

THE RIGHT TOOLS TO WRITE: AN EK3 COLLECTION

A COLLECTION OF WRITINGS BY ENG 412
STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

E:

Good morning, folks! Welcome back to EK3, your first stop for all things writing. I'm Ethan—

K:

And I'm Kev.

And let's introduce today's topic. Last week we covered the basics of a career in writing. Springing off from that, we gathered a few opinions from loyal listeners and present to you now...

E & K:

The Right Tools for Writing!

Which is possibly the worst title I've ever heard, and I can't believe you talked me into saying it in unison with you.

E:

It's catchy!

It's cliché.

Either way, this segment is all
about the tools for writing.
From past to present—

And the ever-approaching future—

We thought we'd get you situated
on which tools for writing are
'right' for you.

And which ones might be coming
up sooner than we think. I can't
say I'm excited.

You're at home with just a pen
and paper, Kev.

Yes, I am. Better than the
hundreds of applications you
have open when you need to
answer an e-mail, Ethan.

They're important!

They're bloated, and hopefully
some of the opinions we've
gathered agree.

Oh?

Our faithful listeners answered
our call and have sent in some
pieces for today's segment.

It's always fun hearing from our
listeners. Let's get started!

The first few pieces focus on
the history of writing. This one
is from Kerigan Moore, titled
"Writing: A Technology."

ONE
KERIGAN MOORE,
“WRITING: A TECHNOLOGY”

At the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, across from the diagram explaining the process and benefits of oil fracking, there is an exhibit with only two items. One item is an ancient votive statue used in the earliest forms of anthropomorphic religions, with roots stemming from the Persian plateau. The other item is, by contrast, less visually interesting; sitting on the black display block is a cracking, molded slab of clay, no larger than the palm of a hand.

Daily, hundreds of people approach the glass which houses this small lump of cured soil, brown and frail and dried with time. These visitors peer beyond the glass and analyze the seemingly arbitrary bumps, divots and slices embedded in the clay's surface, as if the piece has been pressed into aggregate; leftovers from sitting pressed against an uneven ground. How unassuming, they think. Why does the hunk of bumpy mud sit isolated in the display, offering a place of importance among artifacts made of gold and pearl?

Many scholars believe that the clay tablet, unnamed, is one of the first pieces of one of the earliest forms of writing:

cuneiform. The tablet records the amount of beer and grain being given to someone, for something; a transaction, historians posit. A gift?

A receipt, most agree. Five wedge-shaped indentations are placed next to a pictograph of an upright jar with a pointed base; five units of beer. Seven wedge-shaped indentations next to a pictograph of a bowl tipped towards a schematic human head; seven units plus the sign for “to eat,” or grain.

Fascinating, the guests of the Iraq Museum decide, after having read the paragraph description accompanying the tablet. How cool is that? So cool!—and, perhaps, a little disappointing. Ashamed at their own private reactions, they skitter away to oil fracking, thoughts occupied.

What were the earliest humans doing, recording the sale of beer? Where are the deep contemplations on human life and civilization? Where are waxed on the universal truths that transcend time? Our ancestors are supposed to be wise; old things are meant to inform.

The earliest forms of writing can be traced back to 3400 BCE. For those who don't feel like doing math, that's five thousand four hundred years ago. That's like two Egypts, the longest-lasting ancient civilization (about 3,000 continuous years), or twenty-one and a half United Stateses. Incomprehensible numbers, and yet, if one subscribes to the belief that humans appeared in Africa 300,000 years ago, writing is relatively late to the game. If all of human history was a single, twenty-four hour day, writing was invented at eleven p.m.

At 11:01 p.m., or a thousand years later, humans get writing artifacts a little more satisfying to our existential sensibilities: *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Mesopotamia, and *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* in Egypt. These stories help humans explain themselves, and are vital to identity and civilization building. Egypt would later strike again with *The Book of the*

Dead, and ancient Iraq would produce the Code of Urukagina. The “complaint tablet to Ea-nāṣir,” a clay tablet written in Akkadian cuneiform, is the first recorded customer complaint. Hammurabi created his famed Code a few years later, contemporaneous with the elders in the Shang Dynasty inscribing prayers onto oracle bones. Once humans start writing, they’re addicts. Inevitable, of course; writing was always meant to be—right?

Hundreds of years later, around the time the paranoid Essenes are huddled away in their coastal Dead Sea caves, fixedly scribbling on scrolls, Socrates, one of the foundational thinkers of Western thought, has had enough of this writing thing. Plato, his most notorious student, records Socrates’ famous critique in his dialogue *Phaedrus*:

[Writing] is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.¹

Socrates believed that writing was too finite, too fastened. The famous debater imagined that once an idea was written down, the idea held too much authority; how could the belief be challenged, and later changed, if needed? People who write will become forgetful, he argued, reliant on external sources to conduct basic recall and thinking. Writing will allow people to become “hearers of many things” and critical learners of none. Socrates believed that writing was dangerous to authenticity, to genuine knowledge. The person detailing the sale of five units of beer and seven units of grain is missing out on a chance to flex their cerebellum. Plato, by writing down his

teacher's lectures, boxes in the dynamic, flexible nature of belief.

New technologies have always been intimidating, but old sentiments will ultimately be exchanged for efficiency. The advent of the lighting-fast railroad killed the contemplative, reflective, beautiful trot across the countryside. Why linger and meditate over a textile when a factory can produce five times what a weaver can? No one wants to write letters, penning every word laboriously, thoughtfully; they want to call. There's no reason to feel the water rock under your feet when you can fly much quicker in the clouds.

Nicholas Carr, an American journalist, author, and political thinker, believes that "Socrates was right."² His 2010 book, *The Shallows*, posits that the internet now does what Socrates feared writing would do back in 400 BCE. Whether or not growth and innovation are always advantageous is a tricky, long-contended topic, and perhaps a tad uninteresting in the age of perpetual metamorphosis.

The pivotal point comes when humans start to wonder what is worth forgetting, rather than what is worth learning. What do we throw away, in order to make more room?

Socrates was arguing in a time when writing was exclusively for the elite; 95% of the population was otherwise illiterate. Perhaps writing has made humans too certain in their own belief—but writing enacts agency, identity, and ideology that transforms and connects on a much larger scale. Maybe such connection and mobility is worth letting the cerebellum, our memory, rest every once in a while.

Every time one thinks, growth happens—but to have enough room for such growth, one must discard old ways of thought. Writing, as a technology, offloads the mental load of remembering every detail, allowing for increased exploration, sharing, and cross referencing; indeed, humans are "hearers of

many things.” As a species, we are constantly seeking stimuli and thirsting for more knowledge. The visitors to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad wander away from the clay tablet, perhaps completely indifferent, perhaps disappointed at the lack of groundbreaking antiquated wisdom—and yet, they are active witnesses to the process of discarding, and, in turn, to growing. A blunted reed wedged indecipherably into a block of soil is one of the most significant inventions of human history: writing, the technology of thought.



Figure 1.

EK3

E:

What a terrifying thought. I'm so glad to be alive now, instead of then. Imagine less than a few percent of people being literate.

K:

You'd barely make the cut, don't worry, Ethan.

Ooh, harsh!

Next up, two pieces with two very different stories to tell. This is Charley Babb, with an untitled piece on the progression of writing implements and writing systems.

TWO

CHARLEY BABB, “UNTITLED”

I’ve always found it fascinating how long different writing techniques and technologies can last. Both in usage but also physically, it’s always been fascinating to think about how long the written word can last.

It’s changed over the thousands of years that humans have been writing, but it’s always been a concern for writers. In the earliest days of human literacy, writing was something exclusive. It was the realm of skilled craftspeople, working under the orders of kings and pharaohs. Early writing was expensive, time consuming, and difficult. Cuneiform tablets had to be pressed from clay, inscribed with the language and words they were to carry, and then fired in kilns to set them into shape.

The ancient Egyptians had to carve their hieroglyphs into literal stone, a process that was even more difficult, both due to the complexities of learning the language itself and the physical materials.

The Egyptians did have their hieratic script, a much less well known writing system developed from the hieroglyphs. While the hieroglyphs were primarily used for religious

purposes, carved into tombs and monuments, the hieratic script was used for more bureaucratic purposes. It was the language of scribes more than pharaohs, but much less has survived. Because it traded durability for ease of use, using ink on papyrus, much less of the script has survived to the modern day.

That trade-off has never faded. In medieval Europe, paper only really became available in the early 1500s, depending on the region, and without a local substitute such as papyrus, scholars and writers had to find a different solution. Parchment, the prime writing technology, was made of specially treated animal skin. It had to go through days of preparation in order to even produce a single animal's hide for use. Books could take dozens of pelts, fundamentally limiting the number of works that could be produced and recorded. Parchment could last a long time—well-kept examples from the medieval period still exist, after all—but it forced choices. Many works were lost because the scholars and monks tasked with upkeep and updating them were unable to copy the originals down before they were destroyed.

Paper did change things. Made of fibers, primarily from trees, it was substantially easier to produce. With the nearly consecutive development of the printing press, paper allowed thousands more books to be produced, for significantly cheaper and much easier. Books and writing itself quickly became much more than they had been in previous centuries. Books were no longer such time intensive pieces of art, monuments to thousands of hours of labor; they could afford to be used on things beyond the most sacred and important works. Proper literacy took decades longer, but with paper and the printing press, the written word could actually make its way into the mainstream.

The technology behind printing has progressed further, but

hasn't changed a lot in the fundamental ways. We're still printing works on paper, just doing it at a scale that would shock the early adopters of the printing press. With the rise of archival, acid-free paper, it's also easier for works to last longer.

But of course the biggest change in the world of writing is the advent of digitization. Now, books can be scanned and preserved digitally. It gives them a theoretically infinite life, although one much more practically limited. In fact, digital preservation may even be substantially less long-lasting than physical archival copies. While something physical is subject to physical threats, it can also be preserved with care and effort. A digital copy isn't vulnerable to the same type of physical threat, but it has a whole new set of issues. Data corruption is the prime one, errors and glitches adding up to render a file inoperable. But there is also no guarantee of compatibility. Digitalization introduces the issue of whether upgrades will make past works unusable, or whether the software will gradually become more and more obsolete, with no path to recovery. Digitalization allows a work to be saved almost indefinitely, while at the same time making access far easier for readers and writers alike. It's a revolution, but revolutions do always have consequences.

It's fascinating how the physical limits of the technology used to write have changed what has been written, and how the lifespan of these mediums changed with the times. Looking back gives you a unique perspective on how technology has improved, techniques have advanced, and how literature itself has developed.



Figure 2.

Note: the following sources informed this work.^{1,2}

EK3

E:

And from leather to trees,
here's Katy Sue Malt with "The
Carvings We Leave Behind."

THREE

KATY SUE MALT, “THE
CARVINGS WE LEAVE BEHIND”

Growing up in North Carolina meant learning the story of the Lost Colony of Roanoke, England’s first attempt at a permanent settlement in the New World. Roanoke Colony’s fame naturally arose from its disappearance. The colony had been in desperate need of supplies, but when provisions arrived after three years, the settlers were nowhere to be found. The only message left was carved into a tree: *CROATOAN*.



Figure 3.

This was the first time that I considered tree carving to be anything other than a teen's act of boredom or a way to deface and mark up a tree. Tree carving could leave a message. It could be a form of writing.

The act of carving on trees goes by many names: arbor-glyphs, dendroglyphs, silvaglyphs, or simply tree carving. Humans have been carving symbols, messages, drawings, and names in trees for thousands of years. As the tree grows, the writing will change and stretch with it. The tools range from knives to fingernails, with the tree's bark providing a canvas that can last for decades if the writer is lucky. But if the writer is unlucky, so is the tree. Tree bark provides a layer of protection similar to human skin, shielding the tree from fungi, diseases, and pests. Carving into a tree often damages this outer layer of defense, compromising the tree's health. At times, the human desire to leave a mark can be detrimental to the tree's life.

In the poem "Letter to the Person Who Carved His Initials into the Oldest Living Longleaf Pine in North America," Matthew Olzmann showcases the disrespect of this human desire to leave a mark directly on nature's skin. When I first encountered this poem in my creative nonfiction class, I expected it to begin with an accusation. Instead, it felt like a conversation. The narrator asks "what it's like to live without / curiosity, without awe." This pine tree, also in North Carolina, is believed to be around 470 years old. It was decades old when the English first attempted to create a settlement at Roanoke. But where the engraving of *CROATOAN* served as a message, the initials carved in a historic natural feature represent something closer to hubris. "To take it all in and then, / to reach for your knife." As Olzmann wrote, too often humans look at the wonders of the natural world and desire to make their cruel, selfish mark.¹

But how long does it take for a mark to turn from pedestrian to historic? The Basque Carvings in the American west are heralded as historic landmarks. The U.S. Forest Service website describes these carvings and symbols as historic, showcasing how sheepherders from the Basque region in Spain carved on aspen trees, providing a glimpse into human history and the old west. Since these trees only live around 100 years, these carvings and their messages are disappearing. At the end of the article, a bold message warns that “it is illegal to carve on aspen trees on the national forests and grasslands!”² While the Basque shepherds carved without causing damage to the aspen, the fear is that new writers would not be so careful. The fear is that humans would carve and carve until the beauty is lost.

In areas where tree carving is not prohibited and there is precedent, the marks are pervasive. I recall seeing bamboo lining zoo walkways and a bamboo forest at an orchard, carved over and over by knives, nails, and sticks. They went as high as people could reach, with names, initials, dates, drawings, and words from humans wanting to leave their mark. Of course, the more vulgar writing is saved for latrinalia, words scrawled on bathroom walls. Instead, carving on trees has long been devoted to initial pairs. Young love has frequently turned to engraving on trees for permanence, with inscriptions like “A + C” or “K loves B.” A famous example in media has to be from Disney’s *Robin Hood* (1973), where “R. H. + M. M.” is surrounded by a heart on a tree in Nottingham, England.³ While some of these romances are fleeting, their marks are not, growing and warping with the trees they haunt. This romantic gesture has been practiced for thousands of years, with tree carving being referenced by Greek and Roman writers, with the oldest description of writing on tree bark dating back 2,300 years ago. Today, we have countless other canvases to profess our love on, and yet many people still rely on trees.

It has been over 400 years since the Roanoke Colony disappeared, and there is still no conclusive answer for their vanishing. The most popular theory is that after starvation and drought, the remaining colonists joined a local Native American tribe, the Croatan. According to the National Park Service's page on the Lost Colony, John White, the colonists' leader who left for supplies and was delayed by conflict with the Spanish, "found 'CRO' carved into a tree and 'CROATOAN' carved into a palisade."⁴ Although the colonists had agreed to write their destination should they move before White's return, relations with the Croatan were questionable. But while White's books had been destroyed and his armor rusted, the colony's messages remained carved for people to find. Today, you can see a recreation of *CROATOAN* on a tree in the North Carolina Museum of History (under construction as of 2026), showcasing what the colonists' message might have looked like. The fate of the Lost Colony remains unsolved.

Note: the following sources informed this work.^{5,6,7,8,9,10}

EK3

K:

Charley's piece is powerful.
Writing used to mean something.
Now any dolt with a keyboard can
type up a storm online.

E:

What about Katy Sue's? It's sad
to see the wondrous process of
writing used in such a selfish,
shameful way.

I feel the same whenever I see
your drafts.

Says the dinosaur. But now, it's
time to move on from your happy
place in the past and check out
the present. Up next, we have a
few pieces covering the rise of
our newest compatriot:
artificial intelligence.

Compatriot?

Acquaintance, then.

Begrudgingly tolerated
interloper?

Before you get on a roll, let's
move on to a piece by Savannah
Slater titled "The Modern
Writer."

FOUR

SAVANNAH SLATER,
“THE MODERN WRITER”

Left To Our Own Devices

I have a friend who can only write on her laptop or on a piece of loose-leaf paper to transcribe later, and, every so often, tells me that her writing isn't good (a claim that is common among writers, but wholly unsubstantiated on her part). I have another friend who nearly exclusively types on their phone, has only ever used paper for one outline as long as I've known them, and has to finish a work within a certain window of time or the inspiration will run out and it'll never get done. I prefer to write on my laptop, though I will resort to using my phone if it's more convenient, and I despise outlining (or writing any larger creative work, for that matter) on paper. The scribbles of ink and eraser marks and poorly-shaped letters are grating to me now that I've had beautiful, neat, digitized outlines that I can add to or subtract from at will.

Though, it's worth mentioning that I still keep an inordinately large collection of pens in every color and thickness.

The modern writer is spoiled for choice in terms of

medium. Paper is, as always, a classic. Both antique and new typewriters are still available. Digital technology offers a slew of word processors and beckoning text boxes, from Microsoft Word to the humble Notes app. There are countless places to keep your writing, no matter the subject matter, and almost all the writers I know have their work split between multiple. Many of us try to be neat, but good digital housekeeping is a constant uphill battle, as anyone with multiple email inboxes will tell you.

