T-504
Reading Questions on Orality and Literacy
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Challenge adapted from the introduction: find ways in which “Homer and the
dictionary can illuminate each other.”

How are oral and literate mentalities shaped by the medium in which they
operate?
Suggestion: note some of the discoveries you make as you think about the
contrast between oral and literate mentalities. After you have written them
down in narrative form, try to make a table. How does the tabular
representation transform what you have observed? Do you loose anything?
Do you gain anything? [When you make a discovery, note down the page, so
that other students the class can locate it during class discussion.]

Chapter 1: The Orality of Language

1.1 Why did the literate world have to ‘awaken’ to the oral character of language?
1.2 Why might this awakening have happened at the time of electronic media?
1.3 Why is the expression ‘oral literature’ much like saying that a horse is a car
without wheels?

Chapter 2: The Modern discovery of primary oral cultures
2.1 In what ways did Milman Parry succeed in “undercutting this cultural [literate
Western] chauvinism so as to get into the ‘primitive’ Homeric poetry on this
poetry’s own terms, even when it ran counter to the receive view of what
poetry and poets ought to be”? Be specific.
2.2 Why was Plato ambiguous about writing?
2.3 How does Ong’s discussion relate to McLuhan’s aphorism “the medium is the
message”?

Chapter 3: Some psychodynamics of orality --every body should read this chapter
carefully in particular pages 37-57 where Ong lists 9 features of orally based thought
and expression.
3.1 Consider a magic spells are meant to be spoken, and only when spoken do they
manifest their power. A scientific formula, by contrast is meant to be read. Speaking the formula has no effect (except perhaps, for the movie goer, in The 39 Steps). The power of the formula, if any, flows from an understanding of its symbolic meaning, decontextualized from the situation in which it was first written. Can there be science in a primary oral culture (one in which writing does not exist)? Can there be mathematics?

3.2 Much written poetry is meant to be read out loud; no oral poetry, presumably, was intended to be written down. Are there differences, then, between oral and written poetry? Do they serve different purposes, follow different conventions, or is one simply the written form of the other?

3.3 What does Ong mean by an “additive,” rather than a “subordinative” style? Why is the former more common in oral culture and the latter in writing?

3.4 When you speak you think about what you are saying, when you read you think about what you are reading, and when you write you think about what you are writing. But the time scales are different in the three cases. What effect does this have on oral and written styles of discourse? What cognitive loads are placed on the orator, the reader, the writer, and what techniques have people developed to deal with such loads?

3.5 Do you agree with Ong that oral cultures tend to be more conservative than literate ones? Why, or why not? What is meant by Ong’s phrase “homeostasis of oral cultures” and what causes it?

3.6 Why do you think Luria’s illiterate peasants refused to categorize the hammer, hatchet, saw, and log (p. 51)? Are they stupid or what? If they are, then what is it about writing that makes people “smart”? If they aren’t, then why can’t they do this simple task? How could one test their “native intelligence”?

3.7 Do you buy the argument that oral cultures necessarily have one-dimensional heroes and villains (p. 69 ff.)? Is it really impossible to conceive of more subtle characterizations in the absence of writing?

3.8 What does Ong mean when he says “sight isolates, sound incorporates”?

THE REMAINDER OF THE BOOK IS HIGHLY RECOMMENDED BUT NOT REQUIRED
Chapter 4: Writing restructures consciousness

4.1 Here is the passage from Phaedrus that Ong refers to on page 79:

Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practise their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are not part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise but only appear wise.

4.2 To what extent do you agree with this statement? Do you believe the same argument applies to the use of calculators?

4.3 Writing is clearly more artificial than speaking — everyone, more or less, learns to speak without overt instruction, but one must go to school for many years to learn to write? In terms of this spectrum of artificiality, where would you place using a computer (for purposes other than writing, of course!)?

4.4 Why do you think it is that no one likes to read more than about one screenful of text on a computer? What are the likely implications of this fact for the future of writing and thinking?

4.5 With the supremacy of print over orality many aural techniques of emphasis (e.g., raising one’s voice) have diminished in importance. Can you think of any print techniques that replace them?

4.6 Prosody (the use of cadence and inflection to convey or clarify meaning) is an aural technique that also has visual analogs in the world of print. Can you name a few?

4.7 What is your experience around “writing and consciousness”? 

Chapter 5: Print, space, and closure

5.1 Ong points out that the alphabetized index blossomed with the introduction of print. Do you think the advent of the computer will make it obsolete?

5.2 A major effect of print on education was to remove its focus on rhetoric (Ong, page 130). Are there any subjects in today’s K-12 curriculum that may be made obsolete by the computer?

5.3 What does Ong mean by “closure” in the context of print? In what ways might the invention of the printing press have given rise to the concepts of “originality” and “creativity” in writing and thinking?

Chapter 6: Oral Memory, story line and characterization

What is the difference between an epic poem [with the structural metaphor of boxes within boxes], a detective story and a novel? Mention plot and character (round versus flat), complexity of motivation and so on. In what ways can these differences be explained in terms of orality and literacy?

Chapter 7: Some theorems

List the theorems and summarize the argument that Ong build around each of them.

Note that the first sentence in each of the subtitles seems to state the theorem. [Ah, the advantages of structure!] For example the theorem for ‘literary history’ seems to be: Literary history has just begun to exploit the possibilities which the orality-literacy studies open to it. ... as the oral elements of literary texts are identified. (For example the way fairy tales start with “Once upon a time...”) The rest of the section elaborates this idea. Pick out what strikes you as interesting.

In light of the electronic medium, can you provide supplementary insights/guesses? Can Homer illuminate T.V. or can T.V. illuminate Homer?

For reflection later on in the course: in what ways do computers illuminate book worm technologies?