

# Early Writing

The Flood Tablet. The Gilgamesh Tablet. Library of Ashurbanipal.

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The alluvial plains of southern Mesopotamia in the latter half of the fourth millennium B.C. witnessed an immense expansion in the number of populated sites. Scholars still debate the reasons for this population increase, which seems too large to be explained simply by normal growth. One site, the city of Uruk, surpassed all others as an urban center surrounded by a group of secondary settlements. It covered approximately 250 hectares, or .96 square miles, and has been called “the first city in world history.” **The site was dominated by large temple estates whose need for accounting and disbursing of revenues led to the recording of economic data on clay tablets.** The city was ruled by a man depicted in art with many religious functions. He is often called a “priest-king.” Underneath this office was a stratified society in which certain professions were held in high esteem. One of the earliest written texts from Uruk provides a list of 120 officials including the leader of the city, leader of the law, leader of the plow, and leader of the lambs, as well as specialist terms for priests, metalworkers, potters, and others.

Spar, Ira. “The Origins of Writing.” In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wrtg/hd\\_wrtg.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wrtg/hd_wrtg.htm) (October 2004)

True to form, this cuneiform tablet, c. 2310, contains the payment of food and drink to messengers.

From the Nathaniel Terry Bacon Papers, Adams Library Special Collections.

While the history of writing nearly always begins with the understanding that early writing was mainly used for accounting, taxes and inventorying, and therefore not literary, *Gilgamesh* is an epic poem written in the earliest writing system.

**The Flood Tablet/The Gilgamesh Tablet**

British Museum. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

The story goes that Thamus said much to Theuth, both for and against each art, which it would take too long to repeat. But when they came to writing, Theuth said: "O King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom." Thamus, however, replied: "O most expert Theuth, one man can give birth to the elements of an art, but only another can judge how they can benefit or harm those who will use them. And now, since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are.

In fact, it will **introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own.** You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so.

Hesiod is considered the bridge between oral poetry and written prose, a first Greek *author*.

...the technology of writing, in particularly that of the alphabetic writing of ancient Greece, freed the human mind from the arduous tasks of memorization necessary to store knowledge gained through natural speech. At the same time it opened the door to more original analytical thought, which could be stored by artificial means in a permanent coded system of communication, thereby changing the very nature of human consciousness itself.

Senner, Wayne M. *The Origins of Writing*. 1st paperback ed., University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

Nursery rhymes and nonsense verses are another example of material easily remembered because of its rhymes and meters but limited in content by its form. Nursery rhymes serve an important role in an oral society. They prepare children for the more arduous task of memorizing more meaningful and lengthier material. Nursery rhymes are the ABC's of an oral culture.

Logan, Robert K. *The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization*. St. Martin's Press, 1986.

# Some Concerns about Pens, Pencils & Paper

8<sup>th</sup> Century Abbot of Jarrow, riddle about pens

In kind simple am I, nor gain from anywhere wisdom,  
But now each man of wisdom always traces my footsteps,  
Habiting now broad earth, high heav'n I formerly wandered.  
Though I am seen to be white, I leave black traces behind me.

Like all new inventions, the steel pen was not greatly favoured at first. It scratched too much, and still lacked the required flexibility. Many writers using it for the first time complained about its performance. But the years passed and as techniques improved, so did the quality of the pen.

Whalley, Joyce Irene. *Writing Implements and Accessories: From the Roman Stylus to the Typewriter*. Gale Research, 1975.

The Quill trade, which has long been unjustifiably harassed, and interfered with by the inroads of foreign growers, whose produce is poured forth by every northern port, with the same pestilent activity which inundated the land of yore with their hordes of barbarous invaders, - The quill trade, which is without exception the oldest branch of British industry, has received its death-blow, - that blow has been death by a domestic hand, - and the instruments "of devilish enginery" by which it has been perpetrated, is the invention of METALLIC pens! - The effects, we shall give in the words of the sufferers themselves, transcribed from a petition about to be presented by the hon. member for Worcester.

