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Theories and Assumptions: A Review of William L. Davis's *Visions in a Seer Stone*

Abstract: Within the genre of Book of Mormon studies, William L. Davis's *Visions in a Seer Stone* presents readers with an innovative message that reports how Joseph Smith was able to produce the words of the Book of Mormon without supernatural assistance. Using oral performance skills that Smith ostensibly gained prior to 1829, his three-month "prodigious flow of verbal art and narrative creation" (7) became the Book of Mormon. Davis's theory describes a two-part literary pattern in the Book of Mormon where summary outlines (called "heads) in the text are consistently expanded in subsequent sections of the narrative. Termed "laying down heads," Davis insists that such literary devices are anachronistic to Book of Mormon era and constitute strong evidence that Joseph Smith contributed heavily, if not solely, to the publication. The primary weaknesses of the theory involve the type and quantity of assumptions routinely accepted throughout the book. The assumptions include beliefs that the historical record does not support or even contradicts (e.g. Smith's 1829 superior intelligence, advanced composition abilities, and exceptional memorization proficiency) and those that describe Smith using oral performance skills beyond those previously demonstrated as humanly possible (e.g. the ability to dictate thousands of first-draft phrases that are also refined final-draft sentences). *Visions in a Seer Stone* will be most useful to individuals who, like the author, are willing to accept these assumptions. To more skeptical readers, the theory presented regarding the origin of the Book of Mormon will be classified as incomplete or inadequate.

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Brian C. Hales

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Abstract: *Within the genre of Book of Mormon studies, William L. Davis's* Visions in a Seer Stone *presents readers with an innovative message that reports how Joseph Smith was able to produce the words of the Book of Mormon without supernatural assistance. Using oral performance skills that Smith ostensibly gained prior to 1829, his three-month "prodigious flow of verbal art and narrative creation" (7) became the Book of Mormon. Davis's theory describes a two-part literary pattern in the Book of Mormon where summary outlines (called "heads) in the text are consistently expanded in subsequent sections of the narrative. Termed "laying down heads," Davis insists that such literary devices are anachronistic to Book of Mormon era and constitute strong evidence that Joseph Smith contributed heavily, if not solely, to the publication. The primary weaknesses of the theory involve the type and quantity of assumptions routinely accepted throughout the book. The assumptions include beliefs that the historical record does not support or even contradicts (e.g. Smith's 1829 superior intelligence, advanced composition abilities, and exceptional memorization proficiency) and those that describe Smith using oral performance skills beyond those previously demonstrated as humanly possible (e.g. the ability to dictate thousands of first-draft phrases that are also refined final-draft sentences).* Visions in a Seer Stone *will be most useful to individuals who, like the author, are willing to accept these assumptions. To more skeptical readers, the theory*

presented regarding the origin of the Book of Mormon will be classified as incomplete or inadequate.

From the first moment in 1830 when Joseph Smith held the newly-printed Book of Mormon in his hands declaring that it came by "the gift and power of God,"[1] secularists have rejected all claims of divine assistance. Instead, they have searched for alternate explanations that employ natural forces and human abilities to generate all 269,320 words of the text.[2] Over the ensuing century, two theories dominated the explanatory landscape (see Figure 1). Starting in 1833, a conspiracy involving the Spaulding manuscript prevailed until the document was rediscovered in 1884.
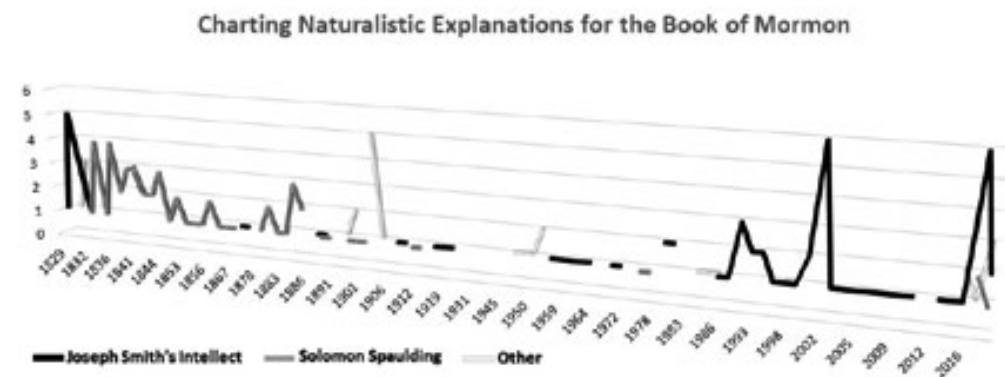
Charting Naturalistic Explanations for the Book of Mormon

Figure 1. Charting the prevailing secular explanations for Joseph Smith's writing of the Book of Mormon.

Since then, the most popular hypothesis has been that Joseph Smith's *intellect* was sufficient to verbally compose all the verses, although details of how he did it have never been proposed.[3] If asked, "What skills would be needed to dictate a book like the Book of Mormon?" The answer has

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1. 1830 Book of Mormon Title page.

2. 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, February 18, 2019, 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/.

3. 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.

been, "The skills Joseph Smith possessed in 1829." If asked, "What skills did Joseph Smith possess in 1829?" The answer has been, "All the skills needed to dictate the Book of Mormon." Even without any details of the methodology Smith ostensibly employed, the circular logic of the intellect theory remains valid for many skeptics.

William L. Davis's *Visions in a Seer Stone* (hereafter *VSS*) potentially changes this long-standing dynamic by describing, perhaps for the first time since 1829, how Joseph Smith was able to generate all the sentences of the Book of Mormon naturally. Davis never fully discards the possibility that inspiration played a role, but such influences are never requisite to complete the project.

A Survey of *VSS*'s Theory

Regardless of one's position concerning the actual origin of the Book of Mormon, *VSS* is groundbreaking because of the level of detail it presents to support its specific thesis. These chapter synopses highlight these details.

Preface and Introduction

VSS begins by describing how "the Book of Mormon contains an enormous amount of nineteenth-century material that permeates both the content and structure of the work" (x). Since it purports to be a history of ancient Americans, the presence of nineteenth-century elements in the text might be unexpected. *VSS* carves out a couple of explanations for Latter-day Saints: "the nineteenth-century anachronisms in the Book of Mormon can then be framed as God's alterations to the ancient record, which He transmitted to Smith via the seer stone" (x) or "for those who believe that Smith actively participated in a literal translation, the nineteenth-century elements can be understood as Smith's personal contributions to the translation project" (x).

After allowing for these possibilities, *VSS* lays out a theory where supernatural influences are unnecessary: "I will often streamline the discussion by referring to the work as the result of Smith's individual creative efforts" (xi). As the result, the 1830 Book of Mormon is described "as a script, or a transcript, of Smith's performative process — the artifact of a grander, multifaceted oratorical effort" (2) and as "one of the longest recorded oral performances in the history of the United States" (2). In this performance, "Smith made use of several techniques that facilitated the process of oral composition, including such methods as

- the semi-extemporaneous amplification of skeletal narrative outlines,

- the use of formulaic language in biblical and pseudo-biblical registers,
- rhetorical devices common in oral traditions,
- and various forms of repetition (e.g. recycled narrative patterns),
- [and] other traditional compositional strategies" (3; bullets added).

Joseph Smith "absorbed these techniques from multiple avenues" (91) that were found in the "oratorical culture in early nineteenth-century America" (2) where he was raised to age twenty-three:

- daily family Bible reading (3, 40)
- domestic education (3, 31)
- Sunday schools (3, 54, 111, 217)
- church attendance (3, 58)
- introductory composition lessons in common schools (3, 16, 78)
- participation in a variety of voluntary societies for self-improvement, such as juvenile literary and debate societies (3, 193)
- household fireside storytelling practices (3, 166, 167, 193)
- public orations (3, 16, 21)
- classroom recitation exercises (3, 82, 138)
- visits to libraries and bookstores (57, 208)
- sermons in churches (3, 4, 16, 20)
- camp meeting revivals (3, 16, 36, 65, 112, 114)
- involvement as a Methodist "exhorter" (3, see below)

Prior to even beginning chapter one, *VSS* has set the stage for Joseph Smith as a type of thespian-narrator possessing all the human skills necessary to orally perform the Book of Mormon recitation.

Chapter One: "Seer Stones and Western Esotericism"

Chapter one provides additional historical context by discussing Joseph Smith's involvement with seer stones and his treasure-seeking in the years prior to 1827. "The impulse to resist or embellish the dogmas and power structures of established religions encouraged eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Seekers to look outside the boundaries of traditional Christianity, where a panoply of philosophies and practices awaited the curiosity of those who sought alternative systems of belief among the

various traditions of Western esotericism" (9). "Smith's use of a seer stone to produce the Book of Mormon … offers a view into the mystical and financial economies of ritualism, religious experimentation, and spiritual seeking among early Americans" (13).

Chapter Two: "Laying Down Heads in Written and Oral Composition"

Chapter two introduces a discovery regarding Joseph Smith's narrative techniques that becomes a bedrock theme throughout *VSS*. "Smith's 1832 history begins with an opening paragraph that provides the reader with a sketch outline of the historical events that Smith wished to emphasize in his narrative" (14).[4] *VSS* elaborates:

> Smith's method of using a preliminary outline, or, as more commonly termed, a "skeleton" of "heads" (an outline formed with key summarizing phrases) to organize and arrange his 1832 historical narrative, was a standard technique of composition in the early nineteenth century. The explicit use of the skeletal sketch in the opening of the history, marking each stage in the sequence of the narrative with a summarizing phrase, provides one of several expressions of the method commonly known as "laying down heads." (16)

Technically, the term "laying down heads" refers to speakers or writers who present "formal partitions"[5] in their presentations by declaring to their audiences "the heads or chief topics of discourse" that will be presented in the forthcoming material.[6] "The heads of a sermon," writes François Fénelon in his 1845 book, *The Preacher and Pastor*, "are great assistances to the memory and recollection of a hearer. They serve also to fix his attention. They enable him more easily to keep pace with the progress of the discourse; they give him pauses and resting-places, where he can reflect on what has been said, and look forward to what is to follow."[7]

VSS further explains: "Laying down heads" involves "two basic steps: first, the speaker or author created a skeletal outline of his or her

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4. See "History, circa Summer 1832," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1.

