



## The Writer and Technology

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**I**T FEELS HARD TO BELIEVE now, but my writing career began in the days before writers had personal computers. I can still remember walking along a street in Oxford, chatting with my editor when he was hailed by a colleague who came hurrying up to him with a manuscript.

‘You’ve got to look at this,’ he said. ‘What is it?’ asked Ron, my editor. ‘It’s a manuscript written on a computer,’ his colleague told him. ‘I’ve just been sent it from America. *Look* at it.’ So Ron took the manuscript and leafed through a few pages, shaking his head in amazement. ‘This is going to put us out of a job,’ he said.

Ron and I had been going for a drink to celebrate the fact that Oxford University Press had agreed to buy my first book. The manuscript of that book had been written on a portable typewriter with the help of about half a dozen bottles of correction fluid. There had been additional bits of text literally cut and pasted in with scissors and glue. When the whole thing was finished I’d had to pay a professional to type it up neatly.

But now I’d seen the future. I went straight home and ordered one of the first personal computers to hit the UK market, an Amstrad 9512 dedicated word-processor. I can still remember the day it was delivered. I was *beside* myself with excitement as I tore open the enormous cardboard box.

I have to say, my enthusiasm was entirely justified. Having my own computer made my working life so much easier and so much more



productive. No more scissors and glue. Instead, I learned to move text around on a screen. No more estimating the word count. Now the machine could do it for me automatically.

Since that time technology has developed at incredible speed. Like everybody else, I now have a range of different devices. I read electronic books. I do the vast majority of my research on the internet and my manuscripts are no longer piles of paper, but digital files that leap from my home to the publisher's office at the press of a button.

I love all of this but has it changed how I write? Yes, I think it has, because it's changed all of us. We are a different kind of society. We may or may not be wiser but we are certainly better connected and much better informed than we used to be.

The irony is that the arrival of that manuscript from America was not the beginning of a movement that would put Ron and his colleague out of a job. In fact, the opposite turned out to be true. The explosion in personal computing meant that many more people began to try their hands at becoming professional writers and the number of manuscripts landing on editors' desks grew exponentially. If anyone's position has been threatened, as technology enables many more voices to compete for the public's attention, it's the writer's.