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library. "Pencil made by Henry D. Thoreau." The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1827 - 1862. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/40f7c3b0-7a59-0132-6cf1-58d385a7b928>

When the pencil with its own built-in eraser came on the scene, some teachers wanted to ban it from the classroom, arguing that students would do better, more premeditated writing if they didn't have the option of erasing and revising. The anti-eraser group argued that if the technology makes error correction easy, students will make more errors. Other teachers feared the impact of erasers not just on student cognition, but on student health as well: children might chew on the ends of the new eraser-equipped pencils even more than they already chewed on their all-wood pencils.

Baron, Dennis E.. *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution*, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2009.

Our fascination with handwriting as an outward expression of personality, or disorder, is exemplified in collecting autographs (whether friends of celebrities) and graphology.

Craig, Clara E. *The Beginnings of Reading and Writing in the Rhode Island Normal School*. c. 1919

Autograph Book (1924 -1927), Doris J. Steele, Class of 1926.

Sometimes tools for writing became metaphor for thinking itself.

Memory and sense of self was described in essayist Thomas De Quincy's, "The palimpsest of the human brain." Palimpsests are manuscripts that are written over an older text, which has been scraped off the vellum. Often you can still see the old text through the new. By comparing the layering of old and new ideas found on a palimpsest to memory in the brain, the practicality of vellum is linked with thinking.

Freud, similarly, compared a "Mystic Writing Pad" to memory imprinting on the brain, continuing writing as analogy for thinking, and the impermanency akin to dreaming.

# A Note on Reading & Writing

While many believe *literacy* to mean both reading and writing, history has shown us that this was not always the case. Many scribes and monks, they were not always able to read the Latin and Greek texts they copied.

The social and economic environment that supported the printing press's enormous success also supported more texts printed in more languages, people's own vernacular. This shift began to democratize reading and writing and it was the efficiency with which printing spread text that brought the dramatic increased literacy to Europe.

Encyclopedias and dictionaries flourished throughout the Renaissance, and indexes and tables of content were introduced, now that page numbers corresponded to the same content from copy to copy.

At the cusp of the Enlightenment the idea that written ideas had value and the author had rights was further developed with the first modern copyright law:

One beneficiary of the increasing rationalization of the publishing industry was the author. In 1709 Britain passed the first modern copyright law. It recognized that manuscript was a valuable commodity which the author had ultimate rights.

Fabre, Maurice. *A History of Communications*. 1st ed., Hawthorn Books, 1964.

Swift's *Battle of the Books* satirizes argument between *modern* and *ancient* learning and understanding. Though the debate stems from how each side conducts their work, it is really about how to understand and use history while advancing thought. More than any one tool, it was the sharing of ideas that shaped this time.

And, though print was "rationalizing" the way information was distributed and influencing how people thought about describing the world around them, they still wrote their works by hand and sent manuscripts to the printer.

# Typing

Typewriter on loan from Professor Elisa Miller.

Nietzsche wrote, “Our writing instruments are also working on our thoughts.” In 2012 his work was analyzed and researchers found that his writing did change when he switched from writing to typing – a change made necessary by blindness. A shift in themes was identified through word-frequency analysis before and after he switched to using a writing-ball.

Though Mark Twain claimed *Tom Sawyer* (1876) to be the first typewritten novel, it was actually *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). He, however, did not type it. A typist, name lost to history, copied his hand-written manuscript.

His letters to his brothers, and then the Remington Company, show his initial interest in using a typewriter, and frustration with learning a new way to write.

Undoubtedly, its efficiency in affairs has been the immediate cause of its popularity; but, unfortunately, business has too largely dictated its construction, and given it the character of a mere time-saver and makeshift. In literature its use is even now hardly more than an afterthought, and its structure is essentially different from what it would have been had literature first discovered its merits. Is it not a little curious, when we reflect upon it, that a machine which is beginning to supplement the labors of clergymen, lecturers, and contributors to the magazines should continue to be constructed almost entirely in accordance with the demands of business? Does it seem reasonable that the number of characters, the marks of punctuation, the entire typographical capacity of that piece of mechanism to which, directly or indirectly, the man of science confides his conclusions, should be prescribed by the flour merchant and the dealer in all kinds of property except manuscripts?

“Being a Typewriter,” *Atlantic Monthly* (Dec. 1895)

In time, the typewriter became analogous with *writer*. This book on Steinbeck’s writing style uses Typewriter to mean his very writing style, while never talking about the typewriter directly.

