

# Handwritten vs typed essay exams: Differences in Process and Product



Jessie Paterson, School of Divinity  
Nora Mogey, Institute for Academic Development  
The University of Edinburgh



Students in School of Divinity  
and the choice they made  
for their examination

	Dec 2010	May 2011	Dec 2011
Type	13 (9.4%)	11 (8.6%)	??
Hand	125	117	Class total 63

When typing I tend to type fast and have to go back and correct the inevitable mistakes

I have always written exam essays by hand; it's what I am used to and what I expect

Comfort with what's familiar

Typing speed

Anticipated differences in writing

Revision of finished work

Concentration

With the computer it is easier to have an overview and to organise the structure

I will feel more inclined to re-read my work on computer

I'm not sure whether using a computer would actually hinder my ability to write fluently and condense what I mean, as I would be constantly going back over my work and rewording parts of it

My hand won't hurt as much on a computer

# Practice Exam

Two questions, no choice

Everyone does question 'A' first, then 'B'

Half the class type first

Half the class type second

Surveys & focus groups to collect opinions

Essays marked and feedback provided

2 x £50 prizes as an incentive to really try hard !

# Student reflections

Would you ever consider using a computer to word process an essay type exam?

		AFTER		Total
		No	Yes	
BEFORE	No	4	2	<b>6 (17%)</b>
	Perhaps	2	13	<b>15 (42%)</b>
	Yes	2	13	<b>15 (42%)</b>
Total		<b>8 (22%)</b>	<b>28 (78%)</b>	<b>36</b>

Note that some students totally changed their minds

# Student reflections

Would you ever consider using a computer to word process an essay type exam?

**Yes > No**

**I feel more comfortable writing  
in an exam situation**

**I preferred the hand written  
exam**

**No > Yes**


**I learnt that using a computer is  
much more productive as it is  
more flexible.**

**I'm quicker and I use a better  
vocabulary when I type**

# Student reflections

Would you ever consider using a computer to word process an essay type exam?

Students who changed their minds : Perhaps > Yes ( 13 / 36 )



I also find it helps by just appearing more structured and less messy than my hand-written exams.

I think I may be willing to change and improve sentences more.

I feel that I am quicker at writing on the computer, and sometimes more articulate.

# Student reflections

I think I would become distracted by the editing of the structure possible on a computer. I would also be prone to deleting more of my writing so would end up with less written work on the topic. Although it may be more accurate, it is a risk that is probably not worth taking.

I felt more confident using the computer since that is what I am used to, possibly over confident, because I felt I was much more careful with the handwritten exam. I think that the main difference in my approach was in my planning. I wrote more words on the computer, probably too many, but had no time to cut down because of my haphazard way of just writing and changing things as I go along.



# Does planning help? ... Yes !

Handwritten I had thought about it before I started so I knew where the essay was going, but less thought was involved in the computer version.

When typing you write more, so you say more things that might not actually be necessary.

