

Freewrite: Synchronizing Mind, Hand, and Pen – An Excavation of A Basic Practice

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The preparatory program Language and Thinking at Al-Quds Bard College (Palestine) culminates in the collaborative activity ‘The Museum of Us’ in which students display their thinking and writing in a multimedia project. Their artifacts include text fragments they curated on their short but intensive journey in the two-week course, expanded through visualizations, audio material, sculptural elements, etc. This final project requires students to reflect on their learning process, to condense their conceptual, analytical thinking about the materials covered within the arc of the course, and to expand their thinking creatively and imaginatively. The atmosphere during this final event is usually celebratory, namely a celebration of students’ intellectual curiosity, creativity, and talent. Walking around this Museum alongside students and instructors during the last iteration in September of 2025, I was interacting with the student-cum-artists, hearing about the stories and conceptions of their creations. Towards the end of the walk, we started noticing a theme emerging. Despite the broad variety of stories and ideas, hands were on display in almost all the projections. This was surprising because none of the materials covered in the course (texts, audio-visuals, music pieces, etc.) speaks directly, or even indirectly, to this theme. Students asked us to identify a worker’s hand among many; others wanted to know if we noticed the skin tones of the different hands, and others interrogated us about the symbolism of clutched, open, raised, praying hands. They connected hands to the major themes and texts of the course, such as class (Marx), race (MLK), gender (Kincaid), justice (Sophocles’ *Antigone*), and hope. Hands are indeed fascinating, not the least because the world with its structures and struggles imprints itself on our hands. Also, because each hand is unique. I asked students to think about their fingerprints, one of the physical marks of individual identity.

This essay is a meditation on the hand as well, as it interrogates the relation between thinking and writing, specifically handwriting. Composite, collaborative activities, like the Museum of Us, are the culmination – and so the ending – of a process utilizing a variety of practices from the Bard College Institute for Writing

and Thinking (IWT). We must go to the beginnings to explore this relation, namely, to the Freewrite, the basic practice that underlies most, if not all, other practices. There is much to be said about the beauty of Freewrite's simplicity: pen and paper, writing hands and thinking minds. Its simplicity is beautiful, but deceptive. Excavating the site/situation of Freewriting will hopefully allow us to appreciate its beauty more. Still, the motivation for this excavation is mainly epistemological. To the pragmatist's objection about the futility of examining and working out how and why a practice works, when it works, I will only say for now that interrogating the relation between thinking and writing is more important than examining, for example, bicycle riding. It took robot engineers decades to crack the human walk; building cycling robots is not far-fetched. Clearly, the point of their research was not primarily to build robots that walk, but to describe, model, and theorize all that goes into that walk, and then build the machine that puts all this into practice. Much knowledge has been gained by examining, analyzing, and describing these simple practices. And yet, it seems to me the need to excavate the relation between writing and thinking is even more important than cycling. In an age of upcoming AI technologies that challenge our understanding of what is uniquely human, I claim that examining the relation between handwriting and thinking will provide us with insights into the distinctly human, which this essay aims to do.

I will attempt a phenomenological description of the ontology of the handwriting and thinking ecosystem for a typical IWT classroom. From the specific and minutely detailed, I will draw more general rules and modelings. A common language used in prompts of Focused Freewrites is "Tell the story of ...". The story here will not have a plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The story is like a drive in a fragmented territory, criss-crossed with barbed wires, gates, walls, and checkpoints, like the Palestine where I live. Ways without exit, dead-ends – aporias in Greek – force you often to go back and start again. But there is no way to know if the way is open or not, except if you do drive it. The threads of this essay will not converge into one neat linear story or straight argumentation strategy. Unlike dialectics, where thinking returns to the beginning/the origin every time it elevates the contradictions, the return here will not and cannot start from or reach any beginning which happens to not even exist. We'll return to the most advantageous fork in the road, take the other turn, and continue; even better, teleport to a completely new departure point on this terrain, unrelated to the way we can't exit, and continue from there. After all, human will and thinking are not obliged to obey all laws of physics. Thinking, for instance, moves faster than light, as Thomas Mann points out in *The Magic Mountain*.



