

Handwriting: an instrument of understanding and empathy

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Abstract: Relationships between teacher and student can be improved by a new way of approaching the world of teenagers by using graphological techniques which allow a better comprehension of the teenagers' psychological points of view. Through the science of graphology which examines handwritten texts, the characteristics of the personality and the attitudes of the writer can be recognized. This method is essentially based on a psychological rule which says that every unconscious or conscious psychological content becomes manifest through some kind of expression. It provides useful tools for improving the teachers' abilities to listen and to understand their students properly.

Keywords: graphology, teacher-student relationship, listening and understanding skills.

Graphology, the science of handwriting analysis, is a part of the Human Sciences, together with Psychology, Pedagogy, Sociology and Cultural Anthropology; as in these disciplines, it adopts an interpretative method to understand human behaviour. Handwritten texts are used to investigate and carry out research in graphology. The line of ink left by the pen forms the layout or 'graphic wire' which, if carefully examined, makes possible an understanding of the characteristics of the personality and the attitudes of the writer. Basically this method is based on a psychological rule which explains that every unconscious or conscious psychological content must become manifest through some kind of expression.¹ Graphology can be applied in different areas, such as forensic document examination, employment

¹ About graphology, see J. Crepieux-Jamin, *ABC della grafologia* (Padua 2001); C. Colo-J. Pinon, *Traité de Graphologie* (Paris, 2002); J.-Ch. Gille Maisani, *Psicologia della scrittura* (Naples, 2000); M. Pulver, *La simbologia nella scrittura* (Turin, 1983); R. Saudek, *Psicologia della scrittura* (Padua, 1982); A. Teillard, *L'anima e la scrittura* (Turin, 1980).

profiling, children and teenagers profiling, and handwriting retraining. This paper will concern itself with teenagers' profiles and their use in the teacher-student relationship since graphological techniques can offer a new approach to the world of teenagers. It can be useful for people who would like to get in touch with the world of today's teenagers.²

There are three phases of the graphical process. The phase prior to writing that is the beginning (5/6 years – 8/9 years), the writing phase (8/9 years – 11/12 years), and the post-writing phase (from 13 years).

In the phase prior to writing, the main characteristics are the effort to achieve the requested writing performance, imbalances (no proportions, asymmetries), and clumsiness in the management of space and in the management of the written signs. Looking at the following pictures, one may notice that the first is written with more effort than the second, but both indicate the difficulties of learning to write.³ These are very good performances. It means that they are very mature for their age. In fact both students (a girl and a boy) have achieved excellent results during the whole course of their studies.

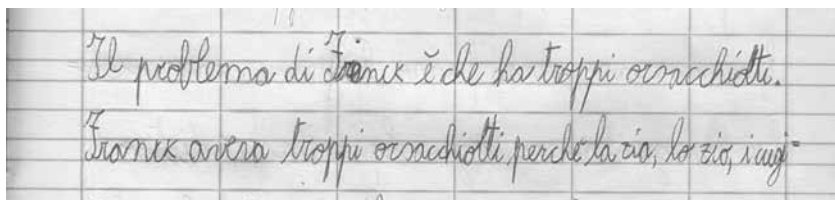


Fig. No. 1 – boy, 6 years

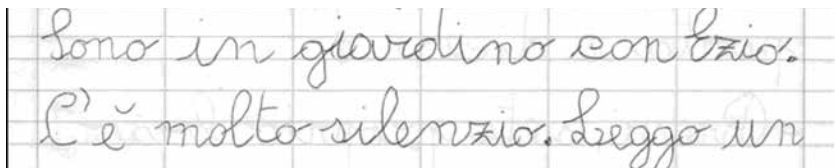


Fig. No. 2 – girl, 6 years (Silvia)

- 2 About children and teenagers profiling: F. Cherubino, 'La grafologia in età evolutiva nella scuola', *Grafologia medica*, No. 2 (2011), 3–11; F. Dolto, *Adolescenza* (Milan, 1995); E. Erikson, *Gioventù e crisi d'identità* (Rome, 1974); A. Freud, *L'Io e i meccanismi di difesa* (Florence, 1967); A.R. Guaitoli–A. Orlandi, *Ascoltare il segno* (Rome, 1999); A.R. Guaitoli–E. Manetti, *Identità, scrittura e segni* (Rome, 2005); U.A. Lallemand, *Segnali d'allarme* (Rome, 1997); A. Mele, 'I diversi vissuti dell'oralità nelle scritture attuali', *Grafologia e sue applicazioni*, Vol. XXXI (2006), 35–41.
- 3 N. Boille, *Oltre il bianco* (Rome 2010), 31–41.

