Bush Telegraph

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Readings in Writing

By

Luke Strongman

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INTRODUCTION

A “bush telegraph” is an antipodean slang noun phrase for a “grapevine” or informal network of communication. The title of this book on English language use comes from the fact that the book is written from the southern hemisphere (where the idea of a “bush telegraph” is more widely known) and because the concept of a “bush telegraph” describes what the book tries to do—to discuss salient points in English language use and tertiary teaching across branches of interrelated interests. Using a formal/informal register, this book seeks to present analyses and commentaries of varying lengths on key aspects of English language writing culture, for the students and faculty members of a tertiary learning organization.

Each chapter of *Bush Telegraph* describes aspects of English writing culture. Separately and together the 20 chapters aim to teach, to elucidate, to analyze, and to discuss salient aspects of English writing culture, with the overall aim of communicating central ideas in, and improving knowledge of, English language writing culture.

Chapter 1 explores “writing origins” and briefly explains how writing evolved from graphic origins to the abstract symbolic form of the alphabet today.

Chapter 2 explains the topic of English language ownership, commenting on the way that native and non-native speakers of English may make claims to linguistic authority.

Chapter 3 introduces the meaning of “corpora” and briefly states their validity for the study of English language and linguistics.

Chapter 4 outlines the fundamentals of writing and editing.

Chapter 5 discusses the topic of planning in writing, with a focus on the non-fiction essay.

Chapter 6 introduces the classical topic of rhetorical composition.

Chapter 7 provides an analysis on the philosophy of language.

Chapter 8 asks the question “What is a genre?” before briefly discussing the topic of genre analysis.

Chapter 9 discusses the topic of learning disabilities and outlines some basic strategies for teaching people who have some degree of learning disability.

Chapter 10 outlines approaches to second language learning.

Chapter 11 discusses the topic of translation from a variety of viewpoints.

Chapter 12 is a discourse on the semantic web and the problems in accounting for subliminal forms of communication.

Chapter 13 outlines the basic principles of writing for the Web.

Chapter 14 discusses the increasing prevalence of open educational resources (in English) used on Web-enhanced forms of teaching and eLearning.

Chapter 15 is a philosophical discussion of issues from the "private language argument."

Chapter 16 asks the fundamental questions of whether animals have language and how meaningful is it for animals and humans to try to understand each other's communication?

Chapter 17 asks about the true value of fiction writing, and what epistemological claims to knowledge the reader can gain from it.

Chapter 18 is a discourse on "graffiti" from its recorded origins in the classical era to the present day, describing the outline of an ethnographic understanding of the demotic writing phenomenon.

Chapter 19 discusses the main concepts and ideas of public relations writing in the context of the global media.

Chapter 20 explores the relationship between writing and memory, arguing that it is useful for writers to maintain active working memories for their compositions.

Lima (2010) argues that there are two main approaches to teaching writing—the product approach (in which the main focus is on the form, language and grammar of the writing produced); and the process approach (in which students as "professional authors" undergo a "rite of passage" or "learning curve" as they acquire skills and training in writing techniques and writing culture) (p. 1). This book tries (like a "bush telegraph") to weave a common strand between the two approaches.

The aims of *Bush Telegraph* are to:

- inform students and teachers of the salient characteristics of writing culture
- help students engage with writing strategies
- explain aspects of writing style, genre, and process
- discuss characteristics of writing in print and online mediums.

The book combines informative discussion and practical guidance. The intended readers are students and teachers at tertiary organizations, but students and other readers of all levels may find the book useful too.

Reference

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS OF WRITING

Writing is essentially a graphic art that arose from pictorial representation. The fundamental issue of the origins of writing is not the exact place and time of its origin but, rather, how and when the gap was bridged between pictorial and non-pictorial modes of visual representation (Harris 1986, p. 10). The pictorial representation of mental concepts (such as in animal drawings) was probably first devised by the Egyptians or the Phoenicians as a form of mimetic art. For example, the symbol of a star was drawn to represent a heavenly body that looked like a distant point of light in the night sky. The question arises then: How did pictorial representation become an alphabet? Was this an independent invention? How much later in human history did it occur? And is an alphabet derived from picture writing?

Harris (1986) suggests that six factors underpin the development of writing (p. 2).