But, on some level, this isn't new. Art has always been a messy process. Some of the greatest creative geniuses of our time have written or painted or otherwise created works that felt like pulling teeth at the time or almost weren't finished at all. The advent of such a wide spread of options hasn't changed our nature as artists—it's merely changed the channels through which we create and share our creations. In a lot of ways, from the printing press to the internet and self-publishing, new technologies have often democratized writing. We'll come back to that later, but first I want to point out the elephant in the room that is modern writing: the recently crowned star of writing technology's hopes and dreams—but not necessarily *writers'* hopes and dreams.

ARTificial

First of all, anything that fabulously rich people and companies promote so aggressively as a panacea for all the world's ills (and, of course, a way for them to get fabulously *richer*) deserves every bit of the intense scrutiny AI has been put under. We all know that by now—if something is dressed up in frills and hawked as being almost too good to be true, it probably is.



Figure 4.

I didn't have a name for this phenomenon, or for the intense distrust I harbored for it, until I got an email on a sleepy December day from my only Substack subscription: "Manufactured Inevitability and the Need for Courage," an essay discussing the rhetoric surrounding AI by L.M. Sacasas from the sixth volume of his publication, *The Convivial Society* (which is a fantastic read, but for our purposes here, we're only visiting it briefly).¹ Now, if you're like me, you have an intense dislike for being constantly told that a large language model can do your job—and your hobbies, for that matter—better than you can, and you can't quite rationalize why everyone continues to *insist* that it can. This essay in particular caught my attention.

Manufactured inevitability. That's what I had been raging against all this time alongside artists, writers, and massive IP lawsuits alike. It seemed like every person and every field was rushing to adopt AI in every way they could all around me, while I could do nothing but grumble and install a Firefox extension to prevent me from having to see an AI overview every single time I wanted to know how many feet are in a mile or when a film I'm looking forward to is coming out. The fact is, resisting, or even simply not using, AI makes you somewhat of a rare bird in today's technological landscape. If that's true, why do we keep resisting?

For some, the answer is likely spite, and that will serve you just as well as anything else. But beyond that, there is also our love for art—and, going hand in hand with that, our love for humanity. Art is a hallmark of human civilization, from the first cave paintings to a child's scribbled crayon stick figures. Art is deeply personal, existing to express and communicate and connect with others. If we keep this definition of art in mind, centering the process of creation by a living being, anything written or produced by AI doesn't qualify for the title of art in the first place.

The struggle to create, the struggle to express yourself, and the struggle to be proud of what you make are all hallmarks of the artist's experience. Writers and artists of all mediums, hobbyists and professionals, we all share common threads that connect us no matter how new or how experienced: love (or sometimes love-hate) of our craft and the choice to struggle on, because it's worth the struggle. Because the choice not to outsource, the choice to feel and connect and experience, is ours to make.

Fanfiction To Published Novel?

Now, back to the conversation of democratization in terms of the internet and self-publishing. If you're paying any kind of attention to the publishing industry, the shelves of Barnes & Noble, or book-related social media, you've probably noticed a trio of trends, all of which often go hand in hand: the rise of self-publishing; the rise of fanfiction, name-changed and carefully edited to be published without violating IP laws; and the recent stardom of the subgenre known as romantic fantasy (or, as coined by social media, *romantasy*).

The decline of stigma around self-published books, the general upset of tradition in the publishing industry as a technology, and the culture shift around it have all marked the advent of a new publishing market, a market that values its own survival enough to shift priorities toward resonating with the modern audiences that can keep it alive. That shift in marketing strategy centers around appealing to a social media-informed public—and, often, one that browses for books based on existing tropes and familiar content (tropes and content which find their roots in fanfiction, where they were grouped and named).

However, this shift toward pre-existing details and character archetypes (as well as the publishing of edited works of fanfiction, which presuppose an audience connection to the characters around whom these works are based) has also caused a sort of collapse of context—something I've referred to recently as BYOF, or “bring your own feelings.” In prioritizing marketable traits in writing, I've found that a great many recently-published books fall flat in terms of character work and development (and even romantic plot—many of these pairings read in the end like low-budget romcoms, sometimes even becoming so tropey as to be uncomfortable to read). The

emotional stakes of the books themselves are propped up on a base of existing reader buy-in, and can collapse entirely when that buy-in isn't present.

Self-publishing isn't the end of the world, and neither is the imperative of the publishing industry to change to meet the changes around it. Though it's been oft debated whether or not these things "degrade" the value of publishing, many complaints about such degradation come from a place of condescending distaste for the romance genre as a whole and the tastes of that genre's audience, which is mostly women (but that's another essay on its own, and I don't have time or room in my word count to unpack it). There are many valid concerns about the content of recently-published books (such as the issue of BYOF and over-reliance on tropes) and the level of weight marketing carries in deciding what books reach the shelves, but there are also many concerns that are, frankly, not raised in good faith. Even with its recent gains in social capital and in publishing, fanfiction as an art form still experiences a high level of stigma.

Like most things, it's a matter of opinion. But whether you love it or hate it, in today's environment, fanfiction and online fandom have become a training ground for future writers, and romantasy is here to stay.

EK3

K:

See, there's a writer after my
own heart.

E:

Your shriveled, dead,
technophobe heart?

You know me so well, Ethan. But
yes. Except for the romantasy
bit. I'm more of a sci-fi guy,
myself, and I hope the recent
Artemis missions can revive that
market.

No romance for you?

I didn't say that.

Is the great Kevin Carnegie
hinting that he might have-gasp-
depths?

I'm not giving you the
satisfaction of a response to
that.

Fine, I'll let it go.

Thank you.

For now.

Ugh.

[laughs] Here's James Roche's
"The Rise of Artificial
Intelligence."

FIVE

JAMES ROCHE, “THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE”

Forms of writing have continuously evolved throughout the course of history.

Specifically, writing has advanced in various ways from cave engravings, to quill and parchment, to the pencil, and to, now, typing on a phone or a computer. Even in current times, writing takes many forms and many shapes. It continues to evolve and grow thanks to the emergence of new and exciting technologies. Recent developments of these new technologies include voice dictation, texting, and emailing.

A most recent emerging technology used to help advance and guide writing is Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is different from previous new writing tools in that it does not merely aid writing, but can write for you. It has also rapidly evolved since the invention of tools like ChatGPT in 2022. Not only can AI write entire essays for an individual, it has also been used to create or generate images and videos. It is an extremely powerful new technology that's used very frequently and is multifaceted. Debate also exists on the rapid evolution of AI and how it can be dangerous in the future. Members of both

the general public and in the AI industry are lobbying government officials to introduce some sort of parameters or regulations to counter the rapid rise of AI. It is a tool that has completely changed many things in our society, and is undeniably one of the biggest technological achievements and advancements in human history.

When it comes to AI and writing, the possibilities are truly limitless. For example, I could type into an AI program like ChatGPT or ClaudeAI telling it to “Generate me a well-crafted five-page essay detailing the history of Great Britain,” and the program would generate those five pages in less than ten seconds, with little to no faults detectable. That scenario puts into perspective just how powerful AI is when it comes to its ability to craft writing material.

Generating entire essays on a prompt is not the only thing AI can accomplish. As previously mentioned, it is a multifaceted tool that can be used for many things in both our society and in writing. I could use it to generate an email or formal message to a work supervisor or school professor. AI can also edit and check large or short pieces of writing for things such as cohesion issues, punctuation errors, spelling errors, and grammar problems, with little to no error. Normally, you would have to hire someone to edit a piece of writing for you, but you can hire AI to do this for free.

Questions have also been posed in various industries about the problems AI may cause by replacing jobs. The writing industry is no different. As previously mentioned, AI can do extraordinary things such as writing essays/pieces of writing, editing entire documents, and rewriting sentences. These are things usually done by authors, professional writers, or editors. It truly remains to be seen whether or not AI has the capacity to erase those jobs.

The impact of AI has been felt in writing in many ways.

When it comes to education, this impact has been seen as largely negative. This is because it has been speculated that students nowadays use AI to cheat in school, such as by using it to answer test questions, generate entire papers, or analyze and complete homework assignments. Professors and members of the academic community are trying to navigate how to mitigate the use of AI in the school setting. Nonetheless, finding solutions to this problem is difficult because it is so easy to cheat with AI, and students will go to great lengths to cover up academic dishonesty. Professors have employed the use of AI checkers such as GPTZero to detect cheating. In addition, professors and teachers will sometimes check the word choice of a sentence or essay, and if it deviates from the traditional form of writing from that student, they may charge said student with academic dishonesty. However, doing this is easier said than done, and many students still get away with cheating using AI. Hopefully, new technology will be invented that is better at navigating the use of AI by students.

AI is a new form of technology that has changed how people write, and our greater society as a whole. Its impacts have been seen in many subsets of writing, whether it is in the academic setting, job industry, and the abilities of AI to generate entire essay prompts. The use of AI in writing will only grow as it continues to become more intelligent and advanced. It will also be imperative to take note of how AI will evolve, as there is growing debate on whether or not it needs government oversight and regulations. Nonetheless, the invention of AI represents one of the greatest technological advances in writing throughout the course of history, and its situation continues to progress.

EK3

K:

This guy has the right idea,
doesn't he, Ethan?

E:

I wouldn't be so... conclusive
about it. I think artificial
intelligence could be quite
useful.

To serve my coffee, maybe. Not
to write a readable story.

I'm not taking a side on that
yet. I'd like to see how exactly
it turns out. Call it a morbid
curiosity.

Morbid's putting it lightly. And speaking of morbid, folks, we've gotta pay the bills. Before we continue with a speculation on the future, we've got a word from our sponsors. We curate our advertisements, and we've got a beauty here for you today. Here's Gwen Engelhart on behalf of our sponsor, "The Pilot G-2: The People's Pen."

SIX

GWEN ENGELHART, “THE
PILOT G-2: THE PEOPLE’S PEN”



Figure 5.

If I was trapped on a deserted island and I could only take three stationery items, it'd be three Pilot G-2 0.7 mm pens.

I'd worry about the paper later.

This pen has been with me since the beginning. From childhood days scribbling small drawings on a legal pad to drafting my college admissions essay, the Pilot G-2 is the pen I'm always reaching for. I keep two stashed in my car, at least

five in my backpack, and a cup full on my desk (there are fifteen in that cup; I counted).

If anything's noteworthy, I'm using the G-2 to write it down.

Crafted With Care

Pilot, the largest pen manufacturer in Japan, debuted the G-2 in 1997. The pen gained notoriety for its retractability—a feature that set it apart from the gel pens of the era. This retractability has saved me from marking up my papers or pockets with involuntary swipes—unlike traditional capped pens. Though being one of the cheaper, if not the cheapest, pens on the market, the G-2 continues to outperform its pricier competitors in construction and performance. The ergonomic grip isn't bulky, allowing for comfort and minimizing the chances of an aching hand after an all-nighter of note taking. The ball of the pen is made of tungsten carbide, ensuring wear resistance, no matter the pressure.

What I, and many of the G-2's fans, celebrate is the ink. Though its critics bash its relatively slow drying time, it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make for its rich pigment that jumps off the page. My personal favorite is the classic 0.7 mm in black, but the pen also comes in a whopping thirty-one different colors—if color coding is your thing. There's a reason that the Pilot G-2 is America's #1-selling, longest-writing gel ink pen; the ink never falters.

In addition to being a well-built pen all around, you can feel better buying a new pack. Pilot is committed to being environmentally friendly. Across its various types of pens, Pilot uses recycled materials—its most environmentally friendly line, the Bottle to Pen (B2P) pens, are made of 86% to 89% recycled components. The body of the G-2 is made from 70% recycled

plastic, and can be refilled with replacement ink cartridges that pop easily into the barrel of the pen.

The construction and performance of the pen can explain, in part, the wide network of superfans the pen has garnered. However, I believe the explanation for its loyal following goes beyond recycled plastic and long-lasting ink.

The Community

Loyal disciples of the pen can be seen across the internet. Writers at major outlets¹ muse and sing the praises of their beloved G-2. Even wars on Twitter² are fought to assert the G-2's place as the best pen of all time. Though I'd gladly partake in the battle, if need be, I prefer a more pacifist-type approach to celebrating my favorite pen. It was this pacifist pursuit that led me to an old Facebook group, "Pilot G-2 fan club!"³ As I idly scrolled through the community's posts—from the most recent, from 2025, to its first, in 2009—I reflected on just how much of my life I'd navigated with a G-2 by my side. Among these fellow G-2 lovers, I saw a bit of who I was, who I am, and possibly, where I'm headed.

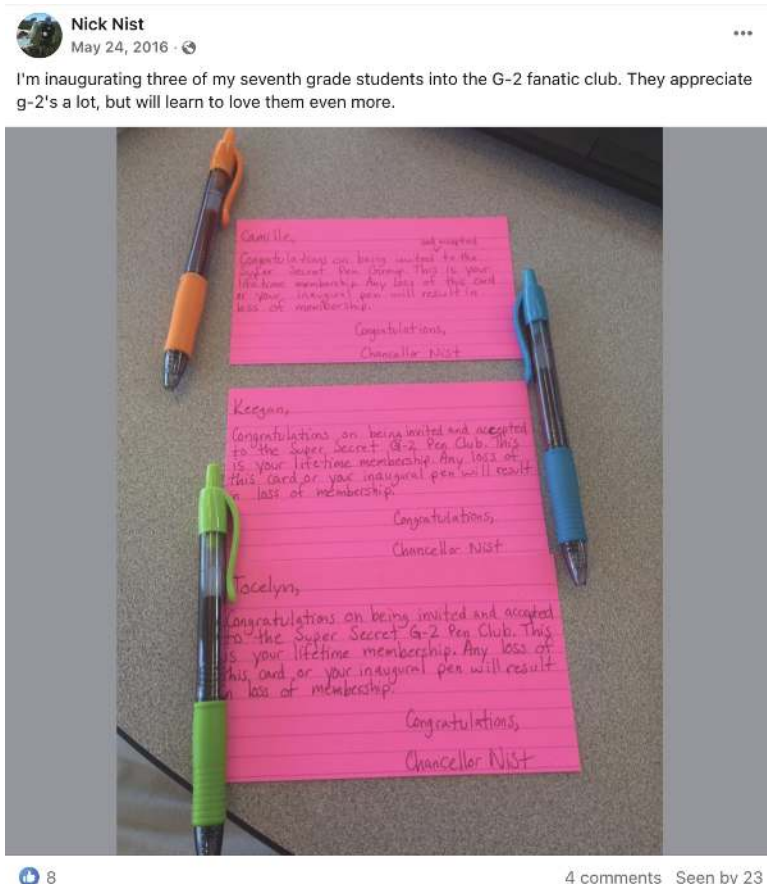


Figure 6.

My love for the G-2 is amplified by my love to share it with others; it's a treat to be able to loan someone my favorite pen. Back in grade school, I, like the post above, sang the praises of the G-2 far and wide—successfully turning my friends into converts.

This post also reminded me of a lost art. Before schoolwork went digital, the necessity of needing a loaned pen held the possibility of meeting a new friend. It was an accessible way to speak

to someone you otherwise wouldn't have, and an easy opportunity to share a bit of kindness with another person. Sharing a pen could lead to sharing a connection, however briefly.



Figure 7.

Unwilling to fully break the bond between Pilot and I, I turned to their FriXion line of erasable pens for a time. A few unforgiving math teachers had grown tired of my scratched-out

answers and apologetic marginal notes, so I needed something with a little less finality.

Though the FriXion pen did divert me temporarily from the G-2's use, it accommodated me when I was more wary of mistake-making. I've long since abandoned the FriXion, as it paled in comparison to the G-2, but it provided me valuable lessons, nonetheless. I came to understand and welcome my scratched-out answers and notes as part of the process. I found that a sense of finality doesn't have to be a deterrent. A learner is a "mistake-maker."

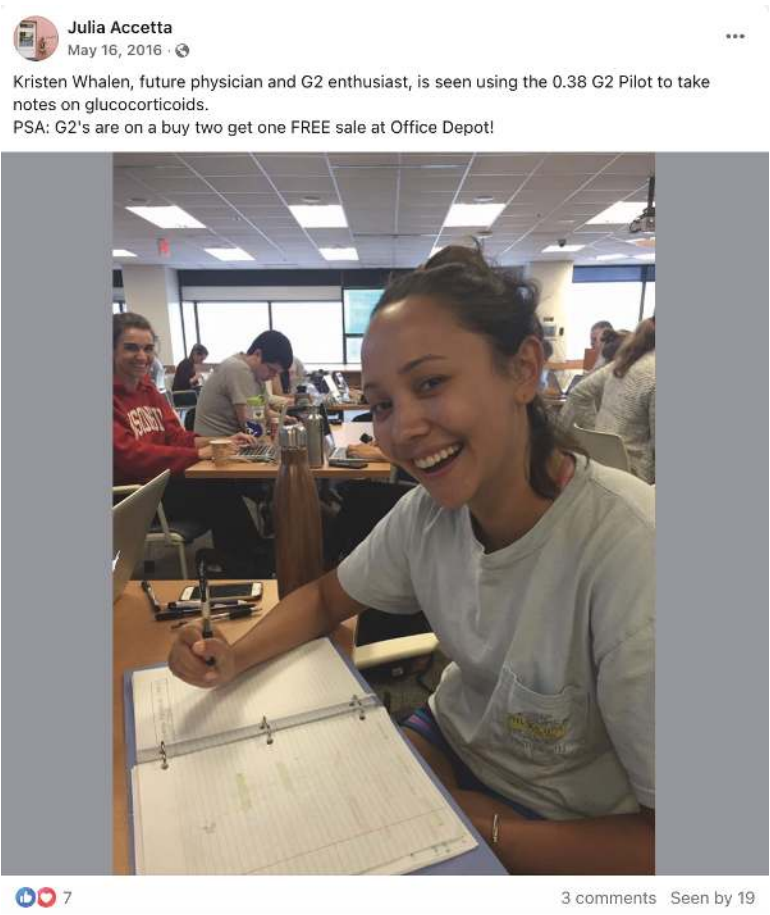


Figure 8.

