

# THE FUTURE OF READING

## Unscrambling the scribble

Studying for a Masters of Education at the ripe old age of 50+ has certainly been a challenge, but the idea of sitting for an exam spun me into a panic. I did everything I could think of to prepare, including reducing the entire content of the subject 'Online Communities' down to ten slightly risqué acronyms (hey it worked thirty years ago) and spending an hour in the local newsagent deciding which pen to buy for the exam.

As I read over the exam questions I was fairly confident, despite the butterflies, that I'd be able to pull this thing off, but soon to my great amazement, I realised that there was one thing I hadn't prepared for. I'd forgotten to practice using my fancy new pen. My handwriting limped and stumbled across the page like the faltering steps of a sodium-deprived long distance runner. The scrawl I left on the page was depressingly illegible – even to me. My hand seized up. I was paying the price, after twenty years, of letting the computer do all the writing for me.

Over the past few years there's been much discussion about how computers are changing the way we read. Our attention spans are shorter, we prefer quick bites of information preferably with graphics, nobody is reading the classics anymore, and the Holy Grail of computer interfaces is the one which exactly replicates the experience of reading print on paper.

But my experience with a written exam got me thinking about the almost equally dispiriting influence of computers on handwriting. Will handwriting eventually disappear altogether? Neef, Dijck, and Ketelaar ask the same question in their 2006 book appropriately titled *Sign Here!: Handwriting in the Age of the New Media*. They argue that handwriting didn't disappear in the wake of previous

'writing machines' and it's hard to believe it will happen in the computer age either as long as handwriting's technologies are "intimately tied to particular practices and forms that are continued in the present."

However, the most frequently employed "practices and forms" being continued in my world are the post-it notes dotted over the computer at work and the weekly grocery list. Are these the mundane uses to which handwriting will be limited in the future? Already the illuminating practice of being able to trace an author's creative process through successive manuscript revisions belongs to the past. Another primary source of information, the letter, has always been important to historical researchers because letters often reveal the hidden motivations and personal influences driving those who shape events and intellectual thought. They also reveal discrepancies between the private and the public self. Charles Darwin's lifelong correspondence gives us an insightful and comprehensive picture of the man and his theories to which we would not otherwise have access. Along with love letters, unless someone has the forethought or interest to print them out, the similarly rich sources of information to be found in the emails of today lie unrecoverable in cyberspace.

Then there's the fact that all typing looks the same. I've always treasured the individuality and immediacy of hand written communication and I'm still popular at parties with my knowledge of graphology which is supposed to reveal a writer's hidden personality (sometimes better not to mention those earthy downstrokes).


There's no longer the same emphasis on handwriting at school that I experienced growing up in the 50s and 60s and unless calligraphy becomes a more popular art form it's unlikely that anything can be done to stop handwriting's speedy decline. Soon we'll need a new edition of Eve McLaughlin's *Reading Old Handwriting*, originally published in 1979 to help people trace their family histories. Unfortunately, I can't use the following quote as an excuse for my own poor exam performance, "Documents penned by more highly educated people tend to give more trouble. The more used a person was to writing, the less neat it was ..."

After years of relying on the computer to do most of our writing for us, perhaps we should change this line to read, "The less used a person is to writing, the less neat it is ..."

**Janice Todd**  
Information Services Librarian, Teacher Education  
University of Technology, Sydney  
janice.todd@uts.edu.au

Currently reading *The Case for God* by Karen Armstrong

Are these the  
mundane uses to  
which handwriting  
will be limited  
in the future?




**Harness the Power of  
your Information**

**INMAGIC® Presto**

**INMAGIC® DB/Text® Library Suite**

**for Social Knowledge Networks**



**MAXUS**

For further information contact Maxus or your local representative

VIC	Maxus Australia	03 9646 1988
SA	Ibatax Consulting	08 8234 7113
WA	Infodata	08 9389 9558
QLD	Resource Options	07 3343 7300
NT	Peter Walton & Associates	08 8927 3669

maxus@maxus.net.au    www.maxus.net.au