Great advances in human cognitive/psychological evolution in the Quaternary

4. Literacy, as opposed to orality

One of the great advances of human capacity in the Holocene was the development of writing (a technological innovation) that enabled literacy (the storage and manipulation of thought in written form). Comparison of the paired lists below illustrates that civilization as we enjoy it would be impossible without literacy (and the lists themselves are examples of what literacy can do for us).

**Orality: the world with spoken but not written language**
- Arbitrary decisions
- Spoken agreements
- Seasonal or lunar time
- Oral couriers
- Lore
- Memory
- Variation in meaning through space and time
- Ideas sufficiently simple to be held in one’s mind
- Unrecorded numbers

**Literacy: the world with writing**
- Laws
- Contracts
- Dates
- Definitive long-distance communication
- Communication across time
- Lists
- Dictionaries
- Theories
- Numerals