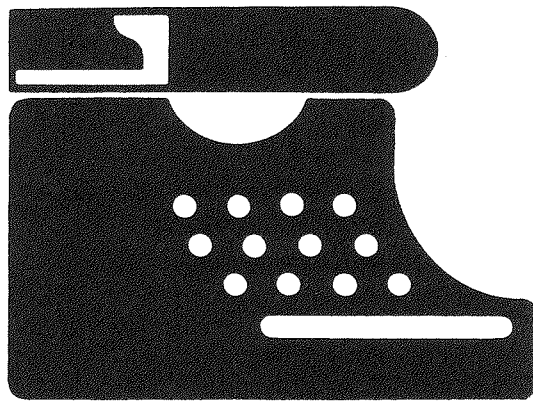


# Teachers & Writers



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## Special Issue!

*Editor's Note:* This special issue of *Teachers & Writers* is situated at the intersection of writing and history. The first article—a selection from the new T&W book *Like It Was: a Complete Guide to Writing Oral History* by Cynthia Brown—is about the writing of history. The second article deals imaginatively with the history of writing.

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# WRITING ORAL HISTORY

by Cynthia Stokes Brown

Students and teachers seldom write history; they usually read it. But that is changing as the understanding spreads that writing must be undertaken across the curriculum. Writing is so basic that it needs to be practiced and enjoyed in every discipline. English teachers may teach the technical and mechanical aspects of writing, but to develop real fluency and power, students need opportunities to apply their writing skills across disciplinary boundaries. The great thing is that there are challenging and interesting ways that young people can actually write history.

Writing oral history is not brand new to American schools; it is simply coming around again in the guise of “writing across the curriculum.” The last time around it was called “cultural journalism.”

The best known project in cultural journalism took place at Rabun Gap High School in the Appalachian Mountains in northern Georgia. Students there began publishing their material locally in 1967 in a little magazine called *Foxfire*, the name of a local organism that glows in the dark. In 1972 the first book of *Foxfire* articles was published nationally; called *The Foxfire Book*, it became a bestseller and has sold more than two million copies.

The *Foxfire* project stands for the idea that high school students, not just adults and outsiders, should take part in documenting the cultural life of their community. So much rich ore, fast disappearing, was to be mined that the task required all helpers available. And no better passage into adulthood could be imagined than having young people document the values of their community's wise elders.

But oral history was not a popular activity in schools much before *Foxfire* for the simple reason that it is difficult to accomplish without cheap, portable, effective tape recorders. The first professional portable tape recorder in the United States appeared in 1950. By the late '60s tape recorders had become widely accessible and had helped to transform the very nature of how we think about history.

The tape recorder gives voice to people without the time, resources, or skill to write detailed accounts of their experience, people who are, however, skilled at telling their story orally. In order to be heard widely and to be preserved, these storytellers need the assistance of writers who can transcribe their stories into literary forms, and that is where you come in.

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Now that tape recorders are relatively cheap and accessible to most people, anyone can write history from oral interviews. But students might wonder what they'll get out of it. You can tell them:

- You would be helping to put the people into history who belong there. You would be learning the history that is not available anywhere else or any other way.
- You would be serving the people you chose to interview and record.
- You would be explaining and celebrating your community's values, presenting its history as seen from the inside. Outsiders writing about your community are bound to value and describe things differently than your narrators would.
- You would be learning about the moral decisions that people have to make. An interview constitutes a way for you to talk with your elders about issues of great importance, which otherwise might not be discussed and which you need to be aware of as you make your choices.
- You would be meeting special, wonderful people with whom you might form a deep human bond.
- You would be honing your skills as a writer, which will enable you to play a more powerful role in creating the history of your community and world.

### Practical Tips for Interviewing

Here are some tips on the specific steps that are part of the process of interviewing.

#### 1. Making Arrangements

Make a visit to your potential narrator to describe what you want to do and to solicit his or her cooperation. Narrators want to meet the person who will be interviewing them; they can't imagine what the interview will be like just by talking to you on the telephone. They want the assurance of meeting you face to face before committing themselves to telling you about their personal lives. Talking on the telephone may not give them this assurance, and the chances are greater that they will say no if you try to make arrangements by telephone. Agree on the time and place for the interview, give them an idea of the topics you want them to talk about, and suggest about forty-five minutes for the first interview.

