Joseph Smith as a Book of Mormon Storyteller

Author(s): Brian C. Hales

Abstract: For nearly 200 years, skeptics have promoted different naturalistic explanations to describe how Joseph Smith generated all the words of the Book of Mormon. The more popular theories include plagiarism (e.g. of the Solomon Spaulding manuscript), collaboration (with Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, etc.), mental illness (bipolar, dissociative, or narcissistic personality disorders) and automatic writing, also called "spirit writing, "trance writing," or "channeling." A fifth and currently the most popular theory posits that Joseph Smith possessed all the intellectual abilities needed to complete the task. A variation on this last explanation proposes that he used the methods of professional storytellers. For millennia, bards and minstrels have entertained their audiences with tales that extended over many hours and over several days. This article explores their techniques to assess whether Joseph Smith might have adopted such methodologies during the three-month dictation of the Book of Mormon. Through extensive fieldwork and research, the secrets of the Serbo-Croatian storytellers' abilities to dictate polished stories in real time have been identified. Their technique, also found with modification among bards throughout the world, involves the memorization of formulaic language organized into formula systems in order to minimize the number of mental choices the tale-teller must make while wordsmithing each phrase. These formulas are evident in the meter, syntax, or lexical combinations employed in the storyteller's sentences. Professional bards train for many years to learn the patterns and commit them to memory. When compared to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, the historical record fails to support that he had trained in the use of formula systems prior to 1829 or that his dictation employed a rhythmic delivery of the phrases. Neither are formula patterns detected in the printed 1830 Book of Mormon. Apparently, Smith did not adopt this traditional storyteller's methodology to dictate the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith as a Book of Mormon Storyteller

Brian C. Hales

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org. You may subscribe to this journal at InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription.

Joseph Smith as a Book of Mormon Storyteller

Brian C. Hales

Abstract: *For nearly 200 years, skeptics have promoted different naturalistic explanations to describe how Joseph Smith generated all the words of the Book of Mormon. The more popular theories include plagiarism (e.g. of the Solomon Spaulding manuscript), collaboration (with Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, etc.), mental illness (bipolar, dissociative, or narcissistic personality disorders) and automatic writing, also called "spirit writing," "trance writing," or "channeling." A fifth and currently the most popular theory posits that Joseph Smith possessed all the intellectual abilities needed to complete the task. A variation on this last explanation proposes that he used the methods of professional storytellers. For millennia, bards and minstrels have entertained their audiences with tales that extended over many hours and over several days. This article explores their techniques to assess whether Joseph Smith might have adopted such methodologies during the three-month dictation of the Book of Mormon. Through extensive fieldwork and research, the secrets of the Serbo-Croatian storytellers' abilities to dictate polished stories in real time have been identified. Their technique, also found with modification among bards throughout the world, involves the memorization of formulaic language organized into formula systems in order to minimize the number of mental choices the tale-teller must make while wordsmithing each phrase. These formulas are evident in the meter, syntax, or lexical combinations employed in the storyteller's sentences. Professional bards train for many years to learn the patterns and commit them to memory. When compared to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, the historical record fails to support that he had trained in the use of formula systems prior to 1829 or that his dictation employed a rhythmic delivery of the phrases. Neither are formula patterns detected in the printed 1830 Book of Mormon. Apparently, Smith did not adopt this traditional storyteller's methodology to dictate the Book of Mormon.*

The tavern's lights flicker across the faces of the male crowd who gather almost ceremoniously at the end of another Bosnian workday in July of 1935. As scattered greetings and gossiping rumble in subdued tones, a famous visiting bard, hoping to earn a dinar or two, takes his place on the makeshift stage in the corner of the room. After tuning his gusle, a one-stringed instrument he plays as he recites, Avdo Međedović begins a musical rendition of the renowned story *The Wedding of Meho, Son of Smail.* The lengthy tale of over 12,000 lines describes an imaginary Meho's ambition, betrayal, and ultimate victory. Međedović's melodic prose unfolds for hours until the crowd departs or sleeps.[1] On the morrow, they know Avdo will return to continue the tale, repeating this process day after day, until Meho triumphs and marries his bride.

Over a century earlier on the other side of the world in Harmony, Pennsylvania, a 23-year-old farmer named Joseph Smith places his head in a hat and recites a few thousand words each day that he represents as a translation of an ancient record. During the next three months, Smith joins Oliver Cowdery and other scribes who record streams of sentences that eventually become the Book of Mormon.

Both of these events involved the telling of lengthy stories to eager audiences over multiple days of oral performance. Such similarities spawn the question, *Could Joseph Smith have employed the same techniques in dictating the Book of Mormon as professional storytellers like Avdo Međedović used to enthrall their audiences with their lengthy tales?*

Questions of how Joseph Smith generated all the words of the Book of Mormon have been the focus of much conjecture by investigators in the past. Popular theories include plagiarism, collaboration, mental illness, automatic writing, and attributing the text purely to Joseph's intellect.[2] A variation on the fifth theory poses that Joseph developed storytelling skills to the point that he could generate the entire narrative as Međedović, Homer, Irish bards, or English minstrels of bygone ages have sung or performed their epic oral narratives.

---

1. On May 23, 1950, Albert Lord returned to the Balkans to re-record Međedović telling "The Wedding of Meho, Son of Smail." At that time, the story was shorter at 8,488 lines.

2. See Brian C. Hales, "Naturalistic Explanations of the Origin of the Book of Mormon: A Longitudinal Study," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2019): 105–48, https://byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/58 3halessecured.pdf.

Fawn Brodie wrote in 1945 that Joseph Smith's "talent, it is true, was not exceptional, for his book [the Book of Mormon] lacked subtlety, wit, and style. He was chiefly a tale-teller and preacher."[3] Nine years later Kimball Young agreed: "As a youth, [Joseph Smith] was a great spinner of tall yarns. It is more than likely that with the telling and retelling of these stories, he came to believe them to be true."[4]

In his book *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, David Persuitte concurs: "[M]ost likely it was Joseph, with his storytelling ability, who welded everything together to make *The Book of Mormon* a cohesive whole."[5] According to Meredith Ray Sheets and Kendal Sheets: "By the time he reached his teens, Joseph Jr. was handsome and charismatic, a talented storyteller and persuasive speaker."[6] Dale Morgan similarly affirmed: "Mormons and non-Mormon accounts alike agree that the youthful Joseph Smith had a remarkable imagination and a well-developed talent as a teller of tales."[7]

In his 2016 PhD dissertation, William L. Davis expands this idea: "[T]he *Book of Mormon* stands as one of the longest recorded oral performances in the history of American culture. … [T]he fundamental oral techniques Smith employed were the same techniques common to storytellers, preachers, trance lecturers and other social and political orators in early nineteenth-century America."[8] Four years later in *Visions in a Seer Stone*, Davis further describes the Book of Mormon "as

---

3. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. rev. (1945; repr. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 62.

4. Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1954), 82.

5. David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 19.

6. Meredith Ray Sheets and Kendal Sheets, *The Book of Mormon: Book of Lies* (McLean, VA: 1811 Press, 2012), 15.

7. Dale Morgan, *Dale Morgan on the Mormons: Collected Works, Part 2, 1949–1970* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 2014), 192. It is unfortunate Morgan provided no documentation to support this statement.

8. William Davis, "Performing Revelation: Joseph Smith's Oral Performance of *The Book of Mormon*" (PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2016), 5, 24. Research shows that storytellers, orators (preachers), and trance lecturers produce their words with different methodologies. See Brian C. Hales, "Automatic Writing and the Book of Mormon: An Update," *Dialogue* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 1–35, https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V52N02_1.pdf and Brian C. Hales, "Joseph Smith as a Book of Mormon Orator," forthcoming.

a script, or a transcript, of Smith's performative process — the artifact of a grander, multifaceted oratorical effort."[9]

This article evaluates the theory that Joseph Smith used storytelling methods to produce the Book of Mormon. The first section examines the discovery and design of the techniques used by accomplished bards. The remaining section explores and compares those techniques to historical descriptions of Joseph Smith's dictation of the Book of Mormon in 1829.[10]

The Storyteller's Techniques

Appreciating the popularity of storytelling over the past centuries may be difficult for people in literate and literary cultures today. Before the printing press was invented, when few could read and books were hand-scribed by quill and ink, oral messages were the only communications society could offer the average citizen.

