

In Five Thousand Years of Teaching Reading, What Have We Learned?

Bob W. Jerrolds

In keeping with this year's theme; "Looking Forward, Looking Backward: Reading at the Crossroads," I'm looking backward. As you may have heard it said before, historians are the only people in the world who get paid for looking backward. Unfortunately, for this presentation, I'm not getting paid. I'm getting older now, so I am looking more backward. In fact, I can't believe how backward I look! I have been retired for six years. A couple of you are old enough to have talked with me about retiring, and I have given the same advice that was given to me. If you are in education, you will know when the time comes to retire. A former member of the Georgia State Department of Education said that an educator ought to retire when he sees the same innovation coming around for the third time. To look backward we need a good rear-view mirror, and we need to remember that objects coming up behind us may be larger than they appear.

I suppose that as we get older there is a greater tendency to look back. Aunt Ludie said - now you remember my Aunt Ludie - You knew full well when you invited me to make a presentation that you were going to hear about my Aunt Ludie! I remember Aunt Ludie saying she was so old that she could remember when people wore hats and told the truth. Hat or no hat, I'm going to tell you the truth. The truth is some of the ideas we have about the teaching of reading and some of the techniques we use are older than Adam's house cat, and that is not necessarily bad. I do, however, think that it is reprehensible that some of our colleagues have built their entire professorships on the process of putting old wine in new bottles.

I commend our program planners (Bob Schlagal and Woodrow Trathen) for providing for a look backward. It is a whole lot easier to get where you are going if you know where you have been. I also commend this organization for having as one of its reasons for existence, "To ensure that in the field of reading no idea is too bold or new to be given a hearing, and none too old to be given reconsideration." That is really quite well-stated, which is, of course, why I wrote it.

What was the purpose for the invention of writing in the first place? The purpose was to record what we had learned so that we and succeeding generations would not have to learn it by experience all over again. Would it not be supremely ironic if, of all groups, reading people did not know their own history? There is some evidence that such might be the case. If we did know the history of our own field, would we constantly be throwing out ideas and practices only to come back to them again and again under new names? Anticipating how the research for this paper would turn out, I considered entitling this paper, "Been there; done that; bought the t-shirt." What I did not anticipate is that my title would be in error because we have been teaching reading for more than 5,000 years.

Just how old is reading and writing anyway? For more than 100,000 years humans have been making marks on various surfaces, and archeologists are continuing to find more all the time. Some of these marks are lines, some dots, some are hatch marks, etc. Although some may have been random, and some were apparently just decorative, most clearly did convey meanings. Most of those that conveyed meaning represented some kind of counting. Ancients also drew pictures and made various geometric designs that also represented counting.

In Alberto Manguel's interesting book, *A History of Reading*, he writes,

In 1984, two small clay tablets of vaguely rectangular shape were found in Tell Brak, Syria, dating from the fourth millennium BC. I saw them, the year before the Gulf War, in a an unostentatious display case in the Archeological Museum of Baghdad. . . . All our history begins with these two modest tablets. They are—if the war spared them—among the oldest examples of writing we know. ([Manguel, 1996](#))

History is usually defined as the *written* record of human kind. If history began with those two little tablets in Baghdad, let us hope that the days immediately ahead in Baghdad do not begin the closing of some giant, cosmic circle.

Of all the mnemonic marking that peoples used preceding real writing, knot records were the most common in early developing cultures around the world and were used to convey elaborate means of counting.

The Inca of ancient Peru used mnemonics almost exclusively to achieve what writing achieved in the same or similar contexts in other societies. The Inca had several different types of knots to record their empire's daily and long-term mercantile transactions and payment of tribute. Each knot held a specific decimal value (no knot in a certain place meant "zero"). For example, one overhand knot above two overhand knots above a group of seven knots recorded the number "127". Thus, there were specific cord places for the concepts "hundreds", "tens" and "ones". Bunches of strings of knots could be tied off with summation cords. ([Fischer, 2001](#)).

Less convenient than knots, other materials such as stone carvings, pictographs, notched sticks and bones, colored pebbles, etc. have been used to make records of whatever early cultures valued highly whether genealogy, lists of kings, possessions, captives taken in battle, seasonal cycles, or whatever. These were precursors of real writing, but they did not take on the subtleties of transcriptions of human speech. Instead they were only mnemonic devices, although they were frequently elaborate and complex. The earliest of these meaningful markings almost always involved counting of some kind.

