



Section Three: Writing Research

Nomenclature

Gina Cooke

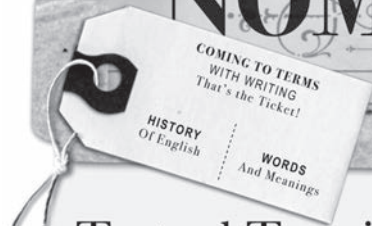


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Language for Language Instruction

NOMENCLATURE

by Gina Cooke



Part of learning about any subject is learning its terminology, and learning about writing is no exception. But no one learns much about words or what they really mean from reading a list of definitions. Instead, let's consider written language as a journey, and words—the terminology of text—as the currency that pays our way.

Textual Terminologies

TALKING ABOUT WRITING:
ENGLISH 101 AND BEYOND

LEARNING TO WRITE

As a scholar of English, I do a fair amount of reading and writing about reading and writing. I am keenly interested in how teachers teach and how learners learn the workings of written language. After all, one of the most important tasks of schooling is literacy. We all remember aspects of learning to read and write as kids: flash cards, reading groups, spelling tests, book reports. If we're growing up in a literate community, then learning—and using—written language comes with the territory.

It's been that way ever since humans first invented text: for more than 8,000 years, from Mesopotamia to Main Street, young people have been schooled in forming characters, building words, and composing texts. Wealthy Egyptian boys learned to write hieroglyphs on papyrus. Sumerian students were beaten with a cane if they failed to copy cuneiform texts carefully. Greek children copied and memorized passages of Homer's *Odyssey*, and Roman children scratched the alphabet into wax tablets.

In the modern world, modern technologies help us navigate our writing ventures. Computer labs language classrooms, and entire courses are conducted online. But text remains the topic: through changing media and methods over thousands of years, teachers still teach and learners still learn how the written word works.



Anglo-Saxon Futhorc Runic Alphabet



Ancient Roman Inscription

Ancient Greek alphabet

Anglo-Saxon (Old English), Latin, and Greek form the backbone of the Modern English language.



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LANGUAGE FOR LEARNING

When we study in any academic discipline, we have to learn its vocabulary. Every subject area has a set of words to name, describe, and explain the concepts being taught. In biology classes, scientists speak unabashedly about *photosynthesis* and *chromosomes*; in math, *integers* and *decimals* share the page with *digits* and *sums*. No one tries to understand history without learning and using words like *democracy* or *monarch*.

Writing as an academic discipline is no exception to this rule. Most young children learning a writing system acquire an instructional vocabulary to guide their learning: *vowel*, *syllable*, *suffix*, *cursive*, *adjective*, and *phrase* are all names for things we learned along the way as our writing skills emerged and evolved.

Just as travelers need a road map and a compass (or perhaps a

GPS), writers also need navigational tools for their explorations: pen and paper (or a hard drive and a keyboard), a curious mind, and a common vocabulary.

In my own journey as a writer, it seems that the demands on my language skills are continually increasing. So too is the need for a deeper understanding of a shared writers' vocabulary. The common terminology—the nomenclature—that we use to learn about writing can help us navigate our continued learning.

LANGUAGE FOR WRITING

On the pages that follow, I'll share my research into some high-frequency terms within a writers' vocabulary. Using sources like the *Dictionary of Word Origins*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, I'll consider the terms' historical origins, their modern meanings, and what they can tell us about the work of teaching and learning about writing.

A Timeline for English

- 7th Century: The Angles, Saxons and Jutes establish a presence on the British Isles, bringing their Germanic language with them.
- 8th Century: After Viking incursions into Britain, the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse languages merge into 'Englisc,' or Old English.
- 11th Century: In 1066, the Norman invasion brings the French language and French scribes to Britain, rapidly influencing the local language and marking the beginning of Middle English.
- 15th Century: The Great Vowel Shift and William Caxton's printing press cause radical changes in English speech and writing. Shakespeare is born in the 16th century and writes in Modern English.
- 18th Century: Neoclassicism's renewed interest in ancient Greece and Rome bring countless new Greek and Latin words into the English language.
- 21st Century: English is a global language, used worldwide for commerce, aviation, education, science, research, entertainment, law, and diplomacy.