"Just when the custom of reciting and chanting stories began it is impossible to determine," observes Ruth Crosby. "It is probably as old as humanity itself."[11]

> In ancient Greece and Rome, and in England of the early Middle Ages the custom of oral delivery was well established. … [T]he professional story-teller was one of the most popular characters in the Middle Ages. Before all classes of people and upon all occasions of festivity he entertained with his inexhaustible supply of gestes, romances, lays, saints' lives, and miracles of the Virgin. … The professional minstrel was often employed also merely to help some king or nobleman while away his leisure hours. Often, too, on journeys, whether on

9. William L. Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 2. Davis has proposed multiple naturalistic methodologies for Joseph Smith including borrowing from John Bunyan's 1678 book, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (William L. Davis, "Who really wrote the Book of Mormon?," *Salon.com*, Nov. 1, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/10/31/who_really_wrote_the_book_of_mormon/), imitating frontier preachers by "laying down heads" (*Visions in a Seer Stone*), and automatic writing (William L. Davis, "The Book of Mormon and the Limits of Naturalistic Criteria: Comparing Joseph Smith and Andrew Jackson Davis," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 53, no. 3 [Fall 2020]: 73–104).

10. See John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2017), 126–227, https://byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/chp-welch-opening-2-sec2.pdf.

11. Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 11, no. 1 (January 1936): 88.

horse-back or shipboard, the song or recitation of the minstrel was heard. Not only before the nobility but for the benefit of the common people in the streets the professional story-teller recited his tales and paused at interesting points to pass his hat for contributions. … [T]he popularity of the minstrel in the days when books and readers were few and when theaters offered no rival attractions, cannot be overestimated.[12]

Traditional stories of varying lengths have been perpetuated by storytellers in virtually all cultures.[13] Unfortunately, of the approximately 3000 languages spoken throughout the world, only a few dozen have preserved their stories through writing.[14] Oral telling and retelling has been the primary way to archive those narratives. Some of the more prominent oral stories that have been recorded from various traditions are listed in Table 1.

Origin	Title	Approx. Word Count
Joseph Smith	Book of Mormon	269,320
Greek (Homer)	*Iliad*	148,045
Iceland	*The Story of Burnt Njal*	144,000
Greek (Homer)	*Odyssey*	134,560
Finnish	*The Kalevala*	130,430
Italy-Latin (Virgil)	*The Aeneid*	108,170
Middle East	*Arabian Nights*	81,000
Serbo-Croatian	*The Marriage of Meho*	80,000
Iceland	*The Eddas of the Norse Mythology*	80,000
Tonga	*The Banished Child*	43,000
Sudan	*The Epic of Son-Jara*	40,000
Congo	*Mwindo Epics*	<30,000
[multiple]	*Gilgamesh: Man's First Story*	25,500
Spanish	*El Romancero*	25,000
French	*La Chanson de Roland*	25,000
Mali	*Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*	24,000
Old English	*Beowulf*	22,000

---

12. Ibid., 91–93.

13. See Norma J. Livo and Sandra A. Reitz, *Storytelling: Process and Practice* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1986), 81; Daniel Biebuyck, Mateene Kahombo, and Kahombo C. Mateene, eds., *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga (Zaire)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969); Daniel P. Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief: Epic Literature from the Banyanga, Zaire Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 127–271.

14. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* 6

Origin	Title	Approx. Word Count
Spanish	*El Cid*	15,000
Byzantine	*The Lament of the Virgin*	12,000
Turkish	*The Book of Dede Korkut* (longest story)	11,000
Arabia	*Taghribat Bani Hilal*	8,700
Old English	*Bede's Story of Caedmon*	5,000
Turkish	*Kokotoy's Memorial Feast*	751

Table 1. Prominent oral texts.

Learning how lengthy stories were produced and reproduced during past centuries and even millennia has become part of an academic discipline solely devoted to understanding this genre of oral performance.[15]

Fieldwork in Yugoslavia

During the summer of 1933 and from June 1934 to September 1935, Professor Milman Parry of the Department of the Classics at Harvard University visited Yugoslavia, where with the help of Harvard student Albert Lord, he archived the tales recited by dozens of storytellers. Many of the stories were recorded on 3,500 double-sided aluminum discs, each with a playing time of about four minutes. Other stories were transcribed into over 800 notebooks.[16] Together, over 12,500 individual texts were preserved in some form for future study.[17]

Parry and Lord discovered that "[m]ost Yugoslav epics are shorter than the Homeric poems [Iliad and the Odyssey]. … Twelve thousand lines is the approximate length of the longest of songs."[18] But, unlike Homer (and Virgil, and the Nordics), the Serbo-Croatian storytellers were available for scholarly research. We cannot know if Homer or

(New York: Routledge, 2002), 7.

15. See John Miles Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985). Foley spent "thirteen years of scouring libraries through the United States and Europe" to acquire "the annotation of more than 1800 entries" (xiii). Since that year, hundreds additional publications have appeared on the subject.

16. "Milman Parry Collection," Harvard University, https://chs.harvard.edu/milman-parry-collection/.

17. See Matthew W. Kay, *The Index of the Milman Parry Collection, 1933–1935: Heroic Songs, Conversations, and Stories* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

18. Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 45–46.

Virgil recounted their long narratives verbally without notes,[19] but in the 1930s, Serbo-Croatian storytellers of tales over 80,000 words could be recorded and even filmed, as they performed their massive oral works. Transcripts of their performances were also made available to study.

The databases created through this fieldwork allows researchers to investigate the mental workings of the bards as they recite. Noam Chomsky, who has been called "the father of modern linguistics," explains: "[L]inguistic theory is mentalistic, since it is concerned with discovering a mental reality underlying actual behavior." He adds: "The problem for the linguist … is to determine from the data of performance the underlying system of rules that has been mastered by the speaker-hearer and that he puts to use in actual performance."[20]

The *performance* data of the Serbo-Croatian storytellers obtained by Parry and Lord provides helpful responses to the following questions:

- Where do the stories come from?
- How are the stories remembered?
- How are polished sentences generated in the moment?

Researching both modern and ancient storytelling may not discover all the techniques employed in the past, but it can identify prominent methodologies, which can be used for comparison.

Avdo Međedović and *The Marriage of Smailagić Meho*

Among the many storytellers that Parry and Lord encountered in Yugoslavia, perhaps the best documented is the story-singer Avdo Međedović (1875–1953).[21] Between June 28 and August 11, 1935, Parry recorded nine (44,902 lines) and transcribed four (33,653 lines) out of 58 of Avdo's most popular epic poems, all in his native tongue.[22]

Fortunately for researchers today, one of Međedović's longest stories was subsequently translated into English and published by Harvard

---

19. William L. Davis acknowledges: "The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* … developed over centuries within a vibrant oral tradition in which performers produced an endless number of variations (multiforms) of the epics. How much of Homer's texts actually belong to the poet Homer (some scholars question if he ever existed), or to generations of poets who may have refined his work, is unknown" (Davis, "Performing Revelation," 5fn11).

20. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1965), 4.

21. See Albert B. Lord and David E. Bynum, *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs: The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, vol. 3, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

22. Ibid., 3:6–7. See also Davis, "Performing Revelation," 246.

University Press in 1974. *The Marriage of Smailagić Meho* contains 12,331 lines of script with approximately 6.5 words per line, topping more than 80,000 words.[23] With recordings of his original audio and Croatian and English transcriptions, *The Marriage of Smailagić Meho* became a case study into the methodology of at least one form of epic storytelling.

Concerning Yugoslavian storytellers like Međedović, Albert Lord, who became a Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Harvard, commented:

> If we are fully aware that the singer is composing as he sings, the most striking element in the performance itself is the speed with which he proceeds. It is not unusual for a Yugoslav bard to sing at the rate of from ten to twenty ten-syllable lines a minute [65 to 130 words per minute]. Since, as we shall see, he has not memorized his song, we must conclude either that he is a phenomenal virtuoso or that he has a special technique of composition outside our own field of experience. We must rule out the first of these alternatives because there are too many singers; so many geniuses simply cannot appear in a single generation or continue to appear inexorably from one age to another. The answer of course lies in the second alternative, namely, a special technique of composition.[24]

The Spectrum of "Techniques of Composition"

Lord refers to "a special technique of composition" that allow Serbian storytellers like Avdo Međedović to rapidly recite a story of more than 80,000 words to an audience without using written notes. The potential methodologies that would endow a storyteller with this ability exist on a spectrum as shown in Figure 1. At one end are polished sentences extracted completely from memory. At the other end, nothing is memorized, and the storylines and wording are all newly created in the moment. An interim position on the continuum describes the

23. Međedović's "longest song on records" ["Osmanbeg Delibegovic and Pavicevic Luke"] contains 13,331 lines [approximately 86,000 words] and fills 199 record sides, or 100 12-inch discs recorded on both sides. If one reckons five minutes of singing on one side of a record, then this song represents over 16 hours of singing time." Lord and Bynum, *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs: The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, vol. 3, 7. Unfortunately, "Osmanbeg Delibegovic and Pavicevic Luke" has not been translated into English.

24. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 17.

memorization of ideas and outlines ahead of time that simply need to be clothed in language during the performance.
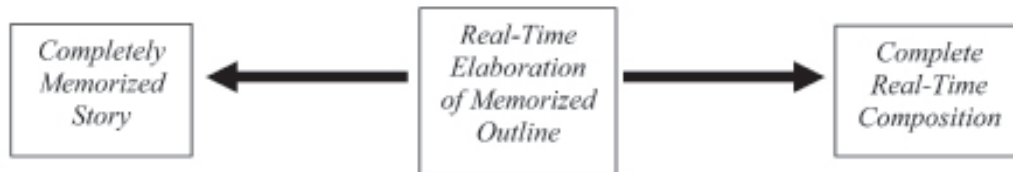

Figure 1. "Techniques of Composition" spectrum.

A Completely Memorized Story

Totally memorizing lengthy narratives has been reported and verified historically. For example, Muslim followers have committed the entire Qur'an (around 70,000 words in English) to memory. However, as a general approach to professional storytelling, the enormous pre-performance commitment of time and mental effort would create obstacles. The story itself would need to be fully composed and polished prior to memorization. Writing such narratives would require literacy, an ability seldom possessed by early minstrels and bards.

Remembering each word and word-order would demand multiple repetitions of the material. How many repetitions would depend upon the memory ability of the bard, but for lengthy stories, the effort would undoubtedly require the investment of a substantial amount of time.

Committing thousands of words to memory might be possible for a few gifted individuals, but probably not many. Most would find that memorization limits the number of stories in their repertoires to unacceptably low levels. Reciting a memorized narration also leaves the bard less responsive to audience reactions and other surrounding factors. This lack of reactivity could render the performances stiffer and possibly less interesting.

Memorization does have its advantages. During the performance, remembering words previously memorized would require relatively little on-the-spot cognitive activity. A well-memorized story may flow without much mental processing.

Complete Real-Time Composition

At the other end of the spectrum is a hypothetical method wherein bards would create everything, the storylines and wording, in the moment of the recital. Nothing flowing from the bard's mouth would be memorized — it would all be new. The sentences, and even the ideas behind those sentences, would be created completely extemporaneously.

This theoretical technique would be intellectually difficult. Making up the plotlines, characters, geographies, conversations, and other details off the top of the storyteller's head in real-time would be challenging. But even more formidable would be mentally constructing a continuous stream of coherent final-draft sentences extemporaneously.

The Cognitive Demands of Creating a Story Extemporaneously

Of all the challenges confronting a professional storyteller, choosing the right word and syntax for the next sentence in their unfolding story may be the most cognitively demanding.

The Demands of Wordsmithing a *Written* Message

To illustrate, consider an example of the decisions confronting George Orwell[25] as he wrote his popular 27,695-word *Animal Farm*. Orwell described his approach: "A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?"[26]

At the moment Orwell composed the first sentence of *Animal Farm*, he had several choices to make. The published version reads: "Mr. Jones, of the Manor Farm, had locked the hen-houses for the night, but was too drunk to remember to shut the popholes." Tables 2 and 3 identify some of the word choices Orwell might have considered along with obviously unusable possibilities (cross-outs). Several of the alternate wordsmithing options that Orwell might have chosen while building the first sentence were more eloquent than others.

---

25. Orwell's real name was Eric Arthur Blair.
26. George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ Book, 1946), 165.

First Line of *Animal Farm*	"Mr. Jones,	of the Manor Farm,	had locked	the hen	houses
Alternative Words	Mr. Smith	of the McGregor Farm	~~had bolted~~	the chicken	coops
	Mr. Brown	of the McDonald Farm	had secured	~~the chicks~~	~~homes~~
	Mr. Farmer	of the Jones' Farm	had closed	~~the birds~~	pens
	Mr. Orwell	~~of Manor village~~	~~had padlocked~~	~~the egg-layers~~	cages
Story Considerations	Whatever name is chosen must be used throughout.	Whatever name is chosen must be used throughout.	What type of locks were common in this time period?	What about locking up the pigs or other animals' cages?	

Table 2. Wordsmithing options (first half of sentence).

First Line of *Animal Farm*	for the night	but was too drunk	to remember	to shut	the popholes."
Alternative Words	for the evening	~~but was too tipsy~~	to recall	to close	the small door allowing chickens to access the outside:
	for the day	but was too intoxicated	~~to recollect~~	to lock	
	~~for the daytime~~	~~but was too plastered~~	~~to think about~~	~~to seal~~	
	at twilight	but was too inebriated	to know	~~to fasten~~	
Story Considerations	Is darkness a factor at this point in the story?	Need to explain why he was already drunk.	Was this his daily routine or was this a special occasion?		Will readers know what this is?

Table 3. Wordsmithing options (second half of sentence).

Obtaining a high level of textual refinement generally necessitates rewriting of multiple drafts prior to the final composition. Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, explains the challenge: "I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not *one* of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts." Bernard Malamud, [27]one of the best known American Jewish authors of the 20th century agrees: "First

27. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Random House, 1994) 20–21; emphasis in original.

drafts are for learning what your novel or story is about. Revision is working with that knowledge to enlarge and enhance an idea, to re-form it."[28] Betty Mattix Dietsch, author of *Reasoning & Writing Well*, concurs: "Some inexperienced writers seem to think they have hit the jackpot on their first draft. They evade the fact that every exploratory draft needs more work."[29]

Orwell once lamented: "Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness."[30] He knew the first sentence of his book would never have created itself without his deliberate intellectual effort, neither the second nor the third. He was solely in charge of crafting every polished phrase. No author including Orwell can outsource word-choices to someone else's brain or to an unconscious portion of their own.[31]

The Demands of Wordsmithing an *Oral* Message

Bards who tell incoherent tales or whose lines reek with poorly constructed sentences will not be popular, so their situation is more critical and unforgiving. Any of the wording of a story that is not committed to memory requires nearly the same level of wordsmithing and revising as a written narrative, except it must be done mentally on-the-spot as the phrases are being articulated. Telling a lucid tale involves the simultaneous mental processing of multiple levels of story content during the oral performance:

1. Context
    a. Timeline: current setting in contrast to past and future events.
    b. Characters on center stage and their interpersonal relationships.

---

28. Alan Cheuse and Nicholas Delbanco, eds., *Talking Horse: Bernard Malamud on Life and Work*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 177.

29. Betty Mattix Dietsch, *Reasoning & Writing Well: A Rhetoric, Research Guide, Reader, and Handbook*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 62.

30. Orwell, *A Collection of Essays*, 316.

31. The "automatic writing" theory used to explain the origin of the Book of Mormon assumes that Joseph Smith entered an alternate state or trance state where word-choices became automated in some unconscious part of his brain. Such a mental state that is capable of high-level cognitive function without conscious participation has never been shown to exist. See Brian C. Hales, "Automatic Writing and the Book of Mormon: An Update," *Dialogue* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 1–35, https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V52N02_1.pdf.

    c. Locations of activities and consistency of geography and ecology.

    d. Correlation with previous content, editorial promises, section headings, flashbacks, and embedded sub-stories.

2. Message or plot

    a. Story actions: design, purposes, and plausibility.

    b. Dialogues and orations: delivery, clarity, and implications.

    c. Ongoing invention and imagination.

3. Wordsmithing

    a. Vocabulary: words to convey the intended meaning.

    b. Grammar: the relationship of subjects, verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions in forming phrases.

    c. Syntax: the order of words and phrases in the sentences.

4. Finalization

    a. Editing, revising, and proofreading.

    b. Critical analysis of content.

5. Accurate verbal expression of final draft

All of the mental processing of these story features (and possibly others — depending on the genre of narrative) must be compressed into the moment of dictation within the bard's mind. There, imagination converges with multiple sources of data stored in long and short term memory, split-second decisions are made, and a word stream produced.

The storyteller's accomplishments are even more impressive in light of scientific studies regarding human cognitive abilities. In a landmark 1956 article entitled "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information," George A. Miller, a Professor of Psychology at Harvard, described research data showing that the human brain cannot simultaneously process limitless "chunks" of data. When the brain's cerebral "channel capacity" exceeds its maximum boundary, confusion and errors will result: "The span of absolute judgment and the span of immediate memory impose severe limitations on the amount of information that we are able to receive, process, and remember. … There seems to be some limitation built into us either by learning or by the design of our nervous

systems, a limit that keeps our channel capacities in this general range" of five to nine data chunks at one time.[32]

While dozens of additional studies have examined Miller's conclusions, his primary observation that the human mind has limited abilities to process information has been repeatedly corroborated.[33] Addressing this reality, Albert Lord asks: "How does the oral poet meet the need of the requirements of rapid composition without the aid of writing and without memorizing a fixed form?"[34] The answer involves several specific storytelling strategies.

