

KITTY BURNS FLOREY

Script

BY THE AUTHOR OF
SISTER BERNADETTE'S
BARKING DOG

Scribble



THE RISE AND FALL OF
HANDWRITING

"A winsome mix of memoir and call to arms . . . An
entertaining history." —CHICAGO TRIBUNE, EDITOR'S CHOICE

“This is a book every writer would love, a curio cabinet on the art and act of writing.”

—Amy Tan, author of *Saving Fish from Drowning*

“A winsome mix of memoir and call to arms ... An entertaining history.”

—*Chicago Tribune*, Editor’s Choice

“A witty and readable (and fetchingly illustrated and glossed) excursion through the history of handwriting.”

—Cullen Murphy, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Highly enjoyable ... Witty and often endearingly autobiographical.”

—Michael Dirda, *The Washington Post*

“A charming, illustrated eulogy to a craft that’s fast losing its place in the modern world.”

—*Financial Times*

“Florey’s argument is nostalgic yet pragmatic. ‘It seems wrong,’ she says, ‘when something beautiful, useful, and historically important vanishes.’ Charmingly composed and handsomely presented, *Script and Scribble* just might provoke a handwriting revival.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“[A] pithy account of the history of handwriting ... Florey makes a solid case for handwriting as a social indicator, and her affection for its art is thoughtful and aesthetically informed.”

—Albert Mobilio, *Bookforum*

“Kitty Burns Florey’s charming history of the rise and fall of handwriting is a loving and polished tribute to a modest but deeply civilizing skill that can make our words not only intelligible to others but, like this book, sweet and beautiful.”

—David Skinner, author of *The Story of Ain’t: America, Its Language, and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published*

“Florey ... lovingly traces the history of handwriting, from its ancient birth to its imminent demise.”

—Sam Anderson, *New York Times*

“What in God’s name has happened to penmanship? It’s easy to blame the computer, but, as Kitty Burns Florey demonstrates in her thoughtful, witty, and sensible book, the story goes far deeper than that. It touches on the way we think, the way we write, and the way we lead our lives. Read *Script & Scribble* and be enlightened.”

—Ben Yagoda, author of *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better or And/Or Worse*

“Part memoir, part meticulously researched primer, [this] captivating history of handwriting is a lovely ode to a nearly lost art.”

—*ReadyMade*

“Frank and engaging.”

—*Rain Ta*

SISTER BERNADETTE'S BARKING DOG

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FIVE QUESTIONS

VIGIL FOR A STRANGER

DUET

REAL LIFE

THE GARDEN PATH

CHEZ CORDELIA

FAMILY MATTERS



Script and Scribble



Script and Scribble
The Rise and Fall of Handwriting
KBF

KITTY BURNS FLOREY


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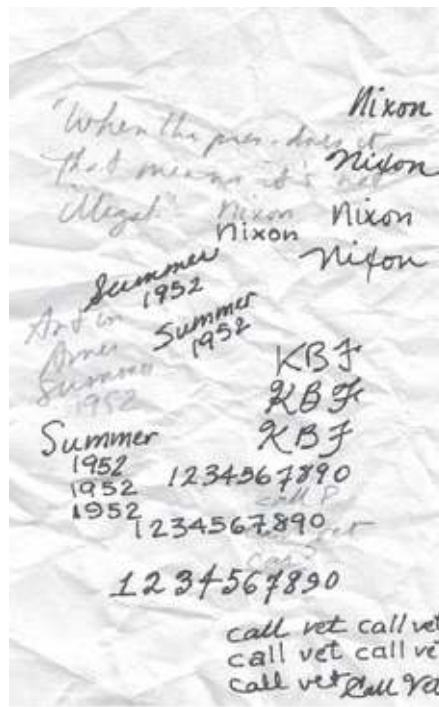
*A true source of human happiness
lies in taking a genuine
interest in all the details of daily life
and elevating them by art.*

WILLIAM MORRIS

Preface

A Handwritten Life

Since I first picked up a pen, I have been under the spell of handwriting. I've experimented endlessly with different scripts: straight up, right-slanting, left-slanting, print-like, florid, spare, minimalist, maximalist, round, spiky, highly legible, insouciantly scrawled. I can make a list or write a check without scrutinizing my rushed, ugly *F*'s and illegible *r*'s and wishing I'd taken more time or had a better artistic sense. When I doodle, I often doodle handwriting styles.



