

How writing 'made us human'—an 'emotional history' from ancient Iraq to the present day

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Evidence suggests that writing was invented in southern Iraq sometime [before 3000BC](#). But what happened next? Anyone interested in this

question will find [How Writing Made Us Human](#) by Walter Stephens both an enjoyable and stimulating read. It offers what it calls an "emotional history" of writing, chiefly referencing academics and writers in the Western tradition.

The most detailed sections of the book are those on the Renaissance and Early Modern periods, where the author's expertise and wide engagement with the sources are palpable. Topics that range beyond his expertise are served by well-chosen case studies.

Lots of interesting things—such as [ancient](#) and [modern](#) graffiti, or ancient scholars' [efforts](#) to reconstruct even older forms of writing—fall outside of the book's scope. But its range, from Uruk (modern day Warka, Iraq) in the 4th millennium BC to the present day, is enormous.

Stephens has produced a fascinating story of twists and turns. One of the big debates which lasted up to the Renaissance was about who invented writing. With both archaeology and chronology all but unknown, what thinkers had to go on was largely the Hebrew Bible and Graeco-Roman writers.

Here, the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus (AD37 to AD100) looms large: Josephus offered an [account](#) of the invention of writing before the great Biblical flood. Whether later discussants believed, disbelieved, parodied, refuted, or (due to antisemitism) deliberately ignored him, Josephus' account turns up impressively often in studies of language across the centuries.

Does writing make us human?

The title, How Writing Makes Us Human, is inspired by the role that learning to read and write played in the emancipation of enslaved people in 19th-century north America. Here, the American public's acquisition

of [literacy skills](#) truly promoted the advancement of humanism. It enabled enslaved people who achieved freedom to share their experiences of appalling cruelty with the reading public. The literate public were also to read the arguments for abolition, and to become advocates for it.

Slavery is one of the few places in the book where the effects of and attitudes to writing are discussed in relation to illiterate people. The irony is, of course, that throughout human [history](#), the vast majority of humans couldn't read or write. Hopefully, nobody would describe the [millions](#) of illiterate people around the world today as bad or failed humans. In this regard, the "us" in the title only works in a restricted sense.

On the other hand, writing has certainly played an [important role](#) in shaping and structuring most human societies. In this way, it has far-reaching effects on illiterate people, too.

At various times writing has been a [tool of resistance](#), but also a means of [social control](#). These aspects, where writing really does impact (almost) all humans, are not much explored in the book, whose concern is historical rather than anthropological. This means that current ethnographic [investigations](#) of writing and literacy likewise fall out of scope.

The book largely operates by collecting and analyzing an imposing number of statements that scholars and literati through the ages made about writing. A complementary approach would be to work by inference, such as looking at [spelling](#) choices and traditions. And it would have been useful to see more on the practice of transmission through dictation and [memorization](#), where writing and oral traditions merged into one.

Even if the book's focus is, in principle, somewhat narrow compared with the history of writing at large, Stephens develops it in a generous way. He offers ample background information, a highly readable (and often enjoyable) tone, and any number of gems—such as the Library of Constantinople reportedly including "the intestine of a dragon twenty feet long on which the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer had been written in letters of gold."

As well as for the many things it has to say about attitudes to writing, the book can be enjoyed as a microcosmic study of the "Western tradition." The book demonstrates that learned attitudes to, and ideas about, writing are a fascinating vantage point from which to view that long and complicated story.

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