The G-2 has carried me through my career of college note-taking. I've filled countless college-ruled notebooks with lecture notes on every subject. It's been there through lectures, studying for exams, drafting essays, and planning out my semesters.

I, like Kristen Whalen in this post, hope that my diligently recorded notes from my courses will pay off in my future career. I hope that some future wisdom can be gleaned from presently recorded insights.

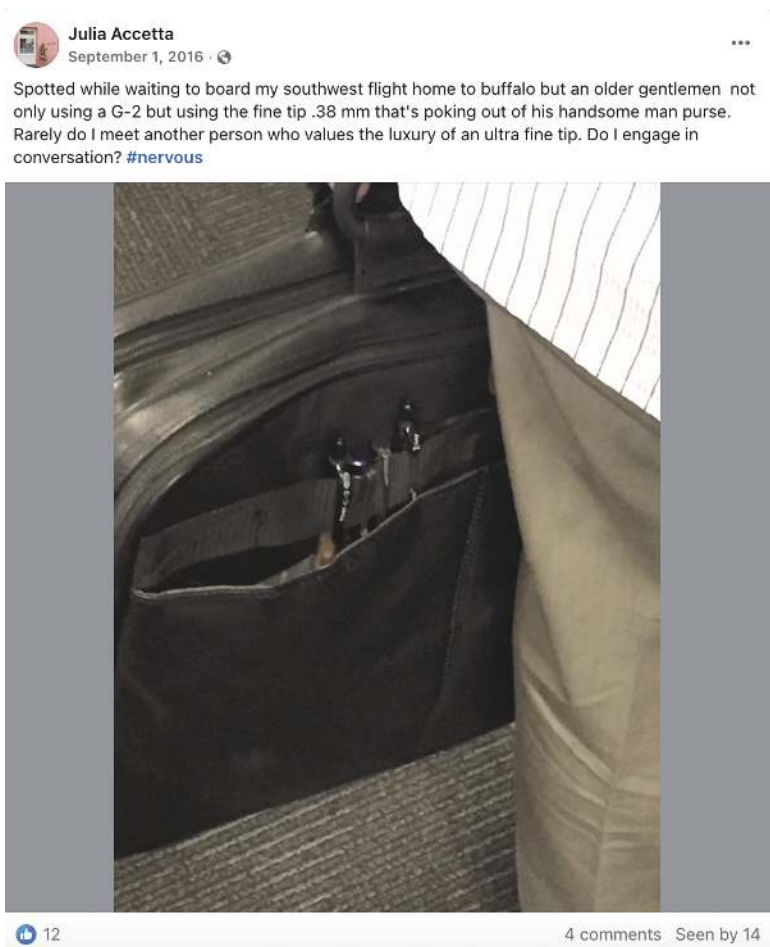


Figure 9.

Ultimately, this Facebook group serves as a reminder that the most niche and seemingly inconsequential details of our lives—like our choice of pen—weave us together. It's not just a writing tool. It can be the difference between a new friend or stranger; an opportunity capitalized upon or squandered.

The Only Pen I'll Ever Use

In my life, the G-2 has contributed to the creation of countless to-do lists, bucket lists, birthday cards, thank you notes, doodles, essays, annotations, planned trips, half-baked ideas on napkins, signing for my first car, and drafting applications to college, jobs, and other opportunities. It's seen shoddy portraits of friends, comic strips, sticky notes tacked to doorframes, written condolences, the pockets of my apron at work, and weighing decisions via pros and cons lists.

This brilliant tool helps me look back, note the present, and plan for my life ahead. It's imbued with personal hopes and wishes, and the hopes and wishes of others.

There is no pen I'd rather use.

EK3

K:

Isn't it a beauty? I've got one right here and it writes cleaner than the Pope's criminal record.

E:

Oh God, you can't say stuff like that when I'm drinking. I got water all over the mic filter!

Sorry, man, I can't help being the greatest comedic genius of my generation.

You guys can't see it, dear listeners, but I'm rolling my eyes so hard right now. Seriously, though, how do you ever get anything done writing like that? Doesn't your wrist hurt after a few hours?

A little arthritis wouldn't stop me. Don't your fingers ever hurt typing so much?

Sometimes, yeah. But like Savannah said earlier, some people only ever write on computers, and I don't see the harm in that.

I suppose that's fair. Different strokes for different folks. Still, I love the feel of a page beneath my pen.

You're skipping ahead, Kev! Hold that thought for later. Next, some essays speculating what writing holds for us in the future. Here's Kenneth Dougherty with the aptly named "A Glimpse at the Future."

SEVEN

KENNETH DOUGHERTY, “A
GLIMPSE AT THE FUTURE”

Introduction

In the past decade alone, advances in technology related to writing have been numerous. In the five thousand years since humans began writing, technological advances were few, and not entirely awe-inspiring. We began with singular symbols and icons, carved with our fingers or smaller implements into soft materials. We began to use alphabets next, creating small systems of letters to formalize the process of putting words to physical form. Primitive paper, pens, and books came next, and soon exploded into mass-produced newspapers and letters. The digital era topped everything off, turning writing from an intense physical ordeal (who would want to write thousands of pages by hand?) into something almost as easy as talking.

The timeline of these advancements is a unique thing to look at. Hundreds of years existed between each minor advancement, up until a few centuries ago. After the introduction of more modern writing implements and machines, it seemed that writing was reaching the pinnacle of its develop-

ment; the physical act of writing is now likely less than a single percent of all writing that occurs. A writer can have their work seen by potentially hundreds or thousands without any effort on their part. For all the work and stress that writing is, modern writing is easy compared to that of the eras before it.

For timeline purposes, I would say that the “modern” act of writing ended about a decade ago with the advent of affordable laptops. People would type away on laptops in secluded environments, in bustling coffee shops, or quiet classrooms. Writing was easy enough that almost anybody could do it.

Now, with the introduction of AI, any barriers that may have prevented people from creating works (notice that I hesitate to call it “writing”) are all but gone. A single sentence thrown into a generator can create a relatively complex piece of writing that would normally have taken days or weeks to plan. There are books on the market (none that have sold too well, thankfully) that were almost entirely written by an artificial intelligence. This isn’t a thinly veiled insult; the “authors” take pride in the fact that the ideas and worlds they had in their minds can be put into physical form immediately.

It takes a generative AI seconds to write pages of content. Compounded over an entire book series, I would estimate that it couldn’t be more than a few minutes for a contemporary generative AI to create.

At first, I wanted to speak about how writing is only ever getting faster. What started as a few words that took hours to dry in the sun slowly moved towards digital writing over a hundred generations into letters created instantly with the press of a button, pasted onto a bright white screen from anywhere in the world. Writing has already reached the peak of its speed. Humans cannot physically write faster than we can now (barring some insane biological implements in the future). Most of writing is thinking about what to write next.

The limit of speed isn't on the technology, but on the mind of the writer.

Which is, obviously, where AI begins to break the limits of human creation. Generative AI doesn't ponder. It doesn't need to think extensively about how a sentence will be interpreted, or if one word or another will be perceived better by an audience. It doesn't deliberate over one of its lovable characters and wonder if the story will benefit more from their death. It just *creates*. It writes what it is told to write.

Which leads to this experiment of thought: how much further can "writing" (again, I hesitate to call it that, but it's the only word available to contain the entirety of any literature) proceed from here? What technologies might exist in the future, and which ones will stem from what we already have now?

I was curious to see what I could come up with.

Vocal Writing

Voice writing exists already. We speak, it transcribes. People do this for texting, but it's a bit too unwieldy for actual pieces of literature. What could change?

If it was ever to come into existence, I imagine creative generation through AI would be pushed into the process. A writer speaks into their phone held up against their mouth. They lay out the general idea for a character they had. The city they live in, the problem they face. Word for word, with as much accuracy as it can manage, it is transcribed and pushed into some digital machine of incalculable size.

It spits out the product; a full story, created only from speaking some random thoughts and words into a microphone. What would usually be saved for back-room idea generation is now all that is necessary to create a major piece of writing.

This is a tiny step forward. I would imagine this already exists, but has yet to be fine-tuned enough to be a replacement for writing prompts.

“Hand-Holding” Writing

It’s not uncommon to teach through a filling in of the blanks. It’s prevalent in schools as a way of forcing students to memorize a word’s relation to its definition, rather than just associating an idea with it. How could writing be pushed forward through this?

To no surprise, AI would be involved. A series of increasingly complicated questions would all but craft the narrative for the author.

At the start, they would be simple. “What genre are you trying to write? Are there any major themes or emotions you’re trying to strike?”

Then they would rise in complexity. “What’s the main character’s relation to the plot? What problem would they be attempting to solve?” If these are too complex for the author to answer, the AI could go smaller, or even all but write the work for them. “This character is plagued by a problem that stems from their upbringing: what person in their childhood might have caused it?” Directed, pointed, and almost impossible to fumble an answer for, because most of it is already presupposed.

At this point, the AI would be asking questions to the author and writing in the background. Each answer the author gives would further entrench the information into the fictional world. It would be the most intertwined, complicated story to exist. A writer can only add so much into their work before the information becomes overwhelming. Not so for an artificial intelligence.

Thought-Writing

The sci-fi nerd in me is simultaneously obsessed with and terrified of the potential for a writing system like this.

An author thinks of an image of a character or location. Somehow, through neural technology, a description is given immediately of what they are imagining. It is evocative and deeply descriptive.

Next, they imagine an *emotion* that they wish to convey with the image. Again, a description is given. It's accurate to the emotion the author imagined, complete with reasonings and deep, plot-relevant points with almost no fine-tuning from the author.

After several iterations of this, it all melds together; the descriptions and feelings the author sought to invoke through their world is put into writing at a level of detail never before seen. The words strike a chord with the readers because it was created through the identification and enumeration of emotions that are usually impossible to put into writing.

It would be comparably slower to the previous options, but much more suited for complex worlds.

Conclusion

There are obviously hundreds of different technologies and machines that could be used in the future. These are a few that I found either most likely or most interesting. My main points are twofold. Firstly, I want to specify again that writing is *not* getting quicker. It's getting phased out. The physical act of writing reached the limits of its speed with the introduction of the computer. Anything past this is not writing. Instead, it is *defined by the lack of it*. Second, I was hoping to show that technology related to writing is nowhere near its end. When

humans began writing on paper, none could imagine the printing press. When humans began typing, none could imagine a program that would do it all for you. And now, with generative AI that creates complex worlds with only a few sentences, we shouldn't have the hubris in believing we know what comes next. We can only assume and hope we are wrong.

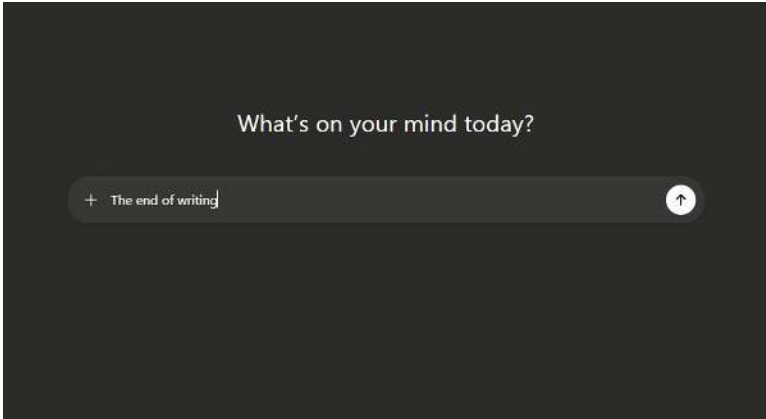


Figure 10.

EK3

K:

I'm going to be honest, some of these possible future technologies are terrifying.

E:

Some of them are so cool, though! And like Kenneth said, voice-to-text already exists and helps so many people.

Thought-to-text, though, Ethan, really?

Rather than debate it ourselves, let's hear from Kennedy Monroe, who explored this exact topic in her piece, "Thought to Text."

I love it when a title tells me exactly what's in the tin.

EIGHT
KENNEDY MONROE,
“THOUGHT TO TEXT”

I used to write slowly, like each word had to be carefully caught and held before it disappeared from my mind.

I would sit with a pen or stare at a screen, waiting and hoping for the right sentence to arrive at the right moment.

Sometimes it came together clearly, but most times it didn't and I was left trying to piece it back together.

My thoughts always seemed to move faster than my hands, and I could feel ideas slipping away before I could fully hold onto them.

I would forget what I meant halfway through a sentence or change it because it no longer sounded the way I intended.

Writing felt like chasing something I could almost reach but never fully keep in my grasp.

Then everything changed when I started using brain-to-text, a small device resting against my head that worked quietly and almost invisibly.

It did not write for me or think for me, it simply listened in a way that felt completely new.

Not to my voice or anything I could hear, but to something deeper where words begin before they become sound or action.

Now I can sit completely still and the words come as quickly as I think them without any delay or interruption.

There is no pen to pick up, no keyboard to type on, and no physical movement required to get the words out.

Just thought turning directly into language at the exact moment it forms in my mind.

A sentence appears fully written the moment I think it, followed immediately by another and then another without pause.

Nothing feels lost anymore because every idea, every fragment, and every half-formed thought finds its way onto the page.

It feels powerful in a way I have never experienced before, like I have finally closed the gap between who I am and what I can say.

It feels like I am no longer translating my thoughts into words but simply existing and letting those thoughts be seen as they are.

But even with that power, something begins to feel different in a way I cannot ignore.

I do not stop anymore to think about what I am saying or take time to sit with a sentence and question it.

I do not rewrite or rethink my words because they arrive already formed and ready to exist.

The device does not hesitate, and because of that, neither do I.

I start to wonder if this way of writing is actually better or if something important is being lost along the way.

I think about how writing without effort might also mean writing without the same level of care or intention.

I remember how it used to feel to struggle through a paragraph and finally get it right after multiple attempts.

I remember the satisfaction of finding the exact word that perfectly matched what I was trying to say.

Now every word feels certain, even in moments when I am not completely sure of what I mean.

There is no space between thinking and writing anymore, and I begin to wonder if that space used to matter more than I realized.

Maybe that space was where meaning lived, in the pause, in the doubt, and in the moment when I had to decide what I truly wanted to say.

Now everything happens immediately, and my thoughts appear before I can question them, change them, or even fully understand them.

And that leads me to wonder if these words are really mine if I never had to shape them or actively choose them.

If they simply arrive through a device that recognizes when I am thinking, what does that say about the writing itself.

I keep writing because I can, because it is easy, and because there is nothing stopping me from continuing.

The page fills faster than it ever has before, becoming a complete record of everything happening inside my mind.

It is unfiltered, unpaused, and uninterrupted in a way that feels both freeing and overwhelming at the same time.

But even with all of that, I start to miss the slowness that used to be a part of writing.

I miss the quiet moments when I had to sit with myself and take the time to figure out what I actually meant.

I miss the mistakes, the unfinished sentences, and the messy pages that showed evidence of my thinking process.

Now the page is always full and complete, but I am not sure if it feels the same as it once did.

When I read back what I have written, it sounds like me, but also like a version of me that feels unfamiliar.

It feels like a version of me that never hesitates, never doubts, and never changes direction once a thought begins.

The brain-to-text device continues to listen without judgment, without questioning, and without ever asking me to slow down.

And maybe that is where the problem begins, because writing used to ask something of me in return.

It used to require me to slow down, to choose my words carefully, to revise, and to truly understand what I wanted to say.

Now it only asks me to think, and even that feels different when every thought becomes permanent the moment it exists.

I begin to wonder if I should turn it off, even if it is only for a moment.

Just to feel the silence again between idea and expression and to remember what that distance felt like.

Just to experience what it was like to reach for words instead of having them instantly arrive without effort.

Maybe writing was never just about capturing thought as quickly as possible, but about taking the time to shape it into something meaningful.

Maybe it was about becoming someone who could say exactly what they meant through effort and intention.

And maybe in this new way of writing, where everything is immediate and effortless.

