



# Editing

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By Carl Tighe

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## Introduction

If only for the sake of your reputation as a writer, it is essential your work is well edited and presented in an acceptable format. This may seem so obvious that it is not worth stating, but a surprising number of writers assume that someone – an in-house editor, a professional copy editor, a secretary, a tea-boy with literary aspirations, a secretary with nothing else to do, a cleaner perhaps - somebody, anybody - will 'sort out' their manuscript. Sadly, this is not so. Nowadays if you are offered the chance of publication, you will almost certainly be required to edit your own work.

The basic rules of writing and editing do not change from country to country. For example, here are three statements by leading Polish writers:

The appearance of genius is just talent working hard.  
Kazimierz Brandys (1916-2000)

The art of writing is the art of erasing.  
Julian Przyboś (1901-70)

Only that which comes after great effort is easy to read.  
Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1914)

Henryk Sienkiewicz was a Nobel Laureate, so we have no choice but to acknowledge he knew what he was talking about.

The poet, critic, playwright and editor T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) – another Nobel Laureate – wrote:

the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour, the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as it is creative.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Function of Criticism' (1933), in: *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953).

Eliot was right. While the role of commissioning editor may be pleasant, the role of sub-editor was always a hard slog and for most writers the copy-editing part of writing is simply a 'frightful toil'.

The commissioning editor is still around, but since Eliot's day the in-house sub-editor has almost disappeared. In-house proofreading and copy editing are rare these days, and the task of the writer has expanded considerably – the 'frightful toil' of editing is now very much the writer's task. Increasingly the publisher simply sends the writer a Style Sheet and tells them to get on with it. If someone later notices a mistake, the manuscript is not corrected in-house but sent back to the writer for correction, thus delaying publication. Where publishers do make in-house corrections they often deduct the cost from the author's royalties. The publisher's attitude is – if your work looks bad and it is full of errors you have only yourself to blame...

There are a great many rules to copy editing – a number of signs and a whole language to learn - but since most of this can be done electronically now, for our purposes the rules can be reduced to ten 'golden' rules:

#### **Ten Golden Rules of Basic Proofreading**

1. Never proofread your own final copy
2. First time, read everything straight through from the beginning to end
3. Then re-read from the last page to the first and even backwards for spelling errors
4. Then re-read all pages, but read them out of order
5. Have each proof-reader initial the copy they check
6. Have someone else read the text aloud while you read the hardcopy
7. Take short breaks so you can concentrate better
8. If you are part of an editorial team, don't make corrections but identify and list all errors for the author to correct
9. Alter your routine
10. Make your marks legible and your comments understandable.

Remember, a good writer-editor sees things that other people do not. In general when copy-editing, writers work to the House Style Sheet, which governs the look and presentation of the piece, but they also proofread for:

- Spelling
- Subject / verb agreement
- Verb tense consistency
- Point of view consistency
- Mechanical errors (typos, layout, paragraphing etc.)

- Word choice
- Word usage (here / hear; there / their / they're)
- Footnoting, referencing and bibliography

As you read consider these questions:

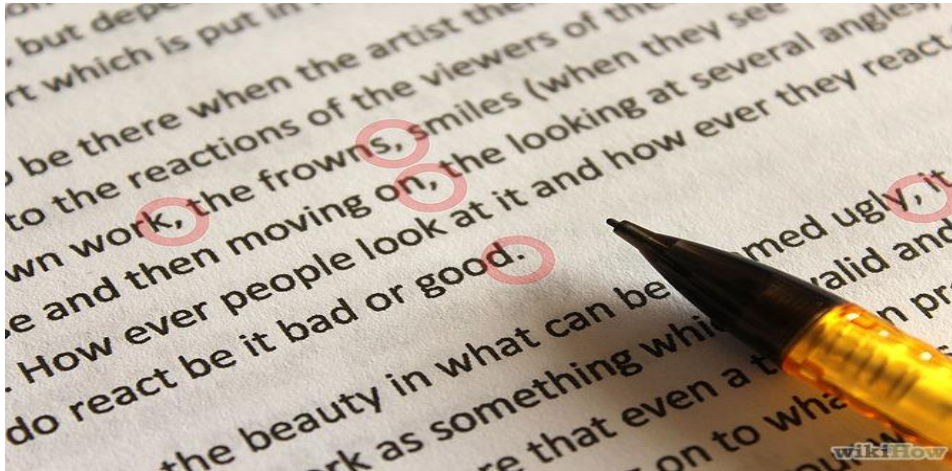
- In terms of editing, in what ways does writing at university differ from commercial publishing?
- How does a lecturer 'marking' a text at university differ from the commercial 'editing' of a text?
- What conclusions can you draw for the development of your own editing and writing skills?
- In what ways do you think your understanding of editing will change how you respond in workshops to editorial suggestions about your work?

### SUGGESTED READING

- 'What is editing, exactly?' (from The Writing Centre at North Carolina University): [www.writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/editing-and-proofreading](http://www.writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/editing-and-proofreading)
- 'Black Day for the Blue Pencil' by Blake Morrison *The Observer*, 6 August 2005: [www.theguardian.com/books/2005/aug/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview1](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/aug/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview1)
- 'Site Unseen: The Readers' Editor' by Ian Mayes *The Guardian*, 20 November 1999: [www.theguardian.com/books/1999/nov/20/books.guardianreview10](http://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/nov/20/books.guardianreview10)
- 'The Lost Art of Editing' by Alex Clark *The Guardian*, 11 February 2011: [www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/11/lost-art-editing-books-publishing](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/11/lost-art-editing-books-publishing)
- 'How Not to Respond to a Copy Editors' Mark-up' [www.editorialanonymous.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/how-to-respond-to-copyeditors-marks](http://www.editorialanonymous.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/how-to-respond-to-copyeditors-marks)

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## PREPARING TO EDIT



Remember: good books are not written: they are re-written  
Phyllis Whitney

Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.  
Mark Twain

A copy-editor is not the same as a commissioning editor, a sub-editor or a proof reader, though some people use these terms inter-changeably.

