Course description

This course explores the ways in which writing has been conceptualized in social anthropology, anthropological linguistics and anthropological archaeology. The overall theme is to demonstrate that there is no natural tendency for writing systems to ultimately develop into alphabetic scripts. A comparative study of various forms of graphic communication, encompassing both non-glottic and glottic sign systems, is undertaken to better understand the nature of pristine and contemporary scripts around the world and to consider alternative models to explain the origins, the spread, and the obsolescence of scripts. The study of diverse scribal traditions from archaeological and ethnographic perspectives will allow us to explore the relations between writing, language, cognition, literacy, power, and the production of social memory. The course is library intensive and students are expected to conduct original research. It also fosters teamwork by engaging students in a group project, separate from their individual research paper, aimed at designing themes for the script for a documentary on writing.

Learning goals

The aims of the course are for students to realize the significance of writing as a cultural practice, and the societal implications that such specialized knowledge and its underlying technologies entail. In additions, the course helps students develop their synthesizing reading skills, their critical thinking, visual perception and analytical approaches, and in furthering their writing skills by building an argument and supporting it with empirical evidence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aug F 25</td>
<td>Why writing?</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept F 2</td>
<td>Semiotics and Writing</td>
<td>Harris 1995: Parts 1 and 2; Ingold 2007; Harris 2000, chapters 1-3</td>
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<td>Sept T 6</td>
<td>Semasiography</td>
<td>Harris 2000: chapter 6; Salomon 2001; Boone 2004; Jackson 2013</td>
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<td>Sept T 13</td>
<td>Writing as visible speech:</td>
<td>Holenstein 1983; Coulmas 1989:37-54; Houston 2004a; Basso 1974</td>
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<td>Sept T 20</td>
<td>Cuneiform technologies of writing</td>
<td>Walker 1987</td>
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<td>Sept T 27</td>
<td>The art of writing in ancient China</td>
<td>Keightley 1996; Bagley 2004</td>
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<td>Sept F 30</td>
<td>Aegean scripts and the invention of alphabetic writing</td>
<td>Kober 1948; Nakassis 2010 (Chadwick 1958, optional)</td>
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<td>Oct F 7</td>
<td>Early phonetic scripts in Mesoamerica</td>
<td>Justeson 1986; Rodríguez Martínez et al 2006; Houston 2004b; Burns &amp; Kelker 2009</td>
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<td>Oct F 14</td>
<td>Screenfolds and Lienzos from Mesoamerica</td>
<td>Pohl and Byland 1990; Jansen 1988; Troike 1990; León Portilla 1992</td>
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Oct T 18 Writing and empire: The Aztec case
Film *Tlacuito*
Nicholson 1973; Dibble 1971; Boone 1996; Lacadena 2008

Oct F 21 (Film Breaking the Maya Code)
Stuart and Houston 1989

Oct F 28 Divine kings; divine scribes:
Social dimensions of the Maya scribal tradition
*Lecture by Charles Golden*
Lounsbury 1991; Houston 2000

Nov T 1 Origins of alphabetic writing
None

Nov F 4 The tyranny of the alphabet.
Ong 1986; Goody 2000; Harris 2000: chapters 4-5.

Nov T 8 Workshop: working with undeciphered scripts
Urcid 2001 Chapter 3; Moser 1983

Nov F 11 Workshop: working with undeciphered scripts
Chinchilla 2011

Nov T 15 Workshop: working with undeciphered scripts
None

Nov F 18 **Group project**
Film *Sign, Symbol, and Script: Origins of written Communication and the birth of the alphabet*
Martin 1994; Trigger 2004

Dec T 22 **Group project presentation**
None

Dec T 29 Script obsolescence
Houston, Baines, and Cooper 2003

Dec F 2 Writing, Power, and Social Resistance
Smith 1994; Silberman 2001; Driscoll 1988; Clement 2007

Dec T 6 Epilogue: A unilinear evolutionary model of writing: How useful is it?
Justeson and Stephens 1993; Harris 2000: chapters 7-9