Describe how you intend to use your story and ask permission from your narrator. Explain that you will be sure the narrator gets a copy, too. Or if you want to publish it in any way—family copies, or in a school or community publication—then agree on the terms. The narrator should be able to review it before any publication. If you don't assure him that he will have this chance, he may be more inclined to censor himself as he talks.

If you would like to bring along a camera or a photographer to take photos, ask permission of your narrator. Or suggest that you would like to look at his photos and possibly choose some to copy.

Bring along all your equipment to this first visit when you are making arrangements. You and your narrator may not be able to wait, and you may want to get started on the spot.

#### 2. Setting Up

Find an outlet to plug in the recorder, unless you are using batteries. Find a place to put the recorder between you and the narrator, so that the microphone can pick up both of you. Think about noise in the environment and find ways to avoid it.

Find a place well away from other people. Having spectators doesn't work—they can't avoid jumping into the con-

versation. (Trying to interview two narrators also doesn't work; they often contradict each other and even argue. Do this only if both narrators were present at the same event you are investigating.) Make sure your narrator is comfortable; don't let him give you his favorite chair.

#### 3. Interviewing

If you are interviewing as a team, one person asks the questions and the other watches the equipment and takes notes.

If you are interviewing alone, it's still a good idea to take notes, if you can manage. The main things to jot down are questions and topics that you want to come back to, or questions you didn't get to ask because you didn't want to interrupt.

It is also a good idea to jot down the names of people and places that the narrator mentions. That way you can check the spelling with the narrator after the interview.

Remember to let the narrator chat in a natural way. Don't hustle him along by rapid-fire questions. Ask only one at a time. Give him time to reflect. Silence is wonderful; use it to jot down a note rather than to leap in with another question. Usually the narrator will reveal the most sensitive material only after hesitating; if you rush in with a question, you will miss it.

Keep an eye on the tape and suggest a break just before it runs out. If the tape does run out while the narrator is still talking, just flip it over and ask him to repeat a few sentences.

#### 4. Ending the Interview

Interviewing is tiring; stop before both of you are exhausted. Agree on a future time and place; plan with the narrator what topics you want to cover next.

Ask the narrator how he is feeling about the interviews. Is he enjoying them? Could anything be done to make them more pleasurable?

Sit down for a few minutes with your notebook and check the spelling of proper names with your narrator. This will make your job of transcription much easier. Also, take time now to make a quick sketch or a list of things in the setting where you are conducting your interview. You can refer to these notes when you write your introduction; you will be surprised how much easier it is to write when you have some written record—the more descriptive, the better. Use words as a photograph. If you have brought along a camera, a few pictures will supplement your narrative, but not substitute for it. Write while the scene is fresh.

#### 5. Follow-up

After each interview, label the tape with the date, name of narrator, and the topics covered.

Listen to the tape. You may want to make an outline of the topics covered and certainly will want to jot down questions for the next interview.

Also, analyze the interview for what went well and what did not. Listen to your questions and see which ones got a full, satisfying response. Notice which ones seemed to shut off your narrator. As you listen to the tape, it will be easy for you to hear what kinds of questions are most productive.

Write out a full description of the interview setting, how your narrator responded, and how you felt about it all. Just pour this all out in writing as if you were talking to your closest friend—or say it to your tape recorder. Then you

will have a record that you can edit and revise when you write your piece and want to introduce your narrator.

After the final interview, thank your narrator again for everything and say what it has meant to you. Give some estimate of how long it will take you to produce a typed record of the interview and remind the narrator of the terms that you both agreed to when you made initial arrangements.

As soon as you have a typed paper or a published article, deliver a copy to your narrator. He will be as excited as you are. If your narrator would like them to give to friends and relatives, you might offer to make or provide several copies.

### Looking at Old Photographs

Look at the photographs in figures 1 and 2, then consider these questions:

1. What clues tell you that this picture was taken a long time ago? Look in the background as well as the foreground.
2. What is shown in the picture that you don't understand? Whom can you ask to explain it?
3. What do you notice about the way people are dressed? How are their clothes different from your clothes?
4. What is different about the way people are posed? What are they expressing with their body language? How is it different from your body language?
5. How has money changed since this picture was taken? What does that explain about the way some older people act about money?
6. How are the advertisements different from ads now?
7. How has transportation changed? How are buildings different—their materials and their style?
8. Can you imagine yourself in the photo? How would you have felt?
9. Do you respond differently to black-and-white photos versus color photos? How?

These questions can be used with any old photographs.