Generally copy-editing is when an editor corrects or improves the text or 'copy' that the writer has submitted, smoothing out rough passages, correcting errors of spelling, punctuation, grammar and expression. In general, copy editing is a blend of common sense, applying the Style Sheet, literary skill and seeing what other people – usually writers – do not see. Often it is a case of practice, of being aware of what can go wrong, of 'getting your eye in'.

Here are some examples to get you into the editing mood and editing mode. The following statements are typical of the kind of work a copy editor will undertake – they all contain inaccuracies, errors of grammar or phrasing and factual errors and they are all in need of serious editorial work. Can you improve / correct these statements? When you have finished compare your corrections with those made by other members of your editorial team.

***WARNING: On this exercise you should not trust your computer spell checker or grammar checker.***

## PART ONE

What do the underlined words refer to?

- ♦ Wash and core six cooking apples. Put them into a flameproof dish.
- ♦ I keep a compass in my pocket and I have a special map mounted on top of the petrol tank. With these tools everything works out fine.
- ♦ But for John's motorbike, a BMW R60, I'll bet there's not a mechanic between here and London. If he blows a cylinder or a gasket he's done for.
- ♦ There seems to have been a great deal of sheer carelessness. That's what I can't understand.
- ♦ Can you give Maria another Handbook, please? She's lost hers.
- ♦ My axe is too blunt. I must get a new one.
- ♦ I've heard some strange stories, but this one is the strangest of them all.
- ♦ Mummy will you buy me a bus? I want a red one.
- ♦ What kind of engine do you want? One with a whistle or one without?
- ♦ Have you got another one of these?
- ♦ The search party got back after midnight. They were all exhausted.
- ♦ His parents could not be traced. A neighbour said they were abroad.
- ♦ The flat has three good-sized rooms, each overlooking the park.
- ♦ Have some more wine. Oh, there isn't any.
- ♦ I've checked all the files. None are missing.
- ♦ His sons went into business, you know. But neither succeeded.
- ♦ These apples look delicious. Let's get a few.
- ♦ No more chocolate for me. I've just had my third!
- ♦ Which is better? The straight rod or the curved one?
- ♦ Look! Footprints. Let's follow them.

## PART TWO

These are genuine clips from letters of complaint sent to the Housing Department of Birmingham City Council over the last ten years. See if you can rewrite them.

- ♦ My bush is really overgrown round the front and my back passage has Fungus growing in it.
- ♦ He's got this huge tool that vibrates the whole house and I just can't take it anymore.
- ♦ It's the dog's mess that I find hard to swallow.
- ♦ I want some repairs done to my cooker as it has backfired and burnt my Knob off.
- ♦ I wish to complain that my father hurt his ankle very badly when he put his foot in the hole in his back passage.
- ♦ And their 18 year old son is continually banging his balls against my fence.
- ♦ I wish to report that tiles are missing from the outside toilet roof. I think it was bad wind the other night that blew them off.
- ♦ My lavatory seat is cracked, where do I stand?
- ♦ I am writing on behalf of my sink, which is coming away from the wall.
- ♦ Will you please send someone to mend the garden path? My wife tripped and fell on it yesterday and now she is pregnant.
- ♦ I request permission to remove my drawers in the kitchen.

- ♦ 50% of the walls are damp, 50% have crumbling plaster and 50% are plain filthy.
- ♦ I am still having problems with smoke in my new drawers.
- ♦ The toilet is blocked and we cannot bath the children until it is cleared.
- ♦ Will you please send a man to look at my water; it is a funny colour and not fit to drink.
- ♦ Our lavatory seat is broken in half and is now in three pieces.
- ♦ I want to complain about the farmer across the road; every morning at 6am his thingy wakes me up and its now getting too much for me.
- ♦ The man next door has a large erection in the back garden, which is unsightly and dangerous.
- ♦ Our kitchen floor is damp. We have two children and would like a third so please send someone round to do something about it.
- ♦ I am a single woman living in a downstairs flat and would you please do something about the noise made by the man on top of me every night.
- ♦ Please send a man with the right tool to finish the job and satisfy my wife.
- ♦ I have had the clerk of works down on the floor six times but I still have no satisfaction.
- ♦ This is to let you know that our lavatory seat is broke and we can't get BBC2.

### **PART THREE**

**See if you can identify the ambiguity in the following sentences – you may need to look up a few words in the dictionary.**

- ♦ Child's stool great for use in the garden
- ♦ New housing plans for elderly not yet dead
- ♦ New University Vice Chancellor expects little sex
- ♦ Stud tires out
- ♦ 12 on their way to cruise among dead in plane crash
- ♦ Stiff opposition to casketless funeral plan
- ♦ Chou En Lai remains cremated
- ♦ Drunk gets 9 months in violin case
- ♦ Chinese ape-man dated
- ♦ Iraqi head seeks arms
- ♦ Cadbury bars protest
- ♦ Queen Mary having bottom scraped
- ♦ President Clinton wins on budget but more lies ahead
- ♦ Urologist has problems with peers
- ♦ Deer kill 130,000
- ♦ Yoko Ono will talk about her husband John Lennon who was killed in an interview with Barbara Walters.
- ♦ Parliamentary complaints about FA referees growing ugly
- ♦ Two cars were reported stolen by the Manchester police yesterday.
- ♦ Witness saw the man with binoculars
- ♦ License fee for altered dogs with a certificate will be \$3 and for pets owned by senior citizens who have not been altered the fee will be \$1.50.
- ♦ Ingres enjoyed painting his models nude

