The Type to Type: A writer’s journal

SCRIPT

Slide 1: My name is Jesse Plichta-Kellar, and this is the story of my handwriting.

Slide 2: According to my grandmother, this is me using a computer for the first time at 22 months old. I’m typing something, I don’t know what. As you can imagine, this is before I can remember. What is not beyond my memory, however, is learning to write.

Slide 3: The right photo is me at age five, shortly before entering kindergarten, where I learned to write the first time, the little girl sitting on the chair. In kindergarten, I struggled to learn to read and write, in part because of a handwriting disability I was unaware of at the time. My handwriting was poor, as most small children's’ is, but apparently it was noteworthily poor. Nonetheless I persisted and acquired the skill. From then to the present day, I have received immense criticism regarding my penmanship from a variety of voices, but mostly educators and older relatives.

The photo on the left is the summer I was six, the girl in the red bandana. When I was six years old, I felt accomplished to be able to write in English. To my surprise, upon my arrival in the first grade this skill was met not with awe, as it had inspired in me, but indifference and an expectation that I learn a new one: writing in Hebrew. Whether this is a valuable skill is subject to some debate, as is the next step in my journey as a writer.

Slide 4: A common discussion on social media, at least in some of my circles, is the merits of teaching schoolchildren cursive, especially in the context of learning to type instead. I loved writing, I had so many ideas, but lacked the motor skills to express myself as I pleased. I was inventing campfire stories, building complex littlest pet shop worlds, and inventing kingdoms in the sandbox, why did I need to be able to write it down, much less so anyone could read it from paper? Whether I agreed with it or not, my educators and other guiding adults believed in the importance of legible penmanship, which no amount of creativity could bring me. Depending on your school of thought, cursive or typing could be the solution to my penmanship dilemma. Pictured here is my second grade school photo, where my elementary school hedged their bets and taught both cursive and typing in the same year.

Slide 5: A lot has changed about the kids pictured here, when I’m around 8 and the tallest by a margin. If we retook the photo today, I’d be the shortest one. The little girl to my right is now a freshmen in college and the boy to my left is now 6’7. My handwriting isn’t quite as bad as the pictured sample from age 7, but it hasn’t grown as much as I have in the past 14 years. I don’t think I quite understood the insistence that it was necessary, and to this day I don’t know if it was worth the time, tears, and effort. Although my handwriting is better than it was at seven, it’s also gradually improved after we gave up on handwriting therapy. I can’t say how much it improved my legibility relative to if I had not had the extra out-of-class practice, but it certainly made me hate my penmanship more, especially as other students receiving the same special help experienced significant improvements. There was, however, one thing that improved my writing.

Slide 6: Although this was not a Channukah I received a laptop, being able to type my papers, starting around age 8 or 9, was a real present. This took a couple different forms: Alphasmarts, which are essentially glorified keyboards which store basic text files, borrowed laptops from parents and computer labs, and dinosaur-esque desktops the school allowed me to use. Did typing much of my schoolwork and most of my personal writing improve my handwriting? Absolutely not, but it did improve the content I was producing while making it a more pleasant experience for all involved. Although I had to share the resources, I was able to unwrap a whole new world of writing.

Slide 7: The only thing that beat being able to type for assignments was having a computer of my own. My school required we have personal laptops starting in sixth grade, and that laptop stayed with me through 8th grade, pictured here. Although I still disliked my handwriting, there was something wonderfully equalizing in everyone using computers for their schoolwork.

Slide 8: My next development in my handwriting came around age sixteen, when my hate-hate relationship with it became a love-hate relationship. I realized, for better or worse, I had something like the world’s lamest superpower: I could totally use bad handwriting as a cop-out from handwriting anything in group work or on the board and if a teacher knew my work enough, and that is was typically of good quality from my typed essays, they wouldn’t spend as much time judging the five pages of handwritten content on a test. I still had an immense dislike for my penmanship and a resentment for those who judged it as well as the many voices insisting that it was somehow a defining life skill. I was far from embracing it, but my handwriting and I were coming to a truce.

Slide 9: The leap from high school is delightful in many ways. For me, one of them was the complete and total disregard for poor penmanship as a problem- 9/10 professors can have read worse or let you type. Outside of math and foreign languages, I typed everything and no one spared a second glance-I could even type some tests. Even when laptops were commonplace in middle and high school, there was still a stigma and an assumption that bad handwriting would somehow degrade the quality of my content or hold me back as some defective life skill. In college, a couple snotty classmates or luddite professors notwithstanding, it’s really not a big deal. My relationship to my handwriting in college has evolved to a new phase of acceptance on my part: I’m cool with it and understand my options: typing and poor penmanship. If someone can handle my penmanship that’s cool, if not I’m happy to type. Those are the options I have and I accept that. It hasn’t slowed me down in life. From waiting three hours for my freshman scarf to writing for the school paper to studying abroad twice to founding an award-winning organization, poor penmanship hasn’t held me back in college. I’m a senior and it’s going great. I have wonderful friends, amazing organizations, fantastic classes, and graduate with honors and two majors in May. There are so many things in life I strive to improve upon, so many incredible experiences to be had, and so many wonderful people to meet. I can do that regardless of my handwriting, but I don’t mind being the type to type.