

LITERATURE & WRITING TECHNOLOGIES – Dr Frank Leahy – 2026-27

Module Description:

This module begins by formulating an understanding of writing itself as a technology – that is as a cultural practice requiring dedicated tools invented at a specific historical juncture (to be contrasted with spoken language, as a human universal). This will encourage us to examine literature as a product of various writing technologies – from manuscript, to print, to typewriting, to a burgeoning variety of electronic forms of text. How these modes of literary production can influence the form and content of literature will be considered, as will the strategies used by authors to represent these different varieties of text within literature itself. These technologies will be understood not only in contrast to, but in relationship with, oral linguistic practices (such as storytelling and poetry). We will consider the role of standardisation in literature (in particular changing standards and their relationship to technological developments), and how and why a variety of writers have chosen to step outside the usual written standard. We will consider regional varieties of language and their representation in literature (using Irish literature in English as a case-study to illustrate wider issues). We will consider the integration of images with text (from the marginalia in the manuscript tradition to contemporary book covers). We will discuss the semiotics of different forms of text, and how we can interpret literature in relation to the technology that produced it.

Schedule:

- 1. Introduction: Writing as Technology**
Amalia Gnanadesikan, *The Writing Revolution: from Cuneiform to the Internet*
- 2. The Oral Tradition**
The Seven Sisters (myth), Walter J. Ong, *Orality & Literacy* (excerpts)
- 3. The Manuscript Tradition: Image & Text**
Sir Orfeo (Auchinleck Manuscript)
- 4. Transitional Print**
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, & Selected Sonnets
- 5. Print & The Novel 1: Innovation**

William Baldwin, *Beware the Cat* (excerpts), Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (excerpts)

6. Print & The Novel 2: Standardisation

Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice* (excerpts) and *The History of England* (juvenalia)

7. Typography

Alex Balgiu & Mónica de la Torre, *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959-1979*

8. Punctuation

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (excerpts)

9. Spelling: Dialect in Literature

Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*

10. Digital Text: Email, Textspeak, Generative AI

Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World Where are You?*, Margaret Kelleher & James O'Sullivan, *Technology in Irish Literature & Culture* (excerpts)

11. Conclusion: the Future

Stephen Marche, "The Future of Writing is a Lot Like Hip-Hop" (*The Atlantic*)

Learning Aims:

The aim of this module is to afford students an awareness of how writing technologies influence the form and content of literature, an understanding of literature as a form of material culture, and to encourage them to analyse literature from these perspectives alongside or in conjunction with other critical lenses.

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this module, students will gain

- an understanding of writing as a technology (and, therefore, a fuller understanding of literature as a type of writing, and of language more generally)
- a deeper understanding of how literature differs from related oral forms such as storytelling, song, and (spoken) poetry, and therefore better understand their object of study as students of English literature
- an awareness of how different means of production – from handwriting, to print, to typewriting, to a variety of digital forms of text – influence the form and content of literature
- an ability to interpret visual elements of literary texts (such as book covers, typography, punctuation, and spelling)

- an understanding of how and why writers deploy a variety of styles within a single text
- an understanding of written standards, and how and why various writers choose to depart from the standard of their time

Assessment:

Component 1: Presentation (with slides uploaded) (30%)

Component 2: Essay 3500-4000 words (70%)