I am still learning what it truly means to mean something at all.

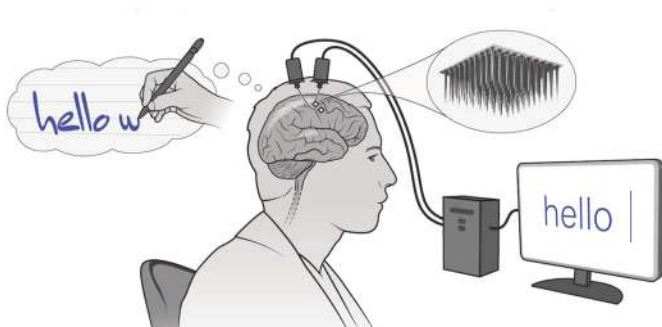


Figure 11.

EK3

E:

So? What did you think?

K:

Well, I can tell you I definitely have a favorite line. "Maybe writing was never just about capturing thought as quickly as possible, but about taking the time to shape it into something meaningful." One of the reasons I love writing is because it slows me down enough to actually consider my words. I don't think I'd like it if my thoughts escaped my head that quickly.

Maybe you have a point about that. But what if, instead of bringing your inner world out, the outer world came in?

You're going to have to explain that one, Ethan.

Crystal Jones wrote to us on the topic of virtual reality stories with her piece, "Interactive Storytelling in Virtual Reality."

NINE

CRYSTAL JONES, “INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING IN VIRTUAL REALITY”

Imagine wanting to experience a book in ways that others cannot. Submerging yourself into the story of your choice. You see your favorite characters and the setting of the story within your own eyes. The details of the world come to life, and you can read a book in a whole new way. Virtual reality (VR) storytelling is a new form of storytelling that throws you into the story of your own personal choice. VR storytelling adds a whole new element to your reading experience, blending writing, gaming and visual storytelling. This technology is still adapting over time, and soon many others will be able to experience a story in a different light.



Figure 12.

Virtual reality was designed in 1968 by the computer scientist Ivan Sutherland. Sutherland created the first head-mounted display named The Sword of Damocles, which was a 3D graphics VR system. As time went on, others adapted and improved VR. The name itself, virtual reality, was coined by Jaron Lanier, the founder of the visual program lab (VLB) that developed a range of VR research. Virtual reality currently has over 171 million users worldwide. People love being able to put the headset on and escape to a world of their dreams. It wasn't until the late 2010s when virtual reality started to become mainstream. Around 2016, the first wave of consumers for VR arose.

VR was originally used for gaming, though creators have found ways to adapt interactive storytelling into the virtual world. In VR storytelling you don't flip the page to find out what happens next. You can see and experience for yourself the plot of the story. Unlike books or movies, VR storytelling immerses you into an unforgettable experience where you can interact and change the narrative of what happens next.

Writers for these interactive stories have to think about the setting and take it into new directions. Being able to see 360 degrees around yourself, challenges writers to find ways to add additional details to their stories. For example, writers may now think about hidden clues that wouldn't be able to be added to traditional written stories without spoilers.

So what does this mean for the common person? This could mean that with the advance of technology, you will no longer need to pick up a phone, tablet or book to read or experience your favorite story. You throw on your VR headset, and now you're flying with Harry Potter, or in *The Hunger Games* with Katniss herself. Many people believe this way of storytelling will not only be more effective than traditional reading, but more entertaining as well. With the rise of artificial intelligence, the possibilities for VR storytelling remain endless.

Some current VR stories are *Red Matter 2*, which is a sci-fi puzzle adventure interactive story where you travel through a dystopian world and reveal hidden environmental clues around you. Another mentionable story would be *The Walking Dead: Saints & Sinners*, an interactive horror story that throws you into an apocalypse with zombies and makes the player deal with actual story-affecting choices that choose your next path within the story. In both of these stories, it's up to the player to choose their own type of ending. People who enjoy gaming with VR also enjoy these interactive stories as well. An additional popular interactive story is *Moss*, an adventure puzzle where the reader travels through this world learning about the main character and deciding his fate. All of these interactive stories are available on Meta Quest for download. There are hundreds of different stories the consumer can choose from. Ranging from horror, to adventure, to romance, to murder mystery. These interactive stories aren't limited to one genre.

Beyond just reading alone, virtual reality opens doors for

new people to create their own stories and experience it for themselves in the first person. This paves way for new creations as the human imagination is never-ending. New possibilities are awaiting the future of storytelling. Aspiring writers may now have the opportunity to create their own world and story in their virtual realities. People may also be able to collaborate on these interactive stories, which would make the writing experience not only easier but more fun for the writer and editor as well. This would also add more jobs writer, editor, illustrator, game tester, engineer, etc, all for one singular story. It wouldn't just contain an editor and writer alone.

History can be taught through these interactive stories, letting players experience earlier decades and events from ten to a hundred years ago. It will also teach the player compassion, letting them step into the shoes of someone else in a way that a history book cannot. VR storytelling lets the reader experience these scenarios safely as well as learn about the past.

The power of storytelling in virtual reality is immersive and thrilling to those who want to step away from traditional movies and books. People want and crave to be inside their favorite stories and experience them for themselves. This new advancement in technology changes the way people can learn or entertain themselves. New stories are bound to be written for the new users of VR storytelling. It paves the way for new experiences, new jobs, new ways to learn, and new ways to go about your day-to-day lives. In the future, many predict VR to be used daily, so the hope is that people will continue to create their own stories and read others' pieces in this new technology as well. Storytelling will never die, it will just adapt to the newer world.

EK3

K:

Maybe it's just me, but for some reason when someone says "stories in virtual reality," it makes me think more of video games than books. And besides, who needs a new world to live in? We have one right here.

E:

But stories are universal, Kev, and there's so many different ways to write them. Join the modern era, embrace the future! There's so much that virtual reality can do!

I think I'll leave that to you youngsters. Open your eyes and step outside; there's your reality.

Oh, you're no fun. And besides, how much of a difference is there, really, between reading a book and playing in VR? In either case, you're submerging yourself in a fantasy world for a few hours.

It's just different. There's effort involved in cooperating with the author's words on the page to bring the story to life in your head that just isn't there in VR.

You're gonna get us lambasted in the comments! But hey, maybe these next few pieces will cheer you up. These listeners submitted under our op-ed prompt, and the first is a piece called "The Simulation of It All" by Rachel Pritchard. It's about the dangers of using AI instead of doing your own work—right up your alley, Kev.

TEN

RACHEL PRITCHARD, "THE
SIMULATION OF IT ALL"

Before

The sun shines down on Adam's face. After months of the cold, dreary winter, the bright, albeit brisk, day is a welcome change. His walk on the uneven sidewalks is no different than any other day, but the air and the wind smells different. It's as if Oxford, Ohio has finally shaken off the grip that winter had on it. The fresh day has given Adam a new perspective on his priorities; he's been slacking with school and feels today is a good day to restart. With the end of the semester quickly approaching, he's been going out with friends a lot without making sure his classwork is done first. But, that's all going to change. Adam has a test coming up in his Business and Management class, so he's going to meet a friend at the library to get a jumpstart on studying for it. He doesn't feel like it'll be too difficult, but it's not like he got an A on the last test in this class, so he needs to step up his game.

As Adam rounds the corner to the library, he gets a ping on his phone that his friend, David, got a study room for them.

He secretly hopes that David has better notes than he does, since he didn't care to pay attention in class the past two weeks (or even show up, on occasion). He's going to really need to lock in to manage to get a better grade on this test. Adam enters the library and beelines for the stairs. He heads down to the basement and circles the sections until he spots David in the study room. He knocks on the door and David lets him in.

During

Adam sits down beside his friend and starts to get out his things.

"There are so many new terms to memorize. This test is going to *suck*," David complains to Adam, who doesn't know what his friend is talking about. His bright, shining morning is a long way away in this basement he's found himself in on a Sunday.

"How the hell are you going to memorize them all?" Adam baits, hoping to just do whatever David does. He doesn't know the terms, let alone a way to study them.

"Well, I was hoping to just listen to them over and over. I don't really have the time to read them again and again."

"What do you mean listen to them? How?" Adam presses, confused as to who would read his terms out loud for him.

"I was going to use this text-to-speech software. Here—look at this." David turns his laptop screen so it's facing Adam. "So I type in my notes, or, like, copy and paste them. Then I just hit play and..."

A robotic-sounding voice fills the small study room. His notes came to life all around them, reading off definition after definition. David hits the pause button on his computer.

"What's that site called?" asked Adam.

“It’s Speechify. They have all different types of voices you can select, too,” David answers.

“How did you even find that?”

“It was advertised on another AI site I use. They’ve both been super helpful when it comes to studying. It’s not cheating if it’s not writing it for you.”

Adam hadn’t known that the text-to-speech generator was AI. He’d never used AI before. Not because of any specific reason, just because he hadn’t really known what it was. He’d seen memes online of people using AI to do all their work for them, and he’d heard his teachers warn him off using AI because that would be plagiarism. But this, using AI as a tool, didn’t seem inherently bad. It seemed like it would help him study, instead of using it to get off easy. David was a great student. If he was doing it, why shouldn’t Adam?

“That’s really cool, man. I’m gonna have to check that out. Do you mind sending me your notes, too? I want to make sure I got all the definitions down.”

After

Adam goes home that day, feeling much more prepared for his test coming up. He has a paper to write tonight, too, but that site that David told him about stays on his mind the entire walk home. As Adam reheats his dinner, he inputs his notes into Speechify, listening to his own words (and David’s notes that he sent over) call back to him.

As soon as he was done eating, Adam tried to lock in on his paper, but he just couldn’t think of where to start. He thought he might use one of the sites that David mentioned, just to get a jump start on it. Only an outline, he thought. It couldn’t hurt. So Adam brought up ChatGPT, the only site he could remember by name, and typed in the prompt for his paper.

Before asking a question, he just hit enter. He didn't mean to, but ChatGPT was already responding. And just like that, there was an entire paper on his screen. He started reading it, and it wasn't bad. It was already late, and Adam was tired from studying all day, so he just submitted that. It wasn't on purpose, he thought. He would make sure to write the next one. Adam went to bed.

Little did Adam know, but his professor added extra precautions to prevent students from using AI. There was white text within the prompt that didn't show up until it was highlighted, copied, and pasted somewhere else. So the AI wrote about a case that wasn't real because the prompt told it to do that. Adam failed the paper, and his professor turned him over to the Academic Integrity Office. Adam would have to go to explain what happened, and most likely fail the class. If they believed he plagiarized, he'd get a mark on his record.

What started as something small, something that might help Adam better himself as a student, ended up hurting him more than losing an hour or two of sleep. Adam wasn't the type to use AI, but what seemed "practical" turned out to be quite the opposite.



Figure 13.

EK3

K:

You're right, I do feel a little better now.

E:

Can you say that again? I wasn't recording. There's no way you just admitted I was right.

...We're literally recording,
Ethan.

Oh, yeah, I forgot.

You want to take a break? We can cut to commercial, grab some coffee, get your brain running on all cylinders again.

Sure, why not? Presented by Trey Poling, here's our "Tom Hessin Feature."

ELEVEN
TREY POLING, “TOM
HESSIN FEATURE”

The sun beats down on tired eyes.
On brown-burnt broken glass.
On cigarette ash, kicking below his feet. It was his last.

Rotten. This is no place for a prophet, much less a poet.
But he's not one to talk.

His pencil: lost. And him too.
He wanders and curses.
Each store lies as he passes.

Fake purses. Fake watches. Fake dresses.
There were once decent people. Where have they
gone?

Fake shoes. Fake belts. Fake wallets.
His clothes aren't any different.
Sickening. His hands clench.

Fake prices. Fake guarantees. Fake quality.
He peers into a window and recognizes a brand.
A child must've sewed those pants.
Do they have a family?
Will they ever?

An irritating light beams.
His retinas are burned. And he's furious.
He blindly runs, tripping over sidewalk cracks.

It's a broken car mirror. Dangling. Catching the sun.
And catching the image of a store.
A stationery store.

The man's shoulders fall, still staring at the reflection.
There rests the sight of craftsmanship. Of decency.
A fountain pen. Walnut wood barrel.
A gunmetal cap and steel nib.
Five stars engraved and a floral decal.

Price: \$62
Nib sizes: XF, F, M
Custom engravings upon request.

Tom Hessin Revolution Collection Rustic Fountain Pen

\$62.00 (plus shipping and tax)



Figure 14.

The Revolution Collection Restic fountain pen takes the writer back to simpler times with its lightweight wood barrel and metal detailings. Its precise construction pays homage to Tom Hessin's past and the legacy of Birmingham craftsmanship.

This pen includes gift packaging, an ink cartridge, and a converter. Custom engravings are available in a print and cursive script. Purchases of this pen include a two-year warranty.

Includes:

- Gift box packaging
- Real walnut wood barrel with metal decorative detailings
- Clip engraved with legacy five-diamond design
- Pen card, ink cartridge, and converter
- PVD coated JoWo nib

About the nib:

The nib, designed by JoWo, manufactured by Opus 88, is durable, stylish, and luxurious. Made of stainless steel, it is sturdy and resistant to corrosion. The stunning gunmetal black was produced with PVD coating (Physical Vapor Deposition), guaranteeing the hardest coating available on the market. The floral decal is sure to surprise and delight. The nib is available in sizes extra fine, fine, and medium.

About Tom Hessin:

Tom Hessin is a name that spans generations and serves as a testament to the care of the family that's kept it alive. In 1870, Andrew Charles arrived in Birmingham, the heart of pen making at the time, and founded *T. Hessin & Co.* It was named after his granddaughter's maiden name, but not a year later a son was born to Charles and was named Thomas Hessin Charles. Thomas, raised in craftsmanship, would later inherit the company and modernize it through the changing world. Under the pressures of wartime, their founding principles stayed true, and they continued to contribute, knowing the importance of pens as tools of communication and expression. The spirit of Tom Hessin continued as the company passed from son to daughter and son again, finally ending in the hands of Charlie Stockbridge. The company has continued to modernize and adapt while exhibiting the craftsmanship which Andrew Charles created in the company's founding. The legacy spanning 150 years and five generations is honored by the five-diamond motif appearing on pen caps today.

EK3

E:

Almost makes me want to write by hand. Almost.

K:

It's much cheaper than a laptop.

True. A good investment for any would-be writer. It looks like it belongs in some kind of space opera.

You a sci-fi fan, too, Ethan?

Don't ask a dumb question, Kev. You converted me to the dark side a long time ago. I might even be more excited for this next piece than you are!

It's sci-fi?

Yep! Heading up the fiction segment, it's Em McGowan with "The Light and the Dark."

TWELVE
EM MCGOWAN, "THE
LIGHT AND THE DARK"

Lieutenant Kendra McGivens clenched her stylus under the table to hide her nerves.

"I'm sorry," she said, the sounds still not flowing easily off her tongue. "I don't know that word, *dezh-ti*. Could you please define it?"

She'd repeated the phrase so many times over the last few months she *should* be beyond making any mistakes with it, but apparently not.

The alien sitting across the table from her rippled his hair tendrils softly in a gesture she now knew preceded a gentle correction. "*I*," he said slowly, using a form of 'I' that she belatedly realized didn't match up to the form of 'you' she'd used to refer to him, "would be happy to define *it*."

Shoot. She'd messed that up, too. Seriously, screw this language.

She bowed slightly in her chair to hide her embarrassment and raised her shaking hands to the tablet sitting on the table in front of her, stylus poised to write. "Please, instruct me." The traditional phrase to indicate acceptance of criticism, at least,

was simple. She'd long ago memorized the pronouns she'd been told applied to her.

He raised three fingers—and *boy* had it freaked Command out that these aliens had almost entirely the same appearance as humans—then gracefully lowered the first. “I am *vuk-ta*,” he said.

Kendra furrowed her brow. “Forgiveness, but how is *vuk-ta* different from *vuk-ti*?” *Vuk* meant ‘male,’ and both *ta* and *ti* were particles that indicated masculine grammatical gender.

And pronouns. She couldn’t forget that they were also both pronouns to indicate masculine gender in general.

“Different from *vuk-tim*,” he gently corrected her grammar. Then he cocked his head to the side, and his tendrils coiled then released in a shrug. “*Vuken-ti* are of the light, while *vuken-ta* are of the dark.”

Ugh, this again. No one in the translation crew had yet been able to get a straight answer about all this light and dark business.

And it appeared today wasn’t the day, either, as he lowered his second finger. “*Dezh-ti* is *ti*, not *kih*.”

Oh. Okay, note to self, the forms of ‘it’ were just as complicated as the forms of ‘I’ and ‘you.’

The final finger lowered, still outstretched, to point at her stylus. “*Dezhen-ti* are very similar to that,” he said.

“My ‘stylus’?” she said, pronouncing it in English.

“Yes. Though we would call yours ‘*stylus’en-ta*.” He placed a plural inflection from his own grammar on the word and changed its gender slightly.

