



Introduction

Writing is so present in our day to day lives that a lot of the time we don't even notice it. We are highly selective in the writing we take in, only giving it our full attention when it seems to matter. But writing surrounds us, it informs us, it guides us and it controls us. In this book, I aim to bring writing out into the light, to understand and analyze it, and to begin to think about how it has come to be so vitally important in our lives. I want to underline the power and complexity of this quite exceptional human invention, and to show how the history of the written word – the physical and material act of writing and its uses, is a story of change. I will show how changes in writing are closely interwoven with social, political and cultural changes, with invention and innovation and with material and technological experimentation and development. Significant changes in writing have occurred in our lifetime and, as we will see, these changes are particularly important to how we now think about writing. Over the last twenty years, the development of digital communication has radically changed how and where we write, what we write about and what writing looks like. This has challenged some of our most deeply held views about human communication, inviting us to think again about this visual language that we so often take for granted.

But does writing still matter now that so much of our communication is digital? Phone calls, video clips, screen shots and audio notes do so much of the work previously reserved for writing. Emojis and gifs stand in place of words, predictive text removes the struggle for accurate spelling, and increasingly sophisticated speech recognition lightens the physical labour of writing. Yet we write more now than we have ever done before, and many of us have access to powerful devices for composing, saving and sharing text. But, despite the phenomenal rise of screen-based communication, older forms of writing are still an important part of many people's experience. Not only are these so-called traditional forms promoted in classrooms but they are also

part of much of our everyday activity and an integral part of the richly textualized environments that many of us inhabit. Digital writing co-exists with these older forms, it enriches them and is enriched by them. In fact, it seems that we live in a time in which writing appears in a fascinating variety of forms, and I try to illustrate this richness in the pages of this book.

I want to suggest that this is an important time to take stock of writing, because it has changed so rapidly, and because it continues to change in quite fundamental ways. How we have taken up and developed new technologies of communication plays a major role in this. But it's too simple to say that technology has *caused* this; it's probably better to think in terms of the creative ways in which people have exploited new technological possibilities in new times, in a rapidly changing world. Amongst these changes is a growing sense of the global – we now know more about other people, their languages and their ways of life than ever before, through travel, through popular culture and through music and film. Innovation in and between written languages spreads rapidly because we are so well connected. Writing seems to be changing now as quickly as it did with the establishment of commercial printing presses and the availability of relatively cheap paper.

It seems important to underline the liveliness and creativity of written expression if only to counter some of the stories of doom and gloom that suggest some sort of catastrophic decline. The complaint tradition¹ is alive and well, and regularly picks up on such things as 'poor' spelling, non-standard grammar, the demise of handwriting, the inclusion of emojis and so on. But in taking stock of writing, I firmly believe that there are more fundamental issues to attend to. In some parts of the world, new technology has led to a democratization of writing and publication. With access to the right technology almost anybody can say anything. Internet platforms, and social media in particular, are clamorous spaces for self-expression and for circulating views and opinions, some of which are interesting, some entertaining, some rather quirky, and some just wrong – even to the point of being harmful. They are spaces for publishing fake news, conspiracy theories, for identity theft, for trolls and bogus consumer reviews, as well as for unhelpful or inaccurate advice and information. In parts of the world, the Internet is anything but democratic. Access to particular platforms is denied, sites are blocked and those who find their way around these obstacles, or find ways of expressing unpalatable

opinions, are prosecuted and sometimes imprisoned. Writing is implicated in all these scenarios. So, although I want to paint a picture of writing as a quite remarkable human invention, it is far too simple to think of it only as a beneficial or civilizing influence. It is an extremely powerful technology which we use to inform each other, to shape and influence our ideas and actions – but also one that we can use to dominate, to mislead and cause harm to others.