Before we can talk about when reading and writing began we have to define real,

or complete, writing. Even though I don't approve of split infinitives, for purposes of this discussion let us accept Fischer's definition. "One might accept that it is indeed the sequencing of standardized symbols (characters, signs or sign components) in order to graphically reproduce human speech, thought and other things in part or whole" (Fischer, 2001).

From the time that writing began many, if not most, cultures have so valued it and been awed by it, especially those who could not read, that they have attributed its invention to a god or goddess, or to a human who, for the achievement, was transformed into demi-god or hero status. Further, throughout most of history reading and writing have been controlled by the priestly classes. The very earliest writings almost always appear to be tallies of the possessions of some king or other high-ranking individual. Thus it would appear that writing was not invented by Thoth, Apollo and his Muses, or some demi-god. It was invented by some long-dead certified public accountant.

A mounting body of evidence indicates that, contrary to what we previously believed, reading and writing did not evolve independently in such varied places as Babylonia, Egypt, China, and India. There are even some reputable scholars who contend that it did not evolve independently in Mesoamerica. I find this assertion a little incredulous, but some scholars claim that writing in Mesoamerica had too much in common with Chinese writing to be coincidence. Although pottery fragments have been found in China with markings on them that date to about 4,000 B. C., there is no consensus that these represent real writing or even pre-writing. Clearly the writing of Japanese, Korean, and other eastern languages evolved from the Chinese, but whence came Chinese?

Having been practiced in Mesopotamia and points east for some two thousand years, the idea of complete writing apparently diffused from there to north-central China, where, due to the demands of the Chinese language, writing went on to assume its unique East Asian cast. (Fischer, 2001)

If history is the written record of the experiences of humankind, then it appears that Samuel Noah Kramer (1959) was justified in entitling his book, *History Begins at Sumer*. Fischer states:

Though there are other possible interpretations, the cumulative weight of evidence urges the consideration that the idea of complete writing may have emerged only once in humankind's history. Drawing from a standardized repertoire of pictograms and symbols - the distillation of a long development from notches to tablets - the Sumerians of Mesopotamia elaborated what has since become humankind's most versatile tool. All other writing systems and scripts are, then perhaps derivatives of this one original idea - systemic phoneticism - that emerged between 6,000 and 5,700 years ago in Mesopotamia. (Fischer, 2001)

What an epiphany for one person and what a boon for humankind the moment that our ancient Sumerian CPA realized that if he elaborated his counting marks he could

make them represent speech sounds and if he could represent sounds he could make his marks record anything that he or anyone else could say! We can only imagine how dazzled he must have been by that insight. The subtle move from complex mnemonic marks to phonetic representation represents the first real or complete writing.

Although we have real writing that far back in Sumer, to date we do not have examples of the work of school children that far back. However, in Sumer a goodly number of tablets have been found dating from about 2,500 B.C. that are obviously the work of schoolboys learning to be scribes. We can tell that it is because on individual clay tablets or pottery shards we have the same word, sentence, list or passage written over and over again in the same hand. We also have passages written by long ago Sumerians in which they describe their activities. Kramer found one man's essay in which he describes a day at school when he was a lad. Like some of us when we tell children about our school days, I expect that he embroiders his experiences a bit. Kramer states of this essay:

In school the monitor in charge said to me, "Why are you late?" Afraid and with pounding heart, I entered before my teacher and made a respectful curtsy.

But curtsy or not, it seems to have been a bad day for this pupil. He had to take canings from the various members of the school staff for such indiscretions as talking, standing up, and walking out of the gate. Worst of all, the teacher said to him, "Your hand (copy) is not satisfactory," and caned him. This seems to have been too much for the lad, and he suggests to his father that it might be a good idea to invite the teacher home and mollify him with some presents - by all odds the first recorded case of "apple-polishing" in the history of man. The composition continues: "To that which the schoolboy said his father gave heed. The teacher was brought from school, and after entering the house he was seated in the seat of honor. The schoolboy attended and served him, and whatever he had learned of the art of table-writing he unfolded to his father."

