suppose that a student will give free exercise to his personal regards and develop what many are pleased to term handwriting "full of individuality".

Now, the writer knows many efficient, painstaking men, whose object in life is to excel, whose sterling characters are written indelibly upon their brow, who, when they take up the pen, chase across the paper with a series of characters both annoying to the stranger and surprising to their friends; for knowing their spirit of painstaking, they expect from them a clear, firm hand. The writing of our most careful men and women is an insult to its recipient. It has no character which coincides with the men as we know them. The character which is revealed is a wholly unexpected one careless abandon is one of the most important functions of life. It is not wholly the fault of these men but is rather due to the faulty instruction which they received in their youth.

With most of us it is the case that from the first to the ninth grade we were taught carefully to COPY the exquisite Spencerian model given us a model revealing no personal character—simply a lifeless thing; and, then, relieved of even this guidance, and meeting exigencies where the pen must make rapid record, all thought of form was lost and we became scribblers.

Most people scribble, because they have not time to carefully form their characters.

Then, if we must scribble, why not find a method of writing' which, even though written in haste, will still remain legible? To this end the school boards adopted the vertical writing system, the open and upright characters of the engraved copy commending the style to them. For some time this proved successful in the lower grades, until, in the higher grades some began to write "back-hand". Absurd as this manner of writing is, I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that it is written by every eight of ten "vertical writers". This system proved even worse than the old slant, for it was not a likely qualification for an office position, and was often unreadable.

To meet the exigencies of the case, the school boards again cast about for a remedy of the evil, and finally found, as they thought, the happy solution of their troubles, the medial slant.

Now, during this, transmission period, covering about five or six years, the pupils were compelled to learn to write three distinct styles, viz., slant, vertical and medial-slant.

Let us see the result of all this, as shown in the high schools, preparatory institutions, and the colleges. We find the true slant (or Spencerian) style but seldom, usually written by students of 18 to 20 years of age; the vertical is almost as scarce and more often well executed. The medial-slant students have not arrived in large numbers in the colleges, but they and the backhand exponents predominate in the secondary schools. When the student reaches the "prep" school, he is initiated into the lecture form of instruction, and is compelled to make notes of the discussion to refresh his memory for the examinations. They are taken slowly at first, but gradually more speed is acquired until we find very full longhand notes of lectures. Two, three and four years of this leaves its mark. The evil is not so noticeable to the instructors as to the parents, and social correspondents.

In the college we see the evil well rooted during the freshman and sophomore years, and in the subsequent years his habit is so well formed that a business course in writing does not wholly eradicate the objectionable characteristics 'acquired during all his hard years' work with the one object in view his degree.

The stand taken by the colleges is that it is beneath their dignity to recognize so elementary a subject as writing. They suppose that that has been seen to before the student reaches this point in his career. Even the new courses of study in the ethics and science of business do not touch upon it-do not even criticize it. It is, plainly speaking, beneath their notice. The colleges require their entering students to be already proficient in certain prescribed subjects, and is it unreasonable for them to expect that the public and private schools should give to them students who can write legibly and rapidly? No. It is the sphere of the secondary school to prepare in every sense of the word; and it is the function of the university and the college to apply that preparation in an exposition of the courses leading them directly to the beginning of a career. Whether that career is to be successful depends upon the preparation. I am speaking, of course, of students who realize that they have a purpose in life. The achievements (or misachievements) of the "lame ducks" in writing as in everything else, are not worth taking into consideration.

It is evident that, in the three systems of writing just reviewed, we have not found an adequate style.

Some of the confusion existing today is due, it is true, to the changes which the pupils have been obliged to undergo in their already acquired styles of writing. But this does not excuse the marked ugliness of outline which existed before the transition was attempted! The fact that changing the styles of writing has not improved the performance of the student gives forceful illustration of the inadequacy of the methods of teaching

If these same students had received efficient instruction in the muscular movement writing, would the same result have existed? No, assuredly not. Why? Because, under the old system, instruction consisted in exhorting the pupil to follow exactly the beautiful, mathematically correct, engraved copy. In order to do this the student was obliged to draw the lines forming a character. This was well accomplished so long as the pupil was allowed to write slowly, but at the first slight call for speed, then what a difference! The symmetry was utterly destroyed. On the other hand, in receiving instruction in the muscular movement, the pupil has always before his eyes the forms which naturally come from his teacher upon the board or upon paper. The plates which are given him for a guide are not intended to be copied with precision. That requirement would affect the same results as the other systems. The pupil is simply required to look well at the copy and gain a good, general idea of it—in other words, to criticize it in his mind, to form his own ideal, and then try to place his ideal of that, particular character on paper. Previous to this step, he must have passed through a course which developed ease of movement, and symmetry of line. There is a good reason why the muscular movement should produce uniform and symmetrical strokes—the arm is rested upon the large muscle of the forearm, from which all motion originates. As the arm is held upon practically the same spot throughout a half page of writing, the fingers merely guide the pen. In the old style, the fingers do both the motion and the guiding, and are hitched along at every word or every two words, at most. The muscular movement includes but one element of the old style the old slant Spencerian characters, modified and omits the principal cause of failure in the other styles, a stereotyped copy.

