

2021

AP®

 CollegeBoard

AP® English Language and Composition

Free-Response Questions

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total time—2 hours and 15 minutes

3 Questions

Question 1

Suggested reading and writing time—55 minutes

It is suggested that you spend 15 minutes reading the question, analyzing and evaluating the sources, and 40 minutes writing your response.

Note: You may begin writing your response before the reading period is over.

(This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

In the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, handwriting instruction (print and cursive) was virtually universal in schools in the United States. By contrast, little if any time is devoted to such lessons today. While some argue that handwriting instruction should still have a place in schooling, others maintain that digital technologies have rendered such instruction unnecessary.

Carefully read the following six sources, including the introductory information for each source. Write an essay that synthesizes material from at least three of the sources and develops your position on the place, if any, of handwriting instruction in today’s schools.

- Source A (Gillis)
- Source B (worksheet)
- Source C (Trubek)
- Source D (Kysilko)
- Source E (Pot)
- Source F (graph)

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position.
- Select and use evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support your line of reasoning. Indicate clearly the sources used through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. Sources may be cited as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the description in parentheses.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Begin your response to this question at the top of a new page in the separate Free Response booklet and fill in the appropriate circle at the top of each page to indicate the question number.

Source A

Gillis, Carly. "Schools Debate Cursive Handwriting Instruction Nationwide." *HuffPost*, 30 Mar. 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/30/cursive-handwriting-instr_n_842069.html.

The following is excerpted from an article on a news Web site.

Cursive handwriting instruction is disappearing.

Students and teachers alike have swapped pencils for keyboards, baselines for blinking cursors, and have all but written off the traditional route of writing.

Although standardized tests may not pick up the flourish of a cursive capital “T” or grade against floaters and sinkers, proponents of cursive handwriting maintain that there is value in teaching the craft and hope to save it from being erased from educational relevancy.

ABC News reports that 41 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for English, which omits cursive handwriting from required curriculum. Now that it's not mandatory, schools around the country are debating whether or not to spend valuable teaching resources on penmanship.

In New York, some schools are considering cutting it altogether. Deb Fitzgerald, a second-grade teacher at Van Schaick Elementary in Cohoes, told CBS 6 Albany that she'd rather “move on” and focus class time on other topics.

Colorado schools are also engaged in a similar debate. Some teachers believe that cursive is archaic and that students should be prepared for contemporary communication. Susana Cordova, chief academic officer Denver Public Schools, told the Denver Post:

“In many respects, it's only inside our schools where we see such emphasis on paper and pencil,” she says. “The move outside our schools, and in innovative schools, is toward technology. There will always be a role for the written word by hand on paper. But the experiences most of us have, with 30 minutes a day practicing cursive in class, has gone by the wayside.”

Copyright © Carly Gillis

Source B

“Lowercase Cursive Letter Practice Worksheet.” *TLSBooks*,
www.tlsbooks.com/pdf/cursivepractice.pdf.

The following is adapted from a free printable worksheet available on a Web site created as a resource for parents and teachers of students from preschool to sixth grade.

Lowercase Cursive Letter Practice

 Write each letter three times.

b

g

d

t

e

f

h

l

i

j

k

p

m

Name: _____

m

o

p

q

r

s

u

v

w

x

y

z

ff

Source C

Trubek, Anne. “Handwriting Just Doesn’t Matter.” *The New York Times*, 20 Aug. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/opinion/handwriting-just-doesnt-matter.html?mcubz=0&_r=0.

The following is excerpted from an opinion piece published in a national newspaper.

These arguments [in favor of learning cursive handwriting] are largely a side show to the real issues, which are cultural. In April, when the Louisiana State Senate voted to put cursive back into the public school curriculum, senators yelled “America!” in celebration, as though learning cursive were a patriotic act.

A month later, Alabama required the teaching of cursive in public schools by the end of third grade by way of “Lexi’s Law,” named for the granddaughter of the state representative Dickie Drake; Mr. Drake believes “cursive writing identifies you as much as your physical features do.” In other words, our script reveals something unique and ineluctable about our inner being.

