Writing - Jeff Connor-Linton

✎ Which are more representational, cave paintings or hieroglyphics? Hieroglyphics or cuneiform? What are the costs and benefits of making a writing system more stylized (and less representational)?

✎ What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the three major writing systems (alphabets, syllabaries, and ideographic systems)?

✎ What are some of the benefits to a society of becoming literate? What social practices are lost when a society becomes literate?

✎ Imagine that you rule a country. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of using writing to communicate with your ministers, army, and subjects?

✎ Writing was relatively new in Greece when Plato was alive. In one of his Dialogues, Plato expressed concerns about the effects of writing on society. One concern was that a writer loses control of his ideas; he can't control who his readers will be, and he can't correct readers if they misunderstand his ideas. Can you think of cases where Plato's concerns have proved valid? What benefits of writing counterbalance these costs?

✎ The spellings of many English words violate the phonemic principle of a one-to-one relationship between letter and phoneme. What would be the costs and benefits of reforming English spelling? What choices would spelling reform require us to make?

✎ New technologies like email and text-messaging may affect writing and spelling. Save a number of email and text-messages (ask permission of your correspondents' permission!) and consider the following questions:
  ⌨ How does spelling in email and text-messages differ from 'traditional' spelling? Which kinds of writing systems do these new spellings represent? Are email spelling and text-message spelling the same? Why or why not?
  ⌨ How do sentences in email and text-messages differ from, say, sentences in a newspaper? Are emails and text-messages alike in their sentence structure?
  ⌨ What are the circumstances in which emails and text-messages are written and read? What are the purposes for which your emails and text-messages were produced? How do these circumstances and purposes differ from other genres of writing—like newspaper stories, editorials, or your own term papers?