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Theories of Writing
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As someone living in the 21st century, in the United States, it is hard to imagine a world without writing. However, until about 3200 BCE writing did not exist, and it was not until several centuries after that, around 1700 BCE, that the Phoenicians invented the alphabet and writing took off and spread around the world (Schmandt-Besserat, 15). Since the invention of the alphabet, writing has evolved; alphabets were adapted to fit different languages and rules were created, such as spelling and grammar, for each language. Writing has continued to change and evolve, especially with the invention of new technologies, such as the computer. Today, online writing has altered writing in more ways than one might think. Online writing has changed the frequency of writing for many and some of the standard rules of writing, it has changed how we can communicate through writing, it has added new literacies that need to be learned, and it has meant that picture writing has become more important again.

Today, at least in the Western world, we write more than ever. It is hard to go even one day without writing anything and many people may not even realize how much they write. Texting, sending an email, posting on social media are all forms of online writing that people do every day. This is often informal writing, but it is writing none the less because it is making coherent words and composing text (which is one definition of writing). Online writing has become so prevalent, especially among the younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) that they no longer know how to talk on the phone because they often do not have to. They can write a text or other online message instead.

Online writing, mostly because of texting, has unofficially changed some grammar rules. Abbreviations for words and phrases have been created because when texting it is faster to write

"IDK" rather than type out "I do not know" and usually the person who receives the message will understand the abbreviation. Many of these abbreviations have become standardized (BRB, LOL, BTW) that one does not even need to think about what they mean, they just know when they look at it, like reading any other word. Other grammar rules such as punctuation are also ignored in texting because the audience does not necessarily need it to understand the message.

It has become a rule of texting that proper grammar is not needed and that has spilled over into other kinds of writing. It is common to go onto social media sites or other internet sites and read something that is full of grammatical errors. People use their texting grammar, not using proper punctuation, misspelling words, using abbreviations, mixing up your and you're. There are many examples of posts on social media that demonstrate this bad online grammar. Someone posted on Facebook, "If you see something and say nothing, your not a witness, your an accomplice", using the "your" when they needed to use "you're". Another ironic example of a Facebook post using texting abbreviations, bad grammar and bad spelling is, "Sum of dese ppl need 2 stay in skool" when trying to say, some of these people need to stay in school.

Using this texting grammar may be fine for some informal online writing, but it is spilling over into formal writing. If the majority of writing a person does is informal online writing, they do not necessarily need to follow grammatical rules. That can cause a problem, however, because then they do not remember those rules when they do formal writing. Online informal writing has changed writing because of the frequency of it paired with its flexibility on following grammar rules. This has meant that grammar errors in all writing are a bigger problem than they may have been before texting and social media because when most of the writing one does is informal, they can forget those grammar rules when they have to do formal writing. This could be in a paper for class, a student's paper is full of grammar errors because they did not go back

and check for them. In most of their online informal writing, they do not have to look for them so they do not check in formal writing either. It could also be when writing a formal email to a boss or a potential employer signing it off "THX" instead of writing out "Thanks" or "Thank you" which makes the email look unprofessional.

Social media, texting and other forms of online writing have not just changed the frequency of which we write and the rules we follow but it has also changed something in the nature of writing. Before, when a person read a piece of writing, they could agree, disagree, or have questions about it but could not ask the author those questions or argue with the writing because it was only a piece of writing. This is one of the reasons Plato did not like writing. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus,* the character Socrates explains why he does not trust nor like writing. In this dialogue, Socrates says,

> for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence… And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves (14).

Typically, when one reads writing, the author is not present. That means that the argument in the written work is unable to distinguish between audiences and cannot respond to questions, clarifications, and criticism. A piece of writing is something that cannot talk back, unlike a person who can answer questions and give clarifications.

Jay Bolter in his book *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* also addresses how readers may want to get involved in the writing's conversation: "readers may want to break in and change the course of the discussion, but they would only be shouting at a text. What is true of all writing is painfully obvious in a dialogue: the form invites the reader to participate in the conversation and then denies him or her full participation" (2).

