When the first edition of *The Beginnings of Writing* appeared in 1982, it inspired a lengthy article in the *New York Times* and the authors appeared on talk shows. It was literally big news in those days that children were inventing and discovering features of the writing system (this was unheard of outside of a handful of researchers). Teachers and parents were excited to learn that children’s scribbles revealed principles of how writing works, and that their seemingly nonsensical spellings advanced along a predictable path with universal stages. The idea that even young children could compose messages in different genres was astonishing, too. *The Beginnings of Writing* presented these discoveries with many colorful examples of young children’s scribbles, invented spelling, and meaningful composition.

That first edition came out over thirty years ago, but these topics are still important. Of course the literacy field has advanced, as our classrooms have changed and our scholarship has evolved. We recognize now that there are sizable and significant differences in the language experience of children from one household or one social class to another (Hart & Risley, 1995). We know that what once looked to white, middle-class educators like a process of literacy acquisition that was shared by all children was, in fact, fairly culture-specific (Delpit, 1996; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Heath, 1983). And we know that the differences in early experience among children can predispose some to failure in learning to read and write (Juel et al., 1986; National Reading Panel, 2000). These days, teachers still want to understand the dynamics of early literacy development in all its variety, but they feel an even greater sense of urgency to leave no child behind. Finally, we are aware that in the years since the first edition of this book appeared, many more children who speak a language other than English at home have entered our classrooms.

We know (if there was ever any doubt that discovery learning is not enough) that as they learn to write, spell, and read, children must be encouraged, kept on track, and explicitly taught. Special educators like Karen Harris and Steve Graham (1992, 2005) have argued that all children can be shown, step by step, the procedures that help most native English-speaking middle-class children to thrive as writers. But it is still true that teaching is most efficient when teachers are aware of where children are in their learning, and are able to help them through the next frontier.

**NEW TO THIS EDITION**

The basic outline of the fourth edition of *The Beginnings of Writing* remains the same, with an introductory chapter followed by a section on early graphics, a section on invented spelling, and a final section on composition. Each of these three sections has been strengthened with new information. Notably, the first section on children’s early graphics includes what we hope you will find to be a lively account of how our writing system developed in the first place. The second section, on invented spelling, has been expanded to include coverage of the history of English spelling and provide a background in linguistics, so that you, the reader, will be able to follow more intelligently the
challenges facing children as they spell an alphabetic language like English. The third section has been expanded to include an historical perspective on how we’ve come to teach writing the way we do. We ask: Who defined our choices? and How did the teaching of writing evolve? Subsequent chapters weave contemporary research from the last twenty years into the theoretical and empirical fabric of what we understood in the 1980s and 1990s about children’s emerging forms of composition. At the request of many readers, we have added several explicit writing strategies for exploratory, narrative, expository, persuasive and descriptive writing and brought these strategies to life with many examples of children’s journal entries, stories, news articles, letters, classroom reports, poems, tableaux enhanced by writing, and so on. Readers will find a lot of these strategies appropriate for students with special needs. Throughout the entire section, we have included strategies that enhance English language learners’ experiences in all ways expressive, poetic and transactional, and we have also noted connections between the experiences we encourage in the text to the Common Core State Standards, K-3 (2010). The last chapter on classroom management, as the others, has been expanded to include the pre-kindergarten environment. Throughout this section, we have added valuable teacher resources that we have come to deeply admire.

REFERENCES


National Reading Panel. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read, an Evidence Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. Washington: National Institute of Health.
In *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World*, Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues point out that grounding teacher education in real classrooms—among real teachers and students and among actual examples of students’ and teachers’ work—is an important, and perhaps even an essential, part of training teachers for the complexities of teaching in today’s classrooms. MyEducationLab is an online learning solution that provides contextualized interactive exercises, simulations, and other resources designed to help develop the knowledge and skills teachers need. All of the activities and exercises in MyEducationLab are built around essential learning outcomes for teachers and are mapped to professional teaching standards. Utilizing classroom video, authentic student and teacher artifacts, case studies, and other resources and assessments, the scaffolded learning experiences in MyEducationLab offer pre-service teachers and those who teach them a unique and valuable education tool.

For each topic covered in the course you will find most or all of the following features and resources:

**Connection to National Standards**

Now it is easier than ever to see how coursework is connected to national standards. Each topic on MyEducationLab lists intended learning outcomes connected to the appropriate national standards. All of the activities and exercises in MyEducationLab are mapped to the appropriate national standards and learning outcomes as well.

