

AUTOMATIC WRITING AND THE BOOK OF MORMON: AN UPDATE

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At a Church conference in 1831, Hyrum Smith invited his brother to explain how the Book of Mormon originated. Joseph declined, saying: “It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.”¹ His pat answer—which he repeated on several occasions—was simply that it came “by the gift and power of God.”²

Attributing the Book of Mormon’s origin to supernatural forces has worked well for Joseph Smith’s believers, then as well as now, but not so well for critics who seem certain natural abilities were responsible. For over 180 years, several secular theories have been advanced as explanations.³ The more popular hypotheses include plagiarism (of the Solomon Spaulding manuscript),⁴ collaboration (with Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, etc.),⁵

1. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 23.

2. “Journal, 1835–1836,” in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 89; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 5, Mar. 1, 1842, 707.

3. See Brian C. Hales, “Naturalistic Explanations of the Origin of the Book of Mormon: A Longitudinal Study,” *BYU Studies* 58, no. 3 (Spring 2019): forthcoming.

4. See Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painsville, Ohio: 1834), 290; Walter Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1978), 59; and Wayne L. Cowdrey, Howard A. Davis, and Arthur Vanick, “References,” *Spalding Research Associates*, Aug. 10, 2018, <http://www.solomonspalding.info>.

5. See William Owen, “Mormon Bible,” *Free Enquirer* [New York], Sept. 3, 1831, 364; Meredith Ray Sheets and Kendal Sheets, *The Book of Mormon: Book of Lies* (McLean, Va.: 1811 Press, 2012), 13–16.

mental illness (bipolar, dissociative, or narcissistic personality disorders),⁶ and Joseph's intellect (with help from the Bible, *View of the Hebrews*, parallelism, or his environment).⁷ Even today the topic remains controversial without general consensus.⁸

A fifth explanation attributes the Book of Mormon text to "automatic writing," also called "spirit writing," "trance writing," "channeling," "psychography," "abnormal writing," "direct writing," and "independent writing."⁹ In psychological terms, automatic writing is described as "ideomotor effect," "motor automatism," and automaticity.¹⁰

Understanding "Automatic Writing"

Psychiatrist Ian P. Stevenson, who served as the chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, explains: "The term 'automatic writing' is used to designate writing that is done without the writer being conscious of what he is writing. . . . Usually the writing proceeds rapidly, sometimes far more so than the subject's normal writing does."¹¹

Independent researcher Irving Litvag further writes: "One type of psychic activity, known as 'automatic writing,' began to attract attention through the activities of a group of mediums, mostly English, in the late nineteenth and

6. See I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1902), 70; William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), 25, 72, 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

7. Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *Millennial Harbinger*, Feb. 7, 1831, 93; Wesley Walters and Michael Marquardt, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 126.

8. See Anonymous, "Could Joseph Smith have written the Book of Mormon?," *MormonThink*, Aug. 27, 2017, <http://www.mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm>.

9. See Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no.1 (2006): 5.

10. Daniel M. Wegner, Betsy Sparrow, and Valerie A. Fuller, "Clever Hands: Uncontrolled Intelligence in Facilitated Communication," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 1 (2003): 6.

11. Ian Stevenson, "Some Comments on Automatic Writing," *Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research* 72 (Oct. 1978): 316–17.

early twentieth centuries. Automatic writing involves the reception and transcription of various types of communications in written form. The medium claims to have no control over the writing that is produced.”¹²

While the process is called automatic writing, it can produce words through speech or through other modes of communication: “The subject may speak what is in his mind, as occurs in ordinary cases of mental mediumship with oral utterances; or he may rest two or three fingers lightly on a pointer that moves around a board with letters printed on it,” commonly called a Ouija board.¹³ “Planchettes” may also be used, which are described as “a miniature table, usually shaped like a heart, less than eight inches long [with] two easy rolling wheels supported at one end, and a pencil fastened in a hole at the top.”¹⁴

In summary, through automatic writing, subjects can produce words using several different methodologies, but in every case the author is believed to be unconscious of the letters and sentences being created. Historically, multiple texts have been attributed to automatic writing (see Table 1).

Comparing the Book of Mormon with *The Sorry Tale*

Pearl Curran’s *The Sorry Tale* is most often compared to the Book of Mormon to support an automatic writing theory. A number of similarities can be identified.

The Book of Mormon Dictation

A brief review of the details of the Book of Mormon dictation show that Joseph spoke virtually all of the 269,320 words to scribes who recorded them with quill pens.¹⁵ He and the scribe worked with dictations of twenty

12. Irving Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows: The Strange Story of Patience Worth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 8.

13. Stevenson, “Some Comments on Automatic Writing,” 316–17.

14. Milbourne Christopher, *ESP, Seers and Psychics* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1970), 124.

15. On February 18, 2019, Book of Mormon scholar Stanford Carmack wrote: “The 1830 first edition has 6,852 full stops in 269,318 words . . . if we count the first instance of ‘me thought’ as two words (18, 41; the second is spelled as one word) and the

Publication	Year	Author	Birth Year	Education
<i>Great Gospel of John</i>	1851–1864	Jakob Lorber	1800	Trained to be the village teacher. Gifted in music.
<i>The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind</i>	1847	Andrew Jackson Davis	1826	Basic writing and arithmetic.
<i>Oahspe: A New Bible</i>	1880–1882	John Ballou Newbrough	1828	Fluent in several languages. Worked as a physician and dentist.
<i>Spirit-Identity</i>	1879	William Stainton Moses	1839	Educated at Exeter College, Oxford.
<i>The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ</i>	1908	Levi H. Dowling	1844	Graduated from medical school and worked as a physician.
<i>Clothed with the Sun</i>	1889	Anna Kingsford	1846	University of Paris. Medical Degree.
<i>From India to the Planet Mars</i>	1900	Catherine-Elise Müller	1861	Local schools to age 15.
<i>A Dweller on Two Planets</i>	1905	Frederick Spencer Oliver	1866	“Without any solid education.”
<i>The Impersonal Life</i>	1914	Joseph Sieber Benner	1872	Attended public schools.
[Multiple]	1911–1945	Edgar Cayce	1877	Cayce’s education stopped in the ninth grade because his family could not afford the costs involved.
<i>The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ</i>	1915–1917	Pearl Curran	1883	Schooling ended at age 13. Admitted to be a “mediocre student.”
<i>The Urantia Book</i>	1924	[Unidentified]		Unknown.
<i>The Scripts of Cleophas</i>	1928	Geraldine Cummins	1890	Trained in journalism and creative writing.
<i>The Seth Material</i>	1963–1984	Jane Roberts	1929	Attended public schools and Skidmore College.
<i>A Course in Miracles</i>	1965–1972	Helen Schucman	1909	Helen Schucman received a PhD in psychology.
<i>Conversations with God Book 1</i>	1995–2017	Neale Donald Walsch	1943	Informally studied comparative theology for many years.
<i>The Book of Mormon</i>	1830	Joseph Smith	1805	Frontier schooling.

