



THE SUNDAY TIMES

THE SCHOOLS BLOG



Are the days of handwritten public exams numbered?

In handwriting, I am afraid I have always favoured speed over neatness. As time has gone on, legibility has increasingly suffered, too, so that I know my colleagues dread receiving a written note from me. In the Common Room at my last school, staff would hold my ill-written notes at strange angles hoping the letters would somehow reassemble themselves in a readable order. The deputy head was invariably called upon to mediate as staff struggled to decipher what they suspected might be the key point.

I manage better handwriting in the comments I write on pupils' work, but even so, I am often asked politely to "translate". I retain a perplexing sentiment for handwriting. I like to see pupils write with fountain pens, and I am uneasy when they ask to type their homework: I gain so much more sense of their ability and indeed character when I read their work in their own handwriting.

I even miss the days of handwritten school reports, where, elegant and succinct, or untidy and verbose, each teacher's voice could somehow be "heard" in the strokes of blue or black pen across a whole page of different hands.

And yet, for all this, some tides in the affairs of man - and school children - are simply too strong to fight. One of these is that it is clear to anyone who teaches young people today that almost all of them are completely at home

with the typewritten word. Handwriting survives, but for most pupils, words are formed and sentences styled on a screen, not on the A4 sheets or rough books of my school memory. Essays and homeworks, like texts requesting a lift from parents or Facebook chatter, are all likely now to be typed, not written, unless an old-fashioned teacher like me requires at least some work to be in handwriting.

Schools that introduced laptops to their classes in the 1990s, too early for the technology to support the way children really learnt, no doubt did little good to their pupils, not least because public exams have remained, essentially, handwritten. However, this week, Isabel Nisbet, chief executive of Ofqual, the exams regulator, has made a bold suggestion. She has said that in future all school tests should be taken on computer. GCSEs and A levels are in danger of becoming invalid, she argues, as children work and research online. Two boards have welcomed her suggestion, and a third has expressed reasonable concerns without decrying the idea.

In almost any classroom nowadays, there will be a boy or a girl who, for whatever reason, is taking notes on a laptop, and there are many more who have a dispensation to use a computer when they sit their public exams. For all my sentimental affection for handwriting, I am sure Ms Nisbet is right. In universities and in the workplace, it is impossible to imagine more than a tiny number of people who are not completely at ease with a computer. Many of us have little cause to write with a pen at all. It should now be a priority for the examination boards, with the help and support of the government, to conduct research into online examining at GCSE and beyond, so that our examination system can be seen to reflect the world in which pupils actually live and work.

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