1. Speech existed before writing.
2. Written messages were originally communicational substitutes for spoken messages.
3. Writing began as an attempt at pictorial representation.
4. The alphabet is based on the different principle of "picture writing" (or sign of a sign).
5. Alphabetical symbols are attempts to indicate sounds.
6. The uptake of the alphabet principle is an improvement over "picture writing."

Writing therefore had an aspect of "distance" (spatially and temporally) over speech. It set human communication free from the limitations of speech, making it unnecessary for the speaker to be present; the "autonomous text" could survive independently of the author. Just as speech was necessary for the socialization of people within groups, writing, in turn, spurred the development of civilization. As Harris (1986) points out, although functionally writing is an extension of speech, technically it is an extension of drawing, or of graphic art (being a form of coloring, carving, incision and impression of surfaces) (p. 26), giving rise to the

possibility of recording thought. Whatmough (1956) views writing as "symbolism twice removed" (p. 112).

The most common form of alphabet used in the Western world today is the English alphabet. That alphabet is made up of 26 letters, each having a name and a place in an alphabetical order (Harris 1986, p. 30). It is a system of recording that uses an inventory of letters. But the alphabet is only one of five sign systems used worldwide. The other four systems are syllabic, logographic, pictographic, and ideographic (Harris 1986, p. 30).

1. Syllabic writing is an inventory of signs in a syllabary where each sign stands for a syllable. Instead of a letter representing concepts as words, a syllable may use a single sign.
2. A logogram is a sign that represents an idea or message as a unit of meaning, such as "%" for percentage.
3. A pictogram is a picture of a concept
4. An ideogram represents a symbol for an idea, such as an arrow denoting a direction (Harris 1986, p. 32).

There is a further sign system termed a rebus (a secondary sign), which presupposes a prior sign to supply the link between its shape and meaning. A rebus is related to a determinative sign, which is a sign used to clarify the maintaining of another sign (Harris 1986, p. 34). As Fischer (2001) states, a rebus permits a picture to express a syllable in spoken language (homophonics) (p. 31). Signs can be distinguished from pictorial or scriptorial perspectives. Writing using alphabets is a scriptorial sign system, and together these scriptorial signs represent the transfer of meaning from "object or concept" to sound and then to symbol. For Fischer, the decisive step in the development of writing is a transition from a pictorial to phonetic symbol (yet phonetization is still not alphabetical writing) and then from phonetization to an alphabet. The transition from three-dimensional token symbols to two-dimensional token symbols (representing relationships among three-dimensional token symbols) probably occurred in 4BCE among the Sumerians of Mesopotamia. They used small clay counters covered in little clay "envelopes" to represent units in trade. These became systematized and a form of semiotic record-keeping developed. This meant a form of indirectness or "abstract symbol manipulation." The Sumerians eventually dispensed with the clay counters and used only the marked envelopes to represent their transactions—these secondary external symbols were interpreted as "writing" signs (Fischer 2001, p. 30). This meant phonetic values superseded the semantic values of the pictogram in representing an external referent. The writing medium of subsequent civilizations was clay or papyrus and, later, vellum (scroll

made from animal skin). It is only comparatively recently (within the last 600 years) that paper has been used as a writing medium. Writing facilitated record-keeping and improved forms of learning and communication among urban federations of people. But people existed in "civilized" states or kingdoms before a complete writing system emerged.

Fig. 1-1: Diagram of the writing system

	Complete Writing System
Writing System	alphabetic, logographic, syllabic
Script	cursive, italic, cuneiform
Characters	sequential signs
Signs	letters, numerals
Elements	dependent affixes, diacritics, punctuation
Types	Times New Roman, Calibri
Orientation	columned, left to right
Material	clay, papyrus, stone, bamboo, paper, computer screen

Source: Adapted from Fischer (1986), p. 65.

