



TRY THIS

- Using your dominant hand, write a few sentences about a current problem or challenge about which you want to gain clarity or insight
- Now with your pen or pencil in your opposite hand write down your thoughts and responses to the issue until you have nothing more to write
- Swap over your pen or pencil and, using your dominant writing hand, write down the question, 'What else?'
- Switch back to your non-dominant writing hand and see what else is there. Keep going with the 'What else?' question, moving from hands right to left or left to right

The writing is bold and rebellious: so is she. She often goes against the status quo, has her own way of doing things and is known for standing her ground. It's all there in her writing. Another friend, who is quieter, has tiny handwriting, as if she's excusing herself for taking up space: not just on the page, but also in her own life.

Hard pressed

As for myself, for many years I wrote in large italic script that expressed my desire to be seen and heard. My words on the page were thick and weighty; I pressed so hard on the paper it would practically curl up at each corner.

The essayist and film-maker Susan Sontag was a great fan of her own handwriting – even though it wasn't always legible. In her essay 'Putting pen to paper' she explained, 'I love my handwriting. I have no trouble reading it. Well there was the time I misread "incite" for "create". But that kind of thing hardly ever happens'. Likewise, songwriter DeeDee Hughes believes 'handwriting reaches inside us in a way typed words on a page never could'.

Recently my younger sister reminded me about one of her teachers at primary school who was mesmerised by our father's neat and lovely handwriting in his letters excusing my sister for a dentist's or doctor's appointment. My sister believed she received extra dispensations as a result.

I believe that handwriting is a practice that connects us to our deeper selves and numerous recent research studies point to key cognitive and psychological benefits of writing by hand, as opposed to on a computer. Karin Harman James, Assistant Professor of Neuroscience

at Indiana State University, found that when people wrote by hand, instead of on a keyboard, their memories improved. Dr. Irmeli Laitinen and Professor Elizabeth Ettore found that depressed women who wrote diaries, were more able to understand their emotions and better able to cope with their problems. And Dr Virginia Berninger found that elementary school students who wrote essays with a pen, not only wrote more than their keyboard-tapping peers, but they also wrote faster and in more complete sentences.

Non-dominant links

If writing with our dominant hand slows us down, think how much writing with our non-dominant hand might impede our progress across the page. But there is evidence that writing with the non-dominant hand can access new information. In his book *Thought Revolution* William Donius writes that 'you break the pattern of the familiar neural pathway to the brain that you follow when you write with your dominant hand'.

His 'animal metaphor' exercise (which I include in my book *49 Ways To Write Yourself Well*) demonstrates this perfectly. The exercise requires you to describe, while writing with your dominant hand, the kind of animal that reflects your overall personality. He then asks you to answer the same question again, but this time writing with your non-dominant hand. Typically people come up with two different animals, with different characteristics that explore

WRITING WELL

WRITE YOURSELF: CREATIVE WRITING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT by Gillie Bolton (Jessica Kingsley, 2011)

WRITING FOR WELLBEING AND HEALTH by Nigel Gibbons (*Journal of Holistic Healthcare*, vol 9, 2012)

THE MISSING INK: THE LOST ART OF HANDWRITING (AND WHY IT STILL MATTERS) by Philip Hensher (Macmillan, 2012)

HARDWIRED FOR WRITING: THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE HAND by DeeDee Hughes (Oak Meadow, issue 110, 2012)

different aspects of their lives.

Writing therapist Nigel Gibbons believes that 'using metaphor can be a way of writing about events in our lives we may not be fully able to articulate, but can be conveyed through the image'. Exercises that draw on metaphor are valuable for deeper probing in journal writing, but can also be useful when you feel stuck with a character in a novel or short story. For example, you might experiment with describing your characters as animals.

With so much of our time spent squinting into our mobile phones, tapping away at ever smaller keyboards, it seems that the art of writing by hand is fast disappearing. But I hope I've convinced you to take up your pen and pencil again, and explore what the act of physically forming the words on a physical page can bring to your creative work. ■

TRY THIS

- Resolve to write a regular journal by hand – even if it's only one word or a few sentences
- Treat yourself to handwriting dates. You could write out a recipe by hand or copy out the words of a poem or a song – then give this away for birthdays and other celebrations
- Feeling stuck? Try writing phrases or affirmations on your body, on a steamed-up mirror, in the sand, in dust on the mantelpiece
- Get into the habit of writing thoughts on odd scraps of paper. Leave a trace. Your handwriting says 'I was here'
- Send letters and cards instead of texts when visiting interesting places. Imagine the surprise and delight of the recipients



JACKEE HOLDER is the author of *49 Ways To Write Yourself Well*, *Be Your Own Best Life Coach*, *Soul Purpose* and *The Journal Journey Guidebook*. She leads writing retreats and workshops which address the therapeutic and psychological aspects of the writing life and is the founder of Paper Therapy, a movement to help people transform their lives through writing. www.jackeeholder.com @JackeeHolder

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