The main features of the writing phase are a general settlement and a better confidence. Uniformity to the model is reached. Fig. No. 3 shows the changes in Silvia's writing.

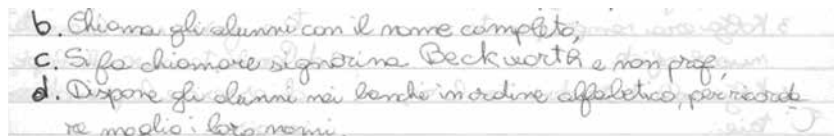


Fig. No. 3 – girl, 12 years (Silvia)

In the third and last phase, graphical shapes are subjected to the tension of the research for more personal solutions. This moment shows the beginning of a long and uneven phase, characterized by the crisis of adolescence. It will be concluded in the process of becoming an adult, with the definition of a particular graphical style.

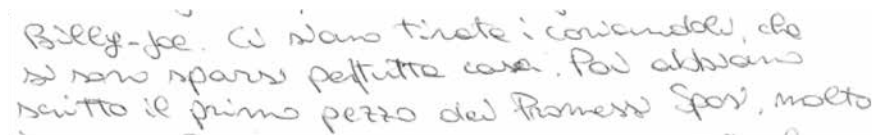


Fig. No. 4 – girl, 15 years (Silvia)

Fig. No. 4 shows that Silvia is looking for personal solutions in this moment of her life (see for instance the connection between ‘i’ and the little dot over it). Finding new graphic solutions indicates, in this case, the reaching problem-solving skills.

Adolescence, the period of life from childhood to adult age, is characterized by a series of physical and psychological changes and by sexual maturity. It is a period of crises, conflicts, and lack of inner cohesion. It is a period of researching one's personal identity to which corresponds an undefined personality. In fact, a teenager's personality has to undergo continuous changes and is in constant evolution. In this context, an adolescent's graphic features should be always considered under a perspective of normality and of expectation because in adolescence there is a non-stop change in everything.⁴

4 F. Dolto, *Adolescenza* (Milan, 1995); D.W. Winnicott, *Sviluppo affettivo e ambiente* (Rome, 1970), id., *La famiglia e lo sviluppo dell'individuo* (Rome, 1994).

To better understand the meaning of the teenager's handwriting, it is important to know the three main constitutive parts of handwriting: Form, Space, and Movement.⁵ The form of writing is the image we choose to represent us. It symbolizes the research of our identity and the emancipation from child-like graphics. It must be considered as the structure of the letters. This structure is the starting- and the end-point of the writing process, its rational part, and the research of an image that represents us.

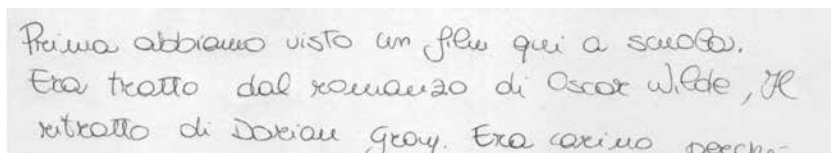


Fig. No. 5 – girl, 15 years

This picture shows that in this writing prevails the form which means that the author is a thoughtful person.

From a graphological point of view, teenagers are a category of people engaged in choosing between conformity and authenticity.⁶ Every teenager feels the necessity to want to know he is part of the group and shares its behaviour or if he feels different from the others. This choice is a very important part of growing up process so that they can choose to adopt either a graphical conventional style or a personalized style. In the first case they use calligraphic shapes⁷ or script/mixed script/capital letters, the trendiest forms of conventional writing that represent the adhesion to a fashionable form of writing.⁸

In calligraphic handwriting, the wish to be represented by an image that is true to the rules learned prevails. In this case the graphical wire follows the norm of the model. When a teenager refuses to comply

5 C. Colo – J. Pinon, *Traité de Graphologie* (Paris, 2002), 23–60; 93–116; 117–64; F. Witkowski, *Psicopatologia e scrittura*, (Rome, 2013), 15–33.

6 It is important to underline that a graphologist only describes a personality, but he does not judge: it would be a big mistake and make him unprofessional (Graphologists European Code of Conduct).