**Assignments and Activities**

Designed to enhance student understanding of concepts covered in class and save instructors preparation and grading time, these assignable exercises show concepts in action (through video, cases, and/or student and teacher artifacts). They help students deepen content knowledge and synthesize and apply concepts and strategies they read about in the book. (Correct answers for these assignments are available to the instructor only under the Instructor Resource tab.)

**Building Teaching Skills and Dispositions**

These learning units help students practice and strengthen skills that are essential to quality teaching. After presenting the steps involved in a core teaching process, students are given an opportunity to practice applying this skill via videos, student and teacher artifacts, and/or case studies of authentic classrooms. Providing multiple opportunities to practice a single teaching concept, each activity encourages a deeper understanding and application of concepts, as well as the use of critical thinking skills.
Lesson Plan Builder Activities

The Online Lesson Plan Builder is a tool that helps familiarize new and prospective teachers with the steps of a lesson plan, providing them a concrete structure that accounts for all the necessary elements, and allowing them quick access to important components including state and national standards.

Look for activities on the MyEducationLab for your course that link directly into the Online Lesson Plan Builder. You’ll see video of a classroom and be offered the opportunity to determine a goal and craft a lesson for the group, scaffolded as you do to remember to focus on specific learning outcomes, incorporate Standards, and focus on the individual needs of learners.

Study Plan Specific to Your Text

A MyEducationLab Study Plan is a multiple choice assessment tied to chapter objectives, supported by study material. A well-designed Study Plan offers multiple opportunities to fully master required course content as identified by the objectives in each chapter:

- *Chapter Objectives* identify the learning outcomes for the chapter and give students targets to shoot for as you read and study.
Multiple Choice Assessments assess mastery of the content. These assessments are mapped to chapter objectives, and students can take the multiple choice quiz as many times as they want. Not only do these quizzes provide overall scores for each objective, but they also explain why responses to particular items are correct or incorrect.

Study Material: Review, Practice and Enrichment give students a deeper understanding of what they do and do not know related to chapter content. This material includes text excerpts, activities that include hints and feedback, and interactive multimedia exercises built around videos, simulations, cases, or classroom artifacts.

Course Resources

The Course Resources section of MyEducationLab is designed to help you put together an effective lesson plan, prepare for and begin your career, navigate your first year of teaching, and understand key educational standards, policies, and laws.

It includes the following:

- **The Grammar Tutorial** provides content extracted in part from *The Praxis Series™ Online Tutorial for the Pre-Professional Skills Test: Writing*. Online quizzes built around specific elements of grammar help users strengthen their understanding and proper usage of the English language in writing. Definitions and examples of grammatical concepts are followed by practice exercises to provide the background information and usage examples needed to refresh understandings of grammar, and then apply that knowledge to make it more permanent.

- **The Database of Children’s Literature** offers information on thousands of quality literature titles, and the activities provide experience in choosing appropriate literature and integrating the best titles into language arts instruction.

Certification and Licensure

The Certification and Licensure section is designed to help students pass their licensure exam by giving them access to state test requirements, overviews of what tests cover, and sample test items.

The Certification and Licensure tab includes the following:

- **State Certification Test Requirements**: Here students can click on a state and will then be taken to a list of state certification tests.

  - Students can click on the **Licensure Exams** they need to take to find:
    - Basic information about each test
    - Descriptions of what is covered on each test
    - Sample test questions with explanations of correct answers

- **National Evaluation Series™** by Pearson: Here students can see the tests in the NES, learn what is covered on each exam, and access sample test items with descriptions and rationales of correct answers. They can also purchase interactive online tutorials developed by Pearson Evaluation Systems and the Pearson Teacher Education and Development group.
• **ETS Online Praxis Tutorials**: Here students can purchase interactive online tutorials developed by ETS and by the Pearson Teacher Education and Development group. Tutorials are available for the Praxis I exams and for select Praxis II exams.

*Visit www.myeducationlab.com for a demonstration of this exciting new online teaching resource.*

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to acknowledge the following reviewers for their comments: Frannie Franc, The College of New Jersey; Jennifer Moon Ro, SUNY Fredonia; Barbara K. Strassman, The College of New Jersey; and Kathleen M. Valentine, SUNY Potsdam.

We thank the children who offered spoken and written samples used throughout this book. We give our heartfelt thanks to the children and families attending Rancho Romero Elementary, in Alamo, California; My Own Montessori, in Oakland, California; The Contra Costa Jewish Day School, in Lafayette, California, and the Children’s Hours School in Geneva, New York; Rosemary Deen’s grandchildren and Ruth Nathan’s, as well, who have remained interested in, and contributed to, our project for many years.

