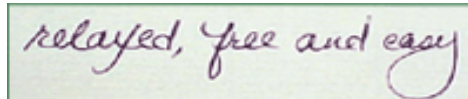
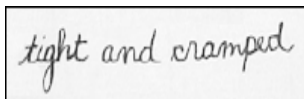


## Retrain your muscles to improve your handwriting

Partly from the internet (I forget the source) – annotated and edited by Felicity

[Felicity: You're facing the Essay paper and your handwriting's terrible – people have told you and if they haven't, ask them how legible it is! If it's a problem, what to do? Poor handwriting makes your writing slower, so you'll lose time. Importantly, the examiners may not be able to read crucial parts, so you'll also lose marks. All of us text and type into electronic interfaces these days more than we handwrite, so all of us have deteriorating handwritng.]

A fountain pen may make your writing look a bit better [but is not allowed in the college exams - only black and blue ballpoint pens are allowed], but if your writing looks like frenzied chickens got loose on the page, you'll need to retrain your arm and hand.



Cramped, uneven letters are often the result of drawing the letters with the fingers rather than using the whole arm to write.

People who have trouble with handwriting write with their fingers. A finger-writer puts the full weight of their hand on the paper – their fingers draw the letters and they pick their hand up repeatedly to move it across the paper as they write.

But if you use the right muscle groups, your writing will have a smooth, easy flow and not look tortured.

People for whom writing comes more easily may rest their hands fairly heavily on the paper, but their forearms and shoulders move as they write. Their writing has a flow that shows they're using at least some of the right muscle groups. They don't draw the letters with their fingers; the fingers serve more as guides.

This exercise may help you determine which category you fit into: Sit down and write a paragraph at a table or desk. Doesn't matter what. Pay attention to the muscles you use to form your letters. Do you draw each letter with your fingers? Pick your hand up repeatedly to move it? Have an unrecognizable scrawl? Does your forearm move? Chances are, if you learned to write after 1955-60 (depending on where you went to school), you write with your fingers.

The goal of this handout isn't to make you into a copperplate calligraphy writer or a 14th Century scribe. If you can compromise between the "right" methods and the way you write now and improve your handwriting so it's less of a strain and more legible, that's enough.



Most people hold the pen between the thumb and index finger. A few people hold the pen between index and middle fingers, which looks awkward, but if it works for you and you're not also finger-writing, it's not an issue.

It takes time to re-train muscles and learn new habits. Finger-writing isn't fatal, but it's slow and often painful (if you have to write much. To change something as ingrained in muscle memory as writing, you need patience and gentleness with yourself, determination and enough *time*. Start at least 6 months pre-exam.

If you finger-write, that's the first, most important thing you need to un-learn: *Don't draw your letters! Don't write with your fingers!* Stick up signs at home to remind you. Write it on the mirror, stick up a note at your study area. But learn it!

First, let's look at the most basic things: holding the pen and positioning the hand.



*Fig. 1. This is the most common pen-holding position, with pen between index and middle fingers, held in place by the thumb.*

Most of us hold the pen between the thumb and index finger, resting the barrel on the middle finger (fig. 1). This works better than holding it between the thumb and the index and middle fingers, with the whole assembly resting on the ring finger (fig. 2). If you do it the first way, you're off to a good start. If the second, you'll be okay. In both, the remaining fingers are curled under the hand.



*Fig. 2. The two-fingers-on-top method for holding the pen while writing.*

Pick up your pen and look at your hand. You'll have better control and a better writing angle if your pen rests over or just forward of the bottom knuckle on your index finger, not between thumb and index finger (see fig. 3). (I hold my fountain pens in the latter position, but when I pick up a calligraphy pen, it drops obediently right over that big knuckle – go figure!)



*Fig. 3. Note that with this position, usually used for calligraphy (or among really disciplined writers), causes the pen to rest atop the knuckle of the forefinger.*

For handwriting, the pen position is less important than for calligraphy. I recommend working in your familiar position unless it's really bad. What's essential is that you be comfortable, the pen feel balanced and you have no tension in your hand. Rest the heel of your hand and the angle of your curled-up little finger on the paper.

