

Reading Journal for “Ancient Greek Writing Instruction and Its Oral Antecedents,” Richard Leo Enos

The origins of writing in Ancient Greece were entirely functional. Artisans used writing on pottery, statues, and public buildings. The next use of writing was also functional, for Homeric bards to preserve the oral Homeric tradition and to pass it on to their apprentices. With the adoption of the alphabet, writing became much more widespread and allowed literacy to flourish into our common conceptions of writing in ancient Greece. H.I. Marrou argues that “Plato and Isocrates are the two pillars upon which classical education was built” (34). Enos tries to broaden the support for this construction by using four pillars: Sophists, Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle. Sophists viewed writing as functional. They would write speeches for people, and the goal of these speeches were to gain the audiences approval. Writing allowed the speaker to refine their arguments and construct heuristics for the audience. Plato disapproved of writing being used in this manner. Using writing to guide the speech inherently destroys the back-and-forth exchange that happens orally when the speech is not prepared in written form. Plato wants a direct, oral interaction between thinkers. Unlike Plato, Isocrates views writing positively. Isocrates, like the Plato, views the Sophists negatively, seeing them as just trying to win an argument for its own sake. But Isocrates also rejects Plato’s approach to seeking universal truth. Instead, Isocrates believes knowledge is derived from the study of people and their cultures, and that writing does allows you to combine wisdom and eloquence to pursue virtue and justice. Aristotle argues, incorrectly according to Enos, that Isocrates does not fully appreciate the heuristic potential of writing. Aristotle argues that writing can be used to organize and explain phenomenon for greater understanding. George Kennedy uses the term letteraturizzazione to explain this transfer from oral rhetoric to written rhetoric. This approach traces the history from Plato to Isocrates to Aristotle, but personally, I do not see much of a difference between this approach and the one presented by Enos.