The father then wined and dined the teacher, "dressed him in a new garment, gave him a gift, put a ring on his hand." Warmed by this generosity, the teacher reassures the aspiring scribe in poetic words, which read in part: "Young man, because you did not neglect my word, did not forsake it, may you reach the pinnacle of the scribal art, may you achieve it completely. . . Of your brothers may you be their leader, of your friends may you be their chief, may you rank the highest of the schoolboys. . . . You have carried out well the school's activities, you have become a man of learning."(Kramer, 1959)

It would appear that a little bribery would go a long way in those days. However, this and other Sumerian schoolboys had their work cut out for them.

Thus the neophyte began his studies with quite elementary syllabic exercises such as tu-ta-ti, nu-na-ni, bu-ba-bi, zu-za-zi, etc. This was followed by the study and practice of a sign list of some nine hundred entries which gave single signs along with their pronunciation. Then came lists containing hundreds of words that had come to be written, for one reason or another, not by one sign but by a group of

two or more signs. These were followed by collections containing literally thousands of words and phrases arranged according to meaning. . . . A collection of most common expressions used in administrative and legal documents was also included as well as a list of some eight hundred words denoting professions, kinship relations, deformities of the human body, etc.

It was only when the student had become well acquainted with the writing of the complex Sumerian vocabulary that he began to copy and memorize short sentences, proverbs, and fables, and also collections of “model” contracts, this last being essential for the redaction of legal documents, which played a large role in the economic life of Sumer. ([Kramer, 1963](#))

Does all this have a familiar ring? To me it sounds like letter learning, word families, sight words, word lists, common phrases, and learning from a model.

Ancient Egyptians called writing. . . “god’s words” - because they believed it to be the gift of Thoth, the ibis-headed scribe of the gods, healer, lord of all wisdom and patron of scholars. . . . Few writing systems in the world have been as beautiful or captivating. None has had such far-reaching effects on humankind. (Fischer, 2001)

Archeological evidence indicates that contact with Sumer, directly or indirectly, is what gave writing to Egypt, not Thoth.

Egypt had borrowed from Sumer not simply the ‘idea of writing’, but logography, phonography and linearity with sequencing. The Egyptian sign inventory was codified very early on, with set phonetic values and sign usages. Then, recognizing specific requirements of the Egyptian language, scribes innovated new writing tools. (Fischer 2001)

Thus the Ancient Egyptians did what the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and others did; they adopted an alphabet and adapted it to the needs of their language. The only major group not clever enough to adapt the alphabet they adopted were the people who spoke English, but more of that later.

The Egyptian hieroglyphs were representations of sounds. They were not, as we might assume from looking at them, ideographs. By the way they are hieroglyphs, not hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphic is the adjectival form of the word. We would not want members of the American Reading Forum calling them hieroglyphics. Ancient Egyptian students were taught to read primarily by spelling the word and by sounding out the syllables. You think we don’t still use something as primitive as the spelling method? In response to the question, “What is this word?” how many times have you heard teachers or parents say “Spell it.” Obviously 5,000 years later we are still trying to teach children with this ancient method.

Of course, the Egyptians rather than the Greeks or Phoenicians were apparently the first to represent single consonants with only one sign corresponding to each

consonantal phoneme in their language . . . This brilliant way of writing . . . Spread to Sinai and Canaan and revolutionized writing in terms of flexibility and economy. One no longer needed to learn hundreds of signs; usually, fewer than 30 . . . (Fischer, 2001)

Speaking of consonants, the Egyptians and many other early writing cultures used only consonants in their texts. They did not use vowels. Can you imagine trying to teach our youngsters to read English using no vowels? It can be done, by the way: nglsh cn b rd wtht vwls, bt nt wtht cnsnts; Ei a e ea iou oe, u o iou ooa.

‘The Phoenicians who came with Kadmos,’ wrote Herodotus in the fifth century BC of the legendary Phoenician prince of Tyre . . . Introduced into Greece, after their settlement in the country, a number of accomplishments, of which the most important was writing, an art which, I believe, had been unknown to the Greeks until then.’ While the Greeks received consonantal alphabetic writing from the Phoenicians, syllabic writing had been known to them long before this . . . Since Kadmos had lived, as Herodotus also alleged, approximately 1,650 years earlier—that is, when the syllabic writing of the Phoenicians’ ancestors had arrived in Hellas—perhaps the historian was recalling a legend relating to the Greeks’ first borrowing of writing rather than the second. (Fischer, 2001)

The Ancient Greek student did not have an easy time learning to read. His texts had no spaces or other markers to indicate where words start and stop. They also had no markers such as upper case letters or periods to separate sentences. Some of you may remember that at the first meeting of this association Hecker, Jerrolds, and Benton (1981) presented a paper in which they proposed a new type of informal reading placement test, one in which the student was faced with the same problems as his counterpart in Ancient Greece. By the way a recent review of the literature revealed that the new informal reading placement test of Hecker, Jerrolds, and Benton has not been heard of since.

