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Abstract: Joseph Smith and his followers declared the Book of Mormon’s supernatural origin—that it was a divinely inspired translation of an ancient-American record, acquired by Joseph through visions and the help of an angel. This explanation, however, was widely rejected by outsiders from the outset. Within weeks after the Book of Mormon’s first pages came off the press, critics promoted “naturalistic explanations”—so called because they are based on scientific observation or natural phenomena—that rejected the possibility of a divine, supernatural origin of the Book of Mormon. To varying degrees, these naturalistic theories continue to be perpetuated today. This article examines the most popular naturalistic explanations for the Book of Mormon longitudinally, which will enable readers to better understand them and why they have waxed and waned in popularity over time.



Naturalistic Explanations of the Origin of the Book of Mormon

A Longitudinal Study

Brian C. Hales

In early 1830, an unknown farmer in upstate New York burst upon the world's book-publishing scene. The Book of Mormon rolled off the Grandin Press in Palmyra, New York, with Joseph Smith listed as “author and proprietor” on the title page.¹ That same year, a few other authors produced new titles, including *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* by Mary Shelley, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* by Thomas Moore, and *Six Sermons on the Study of the Holy Scriptures* by Samuel Lee.² If grouped with books classified as “fiction” in 1830, the Book of Mormon may have been the longest, with approximately 269,320 words.³

1. Joseph Smith Jr., *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, N.Y.: E. B. Grandin, 1830), title page.

2. Mary Shelley, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck: A Romance*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830); Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life*, 2 vols. (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1830); Samuel Lee, *Six Sermons on the Study of the Holy Scriptures* (London: James Duncan, 1830).

3. 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://www.mormoninterpreter.com/curiously-unique-joseph-smith-as-author-of-the-book-of-mormon/>. Other 1830

Then, as now, authors often sought to stir up interest in their publications in the weeks and months prior to their release. Joseph was no exception; although his techniques were poorly coordinated, they proved to be moderately effective. The fanfare surrounding the printing of the Book of Mormon arose from his claims that he had translated the book from an unknown language (inscribed on ancient metal plates) by the “gift, and power of God.”⁴ With storylines discussing religious themes intermingled with a history of ancient American peoples, the Book of Mormon claimed significance for all inhabitants of the world. And the fervor surrounding the book’s printing expanded as missionaries promoted sales by declaring it was scripture just like the Bible (see D&C 42:12; and A of F 8).

NATURALISTIC EXPLANATIONS FOR THE BOOK OF MORMON APPEARED IMMEDIATELY

Joseph Smith and his followers declared the Book of Mormon’s supernatural origin—that it was a divinely inspired translation of an ancient-American record, acquired by Joseph through visions and the help of an angel. This explanation was widely rejected by outsiders from the outset. Within weeks after the Book of Mormon’s first pages came off the press, critics promoted “naturalistic explanations”—so called because they are based on scientific observation or natural phenomena—that rejected the possibility of a divine, supernatural origin of the Book of Mormon. To varying degrees, these naturalistic theories continue to be perpetuated today. Although skeptics have mixed and matched explanations at times, the following five naturalistic theories have emerged as the most popular:⁵

publications with over one hundred thousand words include Jeremy Bentham, *Constitutional Code; for the Use of All Nations*, vol. 1 (London: Robert Heward, 1830), which has 187,270 words; William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (London: By the author, 1830), which has 165,920 words; and Charles Lyell *Principles of Geology*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1830), which has 161,040 words.

4. “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1, 1842): 707; see also Joseph Smith, journal, November 9–11, 1835, in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashhurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, *The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 88–89; and “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834,” 72 (October 1830), *Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed April 2, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/78>.

5. See Louis C. Midgley, “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The*

1. Solomon Spaulding penned a manuscript that Joseph Smith plagiarized.
2. Collaborators assisted Smith in writing the Book of Mormon.
3. Mental illness expanded Smith's abilities to write the Book of Mormon.
4. Smith created the Book of Mormon through automatic writing.
5. Smith's intellect was sufficient for him to dictate the words in the book.

