

Beliefs Affecting Handwritten Communication

Kate Gladstone

ABSTRACT: Despite technologies from printing press to e-mail, we still rely in many ways on handwritten communications. The author examines how certain widely held beliefs about communication in general (and about handwritten communication in particular) impede the efficient/accurate learning and use of handwriting. The author also examines the consequences of these beliefs among schoolchildren, parents, teachers, and others - particularly among physicians. (The author works as a consultant for hospitals that face problems with physicians' handwriting.) Based on experiences with and observations of MDs and others with dysfunctional handwriting, the author presents techniques for helping dysfunctional handwriters revise beliefs which have impeded their ability to learn and use handwriting as a communication channel.

In a world of high technology, some find handwriting unimportant. They may look with bemusement, for example, on Wendell Johnson's listing of poor penmanship among the communication difficulties amenable to a general semantics approach ("The Urgency of Paradise," PEOPLE IN QUANDARIES – page 475 of the 1996 edition). In fact, Johnson not only lists "inadequate handwriting skill" among the deficiencies of written communication, within that listing he gives it first place:

B. Writing deficiencies

1. Inadequate handwriting skill

- a. Due to faulty training
- b. Due to maladjustment
- c. Due to organic conditions, such as paralysis, etc.

Does handwriting today matter as much as this listing suggests it may have mattered to Johnson? If so – if adequate or inadequate handwriting skill really does still make a difference in the computerized high-tech world of 2003 – how if at all does this relate to a conference on belief-systems and their impact?

/1/ WHY IT MATTERS

Handwriting, I submit, still makes a difference. Despite each new technological advance that the manufacturers claimed or the public assumed would eliminate handwriting forever (predictions that keyboarding would make pens and writing-paper obsolete date back to at least 1871, when they formed an advertising/public-relations mainstay of the Remington typewriter company), the tools and materials of handwriting remain a major sales-item in pricey office-supply firms and the humble corner drugstore. Refrigerator-doors, countertops, and (yes) even computer-workstations continue to sport layer upon layer of hand-jotted notes. When a computer goes out of order, and one calls tech-support, more often than not the recorded wait-for-help message will direct: "Please have a pen and paper handy, to take down the information you will need."

/a/ A personal experience: five years ago, a hospital administrator who had learned about the handwriting-improvement services I provide informed me that the MD's at his facility fortunately needed no such thing, "because we have entirely computerized the hospital. Starting in three months, all hospital records will use our integrated technology system." Last year, the same administrator reminded me of the conversation and stated that the hospital needed my help—putting "all" hospital records and procedures into computerized form had not entirely eliminated handwriting. Approximately one in a hundred daily communications at this hospital continued to involve or to produce handwritten data—and, about half the time, those handwritten data did not permit clear, easy, or certain reading. The results included not only patient deaths, injuries, and delay of care, but (more disturbing in the eyes of that particular administrator) a potential for malpractice suits. (The past five years had already seen the first medical-malpractice suit related solely to a death-by-handwriting issue—Vásquez versus Kolluru, 1999 with a \$450,000 judgment. Another suit, initiated in 2002 and now pending in New York State, revolves entirely around an infant death caused by an unclearly written decimal point.)

/b/ The impact of handwriting goes far beyond medical error; I hear almost daily, for instance, from teachers who have realized that they cannot write clearly enough for the students to read it. (One first-grade teacher wrote "cat" identically with "cut" and "eat" for years, and habitually made other similar errors, before noticing this and beginning to suspect that it might have something to do with the prevalence of slow readers in her classroom. A college-chemistry teacher sought my help because, whenever she wrote on the board during lectures or labs or tests, at least half the class would erupt into worried whispers: "What did she write? Can somebody read it?" The class had no problem reading typed worksheets, which suggests that the inquiries related to poor handwriting on the part of the teacher, not illiteracy on the part of the students)

Worse portends - the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), an important exam widely taken by American high-schoolers applying to college, will in 2005 add a handwritten-essay section counting for 1/6 of the student's score. According to advance information released to media by the Educational Testing Service which creates and administers this test, students will have 20 minutes to write a two-page essay which graders will have 4 minutes to read and score. Teachers and students have commented to me that (in their opinion and experience) few American high-schoolers given 20 minutes to handwrite two pages could do this legibly enough that 4 minutes would suffice to decipher, let alone to grade, the result.