This book is dedicated to the memory of four wonderful teacher-scholars who are no longer with us: Carol Chomsky, Marie Clay, Edmund Henderson, and Frances Temple.
At a preschool in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a four-year-old girl had just completed a drawing of a woman fishing. At her side was a language researcher who was studying the beginnings of writing in young children. The researcher wondered what would happen if she asked the girl to write about her picture. The girl looked at her quizzically for a moment and then began to write these letters:

**YUTS A LADE YET FEHEG AD HE KOT FLEPR**

She whispered laboriously to herself as she wrote the letters one at a time. The researcher was elated, and she read the words immediately: “Once a lady went fishing and she caught Flipper.” (See Figure 1-1.)

**FIGURE 1-1** Four-year-old—From Carol Chomsky
(used by permission)
That young girl could not possibly have known that with her charming story she would provide a clear key that would help unlock the mysterious world of children’s thinking about written language.

The girl had inscribed a beautiful example of invented spelling—her young age made it clear that what she wrote was her own invention, and not something she was taught. The researcher at her side was Professor Carol Chomsky of Harvard University (Chomsky, 1971). Professor Chomsky was investigating early literacy, and she had the encouragement of a husband who knew quite a lot about language, the linguist Noam Chomsky. She also happened to be mentoring another linguist-in-the-making, Charles Read, then a doctoral student at MIT, who went on to write a book-length study of invented spelling a few years later (Read, 1975). Read’s work corroborated and helped advance the work of a team at the University of Virginia led by the late Professor Edmund Henderson (1990), and eventually Henderson and his students—Jim Beers, Jerry Zutell, Elizabeth Sulzby, Bill Teale, Richard Gentry, Darrell Morris, Shane Templeton, Charlie Temple, Donnie Bear, Tom Gill, Marcia Invernizzi, Jo Worthy, Francine Johnston, and Kathy Ganske—as well as many other teachers and researchers elsewhere—worked for decades to map the terrain of children’s early discovery of the spelling system of English.

Down on the other side of the world, the brilliant New Zealand teacher-researcher Marie Clay was doing much the same thing for children’s discovery of the graphic features of English writing. And her work was corroborated and extended at Cornell University by Eleanor Gibson (Gibson & Levin, 1975).

And shortly after, a team of teachers and researchers at the University of New Hampshire led by Donald Graves (1982) began exploring the ways that children learned to compose in print. Graves and his students, especially Lucy Calkins (1995), later the director of the New York Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University, showed the world the amazing capacity of young writers to do things in print, and popularized the writing workshop approach in elementary classrooms.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, communicative approaches to children’s writing and reading became well established in the elementary schools of North America. By the mid-1990s, though, teachers realized that there was a need for stronger systematic instruction for skill development in helping children learn to write and read. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget have long reminded teachers that children need a fund of knowledge to use from which to venture forth in their discoveries. Also during the 1980s and 1990s researchers pointed out that children from diverse social groups bring different uses of language and ways of knowing (see Heath, 1984), and also different funds of language resources (Hart & Risley, 1995) to the activity of learning about the English writing system. And that’s just among children who are native speakers of English. American educators are realizing that one child out of seven in our classrooms speaks a language other than English at home—and that language difference is accompanied by distinctive, culturally based ways of interacting with the world and understanding things.

More recently, experts from the special education field (see Troia, 2010, for example) have been investigating what is working and what is not to teach children about handwriting, spelling, and composition, as well as what might work, but is not being done.
YUTS A LADE AND YOU

So, what does a teacher need to know to understand what the precocious preschooler was doing when writing about her favorite dolphin? Two things: the nature of the child’s processes of discovery of written language and the linguistic tools to make adequate sense of these processes.

What was the girl discovering? English spelling is a complicated and quirky system that has drawn equal amounts of complaint and admiration over the years. One recent observer said that while English spelling is systematic, it works by the worst kind of logic: rules that don’t always apply (Beason, 2006). But like anything old and quirky, be it a relative or a writing system, there is more than one key to understanding it. Some of the explanation lies in patterns, and when the patterns aren’t followed, you rely on stories. So teachers must develop an extensive understanding of both the patterns of English spelling and the stories behind the exceptions.

Even the letters themselves deserve some attention. Children will spend the better part of two years learning to read and write those letters—longer than they will spend getting to know their classmates—and they will have intimate relations with those letters for the rest of their lives. Each letter has a story, too, and the alphabet is more richly understood if children’s teachers have a background of knowledge of the 2500-year-old history of our alphabet from which to tell stories of letters, so they are not so many abstract lines.