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A New Angle on Old English

THE WRITE START

ANGLO-SAXON: BEGINNINGS

The story of English begins with the Anglo-Saxons, who inhabited the British Isles from the 5th century on. Ruddy and earthy, these Germanic people didn't leave behind a huge body of literature; they are best known for the epic verse *Beowulf*, which has a lasting presence in today's English classrooms and textbooks. In the language, too, Anglo-Saxon has had a lasting presence: the words that remain from the Anglo-Saxon or Old English era are often our most common, basic words, the starting place for speaking and writing.

ROUGHING IT

When we write, we never begin with a finished product. Usually, we don't even begin with a complete thesis or central point. Most often, good writing begins as an exploration—basic words and basic ideas.

Some writers are fortunate to learn early on the value of a 'rough draft.' Truth be told, my every first draft is rough. It's unfinished, sketchy, even crude. Sometimes, a rough draft doesn't

even look like real writing. It may not even have complete sentences. Maybe just phrases. Or words.

But what exactly is a draft? It turns out that a draft's imperfect nature is in keeping with the historical meaning of the word. The Old English word meant 'to pull' or 'to draw.' Originally spelled <draht>, it still appears in British English as <draught>. In this spelling, we can see the word's semantic connections to its conceptual partners, *drag* and *draw*. So, in investigating the word's origins, we can better understand what a draft actually is when we write.

A draft is often something *dragged* out of us or something *pulled* together to meet a looming deadline. Frequently, our drafts are *drawn* more than they are written; outlines, word webs, charts, and other graphic organizers can literally help us *draw* out our initial writing ideas. Over time, as we revisit our drafts, we *pull* in more or better information, and we *draw* clearer word pictures to better convey our meaning.

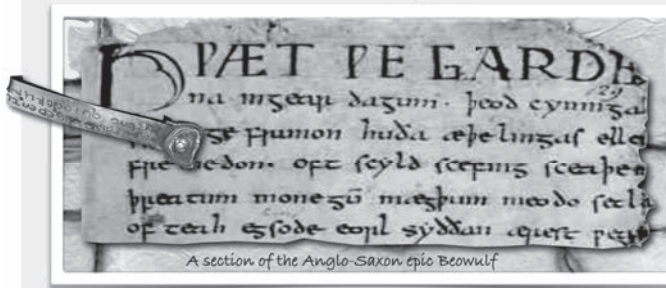
The word *draft* can also refer to concepts other than writing. A draft of



A 2007 movie depicted the monster-killing Anglo-Saxon hero

air, for example, can be bracing or chilling, much like effective writing. Draft beer—beer drawn from a tap—can be lively and flavorful, just like a good text. Ultimately, a draft is the first breath of writing. It's sometimes refreshing, sometimes stale. A draft is something sketched, something unformed, something with promise.

Once we sketch out our basic ideas, it's time to move forward on our writing timeline. After a draft or two, we want to begin to polish our craft. Structure, style, and word choice can change significantly over the writing process. While we can't write at all without a basic (Anglo-Saxon) vocabulary, we also can't stop there. Let's consider where our drafts might draw us next.



A section of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*



NOMENCLATURE

When in Rome, Do as the Romans

OR, WHAT WILLIAM CONQUERED

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pre			u	al		ize	ate	ion
inter		'tissue, something woven'			ly	ed	ing	
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In my research, I use word matrices like the one above to show how we can build many words from a single base. The base <text> derives from the Latin *texere*, 'to weave'; its original meaning is still preserved in words such as *textile* and *texture*. But the meaning has also broadened to refer to written documents, spoken words, and understanding. The word *context*, for example, may refer to written or oral language, to experiences, or to situations. A *pretext* is a reason given, often deceptively.

The most modern meanings for text reflect today's technology: *webtext* and *hypertext* refer to computerized documents and their embedded links to other texts, images or information. Although it was a noun for centuries, *text* has also recently become a verb: *I texted my friend*.