For most of American history, cursive was supposed to do the opposite. Mastering it was dull, repetitive work, intended to make every student’s handwriting match a standardized model. In the mid-19th century, that model was Spencerian script. It was replaced by the Palmer Method, which was seen as a more muscular and masculine hand suitable for the industrial age—a “plain and rapid style,” as Austin Palmer described it, to replace the more effeminate Spencerian. Students who learned it were taught to become “writing machines,” holding their arms and shoulders in awkward poses for hours to get into shape for writing drills.

It was also believed that mastering the Palmer Method would make students better Christians, immigrants more assimilated Americans (through its “powerful hygienic effect”), “bad” children better (“the initial step in the reform of many a delinquent”) and workers more industrious (because the script had fewer curlicues and strokes than Spencerian).

Our 19th- and 20th-century counterparts grafted their values onto handwriting, just as we do with our conceptions of individualism, patriotism and the unique self. These are projections we make onto squiggles and loops.

We have seen similar debates over the meaning of handwriting during other moments of historic transition. In the early medieval era, monks were told to stop using a Roman-based script because it looked too pagan and to adopt a more Christian-looking one. In the 16th century, Erasmus wrote a dialogue in which characters writing in the Renaissance-infused Humanist script complain about the “barbarous” look of Gothic script which they deem less civilized. They also complain that women have messy, impatient handwriting. (Today, women are perceived as being naturally better at penmanship than men, largely because handwriting is now taught at a younger age, when the fine motor skills of girls are more developed.)

Cursive has no more to do with patriotism than Gothic script did with barbarism, or the Palmer Method with Christianity. Debates over handwriting reveal what a society prizes and fears; they are not really about the virtues or literacy levels of children.

Finally, current cursive advocates often argue that students who don’t learn cursive won’t be able to read it—“they won’t be able to read the Declaration of Independence”—but that is misleading. Reading that 18th-century document in the original is difficult for most people who know cursive, as the script is now unfamiliar. A vast majority of historical manuscripts are illegible to anyone but experts, or are written in languages other than English.

In fact, the changes imposed by the digital age may be good for writers and writing. Because they achieve automaticity quicker on the keyboard, today's third graders may well become better writers as handwriting takes up less of their education.

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Source D

Kysilko, David. “The Handwriting Debate.” *National Association of State Boards of Education*, 20 Sept. 2012, www.nasbe.org/latest-news/handwriting-debate/.

The following is excerpted from a report published on the Web site of a nonprofit organization that represents state boards of education in the United States.

Handwriting encompasses two distinct forms: manuscript or printed writing using block letters that are not connected when forming words, and cursive writing, where successive letters are joined and angles are rounded. In the United States, printed writing is generally taught beginning in preschool or kindergarten and continuing through 2nd grade, while cursive is taught beginning in the 3rd grade and continuing through 5th grade. . . .

Those who favor handwriting instruction . . . have “common sense” points: there are and will likely always be times when handwriting notes or lists will be necessary or more convenient—and cursive is faster than printing; handwritten correspondence to individuals has a greater impact on the receiver than emails or digitally printed communications; students, especially in elementary school, still turn in handwritten assignments; there is still a need to be able to read cursive, especially in the case of primary source documents; and cursive is a powerful cultural and historical link to human development, since the drive and ability to draw symbols with our hands is one of the defining characteristics of our species.

But the strongest arguments in favor of teaching cursive are emerging from a growing body of research from the last 10 to 15 years that points to the educational benefits of learning to write by hand—benefits that go well beyond just the ability to write and read cursive. Following are some of the findings.

*** Cognitive and Motor Skills Development:** Because handwriting is a complex skill that involves both cognitive and fine motor skills, direct instruction is required to learn handwriting (it is not good enough to just give a workbook to students and hope for the best). However, the result of good instruction is that students are benefited both in their cognitive development and in developing motor skills.