Online writing has changed this. While still an inanimate object, online writing can talk back. Readers can get engaged with online writing and the author in ways they could not have with paper writing. When there is something written online, on a social media site, a discussion board, a blog, even something on a Google doc, if the reader wants to engage in the course of the discussion they can, through writing, by posting a comment expressing what they would otherwise just be shouting at a text. This allows them to engage with the written text and potentially the author if they choose to respond to the comment. It is of course, not the same as a dialogue because it is easier for someone online to ignore a comment and not respond than it might be if it was a conversation, but it can happen, and it often does. These written online conversations happen often on social media or in online forums. For example, on Reddit, one user posted question about how many times a week should a person go to the gym. A conversation developed in the comments that lead to the development of a debate about how many times a week one would go to the gym if they went every other day, 4 times, 3.5 times or 3 times (Full Body Workout). While this is not the most engaging discussion that has even happened online, it is an example of a written conversation that happened because of online writing. When the authors of online writing choose to respond to the comment a type of dialectics can emerge, but it is one that is happening entirely in writing; it is like the writing is talking back.

Online writing has given writing the ability to talk back, but that does not necessarily mean that Plato would change his mind about writing. He also disliked writing because he thought it would lead to the spread of lies. Online writing can lead to the spread of lies even more than it could before because almost anyone can publish anything they want online. There is so much online writing, that we do not always know what is true and real, what is completely

made up or if it lies somewhere between (maybe what is written is true but not the whole truth or has a strong bias in one direction). This vast amount of online writing means that people have had to learn how to find reliable information online. A recent study on false information on Twitter published in the journal *Science* led by Sinan Aral of MIT found that, "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information" (Fox). This means that false information is being spread on social media more quickly and has a deeper impact than the truth. This rampant spread of false information has had consequences on recent political events. There are questions and investigations into if Russians and other foreigners deliberately flooded social media sites during the 2016 election with false information. Given that many people use social media to get their news and that false information spreads six times as fast on social media sites (Fox), that spread of false information during the election could have affected the election results.

Throughout history, as writing has changed, new literacies have developed so that people can learn how to use writing. Online writing is no exception and it has led to the creation of new literacies. Some of those literacies are new literacy, digital literacy, and web literacy. Jodi Pilgrim and Elda Martinez define these literacies in their piece "Defining Literacy in the 21st Century." New literacy is the ability to use new technologies, such as the internet and the computer, to gather and communicate information. Using information technologies and the internet to find, evaluate, utilize, share, and create content is digital literacy, and web literacy is "the knowledge and use of specific skills needed to locate, analyze, and communicate information found online" (67). The necessity of having these three literacies came about in large part due to the invention of the internet and the vast amount of online writing it has spurred.

Teaching these literacies that are based on technology and online writing also present new challenges to writing. In his article, "Multiliteracies for a Digital Age", Stuart Selber, breaks down computer literacy into three types of literacy, functional, critical and rhetorical. Functional literacy is when a student understands the basics of the computer and can use the computer effectively for educational goals but nothing more (25). This would be like knowing how to type a paper on the computer and how to find information for research. When a student can see a computer as a cultural artifact, can question technology and look at computers critically, then they have critical literacy (25). Critical literacy is not just reading whatever online writing is found and believing what it says, but looking for the bias in the writing, where the facts came from and determining if that particular piece of online writing is reliable. This was a skill that, to some degree was necessary, but has become more important with online writing because almost anyone can publish anything online. The issues surrounding people getting bad, biased or sometimes just completely false and fictitious information from social media sites like Facebook, might be mitigated or even eliminated if more people had critical Internet literacy. If they have that critical literacy, then they could look at an article online and look at the source it comes from and the sources it cites then make a judgment about whether it is reliable or not. This may be starting to happen. In a study done by the Pew Research Center, they found while 68% of adult Americans get their news and prefer to get their news from social media sites like Facebook, 57% of that group expects that the news they see on social media to be largely inaccurate (Masta). Rhetorical literacy is when someone can see the computer as hypertextual media. People are the producers of technology and use it as a means to reflect on their actions to further engage in a process of continuous learning (Selber, 25). Rhetorical literacy is important because it can help people in their abilities to persuade, deliberate, reflect and to do social action online.