Table 1

# Words	Source of Words	Comments	Pub.
5,500 pages	God through an “inner voice”	Jakob, who started writing at age 40, referred to himself as “God’s scribe.” Works were published posthumously.	<i>GGOJ</i>
340,000	Trance state	Prior to dictating, a “magnetizer” would magnetize him, cover his eyes, and await his entrance into a trance.	<i>TPON</i>
298,840	“Jehovih” “The Great Spirit”	Oahspe is made up of a series of related books discussing earth and heaven.	<i>O:ANB</i>
37,532	Channeling from the dead	Psychologist Théodore Flournoy wrote Moses was capable of creating the words of his books subconsciously.	<i>S-I</i>
84,940	Transcribed from the Akashic records	The Akashic records are reportedly encoded in a non-physical plane of existence.	<i>TAG</i>
89,670	Trance state	Anna claimed association with fairies as a child and had many channeled visions.	<i>CWTS</i>
122,000	Martians via trances while sleeping	“Hélène Smith” adopted name as a medium.	<i>FITTPM</i>
161,463	Phylos The Thibetan	Prophecies of airplanes in the future.	<i>ADOTP</i>
79,670	Directly from God	Author reported having his mind subsumed by a larger Being, acting co-creatively with God.	<i>TIL</i>
[multiple-short]	Trance state	Called “The Sleeping Prophet,” Cayce gave answers while in a trance.	<i>[Multiple]</i>
264,000	Deceased Patience Worth	Pearl Curran communicated via Ouija Board with a spirit named “Patience Worth” in a unique English dialect producing over 4,000,000 words.	<i>TST</i>
650,070	Celestial beings	Medium portrayed as not being in an ordinary trance, but unconscious of surroundings and communications. Described as a “clearing house for the coming and going of reported extra-planetary personalities.”	<i>TUB</i>
128,986	Spirit-guide “Astor”	Cummins described as a spiritualist medium, novelist and playwright, who produced many channeled writings.	<i>TSOC</i>
95,480	An energy personality who called himself “Seth”	Contact with spirit personality Seth produced messages in Roberts’ head.	<i>TSM</i>
413,230	Inner voice she identified as Jesus	“Scribed” by Schucman between 1965 and 1972 through a process of inner dictation.	<i>ACIM</i>
69,130	Panentheistic God	Walsch says his books are not channeled but affirms he can hear God talking to him, just as if God stood next to him.	<i>CWGI</i>
269,528	“Gift and power of God”	Some critics allege a direct parallel between the Book of Mormon dictation and automatic writing.	<i>TBOM</i>

Table 1, continued

to thirty words at a time.¹⁶ The scribe immediately read back the text to assure accuracy. The dictations proceeded linearly without stops to review previous pages or paragraphs. Joseph Smith often spelled out proper names when first encountered in the text. No books, manuscripts, or other documents were consulted during the dictation.¹⁷ After breaks, Joseph would start where he left off without reading back the previous portion.¹⁸ Of the nearly seven thousand sentences in the 1830 Book of Mormon, Joseph did not rearrange the sequence of a single one after dictation.¹⁹ No rewriting or content editing occurred; emendations were made, but the core messages and storylines were published without any significant changes.²⁰

Pearl Curran's The Sorry Tale

In 1913, thirty-year-old Pearl Curran visited a friend and after initially resisting, participated in a Ouija board experience. Within a year, Pearl's Ouija board sessions became common, and among the messages spelled out were communications from an entity identifying herself as a deceased

second instance of 'for/asmuch' as two words (111, 32; no hyphen; the first is spelled as one word), then we get 269,320 words." Comment following Brian C. Hales, "Curiously Unique: Joseph Smith as Author of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 31 (2019): 151–90, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/curiously-unique-joseph-smith-as-author-of-the-book-of-mormon>.

16. Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo: FARMS, 1997), 67–83.

17. David Whitmer quoted in *Chicago Times*, Oct. 14, 1881; Emma Hale Smith quoted in Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb, Feb. 14, 1879, Community of Christ Library-Archives; Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26, Oct. 1, 1879, 289–90.

18. See Emma Smith's comments in Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 (Oct. 1916): 454.

19. Brian C. Hales, "Why Joseph Smith's Dictation of the Book of Mormon Is Simply Jaw-Dropping," *LDS Living*, Nov. 10, 2018, <http://www.ldsliving.com/Why-Joseph-Smiths-Dictation-of-the-Book-of-Mormon-Is-Simply-Jaw-Dropping/s/89568>.

20. Royal Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 161–62. See also Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part One Grammatical Variation* (Provo: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2016), 11. See also Brian C. Hales, "Changing Critics' Criticisms of Book of Mormon Changes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 28 (2018): 49–64.

spirit named Patience Worth: “Many moons ago I lived. Again I come. Patience Worth my name.”²¹

During the next twenty-four years, Patience Worth communicated over four million words of dictation to Pearl Curran through her Ouija board and later without it. Included were “seven full-length books, thousands of poems ranging from a few lines in length to hundreds, uncounted numbers of epigrams and aphorisms, short stories, a few plays, and thousands of pages of witty trenchant conversations.”²²

In July 1915, Patience began communicating the text of a new book entitled *The Sorry Tale* (with Pearl Curran as medium), finishing it in February less than two years later. Set at the time of Christ, some have referred to it as a “fifth Gospel.”²³ Casper S. Yost described the process through which Curran dictated the text:

[Pearl Curran] sits down with the Ouija board as she might sit down to a typewriter, and the receipt of the communications begins with no more ceremony than a typist would observe. Mrs. Curran has had no experience in literary composition and has made no study of literature, ancient or modern. Nor, it may be added, has she made any study of the history, the religions, or the social customs of the period of this story, nor of the geography or topography of the regions in which it is laid. . . .

Some time was given to its transmission on two or three evenings of every week until its completion. In the early months she proceeded leisurely with the task, usually writing 300 to 1,000 words of the story in an evening, and, in addition, poems, parables, or didactic or humorous conversation, as the mood or the circumstances prompted. . . .

As *The Sorry Tale* progressed she gave more and more time to it, producing on many evenings from 2,500 to 3,500 words of the tale in a sitting of an hour and a half or two hours. In one evening 5,000 words were dictated, covering the account of the Crucifixion. At all times, however, it came with great rapidity, taxing the chirographic speed of Mr. Curran to the utmost to put it down in abbreviated longhand. . . .

21. Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows*, 15.

22. *Ibid.*, 2, 240.

23. Scott C. Dunn, “Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon,” *Sunstone* 10 (June 1985): 22.

From start to finish some 260 persons contributed in this way to the composition. . . . Each time the story was picked up at the point where work was stopped at the previous sitting, without a break in the continuity of the narrative, without the slightest hesitation, and without the necessity of a reference to the closing words of the last preceding instalment.²⁴

The book was published later that year, apparently with little or no editing. Concerning *A Sorry Tale*, a *New York Times* reviewer wrote: “The long and intricate tale is constructed with the precision and accuracy of a master hand. It is a wonderful, a beautiful, and a noble book, but it is not easy to read. . . . Its archaic language and its frequently indirect modes of expression make necessary constantly the closest attention.”²⁵ More recently BYU professor Richard L. Anderson wrote less favorably: “*The Sorry Tale* spins overdone human tragedy but fades out the divine tragedy of Christ’s atonement for sin. Its Jesus teaches an unstructured ‘kingdom of love’ but drops out the realities of sin and salvation, church and ordinances. Such oversimplified humanism does not match the Christ of the Gospels.”²⁶

Similarities Between the Book of Mormon and The Sorry Tale

Several parallels between the creation of *The Sorry Tale* and the Book of Mormon can be recognized. The books are of similar length and involve Christian themes. Each process was facilitated by a mystical instrument, a Ouija board for Pearl Curran and a seer stone for Joseph Smith.

The dictation speeds are also similar. While Curran spaced out her sessions, the number of words generated in her most productive day may have been equal to or greater than the average dictation given through Joseph Smith and recorded by Oliver Cowdery. A curious detail, common to both, is that after taking a break from dictating, scribes were never required to read back the previous portion before moving on. The lack of editing is another match.

24. Patience Worth, communicated through medium Mrs. John H. [Pearl] Curran, *The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ*, edited by Casper S. Yost (New York: Henry Holt, 1917), iii–iv.

25. “The Sorry Tale,” editorial, *New York Times*, July 8, 1917, 255.

26. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, edited by C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 62–63.

The Book of Mormon Dictation and Automatic Writing: Similarities

Table 1 and the origin of *The Sorry Tale* demonstrate several general parallels between books produced by automatic writing and the Book of Mormon dictation.

Automatic writing can produce texts as long as the Book of Mormon

Automatic writing can produce short prose in a single sitting, or as seen in Table 1 even book-length manuscripts compiled over multiple sessions that are much longer than the Book of Mormon.

Automatic writing can create complex books with complicated storylines

Among the books in Table 1 are several that parallel the Book of Mormon in apparent complexity.

Automatic writing texts do not employ standard composition methodology

Neither the Book of Mormon nor the other automatic writing books were composed through standard writing techniques that involve author researching, outlining, drafting, and/or revising. In some cases the precise methodology may be less clear, but sending a manuscript directly to the printer with little or no modification is most common.

None of the automatic writing authors were considered to have a genius level IQ

Table 1 lists the educational achievements for each author. Some are impressive, but most are ordinary and unremarkable. None of the authors otherwise distinguished themselves as intellectuals or demonstrated a genius-level IQ.

