

### *Transverse penhold*

The penhold of late roman cursive differs from most other cursives. The scribe held the pen transversely; the pen cant is not very obvious as the writing is monoline. With the penhold we are used to today the right downward oblique movement is one of the most difficult and least used. It is one of the mainstays of late roman cursive. When I started copying late roman cursive manuscripts, some loops gave me difficulty. The downward oblique strokes were not easy either. And written at speed everything came out wrong. I expected the letters to lose their shape, but they came apart the wrong way. As soon as I tried the transverse penhold, the whole muddle cleared (Figure 15). The curves became smooth and the strokes fluid enough to lead out of one character into the next. It was surprising how high the writing speed could go. Only the ink-dips seemed to hold it back. I wonder what those chaps could have done with a fibre-tip.

### *Where had we better go from here?*

My research into late roman cursive yielded a sizeable collection of letterforms, ligatures, and interesting strokes. Most of it was quite useless, as you would expect. Some bits were used in an experimental model alphabet from many sources that will soon be test-run in selected London schools. I wasn't much help in designing the model. My training as a calligrapher turned out to be a drawback. I had no idea which strokes would be too difficult for children. The programme of the Inner London Education Authority Art Inspectorate goes on in the capable hands of Nicolete Gray and Prue Wallis Myers. I hope the new model will have a wider movement pattern than the copperplate-descendant we use today. We might hope for beauty in the path of a monoline pen as it is in the late roman cursive rather than thicks and thins from pen angle or pressure.

1. Baudin, F., and Dreyfus, J. (eds). *Dossier A-Z '73*. Association Typographique Internationale, Andenne, Belgium, 1973, pp. 106-7.

## *Towards a New Handwriting Adapted to the Ballpoint Pen*

Nicolete Gray

### *Abstract*

Modern ballpoint and fibre pens are radically different in design and construction, and they can move with equal ease in all directions. The capacity for all-direction line movement fosters development of more convenient and efficient letter designs and combinations. After rejecting the typographic models and debased cursive designs used for formal writing in the past, the natural scribble of children is taken as a beginning point for all-direction cursive writing. By integrating such handwriting with the teaching of reading and other language arts, the habit of legible handwriting can easily flow into an adult hand characterized as fast, pleasurable, and flexible enough for individual expression. Certain historic hands, late roman cursive, gothic, and secretary, offer examples of contradictory rhythms that support the goal of all-direction writing movement. Specific new models are presented for modern writing but only as provisional designs. Experimental interpretations are encouraged; standard techniques for penhold are questioned in favor of new possibilities that reflect the all-direction approach to writing.

For the past few years I have been working on the idea of a new way of writing. I have called it a "way" because my starting point has been the way of putting pen to paper, of forming letters and words. Out of this a new style may develop, but at this time the creation of a new style is not a useful aim.

The need for a new way of writing follows from the fact that we are writing with new instruments. Ballpoint and fibre- or nylon-tipped pens are radically different from the pens of the past—from quills, steel nibs, and fountain pens of similar nib construction. These pens had their own advantages and limitations, and the classic handwriting styles of the past—secretary, italic, copperplate—reflect these qualities. In particular these scripts all depend for their perfection very largely on the movement of line from thick to thin, whether created by pressure on a flexible nib or by the broad-edged, stiff nib moving at a fixed angle to the paper. The way in which these nibs move also affects

letter construction; movements which are difficult to make, such as up strokes, are avoided, those which are easy are emphasized in the writing rhythm.

The new pens—most easily described as “all-direction” pens—do not have these characteristics. The line which they make is undifferentiated; with some a certain difference of thick and thin can be obtained, but not much. On the other hand, they can move with equal ease in all directions. The limitations imposed by other types of nib no longer exist, so letters can, if more convenient, be constructed differently and more easily.

Undoubtedly some people, by taking trouble, can write good italic and copperplate hands with all-direction pens. But with most people good hands formed in these styles tend to deteriorate and grow slipshod and formless. For the average child of today in England—and I believe also in North America—no proper style of handwriting has been developed. In the formative stage they are probably taught printscript (or manuscript); that is, they are taught to copy letterforms which have been developed as detached typographic forms, with all cursive characteristics eliminated. This inculcates a way of thinking about letters which dies hard: the idea that the letter has one basic form, which is typographic, and that it is the shape only, not the way in which it is made, which matters. Thereafter, children may learn some form (probably a debased traditional form) of cursive writing; many just “join up” their printscript model. Over a number of years I have been collecting and analysing the handwriting of students at various levels of schooling. One sees the persistent influence of typographic forms, particularly in insufficient spacing and diminishing ascenders and descenders, making for illegibility and dreariness.