Composition is much older than writing. For many thousands of years people have thought about the best ways to discover ideas, arrange them just so, and shape them to have desired effects on an audience. When writing came along, the traditions of rhetoric and oratory were already well established. Of course children and adults are free to write things that are fresh and new, but more often than we realize, our ideas follow tracks that were set down for us a long time ago. Knowing the main patterns of composing is worthwhile for dynamic and interesting teachers of writing, at any level.

Be mindful of differences, though. Americans are from all over the world, and if our schools have privileged an Anglo-centric, Greco-Roman tradition, the whole world knows there is much good in that. But it is just one tradition. There are more riches to be gained from adding other traditions to our mix—and the children in our classrooms from other language and cultural groups need us to understand and respect the traditions they bring, and also serve as knowledgeable and sensitive interpreters of the language curriculum for them.

Teaching matters, too. A literacy educator wrote many years ago that the best way to help a child become literate is to find out what that child is trying to do (as he learns to read and write) and help him do it better. This is good advice as far as it goes, but as we have said here, a teacher should also have a sophisticated understanding of the writing system that child is trying to learn to use. And there are other voices that need to be heard, too. Each of the United States has standards for literacy, and there is now a set of National Core Standards that seek to guide the teaching of the language arts. They must all be attended to. Professional teachers are obligated to use recognized best practices in teaching children to write, spell, and compose.
WHAT’S NEXT

With all of that, we have set out the agenda for the rest of this book. The book contains three sections.

The first section is devoted to the letters we use to write in English. There we explore where the set of letters and our handwriting came from, then the process by which children discover how to write those letters, and finally how we should go about teaching handwriting.

The second section is on spelling: first a history of English spelling, then children’s developmental spelling, and finally, the assessment and teaching of spelling.

The third section is on composing. After a brief section on the history of the genres of composition, we have chapters on different forms and functions of composition. There is an examination of the discovery processes children use as they learn to compose messages in print, and a chapter with extensive suggestions for teaching children to write.

REFERENCES

Go to the MyEducationLab (www.myeducationlab.com) for your course, where you can:

- Complete Assignments and Activities that can help you more deeply understand the chapter content.
- Apply and practice your understanding of the core teaching skills identified in the chapter with the Building Teaching Skills and Dispositions learning units.

A+RISE Go to the Topic A+RISE in the MyEducationLab (www.myeducationlab.com) for your course. A+RISE® Standards2Strategy™ is an innovative and interactive online resource that offers new teachers in grades K-12 just in time, research-based instructional strategies that:

- Meet the linguistic needs of ELLs as they learn content
- Differentiate instruction for all grades and abilities
- Offer reading and writing techniques, cooperative learning, use of linguistic and nonlinguistic representations, scaffolding, teacher modeling, higher order thinking, and alternative classroom ELL assessment
- Provide support to help teachers be effective through the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing along with the content curriculum
- Improve student achievement
- Are aligned to Common Core Elementary Language Arts standards (for the literacy strategies) and to English language proficiency standards in WIDA, Texas, California, and Florida.
PART I

THE BEGINNINGS OF WRITING

In the title to this section, the “beginnings” of writing is meant in two senses. The first relates to the origins and evolution of our letters and of our system of writing. That story stretches back over the past 5000 years. It is the story of Egyptian hieroglyphs, of the Rosetta Stone, of wandering graffiti-writing Jewish soldiers, of lettered Phoenician seamen who carried the earliest alphabet all around the Mediterranean, of Greeks who wrote both coming and going, of Roman stone carvers, of German traders who remembered only some of the Etruscan alphabet when they developed the runes, of the Roman alphabet and the Christian campaign to eliminate the runes (pagan things, after all!), of the perfection of very different styles of handwriting through the centuries, of uniform and anonymous scripts, of the discovery of individual differences in handwriting as a window into your character, and of the threatened abandonment of handwriting in our age of keyboarding.

The second sense of the beginnings of writing is the story of children’s discovery of how writing works. This includes how children learn how writing differs from drawing, how “English-ness” differs from “Hebrew-ness” and “Arabic-ness” even before children can write a single standard letter, what the principles and features are that must be worked into letters, and how to master handwriting.

Along the way we will argue that regardless of whether teachers prefer to teach children to write meticulously in any particular style, it really does matter that children be able to write letters efficiently. Their growth in literacy depends on it.

