

# The Remote Encoding Center

Where bad addresses go to get better

**L**etter carriers know how hard it can be to read poorly written addresses on the mail, but for one group of postal workers, it's their job to stare at—and decipher—these puzzles for their entire shift, every day.

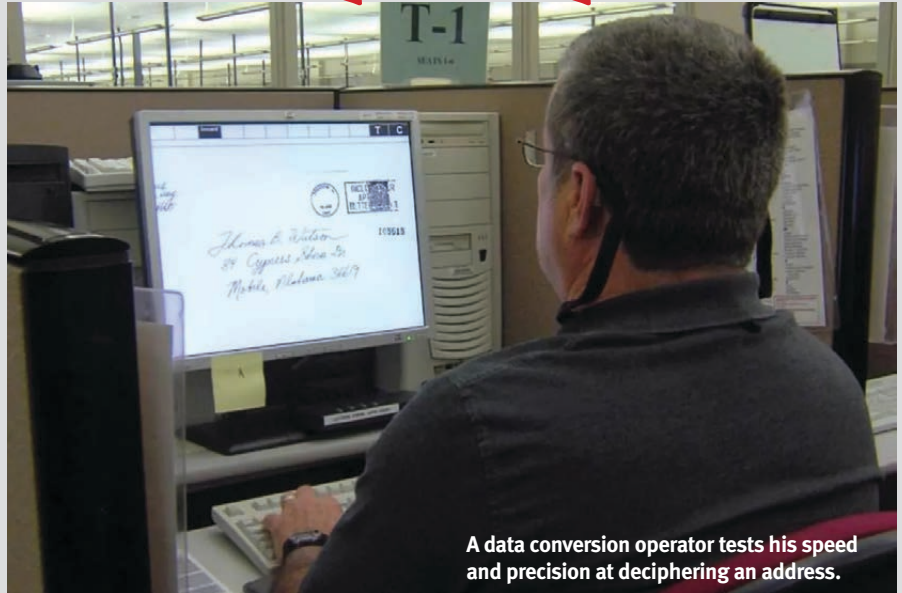
In Salt Lake City, UT, at the Postal Service's Remote Encoding Center (REC), a cavernous 75,000 square-foot building, shifts of hundreds of data conversion operators (DCOs), also known as "keyers," sit in front of computer screens in silence 24 hours a day, seven days a week, fixing the addresses to help the mail go where it was intended.

Established in 1994, the Salt Lake City REC was the first of 55 similar facilities across the country. At one time, the RECs employed about 32,000 keyers, but over the years, computers have gotten much better at recognizing human handwriting and the need for so many facilities diminished. Today, the one in Salt Lake City remains the last still in operation, employing about 870 keyers. But don't write the REC off just yet; it's in the process of hiring 100 more keyers.

The process works as follows: An image of the address taken by a robot that couldn't read it at a processing facility is electronically sent to the REC. A keyer deciphers it and types in computer codes that send it to a letter carrier somewhere to be delivered. The REC receives an average of 3 million images of mail each day from all over the United States and its territories, including Puerto Rico and Guam. A keyer processes an average of 879 images an hour.

"With the machine getting the easier mail to read, the keyers were left with images that took a little more time to decipher," REC Manager Barbara Batin said.

"Using the human intelligence of the data conversion operator, more images can be resolved to the finest depth of



A data conversion operator tests his speed and precision at deciphering an address.

sort, allowing more of your letters and flats, where applicable, to be put into delivery point sequence," Batin added. "Customer service units can use the keying results to create dynamic routes for delivering packages. The REC also processes customs declarations so our customers' packages can leave the country. We have also been involved in revenue protection efforts and image tagging for artificial intelligence."

The amount of mail images is dropping—it averaged 4.7 million images per day last year—as the computers get better at deciphering handwriting. However, some handwriting can still fool the computer.

"N's can be R's and H's can be N's," Amber Morris, a veteran employee of the REC, told Salt Lake City NBC affiliate KSL-TV a few years ago. She said that she had seen it all: "Scribbles, chicken scratches."

