

WHY WE SHOULD PUT PEN TO PAPER

Computers may dominate our lives, but when it comes to reaping serious health benefits, typing is no match for the power of a pen.

When was the last time you wrote something by hand? A card, a letter – even a curt missive to the person who parked you in last week? According to one British study which polled more than 2,000 people, one in three hadn't written anything of substance in the last six months. Local Naplan exam markers would believe these figures; when they sat down to mark student papers last year, complaints came thick and furious that much of what had been turned in was illegible, and in some cases, almost indecipherable – the result, experts say, of too much screen time and not enough emphasis on penmanship.

"Handwriting is a huge part of our developmental process, and in the same way we learn to stand, walk, jump or throw a ball, it's an exercise for the brain and for our physical coordination," certified handwriting analyst Craig Peebles says. Edith Cowan University School of Education lecturer, Dr Mandie Shean, agrees: "Handwriting activates multiple areas of the brain such as sensation, literacy and movement, and it's just not possible to know what will be lost if we stop learning writing by hand."

WHY A LETTER IS BETTER (FOR YOU AND THERECIPIENT)

It might be easier to tell someone you love or appreciate them via email or text but using pen and paper is well worth the extra effort. Dubbed "author benefits", research from Kent State University shows that writing thoughtful letters boosts mood, happiness and satisfaction. Letter-writing also counts as a form of mindfulness because, to do a good job, it has to be done while free of distractions – including from your inbox and Facebook. Handwritten letters can also do wonders for relationships. They require more effort than their tech-savvy alternatives, which means they have far more impact on the receiver. Plus, letters can last forever so their sentiment won't be lost simply with the click of a button.



CONTINUE TO WRITE, HOWEVER, AND YOU COULD STAND TO REAP THE FOLLOWING BENEFITS:

1. IMPROVED MEMORY

Keen to memorise something? You have a far higher success rate if you write it down by hand and then bin it, than typing it or reading it repeatedly on screen, according to various studies which focus on retaining information. In one Aix-Marseille University study, French researchers taught Bengali or Tamil characters and discovered that those who wrote down the characters by hand quickly became better at recognising them than the group who typed them on a computer.

Meanwhile, over in the US, another study looked at more than 300 students at Princeton University and the University of California and found those who took longhand notes displayed a clearer grasp of what was being covered in a lecture than those who made their notes on a laptop. It's suggested that when a person writes by hand, they rephrase information which helps them to summarise and better comprehend what they're hearing.

2. INCREASED CREATIVITY

"Handwriting reinforces your cognitive ability and promotes fluidity of thought, leading to increased speed, increased creativity and, eventually, a boost in knowledge," Peebles says, and he's not wrong; one study by the University of Washington which looked at primary school kids in years one to five found that those who wrote text by hand not only produced more words than they did on a keyboard, but expressed more ideas than those who didn't.

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3. QUICKER RECOVERY TIME

It's been known for a while that regularly writing in a journal can boost your mood and help you recover from emotional black holes (researchers from the University of California, Davis and the University of Miami, for example, found that those who wrote weekly in a gratitude journal were significantly happier and more optimistic about life than those that didn't), but recent studies also suggest that putting pen to paper can help your body heal.

New Zealand researchers asked study participants who needed skin biopsies to write – in detail – for 20 minutes a day about the most traumatic event they'd experienced, while the other half wrote about daily plans, free of emotion. Two weeks later, the biopsies were taken and researchers discovered that the skin of those in the group who had written expressively healed much faster than the others. Previous studies found expressive writing can also boost immune functioning in patients with illnesses such as HIV, asthma and arthritis, and increase the effectiveness of hepatitis B vaccination.

4. HEIGHTENED SELF-AWARENESS

Believe it or not, the way you use your pen holds vital information that can reveal all about your personality, Peebles says, who adds that all slants, pressure, ticks, dots, loops and angles correlate with a personality trait dependent on where it is in the handwriting. "You can often tell when someone is depressed through the state of their handwriting and what you're looking for is if the writing is going downhill, written on a downward slant, or the last letter or word noticeably drops down," he says. "This may not mean anything more than they're having a bad day or received some bad news, but if the trait is consistent over weeks or months, then the author is struggling." His tip? Ask if they're OK and be on standby if they need you. "Handwriting is like a window into the soul and it never hurts to care about someone or show compassion."

6 WAYS TO GET WRITING TODAY



1. Write down a happy thought about your life every day in a gratitude diary (try to make it regular even if it's not daily).



2. Copy out phrases or a whole section from one of your favourite books.



3. Actually write – and send – a birthday card to a close friend or family member.



4. Write out a detailed shopping list adding brands, quantities and which shops you want to visit.



5. Scribe that letter to the person who has hurt you (then immediately burn it!)



6. Send a handwritten thank you note to tell someone that you appreciate them.