In order to keep children curious and motivated, it certainly helps if teachers know the fascinating stories behind our letters and our writing system. Read on!
CHAPTER TWO

THE BEGINNINGS OF HANDWRITING

Good teachers realize that, as adults, they have known a lot about a lot of topics for a long time, and this may blind them to the things that children, as newcomers to many topics, may find curious. One goal of this chapter is to show you what children may find curious about the writing system they are endeavoring to learn. And another goal is to provide you with interesting facts you can use when opportunities arise both to arouse and to satisfy children’s curiosity about writing. We will approach these goals by taking a romp through the choices people have made through the years as they invented the system we use when we write English.

THE CHOICES WRITERS HAVE MADE, OR
A HISTORY OF HANDWRITING

The story of the development of alphabetic writing through history is a good place to start as we explore the choices children face as they puzzle out how our English writing system works. Very briefly, the plot of that story can be boiled down to the scheme in Figure 2-1: our writing began with pictures, then evolved into icons, then moved to syllabaries, and finally to alphabets. But like all stories, the charm is in the details.

THE HISTORY OF THE ALPHABET

The letters we use to write our words started out five thousand years ago with the ancient Egyptians and their hieroglyphs. The term *hieroglyph*, or “holy writing,” was coined not by Egyptians but by the ancient Greeks, who occupied Egypt from 332 B.C.E. to 30 B.C.E., nearly 3000 years after hieroglyphs were developed. The name *hieroglyphs* wasn’t a good fit, since hieroglyphs were a system for writing about all
manner of things and not just holy ones. But the Greeks were simply guessing because they could not figure out how the writing worked, and neither could anyone else for another 2000 years. Then early in the nineteenth century a Frenchman, Jean François Champollion, used a stone to unlock the secret of the hieroglyphs. The stone (shown in Figure 2-2) had been found near the mouth of the Nile in the town of Rashid by one of Napoleon’s troops during an expedition through Egypt. The Europeans called the town Rosetta. The stone named after that town bore the same message inscribed in three languages (Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic or “popular” Egyptian, and Greek) and proved to be the key to unlocking the hieroglyphs, although it took twenty years of research for Champollion to work it out (and he died before the work was completely finished).

Hieroglyphs worked on several levels. On one level they could be pictographs, pictures of the things they stood for. For example, a palm of a hand could stand for just that—a palm of a hand. On another level a hieroglyph could stand for a speech sound. A number of hieroglyphs could spell a word by its sounds, just as our alphabetic letters can. For example, the display in Figure 2-3 spells the name of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. It is read from left to right. The triangle spells /k/, the lion /l/, the feather /e/, the noose /o/, the square /p/, the bird /a/, the hand /t/, the eye /r/, and
the lower bird /a/ again. The circle around the name is called a cartouche (so named because French soldiers thought it resembled a bullet), which was a way of setting off the names of a deity or a royal person. That is the third level of representation: some characters denoted the class of thing a word was.

In about 1850 B.C.E., a group of Semitic mercenary soldiers (ancestors of the Jews) employed by the Egyptian army caught on to the idea that hieroglyphs could represent phonemes, and they borrowed just enough of the Egyptian hieroglyphs—to spell the consonants in their own language (Sacks, 2003). Voilá: they had an alphabet, or part of one. So those Semitic soldiers are thought to be the first to seize on the principle of using written characters exclusively to represent speech sounds at the level of phonemes. Their writing is referred to as Sinaitic writing, after the Sinai Peninsula where samples of their writing were found.

Note that their letters were still close to pictographs—to pictures of the things the letters originally represented. For instance, a pictograph for water was called mem (as the letter that descended from it is still called in Hebrew). In time the character came to represent the sound /m/. By the time the character got to the Greeks, they called it mu and wrote it μ, with no awareness that it was related to water, which the Greeks called hudor.

The Egyptian hieroglyph for an ox’s head was borrowed and adapted by the Semitic workers who named it aleph, Hebrew for “ox.” It stood not for a vowel but for an abrupt stop in breathing, a little like the sound in the middle of “uh-oh.” The Phoenicians (see below) stylized that character further, and the Greeks, also unaware of the letter’s origin as an ox’s head, turned it upside down and named it alpha. The Romans further developed the character into the letter A that we now use. Figure 2-4 shows what is believed to be the pathway that some of our letters followed as they evolved from the early pictographic hieroglyphs through Phoenician writing, and then through ancient Greek writing to the Roman alphabet we use to write English.