- ♦ Tonight's program discusses stress, exercise, nutrition, and sex with United centre forward Will Fredericks, Fiona Stone, Dr Dick Bickerstaff and Terry Wogan.
- ♦ We sell petrol to anyone in a glass container.
- ♦ For sale: Mixing Bowl Set, designed to please cook with round bottom for efficient mixing.
- ♦ The shark-spotting helicopter apparently failed to see the shark even though it was circling directly above the bathers.
- ♦ As the guard went about his duties, he watched him closely, noting the time he came to feed him.
- ♦ I told my mother she should help her.
- ♦ If the baby doesn't thrive on raw milk, boil it.
- ♦ There are some sticking plasters in my desk, which I only keep for emergencies.
- ♦ Crack Found in Governor's Daughter.
- ♦ Something went wrong in jet crash, says expert.
- ♦ Police campaign to run down jaywalkers.
- ♦ Is there a ring around Uranus?
- ♦ Panda mating fails: Vet takes over.
- ♦ Miners refuse to work after death.
- ♦ Juvenile court to try shooting defendant.
- ♦ War dims hopes of peace.
- ♦ If strike is not settled soon it may last a while.
- ♦ Heat Wave linked to rising temperatures.
- ♦ Couple slain. Police suspect murder.
- ♦ Red tape holds up new bridge.
- ♦ Man struck by lightning faces battery charge.
- ♦ New study on obesity looks for larger test group.
- ♦ Astronaut blamed for gas in spacecraft.
- ♦ Kids make nutritious snacks.
- ♦ Chef throws his heart into helping feed needy.
- ♦ University dropouts cut in half.

#### **PART FOUR**

**Improve or correct these statements. When you have finished compare your corrections with those made by other members of the class.**

- ♦ In the late 1990s, the Lithuanians, as part of their reaction against Soviet linguistic imperialism, attempted to prevent Russian residents using the Russian language in Latvia.
- ♦ The Poles are very keen to learn German, but this is more than can be said for the Germans.
- ♦ Europe is very large and it is widely known that Germany and France occupy most of it.
- ♦ As we can see from the Polish revolt of 1988...
- ♦ Right across Europe from Britain to the German border with Russia...
- ♦ Radio's easy accessibility crosses ideological frontiers but can be jammed by powerful transmitters eg Russian jamming the BBC world service propaganda.



- ♦ In many cases radio is aimed at sub cultures and ethnic minorities aid by themselves. Why then cannot they finance their own schools and languages rather than have them forced down people's throats.
- ♦ Today's multicultural society in schools frequently outnumber white English in certain areas. In this respect their wishes to have their common language ie URDU appears sensible but this is England and we speak English and so should they!
- ♦ Migrants create ghettoization but will these accept the dominant cultures? No!
- ♦ The desire to be different can be destabilising if you are a member of Neo-Nazi cult objecting to immigrants spoiling their culture, objecting to ethnic minorities bringing in new religion, a new culture.
- ♦ France attempted to suppress minority languages even Anglo-Saxon.
- ♦ Smetana-Dvorak in Bohemia, Grieg - Norway, Mussorgsky - in Russia - folk songs in Spain and England all helped bridge the gap between High (French) Culture and local, regional roots.
- ♦ Even when achieved (Eire) international culture was too strong 'official' languages (Irish, Welsh) failed to live completely. Religious differences made a completely independent Ireland an impossibility.
- ♦ I've been into the desert with the French archaeologists. My secretions in the desert made me very happy.
- ♦ Bowls, Munich Beer festival, Dutch Cheese, Yorkshire Brass Bands, Scotsmen's kilts. Kundera (1984) thinks culture beat the Iron Curtain; Margaret Thatcher. (1988) Independent sovereign states are essential to Europe. Thomas Masaryk. (1918) Individual states draw closer together with interchange of ideas leading to UNITY not UNION.
- ♦ In the lowlands of Belgium and Holland, varieties of French, Belgian & Flemish are spoken.
- ♦ In Belgium three languages are spoken across the country in an effort to be fair in the treatment of all communities.
- ♦ The first few generations of immigrant workers speak both mother tongue and the new language incompetently, with resulting social disadvantage.
- ♦ English has become the lingua franca of the computer because the Americans first developed the language to use on their computers.
- ♦ Europeans are reluctant to integrate because they fear a single radio/TV European market will encourage cheap American imports.
- ♦ Some of the people interviewed said they no longer trusted the US, which had no history, but preferred a community of Europe.
- ♦ The Asian immigrants who settled in Rochdale 30 years ago still prefer to stay with their own kind and their own culture in spite of overcrowding. The media has not influenced these people.
- ♦ Europe will then be able to reassert itself on the world stage and freed from its past inherent weaknesses, promote the highest ideas.
- ♦ The Copernican revolution began with Kant.
- ♦ Copernicus was the first to discover that the sun was at the centre of the universe.
- ♦ The doctrine of the Rule of Law spread to all countries in Europe except Great Britain.

- ♦ Political democracy became established in Great Britain because there was a political and intellectual culture which was conducive to conciliation and experiment.
- ♦ Methodological was a purely scientific axis and became known as the experimental method.
- ♦ For modern European political thought to gradually transform the problems of when a political group who seek to impose on their views society has to be rectified.
- ♦ The role of the state was to acquire sufficient authority to protect the people against anything which might threaten their unity, identity or territory. The Germans tended to expand the role of the state.
- ♦ Science may equal systematic thinking or reason for European democracy to exist there has to be a relationship between science and politics not mechanical but shared ideas and ways of thinking.
- ♦ Stalin was so obsessed with the idea of dividing Europe that he built the Berlin Wall.
- ♦ In terms of the EU the surge of independence following the withdrawal of Soviet control has not been of great significance apart from the absorption of East Germany.
- ♦ Although Waever in his essay presents a model of competing Europes as seen from a number of perspectives, from different national viewpoints at a political level.
- ♦ The Soviets looked to Western Europe and saw states joining together for common good, they had made a good economic recovery, won independence from the USA.