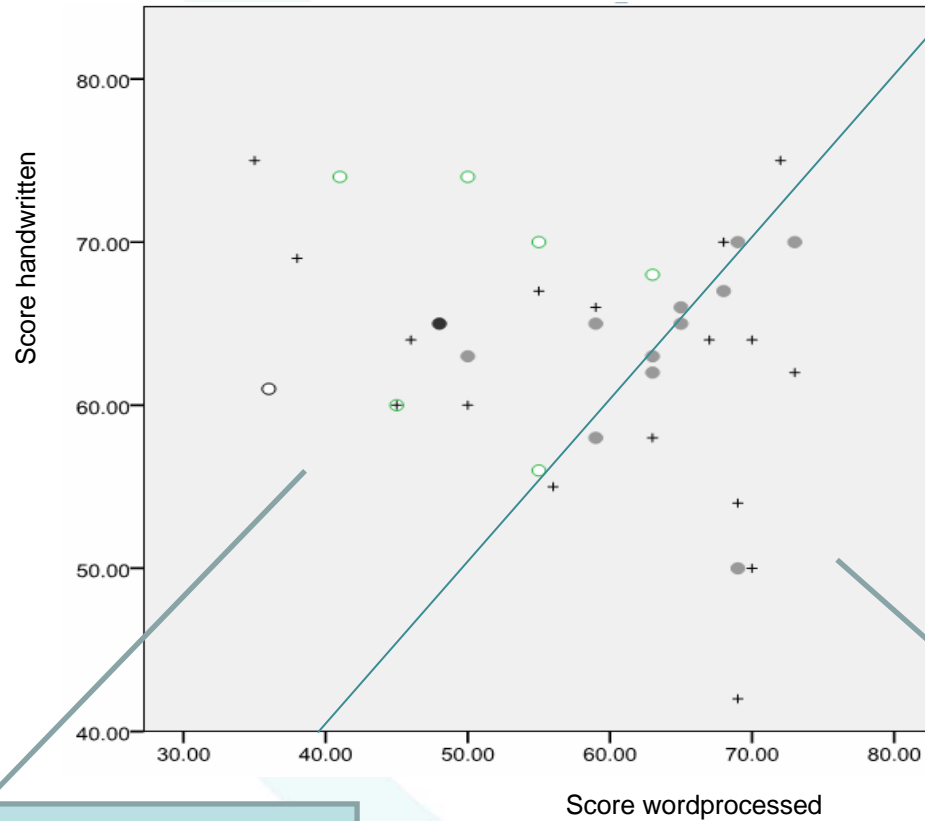
The handwritten version will be better structured.

# Does planning help? ... No!

Although the handwritten version is better planned, then you tend to stick to that plan, its not really changed. The typed version develops much more as it goes.

When handwriting, I feel that I am forced to approach the task with linear and sequential thinking, whereas with the ability to type, I am able to come to the task with a more scattergun approach.

# Does planning help ? No convincing info!



I made a more detailed plan when using pen & paper

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- + Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Students who plan lots when handwriting should get better marks when handwriting and hence would appear in this area.

Students who plan more when typing should get better marks when typing and hence would appear in this area.

# How important is appearance?

It's a good feeling to know that with typing I am able to insert a thought seamlessly into what I have previously written. It can be embarrassing to do so with handwriting, inserting all sorts of asterisks and arrows pointing to different notes.

I am familiar with gauging my progress in an exam by the number of pages I have written and I did not have the ability to do this with the computer.

The computer editing opportunities allowed me to work longer and make revisions that I would not otherwise have done.

# Is appearance important for tutors?

It's faster and it gives you the option of editing your work.

However, I feel that a tutor reads typed and handwritten answers differently, instinctively expecting more lucidity from a typed page. Because of this it seems that handwriting is advantageous, despite the benefits of typing.

Handwritten text from a document, showing cursive script and some corrections.