*** Literacy Development:** Handwriting is a foundational skill that can influence students’ reading, writing, language use, and critical thinking. Students without consistent exposure to handwriting are more likely to have problems retrieving letters from memory; spelling accurately; extracting meaning from text or lecture; and interpreting the context of words and phrases.

*** Brain Development:** The sequential hand movements used in handwriting activate the regions of the brain associated with thinking, short-term memory, and language. In addition, according to Virginia Berninger, Ph.D., professor of educational psychology at the University of Washington, cursive in particular is linked with brain functions around self-regulation and mental organization. “Cursive helps you connect things,” Dr. Berninger said in an interview.

*** Memory:** The act of handwriting helps students (and adults) retain information more effectively than when keyboarding, mostly likely because handwriting involves more complex motor functions and takes a bit longer. One study comparing students who took notes by hand versus classmates who took notes by computer found that the handwriters exhibited better comprehension of the content and were more attentive and involved during the class discussions.

*** Written Expression:** Elementary-age students who wrote compositions by hand rather than by keyboarding, one researcher found, wrote faster, wrote longer pieces, and expressed more ideas.

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Source E

Pot, Justin. “Cursive Writing Is Obsolete; Schools Should Teach Programming Instead.” *Make Use Of*, 17 Feb. 2015, www.makeuseof.com.

The following is excerpted from an editorial published on a Web site that provides information about technology.

Hardly Anyone Uses Cursive

Almost everyone reading this article was taught cursive in school, but most of you don’t use it. “Much of our communication is done on a keyboard, and the rest is done with print,” says Morgan Polikoff, assistant professor of education at the University of Southern California. “While both research and common sense indicate students should be taught some form of penmanship, there is simply no need to teach students both print and cursive.” There’s only so much time in the day, and which skills we decide to teach has a dramatic impact on the lives of students. Does it really make sense to prioritize an obsolete ability?

It’s Not About The Extra Benefits

Learning cursive does offer some benefits: it helps develop fine motor skills, for example, and stimulates certain regions of the brain. You could make similar arguments about almost anything. Playing the original Super Mario Bros helps develop fine motor skills, for example, but requiring school children to play that game 15 minutes a day would be an (admittedly awesome) waste of time. If cursive is taught, it should be taught not as an essential life skill but as an art—like calligraphy—or as an interesting relic of the past. Modern people don’t use it, and education systems should stop pretending they do.

Bad Reasons To Learn Useless Skills

Cards on the table: penmanship was my least favourite class as a kid (with the possible exception of math). I shudder to think of the time I spent learning cursive: 15 minutes of schooling, every day. It’s a staggering waste—but even worse, in retrospect, were the reasons my teachers said it was important. “You’re going to use this every day,” I was told. I don’t. “In college, if you can’t write cursive, you won’t be able to take notes fast enough.” I didn’t use cursive; I kept up just fine. Of course, teachers gave me lots of bad reasons for learning things—that doesn’t mean learning them isn’t important. I hated learning multiplication tables, but was told it was important because when I grow up I “won’t be carrying a calculator with me everywhere.” That prediction didn’t turn out, but I’m not bitter about learning multiplication tables—I use that skill multiple times every day. So while I hated both penmanship and math class, I’m not upset about multiplication tables. The problem with cursive is I never use it. Surveys show most adults feel the same way. Typing is faster, and print is fast enough when you happen to need to use paper (and it’s increasingly possible to avoid paper entirely).