### Tips for Transcribing

- Transcribe everything. Don't waste effort trying to decide whether or not to omit something; just put it down. Leave in the filler words—you know, the words people use in talking to give themselves a few seconds to gather their wits—or to check whether you are listening: “you know,” “well,” “you see,” “yeah,” “uh huh,” “right?” Put them all down. Later, when you edit, you can decide how many to remove. Here in the transcript you want a record of everything that was said. After you have become an experienced transcriber and editor, you may be able to omit most filler words as you transcribe.

An exception to the rule above is a section of the tape that is clearly off the topic you will be writing about. If your story is about designing low-cost housing, you can omit the architect's digression about her trip to Australia last summer, unless it has something to do with low-cost housing. If you omit a portion, make a note in the transcript by using brackets: [The first ten minutes of side two were not transcribed. They contain a description of a trip to Australia.]

- Use brackets for any other description you may want to include: [clears throat], [laughs gently], [pauses five seconds], [mutters unintelligibly].
- Use the last names of the speakers if they are a reasonable length. Otherwise, use initials or some abbreviation. Using two sets of initials may make it hard to remember which one is the narrator; use some device, like “Mrs. C.,” to distinguish the narrator from the interviewer.
- When you cannot make out what is being said, listen again. Try again later. Ask someone else to listen. Don't invent something; leave a blank in the transcript that can be filled in later. Go back and ask the narrator, if necessary.
- Forget about paragraphs. Experienced transcribers can put in paragraphs as they go along, but you and I are better off leaving that for the editing stage.



Figure 1

Photo: Rudy Burckhardt



Figure 2

Photo: Rudy Burckhardt

- When you finish transcribing by pencil, type the transcript. Make two copies of the typed transcript. One you will file as a permanent record of the interview. The second you will use to edit and write your story from.
- Audit your transcript; or better yet, ask a friend to. In oral history parlance, “auditing” means listening to the tape and checking it against the transcript to make sure that the transcriber heard and typed all the words correctly, did not add any extra words, and did a reasonable job of using spelling and punctuation to catch the meaning of the narrator. The sound of words can be deceiving; for example:

Transcription: They used to have the *customers* sitting up with the dead.  
 Correct: They used to have the *custom of* sitting up with the dead.

Transcription: I was appointed to the Task Force on *Economic Gross Inopportunity*.  
 Correct: I was appointed to the Task Force on *Economic Growth and Opportunity*.

### Interviewing a Guest

You probably already invite occasional guests to talk with your class about some topic they know first-hand. (If you can’t get a guest, *you* be the guest.) Let this be an occasion for your students to practice the skills of interviewing and writing from interviews.

Before the next guest arrives, tell your students what the topic will be and what the qualifications of the guest are to discuss it. Appoint a panel of two to four students to be the interviewers. Appoint a committee of two or three to operate the tape recorder; or have several committees of two or three to operate the tape recorder, or have several committees with several recorders. Select someone to introduce the guest. Other students can fill these roles for the next guest.

Have the entire class generate a list of questions for the interviewing panel to put to the guest. List the questions on

the board and evaluate them. Eliminate ones that seem less likely to generate interesting answers; figure out a sequence for them.

When the guest arrives, the committees carry out their roles while the rest of the class listens, perhaps joining at the end with more questions that have occurred to them during the interview. During the next class period, play back the tape for the class to evaluate. Which questions worked best? Why? What questions might have been better? What portions of the tape are most interesting? What portions might one want to transcribe? Why?

After listening to the tape, have everyone write a short report about the speaker’s visit. This can be done in class or at home. At the same time, appoint a committee of two or three students to transcribe and type short portions of the tape, but not so much as to be tiring. Distribute copies of these short selections to the class and have them revise the first drafts of their articles by working into them these exact quotations from the speaker.

Voilà! Your students have now completed their first oral history interview with a minimum of frustration and a maximum of cooperation. Discuss with them what they enjoyed and what they did not, what the problems were and what to do differently next time.

### A Sample Project

This project may prove captivating in classrooms: “Your Family and War.” Ask students to find out everything they can about their relatives’ participation in fighting wars.

#### 1. Finding People to Interview

Ask students to be family detectives and to find out what wars some members of their families lived through. Start with fathers or guardians, then ask uncles and grandfathers. Ask if there are family papers that might give information about further back, or people who know the family history.

Have students explain that this is a preliminary investigation; now they are locating people to interview and soon they will be back for in-depth interviews. For this step, students can keep written notes; recording on tape will come later.