## **PART FIVE**

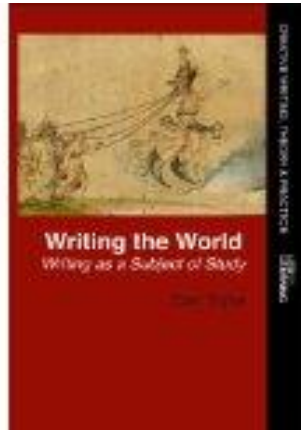
**Here is a list of statements about the rules of good writing – what is wrong with them?**

- 1 Just between you and I grammar are important.
- 2 Verb has to agreed with their subjects.
- 3 Don't never use no double negatives – not never, no-how.
- 4 A preposition is something a sentence should never be ended with.
- 5 Join clauses good, like conjunctions should.
- 6 About sentence fragments.
- 7 Don't write a run-on sentence you got to punctuate it.
- 8 When one is writing it is important to maintain your point of view.
- 9 Always be more or less as precise as possible.
- 10 Watch out for irregular verbs which have crope into the language.
- 11 Make sure each pronoun agrees with their antecedent.
- 12 In letters reports articles and stuff like that we use commas to keep a string of items apart.
- 13 Don't, use commas, which aren't, necessary.
- 14 Its importan't to use apostrophe's right.
- 15 The smothering of verbs is a cause of the weakening of the sentence impact.
- 16 As far as incomplete constructions, they are wrong.
- 17 Perform a functional iterative analysis to root out third generation transitional buzzwords.

- 18 Make sure you hyph-enate correctly.
- 19 Be careful of dangling participles writing a paper.
- 20 Don't abbrev.
- 21 Avoid the *de facto* use of pretentious foreign phrases *vis-a-vis* plain English - *toujours*: instead go for the *echt zeug* or at least *le mot juste*.
- 22 Check to see if you any words out.
- 23 Shun and avoid unnecessary excess words that you don't need or which are not required and avoid redundancies by not using unnecessary repetitions and superfluous words.
- 24 Never go off at tangents, which are lines that intersect a curve at only one point and were defined by Euclid, the famous mathematician and geometer, who lived in the third century BC in Alexandria, where he taught at the original Museum, part of the royal palace given over to scholarship, founded by Ptolemy I, a son of one of Alexander's generals.
- 25 Don't be kind of vague and well, you know what I mean, like that sort of thing, see?
- 26 Last, but by no means least, lay off with the clichés – they are a dime a dozen.

## AN EDITOR WORKS WITH A WRITER

by  
Carl Tighe



This is a rare chance to see a professional editor at work with a writer. It is also a chance to see the detailed preparation and editing work required of a writer, even at an advanced stage in the publication process. The text that follows is the first section of the introductory chapter to Carl Tighe's book *Writing the World: Writing as a Subject of Study* (London: Kingston University Press, 2014). The front cover appears above.

By this stage of the publication process the text of the book had been accepted and edited by the writer to conform to the House Style Sheet. The next stage, shown below, is about 6 months down the line, where the text has been marked-up by the in-house copy editor for further correction by the author. Each and every correction must be considered and accepted or refused by the author, and each question answered. This is a time consuming task and one which demands great concentration.

This is an academic text, so the range and variety of editing problems involved is huge. Editing a creative text – a script, book of poems or fiction - would probably not deal with facts, footnotes and references and so demand less editorial intervention, but the basic principles are the same. The important thing is to register the range of tasks the writer is expected to consider and the detail of the decisions they are required to think about.

The full text of this chapter is about 30 pages, and the book is about 300 pages long. While you may have encountered some of this material in a module reading list or in lectures, it will certainly aid your understanding of the changes the editor has suggested if you engage fully with the text.

Kingston University Press uses as standard Palatino Linotype with a font size of 11 for the text and font size 9 for the footnotes. You may find this rather small and tiring to read on-screen – if so, go to **View** at the top of the screen, then press **Zoom**, and click on 200.

If you want to look at the editing tools available in Microsoft Word, or to investigate the potential for the development of your own copy-editing skills using Microsoft Word, open up **Word** on your computer and then click on **Review** at the top of the screen.

As you read the following text ask yourself:

- What kind of change is the editor asking for?
- What are the main changes the editor wants to make?
- Why does the editor want to make these particular changes?
- What are the general principles of editing shown here?
- How might the writer respond to each suggestion?
- Think about your own writing and ask yourself: In Creative Writing, how does the work of this editor differ from that of a university lecturer?

*You will have noticed a grey area running down the right-hand margin of the page. This is the editing area, where the editor usually places comments and queries for the writer to attend to. You will now see how it is used in editing a text.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO STUDY WRITING?

It has never been possible to 'just write' because there is much more to writing than simply putting words on paper ...

Creative Writing has now established itself as part of academic life. But what does it mean to study Writing? The fundamental problems are -- and always have been -- those centred on the nature of language, the issue of truth in writing, the limits of language and the nature of representation in writing. And underlying any attempt to address these issues has also to address three complex and intertwined underlying problems. The first is that of the subject's relationship to the ancient past, to the idea of 'the Classics' and the issues the ancients uncovered when they started to write. The second is the 'great labour' of uncovering and recovering the various 'traditions' that make up the idea of studying to write, including the training involved in the oral traditions that preceded writing. The third is the relationship of contemporary writing to the established canon of national literature, to the work of university literature departments and to the idea of the University study. But underlying the following discussion is the assumption that Creative Writing is not the newest subject to arrive in universities, but rather the first subject of study, the original and originating subject behind all university study, the subject underpinning the idea of the university.

