

# **The Death of the Art of Writing: Myth or Reality?**

*When it comes to writing, the next generation is all thumbs.*

By Victor Tiong Kung Ming

## **Who's Writing Now?**

Who cares about writing anymore? With the advancement of communications technology, especially the rapid growth of computer-mediated communication and the use of mobile phones, more and more people, particularly the educated young generation, embrace technology in a mad frenzy. Short-messaging systems (SMS), email and word processors flood the lives of young people. There is more typing and clicking happening than writing with a writing instrument. Increasingly, we are moving into an age where the mouse, keyboard and keypads are dearer to us than the nimble pen. This click-and-type wave is, in this writer's opinion, causing the slow and painful death of the art of writing. Undoubtedly, we still "write", but we now "write" with the mouse and keypad. From the beautiful, smooth movement of the once mighty pen, we have moved to embrace the swiftness of the fingers in tapping keys, and in this respect, the thumb is king.

How many of us still write letters, invitations, birthday cards and congratulatory notes? How many pick up the humble pen and paper to write? Not only in business, but also in our personal lives the most important letters or notes, which we once wrote to our loved one with pen and paper, have been taken over by the click-and-type wave. From penmanship we have moved to "keypadship".

We have moved from the joy of writing on a wonderful piece of paper, folding it, putting it in an envelope, applying the stamp and sending the letter, to typing and sending to a virtual email address. Lost are the joys of holding the card or letter, the psychological joy and contentment of touching, turning the pages and holding them. We receive more e-cards than traditional cards, which can be placed and displayed on our tables, workstations, cupboards etc. Love letters or online confessions may slowly be taking over on-paper love dedications.

Culture changes with the passage of time. In the present technology-centered world, time plays a primary role. Increasingly, people are moving towards using email and SMS for communication as they are fast, accessible and easy to use. We see them, and use them, more everyday. Just look around and one will see people happily thumbing their way on the mobile phone or logging in to the Internet and checking their email accounts at their workstations the first thing in the morning (perhaps you do too).

### **Communication Technology's Growth and Implications for Writing**

The increasing popularity of keypadship has several implications. Some of those that have emerged are:

- i. The breakdown of traditional grammar, terms and styles and the creation of new ones. Simplifications and shortcuts are prevalent in emails and SMS. These shortcuts are often very personalized in nature and may sometimes be comprehensible only between the interacting parties.
- ii. Deterioration of handwriting -- cursive writing may be a thing of the past; bad handwriting is increasingly common as less writing occurs with writing instruments.
- iii. Ordinary mail nowadays consists mainly of bills and other official documents.

### **From Graphology to Type-ology?**

Many people believe that handwriting can be analyzed (called graphology) to see the inner soul of the writer, what he is thinking, his behavior, his character, etc. But with click-and-type and keypads, there is a severe loss of the human touch. Is there a loss of human identity? The way a sentence, a paragraph or a letter is typed can show the inner thoughts and character of people. Analysis is still possible but without the complexities and diversity of strokes, curves, loops etc. In their place are the new linguistic structures and forms associated with click-and-type and keypad culture. Creative abbreviations and simplifications abound, and grammar is freely ignored (sometimes abused). Research into how, why, when and what people abbreviate or simplify may prove to be quite revealing. This "type-ology" may not be graphology per se, but still it is useful.

## **Conclusion**

Back to the question: Is writing dying a slow and painful death?

M.O. Thirunarayanan, in an article on the increasing clicking behavior of people, comments that we are now in the generation of "I click, therefore I am." Although the article discusses Web page clicking, I believe this is also true for those who are greatly dependent on the computer for writing and mobile phones for SMS. I propose that we move from this over-dependence, going back to "I write, therefore I am."

What does the future hold for writing? Johan Jaafar, a columnist for *The New Straits Times*, aptly observed:

*The good news is, we don't have to encourage people to "write" again. This is wonderful. We have been complaining that people have stopped expressing themselves. Many out there are doing exactly that. And more.*

I couldn't agree more. The future of communication technologies looks bright. We still passionately write . . . albeit, digitally with keypads.

## **References**

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*Victor Tiong Kung Ming is a lecturer at Curtin University of Technology, Sarawak Campus, Malaysia. His research interests include mathematics appreciation, mathematical thinking and information technology issues.*