The Case for Writing

With all this in mind, it's not surprising that so much attention has been lavished on the 'digital revolution'. Popular writers, scholars, researchers and educators have all attempted to keep pace with widespread changes in communication. In my own field of literacy studies,² these changes have attracted plenty of attention, and this has often urged us to reconsider the very nature and definition of literacy. Surprisingly though, attention to writing itself has been somewhat patchy and there has been little effort to place recent changes within the wider context of its development in ways that account for the central role writing has come to play in social and cultural life. Books that deal specifically with writing often focus on historical detail, tending to be brief and speculative in their consideration of contemporary appearances of the written word. This book, however, aims to provide a comprehensive view of writing today, whilst also paying careful attention to its origins and history, to key developments, contemporary dilemmas and future possibilities.

Linguists, and those scholars and researchers who study language and literacy, have argued for many years over the relative importance of writing and its position in the study of human communication. Of course, there is plenty of communication that doesn't involve humans at all – but writing, itself, is one form of human communication. An historical bias towards written language has caused some to argue for the 'primacy of speech'. Adding to this, recent work by communication theorists and semioticians has attempted to establish broad principles that put writing in its place, seeing it as one of a number of modes of communication. This has all been useful work and has led to increasingly sophisticated theory, as well as better ways of talking about the complex ensembles of communication that digital tools make possible. Because of this, it may seem at first sight to be a retrograde step to

focus narrowly on writing. So, before we go any further then, I want to make the case for writing and why I think it is important to give it special attention, to suggest what we might gain from thinking again about its cultural history and its contemporary significance.

Writing is a highly developed form of communication, and a language in its own right (see Chapter 1). It is a rule bound symbol system for meaning making that normally has a dynamic relationship with spoken forms of language. And, as I have already suggested it wields significant power, shaping our world and our interactions, providing information as well as misinformation. However, the powerful role it exercises in the contemporary world does not mean that it is a superior form of communication, merely that it is a distinctive and instantly identifiable mode of communication. Although much of the writing we do at work, at home and for leisure is taken for granted, it's clearly the case that writing is an observable and recognizable activity. Deborah Brandt³ refers to this as the 'scenic' quality of writing. The materials and body postures we adopt when writing on a notepad, typing on a keyboard or texting on a smartphone are immediately recognizable, the texts produced are undisputedly written, and their significance and relationship to other forms of communication – and to the play of social activity is relatively easy to trace. Irrespective of its form, function or the technology of production used, writing is visible. This makes it amenable to study, and it also enables us to reflect on the way that it is part of the social fabric, how the practices associated with it influence us, and how they change as social, political, material and technological conditions change. Close observation and reflection on writing may highlight the impact of these conditions – and, what's more, the reverse may also be true: studying writing and how writing changes may provide useful insights into the broader conditions surrounding it.

Arguing for the distinctiveness of writing does not necessarily involve separating it out from other forms of communication as a special case, or arguing for its primacy or superiority, but simply involves acknowledging that it is a rule-bound language that uses specific sets of visual symbols and requires a repertoire of specialist technological skills in order to create meaning. As I have already stressed, the visible language we call writing often accompanies other modes of expression, complimenting the visual image in advertising, providing subtitles to movies, or the scrolling news ticker on TV. But writing has developed in ways that make it central to knowledge production,

that make it an important tool of governance, a way of recording the 'letter of the law', of formalizing contractual obligations, trade agreements and so on. Simply because it occupies such a pivotal position it is surely worthy of specific attention.

Global connectivity via the Internet now has a central place in many people's lives, and although this involves a complex technological infrastructure, the dominant mode of transaction *is* the written word, and this remains true despite quite remarkable advances in multimedia technology and virtual reality. If we think of coding as a kind of technical writing then it's certainly the case that its language is fundamental to the architecture of the Internet. However, this claim lies beyond the scope of this book and well beyond my own expertise. Yet it does seem clear that Internet connectivity marks a significant shift in the work that writing does and that can only be propelled further with the combination of machine-generated text and artificial intelligence. This offers further support for a call to look carefully at how the visible language system of writing works.