Hold the pen lightly; don't squeeze it. Pretend the barrel is soft rubber and squeezing will get you a big, fat blot. (If you were using a quill, you'd hold it so lightly that the actual act of drawing the quill along the paper would create the proper contact.)

Many books recommend you write with your table at a 45-degree angle, but that's impractical for most of us. If you can prop up a board or write with one on your lap, that's a good place to start, but a flat surface is fine. Once you try an angled surface, you're likely not to want to quit, so be careful--here goes a whole new budget's worth of art supplies!

Sit up straight, but not stiffly; don't sit hunched over or slumped. Don't worry too much about this position stuff; the important thing is what makes you feel relaxed and comfortable. Your writing arm needs to be free to move, so squished into a La-Z-Boy probably won't be productive.

Hold your fingers fairly straight and write slightly above and just between your thumb and index finger, right where you're holding the pen. Don't curl your hand over and write to the left of your palm; that's a cramped, miserable position. More lefties do this than righties.



Commonly called the "hook" position, this is often seen in left-handers. It makes it harder, but not impossible, for them to use a fountain pen, because their hands tend to drag over the wet ink.

When you're practicing and you reach the level on the paper at which it becomes uncomfortable to continue to move your hand down the paper to write, move the paper up. Once you recognize your "writing level," the paper should move up at that spot rather than your hand moving down the paper. (This isn't critical. If you notice it and it bothers you, that's what you do about it. If it doesn't bother you, skip it.)

I've found only one reference to using the right muscle groups to write, and this *is* critical. I can't be the only person who knows this; I'm neither that smart nor that good. Calligraphy instruction books address hand position, desk position, lighting, paper, you name it--but for some reason, not using the right muscles.

As you've probably surmised, the "right muscles" are not those in the fingers. You must use the shoulder-girdle and forearm muscles. This muscle group is capable of much more intricate action than you think and tires much less easily than fingers, besides giving a smooth, clean, sweeping look to the finished writing. Though it seems paradoxical, since we're accustomed to thinking of small muscles having better control, the shoulder-girdle group, once trained, does the job better.

To get a feel for the proper muscles (and start training them correctly), hold your arm out in front of you, elbow bent, and write in the air. Write big. Use your arm and shoulder to shape letters; hold your forearm, wrist and fingers stationary and in writing position. You'll feel your shoulder, arm, chest and some back muscles doing most of the work. That's good. That's what they're supposed to do. Try to duplicate it each time you practice.

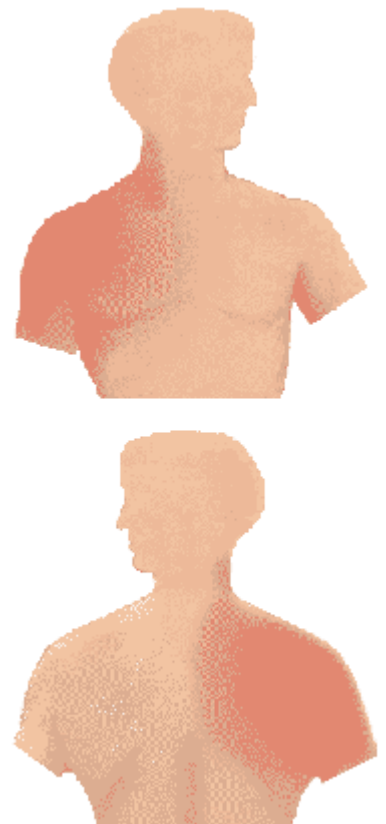
*People always look puzzled when I mention the shoulder girdle. If you raise your hand in the air and make large circles, note the muscles you use in doing so (here, shown in darker pink). That's the shoulder girdle.*

Write in the air until it becomes as natural as breathing. It'll be awkward and feel silly at first. If you have a little kid around, get him/her to do it with you. You'll both have fun, you won't feel so alone, and it'll be good for the child's handwriting, too. If you don't have a kid, tell your co-workers you're improving your financial karma or hexing your boss.

