



Pens at the ready: Sisters (left to right) Serena, Fiona, and Katie practise their handwriting skills with their mother Sharon

Do the write thing

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30.09.09

She has been called a saviour, a miracle worker and a genius but Pam Heather, the founder of a centre that transforms handwriting, is typically self-deprecating. No matter that she has a two-year waiting list, has been visited by foreign royalty, aristocrats and the rich and famous, Mrs Heather is modest about her phenomenal success rate.

"I simply do what teachers would do if they had more time and were not forced to use one specific alphabet. I tailor writing styles to suit the individual rather than forcing the individual to write in a style which doesn't suit them and hampers them," she says.

Recent estimates suggest that as many as 10 per cent of the population are affected by so-called dysgraphia, a neurological disorder that is characterised by the inability to write properly.

Mrs Heather, 74, has run the Learn-Write Centre in [Nottingham](#) for more than 19 years and has successfully treated more than 6,000 students aged from five to 68 years. Referrals come from leading teaching hospitals, educational psychologists, and mainstream and public schools — with a large number from London.

Generally those who attend Mrs Heather's Centre have writing skills substantially below what is expected of their age, intelligence and education. Usually their writing is hard to read and contains a mixture of small letters together with capitals in unexpected places. Words often contain an uneven letter size, fail to keep to the line and slant in differing directions. Letters and numbers can be reversed in the written form.

A dysgraphic person's creative writing speed is slow and spelling is often particularly poor. Pupils typically spend far longer on their homework and get worse grades than their classmates, and they often endure punishment for uncompleted work — all of which can lead to the child being stigmatised.

Sharon Day took her daughters Fiona, 10, and Serena, nine, to see Mrs Heather because they were diagnosed as being mildly dyspraxic.

"They were clearly both very bright but were underachieving," says Mrs Day, who lives in south-west London. "They were at a good school yet the handwriting wasn't really seen as an issue. Serena's handwriting was like chicken scratch — it was impossible to read.

"It would take her five minutes to write a single sentence. At school, they would hang essays on the bulletin board for parents' evening and my daughter's handwriting was appalling — I wanted to cry for her."

Mrs Day noticed an improvement in their handwriting after the initial six-hour session with Mrs Heather.

"Pam starts by finding a pen that suits a person's grip. Then she introduces several different styles of alphabet, working through each letter until she finds a style the child is happy with. Then Pam creates individual homework sheets tailored to the alphabet style she has chosen. Back home, we did dictation with the girls and finally they copied paragraphs out of a book. The difference was unbelievable and we only needed to go back once to see her again. Their handwriting was transformed — it was that quick."

Over the years, Mrs Heather has worked hard to be recognised by the educational establishment who initially rejected her methods and claims of success. Now, experts have revised their opinion.

"When I first told my daughters' school about Mrs Heather they looked at me askance," says Mrs Day, "but when I showed their teachers the results of Mrs Heather's work — the before and after handwriting styles — their eyes nearly popped out. The improvement was so great, we've never looked back."

Mrs Heather's interest in handwriting started because she wanted to devise a way to teach her Down's syndrome brother to read and write. She went on to specialise in teaching handicapped children before leaving education full-time to set up the Learn-Write Centre.

At the moment, Mrs Heather works alone and cannot find anyone willing to live in and be trained up to take over. For all those parents who face a gruelling wait for their child to be seen, there is hope in the form of a self-help book she's currently writing. But parents shouldn't give up hope of ever getting to see Mrs Heather either.

"I may be in my seventies," she says defiantly, "but I only need four hours' sleep a night and have absolutely no intention of retiring any time soon."