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HANDWRITING OVERVIEW

Introduction

Those who work with young students just learning to write face an increasingly difficult task—how to choose an effective handwriting curriculum from a wide variety of methods and styles. Complicating this process is the fact that today's highly persuasive sales campaigns do not necessarily go hand-in-hand with solid, researched-based curricula!

The importance of choosing an effective handwriting curriculum cannot be underestimated. It's a choice that will shape a student's habits and abilities for life. This site is dedicated to helping teachers, parents, and curriculum committees make accurate, informed assessments of handwriting curricula and their claims. (The author acknowledges in advance a definite bias toward programs based on research rather than rhetoric.)

In order to simplify style comparison, the various programs have been divided into categories. However, each program should be evaluated on its own merits rather than its inclusion in any particular group. Groupings are as follows:

Traditional Handwriting:

Palmer • Zaner Bloser® • A Reason For® • McDougal-Little® • Harcourt Brace®

Italicized Handwriting:

D'Nealian® • Getty-Dubary™

Other Programs:

Abeka® • Peterson Directed ®

This site concludes with a Reference Section listing major articles and pertinent research related to evaluating handwriting instruction. This site also includes a Style Comparison Sheet which allows users to print a comparison of the various handwriting styles.

Traditional Handwriting

Palmer Handwriting

There's a good chance that your grandparents learned to write using "the Palmer method." It was popularized by Austin Palmer in the early 1900s, and almost every handwriting program in existence today is a direct descendent of this style—either as an enhancement of the method, or as a reaction against it.

Strength: traditional alphabet formation, historical foundation

Weakness: archaic style, somewhat outdated methodology, minimal commercial support.

Zaner Bloser® Handwriting

The number one selling handwriting program in America. Based on the Palmer method with numerous improvements and enhancements. Zaner Bloser currently offers both their old style (traditional) alphabet, and a new more contemporary version (simplified). More information on Zaner Bloser handwriting can be found at www.zaner-bloser.com

Strength: traditional alphabet, easy-to-use materials, strong support

Weakness: tendency to use meaningless or silly sentences for practice

A Reason For® Handwriting

Using an alphabet very similar to Zaner Bloser's "simplified" style, this curriculum is based on content taken from Scripture verses. It also includes a strong outreach component, giving students a practical "reason" for using their very best handwriting. An informative, well-designed website with downloadable curriculum samples can be found at: www.areasonfor.com

Strength: traditional alphabet, easy-to-use materials, highly motivational

Weakness: unsuitable for public school use due to Christian content.

McDougal, Littell© Handwriting

Similar to Zaner Bloser with minor variations in style and teaching methodology.

Website: <http://www.mcdougallittell.com>

Harcourt Brace ® Handwriting

Similar to Zaner Bloser with minor variations in style and teaching methodology.

Website: www.harcourtschool.com

Italicized Handwriting

Author's Note: Italicized styles are somewhat controversial. Proponents cite easier transition, student satisfaction. However, at least one major study (Graham, 1992) finds little to substantiate these claims. In addition, other studies have raised questions regarding specific liabilities associated with teaching italicized alphabets (Kuhl and Dewitz, 1994; Hackney, 1991; etc.) That having been said, there are still thousands of schools nationwide that embrace this style.

D'Nealian Handwriting

Developed in the 1960's by Don Neal Thurber (Don Neal = D'Nealian) in an effort to ease the transition from manuscript to cursive. It features a unique manuscript alphabet that reflects the cursive forms of each letter. More information can be found at www.scottforesman.com

Strength: strong corporate support, easier transition (see author's note above), historical foundation

Weakness: some studies suggest various problems associated with learning a separate alphabet for reading and writing.

Where is the transition? With D'Nealian manuscript, there's hardly any transition. That's the feature that has made this handwriting method the favorite of teachers from coast to coast. All you do is add a few simple joining strokes and—presto—you're writing in D'Nealian.

A Beka® Handwriting

A "cursive only" handwriting curriculum designed for use with the A Beka language arts curriculum. Popular with many homeschoolers. A Beka handwriting can be found at: <http://www.abeka.com/ABB/Catalogs/HSCat/Catalog.html>

Strength: No transition necessary since only cursive handwriting is taught.

Weakness: Same as D'Nealian. Also, some studies cite concerns about requiring fine motor skills prior to physiological readiness. (Kuhl and Dewitz, 1994).

HANDWRITING AND THE BFH PROGRAM

Good handwriting has a powerful affect on academic achievement. Barchowsky Fluent Handwriting is devoted to developing maximum legibility with maximum speed. Benefit to students is the paramount concern always.

The BFH program grew out of elementary classroom experience. The program evolved as the author taught students from age four to fourteen, observed their capabilities, and listened to their ideas.

Fluent handwriting depends on rhythmic movement and good posture. One is as critical as the other. Think, if you will, about other physical activities. All demand a specific posture and movement to work with well, whether to swing a baseball bat, hit a nail with a hammer, play a piano, or write.

ONE MODEL ALPHABET

The BFH program has one model alphabet only. It serves as the starting point for the youngest students. With no changes in letter formations, it evolves into a suitable hand for older students, and adults.

Most lowercase letters of the BFH model include entry and exit strokes to encourage flowing movement. The youngest students learn these characters. Once they learn to recognize characters, write them, and put them into words, they are ready to move on to joined writing, true cursive. (The word "cursive" is often applied to a method of writing that employs undercurves, overcurves, and loops to make characters join. The derivation of the word cursive is Latin. It means running, as in a flowing, fluent movement.)