In the twenty-first century, with the proliferation of electronic communication, Web 2.0, smart phone apps, and the rapid growth of wireless technologies, the computer and digital screen is replacing paper as the main medium of communication containment. These new digital formats allow for the storage of vast amounts of data, and the "democratization and causalization" of communication. Yet writing has not lost its graphic origins. As Ning (2009) says, "[w]riting with words is challenged by writing with pictures or images" (p. 29). Further, the traditional structures of the book, its physical form, production, circulation, and storage may be seen to "dematerialize" into digital storage. So, in some sense, a written language describes a circular from its pictorial origins in Neolithic Europe to the predominance of graphics and symbols in the digital era. Or, as Gilbert (2013) puts it, "the present juncture should be understood as a mixed media milieu, in which traditional and digital forms of writing and publishing coalesce and conflict in a complex array of textual materialities" (p. 5). Whether on paper or digital screen, the reader is confronted by a variety of textual surfaces, pictures, images, letter, and signs.

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CHAPTER TWO

LANGUAGE OWNERSHIP

Whether or not language ownership is basic to theories of language (arguably not); it is nevertheless basic to the theories of language use in a sociolinguistic sense. The question about who owns the English language (if it can, in fact, be owned) is part of the consideration of the contributing factors to cultural production in society (following the Frankfurt school of structuralism—Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas, and Max Weber). Cultural production is the attempt to understand the ideas and processes that give structure to the cultural fabric of society, including language. As Norton (1997) states, as the basis of sociolinguistic communication, language is an intrinsic part of that cultural fabric; indeed "speech, speakers, and social relationships are inseparable" (p. 410). The act of speaking to another necessitates an interpersonal communication and so a relationship of some kind. But communication relationships and language ownership are not necessarily synonymous. As Benton states in the bilingual English/Māori (Kōhanga Reo) New Zealand/Aotearoa context:

> Ownership of a language is a complex affair, combining a number of different phenomena. At a personal level it may involve a feeling of identification—"This is my language." For groups, there may be the assertion to know and speak the language, which may or may not be prescriptive—"Our language, not yours" (*to matou reo*) as against "Your language and ours" (*to tatou reo*). There is also the question of who has a right to set the norms of grammar, style and vocabulary by which the correctness or appropriateness of usage can be assessed. (pp. 35-36)

Although some forms of language are protected by copyright, no one person or collective group owns the English language. Language is a kind of communicative commodity—a means by which people assert their nature in the environment and work together to establish the possibilities for shared community. Even in property law, ownership is established nine-tenths by "continual and unbroken use." The English language is a system of signs, symbols, cognitive and linguistic concepts and frameworks that about one seventh of the planet's population (or currently one billion people) share. If the ownership of the English language is a

shared construct, then language growth or proliferation is related to the possibilities for language learning. Various degrees and extents of language learning exist. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that language may shape thought and consciousness, and even that in speaking a language system such as English a person is demonstrating fundamental competencies in rational thought (see Kennison 2013).

It is second nature for most people to acquire their "mother tongue;" indeed a child of three is thought to have a basic linguistic competency and sufficient vocabulary to communicate at comprehensive levels. English language use is "controlled" by either legitimacy of source (as for example in the lexicon or corpus of a reputable dictionary) or by authenticity of use (by those considered "native" speakers of it).

Several societies have attempted to control language use, not just for purposes of education and linguistic competency but also for political ends. The concept of "linguistic engineering," arose for example among Chinese speakers in the era of Chairman Mao Zedong. Linguistic engineering refers to the social effect brought about by certain types of language use and its control over the thought processes and behaviors of citizens. As Fengyuan (2006) states, "[i]f we can control the language which people speak, write, read and hear, we can modify the schematic frameworks which [people] use to store knowledge, retrieve information, and understand reality" (pp. 223–24). So language associated with correct beliefs takes precedence over language associated with incorrect beliefs. Only "correct" language is permitted. The correct language is also associated with the preferred worldview and is automatically "selected" in use, while language deemed as "incorrect" falls from use, or becomes localized or fails due to hegemonic pressures. Of course, language use is also associated with memory. Data in working memory are transferred to short-term memory when a threshold of persistence is achieved, depending on language use, frequency, and accessibility (Sabahm 2010, p. 1511). This is a process of natural language learning, and also of the concept of understanding itself. When an item is transferred from a working memory schema into a short-term memory (e.g., when a phrase of language in learned), then within a person's mind it becomes recollectable "globally" and so a basic concept involved in prompting thought (Sabahm 2010, p. 1511).

