

Writing in Style and in Health

By Nancy M. Lowe, MPT, CHT, CAE

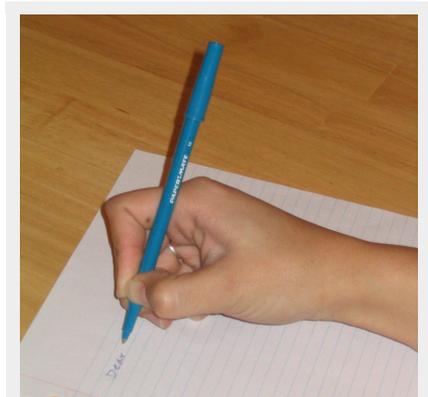
Do you remember those big, thick, chunky crayons from kindergarten? They had substance. They were fun. You could really get your hand around them. Do you ever wish you could still use them? Well, if you did, your bank might object to the thick, waxy magenta or chartreuse signatures on your checks. But today's ergonomic pens and pencils have some of the feel of those easy-to-hold crayons of childhood - and they're OK with the bank.

I never cared much about ergonomic pens until I injured my thumb cutting out too many construction paper shamrocks for our grade-school's St. Patrick's Day party. True, I deserved to be scolded for using the wrong scissors for the job. But I learned at that time to appreciate all kinds of things that make life easier on sore thumbs, including the large-barreled pens and pencils with the rubbery grips that are so easy to control. And using well-designed implements when you aren't hurting can keep healthy digits feeling fine.

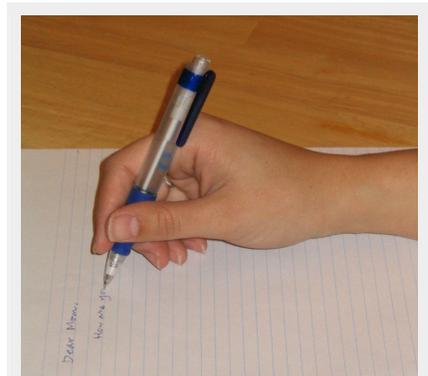
What's different about an ergonomic pen? It is usually thicker than a standard pen, making it easier for most of us to hold with less force from our hard-working hand muscles, and it should have a cushioned or rubberized grip that keeps it from slipping. In these ways it differs from a standard pen, which tends to promote forceful gripping because of its narrow and smooth barrel.

How do you choose a good pen, when one size and design will not fit all? I encourage you to try several kinds. Exploring a friend's kitchen drawer, I came across about six different styles of pens. Looking around an office you may find more than that. Try a coworker's Dr. Grip or PhD pen. These are two of the more common refillable ergonomic pens. Some newer models allow you to switch between pen, pencil and stylus. The cost is low enough that most people can afford to own one or two, but high enough that you're careful not to let them walk away. The size is comfortable for most average-sized hands.

Everyone is different, though. You may prefer a larger size. These are available in low to moderate price ranges. If you have a small hand you might like the disposable pens with smaller cushioned or rubberized barrels. Compare the shape and feel of the grips. Some are more triangular in shape, which prevents rotation and can add stability. Others are cylindrical, allowing slight give and flexibility. Some pens widen a bit near the tip, keeping your fingers from sliding down the



A standard pen may promote forceful gripping because of its smooth, narrow barrel.



A pen with a larger, cushioned barrel is more comfortable and easier for most people to hold.

barrel. Some are smoother, softer, or textured. And you don't need to pay a lot – "Freebie" promotional pens now come in several ergonomic styles and sizes, as do some reasonably priced disposable pens.



An alternate pen position can give certain hand muscles a break.



A bifurcated pen allows the weight of the hand to apply pressure through the pen.

There are a few unusual designs. One interesting style is bifurcated (sort of "Y" shaped), providing a place to rest the index finger while you stabilize the pen lightly between index and middle fingers as well as between thumb and index. The weight of the hand can provide direct downward pressure into the pen.

Whichever implement you choose, make sure your writing surface is at a comfortable height. This is usually about 2 or 3 inches higher than elbow level. Tilting the writing surface slightly toward you can help keep your neck comfortable as well. Grip the pen or pencil lightly. Experiment with varying hand positions to give the muscles a break. Try holding the pen between index and middle fingers. If your wrist is fairly straight and comfortable when you write, while your fingers are gently curved and relatively relaxed, you're likely to do pretty well.

And, of course, be sure to take frequent breaks or change tasks to avoid the discomfort that can come from any sustained or repetitive activities.

As you write with the pens and pencils you've selected to fit you best, remember the fun of the chunky kindergarten crayons. You may even decide to try coloring – I mean writing - outside the lines. Ergonomically, of course.

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