7 Calligraphy is the adhesion to the academic model.

8 The conventional writings of today's teenagers are three: 1) script, written in small letters, usually without any link between the letters; 2) a script that includes more than one form (usually script + italics) called mixed script; 3) writing in capital letters. (Guaitoli – Orlandi, 74–83. See also A.R. Guaitoli – E. Manetti, *Identità, scrittura e segni* (Rome, 2005), 201–33).

graphically with the group, doesn't elaborate any personal way to express himself, and prefers to preserve the graphical form learnt. It means that the teenager is in a temporary moment in which he feels all the difficulties of growing up and tries to find refuge by lingering as much as possible in his childhood world.

If the wish to be represented by an image recognized by the group prevails, the graphical wire follows a conventional pre-established type of writing imposed by a model adopted by the group. Choosing conventional writing means that the teenager needs a façade. This choice has both positive and negative aspects that an expert graphologist can easily see. In its positive aspect, it allows social relationships while the individual is structuring himself. In its negative aspect, it obstructs development by blocking the process of identification.⁹ From the point of view of graphology, it is important to try to understand the relationship that could make the individual approach the group, keeping in mind that, in the teenage years, feeling part of a group is important for personal growth. In fact, it represents the need of the writer to feel accepted by others and to be reassured in following the rules.¹⁰

The new and trendiest handwriting today is a handwriting called *à boule* because it is written with swollen shapes and symbolizes very well myths and social behaviour among today's teenagers.¹¹

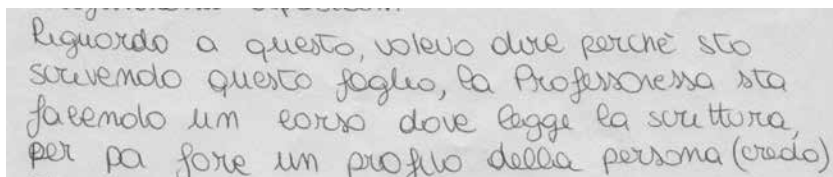


Fig. No. 6 – girl, 18 years

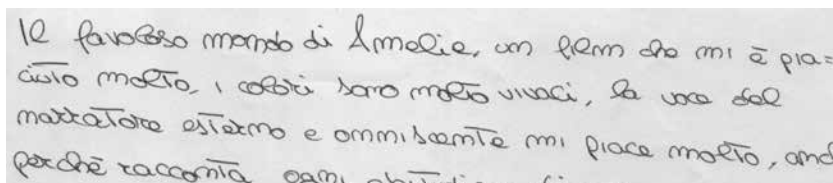


Fig. No. 7 – boy, 15 years

9 Guaitoli – Orlandi, 74–83.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 51–8; S. Esposito, 'Il gioco della palla', *Grafologia e sue applicazioni*, Vol. XXXI 2006, 42–8.

These handwritings *à boule* belong to both boys than girls. They can have big or small dimension, it is not important, but all have swollen shapes. In this kind of handwriting, some items occur very frequently: m/n with the line arched towards the left, an invasive occupation of the space, oval forms swollen in the middle, and low forms that do not allow to the letters to extend upward and downward. All that means confidentiality or defence, but at the same time the need for contact, fantasy, the need to protect the personal affective universe, very little resistance to frustrations, and the tendency to procrastinate responsibilities, as well as lack of ideals, attention to the present and to everyday life, and concentration in feelings.

If the wish to personalize the style prevails, the graphic wire shows emotions, difficulties, affective, and cognitive tendencies in an authentic way. This means adhering to personal behaviours. Everybody can recognize a personalized handwriting because a script can be personalized to simplify, to stylize, to decorate with flowery style, or to enrich.¹²

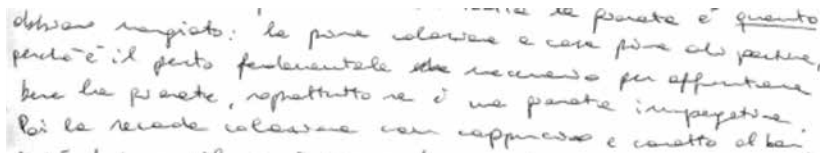


Fig. No. 8 – girl, 19 years

Fig. No. 8 shows simplified forms and original connections. All these elements make this handwriting very different from a learned model and from conventional style.

