

CONTINUOUS CURSIVE: CURE OR CURSE?

Since the re-introduction of the teaching of handwriting into the National Curriculum in England we, at the NHA, have noticed that many schools are opting to teach **continuous cursive** throughout the school, often starting in Reception. In one way this approach represents a welcome commitment to ensuring that the skill of handwriting is taught consistently through the primary years and we commend this enthusiasm. However, I believe that the practice to impose a continuous cursive handwriting style, especially on children as young as five, may be misguided, despite the good intentions. I will attempt to show why.

Many have found that the teaching of continuous cursive, with its florid letterforms and its baseline 'entry' and 'exit' strokes, whilst achievable by some children, leaves many struggling to write. Looking more closely at what this style entails, the arm and hand must move slowly across the page whilst the fingers simultaneously perform a range of complex fine movements in a series of different directions, and this requires a high level of gross and fine motor coordination. Many children find this challenging not only those with known coordination difficulties, and I am convinced that we should think carefully before imposing the practice indiscriminately. The much gentler approach of teaching simple individual letters as a first step, then showing how they can be joined to form a flowing script is much more natural and can be tailored to the maturation of the individual child. This is the reason why it is recommended in the National Curriculum.

I believe that the resurgence of the practice of teaching continuous cursive has been influenced in part by pressure from certain Special Needs' groups who hold the view that teaching this way makes learning more straightforward for the child. For example, I have heard it suggested that if children are taught that all letters start in the same place (i.e. on the baseline) they will have less to remember and thus become less confused. If only life were so simple! The truth, I

would argue, lies further afield and the insistence on baseline entry tends to create a myriad of problems along the way with both fluency and legibility.

Let's unpick where the discrepancy between belief and practice lies. Joining from the baseline only makes sense when the previous letter ends at that same point, i.e. *on the line* – fine for letters such as *a*, *u* and *n* where a diagonal stroke works naturally. However, what happens when letters end at mid-height, such as *o*, *r*, *v* and *w*? These all need to be joined with a *horizontal* not a diagonal stroke. If entry from the baseline has been established as a motor programme, the child will find it hard *not* to return to the line before making subsequent joining strokes (making *o* resemble *α* and *v* like *υ*, for example - see below in Fig.1) and this may result in legibility being affected. Having to learn exceptions to rules and *unlearn* the kinaesthetic patterns is both confusing and time-consuming. Establishing correct and *consistent* motor sequences from the start is optimal for developing automaticity and I would caution against any practice which involves elements of unlearning.

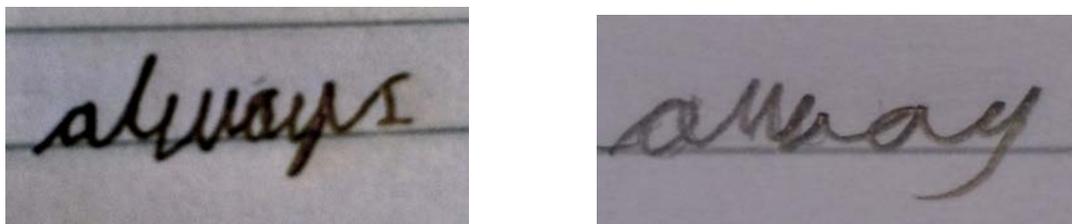


Fig.1 Example of 'w's returning to the baseline in 10 year olds' handwriting

A further argument against teaching baseline entry is that children may not always appreciate which lines represent the *core* of the letterform and which are the joining strokes. This can result in an outcome where either all the additional strokes are retained or where part of the letter is omitted or elided (see Fig 2 below). Either can be detrimental to overall legibility.

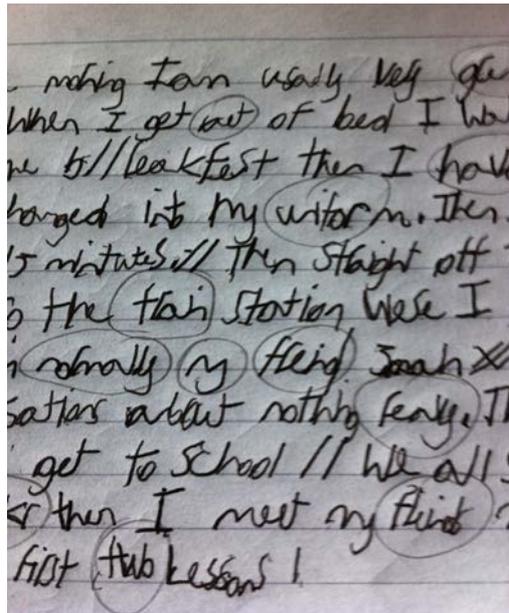


Fig. 2. Handwriting of a 12-year old showing confusion between 'entry' and core letter strokes

It may be helpful at this point to examine where possible misconceptions over continuous cursive come from. First, confusion may arise over the terms commonly used. For example, the word "cursive" is derived from Latin and means "to run" or "flow", as in the "current" of a river. This is a general descriptive term I would argue, and not specific to any one style of handwriting. The D'Nealian cursive handwriting style taught across the US is assumed by many in this country to be the *only* cursive style which children can or should learn, and it may not be generally understood that any joined or part-joined style meets the 'cursive' or 'flowing' criteria. A further belief commonly held is that a continuous cursive handwriting style must be faster and more fluent than a part- or un-joined script (because the pen doesn't leave the page) and, as a consequence, it should be taught to promote automaticity. However, most experienced practitioners working with young people will know that this is not necessarily the case.

