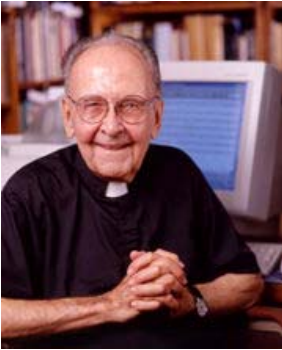


Walter Ong: Priest, Professor, Historian, Philosopher



- ❖ Walter J. Ong; 1912-2003
- ❖ B.A. from Rockhurst College in 1933
- ❖ M.A. from St. Louis University in 1941
- ❖ Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1955
- ❖ Joined St. Louis University as a professor of English and French in 1959
- ❖ Professor of Humanities in 1970
- ❖ Marshall McLuhan was his thesis supervisor.
- ❖ Well-known in the field of rhetoric for his work on Petrus Ramus and also for the subject matter of this book, how the shift from primary orality to literacy dramatically changes the way humans think.

“Heightening the oral-aural element in a culture does much more than merely de-emphasize vision. It subtly heightens the personalist element in a culture. For the plenary development of sound, the human voice, is a manifestation of the person. Even more than it is a manifestation of an understanding of objects, speech is a calling of one person to another, of an interior to an interior.” (Quoted in Rice 272)

Key Points:

- ❖ Writing is a technology of power
 - ❖ New technologies don't replace old ones; they integrate with them
 - ❖ Writing is a technology, albeit artificial, but artificiality is natural to humans
 - ❖ Breakthroughs between semiotic markings and human consciousness occurs with coding i.e. alphabet, punctuation, visible markings
 - ❖ Writing was magic, text was sacred. Writing required technology and skills
 - ❖ Oral = thought; Writing = making intangible thoughts concrete
 - ❖ We now assume that written records hold more force than oral; it was once believed that oral communication was interactive and thus superior because it contributed to memory
 - ❖ Written texts distort oral culture in the same way current technology threatens print culture
 - ❖ Spoken language always has some context; the written is stripped of that extra-textual context
 - ❖ Written text increases the distance between two parties
 - ❖ Orality is not precise; written language is more so
 - ❖ Writing allows greater introspection: i.e. written texts help a religion to “stick”
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Questions:

1. Socrates and Plato denounce writing as inhuman and manufactured. How would they feel about such technological advances such as manufactured body parts or hearing aids?
2. Is society making a circuitous journey from orality to print culture back to orality?
3. If writing “destroys memory,” how are we able to remember a good book?