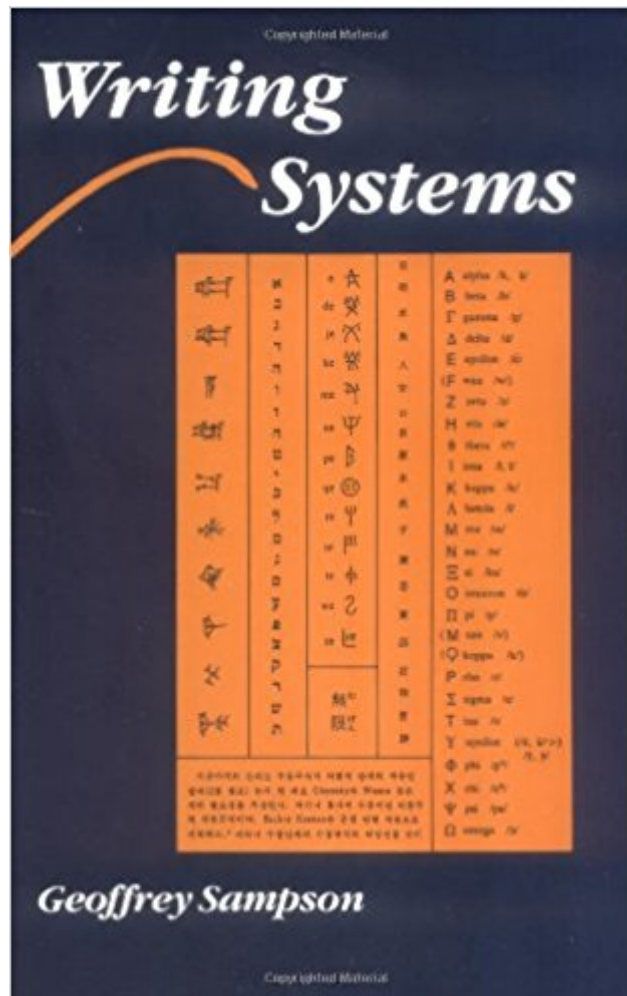


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# Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction



## Synopsis

To say that writing has as much claim as speech to be treated as language may strike the reader as a statement of the obvious. But the fact is that, although the tide is beginning to turn now, for most of the twentieth century linguistics has almost wholly ignored writing. It is not necessary to accept all the theories of the French critic Jacques Derrida in order to agree with him when he describes writing as "the wandering outcast of linguistics." This book is offered in the belief that written language is a form of language. As such, it deserves to be treated with the methods of modern, scientific linguistic study, which have been increasing our understanding of the spoken form of language for many decades.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In this engaging book, Sampson, treating the all-too-long ostracized 'black sheep' of linguistics, offers a refreshing and rigorous contemporary scientific examination of writing cum system. . . . Linguists on all fronts should welcome this text whose contents have undergone the same rigorous examination and discussion as any work on the core problems of language. This work renews an old field of study; and not for trained scientists only, for several arguments here are instructive to the novice." —J. Caflisch, *Choice* "This book is a readable, non-technical discussion of the nature of scripts as linguistically structured systems. It sensibly discusses the general issues concerning the relation of script to language, and concerning historical change in this relationship. . . . Sampson's research is unique among recent books in the extent to which it makes informed use of non-anecdotal psychological research on reading and spelling in addressing issues

of script typology and history. . . . This is a book that can be recommended as the best linguistic introduction to the study of writing systems now available." &#151;John Justeson, Language

This, years ago, was just about the first book I read on a linguistic topic, and it's still my favorite. It covers writing systems, using such various interesting cases as Korean, Chinese, and Modern Hebrew. I know of no single book that covers so well such a large (and important) aspect of linguistics as this book, nor does it do so intelligently. Plus it's fun. This book does use linguistic terminology, but is totally accessible to non-linguists. This book is great for reading on one's own, or could be useful as reading in a linguistics course. It should also be required reading for anyone interested in internationalization of software and any other kind of text processing that could involve non-Roman scripts.