Kendra considered the stylus in her hand, barely seeing it through her thoughts. “*Ti* is of the light. *Ta* is of the dark,” she murmured. But both were masculine?

He smiled. “Yes.”

“Why?”

He cocked his head, and only one side of his tendrils coiled up, staying there in an expression of confusion.

She clarified. “Why is mine a *dezh-ta* and yours a *dezh-ti*?” She used the correct ‘you’ this time, at least. Rarely did she make the same mistake twice.

He waved at her tablet. “You write darkness into the light,” he said. “We write light into the darkness.”

This again. “I don’t understand.” And she didn’t expect to be taught, either. Not when it came to light and darkness.

But he surprised her.

“Here,” he said, and motioned at the center of the table. She pushed her tablet and stylus closer to him, happy to see where this went.

He picked up the stylus and drew it across a blank spot on the screen. A streak of black pixels followed, trailing across the empty white.

“Now watch.” He reached into his formal robes and pulled out a black square, which he unfolded twice and set beside her tablet. From another pocket he retrieved a stylus of his own, and drew a similar line across the dark page. A streak of white followed the nib.

Kendra looked back and forth between her tablet and the alien’s, and quietly despaired. This language would kill her. It already had close to *two hundred* distinct pronouns, one for every possible variant of person, case, sex, gender, and plurality, and now she had to deal with pens that changed grammatical gender *based on what color ink they drew?!*

It seemed he picked up on her distress, however, because he hummed a short comfort-melody as his tendrils swayed toward her like an air hug. “Do not worry too much,” he said. “*Dezh-ti* and *dezh-ta* are formal. Most will not care if you simply say *dezh*.”

Really? “Does that apply to all nouns?” she asked. It would certainly make her life a lot simpler.

He shrugged his tendrils again. “Most. But you are an interpreter, yes? You will be formal much of the time.”

Drat. Well, if she was going to be stuck with it, she might as well have fun.

She reached out and switched the tablet’s settings to night mode, then drew another line across the screen, parallel to the one the alien had left. This time, it left a trail of white on the black background.

The alien’s eyes widened, and his tendrils poofed up like they’d been hit with static.

“*Dezh-ti?*” she asked, smirking a little.

He nodded numbly.

She switched it back to normal and laid down a third line. “*Dezh-ta?*”

“How?” he whispered.

Wait, they really didn’t have this in any of their tech? They were so much more advanced than humans in a lot of ways, it kind of blew her mind that they didn’t have something as simple as a night mode toggle.

Feeling a little bad about her jest now, she shrugged. “This is light mode,” she said, then flicked it once more. “And this is night mode.”

The alien stared at her tablet for a long time, his tendrils waving around wildly. She just waited him out.

“I think,” he said at last, “that it might be time to speak of the light and the dark.”

Kendra blinked. “Wait, what? Why?” Why her, why now? Her division had been trying for ages to get them to open up about this, and every single diplomat they’d spoken to had been rather close-mouthed about it. What had changed?

He raised his eyes to meet her own. “We did not think you”

—he used the general plural form of the pronoun, indicating all humans—“understood about the light and the dark. But you do. So now we will tell you.”

God, her boss was going to have kittens when she told him a *UI setting* unlocked the mystery they’d been after for *years*. She already dreaded making the report.

EK3

K:

It's wild to imagine a whole
culture could be thrown on its
head by dark mode.

E:

Sometimes it's the simple little
things that have the biggest
impact. Like... writing in the
sand, perhaps? Up next, it's
Katelyn Berry with "Just a
Touch."

THIRTEEN
KATELYN BERRY, “JUST A TOUCH”

The sun was almost halfway down by the time Dylan could bring herself to open the car door. Gold and violet hues shimmered off each cresting wave that gently caressed the shore. In the distance she could hear the pleas of ever-energetic children begging to stay in the now-cool waters just a bit longer. Otherwise the beach was quiet and empty, as if it knew she needed to be alone.

Reaching over to the seat beside her, she lifted the ornate, pearly heart from its place. Faintly, she could see the outline of it against the now slightly sunbleached fabric seat. Carefully, she carried it in her arms while marching slowly through the shifting sand, looking back to the car every now and again, wishing for a way to run back inside and drive off. But she didn't. She couldn't. Eventually her eyes dropped to the odd footprints her pitch-black heels left in the sand. Each heel poke looked as if someone had shoved their finger deep into the earth. It reminded her of Skye.

“Why are ya cryin’?”

Dylan jumped at the sudden appearance behind her. She sheepishly peered through her puffy red eyes at the beautiful girl turned wild from the paint. A different shade of paint swathed each finger, her overalls were a mess of splatters that would never fade, and baby blue gelled in her blonde hair, expertly matching her seafoam eyes almost shut from her wide grin. Dylan couldn’t speak for a few moments as the living painting watched her patiently, before she finally swallowed enough tears.

“I don’t want to get my fingers dirty.” Dylan looked at the girl’s attempted dye job and quickly added, “Or my hair.”

“Aw, but that’s the best part! Ya get to paint yourself while ya paint the paper.”

“But it’s so gross and sticky.” Dylan instinctively wiped the run from her nose at the word ‘sticky.’

“Nuh-uh, it’s just like face paint. Don’t ya like that?”

Dylan paused for a moment or two in disbelief at this sensational revelation and simply muttered, “Yeah.” Hearing that, the wild girl lit up, her cheshire grin stretching even further.

“I can paint yer face, and then you’ll already be covered.” She gasped. “Then you can paint my face! Whaddya want me to paint? I wanna be pretty like my mama!”

“A...a cheetah.” Dylan couldn’t help but be taken into the pace of this hurricane of a girl.

“Lemme go grab some orange and black!” The girl rushed off to a nearby easel in a hurry. As Dylan’s eyes followed the girl she caught a glimpse of what the blue-haired girl had painted. It was good. And not good for a five-year-old, it was simply good. No, it was beautiful. A bed of flowers exploded to life on the white sheet, each finger line overlapped into a melody of petals, the insides textured with fingerprints. At the

bottom was a handprint the same blue as her hair, and signed below it, somehow immaculately from a finger tip, was the name 'Skye.' Later on, Dylan would learn that Skye couldn't paint at all with a brush. When she was older and finally had the words, Skye said she couldn't feel the paper or the image through those tools. She preferred the intimacy of her fingers gliding across the page. She even insisted on signing the marriage certificate with her finger and an inkwell she brought so it would have her best possible signature.

But for now, she impatiently, yet deftly, drew the caricature of a cheetah upon Dylan's face. In turn, Dylan would take a bit of deep red paint on her thumb and press it against Skye's lips to match the shade of lipstick her mom had always worn. Dylan continued to add the improvised makeup to Skye until she looked a little too much like a clown, but she seemed happy nonetheless. Although, it didn't help her uncanny smile.

"Can ya paint now?" Skye's words carried that innocent and earnest tone children grow out of too quickly, otherwise Dylan might not have answered.

"I don't know what to paint."

"Well..." Skye started to speak but instinct quickly took over as she dipped her pointer finger in more paint and took Dylan's canvas for her own. On it she quickly, but elegantly, scrawled, 'What's your favourite color?' in her signature blue. "Now ya write the answer."

Dylan studied the various paints before her. A timid finger finally found its chosen hue and, in a legibility befitting a child her age, wrote, 'pink,' and below it, 'yours?' Then they went on, writing questions and answers until the canvas was covered in a rainbow of letters and Dylan had forgotten ever hating the sensation of paint on her fingers.

This was their language. When they were tired of playing or had nothing better to do as kids they would write in the dirt.

Mud soiling and dyeing their fingers in earth until it crept to the base of their nails. By the end, Skye's porcelain skin looked no different from Dylan's red clay. They even did it when they went to the beach.

They had only been to Dredger's Cove that one time when they were no longer children, but certainly still young and foolish. Suntanned and exhausted from the ocean, they wrote along the shore where the waves could cool them and clear their canvas with each ebb and flow.

'No seriously. I wanna celebrate.' Skye etched her swirling script into the sand.

'It's just college. Everyone goes.'

'I'm not.'

'Yeah, but you do...' The water interrupted Dylan's finger. "You don't need to," she finished aloud.

'I can't.' Skye's water-pruned finger drilled deeper into the sand in mild frustration.

'You should come with.'

'Where?'

'College.'

'Live where? Your dorm?'

'Sure.'

"Be serious, Dede." This time Skye spoke aloud, flicking grains of sand from behind her pink-tipped nails. "You know I can't afford to leave my dad's."

"You could sell your paintings, wasn't that the plan anyway?" Dylan spoke aloud now as well.

"Well yeah, but I'm not good enough yet."

"You've been good enough since middle school. Your stuff's amazing!"

Skye paused for a breath before returning her fingers to the shore. 'You think everything I do is amazing.' Skye's finger was determined as it thrust the sand aside.

'They are.' Dylan dexterously returned Skye's determination in kind. But after that, both of their hands slowed and moved with a gentle melancholy.

'Why do you even want me to go that bad?'

'We've never been apart.'

'You'll be fine without me for a while.'

'No I won't.'

"You sound like you're my clingy boyfriend or something," Skye joked as she stood up, finished with their writing as the darkness of night encroached closer. Farther down the shore, Dylan's father was lighting a bonfire and shouting back and forth with Skye.

'Maybe I want to be.'

Dylan took advantage of Skye's distraction. She wrote slowly and deeply in her own frustration, a spiteful glacier carving a path in the earth. A part of her almost wished Skye would turn around, but another part grew more and more impatient for the shore's cleansing wave. Her muscles tensed as she went to carve five new deeper scars into the sand, but something in her froze as she saw Skye start to turn toward her.

Although it was dark, the newly lit bonfire illuminated the words more than the setting sun had. Skye's eyes widened, practically jumping out of their sockets. She had read it, Dylan was sure, even as the tide pulled in, smoothing the sand as if the words were never written. Immediately Skye dropped to her knees; it was only when she was face to face with the sand that she hesitated. In an uncharacteristically sloppy script, her words gently glided onto the surface of the shore.

'Please do!'

Dylan was sure this wasn't the part of the beach where they had written all those words, words she still couldn't believe she wrote or read, but it didn't matter. She placed the elegant heart on the ground where it left another imprint. The black curtains of her pant legs folded in as she knelt to the ground. She shifted her focus from the grains of sand to the wrinkles that now lined her fingers, not from water but time. Sand filled them in and sanded them smooth again as she began to write. Each stroke was patient, delicate, but firm; an extension of the gray-haired woman she had become. Looking down at the finished script she let out a deep sigh and reached for the heart. Removing the top, a bit of gray fell out. Carefully she let the rest fall into the deep channels she had carved until the ash flooded them. She struggled against her knees to get back up, but she managed. Looking down, she saw her final message.

‘Goodbye, my love. Thank you for staying as long as you could.’

‘Skye Elisabeth Williams-Eckelhart’

Then the tide pulled in, flooding the letters and scattering the ashes along the surface. When it pulled away the words and ash were gone.



Figure 15.

EK3

E:

Do I see tears in your
eyes, Kev?

K:

Just dust. This room needs a
good cleaning.

I never thought you'd be such a
fan of romance. You do have
depths!

Shut it. Romance is one of
life's greatest pleasures.
Married for thirty years and
counting.

And officiated by the Holy Roman
Emperor, right?

Is age the only jab you have?
You're such a—

Moving on, before my bestest
friend in the whole wide world
decides today is a great day for
me to meet my maker! Next is
Jack Pettit with "Grafitti."

FOURTEEN
JACK PETTIT, "GRAFFITI"

A wall, built of brick and mortar, creates a city of blank slates. A city of symmetrical brick organized in offset lines calls for greater disorder. Disorder that reflects the messy human condition on the walls that house that disorder.



Shake up the can. Listen to the metal ball rattle around the cylindrical sides, beating against their confines. Listen to the spray of the paint from the nozzle onto the untouched red brick. Trace across the lines of your mind, blurring the straight lines of mortar bordering the brick. Impose disorder through the uneven sprayed paths of the can. Step back and admire your color and breathe in the fumes of expression. Small sprayed paths will create a greater image with time and noise. You can already see it on the wall, like a modern-day cave painting, you can leave your mark. Invade eyes with your hunt, your struggle. The metal ball rattles, and the spray echoes off the walls, soon to be marked.

They're looking for him. His graffitied signature has saturated into the colors of the city and they can't stand seeing themselves in his dirty mirror. They can't stand seeing themselves in the wild colors of each passing train car. They can't stand seeing themselves in every dark alley and every abandoned tunnel. They can't stand, and his sprayed paint does. His sprayed paint walks and stares through the dark spaces, the overlooked spaces of the conscious city. They sense his eyes and his colorful marks, clawed into the foundations, and they grow increasingly uneasy. A sprayed panther of his making prowls in the city's crevices and they will lock him up for freeing it, if they know who he is.

If they knew who he was, for he is now everywhere and nowhere. He is now the passing paint of the daily commute. The flash of color in an otherwise exceedingly dull path. The one that catches the eye. He has finally been seen. He has weaseled his way into the neural pathways of the cities and tainted memories with the reality of suffering. They can't ignore him now. They hear the rattle of his paint can amidst the noisy honks of traffic and the late-night barks of chained dogs. They see his sprayed lines in the dark. He has tempted the public into the darkest alleys of the city and shown them a painted passage. A passage that is inherently dangerous to them. They who trapped him and you. They who keep him trapped by blocking out the sky with concrete pillars, they who inspire worship in their advertisements, they who live outside of the confined city. He's forever creeping inside.

"Squash me," he pleads to the flashing blue and red light parade just outside his small apartment window. He's sitting in the dark; the lights flash on his face. They aren't here for him, but there's a large part of him that wishes they were. There's a

part of him that wants to be handcuffed and thrown in jail, behind real metal bars, just so the world can become a little more clear. “Find me and spray me with your best poison, already. Just like a spider, swat me away. Crush me with your powerful black boot. I’ve already made my web. I’ve already spun my story.”

I remember tagging a train just last week. A long train of vast metal cars sitting in the yard of tracks that I frequented often with a black hood draped over my cheekbones and dark sunglasses that I found abandoned off of Main Street. The train sat, extending its metal lengths into the dark horizon, waiting for a greater purpose than industry, waiting to become a canvas. I wanted to turn every train in this dull city into a great art exhibition riding along metal tracks into the sightlines of everyone but the art critics. After propelling up the eight-foot-tall chain link fence with just my determination, I checked for cameras for the hundredth time. I never knew when they would replace them after I broke them with a rock last time. I climbed up on the tracks, simultaneously rattling my metal can, preparing to paint my masterpiece. Spray painting, sadly, is often an art form that falls victim to a strict time constraint, leaving room only for diligent sprays, with layering sprays often acting as both a background color and a contour. The limited time and space leaves the graffiti artist simultaneously present and incredibly absent. Each graffiti artist in this city (and there’s not many of us) has to rely on a specific style and, usually, a select few colors. We definitely aren’t rich enough to buy more than three to four cans of paint at a time (if we had money, I assume we could resort to a different artistic medium), and even if we could, it’s hard to jump a fence and create

quickly with seven cans of spray paint rattling around in your backpack.

I liked graffiti, though, and I couldn't see myself doing anything else in my free time back in those days. I loved the anonymity, the darkness, the time constraint, the contrast between my color and the metal car, the contrast between my art and a business man's eye, the way my art weaved between grey skyscrapers and concrete, the way the colors flashed with the train's speed, the way the people absorbed my sprayed marks but didn't really see them, like advertisements on side-of-the-highway billboards. I was both fleeting and incredibly present, a presence that is far from curated or intended. I was the rattling rage of the people of the city. The people that go to work everyday, just to go back home to their run-down apartment buildings to try to catch some sleep in the smog. The people that use the honks of traffic as white noise, the people that feel uneasy walking through their own streets' alleys. I wanted to create that uneasiness for the people that are too insulated to feel it, the people in the high-rise apartments looking over the business district, the people of the clouds. I wanted to tell them, "Welcome to the rain, the wet, the dry, the loud, the silent, the contours of the people embedded in the gravel, the people slinking through the crevices." I knew they felt my yellow-slitted eyes in the dark of the alleys because they'd seen my sprayed claw marks, scratched into the metal of movement.

Someone laid on the horn and I jolted from my artistic trance. I sprayed my graffitied signature and stepped back to admire my work in the dim light before pulling my hood tight and leaping back into the grey. Handcuffs soon followed, but I, at least, got to sink my fangs in.

