HOW WRITING WORKS

From the Invention of the Alphabet to the Rise of Social Media

DOMINIC WYSE

'This is an insightful and far-ranging book on writing, its history, and how to teach it. Drawing on the insights of philosophers, scientists, educators, and accomplished writers, Dominic Wyse lays bare the power, mystique, and the pleasures of writing.'
Steve Graham, Arizona State University

'Wyse's deep dive into the history of writing will make this book an instant classic and a must-read for scholars who study any aspect of writing. It is not an ordinary history of a discipline, but a rigorous and creative text that will make readers rethink relationships between music, composing, creativity and writing across our lifespans.'
Jessica Pandya, California State University, Long Beach

'Like music of the soul with an original melody, replete with philosophical and historical notes, this book captures the very essence of writing and composition processes. Dominic Wyse's new volume switches up the tempo of current research to consider writing differently.'
Kathy A. Mills, Learning Sciences Institute Australia,
Australian Catholic University

DOMINIC WYSE is Professor of Early Childhood and Primary Education at University College London Institute of Education. He is author of *The Good Writing Guide for Education Students* and *Teaching English, Language and Literacy*. He has been an invited expert for BBC *Newsnight* and the BBC Radio Four *Today* programme, and for the *Guardian* and *Times* newspapers.

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Dominic Wyse
University College London

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How Writing Works

From the invention of the alphabet to the explosion of the internet, Dominic Wyse takes us on a unique journey into the process of writing. Starting with seven extraordinary examples that serve as a backdrop to the themes explored, the book pays particular attention to key developments in the understanding of writing and language, including Aristotle's grammar, socio-cultural multimodality, and pragmatist philosophy of communication. Analogies with music are used as a comparator throughout the book, yielding radically new insights into composition processes. The book presents the first comprehensive analysis of the *Paris Review Interviews* with the world's greatest writers such as Louise Erdrich, Gabriel García Márquez, Ted Hughes, and Marilynne Robinson. It critically reviews the most influential guides to styles and standards of language, and presents new empirical research on young people's creativity and writing. Drawing on over twenty years of work, Wyse presents research-informed innovative practices to demonstrate powerfully how writing can be learned and taught.

DOMINIC WYSE is Professor of Early Childhood and Primary Education at University College London Institute of Education. He is author of *The Good Writing Guide for Education Students* and *Teaching English, Language and Literacy*. He has been an invited expert for BBC *Newsnight* and the BBC Radio Four *Today* programme, and for the *Guardian* and *Times* newspapers.

This book is dedicated to Pascal Wyse, an outstanding composer of music, text and comedy.

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Introduction

Written language is a supreme achievement that distinguishes humans from animals. For many millions of people across the world, being literate gives access to vital parts of social and cultural life, and being illiterate results in more limited opportunities. For employment as an academic, journalist, and of course writer, writing is central to the work. For professional people, writing is a main vehicle for getting work done. For other jobs, writing is vital to efficient practices including health and safety. And for many people, writing as a source of pleasure, recreation, and reflection is what they value most. One thing all writers have in common is the challenge to write well. The challenge for a tiny minority is to reach 'immortality' in their writing, but for most people the challenge is making writing effectively reflect the meanings and messages they want to create and communicate. For children, the challenge is learning to write in the first place, and for teachers the challenge is helping their learners to do this. But in spite of the thousands of years of history of writing, and in spite of its global use today, writing has attracted less attention from researchers, particularly compared to oral language and reading.

The beginning of my exploration of writing was informed by both seminal and more recent books written by people with different kinds of relevant expertise, for example by classicists (e.g. Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*), philosophers (Aristotle, *On Interpretation*), anthropologists (Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*), cognitive scientists (Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*), psychologists/educationalists (David Olson, *The World on Paper*), linguists (David Crystal, *The Stories of English*), literary/media theorists (Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*), journalists (Lynn Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*), and accounts by writers (Stephen King, *On Writing*). In answer to a question about the origins of his poems the poet Ted Hughes said:

> Well, I have a sort of notion. Just the tail end of an idea, usually just the thread of an idea. If I can feel behind that a sort of waiting momentum, a sense of some charge there to tap, then I just plunge in. What usually happens then – inevitably I would say – is that I go off

in some wholly different direction. The thread end of an idea burns away and I'm pulled in – on the momentum of whatever was there waiting. Then that feeling opens up other energies, all the possibilities in my head, I suppose. That's the pleasure – never quite knowing what's there, being surprised. Once I get onto something I usually finish it. In a way it goes on finishing itself while I attend to its needs. It might be days, months. Later, often enough, I see exactly what it needs to be and I finish it in moments, usually by getting rid of things.[1]

Hughes was not only a great poet, he was also interested in how people learn to write, so much so that he published a book on the matter, *Poetry in the Making*, subtitled *A Handbook for Writing and Teaching*. The aims behind Hughes' book prompt a wider question about the ways in which writing and language might be taught and learned. If people are to learn, there needs to be some agreement about things to be taught and the best ways of doing so.