Recent doodle retrieved from wastebasket

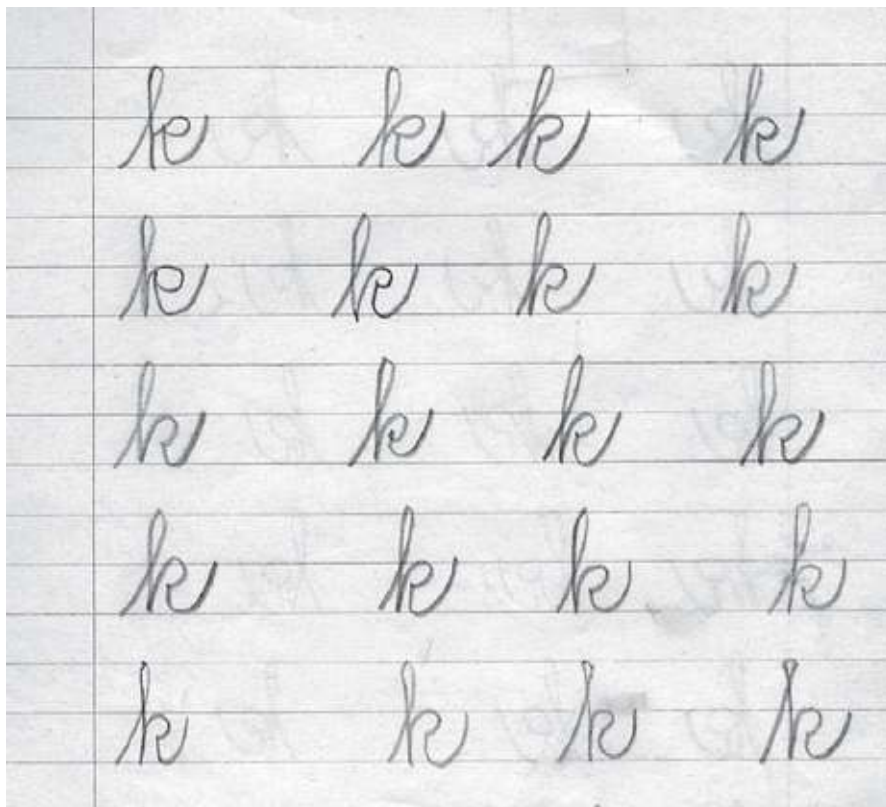
I suspect that, for many, this preoccupation might seem bizarre, even slightly mad. There's a widespread belief that, in a digital world, forming letters on paper with a pen is pointless and obsolete, and that anyone who thinks otherwise is right up there with folks who still have fallout shelters in their back yards. But I'm part of the last generation for whom handwriting was taught as a vital skill. All through school, it was an important part of our lives: you had good handwriting, or you had bad handwriting—at some level, the way you wrote was a part of you, and was judged. That identification with my own script has never left me.

When I look back at learning to write, I can still feel the excitement of it. Little kid

printed. Big kids wrote in longhand.

I learned to write longhand—cursive—in third grade at St. John the Baptist Academy in Syracuse, New York. Above the blackboard there was a frieze showing the idealized script we were all aiming at, in both upper and lower case, and lurking in each student's beat-up old wooden desk was a Palmer Method workbook.

Every day, during handwriting practice, we took out our workbooks, sat up straight at our desks, and grabbed our pencils. Sister Victorine swished around the room in her long black habit, looking over our shoulders with her eagle eye and beating time like an orchestra conductor—*one two, one two, up down, up down*—a brisk martial rhythm that we labored to match with the strokes of our pencils.¹



From Sister Victorine's class

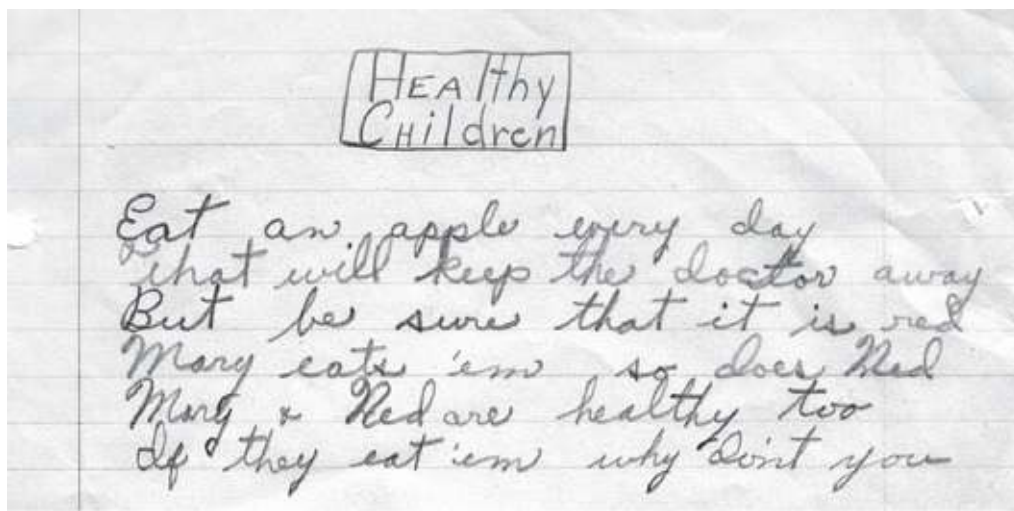
Form, size, slant, spacing: those were the elements of the Palmer Method. At the end of the session, if you managed to keep them all in mind while you sat straight but also stayed relaxed, and if you concentrated on what you were doing instead of wishing you were out in the school yard playing Red Rover, you had pages of perfect ovals, upstrokes, and downstrokes, and by the end of third grade, these would have come together into some species of legible penmanship.