While illegible handwriting can be a problem, it's not the only one. Some of it is simple human error that the computers can't figure out, such as when people put the address in the wrong order. People from overseas often aren't familiar with USPS's format,

and might put it out of order, as, for example:

**City, state, ZIP Code  
Person's name  
Residence number and street**

Another error is when the address is printed, but the information runs to the wrong line:

**John Smith 123  
45 Main Street New Y  
ork, NY, 222  
22**

But some addresses aren't able to be deciphered because they're missing necessary information, such as a child addressing an envelope to "Grandma." One keyer saw the address, "The yellow house across from the gas station and next to the drugstore." But rather than send it back to the processing plant as a dead letter, since it had a ZIP code, the keyer sent it along to that station, thinking that someone there might be able to figure out the address from the physical description.

The keyers must be able to type at least 32 words per minute and be able to process one poorly written address every 4.1 seconds. They're tested twice



weekly on speed and accuracy. After passing the probationary period, they are allowed to listen to audiobooks, podcasts or music, provided that they use earphones to maintain the silence of the work area.

The DCO craft is represented by the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). The REC operates around the clock, with shifts for keyers starting every 15 minutes throughout the 24-hour period. Career keyers bid on their shifts the same way letter carriers bid on their routes.

“Our highest period for keyers is after noon with our staffing dipping its lowest at 4 a.m.,” Batin said.



The Remote Encoding Center in Salt Lake City, UT

Working at the REC is not for everyone, as it can be monotonous and not very social, but many employees work there for decades, often saying they like not having to work with customers.

Few other countries use RECs. Batin said that representatives from Canada Post once visited to learn the method and decided that it wasn't for them. Instead, Canada Post decided

to require customers to print their addresses.

She doubts that USPS will do that. She also says that she thinks USPS's customers appreciate something that is handwritten. “It's Grandma's letter that was sent to little Billy,” Batin said, “and maybe Grandma, in a couple of years, isn't around anymore, and to have a handwritten letter means more than something that was typed.” **PR**

## Is handwriting getting worse?

Since 2013, the requirement to learn cursive has been left out of core standards for many states' elementary school programs. As cursive is taught less and typing and swiping on phones increases, many people believe that handwriting is getting worse.

Some are doing what they can to keep the art alive. Jan. 23 is National Handwriting Day (it's based on John Hancock's birthday) sponsored by a writing-instrument trade group to remind Americans of the joy of penmanship.

Studies have shown that students who are taught both script and print writing do better on reading tests, and that cursive writing uses a unique part of the brain.

But others tell us that handwriting is a fluid art and doesn't have to be

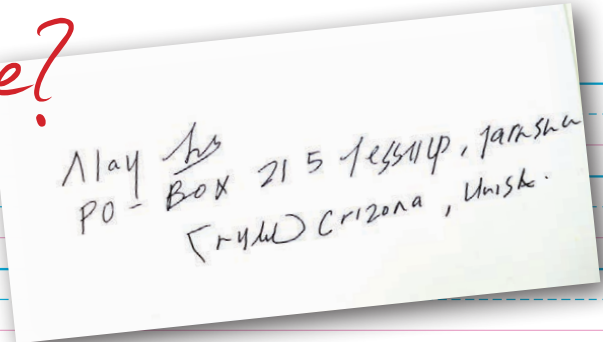
thought of as synonymous with cursive.

Marjorie Wall Hofer, a career coach, spent years studying handwriting and comparing it from one generation to another. What she found was that, by and large, handwriting has adapted over time.

“The Silent Generation are those born between 1924 and 1945,” she said. “This group of adults has a distinctive handwriting style [and] use exclusively cursive writing.”

As the generations move forward, cursive and print start to be combined until Generation Y or Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996.

“[T]heir writing is marked exclusively by printing,” Wall Hofer said.



“Millennials, though still young, showcase a print style different than any of the other [generations]: not a hint of cursive, and larger spaces than ever.”

Whether handwriting is getting worse or is simply decreasing its use of cursive, it's a good thing that Postal Service computers are constantly improving. No matter what the handwriting looks like, the computers—and remote encoding center keyers—will have to adapt to make sure the mail continues to go where it's supposed to. **PR**