The ancient Phoenicians came from the eastern end of the Mediterranean, what is now Lebanon. They were sea-going traders some 3000 years ago, and as travelers and traders they had need of an efficient writing system. So they borrowed the characters the Semitic soldiers had adapted from the Egyptian hieroglyphs and developed those characters into a semi-alphabetic writing system. Their alphabet had consonants, but no vowels, and thus was called an abjad, which is a term for such a writing system that is based on phonemes, but incompletely (Hebrew writing is an abjad, because it normally spells words with consonants and assumes the reader will guess the vowels). The Phoenician traders took their letters all around the Mediterranean, and they were an instant hit. Only 22 letters, simple to write, could spell words in your local language by their sounds.

When the Phoenician system was borrowed by the Greeks, the Greeks added vowels to the abjad, taking characters for consonants that did not exist in their own language and renaming them to represent vowel sounds. The Greeks thus invented the first true alphabet in the world. That is, they perfected the first system that represented all of the speech sounds of the language, consonants and vowels, at the phoneme level.

Of course, there were some quirks. The Phoenicians wrote their words horizontally from right to left (just as writers of Hebrew and Arabic do today). They also sometimes wrote back and forth—from right to left, then from left to right, then from right to left—in the manner the Greeks called boustrophedon (boustrophedon means “As the ox plow turns”). (See Figure 2-5.)
12

PART I  THE BEGINNINGS OF WRITING

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FIGURE 2-4 The Evolution of Some of Our Letters (Adapted from Sacks, 2003.)

FIGURE 2-5 Writing Greek "As the Ox Plow Turns"
The Greek letters were adopted by the Romans, although the route from the Greek alphabet to the Roman alphabet was not very direct. The Roman alphabet used about half of the Greek letters in the same manner the Greeks did, modified several others, and neglected a few more for which Latin, the language spoken by the Romans, had no sounds. By the second century A.D., the Romans had abandoned the practice of boustrophedon writing and settled on writing from left to right and top to bottom.

Today the Roman alphabet is the most widely used system of letters in the world. It has many variations, of course—as you can see if you peruse the symbols available under the “Insert Symbols” tab in a word processing program. The Spanish have their ñ. The French have their ç and the Romanians have their ț, among many other local variations.

THE EVOLUTION OF HANDWRITING

Now that we have completed our brief survey of the history of our writing system and alphabet, let’s take a look at where our handwriting styles came from. After all, this is a subject of hot debate: after the 3000 year run we have just reviewed, there are strong voices in the education field just now who are arguing that it is time to move on from handwriting.

Let’s start with ancient Greek. Ancient Greek letters were all written in capitals. As we saw in Figure 2-5, they were usually written left to right, but they could be written from left to right and from right to left, or boustrophedon. Letters were written without leaving spaces between words, and without punctuation.

When the Romans took over and modified the Greek alphabet, they, too, wrote all in capitals. The formal inscriptions that the Romans carved in stone or on jewelry were written in squarish letters called capitalis (see Figure 2-6). For everyday writing, though, a quicker and less formal version developed called cursiva, roughly equivalent to modern cursive (see Figure 2-7).

Up until the sixth century A.D., writers in Latin sometimes wrote in large capital letters called mayuscula and sometimes in smaller versions called minuscula. Minuscula were shrunken versions of the mayuscula letters with the same forms as the larger letters, and they were not what we call upper case and lower case letters: T/t, G/g, etc. If you speak Spanish or French, though, the terms mayuscula and minuscula are now used as names for upper and lower case letters. (By the way, the terms upper case and lower
case came into usage much later with the era of moveable type, when printers stored capital letters in the upper case or cabinet, and the little versions in the lower one.)

Romans and Greeks used almost no punctuation, except for an occasional dot (not a period) that might be placed between words to mark word boundaries, but not at the ends of sentences (see Figure 2-8).

Bad news came for lambs, kids, and calves in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. when parchment and vellum were invented. These two kinds of writing material made from the skins of young animals had smoother surfaces that allowed writers to work more curves into their letters. Soon a fusion of capitalis and cursiva called uncial came into being. With uncial script emerged ascenders, lines that jutted above the tops of other letters, like our lower case t’s and l’s; and descenders, lines that dropped below the level of neighboring letters, like our y’s, p’s, q’s, and g’s (see Figure 2-9).

Capitalis, cursiva, mayuscula, minuscula, and uncial: for centuries, all of these scripts existed side by side before it occurred to scribes to combine them purposefully, such as in alternating capital and lower case letters to indicate proper names or first words in sentences.