A Double Technology

When I message my daughter to say I'll see her at two, I'm doing something so banal, so mundane that it hardly seems worthy of comment. I take it for granted that my smartphone and all the supporting infrastructure will work – the device, its silicon chips, the app, the 4G network and all the rest. I am, of course, using a sophisticated technology that has been developed during in my lifetime, one that has matured and become normal in the last twenty years. My smartphone can do many things, in fact it's far more than a phone, but in this example it's a *technology for writing*, just like pen and paper, quill and parchment or ink brush and scroll. It is a way of assembling strings of characters that appear as black shapes on a screen. And, in my example, these are alphabetic characters that I can read back to myself, and that when sent or shared can be read by others familiar with that particular alphabetic script. Clay, soft stone, papyrus, parchment and paper, along with the relevant tools for inscription are some of the technologies for writing that we'll read about in this book. Of course, smartphones are a new technology to add to this list, but they use a form of communication technology that has been around for thousands of years – writing, a sophisticated kind of mark making.

Writing is a visible language which has been refined over generations as a way of recording things and communicating with others and, in this sense, written language itself is a technology – a tool that we put to work in our everyday lives. It is a technology for making meaning. And what makes writing so incredibly useful is its relative permanence. The fact that you can save and store meaningful information in writing is crucial. If I forget to press ‘save’ this sentence will be lost – a source of endless frustration for contemporary writers, but when it does save it takes on a sort of life of its own. It’s probably true to say that writing often saves more than we can hold in our head at any one time. One way of expressing this is that writing extends our memory. We could think of this as the mnemonic function of writing. This mnemonic function is what I refer to as the *technology of writing*, and it’s a technology that is of central importance in our contemporary lives. Writing stores, saves and shares information, ideas, messages and just about anything we can find the words for – love, lies, appeals for help, obscenities, religious truths – you name it, and the technology of writing can store it.

To summarize, a *technology for writing* is a way of referring to the tools, instruments and techniques of inscription, of leaving a written mark, whereas the *technology of writing* refers to what we do with writing, the uses we find for it in the messages and texts we create and exchange. These two aspects of writing are what I refer to in this book as the *double technology* of writing: the materials we use to create something visible and the communicative work that written texts make possible. These two technologies are co-dependent – you can’t have one without the other and, of course, they influence each other as well – but for analytical purposes, and to understand writing in more depth it is helpful to distinguish between the two. Informed by this idea of the double technology of writing and in recognition of the formidable power and influence of the written word, this book invites us to pause, to reflect and to think again about writing, why it matters, and indeed why it still matters.

Impressions and Expressions

This idea of the double technology of writing informs the organizational structure of this book. The book is divided into two parts. The first part *Impressions* is concerned with defining writing and

describing its central characteristics, and it offers a fairly detailed account of the history of different technologies. In this I adopt a particular position – one that argues for seeing writing as a linguistic system, a visual or visible language. This helps in bringing clarity to the distinguishing features of writing, and also helps to set it apart from other notation systems such as music, algebra or morse code. In doing this I am not trying to prove the superiority of writing over other forms of representation, but simply mapping the territory or topology of writing – identifying it as something worthy of interest, an object of study in its own right. As an array of visible marks, writing might then be seen as a system of impressions. It creates an impression of a language we know, whether we speak a related form of that language or not. In fact, it offers us a series of impressions from which we infer meaning. But more than this, the idea of impressions becomes a useful way of thinking about its materiality – it reminds us of the history of writing, which is a history of mark making in which symbols were quite literally impressed on prepared surfaces such as clay tablets. Printing, can be seen as an extension of this activity of making and leaving durable impressions. All this is recalled as we press and tap at letters on a keyboard. Touch screen technology may seem to break with this long tradition, but when we turn our smartphones against the light our greasy fingermarks show how we are still pressing, prodding and swiping, and leaving impressions. The word impression works well then to evoke the embodied and material dimensions of writing and it connects the technologies of writing we use today with their historical precursors.