Education Should Focus On The Future

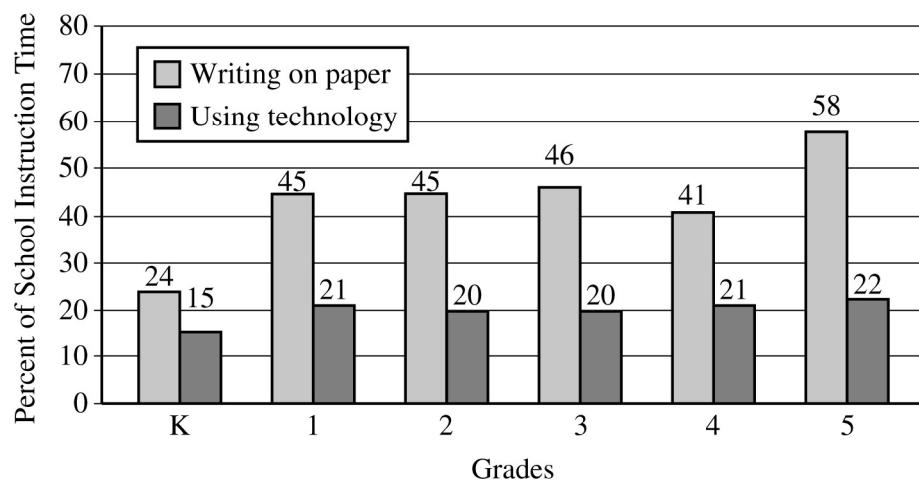
Just because you learned something in school doesn’t mean your kids should: the world is changing, quickly. And while it’s hard to make predictions about where technology is headed, it’s safe to say the future won’t involve a lot of cursive handwriting (unless some kind of disaster sends us back to 14th-century technology, in which case handwriting will be the least of our problems). There’s only so many hours in a day, so it’s important education systems prioritize. Every hour spent learning an obsolete skill like cursive is time they’re not learning the programming skills needed for great jobs, or other essential life-skills like managing your money.

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Source F

“Time Spent in Classroom Handwriting versus Technology.” *Learning Without Tears*, 5 Nov. 2013, www.lwtears.com/files/Research%20Bulletin_Nov%202013_For%20WEB_Nov5.pdf.

The following is a graph of the results of a 2013 national survey of 450 elementary school teachers in the United States that asked how much of their time students spent writing on paper and how much of their time they spent using technology.



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Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentary

Inside:

Free Response Question 1

- Scoring Guideline**
- Student Samples**
- Scoring Commentary**

Synthesis Essay

6 points

In the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, handwriting instruction (print and cursive) was virtually universal in schools in the United States. By contrast, little if any time is devoted to such lessons today. While some argue that handwriting instruction should still have a place in schooling, others maintain that digital technologies have rendered such instruction unnecessary.

Carefully read the following six sources, including the introductory information for each source. Write an essay that synthesizes material from at least three of the sources and develops your position on the place, if any, of handwriting instruction in today's schools.

- Source A (Gillis)
- Source B (worksheet)
- Source C (Trubek)
- Source D (Kysliko)
- Source E (Pot)
- Source F (graph)

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position.
- Select and use evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support your line of reasoning. Indicate clearly the sources used through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. Sources may be cited as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the description in parentheses.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row A Thesis (0-1 points)	0 points For any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no defensible thesis. • The intended thesis only restates the prompt. • The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim. • There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt. 	1 point Responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position.
Decision Rules and Scoring Notes		
	Responses that do not earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only restate the prompt. • Do not take a position, or the position is vague or must be inferred. • Equivocate or summarize others' arguments but not the student's (e.g., some people say it's good, some people say it's bad). • State an obvious fact rather than making a claim that requires a defense. 	Responses that earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to the prompt by developing a position on handwriting instruction in today's schools, rather than restating or rephrasing the prompt. Clearly take a position rather than just stating there are pros/cons.
	Examples that do not earn this point: Restate the prompt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Some people think that handwriting should still be taught in schools today, but others think that it's not necessary anymore because everything is digital."</i> Address the topic of the prompt, but do not take a position <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Kids no longer learn handwriting in school, and there are several reasons why that's the case."</i> Address the topic of the prompt but state an obvious fact as a claim <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"As opposed to previous centuries, nowadays handwriting is not really taught in schools anymore."</i> 	Examples that earn this point: Present a defensible position that responds to the prompt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Even though it may seem old-fashioned, handwriting should still be taught in schools today."</i> • <i>"While it makes sense for students to learn keyboarding and other skills that will prepare them for a digital world, handwriting instruction still holds a place in a modern child's education."</i> • <i>"Given the fact that most kids learn on computers and tablets nowadays, it makes no sense for them to spend time learning an obsolete skill such as cursive handwriting, although they still will need to learn how to print."</i>