But perhaps the contemporary notion of text as writing is not so very different from the ancient notion of text as weaving:

An ancient metaphor: thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns—but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver. The scribes made this old and audible abstraction into a new and visible fact. After long practice, their work took on such an even, flexible texture that they called the written page a *textus*, which means cloth.

—Robert Bringhurst
The Elements of Typographic Style

LATIN: ENGLISH GROWS UP

Over the centuries, English has been profoundly influenced by various Romance languages. In fact, it's often considered to be the most Latin of all the Germanic languages. First, Julius Caesar and his Roman henchmen invaded Britain in 55 BCE, but they didn't leave much of their Latin lexicon behind. The Roman Catholic Church also established a presence in England in the 6th century, likewise without lasting linguistic effects.

The first major infusion of Romance words into the English language began in 1066, when William, the Duke of Normandy (or William the Conqueror) decided that the English throne really belonged to him. The Battle of Hastings ensued, bringing Norman French royalty, nobility, scribes, customs and, of course, language into Britain. New words were adopted, adapted and argued about over hundreds of years.

Centuries later, during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, Greek and Roman classical studies were rediscovered throughout Europe. In order to establish a common vocabulary, scholars and writers made way for another influx of Romance words into English.

Whereas Old English was the language of a hale, down-to-earth people, French and Latin were the languages of art, science, religion, and scholarship. They brought more complex words into English, words with prefixes and suffixes, words with rich, nuanced meanings. Hence, understanding the Latin layer of the English language can increase a writer's level of sophistication. Whereas an Anglo-Saxon vocabulary

might proclaim writing to be *good* or *right*, a Romance-based vocabulary could deem it to be *excellent*, *brilliant*, *superlative*, or *incomparable*.

COMPOSE YOURSELF

Like the English language itself, our own individual language changes over time, through the writing process. After roughly sketching out our thoughts, we want to help our draft mature into a well-structured, well-articulated piece. This is where knowing about some important Latin words can help us.

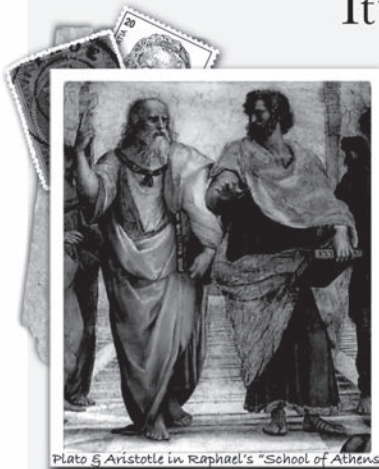
First, we *revise*. When we revise our writing, we're literally having another look at it. To <re> + <vise> means to 'see again'; <vise> is the same Latin base that appears in words like *visual*, *visor*, *vision*, and *visit*, all words that have to do with seeing. All polished writing needs a fresh perspective. It's often helpful to get a second or third set of eyes on our work, to have our peers take a look-see as well. Our final product, after all, cannot stay at the draft stage; it needs to grow up into a full-blown composition.

Many of us think of a *composition* as a particular kind of writing assignment, but if we study the word, we see that it goes farther than that. The words *compose* and *composition* come from Latin too (the <ior> at the end is a dead giveaway). To <pose> something means to 'put' it or 'place' it in a certain way; add the prefix <com>, which means 'together,' and we get a better picture of what writing is: a composition is something thoughtfully put together. It's a draft that's all grown up.

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It's All Greek to Me!

RHETORICAL QUESTIONS



Plato & Aristotle in Raphael's "School of Athens"

GREEK: THAT'S CLASSIC

In modern writing studies, composition and rhetoric walk hand in hand. But in its origins, the academic field of rhetoric lies in the classical world and was originally independent of written text. What I first studied rhetoric, I learned that the term comes from the ancient Greek word *rhētōr*, meaning 'orator' or 'public speaker,' and the word *rhētōr* in turn is derived from *rhēma*, which means 'spoken word.' So the first rhetoricians were not writers at all.

In the 4th century BCE, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a treatise called *Rhetoric* in which he examined the art of speaking persuasively. Verbal prowess was highly valued, and public debates were commonplace in the educated community. Of course, the discipline of rhetoric has changed over the past 2,500 years, but Aristotle's original framework retains a powerful influence in writing studies, literature, philosophy, and education today.