Sources of Storytellers' Stories

Part of the response to Lord's question is for bards to borrow storylines or compose them ahead of time. Portrayals of professional storytellers rising to their feet and creating lengthy stories on-the-spot are generally inaccurate.[35] Undoubtedly some experienced bards occasionally recited tales they created off-the-top-of-their-heads, but such offerings would have been limited in duration and in their scope of originality. Milman Parry realized: "Even though the poet has an unusual memory, he cannot, without paper, make of his own words a poem of any length."[36]

Historically, creating extemporaneous stories was not a primary focus of the village storyteller. Saint Louis University Professor Walter Ong explains, "The oral epic (and by hypothetical extension other forms of narrative in oral cultures) has nothing to do with creative imagination in the modern sense of this term."[37] Albert Lord noted that the storyteller's primary focus is properly voicing the story, not dazzling the audience with a new tale: "Expression is his business, not originality, which, indeed, is a concept quite foreign to him and one that he would avoid."[38]

---

32. George A. Miller, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information," *Psychological Review* 63, no. 2 (March 1956): 86, 95. Sentence order reversed.

33. See Alan Baddeley, "The Magical Number Seven: Still Magic After All These Years?" *Psychological Review* 101, no. 2 (1994) 353–56; Koenraad Kuiper, "On the Linguistic Properties of Formulaic Speech" *Oral Tradition*, 15, no. 2 (2000): 281.

34. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 22.

35. Norma J. Livo and Sandra A. Reitz, *Storytelling: Process and Practice* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1986), 8, 29, 33.

36. Milman Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41 (1930): 77.

37. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 143.

38. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 44–45.

By borrowing or creating a story ahead of time, a portion of the mental burden of the oral presentation is removed. The need to conjure up all the plotlines of the tale is moved to pre-performance, rather than being required during the recital.

Formulas: "Thinking in Mnemonic Patterns"

Once a storyteller identifies a tale to add to his repertoire, what is the next step? How does the bard internalize the story to make retelling possible in the future? In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong explains:

> How could you ever call back to mind what you had so laboriously worked out? The only answer is: Think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions. … Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. … *Formulas* help implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right.[39]

In other words, to present prolonged tales and recount them with precision when desired, storytellers learn them systematically as "formulas." What is a formula? Milman Parry described a formula as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea."[40] More specifically, English medievalist Ronald Waldron defines formulas as "'empty' rhythmical-syntactical 'molds,' ready to be filled with meaning."[41]

Ulrich Marzolph clarifies: "Formulas contain complex references in a comparatively simple form, and in compositional practice serve as mnemonic devices in order to construct powerful images that help the audience understand a variety of underlying notions on a shared cultural

---

39. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34; emphasis added.

40. Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style," 80.

41. Ronald A. Waldron, "Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry," *Speculum*, 32, no. 4 (October 1957), 798n14. "Mold" in original spelled "mould."

platform."[42] They are phrases and sentences that reflect "the same meter and syntax" as the surrounding phrases and sentences, thus allowing them to be spoken or sung to the same rhythm or pattern.[43]

Formulas shift the mental activity of the bard away from wordsmithing to reciting formulaic language, which is memorized and can be recalled almost automatically. For example, imagine attending a birthday gathering and you are to offer a salutation. You could say:

- I wish [person's name] glad tidings on his birthday.

- May [person's name's] birthday bring joy and delight.

- I hope the anniversary of [person's name's] birth is joyful and content.

Alternatively, you could choose a formula you already know and sing:

> "Happy birthday to you.
> "Happy birthday to you.
> "Happy birthday dear [person's name],
> "Happy birthday to you."

In the first examples, each of the seven to eleven-word sentences required wordsmithing. That is, mental decisions of syntax and choice of words like "glad tidings," "joy," "delight," or "content" were required to convey the celebratory feelings. In the second, sixteen words were chosen by remembering the formulaic language of the birthday song (previously memorized) and substituting only one word — the name — where needed.

By memorizing formulas and substituting words here and there, storytellers relate their tale while significantly reducing the amount of intellectual processing required to tell it. "In the interest of efficiency, some formulas can be considered default or preferred formulas. The defaults and preference hierarchies minimize the processing load, so that the poet can attend to planning ahead."[44] During performances, formulas simplify the number of word choices that are required in

---

42.   Ulrich Marzolph, "A Treasury of Formulaic Narrative: The Persian Popular Romance Hosein-e Kord," *Oral Tradition* 14, no. 2 (1999): 298.

43.   Anita Riedinger, "The Old English Formula in Context," *Speculum* 60, no. 2 (April 1985): 305.

44.   Marjorie Windelberg and D. Gary Miller, "How (Not) to Define the Epic Formula," *Olifant* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 49.

the presentation and free up mental bandwidth to anticipate the next formula and the subsequent story element to be recited.

Alfred Lord further explicates: "The singer has not had to learn a large number of separate formulas. The commonest ones that he first uses set a basic pattern, and once he has the basic pattern firmly in his grasp, he needs only to substitute another word for the key one."[45]

The Serbo-Croatian Decasyllable Formula

Seeking to understand whether Serbo-Croatian storytellers used formulas, Albert Lord isolated 12,000 lines of text from a single bard and after analysis wrote: "It became clear that almost all, if not all, the lines in the sample passage were formulas" due to the fact that the lines followed "basic patterns of rhythm and syntax."[46] Within these patterns were constant metered phrases of precisely 10 syllables.[47] This decasyllable isosyllabism "is practically invariable."[48]

When performed by Yugoslav bards, these formulaic phrases could be "chanted, recited, or read" or even formally sung.[49] At times, "music may act as a constraint to fix a verbatim oral narrative,"[50] but always implementing lines with ten syllables, with a predictable pause after the fourth (see Figure 2).

Formula Patterns Survive Translation

*A*n example from one of the South Slavic epics from the Parry Collection gathered in 1935 demonstrates a formula pattern that is detectable in the original Serbian and the translated English:

Počeše se falit' kraješnici,	The Borderers began to boast,
Šta je koji bolje učinijo,	What each had done better,
Ko je više dobijo mejdana,	Who had won more duels,
Ko l' njemačkog roba porobijo,	Who had taken a German captive,

---

45. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*," 36.
46. Ibid., 47.
47. See Stavro Skendi, "The South Slavic Decasyllable in Albanian Oral Epic Poetry," *Word* 9, no.4 (1953): 339–48.
48. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*," 282.
49. Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," 94.
50. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 62.

Ko l' je carski hudut raširijo;	Who had broadened the imperial Border;
Ko l' je boljeg konja podhranijo,	Who had reared the better horse,
Ko l' je boljeg sina podnivijo,	Who had nurtured the better son,
Ko l' je bolju ćerku podgojijo.	Who had raised the better daughter,
Egleniše šta ko begeniše.	Each said what he wished to.
Neko sebe, neko konja fali,	One praises himself, another his horse,
Neko sina, a neko sinovca.	One his son, and another his nephew.
Neko fali svoju milu šćerku,	One praises his dear daughter,
Neko šćerku, neko milu seku.	One his daughter, another his dear sister.
Neko fali od brata devojku.	One praises his brother's girl.
E, sve age fale na izredu.	E, All the nobles boast in turn.[51]

Each Slavic phrase contains 10 syllables with predictable pauses. Formulaic language is also evident with patterned repetitions in both versions.[52] There is of course, variety among the singers. Their stock of formulas and thematic material may vary, and more experienced singers may focus less on learning the formulas and more on the process of substituting other words into the formulas. "There is no 'checklist' or 'handbook' of formulas that all singers follow."[53]

---

51. Albert Lord, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, trans. Albert Lord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1991), 50–51, https://chs.harvard.edu/book/lord-albert-bates-epic-singers-and-oral-tradition/.

52. Ibid.

53. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 49.

Figure 2. A musical score transcribed from three lines recorded by Parry in 1935 showing each line contains ten syllables. The storyteller would actually sing the lines (top melody) accompanied by a stringed musical instrument called a "gusle" (bottom melody).