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria				
Row B Evidence AND Commentary (0-4 points)	0 points Simply restates thesis (if present), repeats provided information, or references fewer than two of the provided sources.	1 point EVIDENCE: Provides evidence from or references at least two of the provided sources. AND COMMENTARY: Summarizes the evidence but does not explain how the evidence supports the student's argument.	2 points EVIDENCE: Provides evidence from or references at least three of the provided sources. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence relates to the student's argument, but no line of reasoning is established, or the line of reasoning is faulty.	3 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence supports a line of reasoning.	4 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Consistently explains how the evidence supports a line of reasoning.
Decision Rules and Scoring Notes					
Typical responses that earn 0 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are incoherent or do not address the prompt. May be just opinion with no textual references or references that are irrelevant. 	Typical responses that earn 1 point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tend to focus on summary or description of sources rather than specific details. 	Typical responses that earn 2 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consist of a mix of specific evidence and broad generalities. May contain some simplistic, inaccurate, or repetitive explanations that don't strengthen the argument. May make one point well but either do not make multiple supporting claims or do not adequately support more than one claim. Do not explain the connections or progression between the student's claims, so a line of reasoning is not clearly established. 	Typical responses that earn 3 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the sources to build an argument. Organize an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims. Commentary may fail to integrate some evidence or fail to support a key claim. 	Typical responses that earn 4 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the sources to build an argument. Organize and support an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims, each with adequate evidence that is clearly explained. 	
Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing that suffers from grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interfere with communication cannot earn the fourth point in this row. 					

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row C Sophistication (0-1 points)	0 points Does not meet the criteria for one point.	1 point Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation.
Decision Rules and Scoring Notes		
Responses that do not earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempt to contextualize their argument, but such attempts consist predominantly of sweeping generalizations (“<i>In a world where...</i>” OR “<i>Since the beginning of time...</i>”). Only hint at or suggest other arguments (“<i>While some may argue that...</i>” OR “<i>Some people say...</i>”). Use complicated or complex sentences or language that is ineffective because it does not enhance the argument. 		Responses that earn this point may demonstrate sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation by doing any of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Crafting a nuanced argument by consistently identifying and exploring complexities or tensions across the sources. Articulating the implications or limitations of an argument (either the student’s argument or arguments conveyed in the sources) by situating it within a broader context. Making effective rhetorical choices that consistently strengthen the force and impact of the student’s argument throughout the response. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.
Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This point should be awarded only if the sophistication of thought or complex understanding is part of the student’s argument, not merely a phrase or reference. 		

****Sample 1A:****

Begin your response to each question at the top of a new page. Do not skip lines.

Penmanship is a practice that has held true throughout centuries of world history. From its beginnings as pictographic script and its myriad practical applications, penmanship has managed to connect people for as long as time can tell. Through letters between lovers via carrier pigeon or through signatures on legal documents, penmanship finds its place in society day in and day out. While to some, cursive handwriting in particular may seem a futile use of motor skills, for many, creating the track of a pen jauntily looping across a paper allows for not only several cognitive benefits, but a source of individuality and normalcy in a rapidly digitalizing world. Cursive handwriting, though it may seem outdated in the digital age, is vital in society not only because it promotes cognitive development, but because it can be used to define a person and his/her work; due to the importance of cursive writing, its teaching must not be omitted from schooling.