Sister Victorine was a tall, stately nun with mild blue eyes, round gun-metal glasses, and a black thumbnail on her right hand. The black thumb mesmerized me. I asked my parents where you got such a thing. My father said, "Maybe she hit her thumb with a hammer." My mother winced absently and said, "Oh dear." They clearly weren't as compelled by it as I was. While I watched Sister Victorine write flawless cursive homilies on the blackboard—*Pride goes before a fall, Haste makes waste*—I pictured her lifting the hammer to pound the nail, whacking her thumb instead, the thumb turning a rich black as she looked at it.

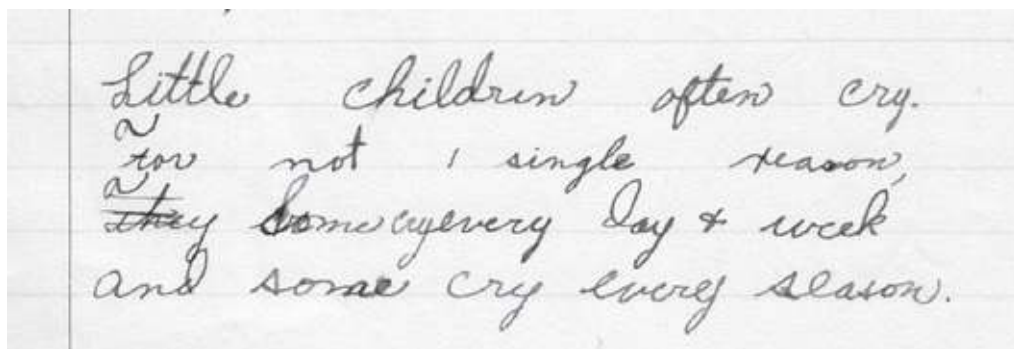
horror. What made it turn black? And why would a nun have been pounding a nail? Did she cry? Did nuns cry? Or had it happened before she even entered the convent? I imagined a tough and gritty childhood, forced labor in her cruel father's carpentry shop. Was that why she became a nun? To escape?

With difficulty, I would turn my attention from her fascinating thumbnail and work on copying her flowing capital *L*'s and trimly crossed *t*'s. I wasn't a superstar, but I was pretty good at it, and I didn't mind handwriting practice. Something about the low-key creativity, the reach for perfection, and the repetitive mental numbness of it appealed to me—still does.

By the time we left Sister Victorine and entered Sister Robert Clare's fourth-grade class, we were deemed to be accomplished hand-writers and were allowed to progress from pencils to straight pens, which cost a nickel each. They were fitted with metal points (nibs) that were dipped into small glass inkwells that sat in a hole at the upper right (too bad, lefties!) corner of our desks. Writing with a straight pen dunked into an inkwell was an adventure: the path from ink to paper could be a sea of blots and blobs, and keeping the ink-flow steady on the paper was maddeningly difficult.



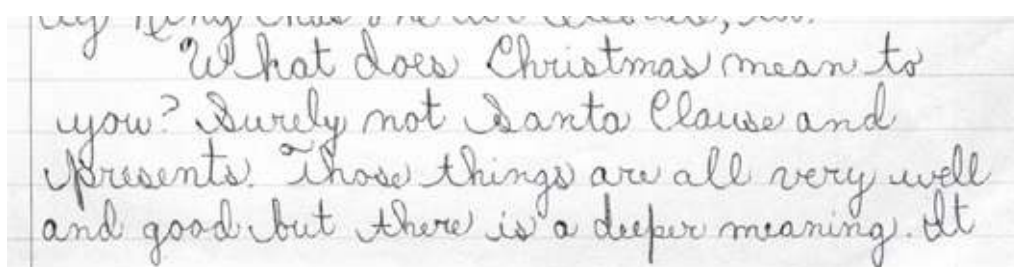
Third grade



Fourth grade²

By fifth grade, we had graduated to fountain pens³ and were writing with some fluency—well enough, at least, to stop worrying about getting it right and start thinking about what impression we were making. This was the age when pen obsessives were born. In the diary kept when I was ten, one of my New Year's resolutions was: "I will write ROUND"—ROUND