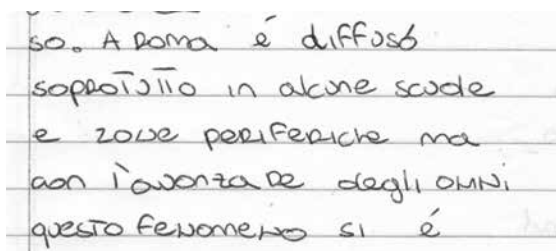


Fig. No. 9 – boy, 15 years

12 Colo – Pinon, 137–47.

Sometimes it can happen that the personalization is not successful. Fig. No. 9 shows too much graphic styles (italics, capital block letters, script, personalized letters) mixed but not well combined. This suggests how much the confusion was in the mind of this boy who was aggressive and who, often, failed tests and examinations. This reading of his personality helped parents and teachers very much and gave them tools to better understand him and help him to cope with the changes of his body and mind. Indeed, the big variety of styles of writing means that he was looking for identity and that he was uncomfortable. It was a moment of confusion but also one of commitment in the construction of one's own identity, where being accepted by the group is fundamental.

Now let's discuss the teenager's space.¹³ By space, we mean the white spaces in the paper. From the point of view of graphology, the space at the same time indicates the relationship with the external environment and the unconscious world. It gives information about the mental order, the organization of the whole personality, and the ability to integrate into the environment.

Favourable elements in the management of the teenager's space are the respect for the margins, a good distance between the lines and between the words, and compactness of the black parts (as long as it is not suffocating). All this means respect for social rules, good integration in the environment, mental lucidity, good management of the time, and a sense to predict.

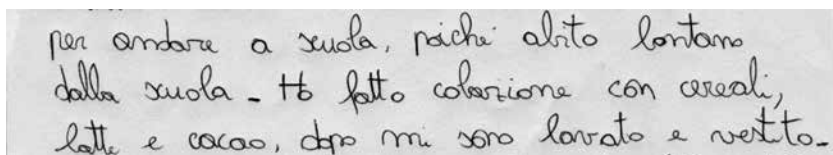


Fig. No. 10 – boy 15 years

This is a good example of well-managed space: there are spaces between lines and between words, the left margin is respected while black prevails on white without being suffocating. This boy is well integrated in the environment, respects social rules, and has good time-management.

13 Guaitoli – Orlandi, 20–7. See also M. Pulver, *Simbologia della scrittura* (Turin, 1983).

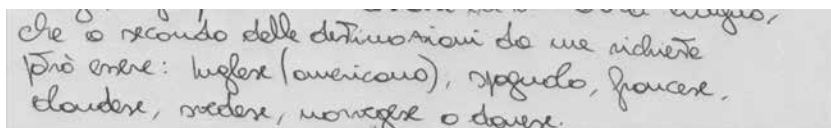


Fig. No. 11 – boy 15 years

In this picture black prevails in a compact space with good level. If it is associated with an elastic graphic wire (imagine a rubber band), the compactness of the black parts shows the ability to concentrate, to reflect before acting, and to follow an aim.

Now, let's turn to the unfavourable elements. One is the lack of order. There can be two reasons: untidiness or exuberance. If the lack of order is due to exuberance, it means little organization, impulsivity, and lack of method and of objectivity. If the lack of order is due to untidiness, it means apathy and the refusal to follow the rules, as Fig. No. 12 shows.



Fig. No. 12 – boy, 15 years

Here space is organized without care. This boy is unable to respect the rules.

Two more unfavourable elements are the rigidity of the space and the lack of spontaneity. This way of writing reflects a total adhesion to the rules with very little flexibility in opinions and behaviour.

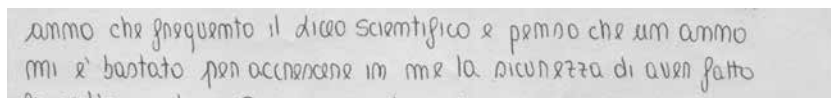


Fig. No. 13 – girl, 15 years

When the letters are order as in sorted boxes, they show rigidity. This writing belongs to a brilliant girl, but it is important that parents and teachers help a person like her to become more spontaneous.

