NEWS LESSON

The Written Word Was Supposed to Make Language Grander. The Evidence Is Not So Sure



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What would you expect to be the biggest effect of writing on a language, and why?
2. How far does the way we speak shape the way we think, in your view?
3. Are there ideas about language that you have always taken for granted without testing them?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**intuition**	☐	A	the way words are put in order to make sentences
2	**syntax**	☐	B	placed inside something larger of the same kind
3	**rhetoric**	☐	C	a small amount of doubt when you hear a claim
4	**nested**	☐	D	the art of using words to persuade people
5	**pinch of salt**	☐	E	no final decision has been reached yet
6	**the jury is still out**	☐	F	following on from this, in a wider sense
7	**by extension**	☐	G	very big changes in how things are done
8	**revolutions**	☐	H	a feeling that something is true without proof

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A study of around 100,000 sentences in 30 languages, plus grammar from 59, found no universal link between writing and structural complexity. The finding is narrower than the headlines it invites.

1 There is an old and flattering story about writing. Because a writer can plan, revise and edit, written sentences are supposed to become longer, more layered and more sophisticated than the improvised sentences of speech. By extension, a language that acquires a writing system is thought to acquire complexity too. It is an intuition so familiar that few people stop to question it, and it has quietly shaped how languages with no written tradition have been judged.

2 Researchers at the University of Zurich and the University of Passau decided to put it to the test. In a paper published in PNAS in 2026, Carlo Meloni and colleagues, with Chundra Cathcart and Balthasar Bickel as senior authors, point out that earlier work supporting the idea drew on only a handful of languages, mostly European ones. The new study widens the lens considerably.

3 It carries out two analyses. The first compares around 100,000 spoken and written sentences in 30 languages, measuring how many clauses each contains and how deeply they are nested. The second looks at grammatical rules in 59 languages, asking whether grammars grew more complex after writing arrived. In short, one analysis concerns how people use language today and the other concerns how grammars have evolved.

4 Neither produced a universal pattern. Written sentences were not consistently more complex than spoken ones, and languages did not systematically add grammatical structure after adopting writing. The distinction matters: the authors report no evidence for a universal effect, which is a good deal weaker than claiming that writing never matters. Their measure is also narrow. Clause counts and nesting depth capture one aspect of syntax, not vocabulary, rhetoric or the many other ways in which writing can alter how language is used.

5 What, then, drives complexity? The researchers point towards social factors, arguing that how people build sentences may depend more on cultural preferences and ideas about how language should be used than on writing itself. Cathcart observes that Western society strongly associates complex sentences with social standing, whereas a global view shows that sentences can be hugely complex in any setting and for any speaker. The release adds that the finding invites us to reconsider how we judge languages without a written tradition.

6 The authors then reach beyond their data. Bickel suggests that if writing, among the largest revolutions in how information is shared, did not universally change sentence structure, then social media and artificial intelligence may not either. This is an inference, not a result, and it should be taken with a pinch of salt. The study concerns writing, not the internet, and the jury is still out on what new technology does to vocabulary, tone and habits of expression.

7 Two practical cautions follow. The information here comes through the authors' own institutions, and the paper's print issue is dated 24 November 2026, after online release, so readers should check the final version. More importantly, a null result across 30 and 59 languages deserves respect, but it is the start of an argument and not the end of one.

Sources: Phys.org, Writing changes language less than we think; NCCR Evolving Language, Writing changes language less than we think. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The authors would probably accept that a study of clause nesting cannot settle whether writing changes vocabulary. T F NG
2. The study's two analyses were designed to answer exactly the same question about modern speakers. T F NG
3. Cathcart's view is that complex sentences are rare among speakers outside Western societies. T F NG
4. The article treats Bickel's comparison with AI as less reliable than the study's own findings. T F NG
5. The final printed version of the paper differs from the online release. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

alter	capture	concerns	drew	flattering	hostile	layered	reluctant

1. The documentary _____ on interviews with only a handful of witnesses.
2. It is hard to _____ in one sentence what the whole film is about.
3. He asked the tailor to _____ the jacket because the sleeves were too long.
4. Calling the old system "efficient" was a _____ description of something that regularly failed.
5. The novel's _____ plot rewards a second reading, since each chapter adds a new meaning.
6. The new regulation _____ only large firms, so small shops are not affected.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Earlier findings were not _____ reproduced when other teams repeated the test. (CONSISTENT)
2. Few readers could miss the _____ of the argument, which anticipated every objection. (SOPHISTICATED)
3. Because the sample was so small, the results were _____, and the team ran the test again. (CONCLUDE)
4. A claim that no evidence could ever confirm is _____ in practice. (VERIFY)
5. One obvious _____ of the study is that its measure is narrow. (LIMIT)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Decide whether the gap needs a contrast, a summary, a condition or a result, and check how the clause that follows is built.

albeit **hence** **in short** **lest** **nonetheless** **provided** **whereas**

1. Some communities prize long, layered sentences in formal speech, _____ others value short, direct ones.
2. The sample is large, the methods are open and the results are stable. _____ , the study is hard to dismiss.
3. Clause counts capture only one aspect of syntax. _____ , a null result across so many languages deserves respect.
4. The conclusion holds _____ the sample is representative.
5. The measure is narrow; _____ , the authors stop short of claiming that writing never matters.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Why might social attitudes shape the way sentences are built more than technology does?
2. When researchers find no universal effect, what should that make us think and what should it not?
3. How might you judge whether worries about AI and language are exaggerated, given what this study can and cannot tell us?

9 Role-play: does writing make a language better?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the believer

You think a language with a long written history is more advanced. Give two reasons. Ask your partner why they disagree, and try to change their mind.

Student B · the sceptic

You read about a big study of 30 languages. It found no universal pattern. Explain what the researchers did and say why the old idea may be wrong. Be polite but firm.

Useful phrases

I've always thought that writing makes language more serious.

That's what many people believe, but the study didn't find that.

Could you give me an example?

I'm not convinced, because they only measured sentences.

That's a fair point, but it doesn't prove anything.

Let's agree to disagree.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you change your partner's mind, and what is one thing you both agree on?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 H · 2 A · 3 D · 4 B · 5 C · 6 E · 7 F · 8 G

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 F · 4 T · 5 NG

5 Vocabulary

1 drew · 2 capture · 3 alter · 4 flattering · 5 layered · 6 concerns

6 Word forms

1 consistently · 2 sophistication · 3 inconclusive · 4 unverifiable · 5 limitation

7 Language focus

1 whereas · 2 In short · 3 Nonetheless · 4 provided · 5 hence

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