NEWS LESSON

Does Writing Make Language More Complex?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Do you write differently from the way you speak? How?
2. Do you think writing makes people think more clearly? Why or why not?
3. Can you name a language that is mostly spoken and not written?

2 Key words

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

1	**complicated**	☐	A	a problem that you need to think about to solve
2	**journal**	☐	B	the ideas, habits and way of life of a group of people
3	**researchers**	☐	C	not simple, with many parts that are hard to understand
4	**pattern**	☐	D	people who study something to find new facts
5	**effect**	☐	E	a magazine where scientists publish their work
6	**culture**	☐	F	a change that something causes
7	**puzzle**	☐	G	something that happens again and again in the same way
8	**worry**	☐	H	to think about problems and feel afraid

3 Read

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

Many people think writing makes language more complicated. A big new study found no sign that this is true for all languages.

1 Most of us believe that writing makes language more serious and more complicated. When you write, you can stop, think and change your words before anyone reads them. So it seems natural that written sentences are more complex. On the face of it, that makes sense. Many people also think that a language with a long written history is more advanced than a language that is only spoken.

2 A team of researchers wanted to get to the bottom of this idea. They work at the University of Zurich and the University of Passau, and they published their study in 2026 in the journal PNAS. Earlier studies had looked at only a few languages, and most of those languages were European. So the team carried out a much bigger check.

3 First, they looked at about 100,000 sentences, both spoken and written, from 30 different languages. They counted how many clauses each sentence had. A clause is a group of words with its own verb. They also looked at how deeply the clauses were placed inside each other. Second, they studied the grammar of 59 languages. They wanted to know whether a language grew more grammar rules after people began to write it down.

4 The answer was no, at least not as a general rule. Written sentences were not always more complex than spoken ones, and languages did not all become more complex once they got a writing system. In other words, the study found no universal pattern.

5 Does this mean that writing never changes a language? No. The study looked at one thing only: how sentences are built. It did not look at words or style, and it does not say that writing has no effect on any single language. One of the researchers thinks that culture may be the missing piece of the puzzle. In Western societies, for example, long and complex sentences are often linked with a high social position. But sentences can be very complex in any language.

6 Many people worry that social media and AI will damage language. The researchers say that new technology does not have to change the way sentences are built. However, this is their own opinion, and the study did not test it.

7 The study also gives us something fascinating to think about. The researchers say it invites us to think again before we judge a language that has no written tradition.

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 study looked at about 100,000 sentences. T F NG
2. The researchers studied the grammar of 30 languages. T F NG
3. The study found that writing makes every language more complex. T F NG
4. The text says how long the study took. T F NG
5. Many people worry that social media and AI will change language. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

borrow	damage	fascinating	judge	opinion	technology	wealthy

1. Everyone has a right to their own _____ , even when other people disagree.
2. Too much sugar can _____ your teeth.
3. It is not fair to _____ a person before you know them.
4. The history of the alphabet is _____ , and I could read about it all day.
5. New _____ such as phones has changed the way we talk to each other.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. The researchers _____ their study in 2026. (PUBLISH)
2. The study _____ no universal pattern. (FIND)
3. The team _____ out a much bigger check. (CARRY)
4. They wanted to know if grammar changed after people _____ to write a language down. (BEGIN)
5. Written sentences _____ not always more complex than spoken ones. (BE)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Linking words join ideas. Some show a different idea, some give an example, some show order or a result.

although	because	for example	however	second	so	unless

1. Many people think writing makes language more complex. _____ , the new study found no sign of this.
2. Some tools change language. _____ , the mobile phone has changed the way we write messages.
3. First, they looked at sentences from 30 languages. _____ , they studied the grammar of 59 languages.
4. Writers can stop and think before anyone reads. _____ , written sentences seem more careful.
5. Written sentences can seem more careful _____ writers can stop and think.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

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

1. What did the researchers count in the sentences?
2. Why do some people think written language is more complex?
3. Do you worry that social media or AI is changing the way you use language? Why or why not?

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

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 opinion · 2 damage · 3 judge · 4 fascinating · 5 technology

6 Verb forms

1 published · 2 found · 3 carried · 4 began · 5 were

7 Language focus

1 However · 2 For example · 3 Second · 4 So · 5 because

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