Dec T 13 **Final paper due** no later than 5:00 pm

**Class Participation and Reading assignments**
Students are expected to attend and participate in class discussions. Throughout the semester, you will reflect critically on the readings and generate thoughtful questions about the material. Two or three pre-class **typed** questions covering the assigned readings are due at the start of each class. Your questions should reflect your comprehension of the readings and highlight salient points that you think will contribute to the discussion of the readings. Please identify your handouts with your name, and make sure to include the date and the bibliographic entry of the readings to which the questions belong. Participation is in large part graded based on your
printed submissions. Because participation is integral to the course, students who miss classes need to justify their absence at least 24 hours in advance and if necessary present relevant evidence. No more than two unexcused missed classes will be accepted; otherwise the final grade goes down half a letter for each additional missed class.

**Written and Oral Assignments**

- **Tuesday September 13:** submit a sentence in English written in rebus writing (5% of final grade).
- **Friday September 30:** A take-home midterm is due (20% of the final grade). The exam will involve writing one essay from two alternative questions aimed at fostering critical thinking by comparing and contrasting assumptions, statements, or theoretical issues discussed in class and based on the readings.
- **Tuesday October 11:** submit an outline of your course paper.
- **Tuesday November 15 through Tuesday November 22 (three classes):** are sessions devoted to a class project. The goal of the project is to develop themes for a script of a documentary on writing. Students work in groups and deliver in class a Power Point presentation. Attendance is obligatory so that the entire class, divided into groups, discusses and presents the themes for the documentary’s script (25% of the final grade).
- **Friday December 13:** Course paper is due no later than 5:00 pm. The final paper should have between 12-15 pages of text (excluding the bibliography). Illustrations, diagrams, maps, and visual examples of inscriptions are encouraged, but should be limited to 5 or 6 additional pages. The term paper contributes 40% of the final grade, with 5% of the grade subtracted each subsequent day if the paper is submitted after the deadline. Papers are not accepted after Saturday December 15 at 9am.

**Summary of grading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in class</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sentence in rebus</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term paper</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class project</td>
<td>25%</td>
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**Use of Laptops, tablets, and other devices**

You are welcomed to use a personal Laptop or tablet for note taking and researching. If a student is found using a device for purposes other than those related to the class, his or her privilege for using it will be immediately suspended for the rest of the semester. The use of mobile phones (calls and text messaging) is not allowed.
**Students with extra challenges**
If you are a student with a documented disability at Brandeis University and if you wish to request a reasonable accommodation for this class please see me immediately. Keep in mind that reasonable accommodations are not provided retroactively.

**Four-Credit Course (with three hours of class-time per week)**
Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, response to questions, preparation for discussions, writing of papers, preparation for exams, etc.).

**Course credit in LALS**
This course can count towards a major or minor in Latin American and Latino Studies if the student writes the research paper on any topic dealing with the intersection of writing and Latin America (past or present) or the Latin American diaspora in the USA.

**Academic integrity**
Academic integrity is central to the mission of educational excellence at Brandeis University. Each student is expected to be familiar with, and to follow, the University’s policies on academic integrity. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities (http://www.brandeis.edu/studentaffairs/srcs/rr/) for all policies and procedures. All policies related to academic integrity apply to in-class and take home projects, assignments, exams, and quizzes. Students may only collaborate on assignments with express permission. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university.

**Textbook (online access available through Brandeis OneSearch)**
Harris, Roy
2000 *Rethinking Writing*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. (Hard copy P211.H3515)

**Class readings in alphabetical order (posted on Latte)**
Bagley, Robert, W.

Baines, John

Basso, Keith
1974 The Ethnography of Writing. In *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, edited

Boone, H. Elizabeth and Walter D. Mignolo (editors)

Boone, H. Elizabeth


Bruhns, Karen, and Nancy Kelker
2009 Did the Olmec know how to write? Science vol. 315: 1365-1366.