**Comment [A1]:** rephrase?

**Comment [A2]:** studying creative writing?

### Representation in Writing

The development of our species is partly the history of the development of a brain that is self-aware and capable of doing more than mapping and processing geography for the essential elements of survival. As Clive Finlayson has written:

Awareness of self would seem to be a natural consequence of awareness of objects in space and time including other members of one's own species. Having got it, whether because it carried some unknown advantage or more likely a side-effect of developing a large complex brain, self-awareness was added to our complex and intricate system of information transfer and communication. It produced an animal capable of situating itself in space and time, an animal that became aware of the consequences of its own behavior and mortality...<sup>2</sup>

Part of this self-awareness in humans is the development of spoken language and beyond that the idea of making a mark and leaving a record in writing.

Our species has been resident in Europe for only about 30,000 years, from when the retreat of the glaciers allowed permanent settlement. From earliest times, mainly from after 18,000 BC, in Africa and in Europe humans made their mark in cave paintings and portable artworks, showing a willingness to communicate by means other than speech.<sup>3</sup> Cave paintings, along with notched antlers and carvings in stone and bone, are a record of sorts -- they are probably the only the surviving examples of a much wider range of artwork on wood, bone and skin. But they are very difficult to interpret, and while they are clearly signs, they are not writing.

Writing is probably the most amazing of all the human inventions. It has brought about a revolution in the life of the entire human species and it has had the most far reaching and profound influence on all aspects of human life. It brought about a revolution that was decisive for the development of the human mind and the development of human societies. Writing is not just an aid to memory or a way of

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<sup>2</sup> C. Finlayson, *The Humans Who Went Extinct* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.217.

<sup>3</sup> A. Lamming, *Lascaux: Paintings and Engravings* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1959); P. G. Bahn, *Journey Through the Ice Age* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson: London: 1997); P. A. Saura Ramos, *The Cave of Altamira* (Harry M. Abrams: New York, 1999); N. Aujoulat, *The Splendour of Lascaux* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2005); C. B. M. McBurney, *The Stone Age of Northern Africa* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1960); S. Cole, *The Prehistory of East Africa* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1954); J. Cook, *Ice Age Art: Arrival of the Modern Mind* (London: British Museum, 2013).

recording something for the future. It is, in its very nature, a complex technology, demanding specialized areas of the brain to work at it, and as such it needs study and practice.<sup>4</sup> Writing is also in its very nature, creative and enabling of creativity. With writing we can behave in a whole range of ways -- good and bad -- not open to animals or to people without writing.

Comment [A3]: who don't write?

What I am doing in this book is looking again at writing as a subject of study, but also as something we take very much for granted. As the philosopher Hegel said:

What is 'familiarily known' is not properly known, just for the reason that it is 'familiar'. When engaged in the process of knowing, it is the commonest form of self-deception and a deception of other people as well, to assume something to be familiar, and let it pass on that account.<sup>5</sup>

Writing is an incredibly flexible tool for all kinds of communication ranging though the utterly trivial, the noble, the intellectually serious and challengingly creative, the flippant and even the kind of thing that changes the course of history. We can offer advice, guidance and information, set down a record of our origins and ancestry, make a record of the laws for all to see and understand, tell each other jokes and stories, create scripts for other people to recite or enact, describe moral and religious beliefs, satirise human conduct, direct armies, build complicated constructions like cities and space rockets, write poetry in which our deepest feelings are given expression, make a shopping list, gossip, stay in touch with family and friends in other continents, write smutty novels, limericks, rude messages on toilet walls, or 'tag' a building with graffiti. We can also do damage, disguise our motives, mislead readers, produce propaganda, forge documents, fake identities, pass on secret information, smear ex-boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, wives and lovers, perjure

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<sup>4</sup> J. Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> G. W. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (Harper: New York, 1970), p. 35.



ourselves, change our past, rewrite history, cheat, cover our shame, gain advantage, undermine colleagues, start wars, tell untruths, 'half-truths' and bare-faced lies.

Civilization and writing are intimately connected. While the early signs and seals made by humans were concerned with food stocks, phases of the sun and moon, charting the year and menstrual cycles, writing soon moved beyond that to become a record of taxes and accounting, to set down knowledge in science and observation in nature, and then on again to record the inner life, dreams, stories, aspirations, orders and plans. Writing became the essential element in developing civilization -- in the building and regulation of cities, in developing countries, states and empires, moving armies, conquering territory, teaching languages, developing government, making laws and regulations, passing on knowledge about food production and animal husbandry, in recording genealogies for ruling families, recording transactions and land ownership, inculcating identity and citizenship, for making all kinds of communications including propaganda. It was not possible to undertake the major building projects of the ancient world, often with a labour force of thousands, unless scribes wrote the plans, regulated, fed, paid and monitored the workforce, supplied the materials, arranged deliveries, fixed the rations, clothing and supplies for the slaves and other workers. It is no accident that the development of writing and the emergence of the first great empires of the ancient world happened at the same time and in the same places.

Writing, the ancients soon realized, is essential for any kind of complex thought where arguments and evidence need to be displayed for analysis and debate. Writing, they discovered, helped to create forms of knowledge, helped to record and analyse experience, helped to shape and develop complex thoughts about the world, helped to develop plans for the future and it soon affected the ways in which humans ordered their thoughts about themselves. The ancients also realized that *writing* something is very different from *saying* something: writing allowed return -- repeated inspection, analysis, interrogation, debate. And writing, it soon emerged,

was not just speech written down. Writing is a form of speech, but a speech that is silent; it knows but does not necessarily tell everything, though in time it often reveals more than at first we understood -- it says and does not say, and what it says is open to interpretation, misunderstanding and abuse. Writing is an ambiguous creation: it is morally neutral. And with this came the realization that while writing is a human invention and a conscious human act, it is deeply problematic simply because language and writing have their own inner life: they have a kind of logic all their own and there is much about them that is not quite under human control. The act of writing things down shapes and changes them -- but often in ways we do not at first perceive. Writing something not only makes a permanent record of the thing that is said, but it often, sometimes simply by leaving things out or ignoring the context in which things are written, changes that which is written.

