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# How to Improve Your Handwriting

By Dr. Kathleen Begley  
Professional Speaker and Author

***Note to Readers:** This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on politics, business, and anything else that strikes her fancy.*

The other day, while flipping through a mound of mail in my home office in suburban Philadelphia, I came across a letter from Capital One. The bank, among other things, issues credit cards. I have several. When I noticed the financial institution's logo in the upper left corner of the envelope, I felt uneasy. Since the economy tanked last fall, Visa and Mastercard issuers have ruthlessly been raising interest rates, lowering limits, and outright canceling cards. I was prepared for the worst.

When I unsealed the envelope, I found a check I had sent several weeks ago to reduce the balance on one of my accounts. It was accompanied by a letter. With shaking hands, I proceeded to read the text. After thanking me for sending my payment, the anonymous letter writer explained the embarrassing reason the check was being returned.

"We're sorry, but we're not able to read your writing."

Immediately, my quasi-mind flashed back to elementary school with Sister Mary of the Flying Rosary Beads and Sister Rose of the Dusty Erasers. Every quarter, the dear nuns gave me a report card with A's in English, math, geography, history, and social sciences – accompanied by an F in penmanship. My memory switched to my early career when one of my bosses asked me to confirm someone's exact job title. Alas, I couldn't read my notes, and had to make a phone call to get the desired information. Finally, my thoughts careened to my husband. Over the years, he has been less than complimentary about my scribble. I blame the U.S. Postal Service, which regularly returns mail I have sent out with allegedly unreadable addresses. Picky, picky, picky.

Incidentally, I beg you not to tell my husband about this Capital One debacle; I'll never live it down. Getting sloppily addressed envelopes back is one thing; having perfectly good checks sent back drags my handwriting reputation to a new subterranean level. I mean who the heck returns money?

To be truthful, though, I was not entirely surprised by this latest slap-in-the-hand regarding my penmanship. In fact, for the past few years, I have been secretly amassing a thick file on the subject. It includes articles from the Los Angeles Times, Metrokids, Newsweek, the New York Daily News, the New York Times, Time, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, and Woman's World. The bad news, according to all these reports, is that good penmanship is going the way of the manual typewriter. The good news is that I'm far from alone in my illegibility.

Although Capital One would probably laugh aloud at my chutzpah in sharing tips on improving penmanship here's what I've learned about handwriting more like the intelligent adults you and I both are:

**Avoid devaluing good penmanship.** Without question, people today compose mostly on computers and instant messaging devices. But a recent study at Vanderbilt University noted that



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the majority of teachers believe students with good penmanship produce assignments of superior quantity and quality – and receive higher grades. I suspect I avoided flunking out of school for bad handwriting by telling the nuns that someday I wanted to follow their inspirational lead and enter the convent.

**Recognize the handwriting-personality connection.** Despite the tendency of electronic communicators to dismiss penmanship, graphologists continue to analyze it for clues to your temperament. If you follow the famous right-slanted, neat Palmer method originated in 1894, you are likely to be regarded as idealist and upbeat. Men and women who write like I do, on the other hand, are regarded as incorrigible nonconformists. So what else is new?

**See the big picture.** To be sure, good penmanship has become such a rarity that only 15 percent of high schoolers taking college boards now write in cursive. The rest print responses and essays. But, like most human advances, handwriting has an important place in history, evidenced by a 2009 book called "Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall of Handwriting" by Kitty Burns Florey. One piece of trivia from the text: Thomas Aquinas, a noted philosopher from the Middle Ages, had atrocious handwriting. Thank you, Tom.

**Value simplicity.** In a book called "Handwriting in America," historian Tamara Plakins Thornton makes a case for penmanship being helpful in reducing anxiety and stress in a complex society. "Penmanship represents a simpler, prettier way of life – slower and more personal, like the handwritten note," Thornton writes.

**Study good handwriting.** I suggest ordering a paperback and accompanying DVD called "Write Now" from [www.levenger.com](http://www.levenger.com). According to promotional material, the product "will make your messages and writings stand out from the ordinary."

**Practice regularly.** Now that most retail stores are brimming with back-to-school supplies, you can easily find and buy lined paper designed specifically for working on your penmanship. According to Emily Knapton, program development director for an educational company called Handwriting Without Tears, you'll make significant progress by rehearsing your p's and q's for 15 to 45 minutes a day.

**Consider your legacy.** Years ago, in a move from Philadelphia to California to attend the University of San Francisco Law School, I lost all my possessions – furniture, clothes, and memorabilia – in a theft of my still-packed 26-foot long UHaul. Although the van contained thousands of dollars' worth of belongings, I was overwhelmed with grief over the loss of a single item: a small box tied carefully with a pink silk ribbon. The package contained letters from my mother, who had died a few years earlier while I was still in college. They were all I had left of her beautiful Irish penmanship.

*Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at [KBegley@writecompanyplus.com](mailto:KBegley@writecompanyplus.com). Her new blog "Meandering to a Different Drummer" is available by clicking the icon on the lower right of her homepage at [www.writecompanyplus.com](http://www.writecompanyplus.com). She responds to everybody. If you feel you've become too busy to ever read this free, opt-in blogletter, please tell us to remove you from our mailing list. Although our feelings will be hurt, we'll cheerfully delete you.*