

Learning cursive in the first grade helps students

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By 2014, 45 American states will stop teaching cursive writing in favour of keyboard proficiency. In Québec, there are no plans for the moment to abandon this type of writing. "Teaching and daily use of handwriting are essential, if only to avoid being at the mercy of technology," says Professor Isabelle Montésinos-Gelet at the University of Montreal's Faculty of Education. Although she welcomes the idea of young people learning to handle a computer keyboard, she believes it should be introduced in the school curriculum when students are already proficient in one style of writing: print (separate letters) or cursive (joined letters).

"Here, as in many countries, the general approach to teaching writing is based on tradition rather than on educational research that has proven benefits," says the professor.

For generations, most Québec [students](#) learn to print in the [first grade](#) and write cursive in the second. "This was decided at a time when the cognitive aspects of the writing process and the important role of graphic-motor skills in learning how to write were unknown," says the researcher, who conducted a study on the subject: Which is better, print or cursive? What form of [writing instruction](#) is more beneficial for students?

The study, conducted in collaboration with Professors Marie-France Morin, Université de Sherbrooke, and Natalie Lavoie, Université du Québec à Rimouski Sherbrooke, with 718 Québec students and teachers in 54 second grade classrooms, demonstrates the influence of three

handwriting teaching methods (print, cursive, or print and cursive) on the acquisition of graphic-motor skills (speed and quality of writing), spelling, and text construction. The results, published in 2012 in the journal *Language and Literacy*, show that students who learned cursive benefited the most. In particular, they had better results in spelling and syntax. "These two aspects are essential elements that contribute to the development of writing skills at the primary level," says Montésinos-Gelet.

Worst approach: the print-cursive method

"Whether they learn print or cursive, children are better off when one type of writing is taught," she says. "Teaching both types does not promote the acquisition of automatic motor movements, which play an important role in spelling and text construction."

The data show that more than 50% of the variance in writing quality among second-grade students is associated with graphic-motor skills. This number hardly surprises the researcher. "If children write too slowly, they cannot remember all their ideas; they forget them before they can write them down," she explains. "Hence the importance of making motor movements automatic so they do not mobilize all the children's resources."

The transition to cursive writing in the second grade hinders this automatization. The findings of her research indicate that writing skills improve in terms of speed and legibility by the end of the year whatever the type of writing. On the other hand, students who learned printing in the first grade and then began cursive writing in the second grade made the least progress in spelling. The print-cursive method did not help with memory consolidation of word spelling.

At the beginning of elementary school, children experience a growth in

spelling that allows them to spell many words, somewhat like the language development phase at around two or three years. If they have to change writing styles at this moment, it impedes their memorization by requiring more brainwork," says Montésinos-Gelet.

In her opinion, teaching cursive [writing](#) leads to the best results in comparison to the other two methods. "We observed among these students an increase in syntactic skills, unlike those who only learned to print or who learned both. The performance of these students remained stable throughout the school year."

Avoiding "backwards" letters

Learning to write in cursive also has the advantage of encouraging students to respect linguistic constraints from the outset. "Children who learn to print tend to treat letters like pictures and often write them backwards." This approach slows down the integration of what specialists call "stroke grammar," i.e., the sequencing of gestures to produce optimal letters.

When students write directly in cursive, they are forced to follow a kind of path determined by the direction of the strokes. "Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to join the letters," says Montésinos-Gelet. "So, there are no backwards letters."

Furthermore, children who write in cursive do not at all have the problem of spacing between letters and words. "They understand the concept of word more quickly than the others do and therefore tend to have better graphic-motor skills related to language processing, which helps them in terms of syntax and spelling," says the researcher.

More information: Morin, M.-F., Lavoie, N. et Montésinos-Gelet (2012). The Effects of Manuscript, Cursive or Manuscript/Cursive

Styles on Writing Development in Grade 2, *Language and Literacy*, 14 (1), 110-124.

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