The Book of Mormon Dictation and Automatic Writing: Dissimilarities

Besides these similarities, a couple of dissimilarities can also be identified.

Joseph Smith's Alleged "Trance State"

Historically, authors describing the Book of Mormon translation are split on whether they believe Joseph Smith entered a trance state as he recited the words. Lawrence Foster, Harold Bloom, T. B. H. Stenhouse, I. Woodbridge Riley, and G. St. John Stott assume Joseph went into a trance when dictating. On the other hand, authors like Richard Van Wagoner and Richard Abanes stress that he did not.

Historically, multiple eyewitnesses describe Joseph Smith as looking in the hat and simply dictating.²⁷ None imply an altered state of consciousness to describe his appearance or behavior while looking into the hat.²⁸ One might argue that burying his face would obscure signs of a trance state, but any change in Joseph's voice quality or demeanor would probably have been mentioned by his sometimes skeptical observers.²⁹ In addition, the process of dictating involved the scribe reading back the previous sentences to ensure the accuracy of the manuscript before moving on.³⁰ Such interruptions seem inconsistent with trance state.

Use of a Seer Stone

A second dissimilarity involves the physical objects that are connected with the creation of the Book of Mormon.³¹ Seer stones or their near equivalent are not associated with any of the other automatic writing books listed in Table 1.

27. Martin Harris, quoted in "The Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon," *Millennial Star* 48, June 21, 1886, 389–90; David Whitmer, in *Kansas City Daily Journal*, June 5, 1881; Isaac Hale, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 264–65; Joseph Knight, "Reminiscences," 2–6, MS 3470, Church History Library.

28. See accounts in "Documenting the Translation Chronology," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, edited by John W. Welch (Provo: BYU Press, 2005), 118–213.

29. Besides followers Martin Harris, Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Samuel Smith, John Whitmer, Christian Whitmer, and David Whitmer, unbelievers Reuben Hale and Michael Morse are listed as witnessing the translation process.

30. Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 83.

31. See Jenny Champoux, "Sacred Stones and Fleshy Tablets: Litholatry and Mormonism," unpublished manuscript, 2018.

Supernatural Answers to: “Where Do All the Words Come From?”

Whether dealing with the Book of Mormon or the other automatic writing texts, it is helpful to ask, “Where do all the words come from?” The answers can be divided into supernatural and natural explanations. Table 1 identifies authors who universally attributed their words to supernatural origins. Several general categories of sources can be identified.

Deity

Communication with deity is commonly reported. It may be Jesus or a universal God, but the highest source of truth is often invoked directly or indirectly. Some automatic writing philosophies attempt to unify all theologies into one whole. Sometimes Christ may be mentioned or listed as the source of words, but his Christian roles as messiah and redeemer are usually diminished or ignored.

Deceased Persons

Reports of automatic writings coming “from deceased persons, or from unknown discarnate entities” are common.³² Professor C. D. Broad of Trinity College, Cambridge, wrote in 1965 that some “automatic scripts” suggest “rather strongly that certain human beings have survived the death of their physical bodies and have been able to communicate with certain others who are still in the flesh.”³³ Information from dead relatives is the most sought after, although random deceased spirits may show up like Patience Worth in Pearl Curran’s writings.

Ancient Records

Besides the Book of Mormon, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* is reported to be derived from an ancient source, the Akashic records, which

32. James Randi, *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural: Decidedly Skeptical Definitions of Alternate Realities* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), 21.

33. Charles D. Broad, foreword to *Swan on a Black Sea: A Study in Automatic Writing: The Cummins-Willett Scripts*, by Geraldine Cummins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), vii–viii.

“are supposed to contain data on everything that has ever happened, is happening, or ever will happen in the entire universe.”³⁴

Spirit Guides

Spirit guides or personalities serve as “a go-between with the ‘other world’” and communicate the messages recorded.³⁵

Trance States

Several of the reports simply list a “trance state” without professing a provenance of the words they speak beyond the implication that they originate outside of and ostensibly superior to the author.

Joseph Smith’s Explanation for the Sources of Automatic Writing

It is likely that Joseph Smith would have agreed with many of the claims of supernatural assistance affirmed by the automatic writing authors. In the arithmetic of his cosmology, such were not unexpected. Joseph taught that spiritual manifestations were real, but that “every Spirit or vision . . . is not of God.”³⁶

Besides originating from deity, Joseph identified another potential source as he cautioned that “there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world. And also Satan hath sought to deceive you, that he might overthrow you” (D&C 50:2–3). In 1839, Joseph cautioned: “Lying Spirits are going forth in the Earth.”³⁷

In 1829, Joseph Smith encountered Hiram Page, brother-in-law to David Whitmer, who was receiving revelations through his own seer stone and had influenced many of the Whitmers.³⁸ Early dissenter Ezra Booth wrote that Page “had written over considerable paper” of his revelations.³⁹ In response, Joseph

34. Randi, *An Encyclopedia of Claims*, 8.

35. *Ibid.*, 222.

36. Joseph Smith, sermon, Aug. 8, 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Companion, in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 12.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Newel Knight, autobiography and journal, 1846, Church History Library.

39. Ezra Booth quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 215–16.

prayed and dictated the following revelation: “And again, thou shalt take thy brother, Hiram Page, between him and thee alone, and tell him that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me and that Satan deceiveth him” (D&C 28:11). Hiram put away his seer stone at that moment, and though one of the Eight Witnesses, he eventually left the Church.⁴⁰

Within the context of Joseph Smith’s teachings, a fairly straightforward spiritual dichotomy is detected. God facilitated the dictation of the Book of Mormon. In contrast, automatic writings that contradict these things are from false spirits. This attitude represents a sort of revelatory elitism for Joseph Smith as he later warned: “A man must have the discerning of spirits, before he can drag into daylight this hellish influence and unfold it unto the world in all its soul destroying, diabolical, and horrid colors: for nothing is a greater injury to the children of men than to be under the influence of a false spirit, when they think they have the spirit of God.”⁴¹

Skeptics often group Joseph Smith’s dictations with those of other automatic writers as they discount all reports of extra-worldly connections. Clustering these authors together might seem to provide an explanation, but in reality, clustering is not explaining. To successfully refute the supernatural claims of automatic writings and the Book of Mormon, a plausible natural explanation is needed. Otherwise, the argument just reframes Joseph’s reports of the “gift and power of God” into a different, but still suprahuman, construct.

Where Do All the Words Come From? Natural Explanations

Numerous skeptics have approached automatic writers and mediums attempting to debunk their reports of mystical communications.⁴² Since automatic writing became popular in the early 1900s, most of the psychological studies were performed at that time.

40. See also the account of James Colin Brewster in Dan Vogel, “James Colin Brewster: The Boy Prophet Who Challenged Mormon Authority,” in *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History*, edited by Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 120–39.

41. Joseph Smith, ed., “Try the Spirit,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11, Apr. 1, 1842, 744.

42. Christopher, *ESP, Seers and Psychics*; Randi, *An Encyclopedia of Claims*; Walter Franklin Prince, *The Case of Patience Worth* (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1964).

The most popular natural explanation is that the words emerge from a portion of the automatic writer's unconscious. That is, a mechanism is employed to transfer control of the writing from the author's consciousness to nonconscious mental forces, and from there the words flow. An article in the March 1930 *Popular Science Monthly* explains, "The source of such composition is the spontaneous expression of a submerged fraction of a person's personality."⁴³

To summarize, explanations that the Book of Mormon was produced through automatic writing necessarily credit all of the words to Joseph Smith's unconscious mind. This leads to additional important inquiries.

How Does the Unconscious Take Control?

If the words emerge from an automatic writer's unconscious mind, what happens to mentally transfer supervision of speaking from conscious to unconscious control? Normally humans are very much aware of their surroundings and cannot switch to an unconscious mode voluntarily. Several descriptions of triggers exist, with significant overlap between them, explaining how mental control switches from conscious to unconscious during automatic writing.