Popular Formulas

Experienced storytellers memorize hundreds of "similarly functioning metrical formulas that could fit into his varying metrical needs almost any situation, person, thing, or action."[54] "The most stable formulas," noted Albert Lord speaking of Serbo-Croation storytelling, "will be those for the most common ideas of the poetry. They will express the names of the actors, the main actions, time, and place. … The most frequent actions in the story, the verbs, are often complete formulas in

54. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 57.

themselves. … A third common set of formulas indicates time when the action occurs."[55]

Lord had noted that the story tellers develop many phrases over generations to express common ideas in poetry according to several rhythmic patterns.[56] However, later when he visited Yugoslavia in 1950 and 1951, he noted that the traditional singers seemed unable to deal with new social-political themes related to Marxism, apparently because "they lacked formulas necessary to express these new ideas in just measures of verse."[57]

Systems in Other Storytelling Traditions

Further research demonstrates that most professional storytellers in other cultures employ formulas in their retellings. But, "the formula is entirely different in every tradition," explains author Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "because of the varying demands of meter and syntax."[58]

Lord's discovery of repeated formulaic patterns in Croatian poetic performances was no surprise. Decades earlier Parry had made a similar discovery concerning Homer's epics, recognizing that the Greeks used a six-syllable pattern called the "hexameter," instead of the decasyllable.[59] A hexameter is a line of six metrical units that follow a consistent repetitive pattern of stressed (long) and unstressed (short) syllables. The second position in the first four metric units may be either a single long syllable or two short syllables. Simplified it looks like what is shown in Figure 3.

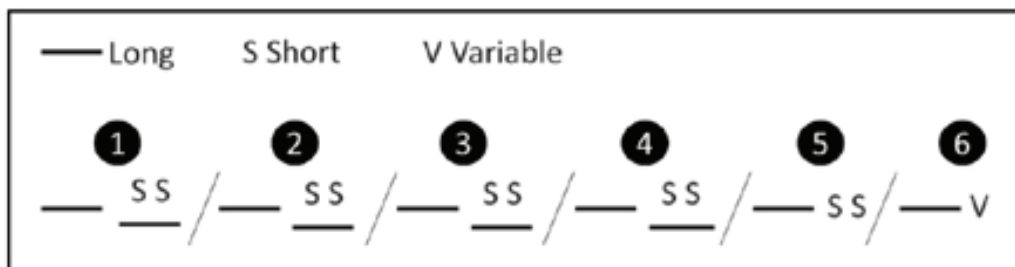Figure 3. A hexameter illustrating stressed (long) and unstressed (short) syllables.

55. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 34–35.

56. Ibid., 22.

57. Francis P. Magoun, Jr., "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," *Speculum* 28, no. 3 (July 1953): 455.

58. Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Oral-Formulaic Research in Old English Studies: I," *Oral Tradition*, 1, no. 3 (1986): 566–67.

59. Ibid.

Similar formula-based storytelling has been found in almost every culture. In the 1950s, Daniel P. Biebuyck's research in the Congo, Africa, documented their storytellers use patterns "based on semantically discrete word groups of 7 and 9 syllables."[60] In his book, *The Earliest English Poems*, Michael Alexander describes how "The number of syllables in an Anglo-Saxon line may vary between eight and about twenty," but "the half-line — a verbal and musical phrase containing two stresses — is the basic unit of Old English metric."[61] Formulaic patterns have also been found in Spanish ballads,[62] traditional Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry,[63] Old French epic songs,[64] the Bible,[65] Kazakh epic verse,[66] classic Arabic poetry,[67] and even in the sermons of early American folk preachers.[68]

Formulas Allow Performance Flexibility

An important benefit of formulas is that they allow storylines to be easily contracted or expanded according to the specific needs of the performance and audience. "The mediaeval poet," wrote Ruth Crosby, "was not in the least averse to padding. Thus we have a whole group

60. Daniel Biebuyck "Stylistic Techniques and Formulary Devices in the Mwindo Epic," *Cultures et développement* 11, no. 4 (1979): 587.

61. Michael Alexander trans., *The Earliest English Poems*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 15–18; see also Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Oral-Formulaic Research in Old English Studies: I," *Oral Tradition*, 1, no. 3 (1986): 548–606; "Oral—Formulaic Research in Old English Studies: II," *Oral Tradition*, 3, nos. 1–2 (1988): 138–90.

62. See Ruth Webber, *Formulistic Diction in the Spanish Ballad* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951).

63. See Magoun, "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," 446–67.

64. See Joseph J. Duggan, *The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic Craft* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).

65. See Robert C. Culley, "Oral Tradition and Biblical Studies," *Oral Tradition* 1, no. 1 (1986): 30–65.

66. Karl Reichl, "Formulaic Diction in Kazakh Epic Poetry," *Oral Tradition*, 4, no. 3 (1989): 363.

67. See Michael J. Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1972).

68. Bruce Rosenberg notes: "In the chanted sermon, the verses are preponderantly formulaic (in the Parry-Lord sense) … The verbal skill of the preacher can be judge by his ability to compose formulas and the craft with which he manipulates them." Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 10, 42.

of commonly repeated expletives or phrases used apparently for the primary purpose of helping out the meter."[69]

Albert Lord recognized that singers "habitually 'ornamented' their songs by richness of description … [and] by the addition of detail and fullness of narrative."[70]

While the formulas remain relatively stable, different words may be substituted with each telling resulting in distinct versions every time. "A poem is never repeated in exactly the same words even by the same man; and in the course of years changes may be introduced which apparently render it almost unrecognisable. Cases are known of minstrels who have doubled and even trebled the length of poems which they had heard.[71]" "Different versions of a story may be the result of distinct elements of information becoming conflated or confused if they are closely associated in stored knowledge."[72]

Besides adding additional phrases to expand a performance, oral presenters included adjectives and adverbs that writers might reject. Walter Ong notes that "oral folk prefer … not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight."[73]

What Formula Systems are Not

Since formula systems were developed to specifically enhance memory and to minimize the amount of mental wordsmithing required while reciting, they should not be confused with isolated formulaic language, repeated phraseology, parallelistic structures, borrowed verbiage, or dialectically similar wording, which do not perform these functions.

A formula system is not formulaic language occurring randomly in a narrative. While a storyteller could employ formulaic language unsystematically throughout a narration, its benefits would be minimal

---

69. Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," 104.

70. Lord and Bynum, *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs: The Wedding of Smailagic Meho*, 3:9–10.

71. H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (Cambridge: Heifer, 1945), 119.

72. Marjorie Windelberg and D. Gary Miller, "How (Not) to Define the Epic Formula," *Olifant* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 49.

73. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.

because of the need to wordsmith all the phrases in between the formulaic language.

A formula system is not simply repeated phrases that occur often in a story. John Foley stressed: "The formula is to be distinguished from simple repetition [of] … ready-made phraseology."[74] Since formula systems employ repetition, duplicated phrases have the potential to be part of a formula system, but only if they conform to the narrative's overarching formula pattern. There is a difference, explains Michael J. Zwettler, "between phrases repeated wholly or almost wholly verbatim and those related structurally," the structure being the syntax and meter of the pre-existing formula system.[75]

Parallelisms like chiasmus are not a formula system. The Bible, Book of Mormon, and many other texts include parallelisms like chiasmus,[76] which, according to John W. Welch, may "conveniently afford inherent mnemonic capacities."[77] John Breck explains that anciently, students without convenient access to writing materials could memorize more effectively with the aid of parallelism, especially chiasmus.[78]

While parallelisms can aid memory, they generally fail as formulas because their construction does not conform to a consistent repetitive meter and/or syntax. A few exceptions might exist, but the patterns of formula systems are not reliably present in most parallelisms.

Borrowed phrases from other sources would not constitute formula systems. Common clichés or verbiage borrowed from other publications, like the Bible, the Qur'an, or other popular titles, would not of themselves constitute formula systems. While similar phrases may be easily identified, their existence alone is not evidence of a formula system unless they comply with the meter of a pre-existing patterns.

---

74. John Miles Foley, "Formula," *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., eds. Stephen Cushman *et al.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 502.

75. Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry*, 46.

76. John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry, introduction to *Chiasmus: The State of the Art* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2020), 5.

77. John W. Welch, "Narrating Homicide Chiastically," in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, 173.

78. John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 53–54; see also Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, "Chiasm in the Drama of Life," in *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 2.

Dialect is not a formula system. Employing a specific dialect, like Old English, the Queen's English, or other vernaculars, consistently or intermittently in a narration does not constitute a formula system.

Practice and Apprenticeships

Through prolonged training and rehearsal, bard apprentices ingrain the formulas into their minds. "Depending on rank" notes Anne Pellowski in *The World of Storytelling*, "the training [of bards] lasted seven, ten, or twelve years and consisted of learning many sagas, the composition and recitation of all types of poetry, and oral lore of all kinds. … To learn the massive body of oral material is an arduous and painstaking task. The young pupils learn to drum and to recite narratives and genealogies."[79]

As a rule, accomplished bards win their reputations through repeated performances that consistently expose few identifiable flaws as they deliver their lines to their audiences.

Summary of Storytelling Techniques

Through extensive sleuthing and field reconnaissance, the predominant methodology of professional storytellers has been shown to require the memorization of formulaic language organized into formula systems. Formulas and their systems minimize the number of mental choices the tale-teller must make while wordsmithing each phrase. These formulas are evident in the meter, syntax, or lexical combinations employed in the storyteller's sentences. Professional bards train for many years to learn the patterns and commit them to memory.