The second part of the book, *Expressions* focuses on the work that writing does, what writing communicates, and how it has been taken up as a technology for making and sharing meaning. Here I have selected some of the many ways in which writing is used for the purposes of expression and communication in both a transactional and a creative sense. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the topic, but it is an attempt to capture the variety and texture of writing, its beneficial, as well as its harmful, uses – examples, if you like, of why writing matters. By mapping the diversity and complexity of writing, I want to show how it is used to express an extremely wide range of things, all of which play a part in shaping our social and cultural lives. In this way, I am adding to the argument that writing matters now – more than it ever has done through its long history. Globalization,

digital communication, the spread of mass literacy and the imperative to share knowledge in a troubled world seem to me to raise the stakes, to make writing a matter of concern.

Writing as an Activity and Writing as a Thing

As if to confuse matters, we use the word writing in several different senses. In one sense of the word, we talk about writing as an action or activity. I am *writing* these words by tapping on a keyboard. The verbal form of the word unambiguously refers to writing as a process. But in another use of the word, we nominalize writing (it becomes a gerund). We talk about writing as a thing or as a text. Here it is something more like a work – whether it's finished, or something we're still struggling with – it's *a piece of writing*. Somewhere along the line the one becomes the other; the process of tapping, scribbling, chalking or chiseling starts to become a thing. In fact, it's probably a thing from the very moment that we decide to do it! The important point, though, is to make the distinction between the actions involved in making words appear in front of us and the impact or effect of those words themselves. I will be using the word writing in both these senses of the word in this book. Unfortunately, these two uses of the word writing don't map neatly onto the double technology model introduced in the previous section. Materiality and meaning are intertwined when I am writing, just as they are in the piece of writing I produce.

When I think about the process of writing, I think about the soft plunking sound that the keyboard makes when I'm setting up an appointment or watching someone at work in an office. It suggests an act that's both physical and material, one that's felt, sensed and filled out by perceptions as well as by memories and associations. Those old enough to remember typewriters in their heyday may recall the particular and distinctive atmosphere of an office before the advent of computers. Typewriters involved a very different sense of touch, a different array of sounds, and their use was perfumed by the subtle aromas of typewriter ink and correcting fluid. But to look at doing writing in earlier times we have to rely on secondary sources. Here, for example, Gogol⁴ writes about the office of the chancellery in early nineteenth-century Russia, conjuring up a very different atmosphere: 'The noise set up by the quills was great, and sounded as if several carts of brushwood were driving through a forest six inches deep in

dead leaves'. Could we imagine the sound of carts of brushwood driving over dead leaves? What might that be like? Gogol is describing a busy office environment in another time and in doing so he conjures up its distinctive sounds and interactions – 'You're always making off with the cork from the office inkpot!' is a passing remark from one of Gogol's characters. All this is suggestive of writing as an activity, a physical and material experience, but the process of writing also involves all the hidden work of composition and sometimes some props, too. That compositional process might involve working from notes, consulting other texts or just staring, rather vacantly, into space, looking out of the window, gathering one's thoughts ... writing.

When I think about writing as text, I think of the neatly laid out array of messages, each in a coloured speech bubble on the screen of my smartphone, I think about the weight and shape of a book, the sensations of turning a page and the smell of a new paperback. But I also think about the feeling of sadness on opening a message that conveys bad news, or the anger and frustration that flares up when I read a bossy email. Then there's the pleasure of reading a carefully crafted written piece, a sophisticated argument, good journalism, the narrative twist of an artful novelist, evocative descriptions or limpid prose. I think of where I was when I read *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* and wonder why it reminds me so much of my mother. Most of the time I think of a piece of writing as something that is reasonably complete – I say reasonably, because it may well be a draft or an extract from a longer text, or a string of messages that are yet to reach a conclusion. Still, a piece of writing can normally be expected to carry some sort of meaning, even if some of its themes or ideas have yet to be brought out or fully developed.