Clement, Victoria

Chinchilla Mazariegos, Oswaldo

Coe, Michael


Coulmas, Florian

Dalby, David
De Francis, John  

Dibble, Charles E.  

Dixon, Judith  

Driscoll, Stephen  

Fossa, Lydia  

Goody, Jack.  

Harris, Roy  

Holenstein, Elmar  

Houston, Stephen  


Houston, Stephen, John Baines, and Jerrold Cooper  
2003  Last Writing: Script Obsolescence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica.
Ingold, Tim  

Jansen, Marteen  

Justeson, John  

Justeson, John, and L.D. Stephens  

Keightley, David  

Kober, Alice, E.  

Kubbler, George  

Langley, James C.  

León-Portilla, Miguel  

Lounsberry, Floyd  

Martin, Henri-Jean  
Moser, Christopher

Nakassis, Dimitri

Nelson, Jennifer, L.

Nicholson, Henry, B.

Ong, J. Walter

Pohl, John, and Bruce Byland

Quirke, S. and C. Andrews

Rodríguez Martínez et al.

Salomon, Frank

Sampson, Geoffrey  

Scancarelli, Janine  

Schmandt-Besserat, Denise  
1992  *Before Writing: From Counting to Cuneiform.* University of Texas Press, Austin.

Silberman, Neil Asher  

Smalley, William A., Chia Koa Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang  

Smith, Adam  

Smith, E. Mary  

Stuart, David and Stephen Houston  

Taube, Karl  

Trigger, Bruce, G.  

Troike, Nancy  
Urcid, Javier

Urton, Gary

Walker, C.B.F.

Additional readings of interest
Basso, Keith, H., and Ned Anderson

Chadwick, John

Coe, Michael
1999 Breaking the Maya Code. Thames and Hudson. (F1435.3 W75 C59)

Daniels, Peter, T. and William Bright (editors)

Englehardt, Joshua

Fisher, Steven, R.

Gaur, Albertine

Gelb, Ignace
Harbsmeier, Michael  

Lawler, Andrew  

Miller, Laura  
2007  Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago. (online resource through LOUIS)

Parpola, Asko  
1994  Deciphering the Indus Script. Cambridge University Press. (+PK119.5P37)

Pier, John  
1997  Roy Harris and writing without speech. High Beam Encyclopedia  
http://www.ecyclopedia.com

Piquette, Kathryn, E., and Ruth D. Whitehouse (editors)  

Pope, Maurice  

Postgate, Nicholas, Tao Wang, and Toby Wilkinson  

Robinson, Andrew  
1999  The Story of Writing. Thames and Hudson, London. (P211.R6)

Salomon, Frank, and Sabine Hyland  

Trolle Larsen, Mogens  

Visicato, Giuseppe  
2000  The power and the writing: the early scribes of Mesopotamia. CDL Press, Bethesda, Maryland. (DS69.9 V58)
Other Readings on Mesoamerican scripts
Berlo, Janet Catherine

Coe, Michael, and Justin Kerr

Cowgill, George

Houston, Stephen and David Stuart

Houston, Stephen, and Michael Coe

Justeson, John, and Terrence Kaufman
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0036-8075%2819930319%293%3A259%3C1703%3AADOEHW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G

Justeson, John and Terrence Kaufman
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0036-8075%2819970711%293%3A277%3C207%3AANDCIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6

Marcus, Joyce

Pohl, Mary E.D., Kevin Pope, and Christopher von Nagy
Stuart, E. George  
1993  The Carved Stela from La Mojarra, Veracruz, Mexico. Science 259: 1700-1701.  
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0036-8075%2819930319%293%3A259%3C1700%3ATCSFLM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M

Tavárez, David  

Terraciano, Kevin  

Urcid, Javier  
2005  Zapotec writing: knowledge, power, and memory in ancient Oaxaca.  
http://www.famsi.org/zapotecwriting/

Whittaker, Gordon  