# Electricity!

"Then there is electricity,—the demon, the angel, the mighty physical power, the all-pervading intelligence!" exclaimed Clifford. "Is that a humbug, too? Is it a fact—or have I dreamt it—that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time? Rather, the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence! Or, shall we say, it is itself a thought, nothing but thought, and no longer the substance which we deemed it!"

"If you mean the telegraph," said the old gentleman, glancing his eye toward its wire, alongside the rail-track, "it is an excellent thing,—that is, of course, if the speculators in cotton and politics don't get possession of it. A great thing, indeed, sir, particularly as regards the detection of bank-robbers and murderers."

Hawthorne, Nathaniel (2008). *The House of the Seven Gables*. Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg. Retrieved January 14, 2019, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/77/77-h/77-h.htm>

The telegraphic language becomes so thoroughly assimilated that thinking apparently resolves itself into the telegraphic short hand used in conversation. This telegraphic short hand is an abbreviated code in which the vowels and many consonants are thrown out. One thinks in telegraphic terms. An odd expression or an unusual message attracts the operator's attention, while he is directly engaged with some other work.

Bryan, William Lowe, and Noble Harter. "Studies in the Physiology and Psychology of the Telegraphic Language." *Psychological Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, Jan. 1897, pp. 27–53.

How to Save Words -- Naturally, there is a right way and a wrong way of wording telegrams. The right way is economical, the wrong way, wasteful. If the telegram is packed full of unnecessary words, words which might be omitted without impairing the sense of the message, the sender has been guilty of economic waste. Not only has he failed to add anything to his message, but he has slowed it up by increasing the time necessary to transmit it. He added to the volume of traffic from a personal and financial point of view, he has been wasteful because he has spent more for his telegram than was necessary. In the other extreme, he may have omitted words necessary to the sense, thus sacrificing clearness in his eagerness to save a few cents.

Ross, Nelson E. *How to Write Telegrams Properly: Haldeman-Julius Publications, C1928*

Word processing enables writers to rearrange text easily and make corrections of typographic and other minor errors. A clean draft copy, devoid of editing marks, can make more serious problems easier to pick out. As Beck and Stibravy pointed out in the preceding section of this book, those features alone have made word processing appealing to writers. But there is more to writing than clean copy. Using word processing and ancillary programs to accomplish these tasks is the subject of the three chapters in this section.

**Studies of the diffusion of innovations such as word processing have shown that innovations are most successful when their use is modified from that expected by their inventors.**

Krull, Robert. *Word Processing for Technical Writers*. Baywood Publishing Company, 1988.

Despite the machine's promise for improving national literacy levels, attempts to place typewriters on school desks went nowhere, and our schools taught typing not for the benefit of tomorrow's novelists or reporters, but for students who would eventually work in offices. Just as penmanship drill developed the big round hand of future clerks, typing class trained generations of twentieth-century office workers whose job it would be to reproduce complex texts composed in longhand or dictated by other people. **Before the computer, writing tools probably didn't create new writers so much as they created new ways for those who were already writers to do their work.** Certainly computers reproduce text as well, and the fact that American offices long ago replaced their typewriters with computers means that anyone working in an office has to know his or her way around these machines. But unlike earlier writing technologies, more and more computer users write for themselves as well as for work and school.

Baron, Dennis E.. *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution*, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2009.

iPhone on loan from Isaiah Hopper.

Sondheim, Alan. *Writing Under: Selections from the Internet Text*. Center for Literary Computing, 2012.



# Handwriting: An Exceedingly Abridged Timeline

Neat handwriting has been a useful improvement for communication, ease of writing and sign of a well-developed mind. Conversely, it has been the sign of working in trade, or spending time on the writing itself and not thinking. Uniformity and individuality have both been important in our understanding of handwriting.

“It was print that endowed handwriting with its own, new set of symbolic possibilities; script emerged as a medium of the self in contradistinction to print, defined as characteristically impersonal and dissociated from the writer. Handwriting thus became a level of meaning in itself, quite apart from the sense of the text, and the sense that it transmitted took as its subject the self.”

**Carolingian Minuscule** (780 – 1200 AD) – though created by a Benedictine monk, credit for the development of Carolingian Minuscule is often given to Charlemagne, who through his grand education and literacy campaigns called for uniformity of spelling and scripts, to make reading easier.