Point out that women are also deeply involved in wars, even if they are not combatants. Remind students to look for information from women—mothers, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers whose lives were changed by war.

## 2. Planning Interviews

In class, have students share their findings. What wars have family members been in? List them all on the board. Which students have connections with which wars? List that information. Which students have found people to interview from more than one generation in their family, say, a father and a grandfather who fought in different wars?

Use this information to form working groups of four or five students. Organize a group around each of these topics that students have found narrators for: Vietnam War, Korean War, World War II, World War I, and any war across generations (this would include students who have narrators from more than one generation). If there are more than five students who have narrators on one topic, say the Vietnam War, set up as many groups as appropriate.

## 3. Planning the Questions

Make it clear that students should expect a wide range of opinion. Some men take pride in fighting, others do not, and it may vary from war to war. Have the whole class generate basic questions to ask. If students do not bring them up, suggest these: Did you volunteer or were you drafted? How did you feel about going? What happened while you were in the armed forces? What happened when you came home? How do you feel about it now? What effect did your being away have on the women in your family? How do your feelings about war compare to your brother's? Your father's? Your son's?

Some sample questions to ask women are: How did you feel about this war? How did it affect your life? What effect did it have on your relationship to your sweetheart/husband/son/father? What did you learn from this experience? How did it influence your present feelings about war? What moment from it do you remember best?

## 4. Conducting the First Interview

Teach students the information they need to record at the beginning of the tape: their names, narrators' names, date, and place of interview. Ask them to tape an interview with their narrators, using the questions generated in class and any others that occur to them at the time.

## 5. Doing Research

Ask students to discuss what they've learned from the first interview. They might play parts of their tapes for each other, if there's time. Ask them to list topics that came up that they didn't understand completely. Give them a class period to research these topics in the library or in class. Ask them to generate another list of questions, more specific this time, to ask their narrators. For example: Why were twenty-six per cent of all casualties in the Vietnam War black when only ten per cent of the population was black?

## 6. Conducting the Second Interview

Ask students to tape record another short interview with each of their narrators to clear up any confusing points and to get deeper into the material and the feelings.

## 7. Writing Up the Results

Ask each student to write an article based on listening to their interviews. After they have written a first draft, ask them to listen again and pick out a few passages that would make effective direct quotations to add to their articles. Have them transcribe these passages.

Students could then turn in their articles, or they could present them to each other in their groups and rewrite them again in light of their classmates' responses. Each group could produce a booklet on its war or on the different ways that generations view war. Each group could plan a class presentation based on combining the articles of each of its members in some way—talks and readings by each member, or making a new tape recording of students reading from their articles plus quotations from their narrators in their own voices from the original tapes. All this would take lots of time, but you would cover lots of material and students would learn lots of history and skills.

As you can see, these simple projects have a way of mushrooming, because often nobody wants to quit. The work becomes too interesting and provocative to let go of—a happy problem.

## Other Short Assignments

There are many short assignments in writing oral history that you can work into your curriculum.

### • Grandmother/Grandfather Stories

Have students ask their grandparents to tell them stories about their childhoods. If visits are not practical, this can be done by telephone or by letter. Students can first retell these stories and later write them up. This is a good chance for students to write language as it is spoken, not as standard written English. Students can bring in photos, mementos, and artifacts. Family time lines can be compared to regional or national time lines. A culminating "tea party" can be arranged so that all the students can meet the local grandparents. This assignment could focus solely on "grandmother" stories and could culminate in a women's history day during March, Women's History Month. For a resource catalog about women in history, write to the Women's History Project, P.O. Box 3716, Santa Rosa, CA 95402.

### • "Then and Now" Essays

Have students write "then and now" essays in which they describe current customs that they know well, and then go on to explore how the same matters were handled in their parents' or grandparents' day. They could conduct interviews, taped or not, with family, friends, or community figures. Possible topics are: schooling, teachers, dating, courtship and marriage, long winter evenings, popular music, sports, the roles of men and women, birth and child-rearing practices, burial customs, ceremonies, celebrations, food preparation, medicine and cures, religious and spiritual

practices. Gender differences in the perception of customs should always be examined. In multicultural communities the comparisons can also focus on ethnic variations in the patterns studied, as well as differences between “then and now.”

- **Biography**

Have students write a biography of a friend, sibling, parent, or teacher. For some period of time, maybe for two weeks, students would observe their person and keep a journal of these observations, including the results of one or more interviews. These journals could be shared and discussed in class. You could provide some categories for data-collecting and some interview questions; students could add their own. You could urge your students, when writing their essay, to bring their material into focus through one outstanding quality of their person or around one event in which their person revealed his qualities in action. Show, don't tell!

