

Scripts and Writing

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Charles Haberl, SAS-African, Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Literature

TTH 04:30-05:50P

Honors College Seminar Room S124

College Ave Campus

Will Count Towards SAS-African, Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Literature Major

Will Count Towards SAS-African, Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Literature Minor

If "reading is fundamental," how much more fundamental must the act of writing be?

That simple act, to signify the words and even the sounds of a spoken language by etching, imprinting, painting, or engraving representative signs upon an object, is so central to our concepts of civilization that it is nearly impossible for us to conceive of a world without it, as demonstrated by the paradox that nearly all efforts to envision a return to a state of primary orality have been literary, such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. Nevertheless, we are transitioning to what some scholars (such as Walter Ong) have called a "post-literate" society, due to the decline of the print media and the rise of alternatives to print, particularly digital audio and video alternatives delivered through the internet.

At the same time, literacy has historically been rare, and at no time in the past has it ever been as widespread and as common as it is today. The overwhelming majority of languages that are spoken today and that have been spoken throughout the history of humanity have produced absolutely no literature, and many languages have never even been recorded in written form, but were rather transmitted from generation to generation solely by word of mouth. At one time, writing was so pivotal yet uncommon a technology that the ability to write was closely associated with the practice of magic, as it must have seemed like magic to those who were unlettered.

Perhaps it is time for us to reassess what writing is and what it means to civilization. Through this course, students will be exposed to the entire span of the history (and proto-history) of writing, learn to identify the different types of writing systems, and appreciate the differences between primarily oral, literate, and post-literate societies.

CHARLES HABERL is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages and Literatures. He graduated with an A.B. from Brown University in Providence, RI, where he studied Mediterranean archaeology and Northwest Semitic epigraphy. At Harvard University, where he received his A.M. and Ph.D., he continued his studies in historical and comparative Semitic linguistics, and wrote the first reference grammar of Neo-Mandaic, an endangered dialect of Aramaic formerly spoken along the Iran-Iraq border. His scholarship focuses upon the Aramaic language and its various scripts, and how the primarily oral cultures of the Ancient Near East are reflected even within their written texts.