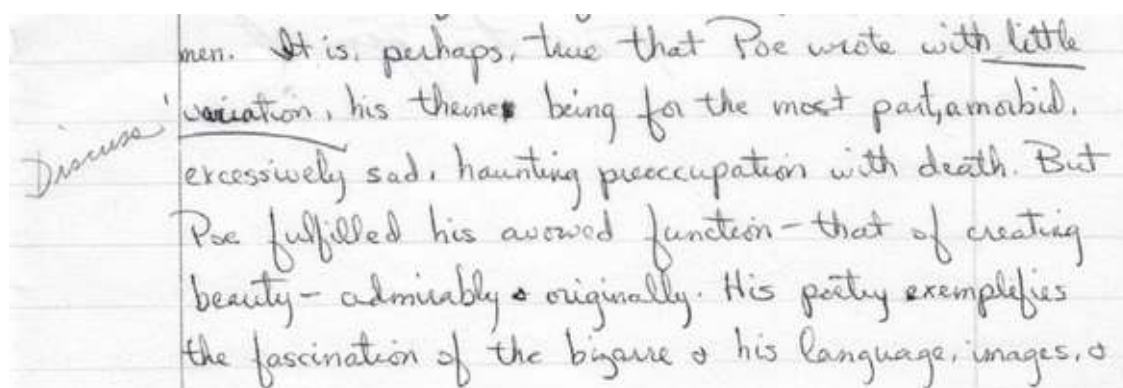
was a fad among my set—and so I did:



What does Christmas mean to you? Surely not Santa Clause and presents. Those things are all very well and good but there is a deeper meaning. It

Patently insincere school assignment, fifth grade

It wasn't until high school that the nuns finally allowed us, grudgingly, to write with ballpoints. In my school, at least, there was a nunly prejudice against them as newfangled nonsense: the ball-points of the day were regarded as not only unreliable and messy (they do tend to skip and smear) but extravagant: when the ink ran out, you threw away the innards and bought a refill! It was almost as bad as buying a new pen every time! But among us devout may-care adolescents, who worried about such trivial concerns? I was very fond of my blue Esterbrook fountain pen, my collaborator in hours of scriptomaniacal experiments. But everyone knew that ball-point pens were way cool, and eventually the nuns stopped fighting them.



men. It is, perhaps, true that Poe wrote with little variation, his themes being for the most part, morbid, excessively sad, haunting preoccupation with death. But Poe fulfilled his avowed function—that of creating beauty—admirably & originally. His poetry exemplifies the fascination of the bizarre & his language, images, &

Smearred ballpoint, twelfth grade

Then felt tips came along. I remember when the first benzene-scented Magic Markers hit my high school, first in basic black, soon in glorious Technicolor. If you handed me one now its intoxicating chemical stink would, in a Proustian second, transport me back to a winter afternoon at St. John's when, wearing a hideous maroon serge uniform, knee socks, and saddle shoes, I sat with a group of fellow students and, with colorfully marker-stained handmade signs for pep rallies: BEAT ASSUMPTION! CRUSH SACRED HEART!—sentiments incomprehensible, perhaps, only to basketball-crazed parochial school students without a shred of irony.

I used to change my handwriting the way I changed my hair color (my natural mouse brown ran the gamut from a sort of palomino⁴ to a daring reddish-black). It's obvious now that most of my scriptorial attempts were outrageously pretentious, appallingly twee, but I considered each one the height of cool—the proper handwriting for an aspiring Bohemian, future writer, a deeply sensitive person who wrote deeply sensitive poetry and then burned

in the sink, weeping. Just as nineteenth-century ink nuts—a common species in those days—believed that good penmanship would lead directly to good moral character, I think I must have believed that an arty style would make me an artist.

What I was really looking for, of course, was my self. The notion that it would arrive through a bottle of Miss Clairol or the way I made a capital *B* was not, I hope, entirely inappropriate for my age group.

Over the years, I've become less flighty and self-conscious, and so has my handwriting. It gradually ceased its adventurous traveling, settling at last into a fitfully legible debased scribble that often looks, to me, not only plug-ugly but slightly berserk:

The tragedy of old age is not
that one is old but that
one is young.
Oscar Wilde

Where is the fluent Palmer Method succession of ovals and loops I learned in elementary school and took such pains to perfect? What happened to the drop-dead-arty script I cultivated in college as a symbol of emancipation from my lackluster and conventional past? Whither the briskly legible semi-cursive in which I wrote the rough drafts of my first few novels, at a time when keyboards existed only on typewriters and on the old piano everyone had in the corner of the living room?

The glory days of elegant handwriting have long been over. In our times, what is the practical use of good penmanship?⁵ How often do most of us need to write with an actual pen on actual paper? Diana, princess of Wales, got into her secondary school on the strength of her neat handwriting. In Ha Jin's novel *Waiting*, set in his native China, a young woman is jilted by a suitor because her writing is unattractive. And aspiring bakers can still move up to cake decorating only if they can squeeze out a beautiful "Happy Birthday."