So on two quite separate counts we urgently need a new method and a new model in the teaching of handwriting. We can start from the ballpoint pen. We need to start in the reception classes at school. Are there any other starting considerations? We need surely to consider what we are aiming for. Copperplate, and to a lesser degree italic, were evolved as formal hands. People needed to write a “fair hand”—for commercial and legal records, for all scripts for the printer—in order to get any literate job. Today this is unnecessary, all that class of work is done on the type-

writer. We need to write for informal purposes only. Speed has become, with legibility, a primary consideration. To these I would add enjoyability: if we are going to learn to write, why not make it a pleasure?

We *learn* to write as small children, and teachers are naturally pre-occupied with the first stages. We *use* handwriting as adults. The learning and the practice should be a coherent development, but so often those interested in handwriting are concerned with only one of the two ends. I am interested in and have some experience with children, but I am not a teacher; my contribution is really at the adult end. Prue Wallis Myers, until recently one of H.M. Inspectors of Schools in Manchester, has long experience of school work and the teaching of small children. So together we compass both ends. We have just finished a draft *Teachers' Manual*, which is to be tried out by some co-operating schools; we hope that it will be published in a completed form by the beginning of the next school year.

Basically what we are producing is a model and a method, and these are founded on four principles. Firstly, on using the quality of the new pens. Secondly, on the idea of taking the natural scribbles of the young child as a starting point and developing these in stages—but without a break—into cursive handwriting. Thirdly, on integrating the teaching of handwriting with the teaching of reading, language, and spelling. Fourthly, on working towards the creation of an adult hand which shall be legible, fast, pleasurable, and sufficiently flexible in formation to allow for individual expression.

The new pens move in all directions; consequently one can include new movements, in particular upward, backward, and horizontal movements which were difficult to make with the old pens. It is to new movements that we must look to find interest and beauty to compensate for the loss of beauty and variety provided formerly by contrast between thick and thin in line width. These must not be meaningless flourishes but movements which contribute also to legibility by emphasizing the differentiating characteristics of each letter. To find such movements we have looked at earlier styles of handwriting because it is unnecessary, wanton indeed, to try to invent anything in the way of new letterforms. We have only to turn to the organic history of each letter

to find the movements we need, so we looked first at the earliest form of cursive, the late roman cursive when a pen not unlike the modern pens was used (but, of course, a dip-pen). Important collaborating research in this field was done by Gunnlaugur S. E. Briem. This proved fruitful, suggesting a possible new penhold and new ways of forming and joining some letters.

We have also looked at gothic and secretary hands which provide interesting uses of contradictory rhythms. Why should all ascenders be parallel? Diagonal movements of *d* and *v* (Figure 1) provide a lively contrast, the backward curve of the descenders of *g* and *y* (Figure 2) can do the same. A horizontal bar to *e* (Figure 3) is an aid to legibility, crossbars of *f* and *t* (Figure 4) are useful ligatures. Alternative forms to letters can add interest and suit different letter-juxtapositions and can be suggested to older children and adults. These are the sort of ideas we have been looking for.

The old pens took one, sometimes two, strokes for each letter. The new pens write whole words in an unbroken line. We need to take this into account from the beginning. It is not just a question of forming single letters well, but of drawing groups of letters as one satisfactory symbol. And here the link with reading and spelling provides itself. An analysis of good ballpoint hands coincides with teaching experience in positing an optimum of two or three letters in a single movement. Obviously these should in the first instance be the letters which frequently occur together in any particular language. In English there are many digraphs, letters which together signify sounds which are different from those signified by single letters, combinations such as *ou*, *ai*, *sh*, *th*, etc. There are also grammatical suffixes such as *ed*, *ing* (Figure 5). Children are often taught to read words rather than separate letters; why not also write words from the beginning? These are the sort of units which we think should be used in the teaching of handwriting, so that ligatured letters should be well-formed and beautiful.

In all this we are really thinking about line-movement, and this is basic to our method and model. We think it essential that children should be taught not just the shape of the letter, but how it is made, where it begins, ends, joins on. In this, continuity should be established with children's natural scribble patterns, which

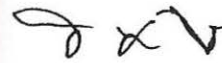


Figure 1.

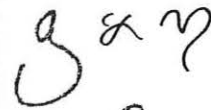


Figure 2.