There is much at stake in these theories. Each one challenges the divinity of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith taught was the “keystone of our religion.”⁶ He declared: “Take away the Book of Mormon, and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none.”⁷ Despite the ongoing influence of these theories, no publication has yet traced and explicated them.

This article examines the most popular naturalistic explanations for the Book of Mormon longitudinally, which will enable readers to better understand them and why they have waxed and waned in popularity over time.

SOLOMON SPAULDING THEORY

Born in 1761, Solomon Spaulding (also spelled “Spalding”) composed a manuscript in 1812 describing a Hebrew origin for the Native Americans. Naming his work “Manuscript Found,” he proudly shared it with family and friends. Then, hoping to see it published and to realize some financial gain, Spaulding sent it to a printer named Lambdin, but Spaulding died in 1816 without seeing it published.⁸

Evidence for Ancient Origins, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 101–39; Daniel C. Peterson, “In the Hope That Something Will Stick’: Changing Explanations for the Book of Mormon” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): xi–xxxv; and Tad R. Callister, “The Book of Mormon: Man-Made or God-Given?” (speech, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, November 1, 2016), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/tad-r-callister_book-mormon-man-made-god-given/.

6. Woodruff, journal, November 28, 1841, in *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–85), 2:139.

7. “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 19 (December 15, 1845): 1060.

8. Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834), 290; Samuel Williams, *Mormonism Exposed* (n.p., 1838), 45.

Nearly two decades later, in 1834, Eber D. Howe printed *Mormonism Unveiled*, which was highly critical of Joseph Smith. In the book, Howe reproduced eight affidavits from Spaulding acquaintances who recalled remarkable similarities between “Manuscript Found” and the Book of Mormon.⁹ Howe’s additional research convinced him that Joseph Smith obtained the manuscript through an intermediary, Sidney Rigdon: “We are, then, irresistibly led to this conclusion:— that Lambdin, after having failed in business, had recourse to the old manuscripts then in his possession, in order to *raise the wind*, by a book speculation, and placed the ‘Manuscript Found,’ of Spalding, in the hands of Rigdon, to be embellished, altered, and added to, as he might think expedient; and three years’ study of the bible we should deem little time enough to garble it, as it is transferred to the Mormon book.”¹⁰

Thereafter, the Spaulding theory became popular with other authors and investigators. For example, Origen Bachelier wrote confidently in 1851, “Solomon Spaulding wrote the romance entitled ‘The Manuscript Found,’ which has since been metamorphosed by Rigdon, Smith, and others into the Book of Mormon.”¹¹

Acceptance of the Solomon Spaulding Theory

Between 1834 and 1884, no one was able to compare the actual document entitled “Manuscript Found” with the Book of Mormon. Only the recollections of Spaulding’s friends could be examined, and they posited a direct connection between the two books. The whereabouts of “Manuscript Found,” however, were likely known to some people who “got the manuscript from Spaulding’s widow sometime in 1833 or 1834, but since it was not as close to the Book of Mormon as they had hoped, it was quietly stored away.”¹²

9. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 278–90.

10. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 290, italics in original.

11. Origen Bachelier, *Mormonism Exposed, Internally and Externally* (New York: n.p., 1838), 5; see also Henry Mayhew, *The Mormons: or Latter-day Saints, with Memoirs of the Life and Death of Joseph Smith, the “American Mahomet”* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), 30.

12. Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith’s Plagiarism of the Bible in the Book of Mormon*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 2010), 238.

The document surfaced in 1884, and when comparing it to the text of the Book of Mormon, most observers quickly identified problems:¹³

- At 50,840 words, “Manuscript Found” is less than a fifth the size of the Book of Mormon.
- The overall writing style and composition of the two books are vastly different. For example, while the text of the Book of Mormon is similar to the language of the King James Version of the Bible, the text of “Manuscript Found” is not.
- The two books do not contain identical or similar names of people and places.