5. François Fénelon et al.*, The Preacher and Pastor* (Andover, NY: Allen, Morrill and Wardwell, 1845), 113n2.

6. George Campbell, *Lectures on Pulpit Eloquence* (London: John Bumpus, 1824), 275.

7. Fénelon et al.*, The Preacher and Pastor*, 113n2.

intended composition by using a sequence of key phrases ('heads') that concisely summarized each of the main topics, issues, or divisions of an idea contained within the overall passage that followed. Second, using this skeletal outline as a reference guide, the speaker or author would then elaborate on each key phrase, expanding it into a fully developed passage of oral address or text" (16).

VSS mentions "laying down heads" over 100 times as it argues that Smith borrowed this technique and used it in his personal sermons and histories, as well as the Book of Mormon: "Smith dictated the majority of the opening skeletal outline to one of his scribes … This same method, it should be observed, is consistent with Smith's production of the Book of Mormon" (21). "Smith's method of laying down heads for his historical narratives emerges as the most prominent and visible compositional feature of the Book of Mormon" (122).

Chapter Three: Revival Sermons in the Burned-Over District

The third chapter discusses how and where Joseph Smith would have learned about laying down heads. Within the "whirlwind of religious activity" in western New York, "Joseph Smith would experience a range of revivalist preaching unlike anything he had previously encountered" (33). The speaking techniques of those preachers involved a specific pattern. First, "the preparation of written skeletal outline of a sermon." Second, "the preparation of a written sermon skeleton." And third, "the preparation of a mental outline during study and meditation, which the preacher retained in his memory and used as a guide during performance, *without ever committing anything to paper*" (50–51; italics in original). "Smith inherited his oral techniques directly from this compositional and rhetorical milieu" (53).

Chapter Four: The King Follett Sermon

VSS offers Joseph Smith's April 7, 1844 King Follett sermon to further support that Joseph organized his sermons according to "laying down heads" (59–88). The claim is problematic because on that day Smith began at 3:00 pm (according to Wilford Woodruff) or 3:15 pm (according to Willard Richards) speaking about the recent death of Church member King Follett, ending at 5:30 pm (according to Thomas Bullock).[8] This

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8. See "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Willard Richards," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-willard-richards/1; "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff," https://

chapter in *VSS* is less useful because no verbatim text of the speech was recorded. Besides Bullock, Woodruff, and Richards, William Clayton also took notes, which were later amalgamated and printed in the Church's newspaper, *The Times and Seasons*.[9] None of these five accounts includes more than 5000 words.

Average orators speak between 100 and 150 words per minute. Even if Joseph Smith spoke at a very slow pace, he would have articulated over twice as many words in more than two hours as found in any of the available accounts. It could be argued that since we do not possess an accurate transcript of Joseph Smith's address, verifying nuanced characteristics like the use of headings is impossible. He probably did use summary phrases to introduce new ideas, but available evidences do not allow a strict conclusion.[10]

Chapter Five: Sermon Culture in the Book of Mormon

Chapter five seeks to further convince the reader that "the text of the Book of Mormon reveals how the pervasive sermon culture of Smith's world had firmly imprinted itself on his imagination, influencing the style, organization, and content of his prophetic voice" (89).

Besides the twenty-one printed headings in the Book of Mormon, (fourteen for chapters and seven for individual books), *VSS* identifies numerous other "concealed heads" (100–03). "Rather than announcing explicit and discrete heads for this sermon, Smith, like many of his contemporary semi-extemporaneous preachers, abandoned the preliminary announcement of each and every main topic in the sermon and substituted a general introduction instead … sermon construction and delivery thus reveals the presence of 'concealed heads,' or a 'concealed method,' rather than an overt, explicit style" (99–100). According to *VSS*,

www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/1; and "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock," https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/1.

9. Ibid.; "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton [23]," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/1; "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*," https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/1.

10. *VSS* also discusses Smith's January 29, 1843 "sermon on the Prodigal Son" (p. 19; see also pp. 20, 21, 49, 57, 59, 63, 66, 78, 89, and 199), which suffers from the same weakness.

the Book of Mormon is built on headings and heads, some overt and some hidden.

Addressing the actual source of the headings found in the Book of Mormon, *VSS* posits Joseph Smith had prepared a "mental outline" prior to dictating: "Whenever a sermon required information specific to the development of the narrative, Smith could prepare such main points beforehand, meditate on the key issues and information that he wanted to address, and then follow (however loosely) his mental outline in performance — all the while allowing for extemporaneous diversions and expansions along the way … Smith's approach to oral composition thereby reveals how he was able to produce lengthy passages in rapid and highly effective ways" (116).

Chapter Six: Constructing Book of Mormon Historical Narratives

Chapter six further elaborates on the two-step process of laying down heads introduced in chapter two, promoting the skeletal outlines as "anchors" to his dictation: "The careful preparation of a story outline — the management of the sequence of events, the dates and locations where they occur, and the characters involved — would have been a critical and central anchor for the entire Book of Mormon" (122). The carefully prepared outline then guided the dictation of sermons and historical narratives: "Smith composed the story by following the same sequence established in the prefatory outline, using each of the opening phrases as a narrative guidepost to anchor his semi-extemporaneous performance of the storyline. This relationship between the prefatory outline and the main body of the text also provides important information about the characteristics of Smith's oral style and the composition of the Book of Mormon" (137).

Chapter Seven: A Theory of Translation

Chapter seven begins by re-emphasizing a repeated theme regarding Joseph Smith's motives: "Smith believed that his process of constructing the text did, in fact, involve divine inspiration and guidance" (160), "Smith sincerely believed, to one extent or another, that the Book of Mormon represented an authentic history of ancient civilizations in the Americas" (165). By ostensibly preserving his sincerity, *VSS* assures its readers that Joseph need not be seen as a fraud, even as he tried to pass off a work of fiction as divine scripture. Readers should not attribute "his years-long process of preparation to deceptive motives" (165).

As observed above, the bulk of *VSS* discusses the presence of skeletal outlines and laying down heads in the text of the Book of Mormon. Chapter seven describes a more comprehensive "theory of translation" that briefly acknowledges additional steps were required: "The preparatory work was extensive; the process involved time, meditation, careful attention, and a good memory" (161).

Composing the Story Content: *VSS* recognizes that prior to the dictation, "a preliminary process of careful preparation and narrative structuring for all the stories" in the Book of Mormon occurred (161). In the years prior to 1829, Joseph Smith engaged in the "early development of story content" (165), "story episodes" (161), and "narrative scenarios" (161).

Composing the Outlines: Simultaneous with creating story content, Joseph Smith "spent several years constructing and revising preliminary outlines (not fully written manuscripts) that framed the work before dictating the current text in 1829. These outlines would have included the organization of such story elements as the many chronologies within the work" (163–64).

Memorization: "Smith would also have had an extensive amount of time to rehearse and familiarize himself with the characters and narratives, thus only requiring, as the text often demonstrates, the promptings of brief sketch outlines, individual mnemonic cues, or nothing more than his memory to recall story episodes. In fact, the large number of brief outlines and mnemonic cues in the Book of Mormon suggests that Smith was deeply and extensively familiar with the narratives, long before expanding them in the moment of performance" (164).

Wordsmithing: "The actual composition of the stories generally involved the expansion and amplification of summarizing outlines and mnemonic cues by means of semi-extemporaneous oral production" (161–62) in the real time performance.

To summarize, the years before 1829 involved composing and memorizing hundreds of stories and outlines. Then during the dictation, Joseph Smith recited the outlines and amplified them extemporaneously into the thousands of sentences his scribes recorded.

Adding Assumptions

A potential weakness of *VSS* involves the types and quantity of supportive evidence that are cited. Historical documentation is seldom provided

and is limited. Instead, multiple assumptions are built into its primary theory. These include:

1. Assuming ancient historians did not use summary headings in their historical compilations.
2. Assuming that the text of the Book of Mormon can be used as evidence of Smith's natural intellectual abilities in 1829.
3. Assuming that between 1823 and 1829 as a first-time novelist, Smith composed and outlined the "story content" (165) for most of the Book of Mormon using his own creativity.
4. Assuming that by age twenty-three, Smith developed a memorization system that enabled him to encode the stories and outlines that he had composed into his memory.
5. Assuming that during the dictation, Smith remembered the outlines and story ideas and then wordsmithed a long series of first-draft oral sentences that was also a highly refined sequence of final-draft sentences.

The remainder of this article will address these assumptions.

Assuming Book of Mormon Historians Would Not Use Summary Headings

The 1830 printing of the Book of Mormon contains 114 chapters (1981 edition has 240) and 15 books. Of these, fourteen chapters and seven books have "heads" or "headings," which serve as brief introductory outlines, ranging from eight to 163 words in length. (Figure 2 illustrates a heading in the original Book of Mormon.)