PRINT AND CURSIVE ALPHABETS

Fine motor skills suffer if two different alphabets are presented in a handwriting programs. (Some educators believe..., AVKO's editorial correction.) Many educators believe it best to teach print-script first, and cursive later. (But there are those who believe it best to teach cursive first and manuscript later. Again, AVKO's editorial insertion) Print-script appears to be simple because it resembles the type from which students learn to read.

Print-script models are frequently composed of circles and lines. The characters are drawn slowly, rather than written freely. Rhythm suffers because most print-script models lack the design elements that allow them to flow. Many students confuse the placement of the lines that form letters. Reversals become a problem. The BFH model will not produce reversals, because of the easy character formation, and conformity to natural rhythmic movement.

In most schools conventional cursive is introduced after two to three years of learning print-script. It is confusing. Letters whose strokes used to start at the top now start at the baseline. Some letter shapes are modified, and some change altogether. Barchowsky Fluent Handwriting letters are always formed in the same direction that we read, top-to-bottom and left-to-right.

Here are two generic samples of print-script:

First Sample (stick ball)

Second sample (D'Nealian manuscript)

Third sample (D'Nealian Cursive)

This is the model for the BFH program.

Cursive models in common use today are reruns from the nineteenth century. There have been many cursive alphabets throughout the ages. Usually letterforms change as cultural changes occur. Nineteenth century handwriting methods are ill suited to our present culture. They do not work with today's tools, technology, and need for rapid writing. Most current, cursive models are based on alphabet designs by scribes who cared more for virtuoso flourishes than for efficient, running hands. Scribes of the past emulated the curls and swirls that adorned copperplate prints that date to the sixteenth century. Letter shapes varied over the years, but the curlicues have long been admired, although to master them requires many hours of practice.

The introduction of a second model for cursive writing is unnecessary if students have already learned to write characters that can be joined with their entry and exit strokes.

SAVE TEACHING TIME

Valuable time is saved when only one method is taught. Handwriting instruction takes place in the early years. The BFH program recommends about 15 to 20 minutes a day in the beginning. Sessions for very young students should not be devoted solely to letter formations. This is an opportunity to play, and to learn left from right, top from bottom. Students can have fun pretending to lead an orchestra, or to trace a bird or helicopter in flight.

First and second grades (ages 5 to 8) can allot about four 20 to 25 minute handwriting sessions per week. Principles of good handwriting should prevail throughout all written assignments.

Joins should be taught in first grade, and just as soon as possible. Each class should start with a five-minute warm up exercise that relates to the letters that students will practice.

Handwriting is a small motor physical education, and just as for all serious sports, a warm up period precedes the game. All warm up patterns in the BFH program relate either to characters, or to joining them.

As soon as students can construct characters satisfactorily, formal handwriting classes should be gradually phased out, with good handwriting practices integrated into all written work, science and math, etc. Do we sometimes forget that numbers must be well formed and placed? A crooked column of numerals, inconsistent in size is hard to add up. Spelling and reports are good places to look for legibility. Note-taking is good for both legibility and speed.

YOURS FOR LIFE

The BFH program grows with the student. Beginners start with a one-model alphabet. As soon as the basics are learned, the emphasis is on developing a legible, rapid, individual hand. Handwriting cannot be ignored during the years of physical and intellectual development.

It is important to monitor students as they grow and develop fine motor skills. With little time invested, the BFH program will help instructors understand the elements of handwriting that need attention through the age of about 14. You will find diverse and engaging activities for older students on the CD-ROM.

It is reassuring to know that students who were taught with the BFH program are now adults who can take legible, rapid-fire notes, as well as impress a client with a personal memo, or a potential employer with a job application.

Getty-Dubay Handwriting

A relative newcomer to italicized handwriting programs. Developed by Barbara Getty and Inga Dubai at Portland State University. While D'Nealian tends to make manuscript letters reflect cursive letters, Getty-Dubay tends to make the cursive alphabet reflect manuscript formation. Some reviewers have referred to Getty-Dubay as "calligraphy style" handwriting. More information on Getty-Dubay handwriting can be found at: <http://extended.pdx.edu/press>

Strength: easier transition (See note above)

Weakness: Same as D'Nealian. Too new for longitudinal studies

Specialized Handwriting

A Beka® Handwriting

A "cursive only" handwriting curriculum designed for use with the A Beka language arts curriculum. Popular with many homeschoolers. A Beka handwriting can be found at:

<http://www.abeka.com/ABB/Catalogs/HSCat/Catalog.html>

Strength: No transition necessary since only cursive handwriting is taught.

Weakness: Same as D'Nealian. Also, some studies cite concerns about requiring fine motor skills prior to physiological readiness. (Kuhl and Dewitz, 1994)

Peterson Directed Handwriting©

Another handwriting program popular with homeschoolers. Peterson uses a unique alphabet, and the major emphasis is on the teaching methodology. More information on Peterson Directed Handwriting © can be found at: <http://www.peterson-handwriting.com>

Strength: Very structured teaching methodology.

Weakness: Same as D'Nealian due to unique alphabet shapes.

References

Author's Note: While by no means comprehensive, the following list provides a good overview of the topic. Included are some classic research studies, articles, and books (some dating as far back as 1923) that are often overlooked in the attempt to get the "latest" research spin.

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Final Comments & Fine Print

All font samples on this site are courtesy of the fine folks at Educational Fontware. They offer fonts and font variations for most major handwriting styles. Visit their website at:

www.educationalfontware.com

This was created in partial fulfillment of the requirements related to a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership (Curriculum & Instruction emphasis). Comments should be directed to Bill Morelan at

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