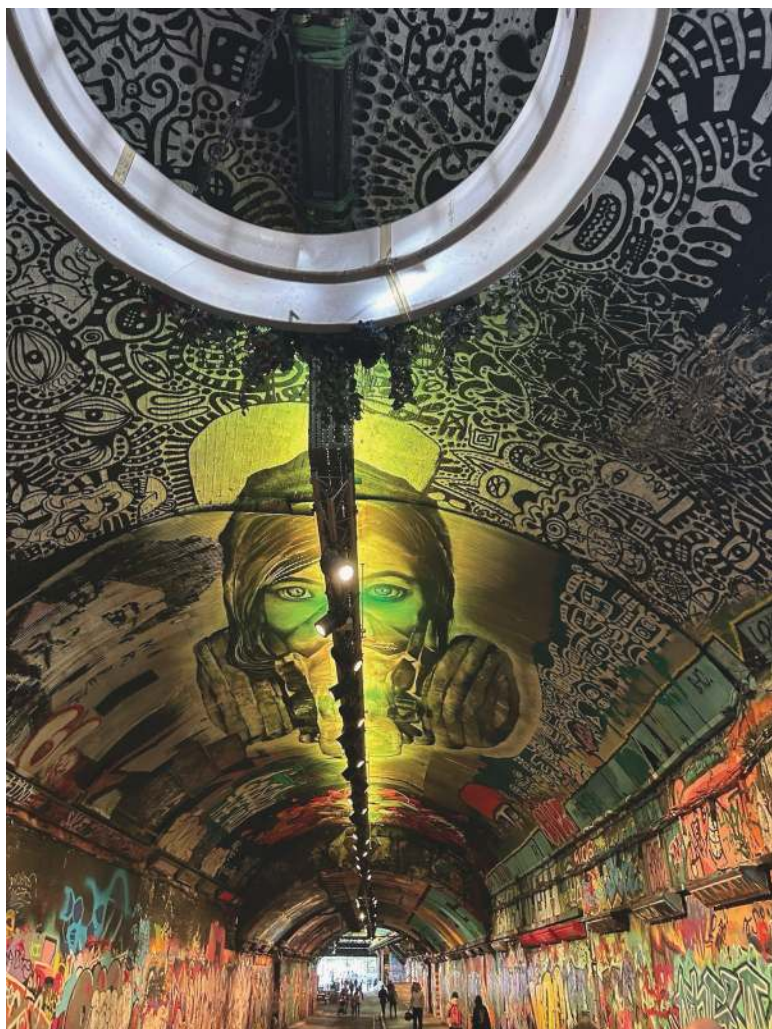


Figure 16.

EK3

K:

That was a fun little journey! I quite liked it!

E:

I did, too. First sci-fi, then unvarnished urban realism, and now fantasy—our listeners really pulled out all the stops for the fiction prompt!

They sure did. Up next is “Galatea” by Cheyenne Worrell.

FIFTEEN
CHEYENNE WORRELL, “GALATEA”



Figure 17.

*On a rainy night, the city's glow is diffused by the mist.
Pygmalion's steps echo on slick pavement,
His mind an intense whirl of dreams and desires,
Towards Aphrodite's club, where gods and mortals intertwine.*

*Galatea, his creation of ink and thin-pressed paper,
Haunts his thoughts with warm yearning.
He seeks Aphrodite's favor,
To breathe life into his scripted love.*

In the rain's rhythm, there exists a symphony of longing.

*As he approaches the threshold of divine intervention,
Hope and desperation mingle in the downpour.
Pygmalion's silent plea echoes in the night.*

Approaching the door of Aphrodite's club, Pygmalion knocked three times, the door swinging open before he had time to pull away. The door clipped his knuckles, and Pygmalion drew his hand back, curling it into his chest as his other hand cradled it close. His eyes trailed up to meet that of Hephaestus, the corner of his lips twitching as he attempted to ease himself, rubbing his wrist one last time before letting his hands drop to his waist. "I-I'm here to see Aphrodite?" Pygmalion stuttered, his gaze flickering between the man's eyes.

The man's left eye had a golden sheen over it, a shimmering scar crossing over the socket that dug into the hairline of his buzzcut. He stood stagnant for a moment, his eyes trailing down and then up again, judgmental as an uncomfortable amount of silence passed by. "Hey 'Dite, he's here," Hephaestus called out, not turning to the empty bar behind him, but instead stepping to the side to let the wimpish man in. Pygmalion tugged his hood down as he entered.

*In the empty bar, devoid of revelry's usual hum,
Red and purple neon lights bathe the space in a sultry glow.
Aphrodite, draped in a tight-fitted white dress.
She sits at a table, smoke swirling from her cigarette,
A solitary goddess amidst the serenity of the night.*

"Pygmalion, it's so lovely to see you," the woman charmed, a smile spread over her glossy, wine-stained lips. Stretching her arm out, she patted the empty spot at the table. "Sit," she ordered, though the pleasantry in her voice made it seem more like the request of a friend.

“Yeah, yeah. Um—it is,” the man returned, slithering down into the chair and fidgeting with his hands as he looked around slightly. “S-so...about Galatea...” Pygmalion started, only for his thoughts to be interrupted by the haunting laugh of the enchantress before him.

“Oh, tish tosh. You’re so quick to do business. You don’t even want to ask how I’m doing? I’m doing you such a big favor, after all,” Aphrodite almost threatened, her gaze hardening as she stared at him with her emerald hues. Pygmalion swallowed hard, clearing his throat.

“I—um... I’m sorry,” he apologized, readjusting himself. “How are you, Aphrodite?” he asked, fidgeting as a wave of nervousness washed over him.

“Just fine, darling,” she replied curtly, snuffing out her cigarette in the ashtray at her side, a thin plume of smoke swirling in the air. “So, about that favor,” she started again, reaching into her rhinestone-bedazzled clutch and retrieving it.

Galatea’s breath.

*The small glowing vial, filled with light and potential of life.
Embossed with intricate patterns, pulsing with silent power,
Its surface is a glimmer of iridescent purple,
A beacon of potential, positioned to bring life to Galatea.*

*Within its compact frame lies a universe of technology,
A fusion of ancient alchemy and cutting-edge innovation,
Whispers of creation echo within its humming core
As it hovers above Galatea, a promise of awakening.*

“Here it is.” Aphrodite spun the pulsing cylinder around in her hand.

Amazed by the small yet earth-shattering piece of tech-

nology before him, Pygmalion pressed his lips together, taking in the sight for all that it was worth. A wonder. “So... how do I use it?” he asked, unable to draw his eyes away from the small vial in the woman’s hand.

“Well, you put it in a quill and write with it. I figured that was obvious,” she replied dryly. “This is important, as well, Pygmalion,” she started, her emerald-green eyes settling into something of a more serious nature. “This ink, when you put it in the quill, be sure you mean every word you write. Don’t spare any detail when describing your love,” Aphrodite warns, her voice grim. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Aphrodite set the glowing vial on the table, watching as Pygmalion gently lifted it up. “Be careful with her, Pygmalion.”

Pygmalion’s hands tremble as they grasp the glowing cylinder.

A surge of anticipation courses through his veins,

As if life itself pulses within his very grasp.

The weight of creation is heavy yet exhilarating.

The cylinder hums with a gentle warmth,

A heartbeat of energy that resonates with his own,

Each touch a connection to the life he yearns to bestow,

Galatea’s form awaiting the touch of his transformative hand.

EK3

K:

Great work as always from our
listeners.

E:

We're proud to have such an
eager fanbase. We get dozens of
submissions for each episode, so
keep sending yours in! We could
use more fiction.

And now, we continue to our
third and final segment;
musings.

Whimsical, ethereal pieces
written from our listener's
experiences and opinions,
sometimes real and personal,
sometimes with a touch of
fiction. Their stories, their
experiences, their imaginations—
their chance to get their voice
out to a broader audience.

I'm happy we have a chance to help you all out. That's what this podcast was for originally: helping authors gain a following.

Even before I joined, that was all Kev wanted to do. If you can look past his evil frown, he's a softie at heart.

How sweet. If only your face could make up for your soulless heart.

Cruel. Even after all I've done for you...

Yeah, yeah, you big bozo. Anyway, now it's time to kick this section off with a piece by Maddie Kaltenmark, who meditates on chalk in her piece, "Ideas—Kids with Crayons/Chalk."

SIXTEEN
MADDIE KALTENMARK, “IDEAS
—KIDS WITH CRAYONS/CHALK”

Every sunny afternoon in the neighborhood is a good one when you have the almost endless color wheel on your chalk sticks. Inviting others to join in on your driveway after making it past your elaborate obstacle courses and hopscotch. Letting them pick which color they want to write their name in, one of the few things you know how to spell at the elementary age. Before long the tan pavement becomes an almost serial killer–like work of art. But there is something in putting your name down for all to see. Making it known to others that you aren’t just another person, you’re Luke, Bree, or Joe. Someone who has marked the world, if only for a moment before the colored dust gets washed away. Chalk is similar to life in that way; your mark on whatever you touch only lasts so long before blurring with the others who’ve come before.



Figure 18.

As a kid, you're not comprehending this thought. All you care about is how pretty your handwriting is and if the color purple suits your name. Plus getting either parent to see your masterpiece. Yet the simple movement can inspire the brightest kids to go off and be the most creative people you'll ever meet. Though not everyone. Some only doodle with their chalk sticks while others watch, not bothering to pick up the messy writing tool alone. But that's when it makes the biggest impact because there is no one around to ask when you get stuck on what to draw next, or to help you when your dog begins to look like a horse. You make mistakes that only you in that moment can fix. It's a critical point in childhood. How can I get unstuck without help? Many will fail and give up, but the ones who thug it out are the people you want by your side when shit hits the fan. Though it is unfair to say that these people never give up. But they do. All the time. They are just the ones who get back on the "horse" again.

Something similar happens later in life. Well, at least in this day and age. These creative kids go through each stage of schooling, pushing themselves to make it into the college that will give them the best opportunities for a job and stable future. But along the way, most burn out and start taking shortcuts. Using generative AI to complete simple homework assignments or going into midterms blind because they got too drunk the night before. These are your future doctors, lawyers, and politicians who used to be bright kids, now crippled by their addiction to taking the easy way out. And this shift in mindset can be seen in young kids as well, with many parents giving iPads and phones out to their children too early. Where they rot on YouTube and online games like Roblox. Losing the feeling of getting their hands dirty, whether from falling off their bike or writing their name with chalk.

Not to say that technology should go, because it has its pros, but it's all very new and heavily engrained into our society, making it hard to feel connected with your peers and surrounding landscape, when you're staring down or at a screen all day. No wonder many mental health specialists say to do something physical with your hands to ground yourself, like a craft or workout. Connecting is what humans are made to do; we're social creatures for a reason. Because the world is vast and can get lonely really quickly. Why else do little kids say hello to random people while walking down the street? They are the foundation of what we as a species are meant to be, social without fear. Social without judgement.

Many of you might remember running around your block or street knocking on front doors trying to find anyone to play with. Whether you'd known them for years or just met them today on the bus. All you wanted was companionship on your vast adventures while you tried to touch the sky with your toes

on the swing or defended against pirates invading your playset. Where's the fun in having to be alone with your thoughts? It's not for anyone below the age of fifteen, I can tell ya that. So go out and doodle with your chalk sticks. Life is meant to be messy, but, at least with this writing tool, you get to choose how messy you want to get.

Humans write for a couple of reasons but one of the main ones is to be remembered. If only for a little bit, for instance in chalk on the pavement of your childhood driveway or sidewalk. But the creativity and motor skills that come from the temporary summer activity are immense, opening up endless possibilities that AI and iPads are taking away from our kids and ourselves. The chance to be imaginative without a parasite dragging you down. It's a hard thing to come by these days, even if you forgo technology. It's so ingrained into our society that it becomes a part of almost everyone's personalities. Some even become shells of who they could be. If only they would put down the phone and ChatGPT to look in people's eyes and faces, they would see their true intentions and knowledge of the world around them.

This disconnection makes it hard to be real without anyone when you're not sure if they're being one hundred percent themselves. Given how disconnected we've become, we might want to try and connect with the ground and place we inhabit. I know there is a saying, among other brain rot, that says, "I need to go touch some grass." But there is some truth to the statement. Because why would I care about the house when I can watch puppy videos for two hours instead of cleaning the kitchen or mowing the lawn? It's gonna look like shit still, but hey you giggled for two hours straight.

Technology can be a helper, yes, but it can't take over your whole life. Not when there are literal mountains and rainforests that could be explored. Enjoy the little things and make

each worthwhile because we won't be on this earth forever. So go sit in your driveway one night after dinner and get your hands messy while brainstorming your next writing project. Because like the chalk and the Christian saying, "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

EK3

E:

I don't even remember the last
time I played with chalk.

K:

Me, neither. I think I've still
got some from when my daughter
was younger. Maybe I should
break it out again.

That sounds fun, honestly. Up
next, it's Cayla Caldwell, who
invites us to consider more than
just pens—or even chalk—when we
think of writing technologies.
Here's her piece, "Ruins as
Technology: How Place Shapes
Thought."

SEVENTEEN
CAYLA CALDWELL, “RUINS
AS TECHNOLOGY: HOW
PLACE SHAPES THOUGHT”

In Guatemala, the past is not something you visit. It is something you live alongside. Ruins appear where you least expect them, woven into homes, streets, and everyday spaces as if they have always belonged there. They are treated with a kind of quiet reverence, not as artifacts to be removed or displayed, but as pieces of history that must remain in place. In fact, there is a law that if you are building a house, restaurant, or any structure and you encounter ruins, you must build around them. It is prohibited to remove or alter the stones, preserving them as a constant reminder of the people who came before us and the lives they lived. I remember going to an event at one of my mom's friend's houses when I was younger, and she had glass floors with ruins underneath. It was surreal to see the past be literally built into the present.

That same presence of the past extends beyond individual spaces and into the broader landscape of Guatemala. It is a country defined by culture, color, and history. Walking through town, you pass buildings that are hundreds of years old, woven seamlessly into everyday life. Much of this history traces back

to the Maya, whose presence still shapes the country today. But even with all of that richness, there is something different about my favorite ruin site. It strips away the noise and the color. What remains is quiet, muted stone and the weight of history.



Figure 19.

The ruins I love most sit right next to a busy road,

surrounded by constant movement and noise. Cars pass, people go about their day, and the chicken buses (old school buses that have been spray painted and turned into public transportation) fly by with *ayudantes* hanging out of the doors yelling their destination, “*¡Ciu Vieja! ¡Ciu Vieja!*” so loudly and so often that you start to wonder how their voices even hold up. The noise feels constant. But the second you step into the ruins, it’s all gone. You can no longer hear any of it. The air feels clean, like what I can only describe as watching my mother hang sheets out to dry in the summer. The sunlight feels warmer on your skin, and everything is so still, you begin to notice small details like birds flitting in and out of the openings in the stone, or the texture of the walls. It slows you down without asking you to.

I usually go with my friends, most of whom are Guatemalan. I say this because you must pay to get in; five quetzales for locals and twenty-five for tourists. Even though I grew up there from a young age, I do not look like most of the people around me, so I keep my head down and only speak Spanish. There is something strange about feeling both like you belong and like you stand out at the same time. Once we are inside the ruins, though, that feeling fades. We are all just people in the same space, sitting in the same quiet. My friends and I are normally loud and constantly talking, but every time we go, we end up sitting in silence for a while. Not because we have to, but because the space invites it. It does not matter if you know the full history of the ruins. Being there makes you think about the past anyway. I find myself wondering what life was like when the buildings were complete, who walked through those spaces, and how different everything must have been. Sometimes I think about how many other young girls may have sat where I am sitting, taking in the same view at a completely different time.

This is where I began to realize that place itself can shape

thought. Writing is often associated with tools like laptops, notebooks, or phones, but those tools are only part of the process. The environment we are in plays a role as well. In the ruins, my thoughts slow down and become more reflective and observant. I notice things I would normally overlook, and I spend more time sitting with ideas instead of moving past them. Because writing comes directly from thought, this shift in thinking inevitably changes the way I write.

In contrast, when I write on my phone or laptop, my thoughts feel faster and more scattered. Notifications, distractions, and the pace of everyday life make it difficult to stay with a single idea for long. Writing becomes something to complete rather than something to experience. The ruins do the opposite. They remove distractions and create space for deeper thinking. The ruins act as a kind of invisible writing technology, shaping not the tool itself but the way thought forms before it becomes writing.

It was not until later that I learned the name of the ruins I kept returning to: Ruinas de la Recolección, “the Ruins of Recollection.”

A perfectly fitting name for a perfect place. Recollection is the act of remembering, of gathering thoughts, of piecing together fragments of the past. If writing is the act of capturing thought, then recollection is where that thought begins. Without asking anything of you, the space slows your thinking and turns your attention inward, allowing ideas to surface in a way that feels natural rather than forced. In a place built on memory and preservation, writing becomes less about producing something new and more about noticing what is already there, waiting to be understood. The ruins do not give you words, but they change how those words come into being. In that sense, they are not just a place I go to write. They are a place that teaches me how.

EK3

K:

I always love hearing how
history and writing can
influence a person like this.

E:

I took a trip last year to Rome,
and I concur. Seeing all the old
buildings and reading pieces
written at the time made me
introspective. It was kind of
therapeutic.

Oh, so that's where your Holy
Roman Emperor joke came from?
Seriously though, that's great
to hear, man. I'm glad you're
trying to connect to your roots.

My roots? I'm not Italian.