For most of us, it's less crucial—or so goes the conventional wisdom. We make shopping lists, we jot things down in meetings, we send an occasional thank-you letter, we address our Christmas cards, sometimes write a few lines inside. Students take notes in class and write test answers by hand. We scribble on the ubiquitous Post-its and stick them up on the borders of the computer screen.

But when it comes to our "real" writing, we are all, all slaves to the keyboard. A vast number of people work at one for most of the day. Others dash to the screen to check e-mail the minute they get home, or live in a continual round of IM-ing and text-messaging on a PDA or a mobile phone. Few teachers now find time or have the inclination to work handwriting instruction into the curriculum; keyboarding is being taught in its place. A stroll into any Starbucks will find a laptop propped in front of at least half the customers. I acquired my first computer in 1985, long before anyone else I knew had one. Less than a quarter-century later, the tapping of keys can be heard around the planet.

We live in a fast-moving stripped-down world, one that's often efficient to the point of

sterility. There was a time when we went to the movies in gorgeously embellished theaters with Moorish tiles, grand staircases, brass-railed balconies, uniformed ushers with flashlights. Now movies are shown in concrete multiplexes where the noise of the gun fight in *Shoeshine* bleeds into the noise of the car chase in *Matchbox 18*. Once, department stores were dazzling mezzanined emporia where the saleswomen wore dresses and high heels and the salesmen wore natty suits and ties.

Now we shop in airplane hangars with names like Kmart and Target and Wal-Mart. Supermarkets are massive mega-stores where you can clock a mile just hunting for a can of chickpeas. Banks are no longer soaring, Greek-columned temples to Mammon but drab edifices. Shoestores with plastic logos blasted across the front. People used to dress up for all kinds of things: church, shopping, dentist appointments, plane trips; now we dress mostly for comfort and getting gussied up is only for very special occasions, like weddings, New Year's Eve, maybe opening night at the opera. Food is fast, service is slow, telephones are answered by robots.



Saleslady and customer, 1944 (image credits prf.8)

This is not meant to be a boomer rant. I'm not saying any of this is bad. Some of it seems like a huge improvement on the past (I wouldn't want to go shopping in high heels and nylons even if I owned any) and some of it doesn't (I wish some nice man in a cap would pump the gas for my Subaru, wash the windows, and give me a free road map, too). It's simply the world as we know it.

We no longer have to spend time lacing our corsets or sharpening our quills, but for many reasons we're all in a hurry, too busy to dress up, or make gooseberry jam, or dampen a shirt,⁷ wrap it in a towel, and let it sit for an hour before ironing it (a domestic ritual I was brought up on and continued to observe until I was in my thirties). I look back on some of these activities with astonishment. Did I really do chores on Saturday mornings that included polishing the bathroom faucets with Glass Wax? Did my mother really come home from work and sit down with her sewing? Did airline stewardesses really wobble down the aisle in spilt

heels and tight navy blue skirts?

And, as ironing and nylons go, so, apparently, goes penmanship.

* * * *

I've had a recurring dream since I was a kid—I'm looking at a piece of paper with words written on it in black ink. The writing is a clear, ordinary cursive script, but no matter how hard I try, I can't read it. When I was very young, the words were sometimes written in pencil in a notebook or sewn with black thread on a piece of white satin in an embroidery hoop. (Not so strange, maybe: in those days most females embroidered, including my grandmother, my mother, and me. But as time has gone by, it has refined itself to this enigmatic dream of penmanship, paper, ink, and incomprehensibility.)

I've begun to wonder if, in its most recent manifestations, the dream is the scary premonition of an ink nut who fears that the day is coming when no one will be able to read handwriting at all.

-
- 1 A friend of mine remembers doing this more romantically to the strains of "The Blue Danube."
 - 2 In third and fourth grades, my ambition was to become a famous poet. This has not happened.
 - 3 We had also begun to acquire a curious artifact of the Pre-Computer Era (PCE), the "writer's bump"—a callous at the place where the thumb and first two fingers come together (known as the "dynamic tripod" in serious handwriting circles) to hold the pen. The bump forms at the top joint of the middle finger. There was a time when everyone had one, and it grew larger in size until, by the time you were in your teens, it was a prominent lump. It wasn't considered unsightly or even worthy of notice. It was a fact of life, like a nose. I still have the vestige of mine.
 - 4 When at age sixteen I discovered Marchand's Golden Hair Wash and came into school a streaky blonde, the nuns sent me straight home again.
 - 5 Or "penpersonship"—there are at least 200 very sincere Google references to this version, as in "It's essential to have good penpersonship."
 - 6 Where there are no salespeople at all, just bored and underpaid checkout clerks without health benefits.
 - 7 At our house, this was done with an old Heinz ketchup bottle fitted with the kind of sprinkler top that was readily available at any hardware store.