Conversely, writing also often reveals other, previously unnoticed aspects of that which is written. Writing is not only a record of the things we consciously set out to record. It is a record of other things too, things of which we are often barely aware. Also while writing is a part of language and in part an extension of spoken language, it is not in itself language and yet, at the same time, it is a language all of its own.<sup>6</sup>

There is much about writing -- its history, theory, psychological and philosophical aspects -- that we still need to explore. Because writing links private emotion and opinion with public expression and intervention, and because as writers we are never exactly sure about the importance or reception of what we are writing, writing carries with it a complex 'representational burden' that other artistic media do not.<sup>7</sup> That is, the act of writing -- of trying to represent thoughts and feelings in writing, of trying to show a character or create dialogue for that character to speak -- demands not only the functional ability to write, but an awareness of the nature of language,

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<sup>6</sup> R. Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (La Salle: Illinois, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Cusk, 'Author, Author', *The Guardian* (30 January 2010), p.15.

the nature of writing, the possibilities of interpretation, and an awareness of the context in which we write.

The writer's search for an appropriate word, style or a literary form that allows them to capture some recognizable aspect of the 'real' world is not just a discussion about the nature of the 'real world', about 'realism' or any other style, but must take into account a wide range of considerations, all connected to the nature of writing. And to a certain extent most people who write are not fully aware of these problems or they have learned to live with them.

In many ways language and writing create and reflect reality, create and shape meaning, credit events and observations with significance. Dale Spender (b.1943) put this very precisely when she wrote:

**Comment [A4]:** add dates for other writers – pp. 7 and 12?

One of the tantalizing questions which has confronted everyone from philosophers to politicians is the extent to which human beings can 'grasp things as they really are'; yet in many ways this is an absurd question that could only arise in a mono-dimensional reality which subscribed to the concept of there being only *one* way that 'things' can be. Even if there is only one way, it is unlikely that as human beings we would be able to grasp that 'pure', 'objective' form, for all we have available is symbols, which have their own inherent limitations, and these symbols and representations are already circumscribed by the limitations of our own language.<sup>8</sup>

The brain can neither see nor hear; it has to interpret the signs and symbols conveyed to it by bio-electrical impulses along the nerves. It can never know or experience the

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<sup>8</sup> D. Spender, *Man Made Language* (Routledge: London, 1980), p.72.

'real thing', so our understanding of the processes by which we interpret the world is not just a problem of linguistics, but strays into the realms of human psychology, anatomy and physiology. The nature of humans is part of the problem. The human ability to manipulate symbols in words as part of the interpretation of 'reality' and the 'real world' is highly complex. As Ernst Casirer put it, 'language is the resolution of an inner tension, the representation of subjective impulses and excitations in definitive forms and figures.'<sup>9</sup>

Comment [A5]: Add date?

Writing is unlike the other arts -- music, painting, sculpture, even origami -- in that we have to learn to interpret the signs before we can begin to understand it. Before we can write we have to learn what the various signs are, what sounds they represent, what meaning they carry, how they might combine: in effect we have to read the signs before we can begin to manipulate them. In order to write effectively we have to become very proficient at interpreting the signs. And unlike the other arts, what is not said is included in this learning, what is hinted at, not said, left out, taken for granted. The context and the referents can be important as the signs themselves. What is actually written down is only part of the message. When we represent something in writing we are often supplying a great deal more than what is written. And to read and write we have to be very adept at following, perhaps even supplying, what the author is trying to say. Unlike the other arts which all go straight to the brain via the eye or the ear, with writing we have to learn to interpret the system of signs by which we seek to represent things. It is this element of interpretation that makes writing so different from the other arts.

Though it sounds a little convoluted, and perhaps even contradictory, before we can begin to write effectively we have to develop our conscious understanding of what it means to write. That is, we have to develop an understanding of what it means to

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<sup>9</sup> E. Casirer, 'Language and Myth' (1923) in P. Maranda (ed.), *Mythology* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973), p.26.

represent things (stories, characters, our past, our ideas, our plans, our perceptions of 'the world') in writing, an understanding of what can be represented effectively in writing and some idea of the limitations of writing. This understanding and the ability to manipulate verbal and written symbols are not talents we are born with -- though we do, it seems, have an innate capacity -- they have to be acquired and developed. As Raymond Williams (1921–88) put it:

Each of us has *to learn to see*. The growth of every human being is a slow process of learning the 'rules of seeing', without which we could not in any ordinary sense see the world around us. There is no reality of familiar shapes, colours and sounds to which we merely open our eyes. The information we receive from the material world around us has to be interpreted according to certain human rules, before what we ordinarily call 'reality' forms.<sup>10</sup>

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The origins of the debate about the nature of writing can be seen in the ancient world, when the effects and complications of writing were just beginning to be noticed. Writing in ancient Greece, for example, took a while to spread. The Phoenician alphabet was adopted and adapted by Greek culture c. 1800–700BC, and at first writing had very little impact: then somewhere c. 740–550BC writing began to appear on gravestones, on pottery, on stone tablets and plaques: the oral compositions *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were set down in writing. With this, Greece is in transition from an oral to a written culture and within a short space of time we can see this process in the lives of individuals. By the time of the great 'classical' philosophers writing was well established: there were schools and gymnasiums, schools of rhetoric, public and private libraries, and there were professional teachers: there were also professional letter writers and readers for hire in the market place. And we can see this transition in action in the lives and careers of famous Greeks of the time. Socrates (469–399BC) wrote nothing but relied on talking and listening; his

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<sup>10</sup> R. Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973), p.33.

near contemporary, the historian Herodotus (c. 484–425BC) read his manuscripts aloud in the marketplace, just like a traditional oral storyteller. But by the following generation things were different: Plato (427–347BC), who had been a student of Socrates, wrote down Socrates' dialogues and offered criticism of Athenian writers. And in the following generation things changed again: Aristotle (384–322BC), who had studied under Plato, wrote his teaching down in books in which he theorised about writing. The ancient world, it seems, went from almost no writing to a little writing and then to literary criticism and theory in little more than three or four generations.