- **The Family Saga**

Have your students seen the television series based on Alex Haley's *Roots*, or read the book? Ask them to talk to the oldest member of their family and collect family stories that go back as many generations as possible. Students' grandparents may be able to recall something told them by their grandparents. In this project, students try to push back to the distant limits of their family's oral history.

To expand this, students could collect their findings and display them in a family history fair. Displays might include photographs, deeds, letters, artifacts, tapes and transcripts of oral history, and a map they make showing where and when their families have moved.

- **The Immigrant Experience**

Have students interview their families about the experience of moving and being a newcomer. Let them map the routes that family members have traveled; one can be considered an immigrant for having moved from one town or state to another. What was the route like back then? How did they travel? Why did they move? What attracted them to the new place? Remember that most of the ancestors of Afro-American students did not come to this country voluntarily, which makes their experience essentially different.

Contact local immigrant community organizations for groups of recent immigrants you might interview. Students in multi-ethnic classes may be able to work in pairs exploring each other's family experience with moving or immigration.

- **Community Folklore**

Folklore is the verbal folk art of a community. Some general categories are: fairy tales, ghost stories, tall tales, jokes, riddles, graffiti, songs, taunts, beliefs about dreams, superstitions, and raps. Children's folklore is a rich possibility: skip-rope rhymes, ball-bouncing rhymes, riddles, playground games, and taunts. Students could collect their own, those of younger siblings, and those of their parents and grandparents. Students can write these up from field notes or from tapes and create a booklet to present to the principal and librarian; the material could be used as the basis for a family night program or a school assembly.

- **Chronicle of a Local Event**

Students could study one significant event that happened in the community five to thirty years ago, perhaps a flood, a

murder, a fire, the solution of a community problem (something positive?). They could interview eyewitnesses and consult primary accounts (newspaper accounts, diaries, letters, etc.). This exercise gives students practice in using primary sources, in seeing how different people have different perspectives on a given event, and in evaluating and synthesizing evidence to produce as accurate a narrative as possible.

- **History of a Local Institution—the School**

All students should study the history of the school they are attending, as well as compare schooling today with how it was for their parents and grandparents and how it is for children in other societies. Primary sources (people and documents) for school history exist right at your school. Generate questions with your students about what they would like to know about their school's past, and then help them figure out ways they can find the answers. There are many possibilities for interviews here. For more information, see Ronald E. Butchart's *Local Schools: Exploring Their History*.

- **Local Effects of National/International Events**

Another way to liven up history and give students a sense that they are in it is to direct them to study the local effects of some general topic in the textbook. Take, for example, the Great Depression. The textbook says that it was a period of hard times and social disorder. Let students verify whether that is an accurate description of what happened in their community in the years 1929-1939 by finding interviewees who remember.

## Community Support

Short assignments like these give your students a chance to practice elementary skills and develop interest in oral history. These assignments also give you a chance to develop administrative and community support for this sort of study. In some communities, there are groups who believe that school assignments should not delve into personal or family information and should stick to the textbook. They believe that family experience and values are private and should not be examined at school. Because there is a diversity of opinion about this issue, it is important for you to inform parents and administration of your plans, goals, and rationale as fully as possible, even about short assignments in oral history.