Page Number of Heading in the 1830 Book of Mormon	Heading Length (Words)	Pages between Headings	Type of Heading
323	8	7	Chapter
330	8	2	Chapter
332	8	16	Chapter
583	9	5	Chapter
514	11	69	Book
282	15	41	Chapter
239	17	6	Chapter
202	22	19	Chapter

Page Number of Heading in the 1830 Book of Mormon	Heading Length (Words)	Pages between Headings	Type of Heading
232	26	7	Chapter
59	28	84	Book
173	28	30	Chapter
348	29	59	Chapter
123	31	49	Book
476	34	38	Chapter
269	42	13	Chapter
426	45	27	Chapter
245	48	24	Chapter
452	48	23	Book
221	68	11	Book
407	106	19	Book
5	163	54	Book
588	END		

For the vast majority of the Book of Mormon text that is not directly associate with these formal headings, *VSS* asserts "Smith also embeds these outlines in the middle of narratives, incorporating them into the development of the stories themselves" (128) as "concealed heads" (68; see also 99, 115). As discussed above, *VSS* considers virtually every line of the Book of Mormon to be a heading or an elaboration of a general heading.

Assuming Headings in the Book of Mormon are Anachronistic

A foundational observation for the general theory advanced in *VSS* is that the presence of headings in the Book of Mormon is anachronistic. That is, historians writing between 600 BCE and 400 CE would not have used such techniques so their presence in the Book of Mormon comes from a much later century:

> "Because this contemporary technique was ubiquitous in the early nineteenth century, and because Smith himself used this same technique to structure his other compositions, the presence of this common introductory and organizational method points to Smith as the most likely source." (189)
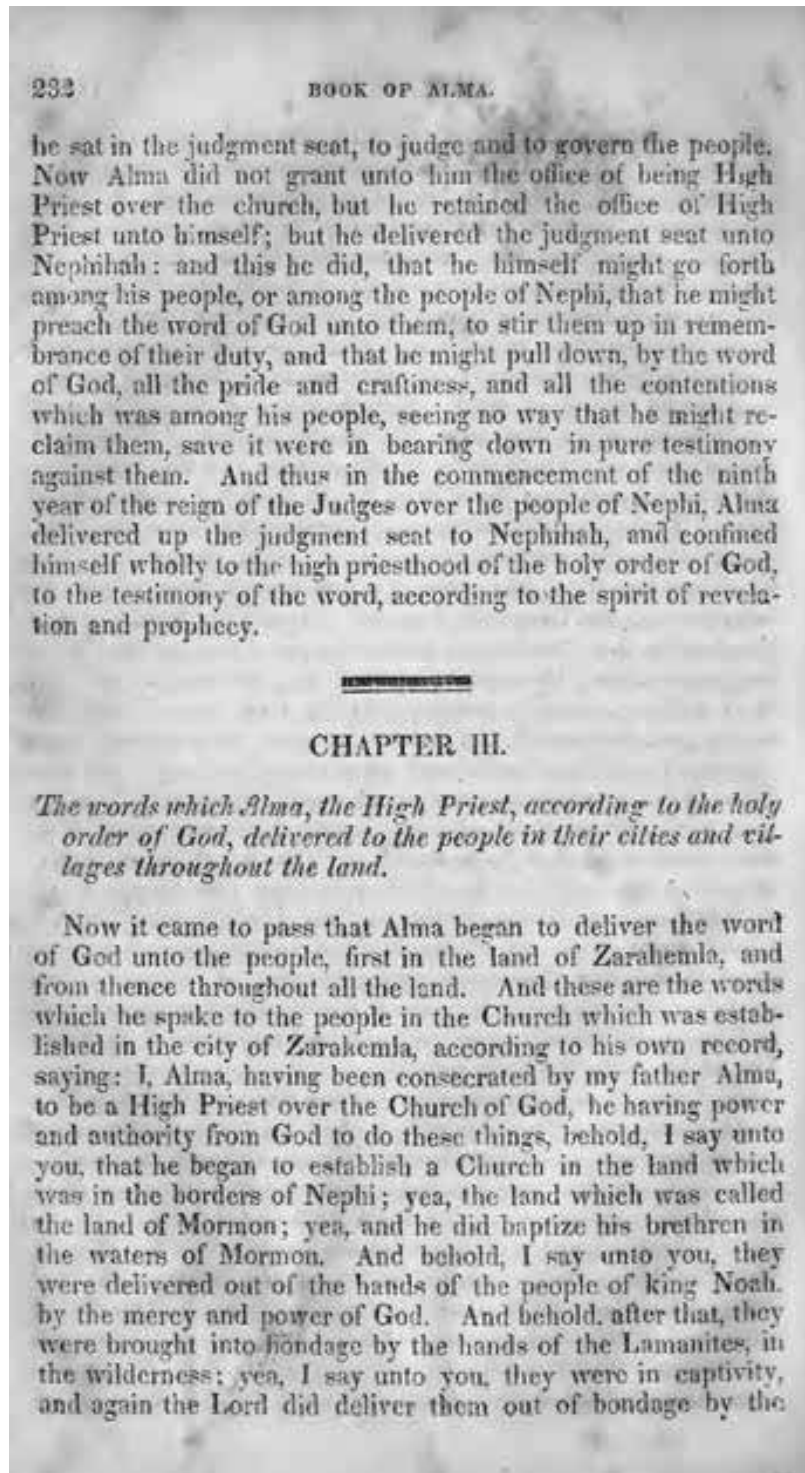
Figure 2. Page 232 from the 1830 Book of Mormon showing a heading for Alma chapter III (current chapter 5).

The "familiar sermon structure" in the Book of Mormon is a "glaring anachronism" (96) and the use of a "skeletal outline" is a "prominent anachronism." (124)

Headings in the Book of Mormon "all reflect the specific style and focus of an early career evangelical preacher in nineteenth-century America." (163)

Such "techniques emerged in a different place and time than the period in which the stories of the Book of Mormon occurred, signaling the authoritative presence of a modern hand." (159)

Despite these repeated claims, *VSS* spends little time demonstrating how ancient historians consistently failed to include chapter headings in their compilations.

Ancient Historians Used Chapter Summaries

A brief documentary review shows that placing explanatory prologues or introductions to written sections has been implemented by writers for millennia. Authors and orators did not wait until the modern era to recognize that adding preliminary summaries to discourses (whether spoken or written) could enhance the audience's comprehension.

Dating from the 4th century BCE, the philosopher Aristotle wrote: "In prologues, and in epic poetry, a foretaste of the theme is given, intended to inform the hearers of it in advance instead of keeping their minds in suspense." Aristotle described the usefulness of "a summary statement of your subject, to put a sort of head on the main body of your speech."[11]

Available evidence also supports that Josephus writing his *Antiquities of the Jews* in the late first century routinely used chapter headings,[12] an example of which is shown in Figure 3. Similarly, both Eusebius of Caesarea (composing *Ecclesiastical History* in the early fourth century CE; see Figure 4) and Augustine of Hippo (authoring *The City of God* in the early 5th century CE) placed summaries called "argumenta" preceding their chapters.[13]

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11. W. D. Ross, trans., *The Works of Aristotle, Volume XI, Rhetorica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 1415a-b.

12. Joseph Sievers, "The Ancient Lists of Contents of Josephus'*Antiquities*," in *Studies in Josephus and the Varieties of Ancient Judaism: Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume*, eds. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Joshua J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 278–79.
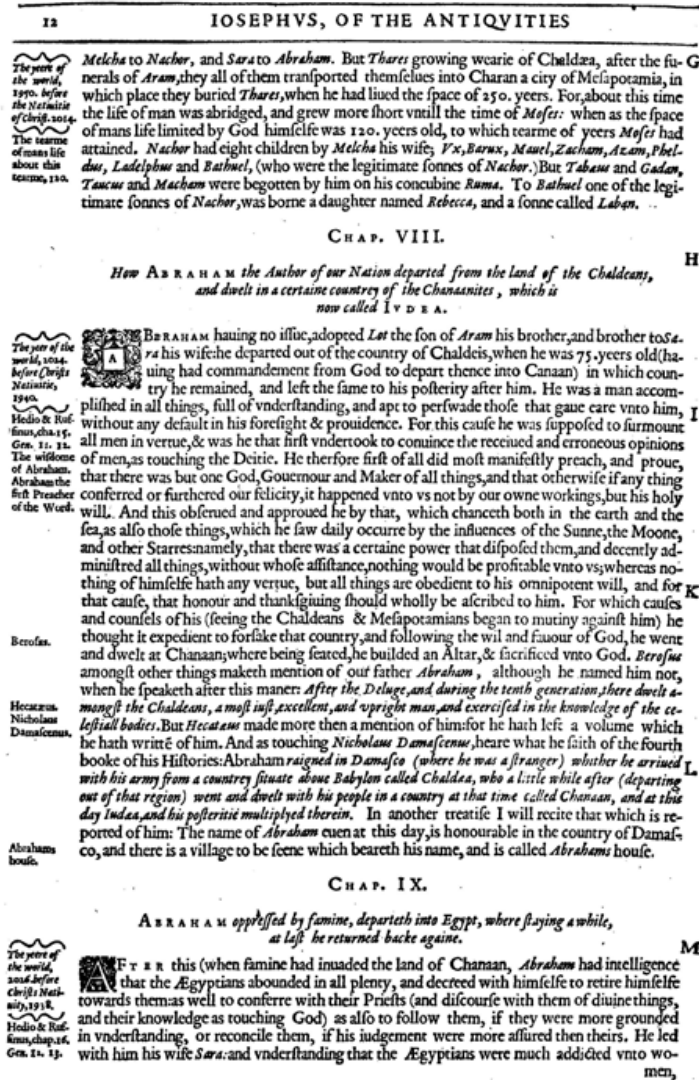
13. Ibid., 275.

