

The Phenomenology of Writing: Handwriting to Typewriting

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The History

Writing is a way of storing information. Before writing, human memories served this purpose and in many instances, it was the task of select and specially trained groups of people who were trusted with this important job (Gaur, p.14). The connection between the storage of information and technology is nothing new (Gaur, p. 36). Before true writing, script that makes use of marks which relate commonly to articulate speech, humans made use of various graphic symbols and memory tools in order to store information (Fischer, 2001).

As Bolter (1991) explains, “writing is a technology for collecting memory, for preserving and passing on human experience” (p. 33). As human society advanced, the needs and methods of recording ideas and information became a necessity. Over thousands of years, writing developed from graphic memory tools such as knot records, notches, pictographs, tallies, string games, and coloured pebbles to the written words we know today. All methods recorded human perception and were used for communication (Fischer, 2001).

The first script, or true writing was created around 3500 BC by the Sumerians of Mesopotamia (Ong, 2003). This script, called cuneiform, began as a method of record keeping for trade, and then later was also used to record laws and edicts of kings (Gaur, 14).

In the fifteenth century, the mechanization of writing began with the invention of the printing press (Bolter, p. 33). Later, in the mid nineteenth century a shift began to take place as typewriting became viewed as an alternative to handwriting (Smith, 2013). Many people found typewriting was clearer and easier to read, was much faster than writing by hand, and enabled information to be distributed at a much quicker pace.

Although there are over fifty inventors of the typewriter, the first was the Sholes and Glidden design that not only named the machine “typewriter” but also created the QWERTY keyboard, which we use today.

Cultural Impact

The first model of the typewriter was not well received as it could only produce uppercase letters which was (and still is) considered “ill mannered or SHOUTY” (Smith, 2013, p. 101). The next few models that were produced corrected many of the original problems, and typewriters became four times faster than copying text by hand, with fast typists able to type up to 120 words per minute (Smith, 2013).

People also had varying opinions about the noise of the typewriter. Whereas some people preferred the silent act of writing by hand, others preferred the clickety-clack of fingers pressing down on the keys, as the noise indicated that something was being accomplished

or completed (Acocella, 2007). The noise of the typewriter became synonymous with the unavoidable and insistent reminder of the “technologisation of knowledge” (Johnson, 2003).

Women in the Workplace

As a result of the increasing amount of information new technologies such as the typewriter produced, many low paid, routine office jobs were created to help keep track of this information. Companies hired women as typists, as middle class, educated women were cheaper to employ than men, and clerical work paid more than any other job open to women at that time (Boyer, 2004). This resulted in significant changes to the gender dynamics in the work place and the role and power of women. In the late nineteenth century, the word “typewriter” referred to not only the machine, but also a female typist. Johnson states that the “typewriter brought with it not only women, but noise. It transformed the gendering of information storage and confidentiality- the ‘secret-ary” (p. 7). This made some people uncomfortable, as this modern form of technology brought women out of the home and into the workplace, a predominately male environment at that time.

Not everyone was impressed with this new invention however, and in the 1940’s philosopher Martin Heidegger expressed his dismay at the increasing use of the typewriter believing it endangered the connection between the word and the movement of the hand (Chandler, 1992). “The word no longer passes through the hand as it writes and acts authentically but through the mechanized pressure of the hand.” (Heidegger, 1942 cited in Chandler, 1992)

Others argued that unlike handwriting, which involved the use of only one hand, typewriting engaged both hands. In addition, both writing with a pen on paper, and pressing on keys on a typewriter, were similar in that they both were created by the motion of the hand, wrist and fingers, and both actions involved touching the surface on which one was writing.

In writing by hand, the eye must constantly watch the written line and only that. It must attend to the creation of each written line, must measure, direct, and, in short, guide the hand through each movement. For this, the written line, particularly the line being written, must be visible. By contrast, after one presses down briefly on a key, the typewriter creates in the proper position on the paper a complete letter, which not only is untouched by the writer’s hand, but is also located in a space entirely apart from where the hands work.

Beyerlen cited in Kittler, p.195

Some typewriter inventors came up with ways to imitate handwriting, and many offered different cursive fonts to make the writing appear more personal (Polt, 1996), yet Heidegger and many other critics felt that using a typewriter resulted in a loss of intimacy with the text. The absence of editing marks, crossed out ideas, illegible scrawls and spelling errors created a perfect, pristine, professional piece of writing lacking character and authenticity.

While the typewriter was the medium of communication in the business world, social writing was still done by hand. “For some writers, in contrast to the text which is printed with a typewriter... ‘handwriting is associated with a process of discovery and an intimate (therefore private) relationship with the words’” (Lyman, 1984 as cited in Chandler, 1992, para. 22). For many people, receiving a letter that was typed—each letter identical, a uniform size and shape, was insulting. It felt impersonal and created a distance between the writer and the reader. Typing sent a different message than handwriting. According to Polt (1996), “the character of the activity... depends on the medium in which it is carried out” (para. 14). To some people, a typed text was interpreted as being more important than a handwritten text because it was looked professional and permanent, to others, it was offensive because it could be produced much quicker than handwriting and conceivably took less thought than writing by hand.

Typing reduced expression... from personal to impersonal... The typewriter is a good distancer. You're less closely attached to what you're writing. Handwriting remains part of you. It's difficult to see the shape of sentences in the maze of handwriting. When typing, you're more conscious of the appearance of your writing. You view it stretched out before you, detached from you.

(McLuhan, 1969 cited in Chandler, 1992, para 34).

Typewriters in Education

Technology from wax tablets to graphite pencils has always had a place in classrooms (Kalmbach, 1996). In 1932 a study by Wood and Freeman on the effects of typewriters on classroom performance, helped smooth the way for the acceptance of typewriters in schools. They found that students who had typing instruction only spent an hour or two a week at the typewriter, yet by the end of the year they performed better in reading than the non-typing students. Additional studies also found that students who used a typewriter, did better in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, paragraph meaning, word study skills, vocabulary and reading comprehension (Cothran & Mason, 1978).

Typewriters were less expensive than a letterpress, required less skill to operate, and were cleaner and safer than a moving press. Researchers also found that students who used typewriters wrote more, wrote longer pieces of writing with fewer mistakes, and had a better attitude towards writing than those students who wrote texts by hand. Teachers also valued the “print-like character of typing, the quality of the letter forms...the relative compactness of typewritten texts...[and] felt that students’ success with a typewriter helped them maintain their interest in school” (Kalmbach, 1996, pg. 62).

The typewriter also had its critics in the educational setting. With regards to the writing space itself, some argued that the typewriter and its uniform font, even line spacing, and lack of editing or revision marks cause “tension between the appearance of a page on the one hand and the content of the page on the other,” making a page look “so good that students can have difficulty moving beyond the appearance of that page to attend to the quality of the actual text” (Kalmbach, 1996, pg. 58).

“‘Things of the past’ are still present” (Polt, 1996, para. 1), it is the world they were created in and for that has transformed. The context in which objects like the typewriter were relevant and useful has changed, yet its effects on modern day society remain. It blazed the way for computers and other word processing devices we use today. The QWERTY keyboard and the way we still format academic papers and essays all can be traced back to the typewriter. For some, the typewriter had a negative impact on the writer’s *experience* of writing, but it is undeniable that we would not be where we are today without this great invention.

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