# PERIOD STYLES:

## A Punctuated History

by Ellen Lupton

GREEK AND LATIN MANUSCRIPTS WERE USUALLY WRITTEN WITH NO SPACE BETWEEN WORDS UNTIL AROUND THE NINTH CENTURY AD ALTHOUGH ROMAN INSCRIPTIONS LIKE THE FAMOUS TRAJAN COLUMN SOMETIMES SEPARATED WORDS WITH A CENTERED DOT EVEN AFTER SPACING BECAME COMMON IT REMAINED HAPHAZARD FOR EXAMPLE OFTEN A PREPOSITION WAS LINKED TO ANOTHER WORD EARLY GREEK WRITING RAN IN LINES ALTERNATING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT AND RIGHT TO LEFT THIS CONVENTION WAS CALLED BOUSTREPHEDON MEANING AS THE OX PLOWS IT WAS CONVENIENT FOR LARGE CARVED MONUMENTS BUT IT POSED DIFFICULTIES FOR READING AND WRITING HANDWRITTEN TEXTS AND SO THE LEFT TO RIGHT DIRECTION BECAME DOMINANT A CENTERED DOT DIVIDED WORDS WHICH FELL AT THE END OF A LINE IN EARLY GREEK AND LATIN MANUSCRIPTS AND THE MORE VISUALLY DISTINCT HYPHEN WAS INTRODUCED IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY MEDIEVAL SCRIBES OFTEN PUT MARKS AT THE END OF SHORT LINES TO MAKE A SOLID TEXT THE PERFECTLY JUSTIFIED LINE BECAME THE STANDARD AFTER THE INVENTION OF PRINTING THE EARLIEST GREEK LITERARY TEXTS WERE DIVIDED INTO UNITS WITH A SHORT HORIZONTAL LINE CALLED A PARAGRAPHOS PARAGRAPHING REMAINS OUR CENTRAL FORM OF ORGANIZING PROSE AND YET ALTHOUGH PARAGRAPHS ARE ANCIENT THEY ARE NOT GRAMMATICALLY NECESSARY THE CORRECTNESS OF A PARAGRAPH IS AN ISSUE OF STYLE WITHOUT STRICT RULES LATER GREEK DOCUMENTS SOMETIMES MARKED PARAGRAPHS BY PLACING THE FIRST LETTER OF THE NEW LINE IN THE MARGIN THIS LETTER WAS OFTEN ENLARGED COLORED OR ORNATE TODAY THE OUTDENT IS OFTEN USED IN LISTS WHOSE ITEMS ARE IDENTIFIED ALPHABETICALLY AS IN DICTIONARIES OR BIBLIOGRAPHIES ¶ A MARK CALLED CAPITULUM WAS INTRODUCED IN EARLY LATIN MANUSCRIPTS ¶ IT IS RELATED TO THE PARAGRAPH SIGN USED TODAY ¶ IT USUALLY OCCURRED INSIDE A RUNNING BLOCK OF TEXT WITHOUT BREAKING ONTO A NEW LINE ¶ THIS TECHNIQUE SAVED SPACE ¶ IT ALSO PRESERVED THE VISUAL UNITY OF THE TEXT BY MAKING THE PAGE INTO A CONTINUOUS LINEAR STREAM SIMILAR TO THE UNBROKEN FLOW OF SPEECH

BY THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY THE INDENT HAD BECOME THE MOST COMMON PARAGRAPH BREAK IN WESTERN PROSE THE INDENT DIVIDES THE TEXT INTO VISUALLY APPARENT UNITS THUS ALLOWING THE READER TO PERCEIVE ITS BASIC STRUCTURE IN A GLANCE AN INDENT IS MORE ABSTRACT THAN A CAPITULUM BECAUSE IT IS A BLANK SPACE NOT A PHYSICAL MARK





DISI RESERATA QUALITER C  
 INEFINE EXULTERIS; ETI  
 OCOQUENTURA EIPREDIX  
 IUANEPASTIUS GODOSE  
 URUS ERITTEBI; HAECAL

er habuisse, quo aleretur: quid est enin  
 nagnum ipsi magistrae rerum omniu  
 t parenti naturae? quid arduum; quic  
 lla tandem non potest? qui stellas; qu  
 olem; qui coeli conuexa; qui terras o  
 nnes, ac maria; qui mundum deniq; if

\* Text which includes the semicolon, colon, and period, as well as the inverted semicolon, which marked a pause halfway between the comma and semicolon (8th century AD). Note that this text is written entirely in capital letters and has minimal word spacing.

\* In this printed text of 1495, the question mark, semicolon, and inverted semicolon are similar in size and shape; today the scale of the question mark is like that of a letterform, while other marks are very small.

ICAL DELIVERY, HOWEVER, NATURALLY CORRESPOND WITH GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE: FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN A PAUSE FALLS BETWEEN TWO CLAUSES OR SENTENCES.