The ways that language is used, understood and communicated also prompt ideas about language ownership and social empowerment, as well as social restriction. Many linguists are involved in efforts to protect, document, or revitalize language. Not only is language a vehicle of communication, it is a repository of human rights and concepts of

ownership, and also of rights of language ownership and use, that shape the social and ethnic structures of society (Speas, n. d., p. 1). This means language ownership is a contentious issue. It gives rise to questions such as: "To what extent is any media exchanged freely or in various controlled ways 'owned' by one speaker or another"? Copyright law aside, non-native speakers of any language face the prospect of using a language that did not originate within their culture. Likewise, linguists who do not speak a certain language may nevertheless as "outsiders" be involved in contributing to a revitalization or maintenance of a language in ways that respect the culture and rights of the person with whom the language originated (Speas, n. d., p. 3). Language itself is not a tangible object and can be transported, relocated, switched, and changed. This means that claims to ownership are harder to ascertain than for other more tangible forms of property. While it is thought that between 6,000 and 8,000 languages exist, only about 200 of these languages are written languages (McWhorter 2011). Language diversity is under continuous erosion, and perhaps up to half of these remaining languages are under threat of falling into disuse. However, organizations do exist to help preserve language diversity. Issues of ownership among traditional societies are as fraught as many issues in the *lingua franca*, because speakers of threatened languages see them as intellectual property passed on by ancestors, and thus coeval with rights. Most issues of rights involve the use of language in the correct way through consultation. Yet others believe that language isn't a media to be controlled. What is clear is that without languages human beings and the cultures they live in cannot thrive. As well as rights, issues of "respect" for language use abound. These issues matter particularly to minority language speakers whose knowledge is more selective. Yet, ultimately, this issue has more to do with ethical responsibility and personal relationships than property ownership.

Postcolonial English

The ownership and use of language centers around notions of legitimacy. As O'Rourke (2011) suggests:

> [l]anguage ownership is essentially a metaphor that reflects the legitimate control that speakers claim to have over the development of a language and the struggles in which they engage to control the production and distribution of linguistic resources and over the legitimization of relations of power. (p. 327)

Languages connect people and groups to shared social, economic, and political concerns. "Native" and "non-native" are used as terms to describe claims to legitimacy and use of the English language. As O'Rourke (2011) states, "[T]he term *native* as its etymology suggests, implies birth into a specific community or a particular place" (p. 328). As O'Rourke (2011) suggests, in today's world of postmodern communication, travel and globalization are ubiquitous and, as bilingualism is the norm in European society and multiculturalism in many others, "the link between native speaker, mother tongue, place of origin, and knowledge of a language cannot necessarily be assumed" (p. 328). For some, if not many, bilingual speakers, a mother tongue (or native tongue) is problematic because linguists might see those speakers as between cultures, not knowing which language is the superior, or even where, when and how the language is acquired (O'Rourke 2011, p. 328). The concept of a mother tongue or first language may be one that describes a notion of language stability or stasis and a background of monolingualism. Multicultural societies may be increasingly challenged by the mix of first and second languages. Consequently, because of the global diffusion of languages, the notion of a "pure" language (linguistic engineering) may, in fact, not be fully recoverable.

Linguists refer to the postcolonial relationships of English language use. An "inner-circle" represents traditional English use dominated by a "mother tongue" variety of language use. Nations such as India, Malaysia, and Singapore are referred to as "outer-circle" countries (Higgins 2003, p. 625), where English is used as an "inter-language" but cannot be termed "native" in itself.

Teachers of English as a second language frequently label speakers in categories of NS (native speaker) or NNS (non-native speaker). As such, ownership might be related to the notion of legitimacy of the speaker (although how that legitimacy is qualified remains complex). For example, categories of native speaker or non-native speaker may derive from social characteristics rather than a particular proficiency in language (Higgins 2013, p. 616). Others regard non-native speakers of English as having a right to appropriate the English language at a grammatical level, altering it and "owning" it for their own use without much relevance to the central or "native" norms of English language use. So English becomes a form of *lingua franca*.

Considerations of language ownership are also determined by the extent to which a speaker might be able to access material and symbolic resources considered a part of its use (Higgins 2003, p. 617). As a result of the proliferation of English language use, many countries use

institutionalized varieties of English or (IVEs) that exist in countries formerly colonized by England, such as India and countries in Asia and Africa. As English language spread through teaching, commerce, diplomacy, sport and cultural entertainment in, to, with and within colonized countries, so English was acculturated to new geographical contexts. In these contexts, forms of administrative, educational and legal systems interacted with those of native cultures, producing what are termed "sub-language" registers (Higgins 2003, p. 617).