Figure 3. This page from *Famous and Memorable Workes of Josephus* shows chapter headings originally included by Josephus in the first century and marginalia summaries by the translator, Thomas Lodge.[14]

It could be argued any historians writing in any time and place would soon realize that giving an opening outline before elaborating could enhance the audience's understanding. This intuitive process is not particularly complex, but self-evident. Authors may not have called it "laying down heads" until the 19th century, but additional research shows it was employed thousands of years before Joseph Smith's birth; an example is shown in Figure 5.

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14.   Thomas Lodge, trans., *Famous and Memorable Workes of Josephus, a Man of Much Honor and Loearning Among the Jewes* (London: G. Bishop et al, 1602), 12.

Figure 4. A representative page from *The ancient ecclesiastical histories of the first six hundred years after Christ* shows two chapter headings, which are included throughout the entire work.[15]

This data seems to contradict the assumption that writers in 540 BCE (Nephi or Jacob) or 400 CE (Mormon or Moroni) would not have realized the value of summary headings and would not have inserted them in their writings. Proving the composition techniques that Nephite writers would have employed is impossible, but multiple evidences show that reserving such methodologies to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries is unjustified.

15. Eusebius, Socrates, and Evagrius, *The ancient ecclesiastical histories of the first six hundred years after Christ, written in the Greek tongue by three learned historiographers* (London: Thomas Vautrou Hierdwelling, 1577), 3.
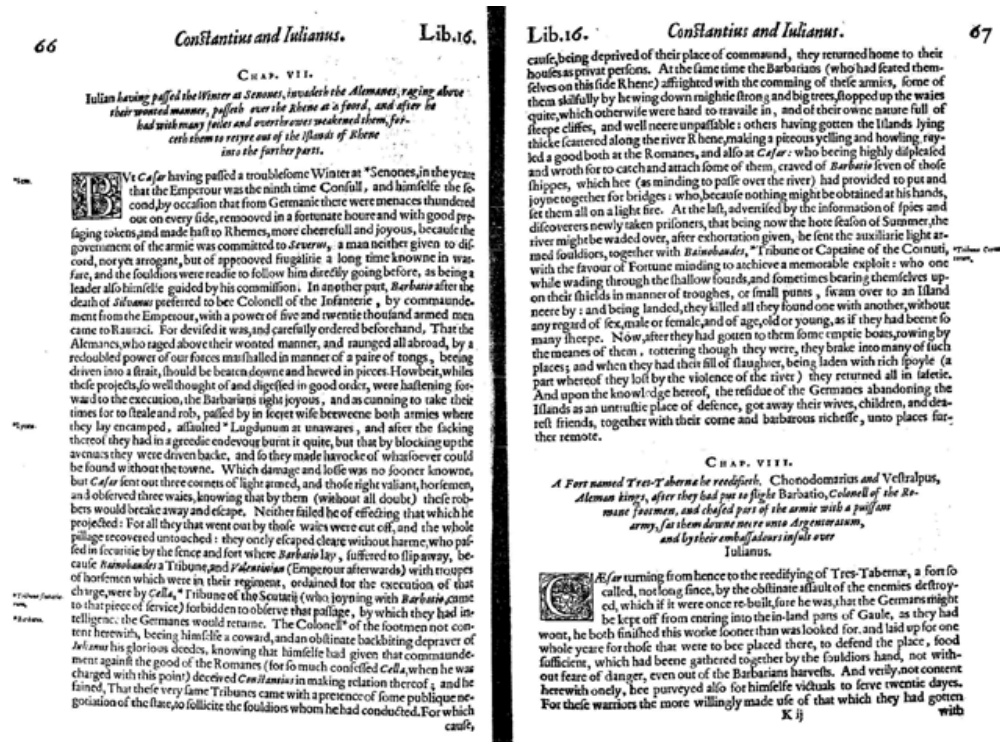
Figure 5. Philemon Holland, *The Roman Historie Containing Such Acts and Occurrents as Passed Under Constantius, Iulianus, Iovianus, Valentinianus, And Valens, Emperours*, (London: Printed by Adam Islip, An. 1609), 66–67.

Assuming that the Text of the Book of Mormon is Evidence of Joseph Smith's Natural Intellectual Abilities in 1829

In its opening pages, *VSS* declares perhaps its most important assumption, that Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon using his "individual creative efforts" in 1829 (xi). For *VSS*, the primary question is not, "Where did all the words come from?" but "What intellectual methods did Joseph Smith employ as he generated all the words?"

VSS notes: "The historical records addressing Smith's habits of reading, study, meditation, and exhortation are spare and contested for his pre–Book of Mormon years" (58). Overcoming this lack of supportive historical evidence is facilitated by rejecting Smith's claims that divine influences were ultimately responsible. Instead, by assuming he created the text using his natural abilities, the text can then be used as evidence of his natural abilities at the time of the Book of Mormon dictation. Contradictions and silences in the historical record can be countered by appeals to the content of the Book of Mormon narrative. This occurs throughout *VSS* with language like "the text reveals" (120,137,147, 161, 189, etc.) and "the text of the Book of Mormon provides important clues" (148).

Smith's method of composition reveals an advanced understanding of nineteenth-century compositional strategies and a fluency in their techniques. Such evidence undermines the hagiographical accounts of Smith as an ignorant farm boy and further uncovers the presence of a familiar (and constricting) trope: the humble and illiterate but righteous man, who, in spite of his lack of formal training and education, is chosen by God to reveal important truths to mankind and to confound the wise and cynical men of the world. (194)

Naturalists who already believe Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon using his human skills will agree with this assumption as it is applied repeatedly throughout *VSS*. Indeed, they may argue no other approach should be considered. Skeptical observers may recognize that every time *VSS* references the text of the Book of Mormon to support its primary theory, it is appealing to evidence that is based upon an assumption. That assumption is unproven historically but vigorously accepted contemporaneously and is different from data derived from the historical record.

Assuming Joseph Smith Possessed Extraordinary Composition Skills in 1829

VSS assumes that "Smith began his work on the Book of Mormon long before he actually started to dictate the text … the production of the work … involves a scenario in which he announced the existence of the gold plates containing the narrative of the Book of Mormon in September 1823" (163). From that point, "Smith would have had a total of five and a half years from Moroni's first visit" (165).

During that time, Smith composed all the "narrative structure of his stories, [including] their placement within the overall plan of his epic work" (151). "The stories were carefully planned, with preliminary summaries and embedded outlines that revealed the shape of individual episodes, along with how those episodes fit within the larger scheme of the entire work" (158). Specifically, his time was spent "generating and developing ideas, choosing topics to address, establishing sequences of events, choosing names and places, and making any possible revisions along the way" (143). To summarize, Joseph spent those years producing "the sequence and contents of the narratives in the overall construction of the Book of Mormon" (147).

Concurrent with the composition of the content, *VSS* reports Smith was also "constructing and revising preliminary outlines (not fully written manuscripts) that framed the work" (163). These "outlines" are referred to hundreds of times in *VSS*, often with adjective descriptors such as "skeletal outlines" (16, 18, 20, 21, 22, etc.), "memorized outlines" (17, 22, 72, 87), "mental outlines" (17, 22, 31, 42, etc.), "preliminary outlines" (16, 18, 67, 116, etc.), and "opening outlines" (21, 22, 96, 127, etc.). According to *VSS*, these outlines were fully produced by 1829 and constituted "a master plan for the entire Book of Mormon" (144).

Lucy Mack Smith's Recollection

In support of Joseph Smith's 1823 compositional skills, *VSS* references Lucy Mack Smith's recollection:[16]

> 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;[17] their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life with them.[18]

16. 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.)

17. Kevin Christensen points out that the Book of Mormon "has no descriptions of people riding animals in over 500 pages that include several major migrations and 100 distinct wars. It provides no notably detailed descriptions of clothing (other than armor) and no detailed descriptions of the structure of later buildings. The most detail we get involves descriptions of fortifications with palisaded walls and ditches" ("Playing to an Audience: A Review of Revelatory Events," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 28 [2018]: 75).

18. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 85. Lucy reports these activities occurred after September 22, 1823. See also Wandle Mace's 1890 account ("Wandle Mace autobiography" [unpublished manuscript, 1890],

"Lucy's account provides intriguing information that offers clues concerning the early stages of the creation of the Book of Mormon" (167). *VSS* portrays these recitals as the tip of an oratory iceberg of Joseph's private Book of Mormon composition activities: "If Lucy's reminiscence is accurate, then this collection of raw story materials suggests that young Joseph was in the earliest stages of his preparation during those evening storytelling adventures around the family hearth" (168).

Assuming Training in Composition

Basic to any author's effort to compose a book is a rudimentary understanding of vocabulary, linguistics, grammar, and semantics. Equally important would be a fundamental knowledge of English composition and rhetoric. *VSS* asserts that Joseph Smith received "introductory composition lessons in common schools" (3). "Many of the oral techniques … were integral components of introductory writing instruction in common schools, with lessons involving the composition of 'themes,' various imitation exercises, and a variety of short and expanded essays" (4).

In addition, *VSS*'s author, William L. Davis published a 2016 article, "Reassessing Joseph Smith Jr.'s Formal Education," where he dismisses as "rhetorical effect," Joseph's recollection that he was "deprived of the benefit of an education … [and] merely instructed in reading, writing and the ground rules of arithmetic."[19] Instead, Davis asserts that Joseph's school curriculum would have been "more accurately depicted" if he had included: "reading, writing, arithmetic, basic rhetoric, *composition*, geography, and history" (emphasis added).[20]

Unfortunately, Davis does not provide supportive evidence showing that Joseph Smith's district school included composition training or that

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44, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=bdd8f2f5-fbd2-4e83-b4b3-ceea5fcc70d0). Concerning Mace's memory, the account is very late and Dan Vogel points out that "he was obviously influenced by the 1853 publication of Lucy's History, which must be taken into account" (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:451).