Research evidence can guide us on these issues. First, from a visual perceptual perspective, some early studies have shown that in order to learn to write, the emergent writer needs to develop an abstract internal representation of each letterform to be translated into a motor trace (Ellis, 1982; Margolin, 1984). This

is more easily achieved if each letter is presented as an individual unit, separate from letter strings. This makes a strong case for adopting simple, unadorned letterforms. Second, from a motor perspective, early analysis of individual movement patterns of males and females shows that the 'lyrical', flowing movements, such as those used for joining strokes which cross midline moving from left to right, take time to develop and are more natural for girls than boys (Laban, 1960). Whilst this particular research is somewhat dated, it is interesting to note that electronic analyses of motor patterns, currently being conducted for the development of movement recognition software (in progress), produce similar findings. The significance of this is that children who mature late may not be ready to produce the movements which continuous cursive writing requires, especially if they are boys. In terms of speed, there is no evidence to date that fully joined handwriting is faster than part- or un-joined script. One old study (Hildreth, 1945) found that joined and un-joined styles were equally fast in adults, and this finding has been replicated more recently with upper primary and lower secondary school pupils (Prunty, 2014).

If, as well as looking at the theoretical background, we observe what people – children and adults – *actually* do, we can gain further understanding on this issue. Here are some examples, reported by teachers:

1. The majority of adults do not write fully cursively; most use a mix of joined and un-joined script.
2. Many adolescents who have been taught joined script in the primary school abandon it when they get to secondary school in order to achieve greater speed when the demands of the curriculum increase.
3. Un-joined script may retain legibility for longer when handwriting speed increases, as in exams.
4. Forcing children with motor coordination difficulties to join may create a range of unnecessary problems with writing and result in an aversion to doing it.
5. It is possible to achieve a stylish, functional, fluent joined or part-joined script *without* using the "Continuous Cursive" model.

6. Whilst anecdotal evidence suggests that handwriting supports spelling (e.g. Cripps, 1995), there is no evidence that this applies only to writing in cursive styles of script.

I ought to make it clear at this point that I am not advocating a return to the old “ball and stick” (“Manuscript”) letterforms which were taught in the 1970s (Fig.3a. below). It is now generally accepted that *that* particular style of writing was both ugly and static. Preferably, we would recommend the teaching of individual letters but in a dynamic way, i.e. with flowing exit strokes (see Fig. 3c below) and teach them in the ‘movement families’ with other letters which are formed using similar movements. Although in the UK we have no national style, the widely adopted ‘Sassoon font’ fills the bill in this respect very nicely.

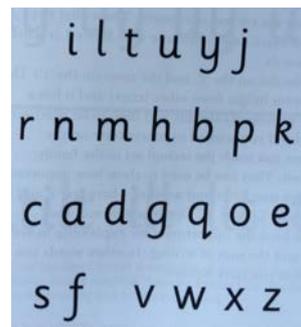
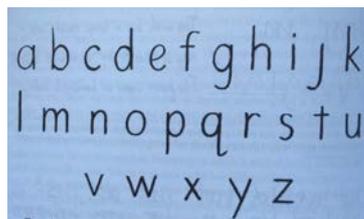


Fig. 3a. “Manuscript”

Fig. 3b. “D’Nealian”

Fig.3c. “Sassoon” font

The Sassoon-style forms are simple to visualize and easy to convert into motor traces. For example, contrast the simplicity of this “g” (Fig. 3c) with the complexity of the cursive “g” (Fig 3b) from both a perceptual and a motor perspective. There is the added advantage with the simple forms that there is no *unlearning* to be done. Once the child has understood where each letter starts and ends, the transition from one to the next becomes very natural. This is the approach recommended in the National Curriculum.

Teachers need to feel confident that research supports this approach as there are number of organisations – many which are money-making concerns – which advocate their own cursive handwriting programmes with reference to perceived benefits in neurological programming. Some even claim that learning

continuous cursive from the outset changes the functional architecture of the brain (and one only has to read the research studies they quote to discover that the conclusions they draw are not what the studies are actually about!). Some claim also that a continuous cursive script better supports reading development. There is no evidence to date to substantiate any of these claims. A comprehensive review of brain-scanning studies (to appear in the coming revision of “The Handbook of Writing Research”) highlights benefits to reading through learning handwriting, but suggests that it comes from the learning of the *individual* letterforms and *not* joined script – quite the opposite of what we are sometimes led to believe.

So I would appeal to any teachers and therapists reading this article to examine the true rationale for choosing one approach over another, to have the courage to promote the practice which has evidence of greatest benefit to the child, and to ensure that the effort and care which is invested in teaching the young to handwrite is not squandered by unnecessarily adopting approaches which are unhelpful.

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