The study of classical philosophers such as Aristotle, his teacher, Plato, and his teacher, Socrates, was revived in the 18th

century during the Enlightenment, when new domains of study arose in the arts and sciences. Thousands of new words entered the English language, borrowed and adapted from ancient Greek, to meet the demands of new ways of thinking and learning.

Old words also began to be used in new ways in academic life: the study of *rhetoric* changed from being primarily about persuasive speech to primarily about reading and writing (Horner 1990: 325). A new class of readers—a literate community—grew up amidst expanding print technologies, creating a need and desire for the work of writers. Along with neoclassicism, then, came new opportunities and a new vocabulary for writers.

MASTERS OF OUR DOMAIN

Over the centuries, rhetoric has been redefined by countless authors,

speakers, and thinkers. Some people use 'rhetoric' synonymously with 'doublespeak' or 'lip service,' as in *The politicians' rhetoric about healthcare reform won't cure sick people*. For university-level writers, however, rhetoric means carefully considering one's appeal, one's argument, and one's audience.

When we write, we try to observe the conventions of the domain in which we're operating. The rhetoric we use—the available means of persuasion—will be different for a personal narrative than it will be for a research paper and different still for a journal article or a website. Beyond just composing, attention to rhetoric gives us integrity in our writing. With skilled rhetoric, our point and our perspective are clear and compelling. A classical art, then, helps make for classic writing abilities.

The Journal
Special Edition

What the H?

Language News Wire: A rogue <h> has been wreaking havoc in English spelling. After an investigation, it appears that the <h> is there for a reason. According to our sources, Modern English words spelled with <h> are always of Greek origin.

The <rh> spelling reflects the name of the Greek letter called 'rho' used to spell /r/. Many words with <rh> derive ultimately from Greek roots related to a sense of flowing: rhyme, rhythm, rheumy, and logorhea all go with the Greek flow.

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Interminable Terminologies

WORDS WITHOUT END

LEARNING ABOUT WRITING

Many people would argue that students need to learn 'how to write,' whatever that means. What's more important, and more interesting, is that we need to learn *about* writing (Wardle 2009). To write, we need to be scholars of writing. That means reading, to be sure; university courses bring an increased reading load no matter one's field. But being a scholar of writing—learning about writing—also means learning about its terminology, its structure, and its past.

Everyone knows that stories are made of words, but my research also teaches me that words are made up of stories. Understanding the story of words and the story of writing helps me to better understand my job as a

writer, in a community of writers and in various writing situations. Having a nomenclature as a departure place is critical to successfully navigating the turbulent waters of writing.

Writing instruction is an ancient and ever-changing tradition. We witness language—and the demands on language—changing all the time, throughout history and in the present day. Spoken language changes, and written language changes. Along the way, writing and studying writing also shift in their meaning, in their form, and in their function.

Wherever we are on our writing journey, let's make sure that among the souvenirs we've collected, we've included the necessary tools for our travel. Literacy has played an

indispensable role in human history; it has accompanied every war, every court, every major religion, and every formal education for the past 8,000 years. The story of literacy is the story of the world, and understanding the history of a discipline better equips us to shape its future.

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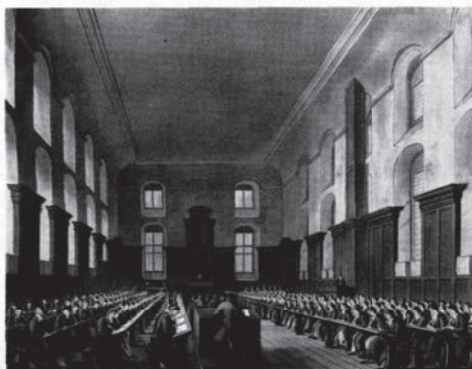
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WRITING SCHOOL, CHEVY'S HOSPITAL
Coloured aquatint by J. Stadler after F. Mackenzie, 1816

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Gina Cooke is a linguist in education and a PhD student at Illinois State University. She has taught about reading and writing from preschool to grad school, and thinks that spelling is cool.