It took the Greeks until about 400 years B. C. before they figured out that they could draw horizontal lines in the text to separate words. While they were at it, they decided they could indicate new sentences by enlarging the first letter and/or indenting.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus tells us how they learned to read.

We first learn the names of the letters, then their forms and length, then syllables and their usual variations. Then we begin to read and write, but syllable by syllable and slowly until we have acquired some facility, then connectedly. . . . (Lamport, 1935)

That sounds suspiciously like synthetic phonics to me.

Because it was Greek to them, these ancients had to be resourceful in their teaching techniques. Lamport cites Athenaeus:

Kallias of Athens . . . composed the so-called Alphabet-Revue on the following plan. Its prologue is composed of the letters of the alphabet, and it is to be read in such a manner as to divide the letters according to the punctuation and bring the conclusion in the manner of a tragic denouement back to the letter alpha, thus: Alpha, beta, gamma, delta, The chorus of women is composed by him with the collocation of letters in pairs, set to meter and accompanied by tunes (Lampport, 1935)

This sounds like the alphabet song to me and dramatization of reading material. And here we are in 2002 still using choral reading as a part of our repertoire.

Another novel approach was used by a wealthy Greek named Atticus. His less than bright child could not seem to learn his alphabet, so the father bought 24 slaves, gave each the name of one of the Greek letters, and gave them to his child as playmates. And some of you thought that Reading Recovery was expensive! We have no record of the effectiveness of the treatment. I do not advocate the Atticus Method. I feel that it is excessive.

Have you noticed that no matter how impressive a new development might be there is always someone who thinks that it will be the ruination of the next generation. Bright as he was Plato was extremely suspicious of books.

The art of writing was to be sure in Plato's time nothing new; but the Greek book . . . was scarcely yet a century old. Something of its newness is reflected in the delightful version of the story of the invention of books and letters, attributed to Theuth (Thoth) of the Egyptians, 'This,' said Theuth, 'will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; for this is the cure of forgetfulness and folly.' To him replied Thamus, King of the Egyptians: 'O most ingenious Theuth, he who has the gift of inventions not always the best judge of the utility of his own inventions to the users of them. This invention of yours will create forgetfulness in learners' souls because they will not use their memories.' (Hendrickson, 1929)

Plato was not the alone in his grave misgivings about books. He and others felt that they had indeed already brought about forgetfulness. In ancient Greece that loutish and lazy younger generation was not bothering to remember that which could easily be looked up again in a book. It occurs to me that we are now hearing the same complaint leveled against computers, which will be worse because computers can look it up for you. And, by the way, the younger generation is still loutish, lazy, and going to hell in a handbasket. But speaking of Plato, he presents Socrates as saying, "I know what I do not know." (Buchanan, 1948) Now, if that is not metacognition, I don't know what is!

Although I have not found the source, I have read that the Ancient Hebrews with a taste for learning used a board much like the hornbook that we meet later in reading

education. To reward academic achievement the teacher would drizzle honey in the shape of a letter. When the scholar had mastered the identification of the letter he was allowed to lick the honeyed letter from the board. Quintus Horatius Flaccus whom we know as Horace was a Roman of the first century. Horace also recognized the importance of rewarding children with food even though he wrote satires on the culinary arts (Marshall, 1911). “He commended the innovation of awarding children toothsome dainties molded in the form of letters when they had mastered the alphabet and thus as it were made them swallow it” (Lampport, 1935).

Although this method had several names through the ages, in honor of Aunt Ludie I call it the Biscuit Method. I remember Aunt Ludie saying, “Why, some of them people in’ around criticizin’ teachers couldn’t teach a yard dog to eat a biscuit.” In England it became known as the Gingerbread Method and it was widely recommended in Europe as late as the 18th century. Huey (1909), Smith (2002), Lampport (1935), and all the rest of us love Matthew Prior’s poem:

To Master John the English Maid
A Horn Book gives of Ginger-bread:
And that the Child may learn the better,
As he can name, he eats the Letter;
Proceeding thus with Vast Delight,
He spells, and gnaws from Left to Right.