As you become comfortable, reduce the size of the air-letters you make. If you have access to a whiteboard or blackboard, write on them. They'll give you a feel for the muscles you need to use and writing on a vertical surface makes it virtually impossible to finger-write. (If you're one of the people who can't write on a blackboard because you keep wanting to shrink the writing down so your fingers can do it, this is really important for you.) If you keep wanting to hunch up close and put your hand on the whiteboard to write, resist the urge! You'd be indulging those dretched fingers.

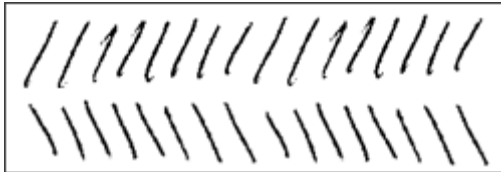
Remember: Your fingers should move very little and your wrist even less. Your forearm does most of the guiding, while your shoulder provides the power.

At some point, you'll want to try this with a pen. Hold it gently. Place it on the paper in an ordinary lined spiral notebook (the lines act as ready-made guidelines for size and



spacing). If you can get hold of a Year 1 school kid's pad, which has big lines with a dotted line between two bold lines, use it. There's a reason children start out writing big and the letters get smaller as they get older and more skilled – that's the easiest way to learn.

Start making Xs and ///s and \\s and OOOOs and overlapped OOs and spirals and ||||s. *Do not draw these strokes and figures with your fingers!* Use the same shoulder-forearm muscles you've been practicing with. Make your lines, loops, circles and spirals freely. Work into a rhythm and make it a habit.

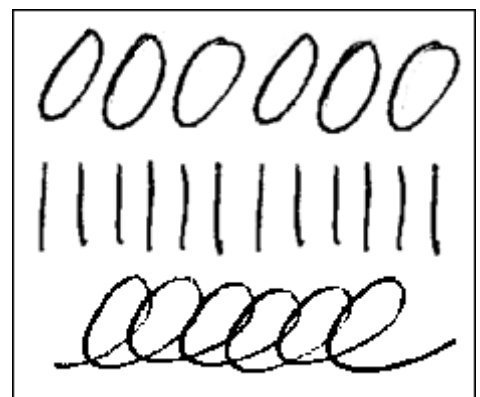


*When you start making slashes and circles, they'll be uneven. With practice, they'll become more uniform, and uniformity is your objective.*

Your goal is smooth, uniform, evenly spaced lines, loops, circles and spirals, without drawing them.

This is where you're most likely to get discouraged. If you use a spiral notebook for practice, you can leaf back and see your progress. At first, your strokes and lines will be bad—over-running and under-running the lines, too small, too big, crooked, uneven, just *ugly*. Check your position; check your muscle groups; and try again. And again.

Concentrate on keeping wrist-hand-fingers largely stationary and in proper alignment. Let the big muscles do the work. It will be more tiring at first, because you're using muscles that aren't accustomed to that kind of work. It'll be hard and frustrating, 'cause your body will want to do it the way it's done it since Year 1 ... even though that way is wrong. It may help to concentrate less on the accuracy of the shapes you're making than on the muscles making them. Retraining your arm is the goal, not making pretty little circles and lines first time out.



*Uniformity and consistency are your aim in all the exercises, whether loopy or slasy. Though it seems uncomfortable, these exercises will make a huge difference in your control and smoothness.*

When you start putting the strokes and lines on paper, start out big. Three, four, even more lines in your notebook. (those Year 1 pads are handy for this.) This helps ensure that you continue to use the shoulder girdle. Don't try to make pretty letters at this stage. Do the exercises as much as you can—shoot for every day. **Ten or fifteen minutes a day should show results in a few weeks for most people.** And note that both air-writing and paper exercises can be doodled during meetings and while on hold waiting for somebody. [You could even do it on a tablet using a stylus and drawing programme.]

Concentrate on that shoulder girdle. Let it do the work. Write big. Write words and sentences at the same time you're doing strokes and exercises. You need both working together to succeed.

Gradually, as your control increases, make your strokes and letters smaller until they're the size you normally write. You'll know when you get there. By this time, you probably won't have to make extra effort to incorporate this stuff into your writing; it'll be automatic. And your writing should look much better (and be easier and feel better, as well).