For the last six or seven years the business school has been forced to accept its pupils as they have come, and has been compelled to commence at the beginning. Its function has become in a word, that of the grammar school, for it recognizes the need of courses in spelling arithmetic, grammar, and writing. The business schools have done good work along these lines, although spelling and grammar are still too much neglected. This is not, wholly, the fault of the schools—it is the outcome of the impatience of the pupil to finish his course in as short a time as possible, which, in turn, is influenced by lack of funds. Business schools, in my opinion, make a mistake in not prescribing a course, of a certain length of time (not less than one year), and at a certain cost. If they had in mind the advancement of education as much as pecuniary gain, they would take the risk now. This like any revolution having as its object a desirable end would soon be commended, and I doubt if there would be any great financial embarrassment. There would certainly

be a marked improvement in business interests. The school diplomas are certainly worth more than two three, four, or even six months of ordinary work. But I am digressing.

If the business school has failed in giving an English education, it has gloriously succeeded in its efforts to revolutionize penmanship. Doubtless all my readers are fully alive to the perfection reached in this subject by these schools. Of course, it does us good to watch accomplished penman swinging off long scrolls and elaborate designs, and beautifully executing our own name. But we do not really admire such skill so much as we do the beautiful, uniform, gracefully executed characters of a "business penman!". He passes swiftly over the page, never once stopping to shift the position of his hand or arm, but using a free, easy, gliding, rhythmical 'motion which makes the old school writer "green with envy", in fact, fascinates him and gives birth to the thought, "I wish I, could do that". It has been an impression among the old writers" who are not intimately acquainted with this modern system, that this method of writing is slow and ponderous. It is, then, the occasion of much surprise when they see a perfectly trained writer turn off line after line much more quickly than they could have done it "scribbling". These surprise increases, when on examining the copy, they are at once "struck" with the uniform slant, size, and absolute legibility of the whole matter. In fact, such writing is as easy to read as print.

It is a source of great satisfaction to all of us who are interested in the economic and educational welfare of our country and in the prospects for the future careers of! our children, to learn that the great city of New York has at last recognized the fruitlessness of continuing in the old way, and has accepted instruction in penmanship, As, given in the business school, is the only rational method of attaining the desired end. They have done this in view of the success it has met in the business schools.

The plea, "no individuality, no individuality", has, I think, been cried down.' What system of writing shows more? The painstaking man writes a beautiful, flowing hand; the miser a small, elegant, almost feminine hand, with lines closely spaced, and so on; and all have the advantage of writing a system which admits of extremely rapid work, legible work, untiring work. The large muscle which makes the principal effort is capable of great exertion while the small muscles of the fingers, which were once universally used alone and much overworked, tire very quickly hence, writers' cramp. What more complete reform could we desire?

We already feel well satisfied that so many young men and women are being sent out by the business schools who can write well and clearly. How much better satisfied shall we feel when the high schools begin to receive firm, uniform, muscular-movement writers! Let us hope, too, that the high schools will awaken to the full realization that it is still their function to continue instruction in penmanship until, at the end of a four-years' course, the student goes out into the world, or into college, with a confirmed habit of good writing at all times and under all circumstances. The instruction received in the grammar school is not enough. Students in leaving the grammar for the high school are at an age when they easily drop into new ways, and this should not be permitted.

The reform has begun; it is being copied in all important cities-in some, in a half-hearted way, with instruction half an hour per week and let us hope that the intelligence of our school boards may demand its adoption in every school, whether un-graded or private, Let us hope that when it is adopted, interest will be taken in the assured good results, and that it will be made a daily study for at least the first four or five years, and at least three times a week in later grades.

The day when a man may scribble his way to fame and fortune is passed, the scribbler is no longer appreciated, it is the muscular-movement writers who are sought out why? Because they can do more in the same time; because their work, quickly performed, is legible; because, in social Correspondence, their friends' do not feel compelled to stow away the letter till they have more time; because it is expected that a man who respects himself enough to write well, will execute his life's work with the same respect for its quality.