Psychological Techniques Expose the Unconscious

Psychologists may deliberately attempt to probe the unconscious through therapeutic techniques. Psychotherapist J. H. van der Hoop explains that in addition to analyzing "dreams [and] visions," and inducing "hypnosis [and] trance states," another useful "means of enquiring into the contents of the unconscious mind was afforded by automatic writing."⁴⁴ Anita M. Muhl, author of *Automatic Writing*, further explicates: "The use of automatic writing in conjunction with psychoanalysis is invaluable in getting at unconscious processes quickly."⁴⁵ Researcher Ian Stevenson explains: "The altered state

43. Wesley R. Wells, "The Truth about Hypnotism," *Popular Science Monthly* (Mar. 1930): 163.

44. Johannes Hermanus van der Hoop, *Character and the Unconscious: A Critical Exposition of the Psychology of Freud and of Jung* (New York: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1923), 6, 59.

45. Anita M. Muhl, *Automatic Writing* (Dresden: Theodor Steinkopff, 1930), 96.

of consciousness that usually occurs before and during the act of automatic writing facilitates the emergence into consciousness of material that is ordinarily kept outside awareness [unconscious]. The condition is thus somewhat like that of dreaming and also like that of a hypnotic trance. . . . We should remember that our minds are stored—one could say stuffed—with much more information than we ordinarily need or ever become consciously aware of.”⁴⁶

While advocated by some health care providers, automatic writing has never enjoyed wide acceptance in medical settings and is seldom practiced today.

Dissociation Taps the Unconscious

A second way to transition out of consciousness to write automatically is described as entering a dissociated state, which is like a person with multiple personalities leaving the conscious self to enter into another identity.⁴⁷ In his 1998 book *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind*, plastic surgeon William D. Morain theorizes that Joseph Smith’s childhood knee operation was his “maiden voyage into ‘dissociation’” and that “there would be many more” during his lifetime.⁴⁸ Explaining that it “cannot be known how successful Joseph’s dissociation was in blotting out the pain,” Morain insists that “the fantasies arising through his dissociations” tormented Joseph for the rest of his life.⁴⁹ Ostensibly, the repressed pain also influenced his dictation of some of the storylines in the Book of Mormon.⁵⁰

According to the 2013 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*: “Dissociative disorders are characterized by a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control,

46. Stevenson, “Some Comments on Automatic Writing,” 317–18. See also Theodore Flournoy, *Spiritism and Psychology*, translated by Hereward Carrington (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1911), viii.

47. See Morain, *The Sword of Laban*, 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

48. Morain, *The Sword of Laban*, 25.

49. *Ibid.*, 25, 72. See also 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

50. *Ibid.*, 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

and behavior.”⁵¹ The resulting pathologies include multiple personalities, amnesia, depersonalization, and fugue (forgetting one’s own identity).⁵² Morain and others postulate that less severe manifestations of dissociation might have permitted Joseph Smith to access previously unconscious functionality and creative abilities.

Ann Taves, Automatic Writing, Hypnosis, and Dissociation

In her 2016 book *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*, Ann Taves, professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, examines Joseph Smith and the origin of the Book of Mormon. In a very complex discussion involving repeated references to consciousness, hypnosis and hypnotic states, automatic writing, and dissociation,⁵³ she acknowledges that Joseph’s dictation came as a “flow of words that seems to arise outside consciousness.”⁵⁴

Taves describes how the seer stone “triggered” or “cued” the equivalence of a “formal hypnotic induction” of Joseph Smith. From there he entered “an imaginative storytelling mode,” a “subjective experience of an altered state,” a “visual modality,” a “highly focused awareness,” or a “translating mode” that caused him to “dissociate” in some ways.⁵⁵

According to Taves, the resulting state enhanced Joseph’s “imaginative skills,” improved his ability to focus “on a target goal,” and “cued the suspension of [his] normal self-referential processing.”⁵⁶ Thereafter, he was able to

51. American Psychiatric Association, “Dissociative Disorders,” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm08>. See also Jerrold S. Maxmen and Nicholas G. Ward, *Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 311.

52. Dianne Hales and Robert E. Hales, *Caring for the Mind: The Comprehensive Guide to Mental Health* (New York: Bantam, 1995), 443–63.

53. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016). See “conscious” (252, 254, 256), “dissociate” (252, 254, 256, 261), “automatic writing” (256, 262), and hypnosis or hypnotic state (251, 253, 254, 256, 259, 264).

54. *Ibid.*, 256; see also 249–50.

55. *Ibid.*, 250, 252, 253, 255, 259.

56. *Ibid.*, 264, 258.

“dissociate control over the flow of words and automate the process so that it flowed quickly and smoothly. Indeed, dissociating the flow of words so that they did not seem to be [his] own meant that [he was] nonconsciously reflecting on them as [he] dictated.”⁵⁷ For Taves, the mental condition—triggered by the seer stone and controlled by nonconscious forces—enabled Joseph to “effortlessly” produce the Book of Mormon text.⁵⁸

Confidence in the Unconscious

Generally speaking, psychologists confidently attribute the origin of words arising from automatic writing to the unconscious of the author, sometimes even without evidence showing how the words originally got in there. Since almost all research on lengthy automatic writings occurred in the early twentieth century, psychological theories embraced generally today are traced to that era. For example, writing in 1906 after discussing an automatic writing narrative that contained specific details that were seemingly impossible for the writer to have known, Columbia University professor James H. Hyslop explained a psychological theory of automatic writing that is advocated by several authors who classify the Book of Mormon as a product of automatic writing:

We are, therefore, left to pure conjecture for the source of the subconscious ideas. We may suppose that it is the resurrection of some forgotten knowledge, or a dream fabrication associating disconnected names and incidents in a consistent whole. As for proof of this, there is none. . . .

The resourcefulness of subconscious mental actions is thus shown to be very great, and that little material knowledge is necessary for more or less perfect dramatization, and the believer in “spirits” will have to learn that he has first to exhaust the field of abnormal psychology before he can trust his judgement to accept any explanation of such phenomena but that of secondary personality [dissociation].⁵⁹

57. *Ibid.*, 257–58.

58. *Ibid.*, 258.

59. James H. Hyslop, “Apparent Subconscious Fabrication,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 1, no. 5 (1906): 208, 213.

Hyslop emphasizes, “The claims for the supernormal are summarily thrown out of court, and we are left with subconscious mental action of the subject as the one general source which cannot be doubted.”⁶⁰

The Book of Mormon as the Product of Joseph Smith’s Unconscious

To further investigate the possibility that the Book of Mormon emerged from Joseph Smith’s unconscious, I will examine four characteristics of the Book of Mormon production:

- The complexity of the dictated text (the Book of Mormon)
- The challenges associated with creative dictation
- Joseph Smith’s conscious abilities, which correlate to his unconscious abilities
- The documented capabilities of the unconscious mind (from scientific studies)

Quadrangulating these four data points provides a clearer assessment of the cognitive challenges associated with the Book of Mormon creation and the ability of automatic writing theories to explain them.

The Complexity of the Book of Mormon Text

The Book of Mormon storyline dictated by Joseph Smith is complex, mentioning 337 proper names with 188 being unique to the Book of Mormon.⁶¹ It references the activities of over 175 individuals and groups who existed in at least 125 different topographical locations.⁶² It describes more than 425 specific geographical movements among these characters.⁶³ The Book of Mormon also includes literary devices that would be memory-intensive

60. *Ibid.*, 213.

61. Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Book of Mormon Names,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:186.

62. See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo: FARMS), 217–326.

63. *Ibid.*

to construct and recite in real time, including 430 distinct chiasms, with over thirty being six-level or greater,⁶⁴ and over one thousand Hebrew literary elements.⁶⁵

How does the Book of Mormon's complexity compare to other books?⁶⁶ Modern literary experts can estimate the reading difficulty of a book using a device called the Lexile Framework for Reading, which "involves a scale for measuring both reading ability of an individual and the text complexity of materials he or she encounters."⁶⁷ The Lexile scale applies to grades 1–12.

For example, books used in the eleventh grade curriculum in the United State public schools in 2004 carried an average Lexile score of 1120, and for twelfth 1130.⁶⁸ The Book of Mormon Lexile score is 1150,⁶⁹ which correlates to the reading level of some sixth graders and most in the eleventh grade.⁷⁰ Other popular books with an 1150 Lexile score include

64. Modified from Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted According to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo: FARMS, 1992); James T. Duke, *The Literary Masterpiece Called The Book of Mormon* (Springville, Utah: CFI, 2004), 116.