19. Joseph Smith, "History of Joseph Smith By Himself" (unpublished manuscript, 20 July-27 Nov, 1832), 1.

20. William Davis, "Reassessing Joseph Smith Jr.'s Formal Education," *Dialogue* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 11–12. Two decades later when Orson Pratt advertised subjects to be taught at the "University of Nauvoo," the list included reading, history, geography, grammar, arithmetic, philosophy, chemistry, astronomy, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, integral calculus and Newton's Principia," but not "composition" or "rhetoric." (*The Wasp*, September 24, 1842.)

it existed anywhere in rural New York in the 1820s.[21] "The great majority of the one-room elementary schools which sprang up over America in the early nineteenth century" wrote R. Freeman Butts and Lawrence A Cremin in *A History of Education in American Culture*, "were simple institutions providing a simple educational fare … Reading, spelling, writing, and arithmetic constituted the principle elements in the offering."[22]

If Smith received training in composition, it is unclear what writing instruments he would have used or what writing surfaces he would have written upon. In the 1820s, paper for writing was expensive and could be difficult to obtain in rural America. The original copy of the Book of Mormon was penned on five different types of paper, indicating that finding paper may have been a challenge.[23] Joseph Knight, Sr. remembered bringing "a barrel of mackerel and some lined paper for writing," to Joseph during the weeks of translation.[24] Assumptions that Smith had ready-access to paper sheets or "a common 'blank book'" go beyond the evidence (164; see also 158, 184 and 190).

Joseph Smith as a First-Time Novelist

As Joseph Smith's first book, the 269,320-word Book of Mormon stands out in several ways. Generally, a "short story" may be defined as containing up to 10,000 words, a "novelette" to 18,000, a "novella" to 40,000, and a novel as "a long work of fiction of 40,000 or more."[25]

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21. In his PhD dissertation, Davis acknowledges: "When Joseph Smith received his education, school children did not yet have books specifically designed for composition." William L. Davis, "Performing Revelation: Joseph Smith's Oral Performance of *The Book of Mormon*" (PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2016), 136.

22. 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: The MacMillan Company, 1904), 133; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York* (London: William Baynes and Son, 1823), 4:461, 490.

23. Royal Skousen, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 37.

24. Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knights Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1977): 36. Knight reported that months earlier he gave "Joseph a little money to Buoy paper to translate." (Ibid., 35.)

25. H. Thomas Milhorn and Howard T. Milhorn, *Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the Craft* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2006), 3.

The Book of Mormon's verbosity may have made it the longest book—among all those classified as *fiction* — printed in 1830.[26]

As a first-time book author, Smith's education and age, accompanying the length and reading difficulty of the Book of Mormon, place him in a unique position when compared to other youthful authors. The Book of Mormon is longer, containing fifty percent more words than the next longest novel and has a higher reading grade level than any other book written by an author 24 years of age or younger.[27]

Author	Education at Time of Publication	First Book Title	Age when Published	Word Count	Reading Grade Level[28]
Mary Shelley	Home tutoring	Frankenstein	21	51,460	4–5
F. Scott Fitzgerald	College	This Side Of Paradise	24	53,940	6–7
Amelia Atwater-Rhodes	High school	In the Forests of the Night	15	54,560	4–5
Gordon Korman	High school	I Want to Go Home!	18	57,040	n/a
Alexandra Adornetto	Secondary school	The Shadow Thief	14	64,480	6–7
S.E. Hinton	High school	The Outsiders	19	69,440	3–4
Taylor Caldwell	Public schools	The Romance of Atlantis	12	73,320	n/a
Zlata Filipović	Public schools	Zlata's Diary	13	74,400	3–4
Nancy Yi Fan	Secondary school	Swordbird	14	79,360	3–4
Catherine Webb	Secondary school	Mirror Dreams	16	97,200	n/a

26. Multiple computer searches of books published in 1830 performed by the author have failed to identify any fictional works with over 269,000 words.

27. Modified from Hales, "Curiously Unique," 159–61.

28. Modified from Lexile, "Typical Reader Measures by Grade," https://lexile.com/educators/measuring-growth-with-lexile/lexile-measures-grade-equivalents/. The Lexile Framework for Reading, Publisher Report, containing the certified Lexile score for the text of the 1830 Book of Mormon was issued August 17, 2017, commissioned by Brian C. Hales for LDS Answers, Inc. Due to the lack of an ISBN number for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, the Lexile score is not included in the Lexile score database at https://fab.lexile.com/.

Author	Education at Time of Publication	First Book Title	Age when Published	Word Count	Reading Grade Level[28]
Pamela Brown	High school	The Swish of the Curtain	17	99,200	n/a
Alex Harris	College	Do Hard Things	18	99,200	n/a
Percy Bysshe Shelley	Secondary school	Zastrozzi	18	101,600	n/a
Arthur Rimbaud	Secondary school	A Season in Hell	19	106,020	7–8
Eleanor Catton	Secondary school	The Rehearsal	23	106,160	n/a
Helen Oyeyemi	Secondary school	The Icarus Girl	21	109,120	n/a
Zoe Sugg	College	Girl Online	24	109,120	3–4
Malala Yousafzai	Private school	I Am Malala	16	114,080	5–6
Carson McCullers	College	The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter	23	114,080	3–4
Maureen Daly	High school	Seventeenth Summer	21	119,040	7–8
Georgette Heyer	High school	The Black Moth	19	120,900	n/a
Flavia Bujor	Secondary school	The Prophecy of the Stones	14	124,000	5–5
Matthew Gregory Lewis	College	The Monk	21	128,960	5–6
Isamu Fukui	High school	Truancy	15	133,920	5–6
Jessica Khoury	College	Origin	22	133,920	3–4
Esther Earl	High school	This Star Won't Go Out	20	138,800	5–6
Beth Reekles	Secondary school	The Kissing Booth	16	138,880	3–4
Christopher Paolini	High School	Eragon	19	163,680	3–4
Samantha Shannon	College	The Bone Season	22	173,600	n/a

Author	Education at Time of Publication	First Book Title	Age when Published	Word Count	Reading Grade Level[28]
Suresh Guptara	Secondary school	The Conspiracy of Calaspia	18	186,000	n/a
Joseph Smith	Frontier school	Book of Mormon	24	269,320	8–9

As Robert Rees points out, famous authors do not produce their masterful works as their first compositions. Each accomplished author demonstrates "a long gestation period during which he 'tried out' his ideas, metaphors, allusions, coloring (tone), points of view, personae, and rhetorical styles before tackling a larger, more complex, and more sophisticated form, whether as a collection of poems and essays (Emerson), an extended personal narrative (Thoreau), a novel (Hawthorne and Melville) or a major poem (Whitman). There are no parallel try works for Joseph Smith, nor any evidence of his apprenticeship as a writer. In fact, all evidence points in the opposite direction."[29]

An Unkind Historical Record

A concession secularists continually resist is the reality that the historical record is immovably unkind to assumptions that Smith possessed remarkable intellectual skills in 1829 that could be applied to authoring a book. Isaac Hale 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."[30] Prior to his baptism into the Church, W. W. Phelps wrote on January 15, 1831 affirming "Joseph Smith is a person of very limited abilities in common learning."[31]

In 1881, John H. Gilbert, the Book of Mormon typesetter and non-Latter-day Saint, was asked: "How do you account for the production of the Book of Mormon, Mr. Gilbert, then, if Joseph Smith was so illiterate?"

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29. Robert A. Rees, "Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance: An Update," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 15, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-the-book-of-mormon-and-the-american-renaissance-an-update/.

30. Isaac Hale quoted in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed: or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, for Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 262–63.

31. Ibid., 273.

He answered: "Well, that is the difficult question. It must have been from the Spaulding romance — you have heard of that, I suppose. The parties here then never could have been the authors of it, certainly."[32]

An 1879 interview by William Blair of Joseph Smith's brother-in-law Michael Morse (who married Emma's sister Tryal) relates:

> Mr. Morse is not, and has never been a believer in the prophetic mission of Joseph.
>
> He states that he first knew Joseph when he came to Harmony, Pa., an awkward, unlearned youth of about nineteen years of age …
>
> Bro. [Edwin] Cadwell enquired as to whether Joseph was sufficiently intelligent and talented to compose and dictate of his own ability the matter written down by the scribes. To this Mr. Morse replied with decided emphasis, No. He said he [Morse] then was not at all learned, yet was confident he had more learning than Joseph then had.
>
> Bro. Cadwell enquired how he (Morse) accounted for Joseph's dictating the Book of Mormon in the manner he had described. To this he replied he did not know.[33]

Multiple other accounts describe Joseph Smith as ignorant[34] or illiterate.[35] No account from those who knew him in 1829 portray Smith as intelligent enough to dictate the Book of Mormon.[36]

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32. William H. Kelley, "The Hill Cumorah, and the Book of Mormon," *Saints' Herald* 28 (1 June 1881): 165–66.

33. See Michael Morse quoted in William W. Blair to Editors, 22 May 1879, *Saints' Herald* 26 (15 June 1879): 190–91.

34. See George Peck, ed., "Mormonism and the Mormons," *Methodist Quarterly Review* 25 (1843): 112; Orlando Saunders, William Van Camp, and John H. Gilbert, quoted in "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine* 26 (August 1880): 198; John W. Barber and Henry Howe, *Historical Collection of the State of New York* (New York: S. Tuttle, 1841), 580–81.