The basic prompt of the Freewrite is simple: write with a pen on paper, without interruption, distraction, or resistance. Mind, hand, and pen should be synchronized. The assumption about writing is that it does not (only) record prior thinking; thinking happens through writing. This simplicity covers interconnected layers upon mutually reinforcing layers of meanings; to uncover all of them will be beyond the limits of this essay. I will mention a few, and then focus on the main layer to be discussed here:

- 1 Material: the ubiquitous availability of writing materials is the outcome of social-economic relations, long-term historical processes, and cultural innovations. Historically, homo sapiens wrote for only a fraction of their long-time existence on the planet. Within these ten to twelve thousand years of writing, it was the monopoly of the few. And yet, the struggle to democratize writing is as old as writing itself, illustrated by the invention of the alphabet by workers on the Sinai Peninsula. The writing system that challenged the monopoly of the hieroglyphic system did not have a straightforward story of triumph. It's naive to believe that hieroglyph scribes left the stage without a push back, a fight that lasted for almost two millennia. Modern scribes (let's call them the 9.9%) share similar, but not identical, concerns about the economy of mass literacy: regulating, harnessing, and extracting its energy. Among them, fewer scribes find other uses for their pens. Emile Zola's model is the North African scribe (a common role across Muslim majority countries) who writes to record deeds, taxes, and events, but also to advocate on behalf of those who cannot write. The ubiquitous availability of pen and paper does not change their quality, as they remain tools to be manipulated by their users to the ends they decide upon. The complexity lies in the fact that the machines producing them function according to an entirely different logic.
- 2 Cultural: Interwoven with the material is the cultural moment in which distraction and noise have become the norm, so much so that leaders of political movements advocate in all seriousness for the people's right to silence (Jean-Luc Mélenchon). To write – or do anything for that matter – without distraction and interruption is perhaps a right, particularly if you can afford it, and perhaps a privilege if you can't. What is certain: it's not a given and anything but a self-evident truth. Time and space for and of human life are quantities to be measured, resources to be extracted and transformed, energies to be harnessed. The economy of our time, therefore, informs – and if one's a pessimist, which I am not, then dictates – the “geometry of our attention” (Joan Retallack).

We will focus on the surface of the Freewrite practice, namely, writing to think rather than recording a thought. Plato's definition of thinking as an inner dialogue

is an attempt to determine its main feature, hence thinking in itself. Where that inner dialogue takes place (the “soul”) remains unclear. How the “soul” can talk to itself using language that it did not – because it cannot – invent, remains a basic challenge to Plato (conventionally understood). We will not pursue this any further. Instead, we note that for him too, thinking is (1) a process that (2) involves language. Alternatively, we approach thinking as sense and meaning-making of things in the world. This determination does not identify the thing in itself as an activity, but the thing for which the activity is conducted. A narrower approach determines thinking as “coming to terms (concepts) with” things/phenomena in the world. To think, i.e. to follow this process, in the Freewrite setting, we use tools and language. Pen and paper are tools that we manipulate with our hands. Language functions for the most part as a tool, namely when meaning is derived from its use. The meaning of words can, on occasion, transcend the boundaries of usage. Words are more than just tools: as carriers of thought, they must be.

Humans can think without writing. Homo sapiens thought throughout 96% of their time roaming the planet without it. A Homo sapiens with a spear hunting a mammoth is using a tool, as much as a crow using traffic to crack a walnut. A Homo sapiens, or for that matter a Neanderthalensis, with feathers on their clothes or beads in their hair, is no different from Bowerbirds decorating their nests with blue objects. Humans strategizing on pack hunts are similar to wolves. Perhaps, Homo sapiens’ elaborate capacity for mimesis enables them to learn from the animal behavior around them. Toddlers imitate the behavior and character of house pets, to an alarming degree for their parents. Human languages are replete with animalistic metaphors, used to approach human behavior, most of them descriptive. Machiavelli’s lion and fox are not meant to denounce a ruler. On the contrary, the ruler must learn from the lion and the fox. Even when the Scriptures clearly distinguish the human from the rest, it still tells of Cain, who learns from the crow. In brief, humans thought in 96% of their time like animals, and possibly even learned by imitation from them.