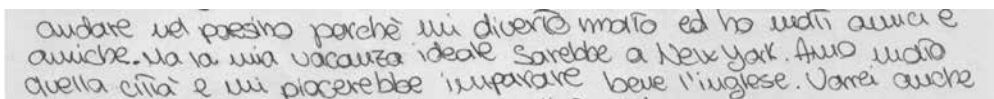


Fig. No. 14 – girl, 15 years

The last unfavourable element is a suffocating compactness. Letters and words are placed very close. The extreme condensation of the graphic signs builds a defensive barrier against the environment which is perceived as aggressive. It means that the user of this kind of compactness, refers only to himself, reducing the time used for thinking and becoming impulsive. In picture 14 there is too much black on the page which means that the linking points with the outside world are missing. There are no openings that provide the opportunity to compare them to others. The individual space is totally defended. It shows a high level of anxiety.¹⁴

Now let us consider the opposite way: spaced handwriting. Too much white in the page means a form of solitude. The level of the writing directs us towards the interpretation of autonomy, reflection, selection, abstraction, introspection, or, on the contrary, isolation, uncertainty, estrangement from reality, and inhibition.

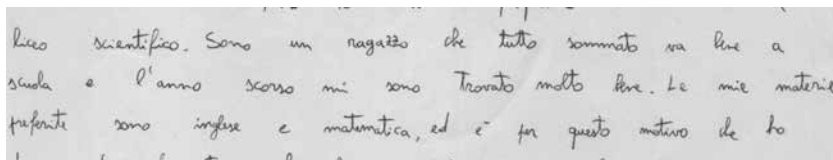


Fig. No. 15 – boy, 15 years

This is a good level of spaced handwriting. White prevails, without entering into the words that save their structure. It means autonomy, reflection, selection, abstraction, and introspection. Sometimes writings have irregular spaces in the page. The formation of spaces (or canals that form openings to the white parts) slows down the cohesion between the words that appear isolated from each other. The space that separates the words and goes up vertically through the canals is seen as an opening to the unconscious that a teenager, whose personality is still being formed and is not ready to manage.

14 Guaitoli – Orlandi, 137–9.

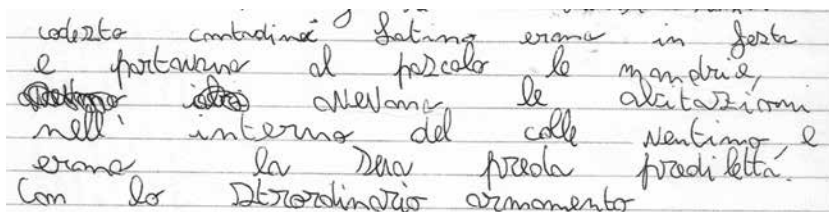


Fig. No. 16 – boy, 16 years

This picture shows a handwriting with a lot of irregular spaces. This boy needs his parents and teachers to help him overcome difficulties in relationships and integrate adequately with his environment. Sometimes it can also happen to see the presence of compactness and canals at the same time. It is a kind of contradiction. It means that the author of this writing behaves in two opposite ways: on one side he looks for others, on the other side he keeps them away.

The last important part about teenagers' handwriting concerns the movement. By movement, in graphology terms, we mean a psychomotor expression that answers to the transmission of the incentives produced by the mind. It is an instinctive and unconscious part of the writing process and is related to the smoothness with which the forms are written on the paper.¹⁵ The best thing to find in a teenager's handwriting is a well-managed and spontaneous movement. Such movement guarantees the ideal process towards maturity. However, it is very rare.

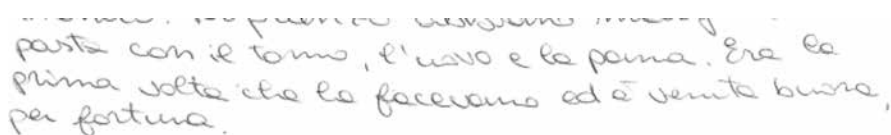


Fig. No. 17 – girl, 15 years

This is an example of well-managed and spontaneous movement. It belongs to a very brilliant girl who mixes spontaneity and reflection. Instead, there are the unfavourable elements of the movement. If it is

15 Colo – Pinon, 93–116.

too static, it means a difficulty to realize personal dreams, abandonment, and inhibitions. In Fig. No. 13 there is a too static movement with the letters and words looking fixed. This girl needs to think a lot of time before acting. There is no spontaneity in her behaviour.

In Fig. No. 12 the writing is too dynamic, with the form lacking structure. This indicated impulsivity and dependence on personal instincts. These two things are very dangerous for teenagers because they can drive them to transgressive experiences.

The examples above mentioned show what a graphologist really does at school. In collaboration with psycho-pedagogical team (working in most of the schools in Italy), he studies students' handwriting, having obtained previous parent permission, and discusses them with teachers so that they can find the better way to help students to learn. Learning is a very subtle process which depends not only on intellectual abilities, but also on the development of life skills.