/2/ HOW THIS RELATES TO GS

Johnson, above, noted three causes for inadequate handwriting: two fairly obvious and not closely GS-related causes (/a/ "faulty instruction" and /c/ "organic conditions")—the things we usually think of as underlying poor handwriting; and one less obvious, less often thought of, cause that (in my opinion) closely relates to GS insights, Johnson's cause /b/, or what he calls "maladjustment." (Throughout *PEOPLE IN QUANDARIES*, Johnson uses the word "maladjustment" to refer to difficulties caused by a person's false-to-fact beliefs about some particular event or circumstance.)

People who seek my help for handwriting (or who send a child, student, or employee to me for

help) usually see their/others' handwriting problems as arising only from factors /a/ and/or /c/ - faulty previous training, and/or a disability of some kind. They do not normally imagine or consider (and I myself once did not imagine or consider) that a person's beliefs (about communication in general, and about handwritten communication in particular) could also play a part in both causing and remediating a handwriting problem.

I began to change my views – and to consider as an important factor what Johnson calls “maladjustment” – when, over and over, I encountered clients who worked with me on handwriting-skills – who visited medical specialists, if needed, to do whatever they could do for any organic condition – yet who showed little or no improvement despite their efforts, my efforts, and the efforts of other specialists. I began understanding the situation differently when I heard one student's chance comment: “I realize I need to change this [pattern of poor writing], but I know I can't really change this because my handwriting is me. If I could change it, I would stop being me.” Hearing this led me to listen for, and to think about, similar comments from other students in my individual and group classes. I have begun to isolate some of the specific semantic “maladjustments” (false-to-fact beliefs impeding success) which (in at least some cases) play a part in creating and/or maintaining a handwriting difficulty. The remainder of this paper will provide examples some of the most common false-to-fact beliefs and belief-systems (among teachers and students) which impede progress in learning/remediating handwriting, along with techniques which I have found useful for helping students to revise, update, and correct those beliefs where needed. Each example will include a brief “case history” of someone whose belief-system included the error, along with what I did (successfully or otherwise!) to help the student replace the false-to-fact belief with a more fully accurate and helpful belief about handwritten communications.

/a/ “My handwriting equals me; therefore, my handwriting cannot [or should not] change and I cannot [or should not] change my handwriting.”

EXAMPLE 1: 36-year-old “Dave” asked for ways to correct his serious handwriting errors, which (according to his statement and that of his employer) interfered with the successful performance of his job. Dave stated, however, that he “could not” accept any correction which would involve changing any detail the way he wrote one or more letters, e.g., he would not accept closing the tops of *a / d / g* to differentiate them from *u / cl / y*. (These letters had provoked the most complaints from his employer, who had referred him to me as a “last chance” before firing.) When I asked Dave why he said that he “could not” accept specific changes, he replied: “Handwriting is something I do and so it is me. Every detail of my handwriting is my handwriting, so changing it would mean changing me, which I am not prepared to do. I know that I need to change, so I feel I need to have you give me an overall change that would be a change without changing any specific thing, because changing specific things would be changing me, and I have an issue with that. I never closed the tops of my *a*'s, so I don't think I'm going to start now.”

DEALING WITH THIS: I spent a few minutes discussing with Dave his identification of “a handwriting” and “the person who made the handwriting,” reminding him (e.g.) that a set of written marks on paper does not “equal” a person. A person uses handwriting to represent himself (as in a signature), to convey his/her ideas (as in other written communications), but producing handwriting (plainly) does not equal producing a person (or we would have already had cloning for several thousand years by this time!) As the word differs from the thing, so

handwriting differs from the person who produced it.

Additionally, Dave and I discussed the fact that he himself (like any person or any thing) can and does constantly change (Dave-this-very-second differs from Dave-one-second ago; Dave-today differs from Dave-yesterday; Dave-yesterday differs from Dave-thirty-years-ago, learning to write and for whatever reason not closing the tops of his *a*'s; etc.) As an engineer working with mechanical change and deterioration, Dave easily accepted this (much more easily than he had accepted the notion of handwriting not exactly equaling the handwriter), so I continued somewhat along these lines: "Since a person constantly changes, even if we identified the person with his or her handwriting then we could still accept that the handwriting can undergo constant change as well." I also explored with him the notion that the abstraction "change" does not exist other than as successive concretely observable changes: change-1, change-2, etc.

He accepted this – somewhat to my surprise, at his second session he showed no sign of his former difficulty with the letters in question, and seemed in fact not to remember that he had even ever had "an issue" with making changes in the way he wrote. He showed no signs of a handwriting problem, and asked to cancel future sessions unless signs of a difficulty returned. (Two weeks after this second – and last – visit, Dave's employer phoned me to express his pleasure at [in the employer's words] the "complete improvement" not only in Dave's handwriting but in his overall attitude to the job, his willingness to accept new challenges, etc.: something I had not specifically addressed except where it concerned handwriting.)