Pen, Paper, Ink— A Stroll Through Handwriting History

THE STYLUS, THE BRUSH, AND THE CALAMUS

The human need—or maybe the urge—to record the minutiae of daily life goes back to cavemen and early agricultural dwellers scratching on walls with sharp stones. That instinct, as the British calligrapher and author Donald Jackson puts it in *The Story of Writing* (1980), “is as deep-rooted as anything we know about our earliest ancestors.” They began by making pictures that recorded the results of the hunt. Eventually, drawing a picture of each slain bison became cumbersome and time-consuming, and a simpler method was developed: the use of a symbol to stand for a thing.

In the fourth millennium BC, the Sumerians were drawing pictures on wet clay of the objects that made up their world—a tree, say, or a house. These were incised with a stylus, a pencil-like instrument not unlike the ones used with today’s PDAs, and because its tip was triangular, the marks were wedge-shaped (hence, *cuneiform*, from the Latin *cuneus*, meaning *wedge*).



A stylus (image credits 1.1)

These stylized images—pictograms—were used to record business transactions, historic events, and recipes, including one for beer, which the Sumerians apparently invented.¹ Over time, their symbols lost detail and became increasingly abstracted, a response to the roughness of the stylus as a writing tool, and tendency of the clay to harden rapidly. The pictograms began to give way to phonograms, in which an image represented the sound of a syllable rather than an object—a radical transformation that reduced the two thousand images of the Sumerians to two hundred.

At the same time, the Egyptians began chiseling their elegant hieroglyphs (“writing of the gods”) into stone or painting them on papyrus, using either a brush made of bristles, or a brush-pen made by chewing or hammering one end of a reed until it was soft. The Egyptians actually had an alphabet of twenty-four letters (all consonants), but because of the relative

flexibility of the brush on papyrus, the urgency that led the stylus-and-clay Sumerians toward simplification was absent. The Egyptians hung on to their pictograms long past the point where they were needed. Hieroglyphics were a composite of pictograms and phonograms, the two types of images often supplementing each other in a phenomenally complex system: a student of writing had to memorize hundreds of separate signs.

Over time, pictograms in general became less realistic and more abstract, until finally, sometime before the first millennium BC, the Phoenicians—the most successful traders and businessmen of their day—took a crucial leap further and devised the first system of writing dependent entirely on sounds rather than on images. A symbol now stood for a sound, not for a syllable. Their ingenious system of letters—a tidy twenty-six as opposed to hundreds—was worked out by merchants in the Phoenician city of Byblos—the city the Greeks had named after their word for *papyrus* because Egyptian papyrus was shipped from there. (*Byblos*, of course, is the source of bookish words like *bibliography* and *bible*.)

The Phoenician system was based, quite sensibly, on Egyptian hieroglyphics: the genius of the Phoenicians was to transform the pictograms into a true alphabet. The Egyptian sign for *ox head*, for example, was:



The Phoenician word for *ox* was *aleph*, and they named the letter by the initial sound of what the pictogram had represented (aleph = A) so that meaning was derived from a sound rather than from a picture. Similarly, the Egyptians used this expressive sign for *water*:



The Phoenicians called it *mem*, their word for *water*, and it became *M*. (If we called our letter *M* not *em* but, say, *Mom*, and our letter *A* *ax*, we might be learning not our *ABCs* but our *Ax-Banana-Cats*. This process is called acrophony, from the Greek words for “uppermost” and “sound.”) Because they were still using a stylus, the letters began as angular forms, but eventually they also began to use brush and ink to generate more rounded letters. Gradually, a complete alphabet evolved and—with some modifications and additions over the slow flow of time—it’s the alphabet we use today.

Between the Phoenicians with their inventories and bills of lading, and the monastic scribes toiling over illuminated manuscripts in their scriptoria, were the Romans. The Romans devised their own take on the Phoenician alphabet, using innovations borrowed from the Greeks and the Etruscans to create a bold, impressive all-caps script worthy of world conquerors. It became known as Roman Square Capital, and was particularly well suited to incising large letters with a chisel and mallet onto the stone facades of buildings.

SENATVS·POPVLVS·QVE·RO
IMP·CAESARI·DIVI·NERVAE·
TRAIANO·AVGG·GERM·DACI·OP

Roman Square Capital ([image credits 1.4](#))

The Romans employed more casual scripts as well, designed to be scribbled rather than chiseled, including an early cursive for writing quickly if not beautifully: when Julius Caesar, on horseback, dictated letters in the midst of a military campaign (as Plutarch tells us he did), the scribes very likely jotted down his words in their messy, shorthand proto-cursive and copied them over neatly in Square Capital when they got back to their tents.