Writing had clearly become essential to the running of complex societies -- its invention had become a necessity. At the same time society began to acknowledge the shift from rural, feudal, tribal forms to city dwelling, democracy and early forms of capitalism: the traditional public modes of literary address through oral storytellers and poets declaiming their work at festivals and parties or in the marketplace persisted, but were steadily replaced by written records, literary works and by private reading. Writing, issues of what was written, who could write, debate about what they wrote, rapidly became political matters: the ability to write opened up politics for discussion and it was in itself a democratising pressure. In Greece the change from an oral to a literate culture was marked by increasing tension between the conservative oligarchs of traditional oral style and the aggressive democrats of the new written style: in some ways we can see this clash in the long Peloponnesian War between the empire of progressive, aggressive democratic Athens and the conservative, traditionalist empire of Sparta (431–404BC); but this change is also visible in the life and work of three writers mentioned above -- Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

All three thinkers condemned the Athenian democracy whose freedoms they made use of. Socrates, while he read books and treasured the wisdom to be found there,

was very much of the embodiment of the old style, questioning everything but writing nothing. Plato, a natural conservative, in his *Protagoras*, *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter*, defended the style and authority of orality and what he saw as 'the traditional establishment' in his writings. He clearly distrusted writing and the rising class of democratic politicians along with the increasingly powerful traders and businessmen and their populist entertainments (poetry and theatre) which turned writing into a commodity. Although he wrote a great deal, he saw writing as simple minded and inflexible. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, for example, the Egyptian god Thoth shows the king of Egypt his latest invention -- writing. The king agrees that Thoth's previous inventions have all been very useful, but when Thoth tries to explain writing as an aid to memory and a record of wisdom, the king will have none of it. He says Thoth is very much mistaken: writing, far from being an aid to memory, will simply produce forgetfulness. And rather than record wisdom, it will help people to find information without actually knowing anything. It will, says the king, allow people to remain ignorant: 'You offer an elixir of reminding, not of memory; you offer the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom ...' Plato considered orality to be the natural condition of humanity and the more effective transmitter of tradition. Writing, Plato warned, changes everything by opening up new ways of thinking and proceeding. Nevertheless, Plato was no mindless nostalgic enemy of writing: his own written work -- *The Republic* in particular -- is highly organized and demonstrates superb literary 'finish'.

Aristotle, though he wanted to exclude all manual workers from citizenship of his ideal state, was much more a part of, and in tune with, Athenian popular culture; he took care to distinguish between the art of Rhetoric -- broadly defined as public speaking for the marketplace, courts and government -- and Poetics, which he saw as a private emotional response to the works of a writer. He clearly viewed Rhetoric and Poetics as parts of both the political life and the inner life, products of the human mind, and saw both as part of the developing business of words and writing, of placing private thoughts in the public domain. Aristotle saw the possibility of logic and rationality in writing: in literacy he saw a chance of understanding and

ordering knowledge of the elements of the universe and understanding the nature of creation. Writing was the key to understanding and to knowledge, and by the time of his death most of his categories of knowledge, now used in philosophy, natural science, language and literature, had been established.<sup>11</sup>

As writing spread in the ancient world so ideas about the difficulties and consequences of writing also developed. In an effort to describe how writing worked the ancient Greeks used the word *mimesis* (μίμησις). For the Greeks this word applied to dance, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, dialogue and drama. However, it is in how this word applies to writing, and what writing tries to do, that some of the difficulties of writing and representation revealed themselves to the Greeks. The word *mimesis* had a wide range of meanings including: imitation, depiction, representation, mimicry, similarity, the act of resembling, the act of expression, the presentation of the self, 'doing what another has done' or 'making something like something else'.

For Plato *mimesis* was not a positive concept and when he used the term there was always a slightly pejorative and satirical edge to his thought. He felt that was a distorted reflection of the real world and he developed the idea that *mimesis*, in fiction and theatre but particularly in poetry, was a secondary reality, an unintelligent imitation. Worse, he said, in book X of *The Republic*, this was often an imitation of things that were bad for society. *Mimesis* pretended to be an imitation of something, when in fact that something either did not exist or it was something that society should not imitate. For Plato this was dangerous because imaginative or creative writing often undermined and weakened the intellectual strength and judgement of society, did nothing to reveal the dilemmas of the real world and did

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<sup>11</sup> C. Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1977), pp.54-64; P. Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (Verso: London, 1974); J. Goody & I. Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy', in J. Goody (ed.), *The Power of the Written Tradition*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1968), pp.49-55.



not help to build rational decision making or to promote active citizenship simply because it was not part of, and did not deal with, the 'real world'.<sup>12</sup> Plato's ideas are those of a political reactionary: he was trying to undermine the power of writers in order to keep the rapidly developing Greek literary culture out of the hands of the masses: he did not particularly like the emerging Greek democracy and would probably have been happier in a society run by an oligarchy where the undifferentiated populace toiled away, just slightly better off than their slaves, and at the weekends enjoyed traditional oral forms of entertainment.

Aristotle was far more in tune with democracy and its commercial tastes. When he wrote of *mimesis* he quietly took argument with his teacher. He used *mimesis* to mean something rather different and less judgemental than Plato. Aristotle believed that imitation of all kinds was basic to humanity, that it came naturally to humans and that much of the process of learning in children was achieved through imitation. This, he thought was why people delighted in seeing well-made images and in reading well-made literary representations, since through them people came to understand the nature of things and 'work out what each thing is'. Aristotle differentiated between the role of Rhetoric and the role of Poetics; he understood rhetoric as an attempt to move people to a particular course of action through public speaking, and saw Poetics as an attempt to release emotion -- *catharsis* -- something more internal, personal and even private. Where Plato had been concerned with the function of poetry in society, Aristotle was more concerned with the manipulation of language and the creation and appreciation of literature as function of conscious human nature.

