

Is It Time for Cursive to Die?

Cursive is disappearing from schools, and some people wonder if we're losing a link to the past. **BY LAUREN TARSHIS**

You love writing in cursive, right? Your pen flies across the page, creating words so beautiful you want to frame them.

Wait, what did you say? Your cursive looks like the scribbles of a 2-year-old?

Don't worry. Today, many people believe that cursive is a **relic** of the past, and that the ability to use it is way down on the list of what's important.

Until recently, though, writing in cursive was considered one of the most valuable skills taught in school. Kids spent months clutching their pencils, practicing tricky *q*'s and strange-looking *z*'s until they were perfect. In fact, students were graded on their penmanship the way you are graded on math.

Well, not anymore.

According to USA Today, 41 states no longer require students to learn cursive. Many kids learn to sign their

names and not much else. Cursive, it seems, is in danger of disappearing from schools—and our lives.

But would giving up cursive be a mistake?

A Sign of Growing Up

Cursive writing, which is any handwriting with letters joined together with loops, has been used for centuries.

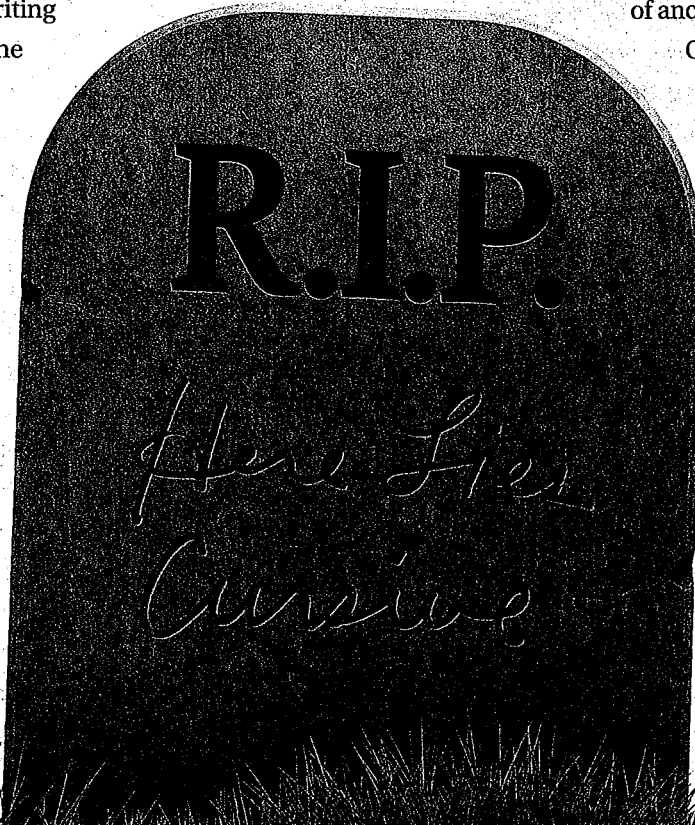
Cursive graffiti covers the crumbling walls of ancient Pompeii. Christopher

Columbus wrote of his adventures in the

Americas in cursive.

Thomas Jefferson penned one of our country's most famous documents, the Declaration of Independence, in glorious cursive.

It's easy to see why this form of handwriting became so popular. It is more **efficient** than printing because you don't have to lift your pen off



the page as often. It's less messy, too, or at least it used to be. Before Magic Markers and sparkly pencils, people used fragile quill pens and bottles of ink. Writing in the smooth flow of cursive meant fewer broken **quill** points and ink stains.

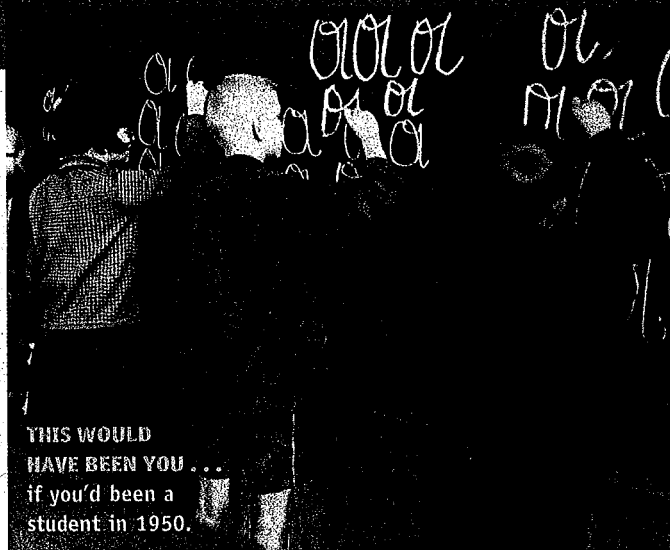
Cursive has been taught in America since the 18th century. For generations, mastering this form of handwriting was part of growing up, like learning to ride a bike. Look through your parents' scrapbooks or memory boxes—their old postcards from camp, book reports, love letters. You'll see their life histories written out in cursive.

