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Teachers lament faltering pens

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Some students can't read their own work.

ONCE penmanship was an art and handwriting a skill developed through endless practice. Now, teachers say, cursive handwriting is disappearing from secondary schools, leaving many senior students unable to write quickly or fluently. The finger is being pointed at technology.

Illegible handwriting has become a serious problem for teachers, according to Ross Huggard, vice-president of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English. He says sometimes students can't even read their own work.

"They write things and you're having a terrible time deciphering and you say 'What's this' and they say 'I can't read it either'," he says.

"There are also kids who will say 'I can't read your handwriting' when you write comments on their work. Now, my handwriting is not that bad, but it tells you that there are really serious issues around their skill levels."

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Mr Huggard, a senior English and literature teacher with 35 years of experience in the classroom, says the emphasis on handwriting has gradually declined with increasing use of computers.

By the time students arrive in high school many dump the cursive style they have been taught in primary school and take on childlike printing — with boys in particular often using block capital letters to write sentences.

"They are taking their pen off the page and

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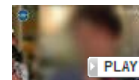
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putting it back on so it's taking them twice as long," Mr Huggard says. "Fast forward to

exams and that's a real issue because they cannot write as many words as other people can. It's a very interesting phenomenon that's become more and more apparent."

Mr Huggard, who teaches at Cranbourne Secondary College, says students accustomed to typing and texting are also struggling to write longhand essays in three-hour English exams.

"Anecdotally, it is quite clear that some kids just find it too demanding physically because they lose the muscle control and the skill to use their wrist, hand and fingers for a long period of time writing," he says. "They are very slow and it is laborious and that means they write less and perhaps they don't finish."

His concerns are echoed in the tertiary sector, where university academics have long been alarmed about the handwriting skills and literacy levels of school leavers.

Grace Oakley, from the graduate school of education at the University of Western Australia, has noticed a decline in undergraduate handwriting over the past 10 years.

She says being unable to write well interferes with a student's ability to select vocabulary, generate ideas and plan work.

"A lot of them don't do cursive writing when they come to university, they just print and some write their whole exam script in whole capitals so it is slowing down their thinking and ability to express themselves."

Associate Professor Oakley says primary schools place a strong focus on teaching students to write but suspects that by the time students get to high school, little classroom time is devoted to helping those struggling with poor handwriting.

"There is so much that schools have to cover that they are making an assumption that students can already handwrite and that we don't have to keep on teaching it once they are older," she says.

Despite increasing use of computers in primary schools, teachers still have a strong commitment to cursive handwriting, with the focus on legibility.

Gabrielle Leigh, president of the Victorian Principals Association, says it is important to develop skills using digital technology but not at the expense of handwriting.

"Because there are other ways people communicate, we have to divide our precious time between building up keyboard skills and building up handwriting, they are competing pressures," she says. "It seems as though it could be a dying art and it should not be, it should be very much a part of the education process and we need to make sure that it is practised."

Primary schools teach the Victorian cursive style from prep, when children are taught to form unjoined letters. They begin to join letters in grades 3 or 4, when pupils receive pen licences as they graduate from pencil to ballpoint.

This is in contrast to the US, where 41 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for English, which omits cursive handwriting from a new national curriculum that states primary school students should use a variety of digital tools to produce writing.

There are no such moves here. Australian students will continue to learn how to write on pen and paper. A spokesman for the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) says the national curriculum supported the teaching of cursive handwriting.

"The Australian curriculum in English states that students will be taught to handwrite fluently using correct letter formation every year to year 7," he says. "The curriculum does not specify a recommended style of handwriting, it is up to each education authority to identify the style of writing to be taught in their schools."

Research indicates handwriting improves brain development helping children to write in full sentences and cognitive capacity.

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