In addition, no credible historical documentation has been found showing that Sidney Rigdon was an acquaintance of Spaulding or knew of “Manuscript Found” prior to Howe’s book making the allegation.¹⁴ Also, strong documentation demonstrates that Rigdon’s conversion to the Church was a direct result of his reading the already published Book of Mormon.¹⁵

After the Spaulding manuscript was found, most critics abandoned the theory. For example, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, who wrote critically of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, rejected the theory: “We do have the original Spaulding manuscript and the Book of Mormon, which do not appear to have enough in common to insist that the latter came from the former.”¹⁶ However, because the original Howe depositions claimed the presence of identical names and exact parallels between the Book of Mormon and Spaulding’s writings, some theorists allege that “Manuscript Found” was not the document the early readers actually

13. See Matthew Roper, “The Mythical ‘Manuscript Found,’” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 7–140; Matthew Roper, “Oliver Cowdery and the Mythical ‘Manuscript Found,’” in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, ed. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006), 123–31; Matthew Roper, “Myth, Memory, and ‘Manuscript Found,’” *FARMS Review* 21, no. 2 (2009): 179–223; Matthew Roper and Paul J. Fields, “The Historical Case against Sidney Rigdon’s Authorship of the Book of Mormon,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 113–25.

14. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 58–63.

15. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 58–63.

16. Tanner and Tanner, *Joseph Smith’s Plagiarism*, 38; see also 243; see also Adam Jortner, “Solomon Spaulding’s Indians, or, What the ‘Manuscript Found’ Really Tells Us,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 246–47.

saw. Rumors of another Spaulding creation, called “Manuscript Story,” were circulated. The theory of a second, undiscovered manuscript is still promoted by some today.¹⁷

COLLABORATOR THEORIES

Allegations that Joseph Smith worked with collaborators popped up soon after the Book of Mormon was published. His contemporaries were convinced he could not have produced the volume alone. William Harris explained in 1841 that “coadjutors” helped:

Here, then, is direct evidence from Smith, himself, of what the Book of Mormon really is—namely, a mere fiction, conjured up from the brains of Smith, or his coadjutors. . . . We are asked, if Smith was an unlettered youth, is not the fact of his producing a work, such as the Book of Mormon, a proof of inspiration. I answer, that the style and matter of the book is nothing superior; but admitting that it was more than a youth like Smith could produce, is it not well known that he had coadjutors of acknowledged talents—fully ample to produce such a work!¹⁸

Several individuals have been promoted as possible assistants. Though Sidney Rigdon is most often associated with the Spaulding theory, a few writers have suggested that he is the real author of the Book of Mormon. For example, Leslie Rumble penned: “Not Joseph Smith, but the ex-Baptist, ex-Campbellite revivalist preacher Sidney Rigdon, who did not lack the necessary knowledge of history, literature and Scripture, was the real author of this fraudulent book in which Campbellite doctrines and phraseology abound.”¹⁹

Oliver Cowdery has also been proposed as a collaborator. Daniel P. Kidder wrote in 1842, “Cowdery had been the principal amanuensis

17. See Howard A. Davis, Donald R. Scales, and Wayne L. Cowdrey, *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon?* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Vision House Publishers, 1977), 3–4, 154–55, 161.

18. William Harris, *Mormonism Portrayed; Its Errors and Absurdities Exposed, and the Spirit and Designs of Its Authors Made Manifest* (Warsaw, Ill.: Sharp and Gamble, 1841), 9.

19. Leslie Rumble, *Mormons or Latter Day Saints* (St. Paul, Minn.: Radio Replies Press, 1950), 11; see also “Mormonism,” *Miners’ and Farmers’ Journal* [Charlotte, N.C.], April 7, 1831, 2; James Gordon Bennet, “Mormon Religion,” *Morning Courier and Enquirer*, September 1, 1831, quoted in Leonard J. Arrington, “James Gordon Bennet’s 1831 Report on ‘The Mormonites,’” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 1970): 362.

hitherto, and having been a schoolmaster, it is presumed that his pedagogical talents found ample scope, as well in giving lessons to ‘the author,’ as in transcribing the book.”²⁰ Nineteenth-century critic Pomeroy Tucker also acknowledged Cowdery’s assistance to Smith: “From all the evidence possessed, there can be no doubt that the plan of founding a new system of religion was concocted by these two shrewd and unscrupulous persons.”²¹ More recently, psychiatrist Robert D. Anderson assured his readers “that Cowdery brought with him the over-arching conceptual plans and some of the important details that made it possible for Smith to complete the Book of Mormon.”²² Richard S. Van Wagoner echoed this view, writing that shortly after Oliver arrived in Harmony, Pennsylvania, “Smith and Cowdery started their partnership.”²³ Van Wagoner also added a lively imaginary description: “It is easy to envision Smith and Cowdery, two zealous young men, forestalling their bedtimes nightly with brains locked in heady conversation about the unfolding of Joseph’s book.”²⁴