When the Sumerians invent cuneiform to make records of their wealth, the invention has a by-product that transforms human life, indeed (re-)invents it. The word becomes a law, and so this written word becomes an institution. The institution alone cannot bind together a community; the bond requires the myth as well. So the institution is followed by an education that goes beyond the practical (vocational) learning of trades. The written word codifies the myth and the law. Because of writing, learning, and institutions – *eruditio* and *institutio* – emerge as the two forces that define the *homo humanus*. In fact, the Human can now define itself and, by so doing, distinguish itself from the rest. The hand inscribes the human word into “the book of the world.” The world imprints its struggles and structures

on our hands, but the hand with a writing device in it begins now to impress human imagination, rationality, and narratives onto nature. Although the period since humans invented writing is very short compared to the periods preceding it, their influence on the planet in the past five millennia is unparalleled and unprecedented. Indeed, humanity turns from a species like all others surviving nature to one that profoundly shapes its environment. With writing, humans become sense-makers, and so their own world's dwellers.

Writing establishes the record of human experience, imagination, and thought, which is a necessary condition for the possibility of thinking at any given time. Writing is, therefore, intricately connected to human thinking.



We're back at a fork in the road, a sign marked "writing and thinking". We took the route of the species. From its infancy, the *homo humanus* suffered from the hubris that it can domesticate all nature and civilize (make civil, city dweller) all things. From its infancy, *homo humanus* warned itself against the hubris of crowning itself the center or ruler of all things. Gilgamesh, stealing the fire of the gods, sets ablaze his enemies, the forest, and with it the *homo animalis* (Humbaba) or the *homo barbarus*, as the Romans will later call it. He comes to realize the barbarity (cruelty) of his heinous actions, but he commits them anyway. The two forces that define the *homo humanus* oppose each, whereby the *eruditio* warns against the hubris of the *institutio*. Writing was and remains fire.

What does this story have to do with the practice of the Freewrite? It shows the unique capacity of the Human to think through writing, whereby thinking is the praxis of sense-making. Further, writing and thinking mutually condition and reinforce each other, as sense and meaning are always embedded in the record of human experience, imagination, and thought. An investigation into the ontology of the Freewrite practice and situation will reveal that it is, in fact, simulating this original state (original in the logical, not temporal, sense). In doing so, it puts the participants in the original writer-thinker position.

Synchronizing mind, hand, and pen is a basic feature of the Freewrite. Sense and meaning, let alone thought, are not generated by the individual mind. Thinking is always already embedded in the archive of human experience. Language is the condition for the possibility of sense and sense-making. Language and thinking presume historical and contemporary communities that generated them. As private languages are not possible (Wittgenstein), one doesn't think on one's own, nor

does an inner dialogue generate sense and meaning. One thinks only in community. In a typical situation of the Freewrite practice, however, one is in a real (not only presumed) community of writers-thinkers. Participants write, share, listen, and respond, while their voices and thoughts interact in the process with the community as a whole. When a member writes, they channel the discourse from their perspective and specific position, and synchronize *that* with pen and hand. This creates the interplay between individual voice and thinking in community.