35. Jonathan Hadley, "Golden Bible," *Palmyra Freeman,* August 11, 1829; Daniel Hendrix in "Origin of Mormonism. Joe Smith and His Early Habits. How He Found the Golden Plates. A Contemporary of the Prophet Relates Some Interesting Facts," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (May 14, 1893), 12; William H. Kelley, "The Hill Cumorah, and the Book of Mormon," *Saints' Herald* 28 (1 June 1881): 166.

36. Like *VSS*, many observers have accepted the assumption that Joseph Smith authored the text of the Book of Mormon and then use it as evidence of his 1829 intellectual abilities. See, for example, Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed*, 12. Direct references to Smith's education and cognitive capabilities by age twenty-three fail

Assuming Joseph Smith Possessed an Extraordinary Memory in 1829

VSS assumes that prior to 1829, Joseph Smith mentally composed the majority of the content to be included in the Book of Mormon and simultaneously committed all that data to memory. That content included material for nearly a hundred separate sermons, plotlines involving 209 distinct individuals,[37] detailed discussions of olive tree husbandry and ancient Israelite law, over one hundred guerilla warfare encounters, and a geography with at least 125 different topographical locations, and stories involving over 425 specific geographical movements.[38] Any details that were not memorized would have needed to be spontaneously created in real time during the dictation.

VSS describes how during the 1823 to 1829 period Smith used the "act of rehearsal" to "enhance" his "memory" (168). He "spent a long time with his stories — meditating on them … until he became sufficiently familiar with them for the stories to become entrenched in his mind. In doing so, such preparations and mental rehearsals would enhance his memory of the narratives" (143). "Smith would also have had an extensive amount of time to rehearse and familiarize himself with the characters and narratives" (164). The result, according to *VSS*, was Smith's brain brimming with all the "advanced knowledge" (140), "advanced awareness" (157), "intimate knowledge" (158), and "familiarization with its stories" (178) needed for his oratory debut.

Committing the Book of Mormon Outlines and General Content to Memory

How much rehearsal would be necessary to prepare Joseph Smith for what *VSS* characterizes as his oral performance? Any reader can answer by simply reviewing the 1830 Book of Mormon and deciding how many hours of repetition would be required to memorize details that would not be easily generated extemporaneously. Assuming Joseph Smith committed this amount of time to memorize is hampered by a couple of

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to attribute genius-level mental capacities or even exceptional intelligence (see Brian C. Hales, "Joseph Smith: Non-Author of the Book of Mormon," forthcoming).

37. See Robert J. Matthews, *Who's Who in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976); Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Book of Mormon Names," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:186.

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

observations.[39] First, while he was reportedly creating and committing all the mental outlines and stories to memory, he was also engaged in other activities (according to *VSS*):

- Attending up to seven years of district schooling (3, 4, 22).
- Working with his family clearing land and in other enterprises (5).
- Directing groups of treasure seekers with his seer stone (11–12, 171).
- Visiting bookstores and libraries to learn specific details about Biblical law, olive tree husbandry, warfare, and other subjects (76, 57).
- Examining maps of Middle Eastern geography to determine migration routes (vii, 171).
- Memorizing parts of the Bible (180).
- Listening to preachers at multiple camp gatherings, Sunday school meetings, and revivals (3, 16, 36).

A second concern involves the human limitations inherent in the memorization of such a large quantity of data by using rote repetition. Walter Ong, author of *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* argues that some kind of formulaic, patterned, or mnemonic memory system might be needed: "In an oral culture, to think through something in nonformulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It would not be abiding knowledge but simply a passing thought, however complex."[40] *VSS* addresses this by asserting that the outlines Joseph Smith memorized were filled with "mnemonic cues" (71, 76, 79, 96 etc.), that could help him recollect the stories and sermon core elements. *VSS* does not address how Smith was able to embed so many oratory elements in his memory so that a "mnemonic cue" in a remembered outline could reliably trigger the other memorized story elements. Instead, *VSS* assumes that it could and did happen.

39.　A topic not discussed in *VSS* involves Smith's assumed motives. If he sought power or money as an eighteen-year-old farmer in upstate New York, it is less intuitive to suppose that he would decide to spend five years mentally composing and rehearsing a manuscript like the Book of Mormon and then expecting that an oral dictation and publication would be successful.

40.　Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35.

VSS allows the possibility that Joseph Smith may have used a written manuscript. "Smith could have easily written the entire plan of the Book of Mormon on roughly a dozen sheets of paper" (158). "If Emma had stumbled across any possible notes, they would likely have consisted of truncated outlines and cryptic mnemonic cues. And given that her experience as a scribe pertained to the beginning of the translation process, she arguably would not have known if any such notes had anything to do with the work" (184). As discussed above, assumptions that Joseph Smith penned outlines or any other form of notes are based upon speculation.

Testing Joseph Smith's Memory

In 1836, Church leaders hired Joshua Seixas to teach Hebrew to forty students over the course of seven weeks beginning on January 26. Assessing Joseph Smith's ability to memorize is facilitated by reviewing his performance as he worked to learn Hebrew. Professors Elvira V. Masoura and Susan E. Gathercole observe: "Research has revealed a close link between language acquisition and the capacity of the verbal component of working memory."[41]

Historian Brent M. Rogers *et al* summarize Smith's participation:

> By all accounts, JS [Joseph Smith] was a diligent student of Hebrew. After Oliver Cowdery returned to Kirtland with "a quantity of Hebrew books" on 20 November 1835, JS commenced an earnest study of the language. Though he participated in the formal classes taught by Seixas, he also devoted considerable time to studying the language on his own. Between 23 November 1835 and 29 March 1836, JS's journal mentions his studying of Hebrew — whether in class, with colleagues, or by himself — no fewer than seventy times.[42]

Matthew Grey also observes: "In addition to attending his regular classes, Joseph asked Seixas for private study sessions, worked ahead on translation assignments, reviewed lessons on Sundays, and studied when

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41. Elvira V. Masoura and Susan E. Gathercole, "Phonological Short-term Memory and Foreign Language Learning," *International Journal of Psychology* 34, no. 5–6 (1999): 383.

42. Brent Rogers et al., *the Joseph Smith Papers: Documents Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), 216.

he was sick."[43] After completing the class on March 30, Seixas issued Joseph Smith a certificate:

> Mr Joseph Smith Junr has attended a full course of Hebrew lessons under my tuition; & has been indefatigable in acquiring the principles of the sacred language of the Old Testament Scriptures in their original tongue. He has so far accomplished a knowledge of it, that he is able to translate to my entire satisfaction; & by prosecuting the study he will be able to become a proficient in Hebrew.[44]

Here Seixas certified that after attending his class and studying Hebrew on at least seventy occasions, Joseph Smith could translate to his "entire satisfaction," but that he was not yet "proficient in Hebrew."

The twenty-four-year-old Orson Pratt also attended the sessions and was apparently the only other student to receive a certificate: "During the winter I attended the Heb. School about 8 weeks in which time I made greater progress than what I could have expected in so short a period. I obtained a certificate from J. Seixas, our instructor, certifying to my capability of teaching that language."[45] By comparison, Joseph Smith learned to translate without becoming proficient, but Orson Pratt comprehended enough to be certified as a teacher.

Linguist Noam Chomsky stresses the existence of "limitations on performance imposed by organization of memory."[46] These restrictions create performance boundaries for human cognitive function in any field requiring intellectual processing. Joseph Smith's well-documented episode learning Hebrew in 1836 identifies an apparent upward limit to his memory abilities seven years after dictating the Book of Mormon. At that time, his cognitive capacity to learn Hebrew was less than Orson Pratt's, six years his junior. By several standards, Pratt was intellectually

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43. Matthew J. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original:' Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, eds. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Religious Study Center, 2015), 271.

44. "Certificate from Joshua Seixas, 30 March 1836," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/certificate-from-joshua-seixas-30-march-1836/1

45. Elden J. Watson, comp., *The Orson Pratt Journals* (Salt Lake City: Elden Jay Watson, 1975), 75. See also "History of Orson Pratt," *LDS Millennial Star* 27 (Feb 11, 1865): 87.

46. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1965), 10.

gifted, but not superior to other geniuses in history and incapable of duplicating Smith's dictation of a near 270,000-word book from memory.

Assuming Joseph Smith Could Wordsmith an Oral First-Draft that is also a Refined Final-Draft in Real Time

As discussed above, *VSS* assumes that by April 7, 1829, Smith had mentally warehoused hundreds of thoughts, outlines, facts, and other linguistic data. These oratory elements would have been almost useless unless he could package them into polished phrases and paragraphs. As Linda Flowers and John Hayes, authors of "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," observe: "Having good ideas doesn't automatically produce good prose."[47]

VSS describes how Joseph Smith used his "semi-extemporaneous" performance skills (3, 4, 22, etc.) to dictate a protracted series of first-draft phrases that were also refined final draft sentences. In the interest of transparency and full disclosure, the intrinsic difficulties associated with this assumed activity must be comprehended by those willing to accept *VSS*'s overall theory.

A Naturalistic Description of Joseph Smith's Most Difficult Accomplishment

Helpful context might be found by answering the question, "What was the most difficult thing Joseph Smith ever accomplished?" from a naturalistic perspective. Possible responses include:

- Organizing a new church
- Creating a new theology that embraced and rejected aspects of predominant Christianity
- Leading a small army over hundreds of miles of terrain
- Rallying followers to build a temple, one of the largest structures in Ohio at the time
- Enduring over six months of incarceration under dreadful conditions
- Secretly introducing a plurality of wives and convincing women to marry him polygamously
- Acting as mayor for the largest city in Illinois in the 1840s
- Running for president of the United States

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47. Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 32, no. 4 (December 1981): 367.