Meredith Ray Sheets and Kendal Sheets advanced a unique, speculative theory, alleging that the primary contributor to the Book of Mormon was Joseph Smith Sr.:

Copying various texts, changing them, and passing them off as *The Book of Mormon* was a Smith family enterprise. Joseph Smith Sr. intended to create a new religion and have his namesake son gain recognition as one of God’s true prophets. Both objectives require the faith and trust of others. Junior and Senior’s ultimate goals was [*sic*] to benefit financially and provide for their future. . . . Joseph Sr. gave his boy a head start on the project. He began compiling *The Book of Mormon* in 1811, when his son turned six years old. When Junior was old enough, he assisted with the project and became the front man for the conspiracy.²⁵

20. Daniel P. Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons: A Historical View of the Rise and Progress of the Sect Self-Styled Latter-day Saints* (New York: G. Lan and P. P. Sandford, 1842), 63.

21. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), 123.

22. Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 96.

23. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith American Prophet 1805–1830* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016), 338.

24. Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer*, 336.

25. Meredith Ray Sheets and Kendal Sheets, *The Book of Mormon: Book of Lies* (McLean, Va.: 1811 Press, 2012), 13, 15, italics in original.

Acceptance of Collaborator Theories

The theory that Joseph Smith worked with collaborators to create the Book of Mormon has never gained strong traction for several reasons. A primary problem is the lack of historical support. The most popular candidates, Rigdon and Cowdery, were not physically close to Smith until their historically documented introductions to him. Cowdery arrived at the Smith household on April 5, 1829, and began his scribal work on the Book of Mormon two days later. Baptized in November 1830, Rigdon traveled to New York soon thereafter to meet Joseph Smith in December.²⁶ Historical evidence does not corroborate collusion between Smith and either of these men or any other person to create a pre-existing manuscript (like Spaulding's "Manuscript Found").

Nor is there evidence of a conspiracy to compose the entire Book of Mormon between April 7 and the end of June 1829. Cowdery penned most of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon during that period. What remains of the original manuscript contains no evidences of extensive editing or revision.²⁷ Multiple witnesses, both friendly and unfriendly, related that Joseph dictated as Oliver wrote. Witnesses said nothing of any attempt to write and rewrite different versions until completing the final draft.²⁸ The complexity of the Book of Mormon also raises the question of whether the combined skillsets of Joseph and Oliver could have been sufficient to generate all the words in so short a time.

Lack of confirming evidence has kept collaborator theories from becoming more popular. Skeptical author Earl M. Wunderli declared succinctly: "There is apparently no evidence that Joseph Smith conspired

26. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, eds., *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 184, 186 n. 9, 249, 255 n. 8.

27. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), 13–33, 62–553.

28. Eyewitnesses include Martin Harris, David Whitmer, William Smith, Isaac Hale, Joseph Knight Sr., Emma Smith, Alva Hale, Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery, and Michael Morse. Other contemporaries who left similar reports include Joseph Lewis and Thurlow Weed. All indicated the process involved Joseph Smith dictating while looking at a seer stone in a hat. See accounts in John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, 2d ed., ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 141–227.

with anyone else to write the book.”²⁹ The primary weakness of these collaboration theories is illustrated by critic David Persuitte. Though he first states that “all things considered, it seems likely that Joseph did have at least one collaborator,” Persuitte concludes that “despite the hints suggesting that there was a collaboration, it cannot be categorically proven that such a collaboration existed. For these reasons, and for the sake of simple convenience, we shall accept Joseph Smith as ‘author and proprietor’” of the Book of Mormon.³⁰

MENTAL ILLNESS THEORIES

Several authors have speculated that Joseph Smith’s supposed supernatural experiences and his ability to dictate the Book of Mormon can be explained by mental illness. Proposed illnesses include paranoia, dementia, parapathy, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, disassociation, and narcissistic personality disorder.

