

CURSING CURSIVE

The Smarter Balanced Assessment was to be administered in South Dakota in the spring of that year. Needless to say: it would be Common Core aligned. We had various opportunities to read sample questions. This essay is about one of them.

First, by way of disclaimer, the question I am going to present was certainly not on the actual assessment. The company offers it as an example of the types of questions to be expected; obviously the real questions are not for publication. Ever! On the other hand, the sample test is probably quite close to the real one in spirit; I have seen these things as a teacher.

First Cautions

The topic of this question, a test question intended for third-graders, is cursive handwriting; the implicit message is that it is a waste of time.

Already before we begin, there are four things wrong:

1. Taking a test is, for many people, stressful. That means that they are somewhat suggestible. This is simply a fact of life; it cannot be changed except by making people angry. Therefore, it is not appropriate to make any political or curriculum suggestions to anyone in the context of a test; to do so is the impulse of brainwashing. To do so for third-graders is a severe abuse of the privilege of testing them.
2. What does a third-grader know about what is valuable or not in a curriculum? And by the way, cursive handwriting is not the only casualty here. Its value is compared only with math and science, period. History, poetry, literature? None of these are on the table, and of course theology and philosophy are not even on the radar. It's only "math and science" (worthwhile) vs. "cursive handwriting" (useless.) Let us all bow down to the god of math and science curriculum while we begin to implement the worst one we can find, the very worst.
Guess what? Under the circumstances, doing cursive writing *instead of science* would probably be a fine choice.
3. Actually, brain research shows that there is a close relationship between the use of the hands and the development of language. Any decision not to develop a fine-motor skill in relation to language is potentially serious for the development of language itself, and to undertake such a change without a careful research base is a serious matter. Of course we all know lots of clever people with bad handwriting; most people who see a doctor know at least one. But they can write; they do write, even if not very often. Maybe before their signatures became a hasty formality, they even wrote well, who knows?
4. Handwriting is also an expression of the total person. A graphologist can tell you an uncanny lot about yourself if you let her have a sample of your writing, and before you dismiss that, let me put it in a suitably multicultural context: The Chinese have a saying, "Your characters reveal your character." The pun is the same in Chinese as in English. People who print by choice are hiding, emotionally. That's fine; there are good reasons to hide. But can it be wise to make it school policy not to develop self-expression in this simplest of ways? Wouldn't it be wiser to improve handwriting as a way to access your best self?

So I am very irritated about this issue, but enough of that!

You are doubtless wondering: What was the question on the test? Or on the sample, rather.

A Question of Cursive

Here it is:

A student is writing an opinion essay for his teacher about cursive writing. The student wants to revise the draft to include more supporting reasons. Read a paragraph from the essay and complete the task that follows.

“Furthermore, there isn’t enough time in a school day for learning unimportant subjects such as cursive writing. I don’t think cursive writing is as important as math or science. Everyone is talking about how American students need to improve their math and science skills. We have to take tests to show what we have learned in those subjects. No one ever tells us we need to improve our cursive writing so that we can get into college or get a job. Let us spend our school day on things that are important. Cursive writing is not something we would use as an adult.”

My notes on cursive writing:

- * not something to use later in life
- * don’t have enough time in school day
- * unimportant
- * not tested on it

And here is the task:

Choose two sentences from the student’s notes that add the best reasons after the underlined sentence to support the writer’s opinion about cursive writing.

- o Cursive writing is faster than printing.
- o People use cursive to write their signatures.
- o Learning to print is more difficult for students.
- o Students need to be able to read cursive writing.
- o Not that many people use cursive when they are adults.
- o Most job applications ask people to print their information.

Three minor points

First of all, a minor point of grammar should be noted because these tests are always written by illiterates: The underlined sentence should be, “Cursive writing is not something we would use as **adults.**” Or “Cursive writing is not something **anyone would use as an adult.** Since the sentence speaks of what “we” would use, the noun “adults” should be plural. Alternatively, the word “we” could be replaced with a singular pronoun, such as “anyone,” and then leave “adult” in the singular. Everyone makes mistakes; I understand that. But this is a *test*. Supposedly an **English test!** Doesn’t anyone proof this stuff? No. They never do. And if you ask about it, they say, “Well, the paragraph was supposedly written by a third-grader.” Pathetic. This paragraph was not written by a third-grader.

