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795 words

Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 10, 2005.

The Insidious Development of Keyboarditis

Whoops. I start right out by making a mistake. My “W,” that was going to start the word “When,” fails to end where it should and slides on up about two lines. I did not intend to do that. It’s easy to justify changing the word to “Whoops.” I call this lack of control “Keyboarditis.”

I’m writing this essay in longhand. I move my pencil across the page, intending to create an orderly progression of words, but coming up with quite a few sudden surprises as I often guide my pencil to somewhere I did not intend.

I have asked around. Among friends and family who have given up the pen and pencil and now do all their writing on the keyboard, deterioration of longhand skills is common and usually surprising. “Oh, look at that. I left out a letter and then went into a two line slide. I didn’t even know I was going to do that.”

I started out, many years ago, writing with a pencil. Only when I had completed the piece I was working on and wanted editors to consider it for publication did I move to a typewriter. Typing was not my favorite work, because I was not very good at it, but since it was a necessary part of writing, I was pleased I could do it well enough to turn my work into good quality manuscripts.

I knew about personal computers for years before I bought one. At first, we didn’t have electricity. When we moved to a place with electricity, computers were too expensive, and I wasn’t interested in becoming that high tech.

Various friends convinced me I should be interested, and eventually, I bought a never-used but outdated computer at a very good price, and everyone reading this essay probably knows how my progression to ever higher technology went

from there.

I was pleased with my new ability to revise nearly endlessly without having to retype the complete manuscript, and I was pleased with the ability to store many works in a very small space and turn them into high-quality manuscripts at will. In addition to writing, there was much work I could do on the computer related to my music and my photography, for example.

I had many problems with computers, their control systems, and various software. I never could decide if the machines saved me time and work or, through crashes and malfunctions, cost me irretrievable time in which I could have written many more good works.

At every opportunity, I asked computer users, "Are you better off now than you were before?" I got very few unqualified "Yes"s. Among working people, I got many answers like, "No, but the people who make the decisions think this way is best, and it's a condition of the job, so I make the best of it."

I have rarely had trouble with what they call "writer's block," being unable to write, but lately there have been many times when I turned on the computer to write, didn't get very far, and shut it off again, not sure what had happened, only sure that I didn't want to sit there in front of the machine.

As my wife's schedule and mine have diverged, there have been several times lately that I left her notes about where I was going and what I was doing as I went out the door and took up tasks that were as far from computers and other modern technology as I could get, and I have been more and more disturbed by my growing lack of control over the pencil or pen.

I have many questions about computers I don't expect to be able to answer conclusively. If anyone else has a conclusive answer about the value of computers, I will be chary of the answer.

One question about writing by computer, I did answer, though, by buying a package of a dozen, lined, yellow pads, making sure of my supply of lead for my mechanical pencil and

beginning again to write in longhand. This essay, I wrote first in longhand, with many errors.

It is clear to me that I will have to practice before I again have complete control over my partially deteriorated handwriting. I already have the second essay in longhand well started, and I am convinced that my daughter, Amanda, is right when she says that writing by keyboard and writing in longhand call different thought patterns into play.

For me, writing in longhand is slower, more contemplative, much more portable, easier to lay aside at any important interruption to pursue the larger flow of my life, less cumbersome. I enjoy writing. I think I am beginning to remember that I enjoy writing in longhand a little more.