EXAMPLE 2 – For contrast's sake, I'd like to present the case of "Anita," whose belief-system on handwriting resembled that of Dave but whom, for various reasons, I did not manage to help much despite her initial good progress. "Anita," a first-year medical intern, came to me in one of several group-classes for physicians with dysfunctional handwriting, classes which I conducted at the request of the administrator of the hospital where these physicians worked. For the first fifteen or twenty minutes of the class, I saw Anita as one of my "easier" students: she caught on quickly to every handwriting-technique and exercises I presented, immediately incorporating each bit of new learning into her class-work. However, after this initial burst of improvement, Anita suddenly gave a large cough, downed her pen, stood up, and said: "I don't believe that I really did this handwriting, and I don't intend to do it in the future. It just isn't me. It's easy, it's legible, which is not true of my 'real' handwriting, but it is not the way I can ever write! I did not do this writing!"

DEALING WITH THIS (or, rather, trying to) - When I asked her what she meant by saying that she "could not ever write" this way ("If you 'did not do this writing,' then could you give me any idea who *did* do it?"), she wordlessly left the room and (as I learned later) went directly to her administrative supervisor who directed her to return to the class (which Anita refused to do, stating – as her supervisor later informed me – "I would rather be me than be legible, even if it means my job. I am just not a legible person, so there is no way I can be doing this [writing legibly].")

The supervisor scheduled Anita for another class with me, but Anita did not attend even though the supervisor informed her that non-attendance would mean losing her position at the hospital. Had Anita returned, I probably would have asked the supervisor to arrange a private session in addition to (or instead of) the group-session, so that I could find out a little more of what Anita meant by defining herself as "just not a legible person" even *after* she had written legibly with apparent ease for 20 minutes. I suspect that she would have needed a lot of help to begin

examining the beliefs she held with regard to herself and handwriting. Anita, I think, defined herself in a particular way (as a “non-legible person,” whatever that meant to her), and ignored evidence – such as 20 minutes of legible writing – that contradicted or threatened her self-definition.

/b/ [common variation of /a/] “Illegible handwriting equals intelligence and creativity - legible handwriting therefore equals stupidity and boring conformity – therefore, I do not want legible handwriting for myself or others.

EXAMPLE: One mother brought her 9-year-old son “Frank” to me at the request of his teacher who reported that he seemed “entirely unmotivated to write readably.” Early in the visit, the mother anxiously asked if some way existed to make sure that learning to write legibly wouldn’t lower Frank’s IQ. The question puzzled me and I asked Frank’s mother what had brought that possibility to mind for her. She answered: “Everybody knows that the intelligent and creative people write so you can’t read it; the people with legible writing are dull and dumb and boring. So if Frank figures out how to write so that his teacher can read it, won’t that take away his IQ and make him dull and boring?”

DEALING WITH THIS – It occurred to me that what Frank’s mother claimed “everybody knows” – that “dumb and boring” people write so that we can read it – might well have something to do with Frank’s lack of motivation in this regard! Not wishing to embarrass or contradict, I met the mother on her own level, agreeing that we certainly did not want to risk doing anything that might lower intelligence. “So let’s find out for sure whether or not legible writing always does mean ‘dull and dumb and boring.’ Before you and Frank even start the handwriting-exercises I’ll give you to do at home this week, I’d like you both to look at the handwritings of people you know, and see if all the legible ones really do come from ‘dull and dumb and boring’ people, and if all the illegible ones really do come from ‘intelligent and creative’ folks. You could also look up famous people on the Net – a lot of Net-sites about famous people include samples of their handwritings Let me know what you find – do all the creative, intelligent, famous folks really scribble? Absolutely all of them? Or do some of them actually write so you can read it?”

They did the experiment, found at least a few intelligent and creative legible writers: Frank became willing to work on handwriting, showed noticeable improvement, and his mother stopped worrying that the improvement would ruin his fine mind.

The remainder of the presentation will consist of an audience-participation exercise lasting five to ten minutes depending on time available. The exercise will explore how mentally accepting as “fact” a given belief about handwritten letters changes the legibility/ease/speed/appearance of one’s writing (with the changes reversing when one adopts the opposite belief as “fact” instead).

CONCLUSION:

Much remains to explore in applying GS insights to handwriting instruction, both preventively and remedially. Conveying these insights by applying them to the teaching/learning of a practical skill that remains in demand (the skill of handwriting) may encourage learners to apply these

insights elsewhere in their lives (as in, apparently, the case of “Dave.”) I would take great interest in hearing from those who have used these or other GS insights to help learners grow competent in handwriting or other academic-skills/job-skills areas.