Who Needs It?

Over the past decade, a powerful force has threatened to wipe out cursive—and handwriting in general—forever: technology. Today, we Skype, e-mail, and text instead of writing letters. College students take notes on laptops rather than on paper. Tourists post selfies from the Grand Canyon instead of mailing postcards.

It's no wonder that many school leaders don't see cursive as a 21st-century skill. Besides, schools are under enormous pressure to help students develop the math and reading skills they need to succeed on tests and in college. Algebra? Vital. Reading nonfiction? Vital. Writing in cursive? Eh—maybe not.

In fact, the ability to write in cursive may soon be the equivalent of playing a musical instrument: an **elective** art form rather than a required skill. Perhaps the time once devoted to



cursive should be spent learning to “read” and “write” computer-programming languages. After all, isn't it more useful to know how to code apps and websites than to write “app” and “website” without lifting your pen?

Yet there are many compelling reasons for keeping cursive alive. For one thing, it builds muscles in your hands. More importantly, studies have found that writing by hand improves thinking skills. Students who write out their essays before typing them tend to express more and deeper ideas. Then there is the fact that handwriting is a form of personal expression. No two people's handwriting is alike, but everyone's typing is pretty much the same.

Left Behind

Throughout human history, inventions have made our lives more convenient, more interesting, more connected. There is no question that Snapchat and texting have transformed our relationships, enabling us to connect with each other more easily and frequently. Not so long ago, sending letters was the best way to keep in touch with friends and family.

With each new technology, we move forward, but we also leave something behind. As handwriting disappears, will we lose our connection to the past? Will we become shallow thinkers who can't express anything deeper than a 140-character tweet? Or will we find exciting new ways to express ourselves?

When it comes to cursive, we have to decide: Should it be left in the past, or written into our future? ●



GOOD HANDWRITING = GOOD PERSON?

In the 19th century, people thought that to become a person of integrity, you had to develop good handwriting. Sloppy writers were suspected of having low moral character.

PERSONAL ESSAY

Why I Keep My Letters

They connect me to the people I love BY NINA SANKOVITCH

Six years before my son Peter left for college, my oldest sister, Anne-Marie, died of cancer. I have a phone message from her on an old answering machine that I take out when I want to hear her voice. I have home movies of her, moments spent laughing with my sons, hamming things up for the camera. I have photos galore. And I have my memories of our conversations. I can remember the summer nights we sat talking on the front steps of our house when we were growing up.

But it is the written words she left me, postcards and birthday cards and letters exchanged over my 40-plus years of being her sister, that allow me to hold in my hand the substance of who she was.

After Anne-Marie died, I pulled out every bit of correspondence I'd saved from her. I also found what she'd sent to my four sons over the years. For each of the boys, I want to create a box filled with the correspondence they received from Anne-Marie, along with photos of each of them with her. These boxes will allow my children to know all over again their aunt who

loved them so very much.

Letters are the history of our lives. Almost everyone I know has letters saved away somewhere. When I ask people why they keep these letters, the answer is always the same. Because the letters are a link, a connection. My friends say things like "the writer is with me, to hold and cherish" or "I like seeing her handwriting and remembering the time and place she was writing about" or "every time I reread these letters from loved ones, they appear in front of me, smiling, laughing."

When the letters we save are from people who are dead, whether for years or for centuries, we are preserving them as a presence in our lives. One friend used her grandmother's letters to write a **eulogy**, presenting her **vividly** for everyone at the funeral service. Another friend describes the letters her mother left behind as a wonderful gift, keeping the bond between them alive.

The cards Anne-Marie sent still speak to me. Whether celebrating an event ("By the time you get this you'll be a real lawyer—congratulations!") or expressing a known fact ("Paris is great—I don't know why we ever left") or admonishing me to keep a secret ("I was so exhausted, I



fainted outside of the theater. Don't tell Mama"), the physical reality of those words means even more to me now than when I first got them in the mail.

Letters provide not only a bridge to the people from our past but also a bridge to those in the present, but too far away for us to touch and see every day. Yes, I am getting texts from my son Peter off at college, short bursts of information: "taking Swedish" and the treasured "love u." But these 160-character messages are not enough to salve how much I miss him.

A letter offers **balm** for the ache of missing Peter, because it is a physical connection. A letter gives me a feel for his mood, not only in what he writes but also in how he writes.

A letter brings him home again. ●

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WRITING CONTEST

Some say that letter writing and cursive writing are lost arts. Do these lost arts have value in today's society? Should they be preserved? Support your ideas with details from each text. Send your response to **LETTER CONTEST**. Five winners will get *A Corner of White* by Jaclyn Moriarty.

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