

What Is Writing?

Writing, writing, it is everywhere, yet few have much to say about it, few know about it. Writing is an inherently difficult topic because discussion of it takes place by means of the very medium being discussed. As fish who know nothing of water, scholars who spend their lives studying different traditions of literature, and of writing, rarely reflect on the actual technology that makes their study possible: how it works, where it came from, and what relation it bears to other formal systems of thought.

Writing is magical, mysterious, aggressive, dangerous, not to be trifled with. Although it takes many forms, it is always a technology of explosive force, a cultural artifact based not in nature (whose rules we did not create) but sprung from the human mind. Human groups who possess writing triumph over those who do not, without exception and swiftly. If humans had existed a year, writing was invented not even yesterday, but some time this afternoon, as far as we know. Writing cast a veil across the human past, separating the million human years that came before from the turbulent last five thousand years. In the brief period since the discovery in Sumer around 3400 BC of the phonetic principle in graphic representation – when conventional markings first represented sounds of the human voice – the cultures encoded in this and subsequent related traditions of writing have changed human life forever.

Writing is the most important technology in the history of the human species, except how to make a fire. Writing is the lens through which literate peoples see the world, feel the world, hate the world, love the world, defy the world, and imagine change. What is writing that, like the lens you never see, creates the world? The difficult topic is muddled and mixed up with other things that have their own life – religion, artistic expression, speech, and human thought.

The Magic, Romance, and Danger of Writing

The holy Quran, encoded in the holy, even divine, script that the prophet himself used, is a sacred document that can never be changed or corrected or amended or mutilated or abused or transliterated into Roman characters: That would be an offense to God and punishable by death. Thus a book can be a fetish, as when one swears when placing a hand on a Bible or Quran: If the swearer is foresworn, he will suffer evil consequences. The text of the sacred Quran justifies mass murder, according to some interpretations, but you can never be sure because of the surprising obscurity of the wholly phonetic Arabic script, its distance from speech. What does it really say? The Jewish religion similarly depends on written documents in whose holy, magical, emotive symbols cabbalists discover secrets of the universe. Fortunately, the rabbi ("my master") can explicate textual obscurities to the ignorant, the less learned, as do the wise mullahs to the faithful.

Ancient Egyptian civilization, too, was bound to the forms and expectations of hieroglyphic writing to an extraordinary degree. The conventions of hieroglyphic writing influenced the posture of statues and the shapes and layout of temples, and, in the revelator Akhenaten's sacred city of Akhetaten ("Horizon of the Aten," near the modern village of Amarna), the design of the whole city described the form of the hieroglyph for "horizon," over which the sun god daily rose. Egyptian writing could also make one live forever, a signal advantage.

Mao Zedong (1893–1976), who pretended to hate the past, hoped to replace the obscurantist Chinese system of writing with an alphabet, but even his unlimited power could not accomplish the change. To change the writing would change the sacred ancient culture that the Chinese adore, which the mysterious and beautiful writing encodes. By changing the writing, one loses everything. That was precisely the intention of Kemal Atatürk when, in the 1920s, he outlawed the traditional Arabic script and ordered that Roman script now encode the Turkish language – thus did he break with the corrupt and ruinous past of the Ottoman sultans.

Jesus wrote in the sand (John 8), but in stark wisdom left nothing behind for followers to kill themselves over. They found other reasons. He must have understood how writing, and writings, can lead to fanaticism, social division, oppression, and the tyranny of the mad and the intolerant over the common man. So great is the power of writing.

We would like to know why writing has such exaggerated effects on human life and where it gets its power. The common definition of civilization as

“human life in cities in the presence of writing” may be a historical judgment, but it is also a speculation on the superiority of a cultural practice that symbolizes human thought and carries it beyond the place and time of its origin. Writing enjoys intimate affection with the human faculty to create symbols, when one thing stands for another. Without this faculty, we would not be human. The relationship between the sounds of human speech and graphic material symbols that represent such sounds in lexicographic writing is a central problem.

A Definition of Writing

Writing is hard to see because it governs our thoughts, and hard to talk about because of the lack of consistent names for real categories. We know that writing is there to be read, but are not sure what we mean by “writing,” so that it is fashionable in criticism to “read” works of art or to “read” Greek culture or manners of dress or almost anything, as if in understanding a work of art or a building or a social practice we are doing the same thing as when we read a text. Writing has been defined time and again, always in different ways, but let us say that writing is *a system of markings with a conventional reference that communicates information*, like the signs on this page. Where does such a definition take us?

Because writing is made up of markings it is material (not spiritual or emotional or mental). The meaning of such markings, their conventional reference, we might say their intellectual dimension, never comes from nature, as does the human faculty for symbolization and speech, nor from God (as many have believed), but from man. The elements of writing, the markings, are related in an organized way, in a conventional way, in order to tell the reader something, to communicate with the reader. Where there is writing there is a reader who understands the system of conventions, even if the reader is God or a god (as often).