65. Donald W. Parry, "Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities in the Book of Mormon," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo: FARMS, 2002), 156–89.

66. See Brian C. Hales, "Curiously Unique: Joseph Smith as Author of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 31 (2019): 151–90, available at <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/curiously-unique-joseph-smith-as-author-of-the-book-of-mormon>.

67. "Understanding Lexile® Measures," <https://lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/>.

68. See Gary L. Williamson, Heather Koons, Todd Sandvik, and Eleanor Sanford-Moore, "The Text Complexity Continuum in Grades 1–12," *Metametrics Research Brief*, Oct. 1, 2012.

69. The Lexile Framework for Reading, Publisher Report, containing the certified Lexile score for the text of the 1830 Book of Mormon was issued August 17, 2017, commissioned by Brian C. Hales for LDS Answers, Inc. Due to the lack of an ISBN number for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, the Lexile score is not included in the Lexile score database at <https://fab.lexile.com>.

70. See "Typical Lexile Reader Measures by Grade" chart, <https://lexile.com/educators/measuring-growth-with-lexile/lexile-measures-grade-equivalents/>.

Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (364,153 words), Melville's *Moby Dick* (206,052 words), and Dickens's *Great Expectations* (162,690 words).⁷¹

At nearly 270,000 words, the Book of Mormon is much longer than other religious texts, including the New Testament (138,020), the English translation of the Qur'an (77,701), and the Torah (just under 80,000). Yale University chair of history Daniel Walker Howe summarizes: "True or not, the Book of Mormon is a powerful epic written on a grand scale with a host of characters, a narrative of human struggle and conflict, of divine intervention, heroic good and atrocious evil, of prophecy, morality, and law. Its narrative structure is complex."⁷²

Challenges of Creative Dictation

The second data point involves creative dictation. This describes texts that are dictated and sent straight to the printer, like most automatic writings. It bears both similarities and differences to creative writing.

Modeling Creative Dictation

While it is possible that Joseph Smith's dictations came by reading a preexisting manuscript concealed in the hat, such a ruse would probably have been detected through the weeks of translation, and multiple documents affirm he used no outside resources.⁷³ Alternatively, Joseph might have memorized the roughly four to five thousand words each day from a concealed transcript, but no such transcript has come to light. Time for secret memorization sessions also seems to have been unavailable. David Whitmer recalled how the translation sessions proceeded: "It was

71. See <https://fab.lexile.com>.

72. Daniel Walker Howe, "What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848," *Oxford History of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

73. See David Whitmer interviews, *Chicago Times*, Oct. 17, 1881; cited in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 74–76; "St. Louis Republican (16 July 1884)," in Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews*, 139–40. See also Emma Smith quoted in Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb, Feb. 14, 1879, Community of Christ Library-Archives; Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26, Oct. 1, 1879, 289–90.

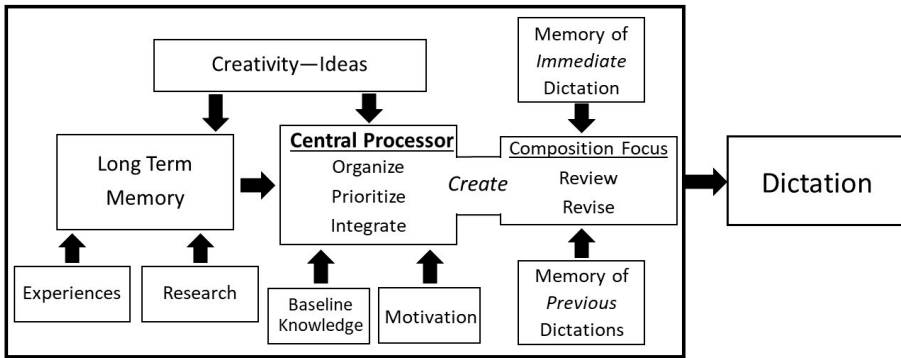


Figure 1. Creative Dictation Model

a laborious work for the weather was very warm, and the days were long and they worked from morning till night.”⁷⁴

Most observers assume Joseph Smith created all the words in real time. Historian Dan Vogel acknowledges: “Smith’s method of dictation did not allow for rewriting. It was a more-or-less stream-of-consciousness composition.”⁷⁵

It appears that a stream-of-consciousness form of dictation would require the mental convergence of several important elements: proper motivation, sufficient knowledge of the English language, an understanding of the rules of composition, a rich reservoir of personal experiences to draw from, research data regarding the topic, potent creativity, proficient memory, and above-normal intellectual processing power. Modeling these demonstrates possible individual interactions and importance (see Figure 1).

One of the heaviest burdens in creative dictation is carried by memory (long- and short-term). In creative writing, the author can consult printed matter in the forms of research materials and previous drafts in order to supplement natural memory. In creative dictation, the author’s memory is responsible for all recall and data storage. Long-term memory supplies facts, details, ideas, and outlines, as the text is generated on the fly. Short-term memory

74. James H. Hart, “About the Book of Mormon,” *Deseret Evening News*, Mar. 25, 1884.

75. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), xix.

provides constant vigilance over the spoken sentences to assure coherency with words recently dictated as well as text recited hours and days previously.

Psychologists Linda Flower and John R. Hayes explain how longer texts are more difficult to produce: “Each word in the growing text determines and limits the choices of what can come next.”⁷⁶ That is, the word choice of the 200,000th word cannot ignore the 20,000th word, the 2,000th word, or any that had been spoken up to that point, if accuracy and sentence integrity is to be maintained. Without the short-term memory’s perpetual attentiveness, inconsistencies will crop up in the manuscript and will expand as the text is enlarged.

Comparing Creative Dictation to Creative Writing

Creative writing has been investigated for many decades and shares many parallels with creative dictation.⁷⁷ Maxine Hairston and John J. Ruszkiewicz, authors of *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers*, explain, “Researchers who have studied how writers work do agree that there are discernible patterns among writers, and that, generally speaking, they seem to work through” specific stages, which can be distilled as follows: pre-writing, choosing a topic, creating an outline, researching pertinent documents; writing, putting words on the paper in the form of a completed first draft; and rewriting revisions, rewriting, content and copy editing, as well as typesetting.⁷⁸ Automatic writing theories explaining manuscripts mentioned above, including the Book of Mormon, assume that these steps were not needed unless they were performed within the confines of the nonconscious brain. According to this model, Joseph Smith was involuntarily writing and rewriting the text simultaneously.⁷⁹

76. Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” *College Composition and Communication* 32, no. 4 (Dec. 1981): 371.

77. See Falk S. Johnson, *How to Organize What You Write: A New Look at an Old Problem* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1; Lynn Quitman Troyka, *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 13; Jean Wyrick, *Steps to Writing Well*, 12th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 91–92.

78. Maxine Hairston and John J. Ruszkiewicz, *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 5–6.

79. In a private communication, Dan Vogel explained that Joseph “worked it out in his mind and therefore had done the editing before dictating rather than after” (Dan Vogel to Brian Hales, Facebook message, Dec. 22, 2015, used with permission).

Part of the reason creative dictation is poorly understood both by researchers and by lay people today is because it is so rare. Practically speaking, virtually no scholars have elected to dictate long manuscripts off the top of their heads and then send them directly to the printer. Even the most intellectual geniuses today pre-write, write, and rewrite their manuscripts prior to completion.⁸⁰

Joseph Smith's Conscious Intellectual Skill Set

The third component involves Joseph Smith's conscious composition abilities because they were closely tied to his unconscious capabilities (see below). Ann Taves writes that at times he engaged in "imaginative storytelling" and could recount "narratives of great vividness."⁸¹ She also quotes a questionable source that says Joseph "acquired knowledge very rapidly and learned with special facility all the tricks of the scoundrels who worked in his company. He soon outgrew his teachers."⁸²

The historical record describes activities showing Joseph Smith was intelligent and inquisitive.

- Orasmus Turner recalled that as a youth Joseph helped "solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics, in our juvenile debating club."⁸³
- Lucy Mack Smith recalled that in 1823 "Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined."⁸⁴

80. See Stephen Hawking, *My Brief History* (New York: Bantam Books, 2013), 93–94; Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory and other Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956), 195.

81. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 252–53.

82. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 253. Instead of quoting the original source, Taves lists "quote in Persuette, 2000, 15," which is David Persuette, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 15. There Persuette documents the source as Wilhelm Wyl (von Wymetal), *Mormon Portraits* (Salt Lake City: [Tribune Printing and Publishing Co.], 1886), 25. Wyl's book is highly biased and includes some claims that are over-the-top unbelievable (e.g., 65, 68, 70, 90, 91, etc.), which undermines its credibility to some degree.

83. Orasmus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement* (Rochester, N.Y.: William Alling, 1851), 214.

84. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 85. Lucy reports these activities occurred after September 22, 1823.

- Pomeroy Tucker portrayed Joseph as an active reader of “dime novels.”⁸⁵
- Joseph reportedly said, “I can take my Bible, and go into the woods, and learn more in two hours, than you can learn at meetings in two years, if you should go all the time.”⁸⁶
- When learning Hebrew in 1835, Joseph was second only to Orson Pratt in the ability to memorize and learn the language.⁸⁷

It is probable that Joseph Smith’s competency in reading and writing, even as a twenty-three-year-old farmer, was above average. However, no available recollections describe him as exhibiting extraordinary intellectual capabilities by 1829. It seems a majority of the printed recollections described him as ignorant or illiterate.⁸⁸

Isaac Hale recounted in 1834 that “I first became acquainted with Joseph Smith Jr. in November, 1825. . . . His appearance at this time was that of a careless young man—not very well educated.”⁸⁹ Similarly, John H. Gilbert, who typeset the Book of Mormon in 1830, remembered: “We had a great deal of trouble with it [the Book of Mormon manuscript]. It was not punctuated at all. They [Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery] did not know anything about punctuation.” When asked: “Was he [Joseph Smith] educated?” he responded: “Oh, not at all then.”⁹⁰

85. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867), 13–14.

86. Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 90.

87. Matthew J. Grey, “‘The Word of the Lord in the Original’: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo: Religious Study Center, 2015), 266.

88. See George Peck, ed., “Mormonism and the Mormons,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* 25 (1843): 112; Orlando Saunders, William Van Camp, and John H. Gilbert, quoted in “The Early Days of Mormonism,” *Lippincott’s Magazine* 26 (Aug. 1880): 198–206, 211; John W. Barber and Henry Howe, *Historical Collection of the State of New York* (New York: S. Tuttle, 1841), 580–81. Jonathan Hadley, “Golden Bible,” *Palmyra Freeman*, Aug. 11, 1829; Reuben P. Harmon, statement, in *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1 (Apr. 1888): 1.

89. Isaac Hale quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 262–63.

90. John H. Gilbert, quoted in “The Hill Cumorah and the Book of Mormon,” *Saints’ Herald* 28, June 1, 1881, 165–66.

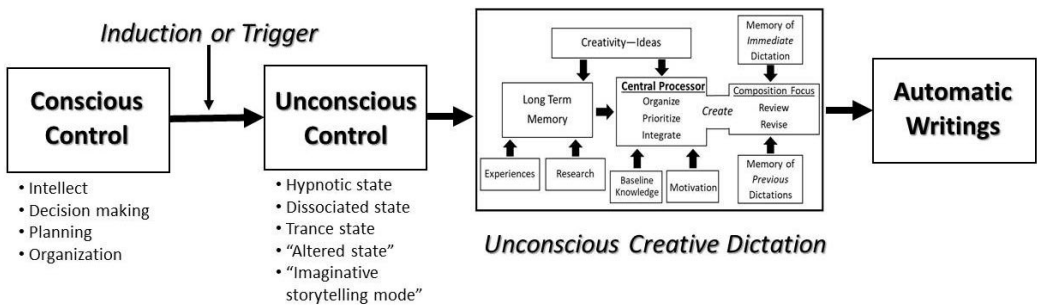


Figure 2. Model of Triggered Unconscious Creative Dictation

Cognitive Abilities of the Unconscious

After reviewing the first three components—the Book of Mormon complexity, the challenges of creative dictation, and Joseph’s qualifications while conscious—the fourth element asks and tries to answer the question: “What capabilities would have been enhanced by switching from an awake Joseph Smith to an unconscious or hypnotized version?”⁹¹

Hypnosis and Unconscious Changes

As discussed above, hypnosis may be used to transfer mental control to the unconscious. Graham F. Wagstaff, professor of cognitive social psychology at the University of Liverpool, recognizes that “[t]he traditional view of the hypnotized person as someone in a state of automatism, possessed of transcendent powers, is still popular among the general public.” But is this “traditional view” accurate? Wagstaff continues: “However, it is now the opinion of most researchers that hypnosis does not induce a state of automatism, and caution should be exercised when employing hypnotic procedures to facilitate memory.”⁹²

91. It is assumed that the unconscious can be accessed through both hypnosis and dissociation although their relationship is controversial and largely dependent on the specific definitions of the terms employed by the authors. See Irving Kirsch and Steven Jay Lynn, “Dissociation Theories of Hypnosis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 123, no. 1 (1998): 112; Jonathan M. Cleveland, Brandon M. Korman, and Steven N. Gold, “Are Hypnosis and Dissociation Related? New Evidence for a Connection,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 63, no. 2 (2015): 207.

92. Graham F. Wagstaff, “Hypnosis and the Law: Examining the Stereotypes,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 35, no. 10 (Oct. 2008): 1277.

Also, in a clinical setting, hypnosis has been touted as providing important health benefits. “The effectiveness of incorporating hypnosis in clinical interventions has gained positive empirical support in pain control, anxiety, depression, trauma, weight loss, and eating disorders among other areas.”⁹³

So while the traditional view of the hypnotic state may describe superior abilities as compared to a conscious state, are such assumptions supported by scientific studies? Does hypnosis or an unconscious state improve a person’s cognitive capabilities, as touted by some proponents? Could hypnosis (or a similar mental state) have endowed Joseph Smith with the capacity to create the Book of Mormon through creative dictation?

General Studies

As the field of psychology embraced the concept of hypnosis in the early twentieth century, researchers quickly explored the capacities of individuals in a hypnotic state. The earliest studies by Paul C. Young in the 1920s concluded, “There is no noticeable difference between the normal and hypnotic states in the ability of normal persons in the fields of sensation, perception, finer discriminations, present memory (learning and retention), or physical work which does not involve fatigue.”⁹⁴ Over a decade later, Hans. J. Eysenck reported up to 77 percent improvement in some tasks under hypnosis as compared to the conscious state, but he cautioned, “There is roughly an inverse relation between the difficulty of a test, and improvement in it under hypnosis; the easier and more mechanical the test, the greater the improvement.”⁹⁵ These results are still accepted today.⁹⁶

93. Tobias Egner, Graham Jamieson, and John Gruzelier, “Hypnosis Decouples Cognitive Control from Conflict Monitoring Processes of the Frontal Lobe,” *NeuroImage* 27 (2005): 969.

94. Paul Campbell Young, “An Experimental Study of Mental and Physical Functions in the Normal and Hypnotic States,” *American Journal of Psychology* 36, no. 2 (Apr. 1925): 231. See also Paul Campbell Young, “An Experimental Study of Mental and Physical Functions in the Normal and Hypnotic States: Additional Results,” *American Journal of Psychology* 37, no. 3 (July 1926): 345–56.

95. Hans J. Eysenck, “An Experimental Study of the Improvement of Mental and Physical Functions of the Hypnotic State,” *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 18, nos. 3–4 (Feb. 1941): 308, 315.

