

Writing has been a tool for human communication and documentation since nearly the beginning of humans themselves. Without writing, humans would practically not have a history; assuming that speaking would have still developed, all stories of historical events would have only been passed down orally. As the classic telephone game demonstrates, information passed down orally becomes extremely distorted. Writing solidifies language in the form of symbols. These symbols, commonly referred to as letters today, have drastically changed over the course of history, and changes in writing itself is altering how writing is utilized. As Schmandt-Besserat and Erard put it, “The history of writing has marked the interplay between linguistics, socioeconomics, and the forces of technological change, an interplay that will shape the future of writing” (19). Without development in language and technology through social interaction, writing would not have evolved to its computer medium as it has. Mediums of writing have been constantly evolving, and now online literacy is shaping the way society thinks about and conducts writing in a different manner than printed literacy.

Typically, when discussion over the first traces of writing arises people bring up cavemen, which are the first identified Homo (human) species. During their existence, writing was not a collection of symbols, let alone a form of communication, like it is today. Cavemen drew pictures on the walls of caves. These pictures mostly detailed humans, animals, and the interaction between the two, and they most likely did this to document personal experiences with hunting and such. Of course, it could have also served simply as visually pleasing art. Fast forward a few thousand years and slightly more advanced forms of writing began to form in Mesopotamia, China, and Mesoamerica. Focusing specifically on Mesopotamia, writing in the form of symbols sprouted out of economic growth. Sumerians first started using clay shapes to keep track of debts after the transaction of goods, but then symbols were impressed on the clay to

signify a certain number. According to Schmandt-Besserat and Erard, “The tablets did altogether away with tokens, and by doing so, the signs became independent entities” (10). This was the birth of numbers. Then came symbols that represented different sounds in people’s names, thus being able to document identity. Soon came Cuneiform, an efficient method of writing language, and then an alphabet was made.

In today’s society, writing has taken on a form that does not even exist in the physical world. In an effort to adapt to technological advancement and become more efficient, writing has moved to the virtual world which comes with consequences to how we think. The digital age has experienced very rapid growth and it can be a difficult adjustment for many. Schools are educating students about digital literacy and implementing digital practices in order to prepare kids for the future of literacy. As Stuart notes, "Not only are teachers obligated to prepare students responsibly for a digital age in which the most rewarding jobs require multiple literacies, but students will be citizens and parents as well as employees, and in these roles they will also need to think in expanded ways about computer use” (4). Writing on a computer is a completely different way of writing, compared to print. Today’s age of writing is unique because we are caught between computers and print, but it is necessary to understand both. There are some people who shun the new way of thinking that computer literacy promotes: “An academic historian would deny that such a hypertext is historical writing at all. . . Electronic writing threatens to redefine historiography in a way that reveals what Sontag has called the ‘impossibility or irrelevance of producing a continuous, systematic argument’” (Bolter 117). There is a linear aspect to print, such as books, that computers overlook because computers can display different types of text at once, giving the reader control over an argument. As a result, certain historians will have to adapt their ways of conducting an argument.

It is clear that online use for writing is becoming dominant, but I believe that too much dependence strip students of the creativity involved in handwriting with a pen or pencil. Writing programs can offer creativity with different fonts and such, but there is a physical and emotional disconnection that hinders the development of personal handwriting. In addition, technology can act a distraction during writing. Stuart describes this before he quotes William Bowen, ““So far productivity [in the United States] has grown more slowly in the computer age than it did before computers came into wide use”” (6). Using a pencil and paper creates a bond between the mind and pencil, and the writer supposedly has no distraction from speaking his mind directly on to the paper. With a computer, we become accustomed to quickly between programs and tabs because there is so much potential information available at the blink of an eye. Also, the ease of deleting words online, compared to erasing on paper, encourages people to immediately edit their work rather than letting their words carelessly flow out from the mind. I know of middle schools and high schools that are distributing iPads to every student, and most colleges now require a laptop. The fast, societal transition to computers is leaving many with less financial freedom in the dust and its creating an untold standard that everyone must have a computer to be involved in modern literacy as well.

On the other hand, online literacy is also a huge benefit to society and its ways of thinking. The internet allows anyone in the world with an internet connection to post nearly anything and interact with one another; the last form of popular interaction was handwritten letters which were more emotionally engaging but also much less efficient. Virtual interaction must be taken with a grain of salt because the internet allows anonymousness, and it may not always be clear who you are addressing. Making a point about the universal adaption, and thus efficiency, of technology, Schmandt-Besserat and Erard say, “Different computing platforms,

operating systems, and software programs [can] swap, share, and process text data, regardless of the writing system of the text” (20). It is simple for any type of writer to share their content on the internet and it is equally simple for readers to access this content. Things put on the internet are immediately available to anyone with internet access, so writers can expose their work to many people in a short amount of time; also, an audience can respond and write feedback on literature, which unites communities. Because of the ease of posting content, I believe that people have become less self-conscious about their work. Publishing a book comes with the responsibility of having it critiqued by an editor, and there is a status gained as an author by having a book sold to the public. However, any person can post their work on the internet without worrying about its quality and who reads it.

Digital writing can include instant personal communication as well, a large benefit over past communications involving writing. Texting and online messengers connect people, wherever they may be, and provide a means of discussion—potentially as quick as face-to-face interaction. Writing in this sense, however, is simplifying what people write. The youth are especially at fault for abbreviating writing through texting language (LOL and TTYL) and emojis. The extreme simplicity of using these abbreviations and pictures to talk and portray emotion certainly receives criticism from older generations, but I see no issues. The dumbing-down of children’s online language may seem unintelligent and harmful to their perception of language; however, talking in an unintelligent manner among peers and family should not matter if academic work and other important literacy is unaffected. Emojis are a revolutionary method for giving text an added dimension of personality, while previous printed literacy struggled to reveal what feelings an author was trying to portray.

Whether people like it or not, society is shifting its preference towards digital literacy and it is becoming a standard for writing. Paper books are facing competition such as Kindle and many writers, especially authors, are struggling to keep up with the norm. Although paper books and handwriting itself will likely never diminish, it still appears to be looked at as a dying breed in literacy. It is important that we do not expose children to excessive amount of technology, otherwise they may become overly attached to the digital world and not appreciate what the real world, and handwriting in this case, can offer. Writing has evolved from simple marks in clay, and it will continue to evolve for as long as humans exist. It will certainly be interesting to experience the change firsthand throughout life.

## **References**

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