In this era, one of the most read books was *Etymologiae*, by Isidore of Seville (seen right). The 20 volumes included topics such as: Etymology, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, music, astronomy, medicine, law, the Roman Catholic Church and heretical sects, pagan philosophers, languages, cities, animals and birds, the physical world, geography, public buildings, roads, metals, rocks, agriculture, ships, clothes, food and tools.

This text helped spread the common Carolingian minuscule script, influencing a standardization across Europe.

**Blackletter** (1150 - 17<sup>th</sup> Century) – The direct descendant of Carolingian Minuscule, this family of scripts was created to make writing faster and easier, to keep up with an increase demand for books, as literacy rates increased across Europe.

However,

“In England, so great as the perception of penmanship as a lowly mechanical skill that an illegible hand stood as the mark of gentle breeding. Shakespeare’s Hamlet admitted that he “once did hold it, as our statisticians do, / A baseness to write fair, and labored much / How to forget that learning.”

**Humanist Minuscule** (1300s) – Also descended from Carolingian, Humanist minuscule was created to make reading text easier, rather than writing text easier. Because it grew out of Humanism, it was often used for secular texts, while Blackletter was used for religious texts.

This style of calligraphy influenced san-serif fonts and typefaces, including Gill Sans, used in place of a font mimicking the handwriting, and here, as a sample.

**Italic** (1420 – 1550s) – Drawing on both Carolingian and Humanist minuscule, Italic script was created to, once again, write faster. Influenced by the development of the printing press, Italic script was more personalized.

“The writing masters were quick to seize upon the possibilities this technique offered [engraving], and no less quick to advertise the outcome. But their bombastic self-advertisement probably concealed a growing sense of unease and insecurity among the professional practitioners of writing, for although in some respects their

market was enlarging with the growth of trade and the expansion of literacy, they were increasingly conscious that these processes had removed their monopoly on the art itself...The arrival of the printed book, and the social changes of the following century, forced him into a no-man's-land which to some extent he might be said to occupy still, falling uncomfortably between the stools of scrivener and schoolmaster."

Italic script was revived during the arts and crafts movement, influenced by William Morris others who pushed back against the increased industrialization of the time.

"Calligraphy revivalists from Johnston on represented the history of handwriting as just such a tale of division and degradation. Medieval scribes had produced pure letter forms whose beauty stemmed from the truthful expression of scribal tools and materials. Their labors offered the kind of spiritual satisfaction possible only where the aesthetics of script and the manual labor involved in executing it were understood as inseparable."

*Round Hand* (1600 – 1700s) *Copperplate* (1800s) – Introduced with metal pens, round hand took advantage of the thick and thin lines created by the nib. Writing manuals solidified round hand as the standard, and Spencerian script was used in business and taught in public schools (seen right).

However,

"Unfortunately, handwriting was subject to the same discontinuities between character and presentation as any other external accouterment of social identity. Victorians knew as much. When the "owner of a large estate, with servants, money, and influence at his command," has a "mean, cramped illiterate hand," commented a New York newspaper, we exclaim, "What! Is this the production of So-and-so? It looks like a wretched scraping of some poor laborer with a scarcity of ink to boot!"

And also,

"Some Americans deliberately adopted personal idiosyncrasies in their scripts to set off their handwriting, and thus themselves, apart. A common strategy was appropriating the graphic mark of a genius formerly reserved for statesmen and literati, namely, illegibility."

And,

"What made print less appealing and script more so were the associations each medium carried. Print was public, openly available to all with the money to buy it; furthermore, in an age of government censorship it was regulated by the state. In other words, there was no controlling the readership but there was plenty of control over the authors. In contrast, handwritten texts circulated among an exclusive, handpicked audience, most usually a circle of social equals with similar tastes and interests. Scandalous gossip, anti-government propaganda, pornography – all were free to circulate in handwritten form. If print was the realm of social exclusivity, privacy, and freedom."

*Palmer Method* (Late 1800s – 1900s) – Developed to simplify Spencerian handwriting, the Palmer Method (seen right) quickly became the standard handwriting instruction. Palmer's emphasis on handwriting becoming automatic has continued to influence handwriting education today.