One of the first examples of a book designed to teach English language use was published in no less than 100 editions. The author became a household name in the UK and in the USA, and a citation to his name was even used by Charles Dickens in *Dombey and Son*[2]. And the title of this book?:

WALKER'S
PRONOUNCING DICTIONARY
OF THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE.
ABRIDGED
FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS
CONTAINING
A COMPENDIUM OF THE
PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION
WITH THE
PROPER NAMES
THAT OCCUR IN
THE SACRED SCRIPTURES
TO WHICH IS LIKEWISE ADDED,
A SELECTION OF GEOGRAPHICAL PROPER NAMES AND DERIVATIVES.[3]

The author, John Walker (1732–1807), had a first job as a professional actor, including a run in London's Covent Garden. But his second career was as an educator: initially setting up his own school. After a disagreement with the co-founder of the school, Walker took up the teaching of elocution, at which he excelled. So much so that he was soon educating royalty. His major contribution was a theory of inflections. His attention to the pitch of the voice built on the

[1] Heinz, 'Ted Hughes', 17. [2] Crystal, *Stories of English*, 406.
[3] Planned in 1774 then finally published in 1791.

work of Joshua Steele who had investigated vocal pitch in relation to music.[4] As is clear from the title of Walker's book, he was concerned that young people should learn to use language 'correctly' as he saw it. However, his wasn't a book about the composition of writing but more about other important elements of language. Books directly about writing were to come later.

How Writing Works is about the process of writing: the place of meaning as the driving force of writing; and the 'ear of the writer' that enables writing. The work on the book was driven by the following questions:

In what ways does meaning drive writing?
How should we understand writing theoretically?
How do key moments in the history of writing enable us to reflect on writing now?
What are the relationships between the composition of meaning, and the technical elements of writing such as structure, sentences, words, letters, and sounds?
What are the relationships between oral and written language?
How are conventions and standards of language established and applied, and in what ways do and should they impinge on writing?
What is the nature of creativity in writing?
And consequently: how does writing work and therefore how is writing best taught?

Although the book does make occasional comparisons with other languages, when appropriate, its main focus is on writing in English. My intention is to present a new and more complete account of the process of writing. By way of introduction to some of the themes of the book, and I hope as a means to engage you, I begin with seven short stories of writing.

1

It was a cold morning and the sky was brilliant blue. The crowd waited expectantly. A countdown commenced. At 'zero' the roar of rocket engines vibrated through people's chests. The shuttle moved slowly at first, as if the shackles would stop it escaping, but then with gargantuan force its forward momentum quickened. The white of its tiled hull, and the white smoke from the rockets, contrasted strongly with the blue sky. In a few short minutes, the shuttle was out of sight and had left the earth's atmosphere. At NASA's Mission Control the pictures of the *Columbia* Space Shuttle's orbit were clear, and radio contact with the crew was fully functional.

While one of the NASA mission control team had been watching the launch, he thought he spotted something. On playback of the launch video, 82 seconds in, the scientist saw what looked like a small object bouncing off the wing of the shuttle. He alerted his manager. Emergency meetings were convened. PowerPoint presentations of technical information were discussed.

[4] Beal, 'Walker, John' in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

Having considered the PowerPoint slides, high-level NASA officials decided that the *Columbia* was not in danger, and further investigations were not necessary, not even the option of powerful military spy cameras that could have photographed any damage to the Shuttle for further analysis.

Twelve days later, on 1 February 2003, the Columbia disintegrated on re-entry to the earth's atmosphere, killing all seven crew members.

The *Columbia* disaster was a tragic event that highlighted the risks astronauts take in the exploration of space. An uncomfortable aspect of the *Columbia* disaster was that writing, in the particular structural and communicative form of the PowerPoint presentation package, was seen as a contributing factor in the disaster because it resulted in key messages being missed. 'Death by PowerPoint' could never have been more serious or literal.

The problem with PowerPoint involved the ways in which meaning was structured. Bullet points at higher levels, and in the executive summaries, suggested that *Columbia* was safe[5]. Technical points that suggested that fatal damage to the shuttle was a possibility were lower in the textual hierarchy of bullet points. At the same time the PowerPoint slides were being produced, NASA engineers were exchanging emails (more simply structured texts) about what they saw as a credible danger.

A formal report into the tragedy by the Columbia Accident Investigation Board concluded that:

> As information gets passed up an organization hierarchy, from people who do analysis to mid-level managers to high-level leadership, key explanations and supporting information are filtered out. In this context, it is easy to understand how a senior manager might read this PowerPoint slide and not realise that it addresses a life-threatening situation.
>
> At many points during its investigation, the board was surprised to receive similar presentation slides from NASA officials in place of technical reports. The Board views the endemic use of PowerPoint briefing slides instead of technical papers as an illustration of the problematic methods of technical communication at NASA.[6]

2

Pierre was happy. He had finished work for the day and was free to spend a precious hour or two on his hobby. A few months ago, he had found *Arithmetica*, a new translation of ferociously difficult mathematical problems. He had already easily solved seven of the problems in the *Arithmetica*. Most of the problems required extended mathematical proofs written out in lengthy series of equations. But Pierre was impatient to get through, so as a shortcut he would begin the solution to a problem, then when he was certain he could solve

[5] Tufte, *Cognitive Style of Powerpoint*. [6] Tufte, *Cognitive Style of Powerpoint*, 11

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