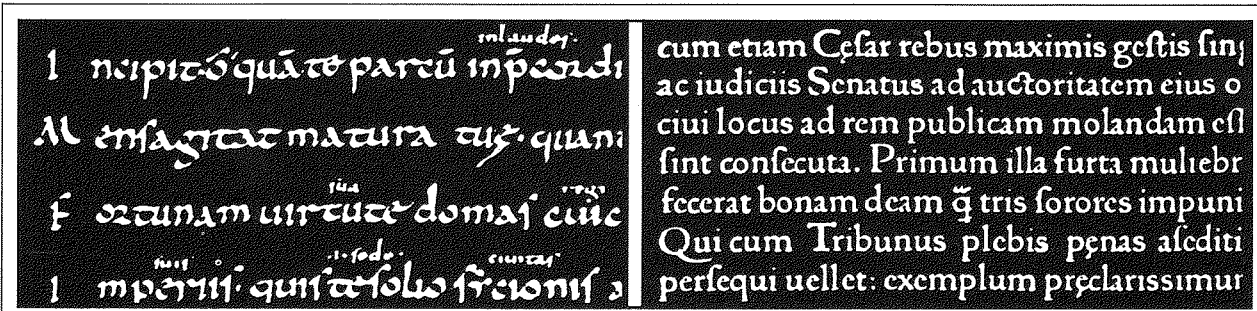
ALTHOUGH IT WAS RARELY USED BY THE GREEKS, THE SYSTEM OF ARISTOPHANES WAS REVIVED BY THE LATIN GRAMMARIAN DONATUS IN THE FOURTH CENTURY A.D. ACCORDING TO DONATUS PUNCTUATION SHOULD FALL WHEREVER THE SPEAKER WOULD NEED A REST, PROVIDING BREATHING CUES FOR READING ALOUD. OFTEN THE MARKS WOULD FALL AT SOME STRUCTURAL POINT, LIKE THE END OF A CLAUSE OR SENTENCE, WHERE A BREATH WOULD NOT BE DISTRACTING. THIS STRUCTURAL ASPECT, HOWEVER, WAS NOT ESSENTIAL TO THE SYSTEM.

THE THEORIES OF DONATUS WERE GRADUALLY MODIFIED BY LATER WRITERS, WHO ADVOCATED AN INCREASINGLY RHETORICAL USE OF PUNCTUATION, TO CONTROL THE RHYTHM OF READING AND TO EMPHASIZE PARTICULAR WORDS AND PHRASES. AFTER THE INVENTION OF PRINTING, GRAMMARIANS BEGAN BASING PUNCTUATION ON SYNTAX RATHER THAN ON SPOKEN SOUND: IT MARKED THE GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE OF A SENTENCE. PUNCTUATION CAME TO BE DEFINED ARCHITECTURALLY RATHER THAN ORALLY. THE COMMA BECAME A MARK OF SEPARATION, THE SEMICOLON FUNCTIONED AS A JOINT BETWEEN TWO INDEPENDENT CLAUSES, AND THE COLON BECAME A MARK OF GRAMMATICAL DISCONTINUITY. SLOWLY WRITING WAS BECOMING DISTANCED FROM SPEECH.

RHETORIC, STRUCTURE, AND BREATHING ARE ALL AT WORK IN MODERN ENGLISH PUNCTUATION, WHOSE RULES WERE MORE OR LESS ESTABLISHED BY THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. ALTHOUGH STRUCTURE IS THE STRONGEST RATIONALE, PUNCTUATION REMAINS A LARGE- LY INTUITIVE ENTERPRISE. A WRITER CAN OFTEN CHOOSE AMONG SEVERAL CORRECT WAYS TO PUNCTUATE A PASSAGE, EACH WITH A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT RHYTHM AND MEANING.

THERE WAS NO CONSISTENT MARK FOR QUOTATIONS BEFORE THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. ANCIENT GREEK TEXTS USED THE PARAGPHOS TO SHOW CHANGES IN DIALOGUE. DIRECT SPEECH WAS USUALLY CONSIDERED TO BE ANNOUNCED SUFFICIENTLY BY PHRASES LIKE HE SAID. „THE DOUBLE COMMA WAS INITIALLY USED TO POINT OUT IMPORTANT SENTENCES AND WAS “ LATER USED TO ENCLOSE QUOTATIONS. ELIZABETHAN PRINTERS OFTEN EDGED BOTH MARGINS “ OF A QUOTED TEXT WITH DOUBLE COMMAS. THIS CONVENTION TREATED TEXT AS A SPATIAL “ PLANE RATHER THAN A TEMPORAL LINE, FRAMING THE QUOTED PASSAGE LIKE A PICTURE. ”

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq



† In this text, written in the classical script called Carolingian, the majuscule is paired with the miniscule to make a formal beginning for each line (circa 10th century AD).

‡ The design of this roman typeface is based on Carolingian handwriting; classical roman capitals are paired here with the miniscule letters (1469).