One of the first diagnoses of a mental illness for Joseph Smith came in 1930, when historian Bernard DeVoto proposed Smith had a “paranoia personality”:

Unquestionably, Joseph Smith was a paranoid. Intensely religious during adolescence, he began to experience auditory hallucinations. Voices which he identified as Jehovah’s, as well as those of prophets and angels, informed him of his divinely appointed mission—to establish the True Church and lead it to domination over the whol[e] world. To these hallucinations were added others of a visual character in which he beheld the holy Personages who talked with him. His religious mission became the obsession to which he related every item of his experience, and as it developed the prophet expanded in grandeur.³¹

Harry M. Beardsley reported a different pathology: “*The Book of Mormon* is a product of an adolescent mind and a mind characterized by the symptoms of the most prevalent of mental diseases of adolescence—dementia praecox.”³² Dementia “is characterized by a loss of

29. Earl M. Wunderli, *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 50.

30. David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 18–19.

31. Bernard DeVoto, “The Centennial of Mormonism,” *American Mercury* 19, no. 73 (January 1930): 4.

32. Harry M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 81, italics in original.

intellectual abilities, especially memory, judgment, abstract thinking, and language skills—together with marked changes in personality and impulse control.”³³ And *praecox* refers “to the appearance of symptoms during the teens or twenties.”³⁴

Over two decades later, Kimball Young posited a novel explanation, labeling Joseph Smith a *parapath*: “There is some historical and psychological evidence that he was a parapath, that is, one who cannot always tell fact from fantasy. . . . As paropathic behavior is common enough among the formulators of religions the world over, of magic makers, and the proposers of all sorts of social utopias, we should not be surprised, then, that Smith, as a product of his time, was caught up in this kind of psychological climate.”³⁵ The symptoms Kimball Young describes for a “parapath” depict a form of psychosis in which a patient struggles to distinguish between the real and the imaginary.³⁶

Puzzling over how Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon, Klaus J. Hansen suggested that Smith suffered from schizophrenia. “Because auditory hallucinations are very common among schizophrenics,” Hansen wrote, referring to Smith’s visions and revelations, “it has in fact been suggested that Joseph Smith may have suffered from this mental disorder.”³⁷ And throughout the pages of a 1993 article, Lawrence Foster recalled his conversations with Jungian psychoanalyst Jess Groesbeck, who suggested that Joseph Smith may have suffered from a bipolar disorder.³⁸

Plastic surgeon William D. Morain hypothesized dissociation in his 1998 book, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind*. Morain theorized that Joseph Smith’s childhood knee operation was his “maiden voyage into ‘dissociation’” and that “there would be

33. Jerrold S. Maxmen and Nicholas G. Ward, *Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 114.

34. Maxmen and Ward, *Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, 8.

35. Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* (New York: Henry Holt, 1954), 82–83.

36. David A. Tomb, *Psychiatry for the House Officer* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1981), 16.

37. Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 19.

38. Lawrence Foster, “The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origins of New Religious Movements,” *Dialogue* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 9–10.

many more” instances of dissociation during his lifetime.³⁹ Though Morain admits that “it cannot be known how successful Joseph’s dissociation was in blotting out the pain,” he insists that “the fantasies arising through his dissociations” tormented Joseph for the rest of his life.⁴⁰ Ostensibly, many “issues seen in *The Book of Mormon* have risen to primacy as a result of Joseph’s childhood trauma.”⁴¹

And in 1999, Robert D. Anderson focused his clinical skills on psychoanalyzing Joseph Smith. Diagnosing him with a narcissistic personality, Anderson described how Smith “used the Book of Mormon to express those [narcissistic] tendencies.”⁴² Based on the idea that stories in the Book of Mormon reflected Joseph Smith’s life, Anderson sifted through the book’s references to detect parallels between the stories and Smith’s life experiences.

