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Computers in Composition

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Through the Lens of Time: The Typewriter and Composition

The zeitgeist of the 1800s is forever marked by the iconic literacy tool: the typewriter. The typewriter is a man-made, fundamental literacy writing tool invented to advance the alphabetic writing system, altering the course of literacy forever creating a ripple effect. Serving at the time, “modern” purposes, the nostalgic machine acquired a universal utility, propelling literacy through its technological advancement of the time. In its prime, the typewriter overhauled the mode of writing, it competitively evolved, undergoing several design changes, its purpose and function adapted with the cultural demand for what was then considered a modern innovation. Today, it remains a foundational invention as a literary tool still in use today by writers in third-world countries, as it does not require electricity to function. By socially situating the typewriter in a bygone era at a time as a socially embedded practice, we can examine how literacies are learned and taught, as well as how literacy tools evolve and change throughout history. The typewriter, by the late 1800s, became ubiquitous, stemming from commercialism. The typewriter underpins its predecessor, the computer. The history of the typewriter offers two perspectives in the form of a lesson and a warning about perceived reservations, as new literary tools are introduced to society. Each new technology embarks on a journey because of man's innate gravitational pull toward exploration, designing new technologies, traversing through the process of social and cultural acclamation. Every new literacy technology goes through a period of polarization that faces a natural process of acclimation through changing literacy practices, for the present and the future, the very language we speak changes. When paradigms massively shift, they disrupt cultural homeostatic views, cultivating tumultuous divides. Adding new diction, humanity eventually adapts to and accepts future literacy tools that are birthed from a human desire to create and advance society while alleviating a "present moment" societal burden. Oftentimes, people and businesses profit in the commercialized production, a byproduct curing a modern inconvenience, as forward-thinking progressives introduce literacy tools that advance society coming with a high cost while fulfilling a supply and demand necessity while challenging the status quo of modern normalcy. These literary tools of literacy push the envelope; making space for what is yet to come. Inevitably, repeating the historically cyclical patterns across time, hoping to learn from our past as we

actively move forward in our present moment. What Generative Artificial Intelligence will or will not do for literacy remains to be seen; will it lead to erudite scholarship like the modern progressives' hope, or will it take away ownership, leading to forgetfulness, as foretold by Plato's Phaedrus? While Kathleen Yancey conveys in *Composition in a New Key*, English composition faces growing pains, cyclical tremors that ebb and flow with the "new moment" times of our present-day reality (Yancey). This new technological tool that causes sociocultural tremors of our time stems from previously invented literary tools, like the typewriter. However, Gen AI might just break the norm of what is the next technological advancement due to its unknown potential and future implications on global literacy.

Birthing out of human curiosity and the innate need for efficiency— Before the invention of the famous and now nostalgic typewriter, we had the Hansen Writing Ball which became the first commercial literacy typing tool. One invention leads to another, from the telegraph to the Hansen writing ball to the QWERTY keyboard in the 1870s. Some technologies are adopted to become embedded social practices that originate as "new technologies" to ordinary, overlooked tools of literacy.

Discover the lesser-known history of the typewriter, where we socially situate the origin of a writing tool that changed history. This video outlines a timeline, reveals unknown early prototypes, and establishes the importance of the typewriter as a fundamental invention that paved the way for printers and computers for our future.

The typewriter underwent many prototypes lost in time and forgotten before becoming patented "writing machines." You can read more about the history of typewriters and [the first known prototype here](#).

Patents

- 1714: Henry Mill Britain Patent Office.
- 1784: The French Patent Office.
- 1843: Charles Thurber Patented a writing machine in Mass.
- 1867: Latham Sholes, Samuel Soule, and Carlos Glidden, patented a writing machine called the typewriter (Hubert 3) .
- 1870: Peter Mitterhofer's Typewriter Prototype.

From public school typewriter classes to speed competitions, we look back on history, and sometimes we laugh, like how in 1913, Margaret B. Owen won the World Typewriting Championship (Lyons 40).

Perhaps we can liken this to ideas in the Guinness World Records and the [World's Largest Catsup bottle](#).

However, the Hague Typewriting Competition served as a political and gendered avenue as the literary tool underwent the process of social integration. The debates about the "all finger method" of typing became a highly polarized issue. Before WW I began, women were tasked with joining the workforce to

keep the communication going from switchboards to typewriters. Women joined the workforce, both as a social and political cause on the cusp of the [Civil Rights Movement](#), causing societal tremors that spurred individuals to a call to action. Speed competitions improved typing speed in the workforce and served to propel societal assimilation.

§ Women like [Rosa Parks](#) fought not for a seat, rather for her rightful place in America.

Ultimately, the typewriter served as an advantageous, gendered tool for women's empowerment that eventually played a role in abolishing segregation, women's rights to vote, and creating space for minorities to have a voice.

§ Furthermore, the typewriter solved a global efficiency issue; the cumbersome nature of penmanship slowed print-progress because human hands have limited writing speeds at about 30 words per minute, whereas the typewriter can type at speeds up to 130 words per minute. In this regard, the pencil, although inexpensive, lacked efficiency. The invention of the typewriter filled a societal gap, solving a modern problem of inefficiency, and spurred a healthy finger competition in its day.