Joseph Smith's Techniques

Few, if any, village storytellers travelled the New England countryside in the early eighteenth century. The storytelling tradition that predominated the Old World for millennia never gained traction among the early settlers or those that followed in colonial America. Generations of Native Americans perpetuated their histories and cultural narratives through verbal storytelling. However, John P. McWilliams, Jr., author of *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860*, noted: "It is probable that no antebellum white author could have had the knowledge

---

79. Anne Pellowski, *The World of Storytelling* (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1990), 204.

of Indian oral tradition, the means to record it, and the poetic ability to translate it."[80]

So if we ask, "Where are the great American epics?" we find a "void in oral epic legend" that is filled with *written* sagas rather than those passed down through a rich storytelling custom.[81] The increased literacy of local inhabitants apparently diminished their need for strictly oral communications.

Joseph Smith's father had worked as a school teacher and all of the Smith family were literate to some extent, so they were not solely dependent upon verbal exchanges for enlightenment.[82] Orsamus Turner, who knew the Smith family in Manchester recalled: "Once a week he [Joseph Smith Junior] would stroll into the office of the old *Palmyra Register,* for his father's paper."[83] Published between 1817 and 1821, the *Palmyra Register* would likely have included information more current and perhaps more interesting than a bards' full repertoire of stories.

Generating the Words of the Book of Mormon

The historical record is rich in eyewitness accounts of the Book of Mormon dictation.[84] Many secondhand references are also available. They describe Joseph Smith dictating the entire Book of Mormon while viewing a seer stone placed in the bottom of a hat to shield it from outside light. Other details provide a fuller picture:

- The entire dictation required fewer than 85 days and possibly as few as 57.[85]
- The number of words produced would have varied between about 2700 and 4700 a day.

---

80. John P. McWilliams, Jr., *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 152.

81. Ibid., 138.

82. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many* Generations (London: S.W. Richards, 1853), 56; William Smith, "Notes Written on `Chamber's Life of Joseph Smith'" (unpublished manuscript, circa 1875).

83. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, NY: Erastus Darrow, 1851), 214; emphasis added.

84. See the collection of 206 historical accounts referring to the translation compiled by Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 126–227.

85. John W. Welch, "Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: 'Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,'" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2019): 16–30.

- The number of words in the dictated blocks typically involved at least 20 to 30.[86]
- Joseph Smith and his scribes checked the accuracy of the recorded text.[87]
- Some proper names were spelled out.[88]
- According to eyewitnesses, no preexisting manuscripts or books were used.[89]
- Many onlookers (followers and skeptics) were permitted to view Joseph Smith as he dictated to his scribes.[90]
- After breaks, Joseph would start where he left off without reading back the previous portion.[91]
- Multiple scribes (followers and skeptics) participated.[92]
- After dictation, none of the sentences were re-sequenced prior to publication.

---

86. Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins,* ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 71, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/translating-book-mormon-evidence-original-manuscript.

87. Martin Harris, "The Three Witnesses," in *Historical Record* 6, ed. Andrew Jenson (May 1887): 216–17; David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ: By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, MO: by the author, 1887), 12.

88. Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," 75.

89. Emma Smith quoted by Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb (unpublished manuscript, February 14, 1879), cited in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:544; "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26, no. 19 (1 October 1879): 290. David Whitmer quoted in *Chicago Times* (17 October 1881), cited in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 76; David Whitmer quoted in *St. Louis* Republican (16 July 1884), cited in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 139–40.

90. David Whitmer in "The Book of Mormon," *Chicago Tribune,* December 17, 1885, 3, cited in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 172.

91. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26 (October 1, 1879): 289–90.

92. Joseph Smith's scribes during the translation can be divided into three groups: those who wrote exclusively in Harmony (Martin Harris, Reuben Hale, Alva Hale, and Samuel Smith), exclusively in Fayette (Christian and John Whitmer), and both localities (Oliver Cowdery and possibly Emma Smith). All were believers except for Reuben and Alva Hale.

- The three-month project produced a lengthy complex text (see Table 4).

Characteristic	Quality/Quantity
Word count	269,320
Number of sentences	6,852
Average sentence length	39.3
Reading level	8th grade
Dialect	Early English
Punctuation	none
Unique words	5,903
College-level vocabulary words (not in Bible)	dozens
Original proper nouns	170
Parallel phraseology— chiasms	367
Parallel phraseology — alternates	400
Poetic literary forms (other)	911
Stylometric consistencies	at least 4 unique authors
Bible intertextuality	hundreds of phrases and integrations
Named characters	208
Socio-geographic groups	45
Geographical locations (Promised Land)	over 150
Geographical references (Promised Land)	over 400
Ecological references	2,065
Monetary system weights	12 distinct values
Chronological references	over 100
Storylines	77 major; additional minor
Flashbacks and embedded storylines	5
Sermons	68 major; additional minor
Sermon topics	dozens
Sermon commentary	often intricate and multifaceted
Formal headings to chapters and books	21
Editorial promises	121
Internal historical sources quoted	at least 24
Subjects discussed with precision	at least 3 (e.g. biblical law, olive tree husbandry, and warfare tactics)

Table 4. Literary characteristics of the 1830 Book of Mormon.

In his dissertation William L. Davis describes Joseph Smith using the same form of "oral-formulaic composition" methods as Avdo Međedović, but using them less effectively:

> [A] comparison of Smith's and Međedović's dictated works provides a more accurate view of their respective rates of

output. Based on an estimated number of working days against the total amount of material, Smith produced the *Book of Mormon* at the rate of some 3,500–4,000 words per day. By comparison, Međedović dictated five epic songs, all at a faster pace. … The production of the *Book of Mormon* within a three-month span of time is truly a remarkable feat. Nevertheless, given the rapid efficiency of oral-formulaic composition, the question that needs to be asked is not how Smith accomplished the task so quickly, but why it took him so long.[93]

Davis also acknowledges that it "hardly seems fair" to compare "Međedović, a seasoned professional," to "Smith, a neophyte."[94] But Davis also fails to investigate important historical findings that could support or contradict his assertion, including:

1. Evidence of Joseph Smith's pre-1829 training to build storytelling skills?

2. Reports of rhythmic delivery of Smith's words to his scribes while dictating the Book of Mormon?

3. Signs of formula systems in the recorded manuscript?

4. Smith's subsequent use of the Book of Mormon text.

Evidence of Joseph Smith's Pre-1829 Training?

Multiple historical sources show that in the 1830s and 1840s, Joseph Smith would sometimes employ stories while teaching the Saints. Scott A. Hales, a writer and editor for *Saints: The Story of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, explains: "The Prophet was an informal storyteller, who sometimes incorporated anecdotes into his everyday conversations and sermons." Yet, Hales also notes: "The stories Joseph told in his daily life never reached the same level of complexity as the Book of Mormon narrative."[95]

Joseph Smith's formal education would have included few, if any, lessons designed to enhance storytelling skills. Course work in district

---

93. Davis, "Performing Revelation," 247–48.
94. Ibid.
95. Scott A. Hales, "'In Truth and Righteousness': Joseph Smith as Storyteller," in *Know Brother Joseph: New Perspectives on Joseph Smith's Life and Character*, eds. R. Eric Smith, Matthew C. Godfrey, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 127.

schools in upstate New York did not include composition in part due to the lack of writing instruments and writing surfaces.[96] Dennis A. Wright and Geoffrey A. Wright explain: "Schools in the nineteenth century provided students with few if any school supplies and rarely had blackboards. Slates were not introduced in the classroom until about 1820, and lead pencils were not used until several years later. … In the early 1800s, paper was very costly because of its scarcity."[97]

While rote repetition and reading aloud were commonplace, students "on the frontier had little formal education and even less training in formal rhetoric or public speaking."[98] If Joseph developed extraordinary oratory skills, he would have done so largely independent of his formal schooling.[99]

Lucy Mack Smith's Report of "Amusing Recitals"
One report from Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph's mother, describes his storytelling inclinations around 1823 when he was in his 18th year:

> During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of travelling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious

---

96. R. Freeman Butts and Lawrence A. Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953), 269–70. See also Clifton Johnson, *Old-Time Schools and School Books* (London: MacMillan, 1904), 133; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York* (London: William Baynes and Son, 1823), 4:461, 490.

97. Dennis A. Wright and Geoffrey A. Wright, "The New England Common School Experience of Joseph Smith Jr, 1810–1816," in *The New England States, Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History*, eds. Donald Q. Cannon, Arnold K. Garr, and Bruce A. Van Orden (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2004), 250.

