



Convert ... to pens!

by Andrew Pudewa

“First draft in pencil, final copy in pen” were the traditional instructions of our grade school teachers. However, when we observe children using pencils during writing classes, it is occasionally humorous (at best) but mostly frustrating for several reasons. One bewildering phenomenon is the amazing amount of time spent on erasing; careful observation will show that it actually takes the average child longer to erase a complete sentence than to write one. Inevitably, we will notice the child’s continuous need to sharpen, sharpen, and sharpen that pencil down to a stub. To an inexperienced observer, this may seem like an excuse to get out of the chair (possible but not likely) or a way to momentarily escape the purgatory of the mostly blank page (more probable but still not the core reason). Finally, we wonder, why does the child complain of “tired hand syndrome” so consistently? Although not quite as obvious, this too may simply be another of the many pernicious problems which pencils promote. Is there a simple solution?

During the Institute for Excellence in Writing student classes, we have a very strange rule: NO ERASING ALLOWED. Shocking to some and bewildering to others, this odd discipline, once accepted, has a remarkably liberating effect. When erasing is illegal and first time perfection is never expected, neatness is no longer a burden. Messiness is okay. Thinking about how the words sound and not obsessing about how the paper looks, children are able to experiment with vocabulary freely. A change is only a strike mark away, and with a double-spaced paper, students have plenty of room to work. Sometimes, the real neatniks will have a hard time with this, hoping to get it perfect the first time. This is just lazy. Nobody gets it perfect the first time. A final or typed copy must be the norm. Clearly, when children are freed from the necessity of being continuously careful and neat, their brains are freed to think more about English composition—putting ideas into words and words into sentences in a correct and logical order. By just quickly crossing out what they do not want, they have more time to find and refine what they do want, something particularly important when using a stylistic techniques checklist. Try the NO ERASING ALLOWED rule in your home or classroom and move one step closer to the true way.

Sharpening also takes time. It eats the pencils. Kids do it constantly. Why? Although often it may be a form of procrastination, the more likely answer has to do with kinesthetic and tactile consistency. As a pencil wears, the drag on the paper rapidly changes. This is a disconcerting feeling to children and even to some adults, demanding a sophisticated adjustment of pressure and speed. For a young child, this may require additional brain activity which distracts from the real task at hand: English composition. Additional variables such as desk surface and stack thickness can exacerbate the inconsistencies of pencil points on paper. A good quality pen has no such changeable nature. The tip is consistent; the ink flow is steady. Believing that problems of habitual sharpening can be easily solved with the use of mechanical pencils, some teachers and parents accept this more sophisticated form of heresy. However, one final, convincing apologetic thrust remains.

“My hand is tired!” How often we have heard the whine. Another excuse? Perhaps, but when pens replace pencils, the tired hand syndrome gradually fades as the bold black or blue ink lines replace the weak gray of the traditional wood or mechanical #2. Young children, especially those with immature visual pathways, crave clear contrast on their paper. It’s easier to see. While wondering why kids don’t generally think to read what they’ve written, we might be oblivious to the fact that it is just hard to look at. In their need to see contrast while using a pencil, young students press hard on the paper. Although the lead may break, at least the line is darker. Sharpening (or clicking more lead down) doesn’t really help. Only pressure makes a difference. Why then should we be surprised at complaints of cramps and moans about tired finger muscles? The children are only doing what they need to do to overcome the added handicap which the use of a pencil imposes upon them.

By now the conclusion should be obvious. Erasing is a phenomenal waste of time since there shouldn’t be any such thing as a first and only draft of any composition. Check the original manuscript of any well-known author, and you will find a mess of changes, additions, and deletions. Students must be free to think about what words to choose and how to best put them into sentences, not the shape of the letters or the look of the page. Using pens for composition, children will not only escape the temptation to erase, but they will be liberated from the compelling need to sharpen while the dark ink on white will provide the much-needed visual contrast which the carbon-gray pencil does not provide. High quality, roller tip, dark ink pens will solve many problems. Relegate pencils—whether traditional or mechanical—to the worlds of art and arithmetic where they belong but don’t let them invade the hallowed halls of English composition. Although we may, when young and impressionable, have been strongly indoctrinated with the “first-draft-in-pencil” fallacy, it is time to see the truth, lead our children in light, and convert to the right way—pens!

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