While those who speak "native" English at its core might think their register is superior (known to many people as "BBC English"), it may be the case that "outer-circle" speakers don't aspire to be just like them, preferring instead to develop their own forms of speak that is derived from native and non-native sources. Ownership then might be a matter of adaption as much as a claim to indigenization or legitimacy (Higgins 2003, p. 619). But concomitant with this is the notion that people invest in language as a form of symbolic capital, although possibly not having equal access to claims of ownership (Higgins 2003, p. 622).

According to Zimmerman (1988), such discursive English-speaking communities have three characteristics. The first is "discourse identities", characterized by situatedness: agendas, skills, and local and cultural knowledge. The second is "transportable identities" characterized by gender and authenticity (for example, the language used in travel). The third is "receptive roles", characterized by language use that arises from the performative happenstance of language reception: interpretation, judgment, adaption, and so on.

Origins of *lingua franca*

The proliferation of English language use among the former English colonies, or postcolonial nations has led to its pre-eminence as an international language. About one seventh of the world's population speaks English. This has seen English become a *lingua franca*—a language used to communicate with people throughout the world (Shibata 2011, p. 71). To return to the premise of the introduction, English is becoming the language of globalization, which is characterized by the intensification of worldwide social relations—through communication, travel, and trade—in and between the disparate countries of the globe.

As the connections between people increase, globalization has intensified the development of bilingualism or the need to develop knowledge of different languages. As Shibata (2011) states, "the acquisition of multiple languages has become indispensable for 'members

of global networks'" (p. 71). Yet notions of "native" and "non-native" are still debated and are sometimes divided between concepts of generic nativeness and functional language. Generic nativeness is derived from first language use, while functional language is spoken more commonly in social discourse (Kachru 2005, 2006). As Haberland (2011) states, a *lingua franca* (*sabir*) was once a trade language of the Mediterranean middle ages (p. 937), but latterly *lingua franca* has come to mean a bridge language—a language used to make communication possible between people who do not share native language. English is more often used as a *lingua franca* than by native speakers.

The social utility of language/language as property and law

The liberal view understands language to be an open and constructed space that is publicly and collectively owned in the sense of being a "non-property." A second view, according to Hutton (2010), is the native-speaker model in which language belongs to an "ethnos"—a structured space with restricted access (p. 638). Consequently, does English language belong to "white native" speakers of standard English or to everyone "irrespective of linguistic and sociocultural history" (Norton 1997, p. 409)? As such, there are tensions not only of language use and identity but also between language as a form of "commons and an entity over which it is possible to exercise limited rights of ownership, or copyright." As Hutton (2010) states:

> To ask whether a language could be owned in the legal sense is to raise complex questions not only about the nature of the thing owned, but also the status of the owner, and the relationship that constitutes the ownership. If there exists an entity called 'a language' which is capable of recognition within intellectual property (IP) law or some other legal-conceptual framework, then it would need to be determined which individuals or groups—its native speakers as individuals or collectively—could lay claim to such an intellectual property right … [l]egal recognition of a right invests the law's definitional power and control in the object of the right, in the owners of the right, and in the nature of the relationship to the right. (p. 638)

The traditional understanding of ownership is as a particular set of conditional rights that extends through constant and unbroken use but is commonly regarded as non-private property of a non-individual free-market. Literal or legal ownership of language, in comparison, is private

and decentralized, and selective instances of language are viewed as neither owned by the state nor by a collective body, neither by a group nor by individuals (Hutton 2010, p. 640). English language users may create a political space through association with an identity and jurisdiction, in which copyright is owned for the purpose of efficient exploitation and overuse. Others view language rights as part of a global language ecology in which property and ownership is reducible to forms of human relationships. Framed in this way, language, like identity, is a form of "commons." For example, just as the public is an author of a celebrity's identity and a co-owner of their image, so does the public have common law rights to language. As well as exercising a limited form of private rights, language is a public good characterized by non-rivalry in consumption and non-excludability (it can't be all-consumed and it can't be all-restricted) (Haberland 2011, p. 944). So as Benton (2001) suggests, "[t]he simplest way to resolve ownership may be to say speakers of the language own it" (p. 38).