96. See for example, John F. Kihlstrom, “The Domain of Hypnosis, Revisited,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hypnosis: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Oxford

Unconscious Memory

As discussed above, one of the greatest mental burdens of creative dictation involves both long- and short-term memory. Scott C. Dunn notes: “Automatic writers [have] produced detailed information from books that they have read but in some cases cannot remember reading.” He then explains that Joseph’s memory, when in the automatic writing mode, was sufficient: “It should not be surprising, therefore, to find Smith’s scriptural productions repeating things he may have heard or overheard in conversation, camp meetings, or other settings without any concerted study of the issues.”⁹⁷ Ann Taves too posits that Joseph rapidly “absorbed information” and “acquired knowledge” that was stored in his memory to be later regurgitated when he entered his “imaginative storytelling mode.”⁹⁸

Despite these opinions, multiple psychological studies demonstrate that entering a hypnotic state does not enhance overall memory recall.⁹⁹ Cognitive social psychologist and prolific author John F. Kihlstrom explains, “Hypnosis appears to be incapable of enhancing memory [but] hypnotic procedures can impair memory.”¹⁰⁰ “Enhanced memory, or hypermnesia, has also been claimed

University Press, 2008), 22, 52; Daniel Druckman and Robert A. Bjork, *Learning, Remembering, Believing: Enhancing Human Performance* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1994), 223, 354.

97. Scott C. Dunn, “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 34–35.

98. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 252–53.

99. Joseph Barber, “Hypnosis and Memory: A Hazardous Connection,” *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 19, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 311, 313; John F. Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis, Memory and Amnesia,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 352, no. 1362 (Dec. 1997): 1727–32; Steven Jay Lynn and Irving I. Kirsch, “Alleged Alien Abductions: False Memories, Hypnosis, and Fantasy Proneness,” *Psychological Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1996): 151–55; Peter W. Sheehan, “Memory and Hypnosis—General Considerations,” in *International Handbook of Clinical Hypnosis*, edited by Graham D. Burrows, Robb O. Stanely, and Peter B. Bloom (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 52; Graham F. Wagstaff, et al., “Facilitating Memory With Hypnosis, Focused Meditation, and Eye Closure,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 52, no. 4 (2004): 434.

100. John F. Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis, Memory, and Amnesia,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 352, no. 1362 (Dec. 1997): 1731.

for hypnosis . . . ; however, empirical evidence for hypnotic hypermnesia has never been particularly convincing.”¹⁰¹ Jean Holroyd, of UCLA’s Department of Psychiatry, explains: “There is some evidence that being hypnotized may actually interfere with reasoning and memory.”¹⁰² Former president of the Society of Psychological Hypnosis Marty Sapp agrees: “There is no experimental evidence to support the use of hypnosis to refresh memory.”¹⁰³ While anecdotal reports exist of individuals recalling obscure details from the past, virtually all studies show that the process is not reliable or consistent.

Kevin M. McConkey and Sachiko Kinoshita examined “The Influence of Hypnosis on Memory After One Day and One Week” and concluded, “The number of incorrect items increased across the test periods . . . for all subjects. The use of hypnotic procedures, however, did not influence the number of total incorrect items” either positively or negatively.¹⁰⁴ This supports the idea that, as Joseph Smith was dictating his 200,000th word, his unconscious memory would have been no more accurate than his conscious memory recalling the 150,000th word or 100,000th word dictated weeks earlier.

Many other researchers could be cited to show that hypnosis or dissociation does not reliably enhance the recall of previously learned information, whether actively or passively absorbed.

Unconscious Cognitive Function

A second substantial mental responsibility of creative dictation involves cognitive function—the act of creating coherent sentences one right after the other in real time. Ann Taves postulates that in his “altered state,” Joseph Smith’s “level of organization of the nonvolitional [nonconscious] story . . .

101. John F. Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis and Cognition,” *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* 1, no. 2 (2014): 142.

102. Jean Holroyd, “Hypnosis as a Methodology in Psychological Research,” in *Contemporary Hypnosis Research*, edited by Erika Fromm and Michael R. Nash (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 219.

103. Marty Sapp, *Hypnosis, Dissociation, and Absorption: Theories, Assessment, and Treatment* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 2015), 135.

104. Kevin M. McConkey and Sachiko Kinoshita, “The Influence of Hypnosis on Memory After One Day and One Week,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 97, no. 1 (1988): 50, 52.

exceeds what [he] would have been able to do volitionally [consciously].”¹⁰⁵ Dunn writes that the human mind has the “ability to think and plan without conscious awareness of these processes” and that “the presence of one’s own language or memories in a text by no means indicates that it was produced through extensive mental effort or conscious planning.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, by shifting to unconscious control, Joseph recruited nascent creative talents enabling the recitation.

However, psychological studies do not appear to support these theories. John A. Bargh and Ezequiel Morsella of Yale University conclude that, “Although concept activation and primitive associative learning could occur unconsciously, anything complex requiring flexible responding, integration of stimuli, or higher mental processes could not.”¹⁰⁷ Harvard professor Anthony G. Greenwald concurs: “Unconscious cognition has been found to be severely limited in its analytic capability.”¹⁰⁸ And a 2005 study demonstrates that hypnotized individuals are not in “a state of highly focused attention.”¹⁰⁹

Peter Farvolden and Erik Z. Woody observe that, “Asking hypnotized participants to complete a fairly extensive battery of demanding cognitive tasks, such as the memory tasks [word recall] . . . is simply incompatible with maintaining a ‘state’ of hypnosis.”¹¹⁰ Peter W. Sheehan in his article “Memory and Hypnosis” explicates: “Hypnotized people do not in general critically analyze incoming detailed information.”¹¹¹ In fact, as Stanford

105. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 258.

106. Dunn, “Automaticity,” 31–32.

107. John A. Bargh and Ezequiel Morsella, “The Unconscious Mind,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008): 73–79.

108. Anthony G. Greenwald, “New Look 3: Unconscious Cognition Reclaimed,” *American Psychologist* 47, no. 6 (June 1992): 775.

109. Tobias Egner, Graham Jamieson, and John Gruzelier, “Hypnosis Decouples Cognitive Control from Conflict Monitoring Processes of the Frontal Lobe,” *NeuroImage* 27 (2005): 975.

110. Peter Farvolden and Erik Z. Woody, “Hypnosis, Memory and Frontal Executive Functioning,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 52, no. 1 (2004): 19.

111. Sheehan, “Memory and Hypnosis,” 58.

professor Ernest R. Hilgard explains, the mental reasoning under hypnosis may “distort” reality: “Reality distortions of all kinds, including acceptance of falsified memories, changes in one’s own personality, modification of the rate at which time seems to pass, doubling of persons in the room, absence of heads or feet of people observed to be walking around the room, inappropriate naming, presence of hallucinated animals that talk, and all manner of other unrealistic distortions can be accepted without criticism within the hypnotic state.”¹¹² As another study concludes, “Hypnotized persons tend to mix perception and imagination in a way that is logically incongruous and that they tolerate the incongruity without seeming to resolve it.” It may be defined as “trance logic.”¹¹³

It appears that no available scientific studies support the idea that a person in an unconscious state is able to consistently perform complex cognitive tasks effectively. Creative dictation would probably fall into that category.

Creativity and Other Abilities

A common belief is that hypnosis enhances creativity by diminishing anxiety. Julie Regan summarizes this popular belief: “Hypnosis and hypnotic induced states provide an individual with the opportunity to relax the conscious, ego-controlling mind thus suspending the logical observing and thinking processes and enabling amongst other things fantasy, imagination, and unconscious material to arise and be accessed.”¹¹⁴ The question is whether this perception is accurate—can hypnosis actually increase creativity? Regan concludes, however, that “There is a lack of clear evidence that hypnosis can enhance creativity.”¹¹⁵ Another study concluded that “Hypnosis does not appear to bolster creativity, relative to non-hypnotic conditions.”¹¹⁶

112. Ernest R. Hilgard, *Hypnotic Susceptibility* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), 9. Both Taves and Dunn quote Hilgard as authoritative.

113. Kevin M. McConkey, Richard A. Bryant, Bernadette C. Bibb, and John F. Kihlstrom, “Trance Logic in Hypnosis and Imagination,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 100, no. 4 (1991): 464.

114. Julie Regan, “Painting Like Picasso: Can Hypnosis Enhance Creativity?,” *Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnotherapy and Hypnosis* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 5.

115. *Ibid.*, 7.