I meant humanity. Something your
technology can never replicate.

There is something appealing about pen and paper, I won't lie. Not appealing enough to replace a nice keyboard, but nevertheless.

Think you could be convinced.

Maybe. It's possible we have a few pieces that could make an attempt...

More than possible: it's true!
Maybe I can even convince you to join me in my journaling therapy. Next up is "Journal Documentary 2017-Present" by Anna Blasinski.

EIGHTEEN

ANNA BLASINSKI, “JOURNAL
DOCUMENTARY 2017–PRESENT”

Journal One: 2017–2018

Origin: Gifted to me by Emerson—who else? She was the only friend I had who loved writing just as much as I did. We spent fourth grade inventing poetry, short stories, and even inspirational quotes, which were just as cheesy as you’d imagine.

Style: This journal featured a cover with two hot-air balloons, one blue and one pink, floating over gold hearts on brown cardboard. The cardboard would later become torn and ragged, barely hanging on to the gold wire spiral. That’s how much I wrote in it, using the pens Emerson also gifted me. Paper Mate InkJoy gel pens, to be exact. They came in a pack of three—one purple, one pink, and one green. With each poem, I alternated colors. For some reason, I centered the poems on the lined paper instead of starting from the left margin. Sometimes, I would try to write in cursive. So, yes. It looked pretty messed up.

Substance: Almost unbearable to talk about or even think of. I get whiplash if or when I dare to look back on it. There will be a poem about spring, followed by a poem from the point of view of a random book character, followed by a poem about some boy I had a crush on. Never let a fifth-grader write poetry. However, I do admit I could stand to regain some of her unabashed confidence.

Journal Two: 2018–2020

Origin: Unknown. It could have been a gift, or something I picked out myself. Either way, I don't think I paid my own money for it. Sixth-graders don't have money.

Style: Thus began my love story with stationary from Peter Pauper Press. Their journals are the perfect size. The pages are lined and rounded. The endpapers are brightly colored. This particular cover was cream, with beige and blue flowers growing from the bottom. I still used the purple, pink, and green pens, although I finally wrote starting at the left margin like a normal person.

Substance: Imagine middle school, and what it was like for you. Now imagine somebody trying to make metaphors out of it. And there you have Journal Two. It is comforting, however, to see my personality become ever so slightly less mortifying by the end. Maybe I should be kinder. It was middle school, after all.

Journal Three: 2020–2021

Origin: I know I picked this one out. I think it was purchased

using some birthday money, or a check from Christmas. I went to Barnes & Noble and scoured the tall, dark, pre-rennovation shelves until this journal caught my eye.

Style: The eggshell-white cover stood out to me, as well as the coral-and-chartreuse birds flying across it. Peter Pauper Press again, because we are in a committed relationship. The same pens, too, although toward the conclusion of this journal, I had to buy new ones.

Substance: This one comes the closest to achieving a comprehensive narrative, not that I'm trying to create a comprehensive narrative of my own random life experiences. It began immediately with a death, then a pandemic, and spanned until I returned to school in person. I started to use poetry more as a diary than a way to make art. No more poems about nature, really—just my thoughts on a year of high school spent alone in my room.

Journal Four: 2021–2023

Origin: Purchased online over the summer, off of the Peter Pauper Press website, which I was elated to discover. I wanted to move away from the light, creamy colors with this one. I was entering high school in person now, and I could do with something more mature. Which, yes, is an admittedly cringeworthy way of thinking, but I specifically remember the thought crossing my mind.

Style: That's how I ended up with a navy journal, covered in purple flowers and stars, like a garden at midnight. I don't know if the silver celestial decals can be called mature, but it was a change, and I was ready for a change. I ran out of ink again,

although this time, I didn't have to buy more. A friend had gifted me a rainbow set of Paper Mate InkJoy gel pens, including purple, green, and pink.

Substance: A normal, conscious, self-aware person wrote this one, which is refreshing to see (picture that as a blurb on a book jacket). Sure, it's obvious that I was freaked out about a lot of things—homework, friendships, looming college applications. But I was also seventeen and having a good time, so it was more than just misery.

Journal Five: 2023–Present

Origin: Purchased off of the website again, because why go to Barnes & Noble when they renovated the store to look like a minimalist millennial hellscape?

Style: Muted cornflower blue with gold butterflies and white flowers. Perhaps my favorite design yet. My pens are almost out of ink, but I don't think they sell the colors as a set anymore. The worst is the green pen. It clearly still has ink left, but I can never make it give me more than a few sentences before it peters out into dry, green-tinted scratches on the page.

Substance: I've had this journal for the longest amount of time, because I don't write as much anymore. Somehow, it feels like so much effort to make my thoughts into something worth writing down. But this means that each entry is more calculated, more developed, more interesting. This journal has seen me through high school graduation, the dawn and demise of relationships, and two years of college. The chunk of remaining blank pages is getting thinner. I'm almost done. A lot has changed across my journals, and I have no doubt that once I

move on to the next one, even more will be different. At the same time, a lot has stayed the same—whether my poems started at the center of the page or the margin, whether my handwriting was legible or not, whether I was writing about homecoming dresses or death, I have always told myself the truth.



Figure 20.

EK3

E:

And while Anna finishes one
journal and starts a new one,
Jocelyn Gale still has the same
one, now filled to the brim and
beyond. Here's her untitled
piece.

NINETEEN
JOCELYN GALE, "UNTITLED"

My notebook is small. It slips into my back pocket, or gets lost completely in my tote. In its spine, I keep a robin's-egg blue mechanical pencil with the pocket clip broken off that I borrowed from my boyfriend on our first date. It's been two years, and somehow, there's still lead in there.

I revel in the longevity of my teeny tiny notebook. Of its lined pages, sometimes filled in neatly, others scrawled on from days where I felt like throwing caution to the wind. Games of hangman played in little corners next to soon-to-be published works and bus-ride thoughts. Of the way scribbles of words and doodles bleed onto the pages at their sides from months of being stuffed in the close quarters of pockets and bags and being passed from hand to hand.

No page is left blank, so I just cram words in illegible spaces between year-old self portraits and grocery lists. Its cover is cardboard brown with deep green screen prints of beavers and ducklings on a lake that stretches from the front cover to the back, and I am not ready to part with the ecosystem. The holes that the spine threads through have eroded to

slip the cover and pages without catching, and the weathered edges are smooth from hitting against my digital camera, dog-eared lit-mag, and smushed granola bar.

When my hands need to be busy, I find a spot and write what I see in my little notebook. Old man eating yogurt and drinking a cappuccino, same shoes as my dad. Two college girls, laughing. A woman with her feet up on the chair in front of her, wearing flats. I read memories of a café, my dentist's waiting room, and the DMV. Of strangers who had cool pants and ringlet curls. Of nosey thoughts about surrounding conversations.

I follow patterns of penciled ants crawling between cursive and print, watching as they circle the dotted pathways of the ladybugs and dragonflies in the margins. I read my attempt to try long division, unsolved and sporadic. I read grocery lists meant to fit certain diets, unfollowed and sad. I read communications with my brother, unanswered and wrinkled in tears. Little beetles hug the words.

I hold it in my hands, swirling it in them, feeling the grains of recycled paper in its cover and the smooth spirals of binding flip across my palms. I run my finger over my eyebrow, feeling the hair follicles in their unruly growth and the slick enamel of my crooked front teeth. They all feel the same. I scrunch letters in the white space between one story and the other, telling my notebook it looks just like me.

EK3

E:

I gotta say you might be right.
It's really fascinating seeing
how different people approach
journaling in such different
ways.

K:

Maybe journaling is for you,
Ethan.

Yeah. I was joking about it
earlier, but it doesn't sound
too bad. Maybe I can stand to
get a few minutes away from
screens.

It's a good start. Soon, we'll
have you writing with a pen!

Please don't put that on me...
that sounds so boring.

You sure? There are ways to make it more interesting, you know. How about instead of a pen, you use... glitter gel?

Glitter gel?

Mmm-hmm. My wife and daughter have hundreds of these. It was no surprise I said yes when we were offered a sponsorship deal for them.

I don't think I've ever used one.

Come over sometime, then. My daughter would be ecstatic to show you her collection.

Let's see if product ambassador Abby Borcoman can convince me.

TWENTY
ABBY BORCOMAN,
“WRITTEN IN SPARKLES”



Figure 21.

There's a preconceived notion that glitter gel pens are childish and only work in certain contexts. I yearn to challenge this. Writing tools differ in the messages they convey to ourselves and our audience: typing is fast and efficient, a pencil is a never permanent learning experience, a fancy black pen is formal and can signify status, while a glitter gel pen is widely viewed as cute, silly, and dramatic. When you turn a certain age, the

amount of fun you have dies, even in the smallest of ways, such as solely writing through typing or with plain black ink. I'm a firm believer that bringing back a sense of whimsy in accomplishable little ways can exponentially increase your connection with positivity and fun. Writing in glitter gel ink allows me, a confused, uncertain, young-adult woman, who knows what she wants but not how to get there, to connect with my most free self, my inner child. She knew exactly what she wanted, and although she didn't know how she would get there, she didn't care...She didn't have to. She danced wildly in her room to Hannah Montana music, played dress-up with her little sister, and drew and wrote everything in bright sparkly letters. When I write this way, it's like letting a piece of that little girl who knows no limits out again. Glitter gel pens aren't just about visual aesthetics; as a writing technology they shape how and why we express things.

Glitter gel pens reflect the highs and lows of girlhood. From scribbling crushes' names in sparkly pink hearts to crossing those same hearts out in bright red X's when your heart was inevitably broken. From drawing nonsensical pictures in your notebook to filling in the non-existent audience of your journal on how your friend let you down again. A glitter gel pen puts me back in those moments so closely, almost dangerously so, as nostalgia is a mind trick in a way. It can soften the hardest moments so much so that in hindsight, you forget just how hard it was and idealize it. But, if nostalgia and writing in glitter gel ink are connected, then writing in glitter gel ink also allows you to soften the very ideas you're writing about. Even when the content is serious, a glitter gel pen has a way of making things feel lighter, just as nostalgia does.

At the Nashville Songwriter Awards in 2022, Taylor Swift, arguably the world's biggest pop star and voice of girls everywhere, defined her more carefree, upbeat pop songs as written

in “glitter gel pen.”¹ She too understands the positivity and lightness that comes with writing in glitter gel ink. It’s a form of pure joy and release that reminds you how far you’ve come from when you first began writing with it. And this metaphor is easily understood because so many people have lived this experience themselves.

Physical journaling has become wildly popular for girls my age again. It’s a warm sense of comfort in a comparatively cold digital age. It allows you to create something just for you, not for your followers. The return to physical journaling marks a craving for nostalgia and for a time when our thoughts were important enough to last longer than an Instagram story post. Glitter gel pens and journaling, for me, go hand in hand. Using a glitter gel pen to write in my journal is a return to my youth when things were fun just because. Digital writing can feel performative and detached. When I do an assignment for class, most of the time I type it all out, rushing to meet a deadline or move on to the next thing. I submit it and forget about it, never to be read again. When I post an Instagram story, I anxiously check if followers and friends have viewed or liked it. Twenty-four hours later it’s already on its way to becoming a distant, foggy memory. Texts between friends, family, and lovers pile up and no matter how much they mean in the moment, they’re lost in a sea of messages over time, difficult to return to. On the opposite side of this, journaling allows me to intentionally get in touch with my feelings, and by picking up the same book and flipping through each page each time I do it, I am forced to reflect on how much I’ve grown from the previous entries. Glitter gel pens are an extension of this. When I journal with my glitter gel pen, I am allowed to feel however deeply I want to, unafraid of responses or views. In the current day, digital writing is a careful and curated performance; my journal is a reckless book of pure unabashed feeling.

Now, I write, not waiting for the glittery ink to dry, because I'm trying not to care if my hands are covered in blue sparkles for the rest of the day. I would like to say I'm making my nine-year-old self proud with this, but in all honesty it's something that would never have even crossed her mind as a concern. As a young-adult woman, I am continuously balancing how to coexist with my younger self without forgetting her, while still focusing on moving forward into my adulthood, using all of the experience and knowledge I've gained. I'll continue writing my deepest, most depressing thoughts in my journal. But writing can still be serious, even when using a glitter gel pen. It simply reminds me of a time when not everything had to be that way. My journal is full of my highest hopes and crushed dreams written in sparkles, because although life's hard, it doesn't always have to be serious.

EK3

E:
I'm convinced!

K:
That was easy.

They look so pretty... Why don't
you use them?

They won't let me. I always run
them out too quickly.

Good problem to have, Kev.

Couldn't agree more. But we've
talked so much about pens, we
haven't even touched on pencils
yet! Here's Nya Hodge with
"Pencil Watching People or
Watching People as They
Watch Me."

TWENTY-ONE
NYA HODGE, “PENCIL WATCHING
PEOPLE OR WATCHING
PEOPLE AS THEY WATCH ME”



Figure 22.

There's this coffee shop on East and Third, where the baristas all speak Pig Latin, and the consumers speak it too, and somehow they end up caffeinated and buzzing. I dropped my pencil there once. My good one; the pinnacle of technology. Nice quality lead, a roll-up eraser, my last name engraved on the side.

It felt good to drop a pencil in that coffee shop on East and Third, because it meant that I was writing, and if I was writing, then I was as close to God as I could get on Earth.

The downside to dropping your pencil is that your thoughts go with it. On the floor, pooling, causing the need for a wet-floor sign or a mop and a bucket. Both, probably, if the thought is slippery enough and the worker diligent enough. That's the danger of being a writer in view of others: What goes on when you go to the bathroom, if someone's eyes lace over your words before you can perfect them? Or if your thoughts slip out of your pencil and onto the red-glazy terracotta floor of the coffee shop on East and Third, how do you get them back? How do you dip the thoughts back onto paper?

I gave all of myself, in that coffee shop, to that pencil. My stories, my last name, my number, to the one barista who spoke something close to English; all of it came from the pink, interlocking folds of my brain through the conduit of that pencil, which, at some point, fell on the ground.

And if a pencil can make you close to God, then dropping it is sacrilege.

I remember the raised eyebrows, the cashmere and cotton and polyester sweaters (this coffee shop crosses class boundaries, and thus the clothes range from comfortable to performative) all rustling in disgust. My pencil was clunky, kept in its own pouch, inside of my own purse. It clanged around on the terracotta tile floor of this new-aged coffee shop. But I lived for it. I was a writer with so much to say that my hands, my fingers, shook with the weight of it.

How many people could say that?

I went back to writing—nonsense, really. The weather that day, whatever musings my mother had to say over the phone that morning, and the color of each and every person's sweater

in the coffee shop. My eyes and ears, the paint; my pencil, the paint brush; my thick papered notebook, the canvas.

This coffee shop serves shitty espresso and worse lattes—burnt, too much milk, and no sugar-free flavor options—but the views are magnificent. My pencil and I know these people; we've fallen in front of these people and lived to write about it.

There's a woman who hates her husband; I know because she tells him so over the phone. I wrote about it. There's a girl in love with her best friend; I know because she dips her fingers into the other girl's hair and winds it around her digit like she's touching pure silk. I wrote about it. There's me; frizzy-haired, perpetually surrounded by others, with graphite-stained fingers. To write about myself, however, is an injustice to the vivid color around me.

I know myself already. I know the worst parts, the bad parts, the middling parts that aren't quite offensive and not totally intolerable. I know the good parts, the best parts. That's all there is. There's no half-way point of my goodness.

But that woman who hates her husband, that girl who is in love with her best friend, and me, and my pencil, we all watch each other. We lock eyes for a moment, and they watch my face shift into understanding and I write down something completely unrelated to what they're experiencing but I want them to know that they're important enough to be written down. Their lives, so involved, and mystic to me, someone who doesn't know them. I use my pencil, the nice one, in the coffee shop, the one on East and Third, and take note of them.

I come back like a vulture, or maybe a dove. No, a vulture. And I feast on these little moments of people's lives. I wonder if they've got laptops, e-ink to remember *me* by, or real blue Bic-pen notes about the way my hair curls against the wind and around my ears.

I hope so.

If anything, I hope everyone who flits by me remembers if I made them feel something, or if my pencil-watching made them feel something.

EK3

E:

And where Nya uses pencils as
she people-watches, Ruthie
Schmeichel invites us to
consider, for a moment, that
pencils can be people, too.
Here's her piece, "Number Two."

TWENTY-TWO
RUTHIE SCHMEICHEL,
“NUMBER TWO”

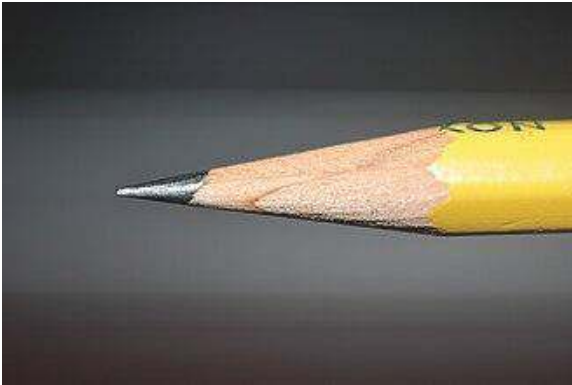


Figure 23.