After the fall of the Roman Empire the Christian church continued the reach of Roman culture, including the Latin language and Roman writing. In the fifth century a young Brit named Patricius lived for six years as a slave in Ireland, then escaped home to England, trained for the priesthood there, and returned to Ireland as the Christian bishop we know as St. Patrick. Patrick brought a bible written in uncial script, and had
his scribes create an Irish version of the script that contained many of the features of modern handwriting. Irish scribes invented true lower case letters, which had different forms from the upper case versions. (So there you have something else to celebrate on St. Patrick’s Day: lower case letters!) The Irish scribes used upper and lower case letters meaningfully, to denote first words in sentences and proper nouns. Irish semi-uncial may be the most beautiful handwriting ever invented, and the Book of Kells the most beautiful manuscript (see Figure 2-10).

Meanwhile, back on the continent, Charlemagne, or Charles the Great—Holy Roman Emperor from 800 to 814 and the political head of most of Europe—had the ambition of unifying his realm and also preserving Roman culture. So he set up a school in Tours, France, imported a scholar from England named Alcuin, and charged him with devising a written script that could be understood throughout the realm. Alcuin took the Irish uncial script and modified it into what was called Carolingian. This was the first fully modern script, with upper and lower case letters, capital letters at the beginnings of sentences and for proper nouns, and a full range of punctuation (see Figure 2-11).

Carolingian script was pleasing to the eye and fairly legible. But as universities were founded and commerce began to spread, more written materials were needed, and
a more condensed form of writing was developed. This was the gothic script that was spreading around Europe by 1150 (see Figure 2-12). Gothic had much the same meaning in the Middle Ages as it has today when applied to a young person with lots of tattoos and spikes—deliberately weird and barbarian—and that was how the old literary types who preferred older styles described that dense, black, unfriendly writing. The name stuck. Gothic, or Blackletter script as it was also called, lasted into the seventeenth century, but into the twentieth century in Germany (and on the masthead of The New York Times, as well as on the walls of traditional churches in America). Gothic script was in vogue when moveable-type printing was invented, so the first widely printed texts used a gothic font. Figure 2-13 is an example of a page from the first English printer, William Caxton.

Gothic may be the only script that affected English spelling, and that was because all those vertical lines made m’s, n’s, and u’s difficult to tell apart (we will say more about this in a later chapter). A joker in the Middle Ages wrote the Latin text shown in Figure 2-14 to illustrate the problem.

Around the year 1500 a Venetian by the name of Aldus Manutius developed a new script that pulled writing away from the Gothic style and back toward the Carolingian. It was suitably named Italic. In those days, as Donald Jackson (1981) explains, the explosion of printed books sidelined a raft of professional scribes, and many of them turned their talent to schooling the growing ranks of bureaucrats in the craft of elegant writing. Handwriting styles came into fashion one after another, and most notably, styles were born that linked letters in the manner we now call cursive (which in Latin means “running”).

A simplified version of European italic handwriting that was popular in America was called Copperplate (because handwriting in that style happened to be transferred directly onto copper printing plates for mass-produced documents). It is similar to
FIGURE 2-14 The Problems of Gothic Script

The text says:

“Mimi numinum nivium minimi munium nimium vini munimum imminui vivi minimum volunt”

or in English:

“The very short mimes of the gods of snow do not at all wish that during their lifetime the very great burden of distributing the wine of the walls to be lightened”
what students today are taught as cursive writing. The Declaration of Independence was written mostly in Copperplate hand by a master penman named Timothy Matlack. Another professional handwriter, Jacob Shallus, was commissioned to write the version of the U.S. Constitution that we have all seen, and he, too, used Copperplate script (see Figure 2-15).

The two documents look as if they could have been written by the same hand, and that was the point. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, handwriting was supposed to follow one kind of script style or another, and never (there’s a use of italic script!) to follow the writer’s personal preference or idiosyncrasies. It was only in the middle of that century that it became obvious that people might have their individual writing styles. And very soon after, it was thought that there was a correspondence between a person’s handwriting and that person’s character. As an anonymous essayist wrote in The National Magazine in 1855:

[N]ot only is it a wise provision of Providence that the handwriting of every man should be different from that of every other, but a man’s penmanship is an unfailing index of his character, moral and mental, and a criterion by which to judge of his peculiarities of taste and sentiments (quoted in Thornton, 1996, p. 73).

By the 1870s, the science (if we can call it that) of graphology was born—since it was believed that your handwriting was a sure sign of your identity (like your thumb-
print), and also a window into your soul. In the 1700s and 1800s, Harvard University insisted that all applications be handwritten, and students could be rejected on the basis of poor handwriting. Some European businesses still insist that applications be written out longhand, because employers consider handwriting a window on a person’s character (Florey, 2009).