While each of these achievements required Joseph Smith to meet and overcome challenges, arguably the most difficult feat was the real-time process of dictating nearly 7000 very long sentences — averaging almost 40 words each — that were so precisely-constructed that they needed no re-sequencing.[48] Figure 6 illustrates the enormity of this feat by comparing the Book of Mormon with other major literary works.

Average number of words per sentence

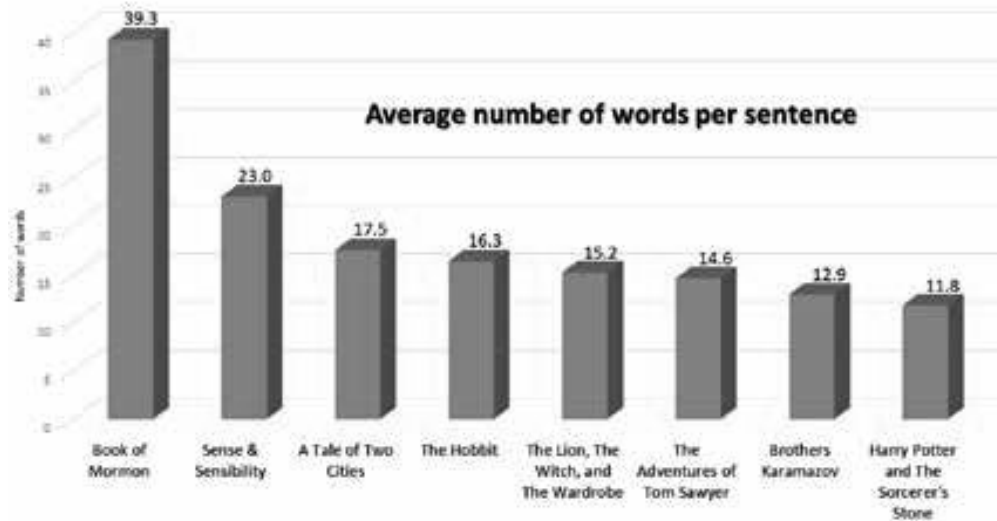| Book of Mormon | 39.3 |
Sense & Sensibility	23.0
A Tale of Two Cities	17.5
The Hobbit	16.3
The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe	15.2
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer	14.6
Brothers Karamazov	12.9
Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone	11.8

Figure 6. Comparing the sentence length of the Book of Mormon
to other literary works.

The Difficulty of Mentally Converting First-Draft Phrases into Final-Draft Sentences

The primary challenge of what *VSS* describes as Joseph Smith's semi-extemporaneous "oral performance" of the Book of Mormon involved the mental processing of all the data required to produce a continuous stream of final-draft sentences. Traditionally, book authors move from first-draft to final-draft through multiple written revisions. In her college textbook, *Steps to Writing Well*, Jean Wyrick emphasizes the importance of revising the initial drafts:

> The absolute necessity of revision cannot be overemphasized. All good writers rethink, rearrange, and rewrite large portions of their prose … Revision is a *thinking process* that occurs any time you are working on a writing project. It means looking

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48. Joseph Smith's dictation as recorded on the Original Manuscript contains no punctuation. Before printing, Book of Mormon typesetter John H. Gilbert added over 24,000 commas, nearly 6000 semicolons, and almost 7000 periods. See Roger Terry, "The Book of Mormon Translation Puzzle," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 183.

at your writing with a "fresh eye" — that is, reseeing your writing in ways that will enable you to make more effective choices throughout your essay … Revision means making important decisions about the best ways to focus, organize, develop, clarify, and emphasize your ideas … Virtually all writers revise after 'reseeing' a draft in its entirety.[49]

Other authors agree:

- Louis Brandeis, who served as an associate justice on the Supreme Court of the United States from 1916 to 1939, coined a common maxim for authors: "There is no good writing; there is only good rewriting."[50]
- Popular novelist and essayist Robert Louis Stevenson explicates: "When I say writing, O, believe me, it is rewriting that I have chiefly in mind."[51]
- Bernard Malamud, one of the best known American Jewish authors of the 20th century agrees: "First 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."[52]
- "I usually write about ten more or less complete drafts" confides Pulitzer Prize winner Tracy Kidder, "Each one usually though not always closer to the final thing."[53]
- Lynn Quitman Troyka writing in the *Simon & Shuster: Handbook for Writers* explains: "Writing takes time. Ideas do not leap onto paper in final, polished form. Not only do writers need to go through the various activities of the writing process, but they also need time to get distance from a draft so that they can revise with fresh eyes."[54]

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49. Jean Wyrick, *Steps to Writing Well*, 12th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 91–92; emphasis in original.

50. Louis Brandeis, quoted in George W. Pierce, "The Legal Profession," *The Torch* vol. XXX, no. 2 (April 1957): 8.

51. Robert Louis Stevenson, quoted in Carl Hoefier, *Creative Preaching and Oral Writing* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1978), 152

52. Lawrence Lasher, ed., *Conversations with Bernard Malamud* (Jackson, MS: U. of Mississippi Press, 1991), 58–59.

53. Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd, *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction* (New York: Random House, 2013), 147.

54. Lynn Quitman Troyka, *Simon & Shuster: Handbook for Writers* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:, 1987), 44.

- Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, declares: "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."[55]
- 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."[56]

Dozens, if not hundreds, of similar statements can be found in publications dealing with creative writing. In contrast, an extensive search of the literature fails to identify even one advocate of a process where a dictated first-draft should also be the final-draft. Neither does it appear that any genius-level authors have ever produced a book of even 50,000 words using this technique.[57] "In all of literary history there is not a single example to match such an accomplishment," observes Robert A. Rees. "If Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon out of his imagination and in the manner in which his scribes said he did (and we have no reason to disbelieve them), he is the only writer in human history to have accomplished such a feat."[58]

Human Mental Capacity and Real Time Editing

The reason why creative writers universally use written drafts to revise their manuscripts is undoubtedly due to the large number of literary variables that need to be manipulated to refine the text and finalize the

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55. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Random House, 1994), 21–22; emphasis in original.

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

57. One possible exception is Bertrand Russell's 71,613-word *Our Knowledge of the External World: As a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1914). He recalled that he dictated "the whole book without a moment's hesitation" to his stenographer (Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory and other Essays* [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956], 212). Biographer Ray Monk shows he had in fact been working on the manuscript for over three months and that the statement is, in fact, a "mythologised account" (Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude 1872–1921* [New York: The Free Press, 1996], 336).

58. Robert A. Rees, "Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance," *Dialogue* 35, no. 3 (2002): 102.

message. The process does not deal with single data chunks (individual words) alone, instead phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and even chapter-length word-strings are involved.

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 supporting that the human brain can process about seven "chunks" of data at a time. When the brain's cerebral "channel capacity" exceeds that number, 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.[59] 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.[60]

As shown in Figure 7, developing characters, stories, sermons, summary headings, and skeletal outlines to be included in the Book of Mormon would have been intellectually challenging to Joseph Smith. Likewise, cerebrally composing the initial phraseology by processing multiple converging pre-language data-streams from memory and imagination would have consumed significant intellectual bandwidth. Those first-draft phrases would have included word-blocks that varied in length, syntax, semantics, nuance, and significance. Mentally revising such linguistic collections into finished final-draft sentences that retained coherency with the previous paragraphs and that anticipated the messages of the next dictation would seemingly be the most difficult cognitive process to complete.

Noam Chomsky observes: "A record of natural speech will show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, and changes of plan in midcourse, and so on."[61] Practice would likely diminish such verbal miscues, but the Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon includes

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

60. 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.

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

very few, if any.[62] The first draft Joseph Smith dictated to his scribes went straight to the printer without any rewriting. For *Huffington Post* blogger Jack Kelly, the fact that Joseph Smith "did not revise a single word before its initial printing" was in his words, "jaw-dropping."[63]
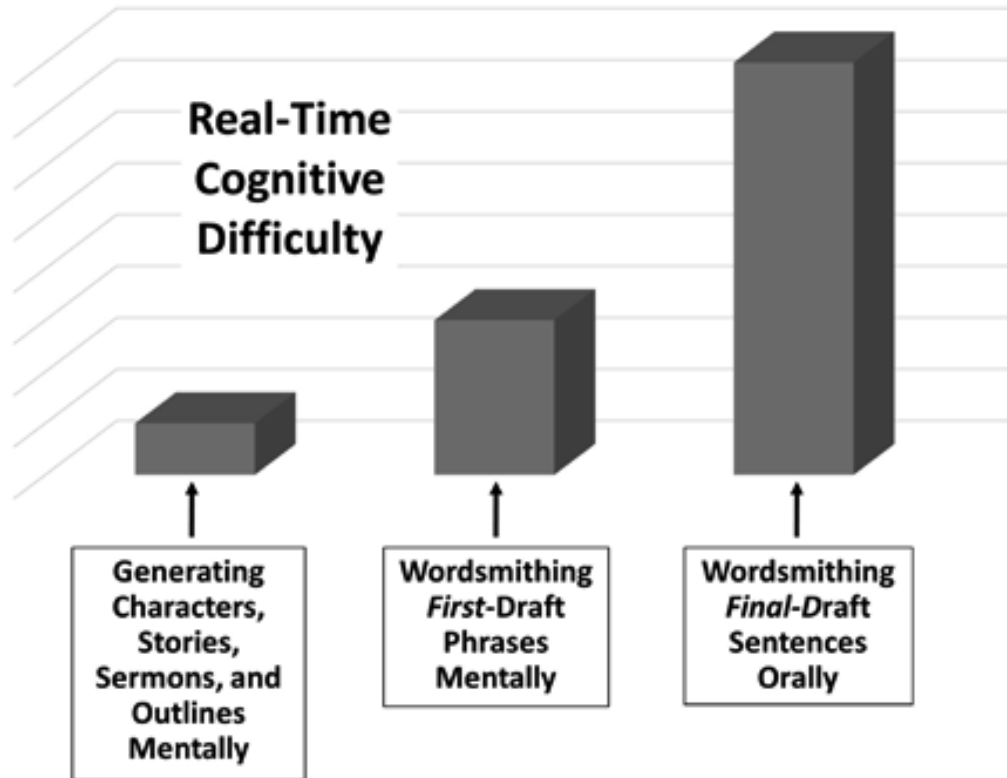

Figure 7. Comparing the relative difficulty of authorial tasks in real-time.

