

*Ian Colford*

---

---

## What Writing Means

*“What Writing Means” is an excerpt from Ian’s Writing in the Electronic Environment: Electronic Text and the Future of Creativity and Knowledge, published in 1996 as #59 of the Dalhousie University School of Library and Information Studies Occasional Paper Series. At our request, Ian kindly read this excerpt at the Henry Street launch on January 12, 1996. It is here reprinted by permission, and with our thanks.*

Humans are the only creatures on earth to have developed writing systems. If we were to look at history pragmatically, we could claim that writing as a technology emerged out of a perceived need, that is, to convey vital information in ways that simple orality did not allow. Every day of our lives we put writing to use in purely functional ways that make it possible for others to comprehend things that we already know. However, many hundreds of years ago the transcendent flexibility of language as a tool for conveying more than simple information was either discovered or recognized. In any event, someone, or perhaps many individuals over many years, came to understand that language could be used as a mode of personal expression, as a means of reaching inward rather than outward. Whether the need to express oneself found its realization in language, or whether language actually gave rise to that need, is hard to say now after the passage of centuries. All we can state for sure is that even after this discovery—even after people started writing their songs and poems—writing retained all its utilitarian functions. But, just as paint is used both as a chemical shield to

protect wood and other surfaces from wind, rain, and sun, and also more extravagantly as a window on the soul, writing gained an aesthetic dimension that made it of value to an entirely different set of practitioners.

Once we have written something down, it can remain there for others to see as a lasting record of our thoughts. But what also remains for others to see is the person, the self, the interior being, responsible for those words. Writing is a projection of the self, and creative writing is a projection of the private inner self. The words we use, every bit as much as the poems we write or the stories we tell, help to define who we are. This is because writing is about choice as much as anything else. The creative writer lives in the same world from which we all derive our experience. And the writer is subjected to the same barrage of sensations—verbal, aural, visual—that all of us face each day. However, through a process of selective paring down and imaginative transmutation, the writer is able to use these sensations as raw material for art. This is a highly subjective process. No two people will choose exactly the same words to describe a similar event or to evoke the same emotional response. The choice is an expression of the individual. And in this sense we can see that the words we use—as soon as we make the decision to write them down—reveal who we are because they are a reflection of a personally exclusive point of reference from which we alone view the world.

As Jay Bolter writes in *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*,

Writing in any form serves as both an extension and a reflection of the writer's mind. And each particular technology of writing . . . is a different form of projection, suggesting a somewhat different relationship between the written word and the mind. (207)

I would take Bolter's argument one step further and suggest that writing technologies behave as metaphors for the mind. Just as we store words in our memory, we store them on paper or on computer disk. The process of recall is much the same in each

case. We sift through our mind for a piece of stray text, a word, or a phrase, or we scrutinize indexes, or we leaf through papers, or we scroll through a document on a computer screen. Each of these storage mediums varies in its capacity and reliability. And I would suggest that the medium of least reliability and narrowest storage capacity is the mind. This explains in part why other storage mediums were developed in the first place.

Like other means of artistic or personal expression, writing marks the convergence of the spiritual and the corporeal. It is an attempt to render articulate that which is fundamentally unintelligible and unknowable. Our desire to translate experience into literature springs from a profound urge to get to the bottom of ourselves and the role we are meant to play on this earth. The imagination helps us along the way, yet this too is something we can never hope fully to comprehend. The only tangible evidence we see is that which drifts to the surface and finds its expression in language; the murkier depths remain hidden from view, though they are hinted at in what we write. This is why so many works of the imagination—not only verbal ones—are startling and disorienting, even to the individual responsible for their coming into existence. The imagination does not operate in a logical or even rational manner; its movements cannot be charted. It will shift abruptly, making unexpected connections and sometimes even formulating innovative or revolutionary ideas. Drawing that which is alien and unforeseen to the surface of consciousness is an essential function of the creative process . . .

---



---

IAN COLFORD received a Master's in English from Dalhousie University in 1982. His stories (which have been described as "harrowing," "deeply worrying," and "pretty grim") have appeared in *Event: The Douglas College Review*, *Grain*, and *The Gutter Voice: Dangerous Web Fiction*. Since 1995 he has been the editor of the *Pottersfield Portfolio*. He is currently at work on a novel that "portrays humanity at its worst."