

The Insidious Development of Keyboarditis

Whoops. I start right out by making a mistake. My "W," which was going to start the word "When," fails to end where it should and slides 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" - the effect on my penmanship of too much typing.

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

I have asked around. Among friends and family who have given up pen and pencil and do all their writing on a keyboard, deterioration of longhand skills is common. (Oh, look at that: I left out a letter and then went into a two-line slide.)

I started out, many years ago, writing with a pencil. Only when I had completed a piece 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 writing 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, I found that computers were too expensive, and I wasn't interested in becoming that high tech.

Various friends convinced me I should be interested. Eventually I bought a never-used but outdated computer for a very good price.

I was pleased with my new ability to revise endlessly without having to retype the complete manuscript. And now I could also store many works in a very small space. In addition to writing, there was much I could do on the computer related to my music and photography.

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

At every opportunity, I asked computer users, "Are you better off now than you were before?" I got very few unqualified affirmative replies. Among working people, I got

many answers such as, "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," but lately I have had many experiences of turning on the computer to write, not getting very far, and then shutting it off again. I'm not sure why, except that I felt I did not want to sit there in front of the machine.

Instead I've left notes for my wife telling her where I was going and what I was doing. And I've become more disturbed by the fact that it's difficult for me to get reaccustomed to using a pencil or pen.

I have many questions about computers that I don't expect to be able to answer conclusively. But I did discover the answer to one question about writing on the computer by buying a package of a dozen lined yellow notepads, making sure of my supply of lead for my mechanical pencil, and beginning to write in longhand again. I wrote this essay first in longhand, with many errors.

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

For me, writing in longhand is slower, more contemplative, much more portable, and easier to lay aside at any important interruption to pursue the larger flow of my life.

Writing longhand is less cumbersome, too. I enjoy writing. I think I am beginning to remember that I enjoy writing in longhand a little more.