Further, the Freewrite and all other practices based on it function as community-building activities. The simple, but effective, guidelines for the practice play a crucial role in allowing a community to emerge. It will take too long to spell out the unwritten rules and values to which one must commit for the process to succeed. The key moment from which all others can be drawn, though, is the commitment to engage in good faith with and in thinking as sense-making. This seems trivial, and it is. Writing must not have the goal of thinking; writers must not commit to trying to make sense of things and phenomena. Writers can engage in deception and manipulation, blurring the meaning, or lying. All bad-faith, fraudulent practices that destroy the discourse are available to writers. To what extent humor and writing for entertainment promote the discourse is debatable. “Ohne Furcht vor dem Odium der Peinlichkeit, neigen wir vielmehr der Ansicht zu, daß nur das Gründliche wahrhaft unterhaltend sei” (Thomas Mann). It is doubtful whether the most profound is the “only” entertaining thing, but it’s certainly the best entertainment. A delicate and balanced use of distraction provides a good repose in serious conversations, but an imbalance would compromise the purpose. In brief, lack of commitment to thinking in the Freewrite setting undermines the community, its emergence, and sustainability. From this initial commitment – almost a leap of faith – required for the success of the practice, we can work out other ethical commitments, even political values and social norms.

In the Freewrite practice, we insist on writing with pen and paper. The basis for this aspect of the practice is in another dimension of thinking through writing. Before the invention of the printing presses and typewriters, using tools with hands was the only way to write. Curiously, many languages distinguish writing from letter setting, printing or typing. Writing seems to be foremost and always handwriting. “Hand” in many languages is reserved for humans, while animals may have claws, paws, hooves, etc. Handwriting in practice and its representation in human languages is intricately connected to being human. The invention of machines that re-/produce texts called for other descriptions and designations in the language, in many ways pointing to the growing distance of these texts from what is uniquely human.

The distinct human quality of using tools is about our ability to make and manipulate tools with our hands (whereas other animals use objects as tools, but don't make or manipulate them). Writing tools, seen from this perspective, are no different from any other instruments. Perhaps, modern universal literacy shows that these tools and writing systems are so user-friendly that almost anyone can successfully use them, unlike many others, which cannot be mastered even after a year-long practice, e.g. musical instruments.

The distinctness of this mode of writing (handwriting) can be better understood by contrasting it with other modes, such as typing and printing. The latter ushered in the age of the mechanical reproduction of the word. While this is often viewed as having a democratizing effect on reading and literacy, perhaps it's worth noting that the availability of printed texts is not the same as reading. More importantly, typing and its relation to thinking are completely different from writing. Typewriters, let alone computers with word processing software, are not tools to be manipulated. They are machines that define the possibilities of their operator as much as she operates them. For example, the introduction of the backspace in word processing software massively changes drafting and text production. Gore Vidal's *Duluth* (1983) tries to come to terms with this feature of word processors, becoming available for mass market at the same time as its publication. The artificiality of the character that writes itself and others within the novel acquires a new quality with the backspace button. Unlike the predecessor button in typewriters, the deletion here doesn't leave any trace, history, or memory. Characters revise and write themselves, but cannot follow the trace, trajectory, and history of their self-creation and evolution. Now they can vanish entirely (which they do towards the end of the novel). I find it a powerful metaphor to describe the new mode of establishing the record of human experience. Its utter and complete disappearance is a good possibility. Whether humans are organizing their vanishing with new technologies and thereby human thinking altogether, it remains to be seen, all the dystopias notwithstanding.

The mechanical reproduction of the word coincides with the mass-scale production of text and knowledge. The typewriter's home is Kafka's world, with its desks and offices. The haunting image of an endless stream of texts spewed out of them conveys a sense of futility, absurdity, and meaninglessness. Since Kafka, we learned to explain and make sense of this seeming absurdity. The archive thus established determines the possibilities of sense-making for individuals and their communities. As much as industrialism of the 18th and 19th centuries produced the hybrid being of human and machine, they operate now typing machines on the lines of knowledge production. The material production in factories co-occurs with the industrial-scale production of knowledge in the basic institutions of modern

societies (as described by Foucault) that ultimately converge to form what I call Social Machines. The desire for technology precedes its invention, entirely according to the logic of trial and error. The desire for the means of the mechanical reproduction of the word is triggered by the resistance of pen and paper to this mode of thinking, the man-machine's. This is no longer a distinctly human way of thinking.

