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Scribbles That Speak: AI and Handwriting Analysis to Address Pathological Challenges

Venu Govindaraju VENU@BUFFALO.EDU
State University of New York at Buffalo

In a world where communication is fundamental to learning, connection, and opportunity, speech-language and neurological disorders present a significant and often overlooked barrier. Conditions such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, Parkinson's disease, and other neurodevelopmental or neurodegenerative disorders can profoundly affect an individual's ability to speak, write, and participate fully in educational and social environments. These challenges not only hinder academic achievement and emotional development but also limit long-term prospects if left undiagnosed or unsupported.

There is a pressing need for tools that support early screening and intervention – especially ones that can capture subtle, early-stage indicators. Artificial intelligence (AI) offers transformative potential in this space. By harnessing large-scale data and machine learning techniques, AI can identify patterns in behavior, speech, and writing that may escape conventional assessments. Among these applications, handwriting analysis stands out for its richness as a behavioral signal.

Handwriting is a cognitively and physically demanding activity that activates linguistic, motor, and visual systems. This complexity makes it an ideal candidate for understanding neurodevelopmental conditions. Subtle irregularities—such as inconsistent spacing, reversed letters, or nonstandard spellings—can serve as early indicators of dyslexia, dysgraphia, or coordination disorders. By transforming scribbles into structured insights, AI models trained on digitized writing samples can assist educators, clinicians, and caregivers in making timely, informed decisions about intervention and support.

The Human Brain and Handwriting. The human brain is equipped with specialized neural circuits that make handwriting feel natural for fluent writers. Regions such as the visual word form area (VWFA) in the fusiform gyrus are tuned to recognize written language Dehaene and Cohen (2011). Additionally, motor planning regions—including the premotor cortex—integrate with language and visual processing centers to coordinate writing Longcamp et al. (2003). These networks evolve through both biological predispositions and learned experience.

When these circuits are disrupted—as is often the case in dyslexia and dysgraphia—the resulting challenges manifest clearly in handwriting. Understanding the brain's role in producing handwriting not only deepens our comprehension of learning disabilities but also helps us design more precise diagnostic tools and interventions.

Handwriting as a Diagnostic Lens. As a window into a child's cognitive, linguistic, and motor development, handwriting is particularly valuable. Irregular letter shapes, spacing inconsistencies, unusual pressure, and phonetic spelling errors often emerge before formal diagnoses. These features provide early clues about learning and coordination challenges, but interpreting them remains difficult—especially for AI systems that are not built for the messiness and variability of children's writing.

Most existing handwriting recognition tools are optimized for adult handwriting or clean, printed text. As a result, they often correct perceived errors—replacing reversed letters or phonetic spellings with standardized output. Unfortunately, this normalization process erases diagnostically meaningful deviations. Effective tools for early screening must preserve such variability rather than eliminate it.

Building Child-Centered AI for Education. To overcome these limitations, our team developed Extended-TrOCR (E-TrOCR), a handwriting-aware transformer model based on Microsoft's TrOCR framework Li et al. (2023). E-TrOCR is tailored to recognize mirrored letters, irregular spacing, and unconventional spelling patterns—all common in early literacy and learning disorders.

The model uses character-level tokenization and introduces new symbols to retain diagnostically relevant features. Trained first on adult handwriting, E-TrOCR is fine-tuned using real-world datasets of children's writing. This training pipeline equips the model to manage the unpredictability of early handwriting while preserving the very features that may signal cognitive or developmental differences Rangasrinivasan et al. (2025).

AI-Based Intervention Tools in Education. When integrated into classrooms, handwriting aware AI tools can offer real-time feedback and personalized exercises aligned to each student's developmental profile. These exercises might focus on strengthening phoneme-grapheme associations, refining spatial layout, or improving motor coordination.

One such method is Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) Georgiou et al. (2021); Hastings and Trexler (2021), which explores how English spelling is related to pronunciation and meaning. SWI fosters vocabulary development, phonological and morphological awareness, and orthographic understanding. Tools such as word sums, word nets, and word matrices visually represent word structure and relationships. Our team is building AI tools that generate these learning aids using large-language models, integrating them with handwriting analysis for holistic support.

Limitations of Current AI Approaches. Despite growing capabilities, generative AI systems still fall short in diagnosing from children's handwriting. These models prioritize clarity and regularity, which conflicts with the variability inherent to developmental writing. In practice, systems might misread a reversed "S" as a "Z" or a mirrored "9" as a "g," replacing diagnostically significant traits with their nearest visual or phonetic matches.

This behavior reveals a fundamental gap: current models lack the task-specific reasoning to know when to preserve irregularities versus when to normalize them. In contrast, human evaluators—such as educators and clinicians—can dynamically switch interpretive modes. Inspired by this adaptability, we are designing AI systems that modulate interpretation based on diagnostic or pedagogical goals, enabling more accurate, purpose-driven handwriting analysis.

Looking Ahead. The future of education lies in tools that are sensitive to the nuances of how children learn and express themselves. Handwriting—once viewed as a mechanical output—is now being recognized as a rich source of behavioral data. With developmentally

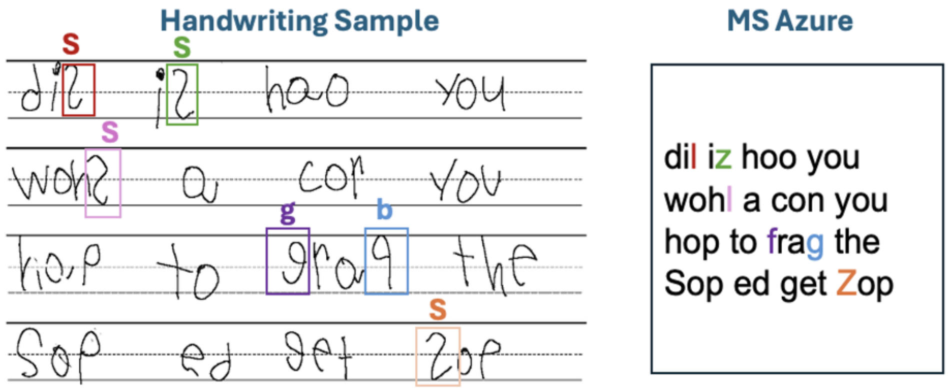

Figure 1: Misinterpretation of mirrored letters by MS Azure highlights the need for semantic analysis in detecting reversals and spelling errors.

informed AI, we can move beyond simple transcription toward tools that analyze, preserve, and learn from the complexity of a child's written expression.

These tools promise not only to reduce time to diagnosis and customize interventions, but also to empower educators with insights previously reserved for expert assessment. Ultimately, the success of these systems will be measured by how well they adapt to individual learners and support their unique developmental journeys.

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