98. Rosenberg, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher*, 17.

99. Proponents of the storyteller theory may quote an 1867 statement from Thomas Davies Burrall that declares that "Joe Smith" was "a wood-cutter on my farm" and that "at night, around a huge fire, he and his companions would gather, ten or a dozen at a time, to tell hard stories, and sing songs and drink cheap whisky, (two shillings per gallons), and although there were some hard cases among them, Joe could beat them all for tough stories and impracticable adventures" (*Louisville Daily Courier* 36, no. 81 [October 5, 1867]: 1). Dan Vogel describes chronological problems and concludes: "Burrall obviously employed a much older man named 'Joe Smith' and confused him with the Mormon prophet" (Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000], 3:363).

> worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life with them.[100]

This very late quotation refers to details of "dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode," none of which occur in the Book of Mormon, raising questions about the reliability of the recollection. These "amusing recitals" were placed in the context of Joseph receiving instructions from the angel regarding the soon-to-be translated ancient record. Nowhere does she hint that Joseph possessed the skills to author such a book or that his imaginative storytelling in the family setting was a harbinger of a fuller fiction that he was developing.

Beyond Lucy's declaration, none of Joseph's other family members or acquaintances described him engaged in behaviors that might be interpreted as rehearsals or public speaking performances. It seems if he had practiced oratory performing, someone in the area might have been aware. In 1834, Eber D. Howe published statements from twenty-two local residents along with two "group statements" from the inhabitants of Palmyra and Manchester.[101] In July 1880 newspaperman Frederick G. Mather compiled written recollections from twelve citizens of Susquehanna, Broome, and Chenango Counties, Pennsylvania.[102] In 1888, Arthur Deming printed accounts from fourteen individuals in two volumes of *Naked Truths about Mormonism*.[103] Many of these persons

100. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool, UK: S.W. Richards, 1853), 85. See also *Wandle Mace autobiography, circa 1890* (unpublished manuscript, 1890), 44, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=bdd8f2f5-fbd2-4e83-b4b3-ceea5fcc70d0&crate=0&index=0.

101. E.D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed: or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, OH: E.D. Howe, 1834). Statements were from Alva Hale, Abigail Harris, Barton Stafford, David Stafford, G. W. Stoddard, Henry Harris, Hezekiah Mckune, Isaac Hale, Joseph Capron, Joshua Mckune, Joshua Stafford, Levi Lewis, Lucy Harris, Nathaniel Lewis, Parley Chase, Peter Ingersoll, Roswell Nichols, Sophia Lewis, Willard Chase, and William Stafford.

102. See [Frederick G. Mather], "The Early Mormons. Joe Smith Operates at Susquehanna," *Binghamton Republican*, 29 July 1880. Frederick G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine* (Philadelphia) 26 (August 1880): 198–206, 211. Interviewees included Sally McKune, Mehetable Doolittle, Elizabeth Squires, Jacob I. Skinner, Samuel Brush, Orlando Saunders, William Van Camp, John H. Gilbert, George Collington, Smith Baker, Harriet Marsh, and Rebecca Nurse.

103. Arthur Deming, ed., *Naked Truths about Mormonism,* 2 vols. (Oakland, CA.: Deming & Co., 1888). Statements were from Caroline Rockwell, Isaac Butts,

knew Joseph Smith Jr. personally, but none pronounced him engaged in the activities of a village storyteller or trying to entertain spectators with his sagas. Journalist James Gordon Bennett visited the Palmyra area in August of 1831 and recorded that Joseph Smith's father was a "great story teller," but wrote nothing similar concerning the younger Joseph.[104]

The "Juvenile Debate Club" and Methodist "Exhorting"

At least one reminiscence spoke of Joseph Smith's early involvement with a local debating club. Expanding and countering arguments in a debate school environment could have tutored him in memory and oratory. In 1851, Orsamus Turner remembered:

> Joseph had a little ambition; and some very laudable aspirations; the mother's intellect occasionally shone out in him feebly, especially when he used to help us solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics, in our juvenile debating club, which we moved down to the old red school house on Durfee street.[105]

Turner also reported that Joseph Smith "was a very passable exhorter" at Methodist camp meetings even though Smith never joined the Methodists. This probably referred to activities during the latter part of 1824 and the first months of 1825.[106] Despite these references, Turner was not overly impressed with Joseph's abilities, declaring him to be "possessed of less than ordinary intellect."[107]

Turner's statement echoes other eyewitnesses like Isaac Hale who remembered in 1834: "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."[108] Prior to his baptism into the

---

Joseph Rogers, K. E. Bell, Lorenzo Saunders, Reuben P. Harmon, S.F. Anderick, Sylvia Walker, W. A. Lillie, William R. Hine, Christopher M. Stafford, Cornelius R. Stafford, G. J. Keen, and Henry A. Sayer.

104. James Gordon Bennett, Diary (unpublished manuscript, August 1831), 7–8; and [James Gordon Bennett], "Mormonism — Religious Fanaticism — Church and State Party," Part I, *Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 31 August 1831 cited in "James Gordon Bennett's 1831 Report on 'The Mormonites,'" Leonard J. Arrington, *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 1970): 2.

105. Orasmus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, NY: Erastus Darrow, 1851), 214.

106. Ibid., 214.

107. Ibid., 213–14.

108. Isaac Hale quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed*, 262–63.

Church, W. W. Phelps wrote on January 15, 1831 affirming "Joseph Smith is a person of very limited abilities in common learning."[109]

Beyond the family recitals mentioned by Lucy Smith and Orsamus Turner's brief references, little evidence supports that young Joseph used the decade before 1829 to hone storytelling skills that would have facilitated his Book of Mormon dictation. If he engaged in such preparations, the absence of data is ironic, since developing storytelling abilities generally requires audiences, but no such audiences are identified. Richard Bushman reports: "He [Joseph Smith] is not known to have preached a sermon before the Church is organized in 1830. He had no reputation as a preacher."[110]

The lack of documentation cannot prove that intense secret preparations did not occur. However, Smith-the-storyteller theories would benefit from additional corroborative historical evidences beyond assumptions derived from reverse engineering the complexity of the dictated text.

Rhythmic Delivery of Smith's Words to His Scribes?

If Joseph Smith imitated professional storytellers, the cadence and meter of the process would probably have been evident to observers during the dictation. The three-month process of dictation and scribing was witnessed by multiple individuals.[111] David Whitmer described how other unidentified persons in Fayette were "present and not actively engaged in the work [who] seated themselves around the room."[112]

Emma Smith mentioned her role: "I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour."[113] Oliver Cowdery described it with less detail and a little more drama:

---

109. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed*, 273.

110. Richard L. Bushman, "A Historian's Perspective of Joseph Smith," on *Joseph Smith's Relationship with God* (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 2007), CD2, track 8.

111. Included were Emma Smith, Martin Harris, David Whitmer, William Smith, Samuel Smith, Isaac Hale, Joseph Knight Sr., Alva Hale, John Whitmer, Christian Whitmer, Reuben Hale, Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery, and Michael Morse. Additional contemporaries who left reports of what happened include Joseph Lewis and Thurlow Weed.

112. David Whitmer in "The Book of Mormon," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1885, 3 cited in *Opening the Heavens*, Welch, 172.

113. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26 (October 1, 1879): 289–90.

"Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated, with the *Urim* and *Thummim,* or, as the Nephites would have said, 'Interpreters' the history, or record, called the 'The book of Mormon?'"[114] Reuben Hale, Emma's brother and unbelieving skeptic, also scribed for Joseph and reportedly stated: "Smith's hat was a very large one, and what is commonly called a 'stove-pipe.' The hat was on the table by the window and the [seer] stone in the bottom or rather in the top of the hat. Smith would bend over the hat with his face buried in it so that no light could enter it, and thus dictate to the scribe what he should write."[115]

Table 5 compiles the various words used by eyewitnesses to describe Joseph Smith's articulation or vocalization of the Book of Mormon text.[116]

Witness	Words Used
Emma Smith	dictate, dictating, spelled them out
Martin Harris	repeat aloud, given, read, from the mouth, translated or spelled the words, dictated, spelled the words out
Oliver Cowdery	from his mouth, told, words fell from the lips
David Whitmer	read off, read, uttered, dictate, dictating, pronounce, spoken, dictated, spell the words out, reading, spell out
Joseph Smith Sr.	Read
William Smith	reading off
Isaac Hale	read and interpret
Joseph Knight Sr.	tell

Table 5. Witnesses and their descriptions of Joseph's vocalizations.

It would appear that none of those watching Joseph Smith's recitations detected any regularization of the phrases in his dictation or if they did, they failed to mention it. Similarly, no reports of musical instruments, singing, or melodic dictations are discussed. No evidence of such a phenomenon has been noted, as far as we know, in either witness statements, in the published text, or in the recorded dictation in the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon.

114. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, September 7, 1834 [Letter I], *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 14.

115. Rhamanthus M. Stocker, *Centennial History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: R. T. Peck and Co., 1887), 555–56.

116. See Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 126–227.

Signs of Formula Systems in the Dictated Manuscript?

When Albert Lord sought to understand how Serbo-Croatian singers could recite lengthy stories, he examined written versions of those narratives. Within them he found the answer he was looking for — formulaic language organized into patterns called formula systems. Lord discovered that bards use these systems to remember their stories and to create performance-level recitals that their audiences would appreciate.

The 269,320 words[117] that Joseph Smith spoke to his scribes were immediately recorded and sent without modification to the typesetter. The 1830 Book of Mormon printing (ignoring the punctuation that was added later) constitutes an essentially verbatim record of his "oral performance." Formulas systems (or vestiges of them) should be detectable in the 1830 printing of the Book of Mormon if they existed in the original dictation. The quest is not to identify scattered formulaic language or occasional parallelistic phraseology. If Joseph used traditional storytelling methods as he spoke, the entire dictated language would have been formatted into formula patterns involving predictable meter, rhythm, syntax, or isosyllabism.[118]

Three authors, Donald W. Parry, Grant Hardy, and Royal Skousen have published editions of the Book of Mormon where every phrase, clause, and sentence was examined for literary characteristics and reformatted according to those features. If formula systems existed in the text, their efforts might have discovered them.

Donald W. Parry published *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted According to Parallelistic Patterns* in 2006. There he defined poetic parallelism "as words, phrases, or sentences which correspond, compare, or contrast one with another, or are found to be in repetition one with another."[119] With this generous classification, he identified parallelistic phrases tucked between lines of prose on nearly every one of the 490

---

117. 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 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." Stanford Carmack, comment on 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://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/curiously-unique-joseph-smith-as-author-of-the-book-of-mormon/.

118. See Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 282n8.

119. Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted According to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, UT: Neal A Maxwell Institute, 2006), xiv.

reformatted pages. By typesetting the text to highlight these lines, word-patterns based upon meter or other literary characteristics became easier to detect on a single page or span of pages.

In his 2003 *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, Grant Hardy sought to "highlight the literary qualities and complex internal structure of the text."[120] He explains: "When I encountered passages that exhibit heightened emotion, repetition, and parallel phrases that were both grammatically uncomplicated and relatively short, I set them into poetic lines."[121] Such poetic lines are found on 189 of the 625 pages reformatted by Hardy. Reviewing the poetic sections shows:

- 57 of the pages are quoting poetic lines from the Bible. Subtracting those leaves 132 of 573 pages with poetic structures attributable to Joseph Smith's creativity.
- Few poetic lines involve all the words on the entire page. Most are interspersed within prose-style paragraphs.
- Poetic sections do not reflect a consistent metrical cadence or rhythmic consistency.
- At least 436 pages are prose, devoid of any apparent poetic structure.

Royal Skousen used his linguistic background and his familiarity with the Original and Printer's manuscripts to create his 2009 *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*.[122] He explains that his work "constitutes a scholarly effort to present to the reader a dictated rather than a written text."[123] To facilitate this approach, Skousen adopted a "sense-line format." "Sense-lines can assist readers in differentiating phrases and clauses, identifying constituent grammatical units, and keeping track of subjects, main verbs, and modifiers." According to Skousen, "The first verbalization of the text would have sounded something like the result of reading the sense-lines out loud."[124] Skousen notes that "nonstandard syntax" and "Hebrew-like syntax," are found throughout the text.[125]

---

120. Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), xxi.

121. Ibid., 663.

122. Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), https://bookofmormoncentral.org/content/book-mormon-earliest-text.

123. Ibid., xlii.

124. Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, xlii–xliii.

125. Ibid., xliv, xlv.

While these three authors worked on different priorities, their linguistic research to determine how to reformat the Book of Mormon text constituted (in several ways) an exhaustive search for evidence of formula systems. All three authors would probably have notice the presence of syntactic, lexical, or rhythmic patterns within the sentences if they were present. Evidence of some other form of mnemonic devices might also have emerged from their analyses. Were any such data discovered? The answer appears to be no. The reformatting reflects no metered patterns; nor is meter mentioned as a literary element used for formatting purposes. If any such systemization of the text was found, it is likely they would have mentioned it and contextualized it with similar features found in the Bible.[126]

To date, millions of readers and scholars have studied the Book of Mormon without mentioning the presence of regularized phraseology resembling formula systems. This could be because no one has been looking specifically for them, but several detailed projects dealing with the nearly 7000 sentences would likely have uncovered their existence if they were present.

Smith's Subsequent Use of the Book of Mormon Text

If Joseph Smith viewed the Book of Mormon as the culmination of years of storytelling preparations, retelling its stories and quoting from its wisdom would have come naturally in the following years due to his familiarity with it. Most storytellers relish the opportunities to share their hard-learned tales with audiences, but after his single dictation of the manuscript, Joseph Smith seldom referred to its contents and stories. BYU Professor Casey Paul Griffiths observed: "An examination of the Nauvoo discourses of Joseph Smith revealed allusions to 451 different biblical passages given by the Prophet, compared to just 22 references to the Book of Mormon, or a 21:1 ratio."[127]

Similarly, little fanfare accompanied its printing and availability. Biographer Richard Bushman explains: "For all the effort and trouble he put into the translation, Joseph made little of the book's appearance. … It was an unusually spare production, wholly lacking in signs of

---

126. See Robert C. Culley, "Oral Tradition and Biblical Studies," *Oral Tradition* 1, no. 1 (1986): 30–65.

127. Casey Paul Griffiths, "5 Things You Might Not Know About the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *LDS Living*, March 18, 2017, http://www.ldsliving.com/5-Things-You-Might-Not-Have-Known-About-the-Coming-Forth-of-the-Book-of-Mormon/s/84830.

self-promotion. Joseph presented his handiwork to the public and moved on."[128]

Summary

For hundreds of years bards and storytellers throughout the world have captivated their audiences with tales, some of which could extend for many hours and even over several daily sessions. The polish of their recitations delivered in real-time without notes or manuscripts demonstrated a highly impressive skill set of either memory or the ability imagine storylines and wordsmith refined sentences on-the-fly during their performances — or some combination of the two.

To date, extended research into storytelling techniques from multiples times and cultures support a predominant methodology. The Bards use formulaic language organized into patterns — called formula systems — to enhance memory and diminish the intellectual burden of wordsmithing the sentences they recite. The formulas in each system are memorized and lack only a few descriptive words that the storyteller recalls by using natural memory. Bards commit a set of these formulas to memory so during performances, the word-choices are mostly automatic and the number of word substitutions that must be cognitively chosen are minimized.

It is possible that yet-to-be-studied storytellers use some other form of memory devices to recall and wordsmith their stories during their oral performances. Nonetheless, the presence of metrically consistent patterns of rhythm, syntax, or lexical qualities in the delivered lines seems universal. Years of practice and training are required to learn the formulas and develop the ability to recite lengthy tales according to the appropriate rhythms.

The historical record indicates Joseph Smith shared stories within the family circle in the early 1820s, but none of those who knew him claimed his intellectual abilities were sufficient to create the Book of Mormon.[129] His education included no formal instruction in composition, rhetoric, or storytelling.

Multiple analyses of the Book of Mormon have identified scattered poetic lines, repeated phrases, predictive lexical patterns, specific word

---

128. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 83.

129. See Brian C. Hales, "'Proving to the World': The Unique Declaration in Doctrine and Covenants Section 20," *FAIR* (blog), March 1, 2021, https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2021/03/01/come-follow-me-week-9-doctrine-and-covenants-20-22.

recurrences, and formulaic language distributed throughout the text. However, consistent metrical or rhythmic systemizations are absent. No literary devices in the Book of Mormon text have been found that could have provided wordsmithing benefits similar to the formula systems used by professional storytellers during their presentations.

In the past, theories involving the Spaulding manuscript, collaborators, mental illness, and automatic writing have been largely discarded by a majority of skeptics attempting to explain the origin of the Book of Mormon. Similarly, the data presented here fails to identify any significant parallels between Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon dictation and traditional storytellers reciting their tales. However, approaching the translation as an oral performance is largely an unexplored field of study. Additional research is justified to further investigate the question, "Where did all the words come from?"

Brian C. Hales *is currently an MA (history) student at Arizona State University. He is also the author or co-author of seven books dealing with polygamy. Brian works as an anesthesiologist at the Davis Hospital and Medical Center in Layton, Utah. He and his wife Laura Hales are co-webmasters of JosephSmithsPolygamy.org.*