Acceptance of Mental Illness Theories

Mental illness–based explanations for the Book of Mormon have yielded several alternative theories but no conclusive diagnoses. The number and variety of these explanations have probably weakened the appeal of any one of them. In addition, none of these theories is widely accepted because the diagnoses do not concur either with the historical record or with current psychological research.

The diagnosis of schizophrenia, for example, is not widely accepted by historians. Hansen himself acknowledged that such a diagnosis was weak, since aside from what could be regarded as hallucinations, “Smith clearly did not exhibit any of the other symptoms of schizophrenia.”⁴³

Other proposed conditions similarly conflict with modern diagnostic standards. DeVoto’s description of a “paranoia personality,” for instance, is probably inconsistent with today’s definition of a “paranoid personality disorder.” Its essential features are “(a) pervasive and unwarranted suspiciousness and mistrust of people, (b) hypersensitivity, and (c) emotional detachment.”⁴⁴ Patients manifesting these characteris-

39. William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), 25.

40. Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 25, 72; see also 95–96, 105, 109, 113, and 172.

41. Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 105, italics in original; see also 95–96, 109, 113, and 172.

42. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith*, xxxviii.

43. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 19.

44. Maxmen and Ward, *Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, 391.

tics consistently alienate those around them. As a general rule, people “keep their distance from paranoids.”⁴⁵ This explanation has largely been rejected because of Joseph Smith’s well-documented ability to gather followers.⁴⁶ Even more problematic is the label of *parapath*, which is not a medical diagnosis. The term was first suggested by German physician Wilhelm Stekel as a general classification for “neuroses and neurasthenia” but never became generally accepted.⁴⁷

To those who seek a natural explanation for the Book of Mormon, the appeal of these theories is also tempered by the inherent futility of diagnosing any historical figure based strictly on available documentation. Dr. Roy R. Grinker, who served as the chief editor of the American Medical Association’s *Archives of General Psychiatry* for seventeen years, explains:

Freud started the fashion of analyzing writers as well as historical characters such as Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, and even Moses. Many of his students have followed this pattern in writing—often brilliantly—imaginative interpretations of the neuroses and psychoses of authors, playwrights, and artists which are based on a minimum of evidence. . . . Psychoanalytic theory has contributed to literary criticism, which in itself can be an aesthetic literary exercise. Carried to excess or based on biased reports of life histories of the authors, it becomes ridiculous.⁴⁸

British cognitive psychologist Michael J. A. Howe added, “From the perspective of many scientific psychologists, this approach is regarded as outmoded, lacking a firm foundation of hard facts, based upon empirical evidence, and involving sometimes implausible theorizing.”⁴⁹

Another reason mental illness-based explanations for the Book of Mormon have not been more compelling is that mental illness generally diminishes a patient’s capacity to consistently perform complex cognitive operations. This problem arises, for instance, with the diagnosis of bipolar or manic-depressive disorders. According to the American

45. Maxmen and Ward, *Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, 393.

46. See Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 231, 437, 557.

47. “Psychoneuroses,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 54, no. 13 (March 26, 1910): 1095.

48. Roy R. Grinker, “The Psychoanalysis of Historical Characters,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 16, no. 4 (April 1967): 389.

49. Michael J. A. Howe, “Early Lives: Prodigies and Non-Prodigies,” in *Genius and the Mind: Studies of Creativity and Temperament*, ed. Andrew Step-toe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 99.

Psychiatric Association, a manic episode is characterized by at least three of the following symptoms:

- Increased self-esteem or grandiosity
- Decreased need for sleep
- Increased talkativeness or pressure to keep talking
- Flight of ideas or the subjective experience that thoughts are racing
- Distractibility
- Increased goal-directed activity or psychomotor agitation
- Excessive involvement in pleasurable activities with a high potential for painful consequences⁵⁰

If Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon in 1829 during a manic phase of a bipolar disorder, symptoms like a decreased need for sleep and an increase in confidence and energy would have been beneficial. However, most of the other symptoms—including a flight of ideas, racing thoughts, psychomotor agitation, and so forth—would have competed with the cognitive function and creativity needed to produce a lengthy, coherent text on the fly. The text of the Book of Mormon is too coherent to be the product of one or more manic episodes, and none of the witnesses of the translation process left evidence that mania played a role. Psychiatrist Robert D. Anderson rejected this theory in a 1994 article.⁵¹

A similar problem arises with dissociative conditions. Though they can arise from a trauma,⁵² which Joseph Smith may have experienced, such disorders predominantly feature “a disturbance or alteration in normal integrative functions of consciousness, identity, or memory.”⁵³ The resulting pathologies include multiple personalities, amnesia,

50. Steve Titmarsh, “Characteristics and Duration of Mania: Implications for Continuation Treatment,” *Progress in Neurology and Psychiatry* 17, no. 3 (May/June 2013): 27.