This is an excellent, if somewhat densely packed, book about well-known writing systems. It explains not only how they formed, but how they are used and WHY they are used in the manner they are, and it explains why some languages may very well be better off using a writing system that is vastly different from our own. While it doesn't cover a large variety of scripts, which had been my original hope, the depth in which Sampson delves into with each script more than makes up for it. This book straddles a fine line: it is written in a reasonably accessible way, yet is so dense that it can be a bit daunting. This is not a book for someone dabbling in the understanding of writing systems; it is for someone who is actively trying to broaden their knowledge base and understanding. Don't let that discourage anyone from this book. If you truly want a reasonably concise, information-filled read on this subject, I 100% recommend this book. It is filled with citations and references to back up all claims and frequently discusses the pros and cons of any particular school of thought. This book does contain a few images, and I do mean a \*few\*. The book is focused more on discussion points than on displaying each writing system to its entirety, which actually works in its favor. However, it is more akin to a college lecture than a display of the systems. There also seems to be a second edition available now, *Writing Systems*, which I have not read and cannot attest to any changes between the two, but if nothing else it would have a solid base.

Great book for those interested in languages and linguistics. Love this book!

Learned a lot about analysing writing systems from a scientific and linguistic perspective. Highly

recommmend.

This book is the one that got me interested in writing systems as a part of linguistics. If you teach reading or language, the linguistic background this book provides will inform your professional knowledge far more than you can ever imagine. There are basically three kinds of writing systems in use in the world today: alphabetic, syllabic and logographic. Sampson gives sufficient historical background to help you understand how, where and with what languages these types developed. You will find out why the term 'ideograph' does not really accurately refer to any writing system in use. You'll learn how Egyptian hieroglyphs actually worked. And you'll be surprised to find out how reading Japanese is somewhat similar to reading ENGLISH! This book is in itself an education in linguistic background knowledge that non-linguists don't usually have, but don't worry, Sampson is such a clear writer and excellent teacher, that the non-specialist can usually follow the discussion without stopping. If you have an interest in language and languages for personal or professional reasons, this book will greatly enrich your life. A perfect companion volume is the more recent but equally wonderful, 'Story of Writing' by Andrew Robinson (who is book review editor for the Times Higher Education Supplement).

The most important sentence in this book is the one regarding Chinese on pages 164-165:

"(Women's liberators might point out the number of cases where words for unpleasant character-traits such as jealousy are written with the 'woman' signific [the word he uses for 'radical']; but the incidence of this sort of thing is no greater than that of comparable sexist assumptions in the spoken English language -- cf. bitch vs. dog, for instance.)" Sampson is trying to suggest that Chinese is not inferior to English (a funny thought since Chinese has been around for 4,000 years) by pointing out that they both denigrate women (also ironic as a justification). When one finds a pervasive theme running through two disparate cultures, it would seem that this might be an orienting factor for all language: women are denigrated because they are the underpinning of written language. Written language was created to control women and other commodities. P. 189: "The axiom of Western linguistics according to which a language is primarily a system of spoken forms, and writing is a subsidiary medium serving to render spoken language visible, is very difficult for an East Asian to accept." This Californian has a hard time accepting it as well. Linguistics is the study of SPOKEN language, yet written language is 5,000 years old. If the data is there, why would you not look at it? This refusal to consider the data of written language is a kind of denial. Page 24: In regards to date nomenclature, and the use of "B.C." and "A.D.", Sampson writes, "Those of us who

acknowledge Jesus as the Saviour have more substantial ways of demonstrating our allegiance."I almost stopped reading the book after this sentence, but I'm glad his inappropriate statement of faith didn't deter me as this book is extremely informative considering how few books tackle an overview of all writing systems. Keep in mind it was written in 1985, and our current ability to compare all written languages via the computer will allow us to see that fertility and procreation were the dominant concerns at the time that Chinese Seal Script, Sumerian cuneiform, and the Egyptian hieroglyphs were created. Humans are animals, and we are driven by animalistic needs. For more info: [...]

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