Change and Evolution in Systems of Writing

General principles appear to govern how any writing can work, as they appear to underlie the formation of speech. The possibilities of organization are limited and in some way predetermined. Hence, the history of writing is

a history of the discovery of these principles, drawn in intelligible patterns. Because systems of writing are conventional and exist by agreement rather than coming from nature or God, there is no right or wrong to how a system imparts its meanings. Systems of writing serve different purposes for different peoples at different times. It is wrong to imagine that the Bronze Age Mycenaean Greeks would have been better off with the later Greek alphabet or with Chinese writing or anything else. Linear B did what it was called to do, to keep economic accounts in a palace-centered redistributive economy, and no one required more.

Nonetheless, because the history of writing is a history of discovery, we are tempted to compare writing systems as if they were in a competition for greatness and to say, for example, that the Greek alphabet is superior to Japanese writing, so complex that less than a dozen non-Japanese in the United States of America could read it when the Imperial Japanese Navy struck on December 7, 1941. Within the historical competition between human groups and the struggle for political and cultural dominion such comparisons are probably justified and fairly belong to an evaluation of the past. The Greek alphabet in its Roman form has in three thousand years become the dominant writing system by far, whereas Japanese writing remains confined to a small archipelago. Apologists for scripts unrelated to the Greek alphabet like to point out that it was not so much the Roman script as Western political power behind the script that brought the alphabet's hegemony, as if the script did not itself make possible (though not inevitable) such power.

Because among the users of any writing the system will satisfy the needs placed upon it, we cannot expect to find improvement or radical change within a developed lexigraphic writing system except in its earliest stages of formation. Both Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs appear to undergo evolution in the several hundred years between the first clear evidence of phoneticization, c.3400–3200 BC, and the creation of texts that reflect grammar and syntax, c.2700 BC; hundreds of years more must pass before we find extended texts. We must, of course, depend on evidence from haphazard finds. In the Eastern civilizations of the ancient world, it was not so much that the scribes who developed the first complex lexigraphic systems served the power elite as that they themselves were that elite; once their systems were in place, they could hardly have imagined, let alone desired, developments that would simplify their systems and undermine their power, or even make them irrelevant in the scheme of things. The Egyptian schoolbook taught that one should

Be a scribe! . . .
You are one who sits grandly in your house;
your servants answer speedily;
beer is poured copiously;
all who see you rejoice in good cheer.
Happy is the heart of him who writes;
he is young each day.

from Papyrus Lansing, c.1000 BC, a schoolbook
(Lichtheim 1976: 173–74)

Yes, for

The scribe, whatever his place at the Residence [pharaoh's court],
he cannot be poor in it.

from *Satire on the Trades* (or *Instructions of Dua-Khety*), c.1800 BC

The scribe is wealthy and content and always in the ancient world male (but some women, especially in Rome, could read and write). Change within developed systems of writing, where it is found, is a kind of tinkering, and then, ordinarily, toward greater complexity and obscurity, more of the scribal art. Egyptian hieroglyphics managed with about 700 signs for most of its history, but, in a quirky development of the self-conscious Ptolemaic period (323–30 BC), increased its repertory to 5,000 signs. Attempts to “improve” a system of writing threaten the conventional basis by which it exists and diminish its intelligibility so that everything worsens.

For example, many have complained about the famously inept – that is, nonphonetic – English or French spellings. The American Philological Association was founded in 1869 to study the world's languages; it boldly encouraged spelling reforms much in the air in the late nineteenth century by publishing its proceedings in a reformed spelling. Today, they can scarcely be read. When Mao Zedong found he could not impose the Roman script, in the interests of the people he simplified the bizarrely intricate Chinese writing by omitting strokes from many characters to improve readability. He thereby rendered Chinese writing unintelligible to Chinese living in Taiwan, San Francisco, and Southeast Asia, whose traditional Chinese characters are now unreadable on the mainland.

Major changes in the structure of writing systems took place when the idea of writing passed from one people to another, always foreign people. Not bound by sacred tradition and the interests of a social class and intellectual elite, illiterate foreigners could make important changes. In the changes

made in this way we can speak of the evolution of writing, of a process proceeding from less able to more able systems of writing.

Writing Is Material

Because writing has a material basis it can be created and destroyed, as book-burners throughout history understand. In the ancient Near East the origin of this life-transforming technology seems to be connected in some way with the use of material *objets*, abstract “counters” or tokens made of clay that represented commodities, according to a famous argument by Denise Schmandt-Besserat. One carried such material, tangible things in a pouch or on a string around the neck or dropped them accidentally on the ground or exchanged them during a transaction or wrapped them up in a hollow ball of clay, to preserve details of a commercial transaction. After five thousand years of such token use in the Near East, between c.8000 and c.3000 BC, the abstract shapes of some portable material tokens seem to have become characters in the first lexigraphic writing (see Chapter 3).