51. Robert D. Anderson explained: “How does any form of Bipolar Affective Disorder explain the Book or [of] Mormon, Smith’s revelations, or the Book of Abraham? At best, it only provides Smith with thoughtful introspection when depressed and energy when hypomanic. It contributes little to the explanation for these ‘miracles.’ . . . I do not think any single personality type will adequately explain Joseph Smith.” Robert D. Anderson, “Toward an Introduction to a Psychobiography of Joseph Smith,” *Dialogue* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 270–71, see also 268.

52. Dianne Hales and Robert E. Hales, *Caring for the Mind: The Comprehensive Guide to Mental Health* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 443–44.

53. Maxmen and Ward, *Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, 311.

depersonalization, and fugue (forgetting one's own identity).⁵⁴ Any of these symptoms would have hindered, not helped, Smith's ability to create the Book of Mormon.

In summary, though some conditions could enhance a person's native abilities by diminishing feelings of stress related to reality testing or by manically energizing their systems, such disorders could not bestow the individual with capabilities he or she did not already have. Additionally, evidences that Joseph Smith manifested a psychiatric pathology while dictating the Book of Mormon are absent from the historical record.

AUTOMATIC WRITING THEORY

Automatic writing, sometimes called "trance writing," has also been advanced as a theory to explain the origin of the Book of Mormon.⁵⁵ According to psychiatrist Ian P. Stevenson, who served as the chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, "The term 'automatic writing' is used to designate writing that is done without the writer being conscious of what he is writing. . . . Usually the writing proceeds rapidly, sometimes far more so than the subject's normal writing does."⁵⁶ Consistent with these observations, Lawrence Foster wrote, "The Book of Mormon is probably best understood, at least in part, as a trance-related production."⁵⁷ Harold Bloom seems to agree, affirming that "magical trance-states were involved" while Joseph was dictating the Book of Mormon.⁵⁸

For some automatic writing advocates, the seer stone or Urim and Thummim was a key component. T. B. H. Stenhouse wrote: "Joseph Smith gazed upon that Urim and Thummim until his mind became psychologized, and the impressions that he received he dictated to his scribe." More recently, G. St. John Stott expressed the same opinion, quoting W. N. Schors: "Staring for some time at a shiny surface . . . [induces] a loss of conscious and voluntary activity." Stott added, "At

54. Hales and Hales, *Caring for the Mind*, 443–63.

55. See Scott C. Dunn, "Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 10, no. 6 (June 1985): 17–26.

56. Ian Stevenson, "Some Comments on Automatic Writing," *Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research* 72, no. 4 (October 1978): 316.

57. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 296; see also 294–97 n. 15.

58. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 86.

this stage of withdrawal from conscious thought [Smith's mind] threw up hypnagogic images which were beyond words. Smith found more substantial inspiration: moments of clairvoyance which let him (he believed) reach out in space and time; and, when he emptied his mind, words which he thought were the word of God."⁵⁹

The term *automatic writing* is used to describe two potentially different phenomena, one of which is supernatural and the other natural. For hundreds of years, automatic writers have applied the term to spontaneous writing they attributed to supernatural sources. More recently, the term has also been used as a label for a psychological diagnostic process. Both theories will be discussed here.