Speaking of Nila Banton Smith, I chose this topic because I had made the first moves toward writing a history of reading instruction. In the process I learned about Lampport’s 1935 dissertation in which he had already done most of what I thought I might do. Toward the end of my preparation for this presentation I found that Nila’s excellent book was coming out in a special edition with an updating chapter by P. David Pearson. So now I don’t have to write a history of the teaching of reading. By the way, the special edition of the Nila’s book has an excellent epilogue in which Norm Stahl helps younger readers understand the importance of the book and the context in which it was written.

By the time the German, Basedow, wrote his *Neuen werkzeug zum lesenlehren* in 1787 the Biscuit Method had been fully developed. I mention this book because I had to demonstrate a reading knowledge of German while in the doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin; and, after all these years, I wanted to make some use of the experience. Basedow was teutonically specific on the Biscuit Method stating, “No child needs to eat the letters for longer than four weeks” (Lampport, 1935).

In case you think that the Biscuit Method died out in the 1700’s consider today’s alphabet soup and alphabet cereal. Think also on the number of parents who bribe and reward their children with food for doing their homework or getting good grades. I can remember the 1960’s when we as teachers rotted all those teeth with M&Ms because the psychologists were telling us to reinforce learning with our conditioning techniques.

The Roman alphabet was their adaptation of the Greek alphabet. We do not know

when they first learned to use the Greek alphabet, but it was long before their conquest of Greece. Apparently they had picked it up from the Greek colonies in southern Italy or those on the islands off the southern coast.

Much of what we know of Ancient Rome's educational theory and practice we owe to the writing of the Spanish-Roman, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, generally known to us as Quintilian. In A.D. 68 Quintilian was granted a professorship, marking the first instance in which the government assumed any responsibility for public education.

The basis of education in Quintilian's time was *mos maiorum*, the way of our fathers. In other words, boys and girls were to be educated by observing and imitating their elders. From its earliest days of power Rome was a society based on warfare and slavery. With the coming of the emperors Roman society became a quagmire of corruption, intrigue, and violence. In this setting Quintilian and many other thinkers developed an almost pathetic faith in education as the remedy for society's ills (Smail, 1938). This is a phenomenon that we have with us today.

We might have expected a man of Quintilian's intellect and apparent goodwill to have had more to say than he does about the nature of the injustices, corruption, and violence in the world under the rule of Vespasian and Titus and especially under Domitian. Perhaps, as is sometimes the case today Quintilian did not always take the high road because he found himself much obliged by his professorship.

Quintilian begins by affirming the supreme importance of elementary education, the foundation upon which the whole superstructure must rest (Smail, 1938). Some of you in this room are still trying to make the same point 1934 years later. Why? Because, despite all the lip-service given to the concept, in practice we are still not placing the emphasis on elementary education.

And what kind of teacher would Quintilian have in an elementary school? The following quotation gives us some idea:

Would Philip King of Macedon have chosen that the first rudiments of letters should be imparted to his son Alexander by Aristotle the greatest philosopher of the day, or would the latter have undertaken the task, save in the belief that the first elements in our studies are best handled by the best teachers and that these elements have an important bearing on the final result? (Smail, 1938)

Although others at the time held that instruction should not begin until age seven, Quintilian said it could be started earlier if it had elements of play and if the teacher were not too exacting in his demands. Quintilian warned against too much rigor with young children lest the teacher cause the children to hate learning. He stated, "For just as narrow-necked jars spill a flood of liquid poured over them, whereas they fill up when it flows in gradually or even drop by drop, so we must observe carefully the capacity of youthful minds" (Smail, 1938). Now, see, right here the man is talking about immersion whether the whole language people know it or not. I have always maintained that in

immersion some will swim and some will drown. Being a renegade Methodist, I have never been sold on immersion anyway. I know one thing for sure; when I taught in public schools I had my share of narrow-necked jars.

Quintilian had some very specific suggestions for the teaching of reading, one of which was called tracing.

