

Book Review: *Why writing still matters: Written communication in changing times*. Cambridge University Press.

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1. Summary

This 190-page monograph by Guy Merchant, holistically viewing writing as a visible linguistic system, elaborates on what writing is, how writing evolves, and why writing is important. As indicated in the subtitle, by “writing”, the author means a form of communication, which is an umbrella term encompassing various communicative ways instead of a sort of individual language skill.

The idea behind this book is made clear in the preface part: the written word, going through profound historical shifts in displaying forms and technologies, is like a mirror reflecting people’s minds and bringing people bittersweetness in assuring clarity and accuracy, which merits in-depth and multi-lens investigation. With three questions posed, the curtain is on: Can I make sense? Can I create the kind of text in my mind? Am I up to it, and can I keep faithful to writing? These three questions are not only the driving forces of this book but also the ultimate aperception the author wishes us to figure out.

“Why Writing Still Matters” is cohesively compiled into two primary parts: Part One Impression and Part Two Expression. The introduction part lays the underpinning logic of this book: writing, exclusively alive in human civilization, is a double technology for impression and expression. “Impression” refers to the mark-making technology for writing, whereas “expression” means the communicative technology of writing. By “double”, the author indicates these two technologies are of reciprocity, that said, they are different yet co-dependent. This “double technology” theory pushes forward the whole book as the supporting framework, assisting in arguing why writing always matters in a detailed way. Apart from that, with adherence to a socio-material approach, “writing” in the following chapters will be interpreted in multiple senses (a thing, a text, or a physical action), which can be mapped on varied social and material scenarios, enabling a multi-dimensional understanding of writing.

2. Part I Impression

Chapter 1 Writing: A Visible Language: Bring out the fundamental point that writing is a visible human communication form, this chapter endeavors to elaborate on what writing is, and how it exists in a social communicative context. To achieve this, the author discusses the writing systems from a linguistic perspective while considering heterogeneous social factors, pointing out that different linguistic features and textual conventions of writing and oral registers are determined by distinctive communicative purposes and register functions. This means what distinguishes writing from other communication ways is its visibility via multimodal representation materials and a range of norms in experiencing this constantly changing world. For the visible and legible effect, both the linguistic symbol systems for mark-making and the materiality for mark-displaying are necessary. The former having to do with semiotics is the bridge of writing and communication, working in various language families and times. The latter is in nature a technology for writing in regard to impression-leaving, based on which the “display principle” of writing makes sense.

Chapter 2 The Matter of Writing: Tactfully connecting to the mark-making technology of writing in the previous chapter, the author elaborates “display principle” here, which is used for the showing of written words and can be interpreted as the material part of writing. To this end, a diachronic look at writing techniques and technologies is taken by illustrating obsolete writing materials from wax tablets and clay in Roman times to paper in the common era. The history of paper for traditional print-based writing is discussed, followed by that of screen for contemporary digital-based writing. Both techniques hold merits and maps on the display principle for their word-appearing for legibility. Employing writing techniques also requires collaborative physical activities involving various body parts and varying along the evolution of writing techniques, thereby inducing some physical impacts. With these, this

chapter ends up briefing some reproducing techniques for writing spread and mechanizing infrastructures for writing transmission across regions and periods.

Chapter 3 Writing Spaces: Design and Display: This chapter strives to discuss the influence that design exerts on display by stating several graphic-space principles and four writing dimensions. In the author's perspective, design has to do with the typographical (size, color, layout, etc.) way writing takes up a variety of graphic spaces like lists, e-books, or even wrappers, in which case a multimodal perspective is a must to better comprehend the "meaning" and heterogeneous outcomes of writing. An instance of a map here is adopted to buttress the significance of multimodality in writing for multiple cultural or economic purposes. By clarifying two dimensions of writing materiality, namely, mark-making and mark-displaying, the displaying principle and design principle are distinguished, which jointly generate the mark-making principle, and the three are actualized by writing, which accordingly produces different functions and results.

Chapter 4 The Promise of Writing: This chapter is written to argue that writing is promising because specific human behaviors extend to which, reflecting that writing serves to not only record information but also operate the world and human society in both profitable and deleterious ways. Confirming the integral part writing plays in real life, the author expands to "promise" by illustrating the indispensable cultural significance brought by writing, viewing the book as a form of extended writing with thinking-conducive functions (reflection, connection, and elucidation) for varied social outcomes, accordingly, the closely entangling relationship of writing and daily life is exemplified by the everywhere-availability of book. With these, this chapter and part I of the book culminate in a warning and stressing that writing matters due to its duo effects: being both pleasing and undermining, particularly in this digital era.

3. Part II Expressions

Chapter 5 Writing: Power and Regulation: This chapter elucidates the link between writing and power as well as regulation. Regulatory, legal items, workplace conventions, and commercial treaties are visualized and broadcasted by written words, while power is wielded and promoted by writing materiality independently or collaboratively with other media. On the other hand, however, writing can be controlled and restricted by regulations and power authorities regarding writing pragmatics, writing content, readers, and so forth. In brief, writing can be controlled and controlling at the same time. Based on this, writing can be a resort for political struggles, a tool for hiding truth and an instrument for patterning human lives in many ways, and "writing" here is a broad-sense term that includes not only written words but semiotics like hashtags. All these arguments are supported by examples to draw the conclusion that the power of writing can be released either intensely or gently for distinctive purposes.