In America, the effort to teach a standard for handwriting persisted through the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. But handwriting instruction was fueled by the belief that good handwriting was essential to the presentation of a good character—like “dress for success” with a strong moral element thrown in. Platt Rogers Spencer (1800–1864) developed a style of handwriting and a method for teaching it that promoted elegant handwriting as an essential part of a young person’s formation. It was phenomenally popular. You see an example of Spencer’s handwriting system every day in the logo of the Coca Cola Company.

A. N. Palmer (1860–1927) simplified Spencer’s system, and produced a curriculum of handwriting exercises that occupied children for several hours each week through much of the twentieth century. Palmer’s method reflected the sort of the mechanization that came with the rise of the industrial age. The act of writing was analyzed into its components, and those components were practiced one by one and then combined into pleasing wholes. Your great-grandparents will remember the Palmer Method.

Charles Zaner formed a college of penmanship in Oberlin, Ohio, at the end of the 1800s, and brought in Elmer Bloser as a full partner in 1891. Their system of handwriting, the Zaner-Bloser method, has been popular through the twentieth century and is reportedly still the most widely used (Graham et al., 2009). In the mid-1970s, Donald Neal Thurber introduced the D’Nealian system, which was based on gently sloping manuscript letters and intended to ease the transition from manuscript to cursive writing (see Figure 2-16).
By the late 1980s, though, the teaching of handwriting, and especially cursive writing, was in decline in the United States (and apparently in much of the English-speaking world). Handwriting had long since lost its moral connotations (although one of the authors remembers being admonished to close the loop on lower case A’s, since to leave them open is a sign of a dishonest character!). Maybe it was the emphasis on language acquisition (children learn much about language informally, from a supportive linguistic environment) and the Whole Language movement (which emphasized discovery over direct teaching) that encouraged a de-emphasis of handwriting. The scholarship at the time encouraged teachers to stress legibility over adherence to any strict model of handwriting.

Not so in other parts of the world, though. Travelers to Europe often bring home reports of European students’ careful and legible handwriting. A primary school teacher from Kent, England, wrote about an investigation of the ways teachers in France taught handwriting, because the French children’s handwriting seemed superior to that of her own students (Thomas, 1998). She reported that French teachers put a strong emphasis on teaching handwriting from the age of three through the age of nine, because they viewed handwriting not only as a practical tool, but also as an expressive art, and even as a part of French culture. Thomas concluded that the emphasis on handwriting paid off: “It is as though having automated the hand, the children’s minds are ‘liberated’ to release their ideas more effectively and creatively on paper” (p. 20).

In the United States, the decline of training in handwriting has evoked alarm in some quarters. Professor Steve Graham, a special educator at Vanderbilt University, and his colleagues found evidence that limited handwriting instruction works to the disadvantage of students who are learning to write (Graham et al., 2009). Their findings in the United States were similar to those of Thomas (1998): students write more fluently if the production of letters on the page is automatic for them.

How much do primary grade teachers teach handwriting? Graham et al. found that the average for the grades one, two, and three was 70 minutes of instruction per week, but the time devoted to instruction varied tremendously. Half of the teachers taught handwriting daily, a third taught handwriting several times a week, and one in ten taught it once a week. The length of each handwriting lesson varied from an hour to 2 minutes. A great majority used commercial handwriting programs, either Zaner-Bloser or D’Nealian.

The advent of keyboarding—writing on computers and texting on smart phones—has bolstered the trend away from teaching handwriting, at least away from teaching cursive. In fact, the Common Core State Standards for English have dropped the teaching of cursive handwriting as a requirement and replaced it with the teaching of keyboarding. We will say more about this in Chapter 3.

■ CONCLUSION

How do children learn to write—that is, to make marks on the page that stand for ideas? Looking back over the history of handwriting, as we have just done, gives us some notion of the choices children have to make among the possible ways writing can work.

Is writing like drawing a picture, which can represent a range of things in a range of ways, or is it communicating by means of a code, where the markings put on the page and their relationship to the things they represent are carefully controlled?

Does writing connect the symbols on the page with the things they represent by resembling some of the features of those things, or do the symbols stand for the sounds
of the words for those things? And if writing represents the sounds of words, does it do so at the level of syllables, or at the level of phonemes?

How do we tell letters apart? What makes an A an A and an E and E? How much can we fool around with the look of a letter before we turn it into something else?

We will explore children’s adventures with these elements in the next chapter.

REFERENCES


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