When the child begins to trace the outlines of the letters it will be useful to have them cut out on a board . . . so that his pen may be guided along them as if in furrows. Thus he will not go wrong as in writing on waxen tablets (for he will be confined within the edges on either side and will therefore be unable to deviate from his model), and by tracing definite outlines with great speed and frequency he will develop the proper muscles and will not require the helping hand of a teacher placed upon his own. (Smail, 1938)

Now, some of you can call it the Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic-Tactile Method of you want to, but you are still using that same old technique. And in severe cases, I think you are well-advised to do so.

Quintilian also suggested giving the child blocks to play with that had the letters carved or painted on them. The blocks could be thrown like dice, and the child was to identify the letter that came up. He could also set up the blocks in rows to spell words. Sounds to me a little like ABC blocks and some of the reading games we use today.

Quintilian and his contemporaries were sold on syllables. He said, “There is no short cut to the learning of syllables. They must all be learnt by heart; nor, as is frequently the case, should the more difficult be postponed till they are dealt with in writing words” (Smail, 1938). That ought to make even you Rudolph Fleschites in the audience happy. However, I would hasten to point out these were Romans, using the Roman’s language, Latin, and the Roman alphabet. They were not trying to read English which uses the Roman alphabet which is 20 letters short of the number needed to pronounce English. I am a great believer in phonics, but I am not a phonics fanatic. You will remember that Santayana said, “Fanaticism consists of redoubling your effort when you have forgotten you aim.” Our phonics fanatics of today would take us back to the way Dionysius of Halicarnassus was taught to read in 60 B.C. Phonics works well for those languages that use alphabets that were designed for or adapted to the language. However, English speakers did not significantly adapt the Roman alphabet. Hence, in those programs that over-rely on phonics the English-speaking child tries to spit, cough, grunt, and groan his way to literacy.

Quintilian also wrote, “The skilled teacher, when a pupil is entrusted to his care, will first of all seek to discover his ability and natural disposition” (Smail, 1938). Here is a man talking about diagnosis and individual differences nearly 2,000 years ago, and we are having teachers today using whole language as an excuse for having all the children doing the same thing at the same time. In another sense of the word Quintilian was out of step with his time, and to a lesser extent with ours.

As for corporal punishment, though it is a recognized practice and though Chrysippus does not object to it, I am altogether opposed to it, first because it is disgusting. . . In the next place, because a pupil whose mind so ill befits a free man's son as not to be corrected by reproof, will remain obdurate even in face of blows. . . and finally because such chastisement will be quite unnecessary if there is some one ever present to supervise the boy's studies with diligence. (Smail, 1938)

Quintilian said that in teaching reading one principle was fundamental, "There is, therefore, only one general principle which I would lay down here to enable my pupil to do all these things correctly, viz. let him *understand* what he is reading" (Smail, 1938).

In a day and age when home schooling was the rule among Romans, Quintilian did not support the practice. He felt that competition was good for children. When they were taught at home they were spoiled and self-centered. Private tutors caused apathy, conceit, and /or shyness. In the school setting they would meet with competition and face more of the realities of life. Everybody thinks that whatever produced him is the best of all possible worlds, and Quintilian was no exception. He wrote of his own school days.

Tests of progress were held from time to time, and to earn promotion was a great prize with us, whilst to be head of the class was by far the most coveted honor. The class order was not decided once and for all. Each month gave the vanquished a fresh opportunity to do battle. (Smail, 1938)

In the debate of private tutor versus the school teacher Quintilian said that the teacher found more inspiration with a larger audience. Throughout my teaching career, I found myself sufficiently inspired.

Apparently in none of the ancient cultures did people read silently. There is some evidence that they knew it could be done, but they did not do it. One of the reasons that few scholars took note of that fact is that the Ancient Greeks and Romans used words that could mean "listen" or "read" so interchangeably that translators often could not tell whether reading or listening was meant. Even when alone, individuals read aloud. Reading silently was viewed with considerable suspicion, as if one were trying to hide something. In view of the fact that so few people could read, perhaps it was considered selfish, or at least bad manners to read silently. Hendrickson (1929) says that among some Jews instructions were given to never read the sacred literature with the eyes alone. Even when no sound was to be made, the words should be formed with the lips.

To the ancients, "Silent reading . . . was not apparently unknown; but where it is alluded to, a special motivation or comment seems to be present to explain it as something anomalous" (Hendrickson, 1929). "Reading silently was not, therefore, impossible (though the degree of silence is still open to debate); but it not only was unusual, it was accounted an imperfect and defective method of reading" (Hendrickson, 1929).