In practice, the benefits of cursive writing cannot be overstated, especially in terms of cognitive development. Studies show that the act of handwriting not only develops regions of the brain associated with thinking, short-term memory, and language, but that it also helps with information retention (Kysilko). While the cognitive benefits of handwriting are obviously not limited to cursive handwriting, manuscript, while it yields the same benefits, is slower. Many proponents of eliminating the teaching of cursive in schools argue that it would allow time for other more important skills to be developed, but cursive helps save time in the long run for many due to its fluidity in practice. Others claim that cursive should not be taught as a necessity but as an art, but this perspective, too, fails to acknowledge that it contradicts the primary doctrine of the anti-cursive: that the teaching of the skill is a waste of time (Pot). The historical significance of cursive is also important when discussing the viability of teaching cursive in schools in the modern day. In American history, cursive was taught as a method of cultivating an American identity, as Dickie Drake, Alabama State representative stated, "cursive writing identifies you as much as your physical features do." (Trubek). In order to maintain the sense of individuality Americans hold so dearly, handwriting must continue to be taught. Perhaps handwriting seems a superficial means of maintaining individuality, but in a rapidly digitalizing world, sometimes the only way to distinguish the writing of two people is by handwriting. Unless you are a seasoned stenographer, 12pt Times New Roman font written by anonymous authors will be impossible to distinguish. No matter how you look at it, cursive handwriting is a vital component of human development and must continue to be taught in schools. Perhaps the most common rebuttal to the importance of teaching cursive handwriting in school is that traditional writing methods are becoming obsolete, but studies show that this is clearly not the case. As schools opt to print fewer copies of worksheets in favor of digital annotation and many textbooks are releasing digital forms, a widespread falsehood is gaining popularity: the idea that schools are "writing off the traditional route of writing" (Gillis). In careful observation of more affluent areas, this may seem obvious, but studies show that a greater amount of time in many elementary classrooms is spent handwriting than is spent using technology (graph). This simple disproval eliminates the top argument against the continuation of teaching cursive handwriting, thus deeming anti-cursive sentiment "unarguable". The teaching of cursive in schools offers copious amounts of benefits for students, that cannot effectively be replaced by any other methods. Cursive is ingrained in the minds of people everywhere, perhaps due to its lasting effect on human cognitive development. So I implore you, student or not, to continue to study cursive. Allow yourself a return to tradition after a long day at the computer. You just might leave a mark on your mind forever.

****Sample 1B:****

In the present, handwriting instruction in schools has dwindled from its former prominence. The digital age offers alternatives to developing and mastering penmanship, so the art is less prioritized compared to traditional Common Core subjects. Although handwriting instruction develops motor skills, it has little place in schools because it is inefficient compared to technology, and other subjects are more useful in the real world. Many advocates for handwriting instruction cite motor skill development as a reason to keep the practice. For instance, the National Association of State Boards of Education claims practicing handwriting both requires and augments fine motor skills (Source D). However, attributing motor skills primarily to this cause is not entirely accurate. Jeff and Justin Pot rebutted the claim by explaining that other forms of hand use such as playing video games are equally as effective (Source E). While handwriting instruction may indeed promote superior motor skills, alternative options render spending periods of class for this one skill irrelevant.

Therefore, the development of fine motor skills is not exclusive to handwriting instruction, so schools should instead consider less time-obtrusive alternatives. One reason for handwriting instruction's decreasing efficiency is the advent of digital typing. Author Anne Trubek of The New York Times admits even third graders spend more time typing than writing (Source F). Because note-taking skills are maximized with the author's speed, if one method is notoriously slower than others, the most efficient action should be practiced. In fact, a survey of elementary school students quantified the difference in speed, as handwriting takes over twice as much time as computer usage (Source G). Due to this extreme discrepancy, prioritizing handwriting instruction in schools should not be encouraged when technology is proving far superior for the students whose skills must be cultivated. As said, handwriting instruction has little place in the modern era. Finally, other subjects should take the place of the space occupying handwriting in schools. Specifically in regards to specialized handwriting like cursive, United school time is better spent on subjects the students will use daily, and even second-grade teacher Deb Fitzgerald agreed schools should move on and focus class time on other tools" (Source A). Skills such as math should be prioritized for younger children since methods like multiplication are intended to benefit both adult and child life (Source E). Overall, rather than devote time to a subject with little value, schools should instead allocate the time to other core topics the student can use in the real world. In conclusion, while handwriting instruction has some amount of merit with its promotion of motor skills, it possesses little worth in schools because of its inefficiency and lack of practical use.