Aristotle used the word *mimesis* to mean that writing of all kinds (but particularly stories, poetry and theatre) did not simply represent or imitate something that actually existed; he was clear that writing fabricated, built a construct, made an

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<sup>12</sup> Plato, *The Republic* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1968), p.370.

artificial creation. Writing, he insisted, was not reality or even an imitation of reality; it had a relationship to the world, but was not the world; writing represented the world in its own way, but writing was a separate entity: writing was writing.<sup>13</sup> *Mimesis*, he said, was what distinguished Rhetoric from Literature; the aim of *mimesis* was *catharsis*, and in his book *Poetics* he elucidated the rules for producing successful mimetic effects. In saying this, even at this early date, Aristotle marked out language, writing and issues of representation as a legitimate area of intellectual interest and subject of study.

Interest in *mimesis* in writing may have begun with the earliest writing in ancient Greece, but it has been with us ever since. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) referred to Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* as 'a representation, counterfeiting or figuring forth -- to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture -- with this end, to teach and delight'.<sup>14</sup> In writers of the Renaissance period it is quite common to see a connection being made to imitation and the notion of 'counterfeiting' or falsity of some kind. Shelley too, in his *A Defence of Poetry* (written 1820, published posthumously 1840), pointed out that 'all things exist as they are perceived', and went on to say that 'language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination and has relation to thoughts alone'.<sup>15</sup> In modern times the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) took up Aristotle's ideas to develop the notion of language and the way it is used by individuals, and the idea that words could be seen as a system of linguistic signs and referents which could be analysed as 'the signifier' and 'the signified'.<sup>16</sup> Writers and philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Arthur Koestler (1905-83), Marshall McLuhan (1911-80), Roland Barthes (1915-80), Paul de Mann (1919-83) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) have extended the debate about *mimesis* and representation in writing, and out of their analyses came semiotics and semiology

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1996), pp.6-7.

<sup>14</sup> P. Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed., J. A. Van Dorsten, (1595: Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> D. H. Reiman & S. B. Powers (eds.), *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, (Norton: New York, 1977), p.505.

<sup>16</sup> F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916: Fontana/Collins: Glasgow, 1977).

(the study of sign systems) and post-modern 'deconstruction' theory.<sup>17</sup> In one way or another, *mimesis* is the dominant trend, the underlying theme and main tradition of all Western art -- visual and literary -- and the driving force behind the idea of writing.<sup>18</sup>

In English we do not use the word *mimesis* very often. We prefer the word imitation; but in reference to art and writing we often use *representation*. In Latin this word was a compound of *re* (again) + *presentare*; to represent meant to show, show again, or show repeatedly -- literally re-present; or it indicated an image or symbol that stood in for something else which was not itself present. From this root we can see how signs might stand for or represent sounds and words, and how words might stand for or represent things or ideas.

*Representation* is very similar to *mimesis* and just as complex: it has a long and varied presence in philosophy, art, art history, historiography, media studies, theatre, film, cinema, computer systems, political theory, linguistics, semiotics, psychology, psychoanalysis, political theory, literary theory, and in the history of writing.<sup>19</sup> In addition there are English words that cover specific aspects of the idea: 'emulation, mimicry, dissimulation, doubling, theatricality, realism, identification, correspondence, depiction, verisimilitude, resemblance'.<sup>20</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) has shown that representation also has a wide range of connected and related meanings: to call up by description, portrayal or imagination: to place a

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<sup>17</sup> L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Remarks* (Blackwell: London, 1975); A. Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (Pan: London, 1964); P. de Mann, *Aesthetic Ideology* (University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota, 1996); J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1976); M. McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1967); R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1953).

<sup>19</sup> C. J. Brodsky, *The Imposition of Form: Studies in Narrative Representation and Knowledge* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1987); M. Krieger, (ed.), *The Aims of Representation: Subject, Text, History* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1987); R. Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973).

<sup>20</sup> M. Potolsky, *Mimesis* (Routledge: London, 2006), p.1.

likeness of something before the mind or senses: to serve as an image, likeness or reproduction of something: to describe, depict, symbolize or act as the embodiment of something: to stand for something; to correspond to something: to be a specimen of something: to fill the place of or be a substitute for someone or something: an appearance or impression, especially of a work of art portraying something: the act of expressing or denoting something by means of a symbol, image, act or exhibition: in the theatre the act of denoting a character, action or set of events by performance on the stage: the act of placing a fact etc. before another by means of discourse: a statement or account, especially one intended to convey a particular view or impression in order to influence an opinion or action.

The more we know about writing, the more we realize just how complex the mental processes involved in using this aspect of the mind and its revolutionary technology really are. Writing and language not only enable us to represent the world in words, allowing us to get ideas out of one head and into another, but language also shapes and defines our ideas for us. And these topics -- writing and representation -- are so closely connected to the roots of the subject and its nature that it is hardly possible to consider the one without engaging with the other. For a writer, issues about the nature of writing and the problems of representation are intimately connected to their struggle not only to find the right word or the right formula of words, but to find the right literary form and the most effective method of presentation for the particular thing they are trying to say. Writing is like taking a verbal snapshot of a continually changing inner personal landscape as it responds to the continually changing external cultural context, using a medium that is itself constantly changing, shifting and evolving. And for the writer these problems don't go away: they keep coming back in different ways and they are with a writer all their working, thinking life. We have little choice but to acknowledge the ability of language and writing to create, challenge, compromise and transmit ideas and values, and to consider these as complex aspects and products of the human mind. In all these areas of meaning language is central to social and individual human experience: without language

human society cannot exist and without society human language cannot survive:  
without language a person is barely human.