I believe that generative AI, particularly Large Language Models, is transforming this mode of thinking, once again. Machine learning farms "big data" produced on a mass scale by these industrial age technologies, operated by social machines. Contrary to the myth of automated machine learning happening by the power of algorithms, underpaid and overworked humans filter and train the machine to produce LLMs. Neither the underpaid "teachers" nor the underpaying owners of these machines have insight into the ways in which LLMs are expanding big data, to what end, and how to make sense of it all. Although the trial and error logic of industrial-scale production of knowledge meant that this production did not and cannot have a blueprint for its design, techniques, mechanisms, and ends, it still followed specific rationalities. When the process of knowledge accumulation reaches or establishes a new plateau, we (thinking humans, perhaps with pen in hand) could analyze the discourse, reconstruct its epistemes, and describe the genealogies of the social machines producing it. The expansion of the archive through generative AI includes an element of randomness and uncertainty caused by the automated augmentation and optimization of its algorithms. The randomness and uncertainty increase when AI is fed with its own production (AI-generated data). It's doubtful whether the massive generation of text/data by AI follows specific rationalities and regimes of truth, analyzable post-plateauing. Even if this happens, randomness and uncertainty disallow the possibility of adequate discourse analysis and episteme reconstruction. Insight into the order of this mass-scale operation is gained perhaps only through AI itself. And why should AI lay bare the principles of its own order and rationality? Judging by the archives it's trained on to develop these principles; AI will not grant us such access, as systems of power and knowledge that taught it never tell.

We will reverse to the last fork in the road before taking the last turn on this ride. AI is altering the way we live, mostly because it is integrated into technologies, devices, and services that do not ask for our permission to use it. Moreover, AI is changing human intelligence (HI). Just like the operator adapting to the machine and its possibilities, AI will soon set the standards for most intellectually demanding tasks, so that HI will have to adapt to AI's standards. The scale, speed, and efficiency of AI's processing capacities are far more powerful and dominating than the machine's productivity. Just like the non-industrial worker and farmer had to adapt to standards set by the mechanical production, HI will have to adapt to AI's

standards. The skilled work of a master craftsman, let alone the imagination and ingenuity of an artist, did not change the mediocre, but hegemonic, standards set by the machine. Even if HI is superior to AI (in some areas it certainly is), it will not change the latter's standards, once set and established. Clearly, I distinguish between AI and HI; they may compete with and influence each other, but are not the same and will never be.

Integrating AI-generated texts within ones typed with computers will further intensify the transformation of HI. The accumulation of these texts establishes in the aggregate a non-archival record the order of which cannot be charted, surveyed, or analyzed by HI (augmented with AI or not). But a thinking that assumes this record as a condition for the possibility of sense and meaning is not a human mode of thinking. We live perhaps at the beginning of a new era in which we will witness the evolution of a hybrid existence involving human, machine, and AI. The thinking of this hybridity (my preferred name for it would be a formula, like 'machine-H+AI') is anything but human.



Excavating the ontology of the Freewrite practice and situation reveals how it emulates and simulates the original praxis of human thinking. The thinking of the homo humanus is closely tied to writing, understood in its literal sense, writing with hand (not typing, printing, pressing, or text-generating). Hand and writing are distinctly human. Indeed, they allowed humans through *eruditio* and *institutio* (education and institutions) to define who and what they are as well as how they want to live.

The Freewrite practice is not an anachronism, but functions within the context of an industrialized AI world as a heterotopia. Its space, norms, and commitments generate possibilities to build and sustain a community, and channeling its discourse allows one to think through writing. Understanding Freewriting in this way, as heterotopia namely, the "free" in Freewrite doesn't refer only to the mode of writing (writing without interruption, distraction, or resistance). Taken as a whole ecosystem of writing and thinking, it is the freedom from imposed alienated thought and freedom for becoming human, a dweller in one's own world. For heterotopia is a space for the practice of freedom.