**In defence of handwriting**

Tim Ingold

I normally write by hand, with a fountain pen. In the past I would never use a typewriter unless I had to, and I must have been among the last to succumb to the temptations of the word processor. The very idea that writing involved a processing of words appalled me. Today, however, I catch myself tapping more and more on the keys of my laptop. I find this both worrying and frustrating. I know I am doing it only because, like most academics, I am pressed for time. The computer is nothing more, and nothing less, than a box of short-cuts. Admittedly, some are handy. When, for example, I am trying to get the sentences of a paragraph in a sensible order, it helps to be able to try out different permutations until the solution eventually falls out. Other short-cuts merely facilitate the correction of errors that arise from the technology itself. I rarely make spelling mistakes when I write by hand, but do so frequently when I type. This is in part because my clumsy and untrained fingers keep hitting the wrong keys. More importantly, however, it is because my hand knows words as continuous, flowing gestures and not as sequences of discrete letters.

In a cursive script the line, as it unravels upon the page, issues directly from this gestural movement, with all the care, feeling and devotion that goes into it. I compare it to practising my cello. When I practise - which I do as often as I can - the sound pours out from the contact between bow and strings. In just the same way, handwriting flows from the moving point of contact between pen and paper. The keyboard ruptures this connection. The tapping of my fingers on the keys bears no relation to the marks that appear on the page or screen. These marks carry no trace of movement or feeling. They are cold and expressionless. Typing on the computer, I find, is joyless and soul-destroying. It rips the heart out of writing.

I am saddened by the rule, observed in my own institution as in most others, that requires students to produce work in a standardised, word-processed format. I am told that one reason for this rule is that it allows work to be checked for originality, using anti-plagiarism software. From the start, students are introduced to the idea that academic writing is a game whose primary object is to generate novelty through the juxtaposition and recombination of materials from prescribed sources. Word processors were expressly designed as devices with which to play this game, and it is one that many academics, having been trained in its conventions, are only too keen to carry on. But the game is a travesty of the writer's craft. Contrary to university regulations, I encourage my students to write by hand, as well as to draw, and to compare their experience of doing so with that of using the computer. The response has been unequivocal. Handwriting and drawing, they report, re-awaken long-suppressed sensibilities and induce a greater sense of personal involvement, leading in turn to profound insight.

Colluding in a culture of expectation that values novelty over profundity, and product over process, institutions have got their priorities back to front. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with copying stuff out. As musicians and calligraphers have always known, whether practising a piece or writing out a text, copying is a form of meditation that can slowly but assuredly lead to deep understanding. It involves the practitioner's entire being: the hand that writes or plays the work, the mind that dwells on its meaning, and the memory that fixes it. Thus the problem lies not in copying *per se*, but in the possibility that the computer affords to short-cut the laborious processes of rewriting and redrafting by the mere touch of a button. As copying *is* thinking, to short-cut copying is to short-cut thought itself. By its nature, thinking twists and turns, drifts and meanders. A hunter who followed a bee-line from a point of departure to a predetermined destination would never catch prey. To hunt you have to be alert for clues and ready to follow trails wherever they may lead. Thoughtful writers need to be good hunters.

Yet thinking is not confined to moments while you hold a pen, let alone to periods spent staring at the computer screen. It is continually on the go, and at any time of day and night it can unexpectedly congeal into a revelation that catches the essence of what you have been trying to say. You have to be ready to write it down, for it can otherwise pass as quickly as a dream on waking. Many writers keep a hardback notebook with them at all times, precisely for such eventualities. I do too.

I would like to conclude, however, with a word in praise of breakfast cereal. Sheets of card cut from used cereal packets are perfect for catching thoughts on the fly. They are sufficiently stiff that you do not need anything to press on, and large enough to allow ample, unruled space. Sometimes I wake up in the early morning with a problem paragraph that I had been struggling with for all of the previous day perfectly formed in my head. Propped up in bed, I quickly write it down on a cereal packet card. I can write a few hundred words in as many minutes, and having done it, and with the words securely saved, I can then move on. Many of the passages I am most proud of started life in this way. I have never come across anything that works quite as well as cereal packets. They beat the computer hands down. Try it, and you'll see!

**Reference:**

Ingold, Tim 2007. *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.

***Tim Ingold****is Professor of Social Anthropology and Head of the School of Social Science (2008-11) at the University of Aberdeen. He has carried out ethnographic fieldwork among Saami and Finnish people in Lapland, and has written extensively on comparative questions of environment, technology and social organisation in the circumpolar North, as well as on evolutionary theory in anthropology, biology and history, on the role of animals in human society, and on issues in human ecology. His recent research interests are in the anthropology of technology and in aspects of environmental perception. He has edited the Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology (1994) and was editor of Man (the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute) from 1990 to 1992. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. His major publications include Evolution and Social Life (1986), The Appropriation of Nature (1986), Tools, Language and Cognition in Human Evolution (co-edited with Kathleen Gibson, 1993), Key Debates in Anthropology (1996), The Perception of the Environment (2000), Lines: A Brief History (2007), Creativity and Cultural Improvisation (co-edited with Elizabeth Hallam, 2007) and Ways of Walking (co-edited with Jo Lee Vergunst, 2008). He is currently writing and teaching on the comparative anthropology of the line, and on issues on the interface between anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture. He has supervised thirty-two doctoral students to completion, and is currently supervising a further ten, on subjects ranging from thinking like a river in northern Finland to traditional craft in Japan.*