BOTH THE GREEK AND ROMAN ALPHABETS WERE ORIGINALLY MAJUSCULE: ALL LETTERS WERE THE SAME HEIGHT. greek and roman minuscule letters developed out of rapidly written scripts called cursive, which were used for business. minuscule characters have limbs extending above and below a uniform body height. alcuin, advisor to charlemagne, introduced the carolingian minuscule, which spread rapidly through europe during the flowering of scholarship which began in the 8th century a.d. and culminated around the twelfth century. during the spread of the carolingian script, condensed, black minuscule scripts, now called “gothic,” were also developing; they eventually replaced the classical carolingian.

A carolingian manuscript sometimes marked the beginning of a sentence with an enlarged letter. This character was often a majuscule, presaging the modern use of minuscule and majuscule as double features of the same alphabet. Both scripts were still fundamentally separate modes of handwriting, however.

In the fifteenth century, the Carolingian script was revived by Italian intellectuals known as “humanists.” The new script, called “lettera antica,” was paired with classical roman capitals. It became the basis of the roman typefaces, which were established as a European norm by the mid-sixteenth century. The terms “uppercase” and “lowercase” refer to the drawers in a printing shop that hold the two fonts. Until recently, Printers liberally Capitalized the initials of any word They deemed worthy of Distinction, as well as Proper Names. In modern German Writing the First Letter of every Noun is marked with a Capital.

The roman typefaces were based on a formal script, used for books. *The cursive, rapidly written version of the Carolingian minuscule was employed for business and also for books in the less expensive writing shops. Called “antica corsiva” or “cancelleresca,” this kind of handwriting was the model for the italic fonts cut for Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1500. Aldus was a scholar, a printer, and a very successful businessman. Italic script conserved space, and Aldus developed it for his internationally distributed series of small, inexpensive books. Following its handwritten model, the Aldine italic used roman capitals. Tagliente advocated the use of italicized capitals in the early sixteenth century.*

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm

Hic elegos? impune diem consumpsit ingens  
T elephus? aut summi plena iam margne libri  
S criptus, et in tergo nec dum finitus, Orestes?  
N ot: magis nulli domus est sua, quam mihi luc  
M artis, et aoliis uicinum rupibus antrum  
V ulcari. Quid agant uenti, quats terqueat un:  
A eacus, unde alius finitua deuehat aurum

A SINGLE TICKET may gain  
**£100,000,**  
A SIXTEENTH may gain  
**£6 000**

§ The space-saving Aldine italic above is paired with roman capitals, as in the earlier Carolingian handwritten text at left (late 15th/early 16th c.).

\* *Fat Face*, designed in 1810, is an early display type. Later boldface fonts would be integrated into unified type “families” which include roman, italic, and bold variations of a single letter style.

In modern American grammar schools, students are taught two styles of handwriting: manuscript, reserved for official or artistic purposes, and *cursive*, for everyday rapid writing. The distinction between manuscript and *cursive* handwriting is an ancient convention based on practical needs. The typewriter, invented in the late nineteenth century, has replaced *cursive* writing for all but the most casual or intimate functions. Most standard fonts are based on manuscript: a few are based on *cursive*.

Aldus set entire books in *italic*; it was an autonomous type style, unrelated to roman. In France, however, roman faces were becoming a standard, and *italic* was gradually subordinated to the roman. Roman was the neutral, generic norm, with *italic* played against it for contrast. The pairs UPPERCASE/lowercase and roman/*italic* each add an inaudible, non-phonetic dimension to the alphabet.

Before *italic* became the official auxiliary of roman, scribes and printers had other techniques of emphasis, including enlarged, **heavy**, colored, or gothic letters. Underlining was common in medieval manuscripts, and it remains the conventional substitute for italics in handwritten and typewritten texts. The insertion of s p a c e between important letters is used for e m p h a s i s in German and Eastern European book t y p o g r a p h y. **Boldface** fonts were not common until the nineteenth century, when display advertising created a demand for big, black types. Most book faces cut since the early twentieth century belong to families of four: roman, *italic*, **bold roman**, and **bold italic**. These are used for systematically marking different kinds of copy, like headings, captions, body text, notes, quotations, and references. For modernist book designers like Jan Tschichold, Carl Gerstener, and Massimo Vignelli, changes in typographic size, style, color, and spacing should construct a consistent, meaningful pattern. These parameters build a secondary system of “punctuation” on top of the basic conventions of writing. What effects might the computer have on writing in the future? Although conventions like the left-to-right line are unlikely to change, the spatial organization of texts could become more elaborate as variations in typeface, color, size, and column arrangement become trivially available.