Much of this early writing (i.e., getting words onto a flat surface) was done using some version of the stylus on wax *tabulae*—shallow book-sized wooden or ivory boxes covered with a film of beeswax stained dark to make the writing more legible—an apparatus that calls to mind the once-ubiquitous Magic Slate.



A woman with stylus and tabula, from Pompeii ([image credits 1.5](#))

Gradually, the instrument's wedge-shaped end became more pointed, but the other end remained flat for smoothing out the wax in order to use the surface again (or to “erase” a word or error). The stylus could be plain as a knitting needle or turned like a spindle, and was usually made of iron or bone (or iron-tipped bone), sometimes of more expensive bronze.

Scholars estimate that perhaps 15 percent of Romans were literate, most of them from the patrician class. An educated citizen carried a stylus at all times, as someone today might keep a ballpoint in a shirt pocket. When Caesar was attacked in the Roman senate on the Ides of March in 44 BC, he defended himself (according to Suetonius) with his stylus—in vain, of course: the sword in this case was mightier than the pen.

Soon after Caesar's time, for books and official documents, the graceful Roman Rustic script came into use—a domestic variant of Roman Square Capital. Its narrower strokes and contracted forms took up less space and so was less time-consuming and expensive to produce.

TESTATUR MORITUR ADEOS ET
SIDERA TVMSI QV ODNONAEQV
CURAENVMENTHABET IVSTVM
NOXERAT ET PACIDVM CARIB

Roman Rustic (image credits 1.6)

The Romans used stylus-and-wax for brief or ephemeral bits of writing, like bills, personal correspondence, jottings, schoolwork,² but sometimes, surprisingly, they also used it to draw up legal documents like wills and contracts. The stuff was durable as long as you didn't leave it in the sun.

But for literary purposes, or anything they wished preserved *ad infinitum*, the ancients wrote with a brush made of hair, bristle, and various fibers, or with a calamus—a reed implement (*calamus* is the Latin word for *reed*) that was sharpened with a knife and split at the writing-end to facilitate the drawing up of the ink. This became the archetype of many subsequent pens, including the fountain pen with its split nib.



Modern calamus, hand-cut from a reed

Until around the fourth century, most writing was done on papyrus, which was made quite cheaply from reeds imported from Egypt. As a result, books were fairly inexpensive in Ancient Rome: you could pick up a copy of Martial's *Epigrams* for six sesterces. (As a comparison, Cleopatra's pearls were worth 40 million sesterces.)

Then, as the Roman Empire started to decline and, with it, trade between Rome and its colonies, including Egypt, parchment began to take the place of papyrus. It was made from a readily available source—animal skins, usually sheep—and had clear advantages over papyrus: parchment was much smoother and sturdier, and could be folded into the shape of something more like a book. The unwieldy scrolls we see in toga movies would have been papyrus.

The Uncial scripts³ that grew out of Roman Square Capital were rounder, simpler, and more efficient—friendlier than the imposing Roman caps. Uncials were developed in the monasteries in answer to what the monks saw as an urgent need: just as Christianity was edging out paganism, the holier Uncial script began to replace its earlier Roman competitor, which, because they had been used for copying the works of pagan writers (Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Caesar himself), were considered sullied, and unsuitable for Church writings. (Even now, to me, Uncial has a hard-to-define but unmistakable “religious” look.)

One of Uncial's features was the introduction of small letters—not lower-case letters as we know them, but capitals written half their usual size, which saved paper and definitely sped things up. The variant known as Half-Uncial flirted with true minuscule letters: the top loop of the *B* was eliminated, for example, leaving the single-looped lower-case *b* we use today.

nequediuerisumautdifferent
quodcorporaliterhabitetinx
quidinhabitatcorporaliter

Roman Half-Uncial (image credits 1.8)

The script was brought to Ireland by Bishop Patricius—aka St. Patrick. The future bishop and saint was a Roman Briton, kidnapped as a teenager and transported to Ireland to be a slave, toiling for six years as a shepherd in what is now County Mayo. He finally escaped, made his way home, was educated in monasteries, became a missionary, was consecrated a bishop, and in the year 432 returned to Ireland—which during his captivity he had come to love—to convert the pagan warrior chieftains to Christianity. He also converted the Irish to Half-Uncial.

Over time, the Irish monks made their own improvements and innovations as, doggedly copying manuscripts (the word comes from the Latin *manu scriptis*, or *written by hand*) in the scriptoria, they kept the flame of learning alive through the so-called Dark Ages—a time of upheaval in Europe during which, miraculously, handwriting flourished and spread. (The period is now referred to more benignly by historians as Late Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages.)



