

Writing

Introduction

Writing and composition were treated as two different subjects, and were actually taught at two different schools during the 1700s. Grammar schools taught reading and composition, while writing schools taught handwriting, spelling, and math. (Often students had to write their math lessons in very fancy lettering, as an exercise – see the PDF file called “Arithmetic Problems” in the Arithmetic & Spelling lesson.)

Handwriting was very important during the colonial period. People employed writing masters, either in small schools or as private tutors, to teach “scholars” how to write properly. These writing masters emphasized forming the letters, not composition.

For this lesson, we combined handwriting with composition. Students will see how scholars of the 1700s first learned the alphabet (though the hornbooks and alphabet poems) and then how older scholars learned to compose letters. Letter-writing was a very important exercise at this time because there was no other form of long-distance communication. Modern students can try writing the same things in the same style of the time period for an idea of what their eighteenth century counterparts experienced.

Here is some more information on the writing materials of the time:

Pens

Pens were made out of the wing feathers of larger birds, especially geese. Each feather had to be carefully prepared: it had to be heated, trimmed, and cut just right so that the ink could be stored in a small slit-reservoir, and flow down the pen. The slit still does not hold much ink, so writing with these pens requires frequent re-dipping.

Quill pens did not actually come to a point, but were slightly blunted. The wider parts of the letters were made by using the full width of the pen, and the thinner parts by tilting the pen up on one corner. If you choose to try making pens out of drinking straws according to the instructions on the disk, you don’t need to worry about this detail – a point will work fine.



Ink

Eighteenth century ink was usually poisonous. A common mixture included oak galls (which are full of tannic acid), copperas (iron sulfate), and gum arabic (as a binder). These inks can gradually eat away at the paper they are written on!

Ink could be purchased in powdered and liquid form in the 1700s, or people could make their own from recipes published in book.

Mistakes

If you made a mistake in the 1700s, you actually took a knife and scraped away the ink! ... Or you could just cross it out and ignore the mistake, as many people did.

If you left out a letter, or word, or even a whole line, you inserted the missing item in the space above. Take a close look at the original handwritten Declaration of Independence: there are two places where something was accidentally left out, then added above! (The “en” in “Representative” and the word “only.”)

Hornbooks

The way many children learned their letters was with a hornbook. This was a thin piece of wood with a handle. On it, they placed a piece of paper with the alphabet, syllables, and usually a prayer. A thin, transparent piece of horn protected the paper.

Works Referenced:

Daniel, Jim. *A Proper Hand... writing in the manner of the 18th century*. Jim Daniel, 2010.

Monaghan, E. Jennifer. *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst and Boston, 2005.



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