****Sample 1C:****

Cursive handwriting should not be focused on or taught in school, because it is a waste of time, it is not useful, and technology is more prevalent now. Teaching cursive writing is a waste of time. If cursive writing is not mandatory, then that can lead students to focus on building a larger vocabulary, which will ultimately make them stronger writers. In Source F, the text states in the last paragraph "the changes imposed by the digital age may be good for writers and writing, because they achieve automaticity quicker on the keyboard, today's third graders may well become better writers as handwriting takes up less of their education." This piece shows how young children have a better chance of being better writers because handwriting is not taking much of their time. With this extra time, children could be building vocabulary to be successful writers. Learning cursive writing in school is a waste of time because as the future is approaching, the use of cursive is becoming non-existent. Source A states "the experiences most of us have, with 30 minutes a day practicing cursive in class, have gone by the wayside. This supports the idea that the time used for teaching cursive has not been useful in everyday life. Going along with a waste of time, cursive is not used enough to be beneficial, so why learn it? Many schools have cut it out of the curriculum. Source A states "41 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for English, which omits cursive handwriting from the required curriculum." Source A clearly displays the idea that cursive handwriting in the school system isn't mandatory, because it is evident that 41 states have taken it out of their curriculum. As time goes on and technology progresses, technology will be used more and the use of pencil and paper are going to be more discrete. In addition to that, with technology advancing, there are going to need to be skills taught about technology, as Source A states "The move outside our school, and in innovative schools, is towards technology." This from Source A simply supports that technology is taking over, because the world after school is filled with technology. From Source B, it states "the wind is changing, quickly. And while it is hard to make predictions about where technology is headed, it's safe to say the future won't involve a lot of cursive handwriting." With that in mind, it is obvious to see with technology advancing, the need for cursive handwriting is decreasing. To conclude, cursive handwriting shouldn't be a skill enforced in school topics.

Question 1

Note: Student samples are quoted verbatim and may contain spelling and grammatical errors.

Overview

The synthesis prompt for this year asked students to use material from six provided sources and develop a position on the place, if any, of handwriting instruction in today's schools. Students were expected to respond to the prompt with a thesis that presented a defensible position; select and use evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support their line of reasoning—indicating clearly the sources used through direct quotations, paraphrase, or summary; explain how the evidence supported their line of reasoning; and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating their argument. The skills required included 2.A, 4.A, 4.B, 4.C, 6.A, 6.B, 6.C, 8.A, 8.B, and 8.C.

We expected these students to develop an argument that consistently demonstrated their understanding of the distinctions being made about cursive vs. manuscript instruction and its importance or lack thereof. This prompt was highly accessible, and nearly all students were able to frame a recognizable response. Their theses were clearly articulated in almost all cases. It appeared that the combination of the new scoring guide and the new stable wording has helped students in that way. The Question Leader makes the important observation that “many lower-half papers were written by students who combed through sources looking for ‘support’ for their own arguments, instead of engaging with the sources,” which was the ultimate aim. By the same token, there were some very accessible places for students to question/engage critically with the sources, and many did so very well. The higher-performing students were also expected to use the sources in conversation with one another in ways that would reveal their sophisticated writing and thinking and their ability to synthesize information in service of their own argument.

Sample: 1A

Score: 1-4-1

Thesis (0–1 points): 1

The thesis is stated at the end of paragraph 1: “Cursive handwriting, though it may seem outdated in the digital age, is vital in society not only because it promotes cognitive development, but because it can be used to define a person and his/her work; due to the importance of cursive writing, its teaching must not be omitted from schooling.” This is a defensible statement that takes a position on handwriting instruction.

Evidence and Sophistication (0–4 points): 4

The response develops a sustained line of reasoning both within and between the paragraphs. It moves smoothly back and forth between discussions of the benefits of cursive and rebuttals of typical objections to cursive handwriting instruction. For example, the response cites Source D about the cognitive benefits of cursive, anticipates the counterargument that manuscript would carry the same benefits, and addresses this counterargument with the claim that “manuscript, while it yields the same benefits, is slower.” All of this is done in one sentence. The response consistently exhibits fluid control of the evidence and appropriate explanations of its significance. Whereas less controlled responses tend to quote large pieces of text when less would be appropriate, this response consistently embeds and responds to very specific words and phrases from the sources and integrates them into its explanations.