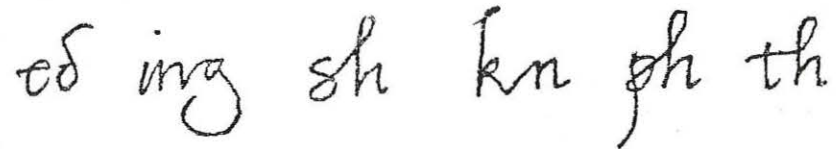


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Figure 5.



can easily be directed to grow into letterforms, so a natural flow need never be lost as it is when children are made to draw disconnected typographic letters. This is also an anchor for legibility. If we always make a letter with the same movement, it remains recognizable even when the movement is simplified for the sake of speed.

This stress on units and movement is also a stress on rhythm. But the rhythm of different people's writing, even when making the same movement, may be different. Some people may enjoy curving movements (such as *g* in Figure 6) fading into a flick; others may like strong verticals, and end their *t* or *d* (Figure 7) or *f* with a firm down stroke. This leaves room for personal expression.

The crux of the matter is, of course, the actual pen movements and letterforms which we advocate. Here I would like to stress that our model is experimental. A new style is not made by two people—we just hope to get it started. Some things we feel very strongly: for instance, loops. The simplest way to get from the



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

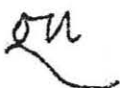


Figure 11.



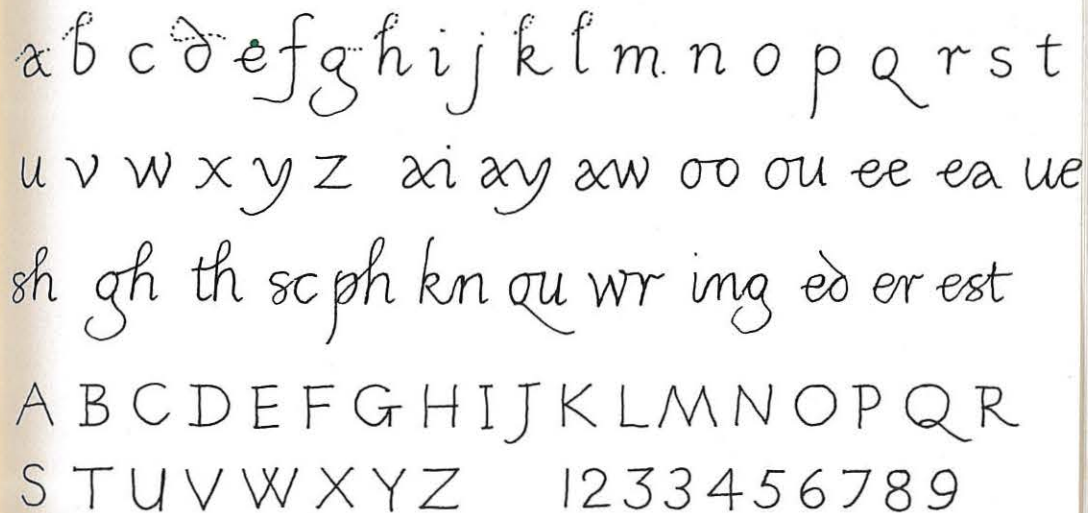
Figure 12.

previous letter to an ascender is with a loop; this can also be a pleasing decorative element. An *r* (Figure 8) must begin with a curve round and up into its stem, in contradistinction to the truncated form which is becoming common. Double *f* should be a distinctive sign (Figure 9), not two identical *f*'s, etc. On the other hand, we have experimental ideas which we should like to try out. For instance, it has been noted by teachers that children often like to start their letters from the bottom upwards. With the new pens this is quite possible; why not, for instance, start *sh* (Figure 10) at the bottom? Again *qu* (Figure 11) always comes together; why not make *ou* in one stroke (Figure 12) and give the *q* its tail as you would dot your *i* or cross your *t*?

So many writing books state that the pen must be held correctly in such and such a way. With the new pens is there any correct penhold? They will write when held in all sorts of different ways. Here again we want to try out all possibilities, and get rid of fixed ideas.

One must always bear in mind that writing is communication. We have always to find the mean between new ideas and the preservation of continuity. We can, I think, revive old forms and formations of letters, forms which are part of the organic life of the letter throughout history. There is no need to think of creating new forms. We do, indeed, plan to produce a second publication, designed for a stage when children are old enough—say, ten or eleven—to be interested in forming their own handwriting, and which will chronicle something of the history of this organic life of each of our letters (Figure 13).

Figure 13.



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 ai ay ax oo ou ee ea ue  
sh gh th sc ph kn qu wr ing ed er est  
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 1 2 3 3 4 5 6 7 8 9