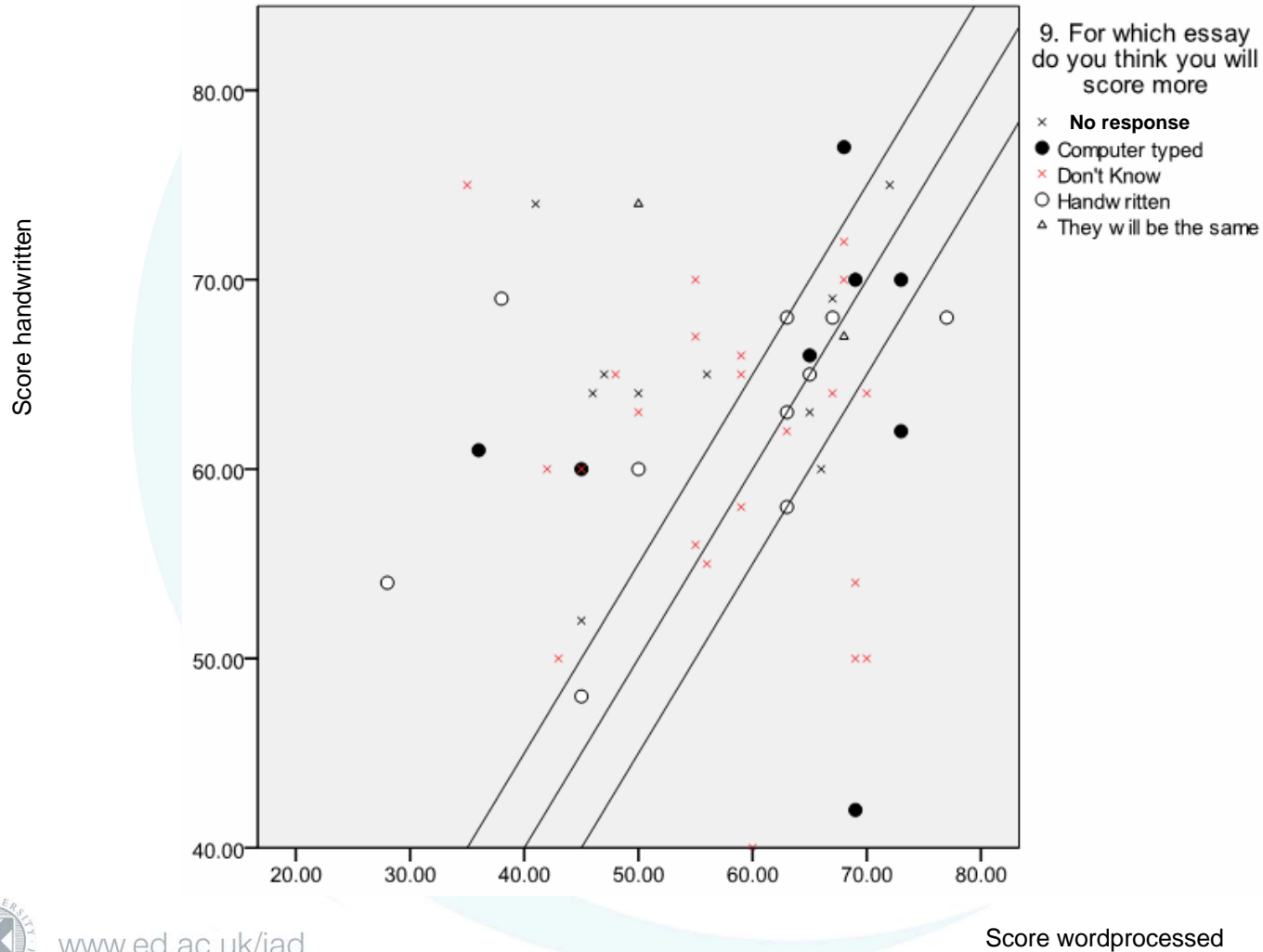
Page 4 of a typed document, likely a legal opinion, with a red handwritten note 'Good!' in the left margin.

Going into this experience, my sense was that my personal strengths were with handwriting the exam and this experience confirmed this to me

Going into this experience, *my* sense was that my personal strengths were with typing the exam and this experience confirmed this to me

I'm not very good at computers and expected to hate it, but I felt much more relaxed and will probably type in the exam.

# Predicted performance



# So what happened in the exam?

“Just a quick email to say what a massive difference it made being able to sit my exam by laptop. I reckon it made about 15% difference!”

	Dec 2010	May 2011	Dec 2011
Type	13 (9.4%)	11 (8.6%)	11 (18.3%)
Hand	125	117	49

### Choice compared to best mark from practice exam

		Score in Practice	
		Hand better	Typed Better
Exam Mode	Handwrite	30	11
	Type	7	4

### Choice compared to viewpoint after practice exam

		Would you consider typing?			Mean score
		Yes	No	Missing	
Exam Mode	Handwrite	23	8	18	59%
	Type	8	0	3	62%

Of the 11 who typed, 6 had written notes by hand in their exam book, 5 had nothing

Thank you for listening

But with special thanks to

HEA, Philosophical and Religious Studies subject centre

Prof. John Cowan

Find out more

Monday 23 April, University of Edinburgh

“Exams make our hands sore”

Free! (Thanks to HEA)

<http://tinyurl.com/76u67um>

Nora.mogey@ed.ac.uk

Jessie.Paterson@ed.ac.uk