The monastery scriptorium (image credits 1.9)

Gradually, the scripts that began to dominate were the Irish spin-offs from Uncial, the so-called Insular Majuscule and Insular Minuscule—*insular* because they were developed on an island, *majuscule* because they consisted of all capital letters. (Insular Minuscule, which included lower-case letters, originated a little later, also in Ireland.) These highly pleasing scripts were taught by the Irish to the monks in Anglo-Saxon (i.e., English) monasteries where the new forms caught on quickly. However, the old-fashioned Celtic churchmen, many of whom clung to the old Uncial scripts, were often at odds with the Anglo-Saxons, who were more enthusiastic embracers of what had become the official Christian establishment, based

in Rome. The scripts the two factions favored coexisted peacefully enough, overlapping and influencing each other, but there were other problems: the Irish and Roman churches had differing calendars (so the date of Easter was always in dispute), they disagreed about whether penance should be performed in private or in public, and their monks favored opposing tonsure styles: the Anglo-Saxons shaved the tops of their heads, leaving the familiarly neatly clipped monkish fringe, and ridiculed the Irish, who shaved the front half ear to ear and sported a long mane that hung down the back—a hairstyle possibly modeled on that of the Druids.

Essentially, it was a power struggle between progressives and conservatives. The backward-looking Celts lost: at the Synod of Whitby in 664, the issue was decided in favor of the Roman tradition, which dominates the Catholic Church to this day, and along with the wild hairstyles, the Irish monks' distinctive Uncial script was gradually replaced by its more compact Insular versions.

Te canit ad celebratque polis
rex sazifer hymnis trans
zephyrique globum scandunt
tuafacta per axem

Insular Minuscule, c. 700 (image credits 1.10)

It was during the course of the evolution of these scripts that the calamus—the reed pen—began to be seen as an inadequate writing implement. It had been a step forward from the brush, but because, like papyrus, it too had to be made from an imported reed, the calamus eventually fell into disuse, and a new writing implement appeared, one that would change the course of handwriting history.

THE QUILL

The idea of using bird feathers to write with had been around for centuries—between about 250 BC and 68 AD, the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, at least in part, with quills. But it wasn't until sometime in the late seventh or early eighth century that they became the major writing instrument in much of the world. The quill was versatile, flexible, and easier to manipulate than a brush. Its harder point—with a texture somewhat like the human fingernail—was better than the coarse tip of a calamus for writing on smooth parchment—but similar enough (hollow barrel, split nib) to be constructed easily by scribes. With the advent of the quill, handwriting became more varied and individual.

Quills were used for the illuminated manuscripts produced by monks in Ireland, including the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the sumptuous *Book of Kells*. Anonymous wrote *Beowulf* with a quill and Chaucer *The Canterbury Tales*. Shakespeare wrote his thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets with a quill. (At the New York Public Library shop, you can buy a Shakespeare action

figure with a quill pen in one hand and a book in the other.) Martin Luther used a quill for his 95 Theses, Cervantes for *Don Quixote*, Bach for *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Charles Perrault for “Cinderella,” Mozart for *The Magic Flute*, Boswell for his *Life of Johnson*, Keats for the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Jane Austen for *Pride and Prejudice*, Dickens for *Great Expectations*, Pushkin for *Eugene Onegin*. (A Russian three-ruble commemorative coin issued in 1999 bears on its reverse a portrait of Pushkin holding a quill.) George Sand wrote her staggering output of books, plays, and essays⁴ in one room while Chopin composed his sublime nocturnes and mazurkas in another—both scratching away with their quill pens. The Magna Carta was written with a quill, and the Founding Fathers used one to put their John Hancock on the Declaration of Independence. Presumably, your great-great-grandparents and mine signed their names (or perhaps just an X) with a quill pen.



The Well-Tempered Clavier

Quills were within the reach of everyone—often right out in the barnyard. You could pluck a quill from the wing feathers (*penna* in Latin means *feather*)⁵ of geese, turkeys, ravens (which could draw the finest lines), or (for the wealthy) swans. The best of them were plucked from living birds—pens for the right-handed from the left wing because of the way they curved, and vice versa.

The trouble with quill pens was that they lasted only about a week—for a compulsive scribbler, a mere day or two. There’s a legend that the prolific Thomas Jefferson raised a special flock of geese at Monticello solely to satisfy his writing needs. I love this idea but sadly, it does not seem to be true. The research librarian at the Jefferson library told me that geese were “one form of livestock that were typically purchased rather than raised” at the estate. On the other hand, there are no references in Jefferson’s financial records to buying quill pens, either—so presumably he bought a goose when he needed one, plucked, and wrote.

You didn’t have to make your quills from scratch—they were sold in quantity by street vendors and in stationery shops—but many people did, even though they were a pain to prepare. Once you managed to pluck a wing feather from a large, angry bird (which—anyone who’s ever met up with a hissing swan—sounds like the road to disaster), you had to cut away most of the feathery bits to make the quill comfortable to hold.

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