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CHAPTER THREE

CORPUS LINGUISTICS

What are corpora? In its singular form as corpus, corpora are collections of original writings containing authentic language representations. As McEnery and Wilson (2001) state, corpus linguistics is the "sine qua non of historical linguistics" (p. 123). It enables linguists to study the relationship between words by both contextualizing data and allowing for speed and ease of retrieval. Of the many varieties of corpora available to the linguist who is working in English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the Helsinki Corpus provide a "through-time" or diachronic span from "old" or pre-medieval English to English language use in the current era. With the advent of digital communications, the use of electronic database retrieval of corpora has become ubiquitous, necessary, and increasingly widespread in a number of different fields, including genre studies, discourse analysis, and text linguistics (Brinton 2012, p. 102).

Some have also argued that corpus linguistics can improve the objectivity of critical discourse research and result in more valid and robust findings (Baker 2012, p. 247). Traugott (2011) points to the relevance of corpus research to such fundamental questions as "What is the appropriate unit of linguistic context?", and "How long do contexts remain relevant to the history of specific constructions?" (p. 231). Knowledge may be represented in the application of network analysis to corpus linguistics, but corpora have a myriad of forms and uses. As Stuart and Botella (2009) suggest, "words that conform to the corpus are the nodes of an interrelated linguistic network" (p. 2). Such networks are comprised of specific lexico-grammatical characteristics that may involve the co-selection between lexical and grammatical terms or lexical and semantic similarities such as "collocations" (the occurrence of two words within a short space of text) (Sinclair 1991, p. 170; Stuart & Botella 2009). The focus of these intratextual and intertextual networks is key words that Stuart and Botella (2009) describe as "fragments of knowledge that are dispersed within, throughout and across texts" (p. 3).

Corpora provide a framework of new perspectives on language; they are a scaffold for the integration and organization of knowledge (Stuart & Botella 2009, p. 3). In the plural form, corpus linguistics enables intertextuality. Relatedly, corpora allow for both retrospection and prospection in

understanding language use as the directions of an interactive force that extends back to previous texts and forward to future texts (Stuart & Botella 2009, p. 4). Corpus linguistics is particularly useful for diachronic "through-time" studies, because they allow easy retrieval of data.

Corpus linguistics is a collection of written texts used, for example, as a basis for generalizations about the structure of the English language (Meyer 2012, p. 23). In the twenty-first century, portable computing technology is ubiquitous and corpus linguistics no longer exists only in printed form for manual analysis (Meyer 2012, p. 23). The field of digital or electronic corpus linguistics has greatly changed the potential for textual analysis. One particular shift has been from textual analysis (which is fixed and at a point in time) to synchronic and diachronic, or "through-time" studies of the dynamic properties of language (Meyer 2012, p. 23). The traditional focus of research is the structures found in a series of canonical texts (Meyer 2012, p. 23). "Contemporary corpus" contains texts that are close to spoken language and which may allow in-depth historical analysis and help to register shifts in the language. Such corpora are diachronic. Yet synchronic corpora also permit analyses, as they contain spoken and written language that may allow for easy retrieval (Meyer 2012, p. 23). Instead, when a text becomes part of an electronic corpus it is labeled with linguistic information and subject to different kinds of analysis (Meyer 2012, p. 24). Yet while the range of studies available with electronic corpora is greater, it also puts the researcher at a further remove from the material they are studying and may reduce the constructions being analyzed into a series of unrelated concordance points drawn together from disparate areas (Meyer 2012, p. 27).

By comparison, a codex means "trunk of a tree" or "block of wood" in Latin (indeed, precursors of Roman codices were re-usable waxen tablets made of wood). Codex tablets were traditionally comprised of sheets of paper, vellum, or papyrus. These media were handwritten upon and the content was stacked, bound and fixed on one edge. This resulted in book-style format. The Romans developed the codex or codices from wooden writing tablets and transformed the shape of the book. By the sixth century, the codex had replaced the parchment scroll in the Greco-Roman world. The codex was more compact, sturdy, had an ease of reference, and permitted random access. In their essence, modern paperbacks are also codices.

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