All these encounters with visible language show the incredible diversity of our experience of writing – many more examples could be added, of course. They are all, in essence, about making meaning from the symbols that shimmer in front of us. Whether we are crafting a text or reading one that has been produced by someone else, meaning is being fashioned, created, negotiated and communicated. But it's not all about meaning – I hope that I have done sufficient work already to emphasize that writing isn't simply a cerebral activity. It is a physical act, and it is felt in the body. It evokes emotional responses and associations, involves exchanges and interactions between people. In other words, it is a form of communication, not just a pared down transaction of information.

A Sociomaterial Approach to Writing

In the entertaining BBC series *The Secret History of Writing*, the presenter, Lydia Wilson, enthusiastically describes writing as a form of time travel. She is talking about how the durability of its material form means that texts can be made sense of in times and places far removed from their origin. Whether we are talking about a Sumerian clay tablet or a nineteenth-century Russian novel, this is undeniably true. In this way, writing can break free from the constraints of the immediate present, from the here and now. I wouldn't want to make any extravagant predictions about the durability of *this* particular piece of writing, but I do know from my first-hand experience that my texts, emails, draft papers and a handful of scholarly papers are read by people in other parts of the world, in different places, at different times, in different time zones. I can communicate easily with friends and family members when they are not here with me, and despite all the advantages of phone calls and video chats, written messages, emails and texts are part of the economy of communication. I can't speak to someone who is busy or has no signal, and I can't speak to someone whose battery just died. But I can leave a written message for them. And, I can also write something more substantial or nuanced than a spoken answerphone message. What's more, writing can be published and distributed – it has the potential to reach a wide audience. In other words, the written word travels well.⁵

The principle at work here is that in a visible language, meanings can always be deferred. They can be reconstituted in another place and time, providing that the reader or recipient is familiar with that particular symbol system. The process depends on having shared associations between the language of written words and the meanings they point to, because writing (unlike pictograms or emojis) isn't a system of direct representation. To understand the phrase 'texting on my smartphone' not only involves decoding those words, it also depends on understanding that texting refers to a particular kind of action, that a smartphone is a particular kind of thing and how the two relate – and, of course, that the letter 'm' when followed by 'y' denotes personal ownership. But that's only a start. That seemingly innocent phrase, 'texting on my smartphone', can take on all sorts of shades of meaning, coloured in part by the surrounding text,

the values and opinions and intentions of the writer and also those of the reader, too. For this reason, I want to suggest that writing never completely escapes from the gravitational pull of its conditions of production and reception. It is composed and transcribed in a particular context just as it may be read and understood in another context. In fact, context and meaning enjoy a reciprocal relationship, because the meanings we make also help to shape and produce context.

Some have argued that most of the power of writing resides with the writer. Leaving aside for a moment that this claim is predicated on an idea of sole authorship, it seems quite clear to me that writers may have mixed motives, they may present confused or confusing ideas, or they may just find it rather difficult to make their message clear. Some rhetorical approaches to writing show us how writers inhabit a particular position. This position informs their relationship with readers and the ways in which they want to influence them, or guide their progress through the text – but readers can always read against an author's intentions. Written texts, as we shall see, make differing claims to authority that may suggest how they should be read, but there can be no guarantees. As an example of this we might consider the ways in which historians have made such good use of documents like wills to further their understanding of the historical past. A will, as we well know, is a legal document that specifies how our financial affairs and material possessions should be dealt with after death. Someone who draws up a will, probably with the assistance of a legal professional, tries to be as clear and specific as possible in their purpose and intentions. However, in the hands of a historian, wills can be an important source of evidence that help to identify what sorts of things are valued and which sorts of people they might be entrusted and bequeathed to – not exactly what the original writers of the will intended. Nonetheless, this re-reading of archival wills, through an historical lens, offers important insights into daily life, gender roles, social position and the relative significance of household goods in other times and places.⁶ There are, of course, many examples of how texts may be re-interpreted from different perspectives. A significant strand of literary criticism has focused on how minority groups are represented in literature whereas work on critical literacy has often focused on how such representations appear in everyday texts. These are all arguments