Joseph Smith made over a thousand edits in the wording in the 1837 and 1840 printings of the Book of Mormon.[64] Most were single- or double-word changes designed to update grammar and spelling. None involved restructuring or moving an entire sentence. Even accounting for all the subsequent textual alterations, the editorial clarity of the original dictation is remarkable.

Assuming Training as an Orator

According to *VSS*, Joseph Smith obtained the necessary rhetorical skills to dictate the Book of Mormon prior to age twenty three: "Whether at

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62. See Skousen, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*.

63. Jack Kelley, "Joseph Smith: Genius," *Huffington Post* (website), July 7, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thought-matters/joseph-smith-genius_b_10773964.html.

64. See Brian C. Hales, "Changing Critics' Criticisms of Book of Mormon Changes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 28 (2018): 49–64.

home, school, church, work, or any number of other social and civic gatherings, cultural institutions in post-revolutionary America taught, developed, and encouraged oratorical skills at a level unparalleled in twenty-first-century American practices" (2). The ability to amplify and expand outlines into finalized narratives was, according to *VSS*, "a skill common enough among revivalist preachers and, indeed, students in common school classrooms" (139). The "semi-extemporaneous composition techniques" (164) he learned were presumably sufficient to "flesh out" (22) and even "pursue extemporaneous tangents" (101) during the recitation.

In 1851, Orsamus Turner reported that Joseph Smith "was a very passable exhorter" at Methodist meetings.[65] *VSS* refers to Smith's training as an exhorter over twenty times (3, 33, 36–39, 42, 44, 47, 49, 58, 66, 78, 82, 105, 111, 114, 120).[66] "Smith's attendance at Methodist class meetings and his efforts as an unlicensed exhorter would have exposed him to a religious environment dedicated to the principles of rigorous education and systematic self-improvement" (39). "His training as a lay Methodist exhorter would have further imprinted the patterns, language, and topics of exhortation" (111). *VSS* concludes: "Joseph's participation was evidently sufficient for him to absorb a measure of Methodist preaching and exhortation techniques" (36).

However, *VSS* fails to inform readers that Joseph never formally joined the Methodists and his involvement with them lasted just a few months from the fall of 1824 to the winter of 1825.[67] Perhaps more problematic is that *VSS* does not mention that in the same book, Turner described Smith as "possessing less than ordinary intellect."[68] When placed in a fuller historical framework, assuming Smith received training and excelled as a Methodist exhorter is unsupported.

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65. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, N.Y.: Erastus Darrow, 1851), 214.

66. Davis also briefly refers to Orsamus Turner's statement that Smith was involved with the "juvenile debating club" (*VSS* 3; see Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve*, 213). In contrast, Davis's 2016 dissertation calls Smith "an adept and capable member of the juvenile debate society," (Davis, "Performing Revelation," 122), subsequently referring to his debate experiences nearly 100 times in the dissertation.

67. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:396.

68. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve*, 213.

Assuming Smith's Ability to Dictate Fluently and
Semi-Extemporaneously

VSS repeatedly emphasizes Joseph Smith's ability to first dictate an outline and then create the refined sentences semi-extemporaneously. Smith "dictated a skeletal outline of summarizing heads to his scribe, after which he amplified (or planned to amplify) each of the heads into fully developed passages" (17–18):

> The textual evidence clearly reveals that these structural tools, most obviously in the form of anticipatory narrative outlines, prompted and guided the semi-extemporaneous oral production of the work. These "prompts" allowed Smith the ability to move directly and fluently from carefully prepared mental "skeletons" and familiar mnemonic cues to the rapid dictation of the full text. Indeed, the process of combining these specific structuring devices with efficient oral performance techniques reflects the same compositional and semi-extemporaneous delivery methods in popular use among the evangelical preachers in Smith's own vibrant sermon culture. (190)

According to *VSS*, the actual talent that enabled Joseph Smith to create final-draft sentences in real time was one of advanced "improvisational techniques" (36): "The evidence also suggests that Smith's flexible semi-extemporaneous method left much of the actual language of the work — along with the amplification of narratives, sermons, tangential topics, and story elements — to improvisations in the moment of performance" (164).

In reality, asserting Joseph Smith could expertly improvise is more of a description than an explanation. It is like claiming the sun emits heat because it is hot, rather than describing how hydrogen atoms fuse to form helium in a process that radiates light and heat. It is true that some forms of behavior do not need detailed explanations, because they are so common. If I say, "John drove to town," I don't need to describe how he opened the door of his car, turned the ignition, pushed on the gas, and turned the steering wheel. Those events are so routine that listeners will assume they occurred without additional data.

Yet, assuming that Joseph Smith possessed the skills in 1829 to create nearly 7000 refined sentences as a continuous oral performance in fewer than three months is less justified because it is a process seemingly

unparalleled by intellectuals historically.[69] This assumption could represent a leap of logic that goes largely unrecognized by secularists due to a lack of proper scientific scrutiny or simply due to their confidence that since supernatural influences do not exist, a naturalistic explanation must exist, even if details are unavailable. "There is a relatively widespread conception that if individuals are innately talented," explain K. A. Ericsson et al. in the article "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," "they can easily and rapidly achieve an exceptional level of performance once they have acquired basic skills and knowledge." Significantly Ericsson adds: "Biographical material disproves this notion."[70]

No other Recollections of Possible Composition Activities

VSS assumes Smith was involved in a comprehensive list of linguistic activities between 1823–1829 including story and outline development, Methodist exhorting, and practicing for his future "oratorical effort," or "oral performance" (165, 2, 3 etc.). If so, others might have noticed, but little supportive evidence has been found beyond the recitals mentioned by his mother Lucy Mack Smith, which she dated to 1823.

For example, in 1834, Eber D. Howe printed the statements from twenty-two local inhabitants along with two "group statements" from the residents of Manchester and Palmyra.[71] In July 1880 newspaperman Frederick G. Mather recorded detailed recollections from twelve residents of Susquehanna, Broome, and Chenango Counties, Pennsylvania.[72] In

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69. Skeptics may confuse automatic writing, which can produce lengthy manuscripts like the Book of Mormon, with the theory advanced in *VSS*. *VSS* describes Joseph Smith as superiorly intelligent and as using that cognitive ability to produce the words of the Book of Mormon. In contrast, automatic writers may or may not be overtly intelligent and never claim credit for the words they produce, instead attributing them to a supernatural source. The two are very distinct processes. (See Brian C. Hales, "Automatic Writing and the Book of Mormon: An Update," *Dialogue* 53, no. 2 [Summer 2019]: 1–35.)

70. K. A Ericsson, R. T. Krampe, and C. Tesch-Römer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," *Psychological Review* 100 (1993): 366

71. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed*. 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.

72. See [Frederick G. Mather], "The Early Mormons. Joe Smith Operates at Susquehanna," *Binghamton Republican*, 29 July 1880. Frederick G. Mather, "The

1888, Arthur Deming published statements from fourteen individuals in two volumes of *Naked Truths about Mormonism*. [73] Many of these individuals knew the Smith family and Joseph Smith Junior personally, but none describe him as an orator, writer, or scholar capable of authoring a lengthy complex book.

Richard Bushman reports that Joseph Smith "is not known to have preached a sermon before the Church is organized in 1830. He had no reputation as a preacher."[74] If Joseph spent the thousands of hours composing a book and practicing for an oral performance as *VSS* describes, he must have been extremely secretive. Any such behavior would probably have been recalled by critics in the years immediately after the publication of the Book of Mormon as they sought to explain its *true* origin.

Conclusion

The limited number of well-developed ideas presented by William L. Davis in *Visions in a Seer Stone* are a very welcome addition to the body of Book of Mormon scholarship. Representing the most detailed secular explanation for the origin of the Book of Mormon published to date, it breaks new ground on a field of study that is surprisingly barren.

However, as a comprehensive explanation describing all cognitive processes Joseph Smith would necessarily have employed while dictating the Book of Mormon, the theory presented in *VSS* is rather anemic. Only the transfusion of a large number of major assumptions can resuscitate *VSS*'s theory to make it viable. Several of the assumptions are problematic like the idea that ancient historians would not use summary headings. Similarly, the claim that Joseph Smith possessed the intellectual gifts

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.

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

74. "A Historian's Perspective of Joseph Smith," audio book, CD2, track 8 on Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Relationship With God* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2007).

needed to produce the Book of Mormon naturally is contradicted by multiple reliable historical sources.

It appears that secularists still await the identification of a plausible hypothesis that explains how such a long complex book could be dictated in a single draft in fewer than three months by a poorly educated, twenty-three-year-old individual.

Brian C. Hales *is the author of six books dealing with polygamy, most recently the three-volume,* Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology *(Greg Kofford Books, 2013). His* Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto *received the "Best Book of 2007 Award" from the John Whitmer Historical Association. He has presented at numerous meetings and symposia and published articles in* The Journal of Mormon History, Mormon Historical Studies, *and* Dialogue *as well as contributing chapters to* The Persistence of Polygamy *series. Brian works as an anesthesiologist at the Davis Hospital and Medical Center in Layton, Utah, and has served as the President of the Utah Medical Association.*