A rhetorically literate person can see the dangers and benefits in persuasive techniques which helps them become a more informed decision maker, especially with the information they see online. They can see that there are problems that can only be resolved by mediating between different perspective. They can look to their past and current activities to improve their performance in the future, and a rhetorically literate person can see and use social media sites as an outlet for creativity and as a platform for social action. Using technology and online writing becomes like a rhetorical act between the two, not just the student taking information from the computer or online texts. It is critical that all three of these literacies be taught, learned, and used together, so that we can effectively use technology like computers and online writing.

Online writing and computers have also meant that we are using picture writing again more than we have since the invention and spread of the phonetic alphabet. While hieroglyphics are not making a comeback, online writing has led to the use of picture writing in the form of computer icons. Bolter discusses how an electronic text will have alphabetic signs, but it has picture elements of different sizes and functions as well. These elements address the reader and writer of the online text without referring to speech like standard non-digital writing does (50). He explains this concept further in his discussion of icons as picture writing,

> We can see the eclectic and animated qualities of the computer's picture writing in the now familiar example of the Macintosh desktop…Files take the shape of shaves of paper; files are contained in libraries that are represented as folders. A program for word processing may look like a hand writing on a piece of paper. When the user wants to get rid of a file, he or she drops it into a metaphorical trash can. Every image is the reification of some aspect of information processing (50-51).

Computer icons are picture writing and, if people have computer literacy, they do not have to think about what the icon means. They just know when they look at it. All of that is truer today than when Bolter wrote this book back in 1991. There are now even more computer icons that are instantly recognizable. If the person is familiar with the type of computer they are using, they

do not need the words "settings", "documents", "Google Chrome", under the icon because they see the icon and read it for what it represents. Examples of common computer icons are the icons for internet browsers such as Google Chrome, Fire Fox, Safari and the Microsoft office icons for Word, Power Point, and Excel. Reading these icons comes easy as reading a word on a page.

The wide spread use of emojis is another way that picture writing is starting to thrive again, in ways that it would not have without online writing. They started because of texting, but their use has now grown to other forms of online writing, mostly social media. While emojis may have started out as simple smiley faces that could be added to texts to help express emotion and tone, they have now taken over. There are tons of emojis, different facial expressions representing emotions, animals, foods, drinks, buildings, flags, other objects. In fact, there are so many that it is now possible to write out a sentence using completely emojis with little to no words and letters. Most people when they receive an emoji in a text, they can read it just like they would read a word. If they receive the thumbs up emoji can recognize that it means that everything is good and might read it as saying "okay". It is a similar the simile face or sad face emoji. Most people will recognize that the emoji means the person is communicating that they are happy or sad or whatever expression the emotion the emoji represents. They can be used to help set the tone of the conversation by showing what emotion the sender of the message is trying to express. With the emojis that do not communicate emotions, such as the emojis that are flags, animals, foods, and drinks people can recognize them as representing the thing that the picture is of instead of using the word. For example, the dog emoji might be used instead of writing the word "dog", or the Spanish Flag emoji might be used to say "Spain". Emojis will not replace the phonetic alphabet, but they have influenced informal writing to such a degree that they can stand alone and still be read. Online picture writing in the form of computer icons and

emojis have not changed writing to such an extent that writing will turn back pictures only, but they have made it so the idea of reading a picture or writing using pictures is not only a writing style of the past.

Throughout its history, writing has developed and changed with the invention of new technologies such as the phonetic alphabet, paper, ink pens, computers, and the internet. Online writing has opened up a new world which has changed writing in different ways. Thanks to online writing, today we write more than ever. It is hard to go even one day without writing online, even if it is just sending a text or email or posting on Facebook. A lot of online writing is informal writing which has developed its own set of grammar rules and abbreviations. Online writing has given writing the opportunity to talk back through comments and discussion boards. The internet, the computer, and online writing have created so many changes in writing that new literacies have been created so people can effectively use these new technologies. Finally, online writing, though computer icons and emojis have meant that picture writing is starting to make a small resurgence, meaning that is no longer strange for people to read a picture as if it were writing. Online writing, at least for those in the Western world, has had a major impact as writing as we know it today, and will likely continue to change writing as computers and other technologies advance.

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