The Ancient Romans had to deal with some pretty capricious gods and goddesses. Ovid has one of his characters say, "I read what you had written without a sound, lest my tongue unawares might swear by some god." (Hendrickson, 1929)

Romans in the Christian era were still reading aloud. St. Augustine seems obliged to explain the strange behavior of the venerable St. Ambrose when reading.

But when he read his eyes ran over the page and his heart searched out the meaning, but his voice and his tongue were at rest. Often when I was present - for I have seen him reading thus silently, never in fact otherwise. We would sit there in long silence (for who would venture to intrude upon him so intent upon his study?) and go our way. We hazarded conjectures as to his reasons for reading thus; and some thought that he wished to avoid the necessity of explaining obscurities of his text to a chance listener, or that he avoided thus the discussion of the difficult problems that would arise and prevent him from doing the amount of reading that he had planned in a given time. But the preservation of his voice, which easily became hoarse, may well have been the true reason for his silent reading. (Hendrickson, 1929)

Conclusion

I recognize that my title was overly ambitious and that I have dealt with precious little beyond the ancients. I assure you that I have looked fairly carefully at the history of reading instruction through the 19th Century, and the pattern continues. Let us quickly list a few generalizations that can draw from 5 - 6,000 years of teaching reading.

1. Teachers throughout the ages have used the some of the same techniques. They have used them because they are effective. They are effective because they are consonant with the nature of the written language or with human motivation.

2. The written form of language is incredibly resistant to change. Originally this resistance was based on beliefs that writing came from the gods. For the greater part of the time that writing has been in existence it was controlled by the priestly and upper classes who knew what the control of writing was the control of power. Today resistance to change in writing continues. We know, for example, that the Roman alphabet is inadequate for English, but we will not change it. Consider, if you will, your computer keyboard. It is as plain as a pikestaff that we could type twice as fast if the home keys were the vowels and a couple of the most commonly occurring consonants. Why are they a, s, d, f, j, k, l, semicolon? - because the keys on manual typewriters used to stick.

3. We don't always notice the obvious. It took about 3,000 years to take note of the fact that we could separate written words with a space. It took nearly 5,000 years to discover that we could teach children to read better if we used materials written for children. In English we didn't discover the question mark until 1587, and even now we put it on the wrong end of the sentence. Those and other examples make us wonder what

might be out there that we have not yet noticed.

4. We need to remember that the techniques, motives, and tools that the reformers and theoreticians were advocating through the ages were not in widespread use at the time, otherwise, they would not have been trying to promote them. And , today, many of you have been trying for years to get teachers and parents to employ your ideas about the teaching of reading.

5. Lastly, in any given time, most especially our own, whatever is being promoted is always in a new dress, and we tend to think it is something new and wonderful. Further, the promoters usually present it as if it were a panacea. We are the most advertised and propagandized generation in the history of reading education. Whenever you read or hear about some nine day's wonder in the field of reading stop and analyze its basic elements. I'll bet you find yourself saying, "Been there; done that; bought the t-shirt."

References

Buchanan, S. (1948). *The portable Plato*. New York: Penguin.

[BACK](#)

Fischer, S. R. (2001). *A history of reading*. London: Reaktion Books.

[BACK](#)

Hecker, N. M., Jerrolds, B. W., & Benton, S. E. (1981). The space test as a possible new informal reading placement test. In G. H. McNinch (Ed.), *Comprehension: Process and Product*. Hattiesburg, MS: American Reading Forum.

[BACK](#)

Hendrickson, G. L. (1929). Ancient reading. *Classical journal*.

[BACK](#)

Huey, E. B. (1909). *The psychology and pedagogy of reading*. New York: Macmillan.

[BACK](#)

Kramer, S. N. (1959). *History begins at Sumer*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

[BACK](#)

Kramer, S. N. (1963). *The Sumerians: Their history, culture, and character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[BACK](#)

Lampton, H. B. (1935). *A history of the teaching of beginning reading*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago), Chicago.

[BACK](#)

Manguel, A. (1996). *A history of reading*. New York: Penguin.

[BACK](#)

Marshall, J. (1911). *Horace's complete works*. New York: J. M. Dent.

Smail, W. M. (Trs.). (1938), *Quintilian on education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

[BACK](#)

Smith, N. B. (2002). *American reading instruction*. [Special Edition]. Newark, DL: International Reading Association.

[BACK](#)