Artistic mediums, like the typewriter, oriented itself in history through the process of [remediation](#), which plays a role in preserving useful and relevant modern technologies, such as the QWERTY keyboard. The present-day keyboard is still in circulation and found useful in all offices across the world. From Braille keyboards, ergonomic keyboards, QWERTY keyboards, color-changing keypads, and the popular [nostalgic typewriter keyboards](#). The computer keyboard is still in circulation, being used world-wide, and is still being modified and altered.

Maybe, if you're like me, you have an affinity for things of the past, and you're asking yourself: why can't we bring back the video phone?

Who decides what literacy tools withstand the test of time and which ones are left behind? The answer is found in remediation and present-day cultural demands.

The video phone has been assimilated and adapted into modern technologies from Zoom Meetings, Google Meet, Slack Huddles, FaceTime, and Video Calls, etc.

For example, the typewriter and the telephone follow the same historical pattern. One that parallels the invention and assimilation process as other literary technologies. Like the pencil, the telephone, and the computer, but what about AI? Does AI break the historical cycle into the realm of the unknown for the future, or is it simply another literacy of our time, feared for its presently unknown capabilities and its role in our future?

Famous Literary Works During the Typewriter Era

Can you imagine entering into the past during a time before typewriters and computers were invented, when authors handwrote their manuscripts, toiling over candlelight without the aid of whiteout or a backspace button on a keyboard to save them time and effort? The novel was a laborious endeavor and act of dedication and perseverance, like the printing press. It took great lengths to publish a manuscript or write a book.

The first known manuscript typed on a typewriter was "Life on the Mississippi" by Mark Twain. Famous authors of the past: William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Jack London, and Virginia Wolff wrote on the typewriter, living on the cusp between old and new literacies. These authors blurred the lines of writing technologies as they handwrote and typed their manuscripts, adding to their repertoire of literacy tools and knowledge. For a complete list, see [Famous Writer's and a Note About Their writing practice and Typewriters](#) (Budden 2025).

Even authors of the typewriter era fought over the ethical use of writing on a machine versus handwriting a manuscript. Figure 2. William Faulkner's Underwood Universal Portable typewriter.

The Phaedrus: On Rhetoric, Writing, & Gen AI

Consider the Myth of Theuth as no longer a myth but a modern-day reality in our present moment that has yet to make history, offering an unknown future in an AI tech-rich world where every cyclical historical event, invention, and pattern has faced the scrutiny of societal backlash. These storming processes are patterned after every new invention introduced within societies before the norming process can happen. In order for a new literacy tool or technology to gain acceptance, it must go through the process of becoming socially assimilated. Does AI deviate from this social norm? Big corporations are viewed as Thamus viewing their algorithmic engineers as Theuth offering such a deified technology (AI) so advanced it supersedes the mainstream cultural process of criticism and into the realm of the deified, untouchable. Yet our modern-day public remains divided from progressives pushing AI before it's been culturally accepted and conservatives slowing the process through inquiry and apprehension. Through Plato's *Phaedrus* (Fay-Druze), we learn that, like Theuth, an inventor is not the best judge of their own inventions. The ancients feared a technology of the future, but could it be a warning to our present time in history, Plato foretold? Gleaning from this historical text we learn the essential power civil discourse holds for humanity. Although Plato's hypothetical futuristic commentary never comes to fruition, the threat of a present-time reality of Generative Artificial Intelligence looms over us. We are left asking our fellow global citizens what

are we to do with AI going forward and how can we in unity discuss modern-day proprieties and improprieties engulfed by AI? And do new literary technologies from the past train modern-day citizens to forge? If not before, does it hold the power to teach and train lay people to forget? This cumulative invention has pitted teachers against students, big corporations against its consumers, and the government lies in the balance between lagging behind in appropriate and timely decisions on policies. Through our research, we learn that the pace of technological acceptance is set by society's acceptance or resistance to the technology. The iconic chattering from the QWERTY keyboard on an Underwood typewriter has collectors swooning for nostalgic artifacts that have fallen by the wayside in light of newer technologies. In our post-typewriter era, you can still purchase overpriced, [retro typewriters](#), which are now non-essential, antique collector items whose value is debatable, holding more of an intrinsic value. However, these historically situated artifacts contain little societal value in our present day, yet at their zenith, they changed the future and the world. In the prime of their time, new technologies like: Cuneiform Tablets— Pencils—Switchboards— Samuel Morse's Telegraph— Alexander Graham Belle's Telephone— Gutenberg Press— Typewriters—Computers— AI— The Unknown, form the present-day foundation to composition and literary studies in composition. Is AI crippling our future? And what about those lesser-known inventions that led to legendary inventions, like the video phone that paved the way for FaceTime on the Smartphone. Every invention goes through the prototype process, undergoing rigorous early testing. Once technology goes commercial, it begins facing public scrutiny. The typewriter is an essential invention telling a story of how literacies are traced throughout history and their impact on cultures worldwide. The typewriter is the grandfather invention and predecessor to Gen AI while leaving traces of its influence in its wake to live on as an adapted form of writing literacy and a tool to be remembered.