The No. 2 pencil is a staple of grade school.

He's proud of that fact. Of course, his brethren are constantly used by professionals: bakers, engineers, scientists, you name it. But he has always had a soft spot for children.

He can still remember the way the Woman pulls his box off the shelf for the Little Girl. They take no notice of him. To them, he is just another item to check off. But he beams from

the box anyway. Now he will be of use. Now he will help this Little Girl, and she will love him. They will be together forever.

He is still beaming as the Woman dumps him (and some of his siblings) into a clear plastic box, which is snapped closed and shoved into a bag on the Little Girl's back. He bounces around in that bag, in the dark, listening to the sounds of the outside world—hissing and rumbling and screeching, like that truck that dropped him off at the store he was bought from; high-pitched voices inside that rumbling; the rustling of clothes against fabric; footsteps and more voices, deeper voices like the Woman's.

Then, a ripping sound, and the light of day. He blinks up at the Little Girl from his place in the box, at the way her face tilts as she sets him on the table. Her hand reaches toward the lock, the box opens...

She picks him up. Smiles at his perfect point. Rubs her finger against the soft, neat eraser.

Yes.

He watches as she lowers him to that pure, white paper, already imagining the words that will flow out of him.

As she makes the first stroke, he sighs in contentment.



Over the years, the Little Girl loses all her pencils but him. Him she keeps, and oh, the things they write together! He starts by filling in blank spaces on worksheets with big letters, squares with pictures, and eventually solitary questions in small black text. At some point he moves to thinner paper with blue lines and writes *a lot* about endlessly boring topics. Sometimes she has to trade him for a pen, but he can tell that she'd rather have him—whenever he's in the box, the Little Girl writes furiously, always shaking her hand out, and stress digs lines into her face.

Eventually, the paper itself is blue or green, and all he does is fill in bubbles for hours.

The Little Girl turns into a Young Woman. The writing comes faster and more frequently, and sometimes it's not words at all, but he doesn't care. All that matters is that she's still using him, dulling his point and then sharpening it again, until he has shrunk in his old age. His eraser is gone, and she's forced to use a big, blocky one instead. By the way she sighs as she hunts for it, he knows that she, too, misses the young days.

The first time the Young Woman pulls out the mechanical pencil, he thinks she's just trying it out. A one-time use out of curiosity. With a sting of jealousy, he notices the wide grin bloom across her face as she sets that pencil to paper. He consoles himself by saying that she's just curious. The mechanical pencil is new. Soon her curiosity will be satisfied, and she will return to her trusty, well-loved No. 2 pencil. They've gone through too much for it to be otherwise.

She does return to him, but not as much as before. Now half of her time is spent with the mechanical pencil. Then three-quarters of it. Gradually, he stops being used at all.

His lead heart sinks.

Now he lies forgotten—peppered with teeth marks, stubby, graphite-streaked—at the bottom of the Young Woman's pencil pouch. In the stillness and the dark, all he can do is wonder what happened.

Has he gotten too old? Too short? Is his point too dull? Has she gotten tired of his lack of eraser, or of having to sharpen him?

Really, what does the mechanical pencil have that he doesn't?

Even if that pencil does everything else better than me, he grumbles, he doesn't have my heart. I'm sure he doesn't care

about the Young Woman as much as I do! Isn't that the important thing?

And then comes the day when the pouch zips open. Through the other objects in the pouch, he sees the Young Woman staring down at him, her brow furrowed. His heart leaps at the sight of her face. She's older now, but within her eyes he can still see that Little Girl he used to know.

Utensils clatter as she empties the pouch on the table. Her hand sweeps through them all, spreading the contents out along the wooden surface. He is breathless as she begins to put the objects into piles. The mechanical pencil immediately joins the left-hand pile, along with other new pens, some glue, and scissors.

He waits on that table, wondering about the piles. But then, every thought leaves him as he feels her fingers close around his yellow body. She lifts him from the table—lifts him!—and finally he is close to her again. A thrill ripples down to his long-dead eraser as her eyes dart over him, as she rolls him in her fingers.

He flashes back to the old days, the days when he was her everything. She held him like this in those days. Maybe this means he'll be everything to her again.

Her lips twitch, and he expects her to smile. Instead, those lips purse into a thin line. Her eyes harden.

She places him in the right-hand pile. Her hand descends again, this time to sweep the pile up. But she doesn't dump them into the pencil pouch. Instead, she turns.

His lead point breaks off as she throws him into the trash can, but it's his heart that truly shatters. Because he knows, then, that the Little Girl is gone. She has let him go, and there is no going back to her.

EK3

E:

Now it's my turn to cry a
little. That poor pencil...

K:

Every pencil you ever used feels
exactly like that, Ethan. Don't
you have empathy?

I do. I'll never throw a pencil
away again. I'll keep them
tucked away forever in my
pouches instead.

Marginally better, I guess. No
chance I'll ever get to see your
handwriting?

It's horrible. You don't want to
see something like that.

No handwriting is bad, Ethan. It
serves to identify you. Says
something about you that other
people can see in your writing.

Even if mine is illegible?

I mean... that would make it
harder, for sure.

I thought so.

But in the right contexts, I
think people would be happy to
have something, anything, that
you wrote. No matter if they
couldn't read it. Up next is
Aaron Wanko with his piece, "For
When You're Older."

TWENTY-THREE
AARON WANKO, “FOR
WHEN YOU’RE OLDER”



Figure 24.

I look for the Post-It behind the picture.

Sometimes my mom or my dad would leave these little Post-Its around our house. Little notes like *I love you* or *How's the weather?* You know, stupid little stuff like that. I always got annoyed with it, with how my friends would always mention it when they came over, leading me to immediately shut it down, sticking the little notes into crevices before my friends could see them, with the fear that they would think that it was

somehow embarrassing to have my parents be cute with each other.

My parents did this, in part, because of their conflicting work schedules. My dad had the early morning shift at the local bakery, where he would get up at two a.m., coming back to sleep by ten in the morning. My mom, on the other hand, worked a typical nine-to-five civic job for the city. I think this was their best way of staying in touch, especially in an age where we didn't have everyone at the press of a button.

Our family photos have this particular trait as well. If you peel off the little cardboard backs to the framed pictures on our walls or living room tables, you'll find a Post-It note that says a quote by somebody that day (like the Fourth of July photo with a quote by my dad on the back: "No party quite like a nationwide freedom party"). I remember at one point my parents got rather fed up with me constantly taking down the Post-Its, given that this was *their* thing, so they told me that I wasn't allowed to mess with them.

"You can someday, though." I remember my dad telling me when he sat me down on a weekend afternoon. "How about I grab you some at the store when we go there next? That way, once you're old enough you'll have some on hand."

I was probably pretty done with him at that point, so I did what any self-respecting first-grader would do and called him a butt. He laughs about it to this day, but I think that was just because it was one of his last happy memories before Mom passed.

During my second-grade year, the cyan-colored Post-It notes that had practically become her trademark were all but gone. My dad stopped leaving them around the house too, since Mom was spending most of her time in the hospital anyways. By that point I had almost outgrown my rebellious streak, so I had started to become a trusted member of the Post-It society,

as my dad called it. It was really simple stuff, like him leaving me instructions on how to reheat dinner or asking me if I could take out the trash, but my favorite moments were the scavenger hunts.

I think he used them as both a way to distract himself and to keep me occupied. There was only so much fun that could be had on your own before turning on the TV became the most appealing option, but to his credit he really did try. He would stick little messages from Mom behind photo frames, things that said, *I hope your day went well, sweetness. Dad was telling me about your project for science, and it sounds like it's going really well. I'm so proud of you*, all in shaky letters. I think she was worried about me seeing her, frail and skeletal, so I was never invited to go into her hospital room.

But one day, all of that changed. I was busy trying to figure out how to spell the word *because* on a red Post-It note that was an appeal to why we should buy ice cream at the store, when my dad suddenly rushed into the room, telling me with a wide-eyed look that we needed to get to the hospital right away.

We didn't make it in time.

I don't think I fully processed what was happening. As an elementary school-age kid, the concept of death was rather foreign to me. All I knew was that I was seeing Dad a lot more, and Mom much less. My dad stopped writing as many Post-Its for me, since the advent of cell phones meant that we could communicate more easily from afar. I think that he just didn't want to think about her all that much, though.

Time passed, and some wounds healed. My dad gifted me a small box of items for my tenth birthday, all of them being pictures of my mom and our family. He told me through watery eyes, "I think you're old enough to have these now. These are pictures of Mom from a while ago, and she—she wanted you to have them."

I looked at the photos. As far as I could tell, these were just regular photos, not too dissimilar from those that remained up in our living room. I looked at him, confused, but as I did he brought out a frame wrapped in cloth. "This was her favorite picture of us," he said through a shaky breath. "And remember to look for the Post-It behind the picture."

As I carefully held the image, I saw the familiar smiles of my parents, beaming into the camera as they held a little baby me in their arms. At first when I flipped it over, I was confused why there was a small stack of cyan Post-Its, the color my mom always loved to use. Only once I read the topmost note did the tears finally start.

Written in shaky handwriting, it simply read, *For when you're older.*

EK3

E:

Okay, I'm convinced. But what would I even write about? And who would I write it to? I don't have a family like you do.

K:

You could write to my family, anyway. You know my daughter calls you Uncle Ethan.

I don't even know where I would start.

How about with a letter? Here's Paige Auxier and her untitled piece on the value of writing letters to your loved ones.

TWENTY-FOUR
PAIGE AUXIER, "UNTITLED"

I get a sudden, incessant urge to organize my bedroom once every handful of months. I keep a fairly organized space and pride myself on my capacity to efficiently, and perhaps too impulsively, part with objects that serve me no direct purpose. I'm sure, if I thought long enough about when and where I received an item, I could easily attach arbitrary significance to it. Then, from there, indulge in the passing pleasure of reminiscing on pleasant days gone by as I gaze upon it. However, in the vast majority of instances, I choose to instead enjoy the more long-term satisfaction I derive from having and maintaining an organized space by tossing it out. This, however, doesn't extend to all items or objects, which is a fact I'm reminded of each time I act on my urge to organize. As I never once, while sitting on my bedroom floor surrounded by bags of trash, piles of donations, and the yet to be sorted contents of my wardrobe, consider parting with any of the handwritten cards I've received from friends and loved ones throughout the years that sit in a towering stack on the top shelf of my closet.

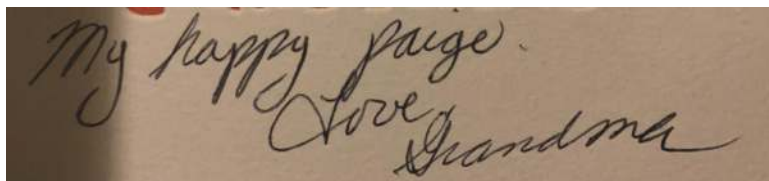


Figure 25.

In one past episode of room reorganization, I briefly paused my tidying to sift through the contents of my card collection and momentarily indulged in reading over the sweet messages written in them. While doing this, though, I came across a card penned by my late grandmother. At the time, the wound of her passing was much fresher, and upon staring at the short note, “Merry Christmas, my happy girl,” I felt a bittersweet knot of emotion form in the back of my throat. The message itself lacked any significant depth of meaning, due to its being so short; her handwriting, however, struck me heavily, as I realized just how much it symbolically represented her as an individual. Her twirly lettering was as delicate, feminine, and timelessly elegant as she was. The sight of it brought forth recollections of hydrangeas blooming in her garden—the soft blue fabric of her nightgown, the sweet chime of her charm bracelets, the taste of her homemade chocolate chip cookies, and the crescendo of her voice alongside a piano. Through this, I was enlightened to the fact that the appearance of a person’s handwriting often serves as an extension of who they are. Like a secret code or message, analysis of an individual’s penmanship can provide insight into what they’re like. My father, for example, has a small, stiff, and neatly compacted style of lettering that could be seen as representative of his practical, efficient, and organized nature. While my mother, on the other hand, writes with much larger letters that swirl haphazardly across the surfaces they’re etched into

with inexplicable capitalizations that perhaps signals her personality is bold, unique, and unpredictable.

From this, I began to realize that there are benefits to handwritten notes and letters that can't be derived from the use of other mediums of communication. And my cherishing of cards was perhaps proof that I had, for a long time, inadvertently valued handwritten messages without ever consciously recognizing it. Failure to recognize and appreciate the virtues of writing and receiving handwritten notes, however, is a large part of what has led to the art being lost amid recent advancements in technology that accommodate rapid and effortless communication.

One special quality or benefit of handwritten notes is their tactility. The grooves left in paper by pens form mountains and valleys of meaning for their readers. There's also, as I mentioned earlier, much that can be discovered from the characteristic curve of a person's penmanship. For within each arch, swirl, and slant of a letter is something to be gathered about the person who wrote it. Handwriting is also as inconsistent, unpredictable, and imperfect as the people, relationships, and emotions dictating its contents and composition. Words are bound to be misspelled, crossed out, or misplaced which in turn makes handwritten messages feel more authentically human. In giving a letter, an individual is granting someone else access to their inner thoughts and feelings toward them. By tacking a stamp onto the corner of an envelope, one is saying, "These are my thoughts, they're yours to keep, do with them what you will, shove them in shoe boxes, toss them in wastebaskets, hide them between the pages of your books, let them collect dust in hidden corners, or place them upon your desk and permit them to stare back at you day in and day out as a physical reminder of me and of what I've said, what I think, and how I feel for you." The feelings one writes about will inevitably pass, the paper

they're etched into might wrinkle, and the ink they're written in may eventually fade; however, the sentiment is still eternal so long as it exists physically.

The process of writing and sending a letter adds greater depth to a person's message, too, as it requires both intentionality and patience. To send a letter, one must first deliberate over what they wish to say, determine how they wish to say it—perhaps by writing and rewriting several drafts—figure out where and how to send it, and lastly, endure the grueling waiting period between sending it off and receiving a response. Abandoning the ease of instant communication causes us to feel a heightened sense of vulnerability; so when sending a letter, one is not only sharing a message but also notifying its recipient that the sender cared enough to face discomfort for the sake of sending the sentiment.

All things in life are fleeting; experiences end, feelings are impermanent, and relationships are subject to change. In a lifetime, one experiences so much, and amid all there is to do, see, and worry about, a lot is bound to get lost in translation. So, upon reminiscing on experiences, it's no wonder that we often end up revising or rewriting our own personal histories so that they follow more favorable narratives. In time, we inevitably grow out of touch with feelings we once felt and thus tell ourselves inaccurate stories that might eventually wind up vanishing from our recollections altogether. So, in instances where one feels a certain way for another and shares that sentiment through a handwritten letter, they're in turn making their feelings permanent, as ink can't be revised or erased. By sending a letter, we not only submit to sharing our feelings with someone else but to doing so in a manner that's eternal and undeniable. In this way, handwritten letters function similarly to photographs by creating snapshots of who their composers were at the time at which they wrote it.

Composing an honest letter to someone else also requires you to at least partially embrace the mess that it is to feel, for emotions are in and of themselves dynamic and volatile, bleeding into one another and branding your heart like ink printed on a page. The medium itself doesn't readily accommodate quick revisions either, as you're given no access to backspaces or autocorrect. So, by sending a letter you're allowing a messy part of you to exist elsewhere in the hands of someone else who can eternally keep and refer back to it.

I wonder, too, if handwritten letters now mean more than they once did, as they're no longer the standard for long-distance communication. Perhaps we've grown so accustomed to the emotionless nature of digitalized, always accessible, and instantaneous correspondence that we've forgotten how much it can mean to send a physical message to someone else. So, by rediscovering the art of letter writing, can we, in turn, add more depth to our connections, learn to embrace the mess that it is to feel, discover how to productively ruminate on our feelings, and grow more emotionally stable and intelligent by taking the time to consider and articulate our thoughts independently without backspaces, autocorrect, or AI-generated suggestions? Perhaps I'm giving letters too much credit or disregarding how the experience of writing or receiving a handwritten note may be of great value to some and of less to others. Regardless, though, it's a kind gesture that we've undoubtedly lost touch with over time. So, consider, if you have someone you yearn to share a heartfelt sentiment with, sending it in a letter.

OUTRO

E:

I'm happy we got so many
emotional pieces today, Kev.
It's been a minute since I had
something to think about.

K:

I agree. I'll never get tired of
hearing from our listeners. Even
in my old age, I have more to
learn from others.

So you can call yourself old but
I can't?

Yes.

[laughs] I see how it is.
Anyway, looks like we're about
out of time for today, so I'm
Ethan—

And I'm Kev—

And this has been "The Right
Tools for Writing" with EK3!
Join us in a month for our next
topic, and check out our socials
for prompts and submission
guidelines. See you next time!

See ya!

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