116. Steven Jay Lynn and Harry Sivec, “The Hypnotizable Subject as Creative Problem-Solving Agent,” in *Contemporary Hypnosis Research*, edited by Erika Fromm

Specifically regarding Joseph Smith and dissociation, psychiatrist Robert D. Anderson, author of *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith*, offers this evaluation: “If Smith experienced dissociative states while creating the Book of Mormon, they were, in my opinion, limited in degree. Dissociative states require amnesia, significant distress, impairment in functioning, and/or a disruption of the integrative functions of consciousness, memory, and identity. But the Book of Mormon contains integrated careful calculations of fact and date, creating a complex history instead of a disorganized mess. This result suggests either full or nearly full personality [conscious] function at the time of dictation.”¹¹⁷

A practical example of the unconscious mind’s limitations is the process of dreaming because “dreams are the clearest expression of the unconscious mind.”¹¹⁸ While dreams may include elaborate ephemeral plotlines and sweeping imaginings, they cannot be flipped on and off at will. Neither do they deliver the type of minute organization and sustained complexity found in many automatic writings including the Book of Mormon.¹¹⁹

Ernest Hilgard’s Hypnotized Storyteller

A key piece of evidence cited by both Dunn and Taves to support their positions involves a young storyteller introduced by Ernest Hilgard in his book *Divided Consciousness*.¹²⁰ He described a “highly hypnotizable student” who, while hypnotized, could tell stories with such “clarity and verisimilitude”

and Michael R. Nash (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 332.

117. Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), xiii–xiv.

118. Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Mentor Books, 1973), 118.

119. An additional concern of automatic writing is that it does not address the statements of the Three and Eight Witnesses who declared they viewed tangible artifacts like the gold plates. Perhaps they might be dismissed as a conscious ruse to supplement the otherwise unconscious production of the words. For an innovative treatise of this topic, see Ann Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts*, edited by Blair G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, and Boyd J. Petersen (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 93–119.

120. Dunn, “Automaticity,” 25–26, 37, 41, 42, and 44. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 250–51, 261–62.

that they seemed real to listeners.¹²¹ In one experiment, Hilgard challenged the student under hypnosis to fabricate a story about being in a cave with friends. From there, he recited a seventeen-minute narrative with impressive details regarding geography and the group's activities. The student later related how "In hypnosis, once I create the pattern, I don't have to take any more initiative; the story just unfolds."¹²²

Dunn refers to this student's state as "dissociation," which allows a person access to the "latent abilities of the human mind" so they can "rapidly produce writing of a quality superior to their natural powers."¹²³ Taves agrees that the student demonstrates how, through hypnosis, a person "could tap into levels of mental activity that were not available to the consciousness of the hypnotized person."¹²⁴ Focusing on the student's described ease of dictation, Taves writes, "Both dream narratives and 'confabulations'—defined as 'fictive narrative[s] produced effortlessly, without insight as to . . . veracity'—provide evidence that most people can produce stories effortlessly."¹²⁵ While this may be true, Taves does not address the length, quality, and complexity of the narratives produced "effortlessly."

As a parallel to Joseph Smith, Hilgard's hypnotized student has limitations. The seventeen minutes of recited text would equate to roughly 2,500 words, so memory requirements would not parallel the creation of a text over one hundred times as long during a three-month span. Additionally, Hilgard does not provide a transcript, so it is impossible to know whether the sentences flowed with sufficient polish to allow them to go straight to press with minimal editing. Other dissimilarities can be identified suggesting that a hypnotized storyteller's short yarn would require only a small fraction of the cognitive functionality (whether conscious or unconscious) needed to create lengthy automatic writings or the Book of Mormon.¹²⁶

121. Ernest R. Hilgard, *Divided Consciousness: Multiple Controls in Human Thought and Action*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986), 196; see also 51.

122. *Ibid.*, 198.

123. Dunn, "Automaticity," 26.

124. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 252.

125. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 258.

126. While Hilgard speaks of a hidden part of the unconscious that assisted the hypnotized storyteller (called the "hidden observer"), he does not consider that

Nonconscious Control Diminishes Intellectual Capabilities

It seems that descriptions of a person entering a nonconscious state where they perform complex cognitive functions that are well beyond their conscious abilities are simply describing a psychological unicorn—a mental condition that scientific experiments have not yet shown to exist. John F. Kihlstrom and Eric Eich write that “Hypnosis does not appear to enhance the performance of people whose sensory and perceptual abilities are intact.”¹²⁷ While Taves acknowledges that Joseph Smith “stands out,” she does not attempt to close the gap between psychological descriptions of documented unconscious capabilities and those required in creative dictation.¹²⁸ A possible analogy might be identifying a person skillfully drawing stick figures and then assuming their skills would allow them to paint the Mona Lisa. The available data does not seem to support the leap of logic required by the theory. Additional supportive documentation is needed.

Perhaps some recalcitrant clinicians, like James H. Hyslop mentioned above, would look at the historical data and still maintain that the unconscious is responsible for lengthy automatic writings. This position could be greatly strengthened by performing a prospective study where a subject is examined while creating a continuous text through multiple sessions of automatic writing in a way that generally duplicates the origins of *The Sorry Tale* or the Book of Mormon. If the process occurs naturally, scientific experimentation ought to be able to replicate it.

To date, texts attributed to automatic writing attain that classification well after they have been written—through retrospective observations. That is, authors like Pearl Curran, Helen Shucman, and Joseph Smith have been studied by academics only after producing their epic works that have been labeled automatic writings.

hidden part of the mind to represent “unrealized human potential” (Hilgard, *Divided Consciousness*, 209). Hilgard’s research supports that neither the unconscious, nor this hidden part, possess the cognitive potential assumed by Taves and Dunn (Ibid., 196–215).

127. John F. Kihlstrom and Eric Eich, “Altering States of Consciousness,” in *Learning, Remembering, Believing: Enhanced Human Performance*, edited by Daniel Druckman and Robert A. Bjork (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1994), 222.

128. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 258.

To summarize, in their 1992 article “Is the Unconscious Smart or Dumb?” psychologists Elizabeth F. Loftus and Mark R. Klinger review the literature on the topic and ultimately conclude: “There seems to be a general consensus that the unconscious may not be as smart as previously believed.”¹²⁹ Theories that task the nonconscious mind with the ability to complete complicated intellectual projects remain unproven.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the similarities between the creation of the Book of Mormon and other automatic writings are undeniable. While automatic writing has been promoted as “the best model for understanding the translation of the Book of Mormon,” the apparent connection does not constitute an actual explanation of how these compositions were generated.¹³⁰ Grouping the Book of Mormon with automatic writing provides no answer to the question, “Where did all the words come from?”

Secularists will understandably reject Joseph Smith’s revelations describing different types of supernatural forces influencing both the creation of the Book of Mormon and automatic writings. Even as psychological explanations attribute the words to the subconscious minds of the authors, prospective experiments demonstrating this to be a possibility have yet to be performed. Neither have assumptions that entering a trance state could enhance the natural compositional abilities of the authors been proven. Indeed, available scientific studies appear to demonstrate the opposite.

These observations might explain the reason why, historically, automatic writing has never gained wide acceptance among naturalistic theories explicating the origin of the Book of Mormon. It appears that Joseph Smith’s intellectual qualifications in 1829, the complexity of the Book of Mormon, the difficulties of creative dictation, and the inherent cognitive limitations

129. Elizabeth F. Loftus and Mark R. Klinger, “Is the Unconscious Smart or Dumb?” *American Psychologist* 47, no. 6 (June 1992): 762.

130. Dunn, “Automaticity,” 33. See also Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 256; Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism*, 84.

of an unconscious state fail to coalesce into a plausible explanation of how he generated all the words. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this article should not be considered the final word; additional research is warranted to explain Joseph Smith’s loquaciousness even if automatic writing is insufficient to do so.

		Standard Writing	Automatic Writing	Book of Mormon Dictation
Produce long books		Yes	Yes	Yes
Produce complex books		Yes	Yes	Yes
Writing methodology	Pre-write	Yes	No	No
	Write	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Rewrite	Yes	No	No
Use of objects in forming text		No	Sometimes	Yes
Trance state		No	Frequently	No
Author claims of supernatural assistance		No	Yes	Yes
Author’s intelligence matches book’s complexity (generally)		Yes	No	No
Naturalist explanations		Human intellect	Subconscious origin of words, human intellect, and/or deception	Human intellect, deception, and/or subconscious origin of words
Joseph Smith’s explanation		Human intellect	False spirits or human influence	Gift and power of God

Table 2