



# n Writing

Why **handwriting** is still an invaluable skill in the digital age

This girl's got the write stuff

→ Today's tech-savvy kids spend most of their time tapping away on keyboards, whether it's e-mailing, chatting or doing homework. When they're not doing that, they're texting—incessantly. You can forget handwritten letters. Today, notes passed during class are the only real mode of written correspondence. Seems like old-fashioned handwriting is fast becoming obsolete in the digital age. So, should school-aged children still learn how to hold their pencils properly and obsess over dotting their i's and crossing their t's?

Yes, they should, say developmental professionals and educators. Whether writing is considered an art, a learning tool or a crucial step in the developmental process, it is something that today's children still need to learn to do—and they should learn to do it properly.

Elaine Tsang holds a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy and leads the "Improve Your Handwriting" workshop at Elliott's Corner. An expert in the mechanics of handwriting, she considers typing and writing to be "equally important" skills for kids to master, but says that learning to write properly is invaluable.

"Research indicates that typing and writing employ different areas of the brain," Tsang says. "They also show that the specific

act of writing actually changes how children learn and how their brains develop."

One of the studies she refers to was carried out by Indiana University researchers who found that a child's learning and brain development could be greatly impacted by handwriting. This was discovered when researchers divided preschool-aged children into two groups and asked one to write out the alphabet and the other to sound out the letters. After four weeks, the writing group showed greater letter recognition than the other.

Handwriting, however, is not just an educational tool or a means of memorizing your A,B, Cs. Its impact extends far beyond the walls of the classroom, helping to develop fine motor skills, increase patience and enhance learning, while improving memory, focus, visual perception, hand-eye coordination and organizational skills.

"Handwriting is a skill that requires precision. Those who master it will have a more developed sense of competency," Tsang says. She adds that mastering handwriting

can lead to greater proficiency in other complex tasks, such as sewing, knitting or jewelry making.

And there's an added benefit: studies show that given identical content, legible tests often receive higher marks than their sloppy counterparts. This is particularly important when you consider that certain exams, like the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), still feature handwritten components.

At the same time, handwriting can reveal a lot about a child's personality and development. "Handwriting is a tapestry reflective of the interweaving of an individual's personality, his/her fine motor control and his/her learning environment," says Janienne Vaughan, leader of the English as an Additional Language Program at Yew Chung International School of Beijing (YCIS) Primary. "While a perfectionist will form his letters correctly and precisely, an impulsive person will rush through them and proceed onto the next exciting task. And, while strong personalities will write with

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bold strokes, timid people will often write lightly," she explains.

Despite all these upsides, Vaughan cautions against pushing kids to write before their finger muscles are developed. If a child's hands are not strong enough to hold a pencil properly, he or she will find ways to compensate, a practice which could lead to poor pencil-holding techniques that may persist throughout the child's life. Once children do start learning to write, they should write often and well. "The strengthening of children's finger, hand and arm muscles will significantly impact their penmanship," Vaughan says.

So what qualifies as good hand-writing technique? It all starts with how you hold the pencil. Tsang advises employing the Tripod Grip, which is accomplished by forming an "O" with the thumb and the tips of the second and third digits, and then placing the pencil in between all three—much like holding chopsticks. "Be sure not to grip too tightly or press down with too little or too much force," says Tsang. "Such ineffective techniques can negatively impact fluidity, speed and/or endurance."

Today, handwriting is not as highly emphasized as it used to be, but certain schools do continue to offer regular handwriting courses for younger students. At YCIS Beijing, students begin learning the Queensland Beginners Alphabet in Year 1, and move to

the Queensland Modern Cursive Script in Year 3. The latter was developed by a Rhodes Scholarship team researching a writing style that would suit modern demands for fast, legible writing.

In keeping up with modern times, the school has even instituted an e-learning platform that allows students to practice writing their Chinese characters by hand and on the computer, reinforcing character knowledge in both digital and analog forms. And, according to April Peng, primary Chinese coordinator at YCIS Beijing, students who study Chinese as a second language receive an added benefit: "The Chinese written language is unique in that each character contains a story. In this manner, Chinese handwriting becomes a window into Chinese history," she says.

With any luck, today's educators will provide children with enough opportunity and instruction to practice their handwriting and hone their penmanship. After all, as Vaughan is quick to remind us: "When the power goes out and the batteries fail, the best backup is a sheet of paper and a pencil." ●



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## How to Hold a Pencil

**While there is no "right way," most educators agree that the Tripod Grip is most ideal. Here's how to do it:**

### 1. Finger Positioning

Gently place the tips of your thumb, index and middle finger together. Place your pencil in the middle, so that the tip of your index finger rests on top of the pencil. Ensure all three fingers are bent slightly, and that the palm of your hand is rounded. A ball should be able to fit inside.

### 2. Hand Positioning

Your forearm should line up vertically with your thumb. Some people turn their hand inwards towards the body (so it looks like a hook), while others jut their elbows out—both positions are incorrect. For practice, write on a vertical surface, like an easel or a chalkboard. This forces the hand up and the elbow down.

### 3. Pencil Positioning

The top of your pencil should point backwards towards the shoulder of your writing hand. This rule is particularly helpful for lefties, as it prevents smudging by forcing the hand to move below the freshly written line of text, instead of over. It also makes it easier to see the words.



**A YCIS Beijing**  
student practices  
his characters



**YCIS Beijing**  
makes a point of  
getting students to  
write by hand