Chapter 6 Writing and Knowing: Taking the genre

theory and "new theory" idea, this chapter discusses how writing and knowledge relate to each other in both advantageous and disadvantageous senses. Knowledge is acquired through learning in the forms of daily routine or academic practice, which largely hinges on writing technologies and writing practice. Academic writing and non-academic writing genres are thereby introduced given genre in line with Hyland (2008) as well as Biber and Conard (2019), highlighting that writings are produced to cater for practice-specific purposes. Aside from these, counted as a sort of cultural knowledge, religious writing can be a symbol of authority achieved by materialistic sacred texts in disparate regions and dynasties.

Chapter 7 Writing Narrative: This chapter focuses on a story-telling-aimed writing form: narrative, demonstrating an assorted of narrative forms and formats, which are composed and posted on different platforms based on different communicative goals. In what follows the author looks at everyday narratives, fiction/non-fiction narratives, literature (serious narratives), printed books, and digital stories, followed by some concerns when creating such writing regarding grammar, convention, readability, and the acceptance of multimodal creativity. This chapter ends up reiterating the cruciality of narrative as a written form, how writing promotes the implementation of narrative, and how it impacts human society in both favorable and harmful ways.

Chapter 8 Writing, Connecting, and Organizing: this chapter talks about the social communication or say, links achieved by writings of either paper or digital-based technologies. The author thus put forth the argument that writing is a huge deal in social lives by keeping, refreshing, and consolidating social connections meanwhile creating social interactions, and that there is a mutual-affecting association between specific professions writings, and work affairs. The author also has written labels included in this discussion, with the instances of signs, cards, indexes, and lists that are ubiquitously and sometimes discriminately serving as navigating, pigeoning as well as even dehumanizing roles in some historical events.

Chapter 9 Writing Futures: As the last argumentative chapter of the whole book, this chapter conducts some outlook of writing given the earlier-mentioned double technology (the technology for writing and that of writing). By examining a series of modern technologies, some potentials of writing can be foreseen. Hashtags and hyperlinks are put on the table here as promising comprehension promoters of online writing. Additionally, some speech-like writing and the corresponding changing relationships of writing and multi-modal communication forms are predicted. Finally, wordplay (e.g., emojis, glyphs, and transcriptions) is discussed here as a writing form of great promise, due to its space-resistant and multi-functional quality in different cultural contexts. With these, the author jumps to the conclusion that as hard as it is to have an envision of writing, the developing awareness of which helps people genuinely understand the importance of writing and the paramountcy of using it wisely for the advancement of human civilization.

Conclusion: The section sets out to highlight the theme of why writing matters and always matters, while restressing the main ideas of the book. That is, writing,

hinging on particular technologies, and observing the display and design principles, is sense-making by influencing the thoughts and behaviors of human beings in iterating and interactive ways. Considering the new challenges of the innovation and cost of writing, the author has a book-end by emphasizing the impressing and expressing qualities of writing, proving that the meaning of writing to individuals and the world is remarkable and constant.

4. Evaluation

This book's successes in expounding the everlasting importance of writing. "Writing" here in essence refers to a visual communication approach. Therefore, this book is not so much about the primacy of writing as about that of the visible language. With this notion threading through the whole book, the history-proof impact of writing is proven to permeate and be profound to mankind's society on many levels. Generally, the benefit holders of this book are wide due to the broad scope and comprehensive variables involved, making it an illuminator to both linguistic and nonlinguistic-specializing readers. For the former, this book not only manages to shed light on sociolinguistics and functional linguistics but provides insights on discourse study including register study and genre study as well, the cross-country comparisons are also helpful to intercultural study. For the latter, on the one hand, this book can be an excellent introducer of the linguistics realm, at the same time, the discussion involving communication and new medium can also help stimulate interdisciplinary research consisting of but not confined to multimodal language communication and multimodal discourse analysis.

The specific merits of this book lie in several respects. First of all, the beautiful yet plain discourse renders the whole reading comprehensible and engaging despite some sophisticated concepts, as Guy Merchant brings up in the text, skillful writings make banal knowledge no more banal. Also, a good composition should have fairly clear coherence and organization, and this book is. To be exact, the between-chapter structures are designed based on distinctive variables, while the with-chapter structures are engaging being incremental or well-categorized. Most importantly, the leitmotiv "why writing still matters" has been well stuck to, making the whole argument sufficiently lemma-oriented.

As high-quality as this book is, certain limitations there might be. For linguistics learners and researchers, the linguistic analysis might not be strong enough due to the relative lack of linguistic theories. In the meantime, the historical development takes up an excessive part, making this book less "linguistic" to some extent. Despite these limitations from a reader's personal view, "Why writing still matters", illustrating how and why writing plays a crucial role in worldwide human cultures, is worthwhile for linguistic-major undergraduates, graduates, researchers, linguistic amateurs, and readers from other human science domains.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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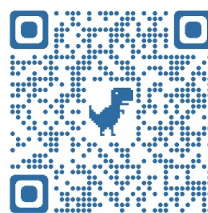
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