Sophistication (0–1 points): 1

The response consistently displays a vividness and persuasiveness of style that goes beyond the occasional rhetorical flourish. From the crafted introduction that contains relevant details about the history of script to the direct address in the conclusion, the response is vivid. The response also consistently explores complexities and tensions across the sources. Most sources are presented in conjunction with one another in a way that

Question 1 (continued)

demonstrates a deep understanding of the tensions present and offers a cogent explanation for why the response's position is ultimately more relevant. Finally, the response consistently explores the broader context of the place of cursive in American society.

Sample: 1B

Score: 1-3-0

Thesis (0–1 points): 1

This response clearly articulates its thesis at the end of paragraph 1: "Although handwriting instruction develops motor skills, it has little place in schools because it is inefficient compared to technology, and other subjects are more useful in the real world." This multipart claim is defensible and takes a clear position on the subject of handwriting instruction.

Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 3

The response uses a conventional five-paragraph structure, but it distinguishes itself by incorporating evidence from multiple sources clearly and explaining their connection to the thesis. The response organizes multiple claims into a line of reasoning, providing clear explanations of specific evidence. For example, in paragraph 2 the response uses Source D to provide evidence of an opposing point of view, then uses evidence from Source E to refute the claim. The response goes on to explain how the point raised in Source E about video games developing motor skills is applicable to the classroom, saying that "alternative options render taking periods of class for this one section irrelevant" and that "schools should instead consider less time-obtrusive alternatives." Not all of the evidence in the response is clearly integrated, however. The third paragraph's claim that Source C "admits even third graders spend less time typing than writing" is a mischaracterization of the significance of the relevant phrase, and the connection to the "decreasing efficiency" of handwriting is not clear. In the same paragraph, the claim that the chart in Source F demonstrates that "handwriting takes over twice as much time as computer use" is also a mischaracterization with little connection to the topic of the paragraph. These lapses prevent the response from having earned the fourth point in Row B.

Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

The response does not display a vividness or persuasiveness of style. While its prose is generally functional and workmanlike, it does not serve to highlight the most persuasive parts of the argument. The response does contain a line of reasoning, but it does not explore the complexities or tensions across the sources, nor does it situate the argument in a broader context. Its mischaracterization of several of the sources does not suggest a very sophisticated grasp of the material. The response also does not display especially effective rhetorical choices. Once an adequate explanation has been provided for one point, the response moves on to its next point.

Sample: 1C

Score: 1-1-0

Thesis (0–1 points): 1

The thesis is stated in the first sentence of the passage: "Cursive hand writing should not be focused, or taught in school, because it is a waste of time, it is not useful, and technology is more prevalent now." Although its phrasing is somewhat confusing, it is a defensible thesis that takes a position on handwriting instruction.

Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 1

The response is characterized by long quotes that are followed by close paraphrases. For example, paragraph 2 includes an extended quotation from Source C that is followed by the paraphrase, "This piece of text displays how the younger children have a better chance of being better writers because handwriting is not taking much of their time." The commentary that follows, "With this extra time children could be building vocabulary,"

Question 1 (continued)

attempts to explain the statement, but it is not attached to the argument. Later paragraphs lack even attempts at commentary and consist entirely of close summary of the sources.

Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

The response does not display a vividness or persuasiveness of style. It often struggles to find the appropriate word or syntactical structure to convey the underlying idea, as when it asserts in the first sentence that “Cursive handwriting should not be focused, or taught in school.” The response does not develop a line of reasoning, so it could not earn the sophistication point by exploring complexities or tensions across the sources or situating its argument in a broader context. Finally, the response does not display effective rhetorical choices. Its consistent use of a quotation followed by a paraphrase is not a sophisticated structure.