Even such obsolete systems of communication based on writing as semaphore require material flags moving in someone’s hands. Morse code seems immaterial. Consisting of an ON/OFF digital mode, it is the only digital-modulation mode that humans can understand without a computer. Nonetheless, messages transmitted by Morse code are directly transferred into written documents. As a property protected by law, writing in cyberspace is in an awkward position, because the relationship of cyberspace to the material world is not clear, and we are unsure how laws of copyright apply to a medium you cannot control. The power of hardcopy, whose doom many predicted, remains strong in comparison to electronic documents because the tangible hardcopy is not endlessly permutable and easy to lose. Contracts, wills, and certificates of marriage, anything having to do with money, remain in hardcopy. Even as pixels on a computer screen, even when floating in cyberspace, writing retains its material basis.

Speech and Writing

In seeking a definition of writing, scholars sometimes take account of writing’s materiality but nonetheless emphasize writing as a *secondary*

representation of the primary speech. The influential L. Bloomfield, in a book called *Language* (1933), wrote that “writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks” (Bloomfield 1933: 21). By “language” he must mean “speech,” which writing obviously is not. But is not writing really a language in its own right?

The distinguished Mayanist Michael Coe, writing on progress in the decipherment of Maya glyphs, notes that “writing is *speech put in visible form* in such a way that any reader instructed in its conventions can reconstruct the vocal message. All linguists are agreed on this, and have been for a long time” (Coe 1992: 13, my italics). Coe agrees with Bloomfield, but sees that language and speech are different things. By having “visible form” writing must be material, but “vocal message” nonetheless lies at the heart of the definition.

A. Parpola, the distinguished scholar of the Indus Valley writing, calls writing “a visual communication system based on the representation of spoken language by conventional marks of some durability” (Parpola 1994: 29). Is Braille a “visible communication system”? Certainly it is writing. Parpola’s “durability” implies materiality, but still writing represents “spoken language.”

The great Assyriologist and historian of writing I. J. Gelb thought along similar lines, declaring that “writing is *written language* . . . I agree entirely with the linguists who believe that fully developed writing became a device for expressing linguistic elements by means of visible marks” (Gelb 1963: 13). Because in Gelb’s view the phonographic element, “a device for expressing linguistic elements,” is the essence of “fully developed writing,” or “full writing,” the Greek alphabet, beyond which the art of writing has not progressed, came at the apex of a long development. The Greek alphabet is even the *telos*, the immanent goal, toward which “writing” has always striven, because in the Greek alphabet the phonographic element is overriding.

P. L. Daniels, in his and P. T. Bright’s useful book *The World’s Writing Systems*, thinks that “writing is defined as *a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer*” (Daniels and Bright 1996: 3, original italics). By this definition he agrees that writing is bound up with speech (an utterance) and, in company with other scholars, excludes from “writing” communication by means of symbols or representations not couched in a specific linguistic form. However, in his insistence on recovering an utterance “more or less exactly” Daniels’s surprising formulation would exclude all forms of writing up to the Greek alphabet, and even, strictly speaking, the Greek alphabet itself, because

no writing before or including it permitted the recovery of an original utterance “more or less exactly.” When such recovery took place in actual usage it did so on the basis of a shared language between writer and reader and shared expectations based on the context of the message, not on the basis of the phonetic and semantic information encoded in the script.

Such understandings of writing as being a secondary representation of the primary speech are always re-expressions of F. Saussure’s famous dictum: “A language and its written form constitutes two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former” (Saussure [1922] 1983: 24). Saussure only echoed Aristotle’s formulation: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words” (Aristotle, *de Interpretatione* 1.1).

First comes “language,” then comes its “written form,” which depends on “language.” Yet in its dependence on a material basis, writing is fundamentally unlike speech, which is never tangible. The relationship between written form and speech is more complicated than such commentators believe.

Writing is a technology with a material basis, while speech is never a technology and never material but an essentially human aptitude. If dolphins could speak, they would be humans with an odd-shaped nose. In our own definition that writing is *a system of markings with a conventional reference that communicates information*, we do not refer to speech, language, or utterance. In the definitions of commentators quoted above, the words “speech” and “language” are treated interchangeably and in the clumsy way we complained about earlier. How writing functions will depend on the innate faculty of humans to communicate by means of symbols. A *language* is any system of symbols that serves this innate faculty to communicate through symbols: *speech* is one such system of symbols, *writing* is another (see **diagram opposite title page**).