



# Writing by Hand

## Deepening Student Engagement with the Word and the World

GREG GRAHAM

In an age when digital literacy is viewed as the holy grail of education, and when teachers are urged to jump aboard the digitrain or get run over by it, Heather Sellers is one of the few voices bucking the trend, extolling the benefits of writing the way human beings have written since they became literate: by hand.

Sellers, a professor of English at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, and author of the critically acclaimed memoir *You Don't Look Like Anyone I Know*, which details her lifelong struggle with face-blindness, believes students who write by hand produce superior work, so she requires handwritten first drafts of each assignment. Sellers says she stumbled onto the fact that writing by hand can make a huge difference in the quality of written work. After noticing stark variations in quality in students' submissions to her writing class, she wanted to know if there was something about their approaches that made a difference, so she asked the writers how they worked. Three of them had submitted work that Sellers regarded as "stunning—prose that read more like poetry." When she asked them about their writing process, each of them said they had written their stories by hand. In contrast, Sellers found

that all of the weaker pieces had been drafted on a computer. There were a couple of students in the middle whose work was a mixed bag. Their descriptions of how they wrote, says Sellers, were revealing:

"There were these two stories that had some great parts, and some flat parts, so I asked these two writers to say a few words about their writing process. I still remember their names. Chantelle said, 'Well, I started hand-writing. But then I got behind, and it was due, so I typed the rest, but the opening, the scene at the restaurant, and the ending were done by hand.' Those were the *exact* same sections I'd pegged as thrumming, as memorable, as real. Charlie said the same thing—parts were done by hand, parts on the computer. The class was stunned when I showed him that I could tell which parts he'd hand-written first and which sections he'd typed."

Sellers says this was a transformational moment for her, one she shares with each incoming class. In her disarmingly warm and engaging style, she preaches the gospel of handwriting to every digital native who walks through her door. And she meets less resistance than one might expect. Make no mistake about it—her approach is a radical one. More than merely writing by hand, Sellers' students start out writing with markers in giant, all-capital letters. The reason? "I want them to go really, really, really slowly." Surely college students balk at these elementary-school practices? Surely these media multitaskers gripe and

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moan about this tedious work? According to Sellers, quite the opposite:

Here's the thing: You know why we write by hand? Why we keep doing it? It's fun. It was fun when we were little kids, and it's fun now. It's fun to have markers and pens, and great sheets of paper, and to paint with words. And it is fun to concentrate. Any athlete knows that. Readers know that, lovers know that, kids know that. I think we are all just working so hard to try to put something meaningful together... it's easy to get caught up in the energy of that.

Though Sellers' evidence for the benefits of writing by hand is anecdotal, recent research supports her findings. *Gwendolen Bounds'* excellent *Wall Street Journal* article "How Handwriting

Trains the Brain" (October 5, 2010) cited multiple studies on the importance of writing by hand. Neurologists at the University of Indiana found more advanced neural activity in children when they wrote by hand, as opposed to typing. An educational psychologist at the University of Washington found that second-, fourth-, and sixth-graders in a study there "expressed more ideas when writing essays by hand versus using a keyboard to compose." In her *Wall Street Journal* article, Bounds also quotes a neuroscientist at Duke University who says "as [aging] people lose writing skills and migrate to the computer, retraining people in handwriting skills could be a useful cognitive exercise."

Writing by hand really works, and I just want to make sure we don't lose this method," says Sellers. "The process can help our students retain their individual thinking, get them in touch with their voice, and also help them understand the hard, slow work it is to write. Good writing simply takes an enormous amount of time. Writing by hand is a realistic pace for making something out of words. It forces one to slow down and stay connected to the sensory and sensual moments that come from the deepest part

of one's self. I know this sounds weird, but I have seen the results.

In her creative writing classes, whether fiction, non-fiction, or poetry, Sellers emphasizes the importance of taking one's time by making a connection between



Photograph by Amy Wharton.

writing and drawing: before her students even start writing, she asks them to take fifteen minutes or so to make a sketch of the scene they want to create. When they are done she has them list all of the sensory details in the picture. "I think there has to be a kind of building stage before we get to the thinking stage," she says. "In working by hand, I tell my students, you are creating the containers where you will eventually do your thinking. If you are just thinking, on a screen, where you can write so fast and erase so fast, it's kind of like Frost's metaphor about playing tennis without a net.

Sellers describes those quickly-typed-up pieces of writing that students often produce as "phoned in."

She adds, “You know in ‘bad acting’ how it doesn’t seem like the actor is that person he is playing—it seems... fake? That’s how computer-generated first drafts can seem: too-fast thinking, a gliding over the surface, typos, hard-to-understand sentences and arguments.” Writing by hand, Sellers has found, serves as a governor to keep the writer from speeding past the necessary steps in the writing process. “This is very much a process of seeing what it is you know,” she says, “getting your mind on the page, without the interference of the editor, the fake voices, the cleaner-upper, the conformist.”

Educational theorist and philosopher Paulo Freire defined literacy as “critical engagement with world and word.” Sellers believes writing by hand can improve literacy by deepening students’ engagement with both word and world.

“I’m trying to create a reverence for the process,” she says. “I’m looking to be part of a culture of quiet and contemplation. My students get addicted to our in-class handwriting sessions. I assign them the task of writing by hand for thirty minutes a day for thirty days. For many of them, it’s the only time in the day they are alone. It’s a form of meditation, right? To sit with oneself and discover what’s

there. Writing by hand, then, is a great way of creating a conversation with oneself. That’s vital for the first-year writer—maybe the most vital thing.”

As the author of three books on the craft of writing, Sellers frequently travels to read and speak around the country. When she tells other writing instructors about her practice of requiring handwritten first drafts, the responses range from intrigued to incredulous. “Some

people freak,” she says. “And I’m not sure writing by hand is right for every teacher, every writer, every classroom. I just want to make sure we don’t lose a method that really works.”

Sellers knows full well the challenge of convincing students to commit the time necessary to do “the hard, slow work it is to write,” but she also sees what this process gives them. “I teach the sonnet in all my poetry workshops,” she says, “and at first the students

complain mightily about how much time writing the sonnet takes. ‘Yes,’ I say. ‘This is how much time a poem takes. This is the right amount.’ Then, they produce their best work of the semester in these sonnets and they realize it’s worth it. It’s worth spending this much time on a poem. And I think that lesson transfers to composing an essay, a memo, a letter—to all writing.” 🗨️

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*For additional information:*

“How Handwriting Trains the Brain”  
by Gwendolyn Bounds  
*Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2010

“Handwriting is a 21st Century Skill”  
by Edward Tenner  
*The Atlantic*, April 28, 2011

“Handwriting in the 21st Century? An Educational Summit”  
[www.hw21summit.com](http://www.hw21summit.com)

“Printing, Cursive, Keyboarding: What’s the Difference When it Comes to Learning?”  
[newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/20977.html](http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/20977.html)