against a simple linear model of meaning making. The notion that a writer constructs a text out of meaningful units and that these are faithfully read off by a reader is insufficient.

This book is underpinned by a sociomaterial approach to writing. It's an approach that fully acknowledges that writing, and the substantive area of meaning making are social practices. Texts don't exist in isolation but are part of how people interact, what they think, do and feel and, in the end, they are part the world as they experience it. Written texts have become absorbed into habits and routines and these are deeply embedded in many social institutions. But texts are also things, they have a particular materiality. Books, journals, writing pads, and all the rest have a material form that takes up space. They have weight and shape. Their material form means that they can be used for unintended purposes. Books may be used to prop open doors or press flowers, paper to plug gaps in floorboards, beer mats to steady tables. A laptop can be used to hold a piece of paper in place, and an iPad makes a good drinks tray if you've got a steady hand. As material forms texts and technologies do a variety of things in the world. Now although writing on screen may seem rather different, and in some ways it is, it still has a material appearance – it is a recognizable thing, 'out there' in the world, whether it's a list of train arrivals and departures on an electronic board, or a self-help manual on a Kindle. But a sociomaterial approach doesn't simply add the material dimension to a conception of writing as a social practice, it suggests that the two aspects are inextricably linked.

A sociomaterial approach is a way of accounting for the contingency and instability of meaning. Written texts don't just mediate activity but act and are acted upon in diverse, unpredictable and often unintended ways. They are part of a complex web of relationality that involves humans, non-humans and inanimate things, becoming meaningful under specific conditions or coalescences. This idea is based on a view that realities are produced when sociomaterial conditions align in particular ways. In common with other relational perspectives, people and things are given equal status. They do not exist in isolation, only in different types or configurations of relation, holding in place or dispelling ways of doing, being and knowing. But sociomaterialism also recognizes the obduracy of social and material conditions that hold inequities in place, conditions that tend to ensnare and dominate. So, although power is generated through particular



Figure 0.1 LNER railway sign – fasten this gate.

sociomaterial arrangements, it is also discharged, dissipated and dissolved through them.

An example may help in illustrating the application of these rather abstract ideas. Figure 0.1 is a photograph of an old railway sign attached to the five-bar gate leading to a paddock near where I live. It's not exactly an unusual sight. Embossed cast iron signs and notices like this one were churned out by the railway companies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and are now collectible items. This particular sign was most probably designed as a property marker and safety measure, to regulate behaviour on land owned by the railway company. In its original location it would have acted in a particular way, as a warning notice and, supported through a system of byelaws, it would have functioned to control the actions of the general public. Failing to close the gate would constitute a criminal offence, carrying a penalty of a forty shilling fine. In this way, the material form of the text and its placement was part of a whole set of relationships between the railway company and its officials, the land itself as well as notions of land ownership, the general public and the legal system. Within this nexus of practice, the sign, its material form and its meaning acted in a particular way. That particular sociomaterial network has long since dissolved – arguably, the words can still be read in the same way, but just as the sign has acquired the patina of age, as it has begun to rust away, so its current location places it in a new set of relations. The forty shilling fine no longer applies – that

might be read ironically – the railway company (the LNER), and even the currency of the fine have ceased to exist, but the gate still marks a boundary to private property, and still needs to remain closed to prevent the escape of livestock. It is a subtle reminder of ownership and authority to passers-by, but it now has a decorative function and a slightly amusing reference back to former times.