Second minor point: What’s all this whining about what “people are saying?” Who is saying stuff? And third-graders are listening? To curriculum polls?

Third point: job applications are not the pressing issue for third-graders and it is abusive to seek to make suggestions about them. Yes, this is a suggestion to the third-grader that, while he is stressed about this test, he should really be concerned about how to complete his job application.

Come on!

Down to business.

There are six options for the completing sentences. The first four are reasons *for* learning cursive, not for cutting it out. (Not terribly serious reasons, but reasons.) Obviously the only options to complete the essay are the last two. In that sense, the question is very simple and the answer is not subjective or ambiguous.

Remember, however, that this is a stressful situation and these are third-graders. They have been asked to find the “best” reasons for something that doesn’t much concern them, and when they are presented with four non-reasons in a row, they will be feeling anxious about which is “best” before they realize that they are all irrelevant. They were told they were to make a judgment. I admit I myself went back to re-read the assignment when I got to #3 and still didn’t have a good reason or even a bad one. I thought I must have missed something. And I am not in third grade.

Again: this is a test. The kids are under stress. Wouldn’t it be reasonable to make #2 or #3 one of the “best” reasons?

And since the students are supposed to pick the “best” reasons for taking cursive out of the curriculum, wouldn’t it make sense to offer a poor reason for them to pass over?

“Some people’s cursive is hard to read.” (The child could say: So what? Not a best answer.)

“Older folks have too many loops in their writing.” (At least this is on topic. Another one for the student to skip as “not best.”)

Construction for a Profile

This kind of construction is confusing for the student. There is no “best.” There are four anti-reasons and then two reasons, “best” because “only.” Why should a test be topsy turvy like this? What are we testing for? Either the authors of the test are incredibly stupid and myopic or they are after something else.

Since the test is not useful for the teachers but is only an information-gathering exercise for the feds, one has an uncomfortable feeling about this. What are the test composers going to learn, as a child scrambles to choose one of the first four “wrong” items?

This: The composer (or the testing company) will learn which reasons for teaching cursive are most persuasive to this population of third-graders, which is to say, to their parents. That is what he will learn if he pays attention, and since these tests are mostly written in cooperation with the American Psychological Association, we should assume that somebody besides me recognizes this opportunity. If you are engaged in social engineering, as these people certainly are, this is very important. In order to change people’s thoughts, first you need to know them.

Presumably the real assessment includes a question that will enable them to gauge where the culture is on some sort of progressive issue. It won’t be about cutting out cursive writing, but maybe about cutting out European history, or gendered bathrooms, or something else that’s not for third-graders to judge but where third-graders will inevitably show where their parents stand and why. They will do this because they will check what is on their mind as a relevant point, instead of what finishes an essay according to the directions.

We may never know what this is about, because the real assessment is only on the computer, only seen by the students who take it and maybe by the proctors who supervise them, the latter being, however, deadly sworn to secrecy. It is likely, if my other adventures with test-watching are relevant, that the pattern will hold whereby the first four of six answers will be reversed and the question will be rendered moot

for those who can read fast enough. This is how an apparent English test becomes a personal or political profile. Yes, the top students will get the right answer, but the others, especially the growing population of dyslexics, will provide the desired information.

Ask the French

When my daughters were in ballet, some several years ago, their teacher was French. She showed me the test her daughter took in high school — the English test. The interesting thing was that nine cities in France gave these tests, and gave them twice a year, and published the tests *and the answers* three months afterwards. Eighteen times a year, the French could write an English test.

So.

It's not such a big deal to write a real test; and if it's too tough, we could hire the French to do it and they could do it blindfolded. Instead, we have this cult of secrecy where all sorts of "testing" garbage goes unchallenged because nobody is allowed to see or speak of the test. What's to hide?

A little sunshine would go a long way to keeping the questions honest.

It's time to say, "Show me!"

Or just don't take it.

(Originally written 2014)