Supernatural Theory of Automatic Writing

For centuries, spirit mediums have reported that processes they call "channeling," "spirit writing," and "automatic writing" could be used to contact supernatural forces.⁶⁰ Irving Litvag explains, "One type of psychic activity, known as 'automatic writing,' began to attract attention through the activities of a group of mediums, mostly English, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Automatic writing involves the reception and transcription of various types of communications in written form. The medium claims to have no control over the writing that is produced."⁶¹

Studies show that some instances of automatic writing have similarities to Joseph Smith's dictation of the Book of Mormon.⁶² The books and manuscripts produced through automatic writing, for example, may be long and intricate. Automatic writers have universally attributed their words to otherworldly sources like deity, deceased persons, ancient records, spirit guides, or nondescript mystical communications. The complexity

59. G. St. John Stott, "The Seer Stone Controversy: Writing the *Book of Mormon*," in "Literature and Altered States of Consciousness (Part I)," special issue, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 47.

60. Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 5, 9.

61. Irving Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows: The Strange Story of Patience Worth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 24.

62. Dunn, "Spirit Writing," 21–23; Scott C. Dunn, "Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 27–30.

of the automatic writings may greatly transcend authors' apparent intellectual abilities, as indicated by their education and writing experience.⁶³ Lastly, such a process does not follow the normal writing methodology in which the author prewrites by first researching and perhaps making an outline, then writes, and finally rewrites, including editing and revising sometimes multiple drafts. With automatic writing, the words are instead produced instantly, with no obvious prewriting preparation or later revisions, and go to the publisher with minimum modification.

The most common comparison between Joseph Smith's creation of the Book of Mormon and automatic writing involves Pearl Curran, who wrote *The Sorry Tale* in 1917. Four years earlier, Curran had experimented with a Ouija board, and among the messages spelled out were communications from an entity calling herself Patience Worth: "Many moons ago I lived. Again I come—Patience Worth my name."⁶⁴ In July 1915, Patience began communicating the text of *The Sorry Tale*, with Pearl Curran as medium. Casper S. Yost described the process:

[Pearl Curran] sits down with the ouija board as she might sit down to a typewriter, and the receipt of the communications begins with no more ceremony than a typist would observe. Mrs. Curran has had no experience in literary composition and has made no study of literature, ancient or modern. Nor, it may be added, has she made any study of the history, the religions, or the social customs of the period of this story, nor of the geography or topography of the regions in which it is laid. . . .

But as *The Sorry Tale* progressed she gave more and more time to it, producing on many evenings from 2,500 to 3,500 words of the tale in a sitting of an hour and a half or two hours. In one evening 5,000 words were dictated, covering the account of the Crucifixion. At all times, however, it came with great rapidity, taxing the chirographic speed of Mr. Curran to the utmost to put it down in abbreviated longhand. . . .

Each time the story was picked up at the point where work was stopped at the previous sitting, without a break in the continuity of the narrative, without the slightest hesitation, and without the necessity of a reference to the closing words of the last preceding instalment.⁶⁵

63. See Brian C. Hales, "Automatic Writing and the Book of Mormon: An Update," *Dialogue* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 1–35.

64. Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows*, 18.

65. Patience Worth, communicated through Mrs. John H. [Pearl] Curran, *The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ*, ed. Casper S. Yost (New York: Henry Holt, 1917), iii–iv.

The book was published later that year apparently with little or no editing. Concerning *The Sorry Tale*, a reviewer wrote: “The long and intricate tale is constructed with the precision and accuracy of a master hand. . . . It is a wonderful, a beautiful, and a noble book, but it is not easy to read. . . . Its archaic language and its frequently indirect modes of expression make necessary constantly the closest attention.”⁶⁶

Several specific parallels between the creation of *The Sorry Tale* and that of the Book of Mormon can be identified. The books are of similar length and involve Christian themes. Each process was facilitated by a mystical instrument through which words were conveyed—a Ouija board for Pearl Curran and a seer stone for Joseph Smith. The dictation speeds are also similar. While Curran spaced out her sessions, the number of words generated on her most productive days are similar to the average number of words dictated by Joseph Smith and recorded by Oliver Cowdery. Witnesses reported that neither Pearl Curran nor Joseph Smith required scribes to read back the previous portion before continuing on where they left off. The lack of editing is another parallel. Neither Pearl Curran nor Joseph Smith would regard those facts as indicative of a natural explanation for their writings, however, since both believed they were empowered supernaturally.

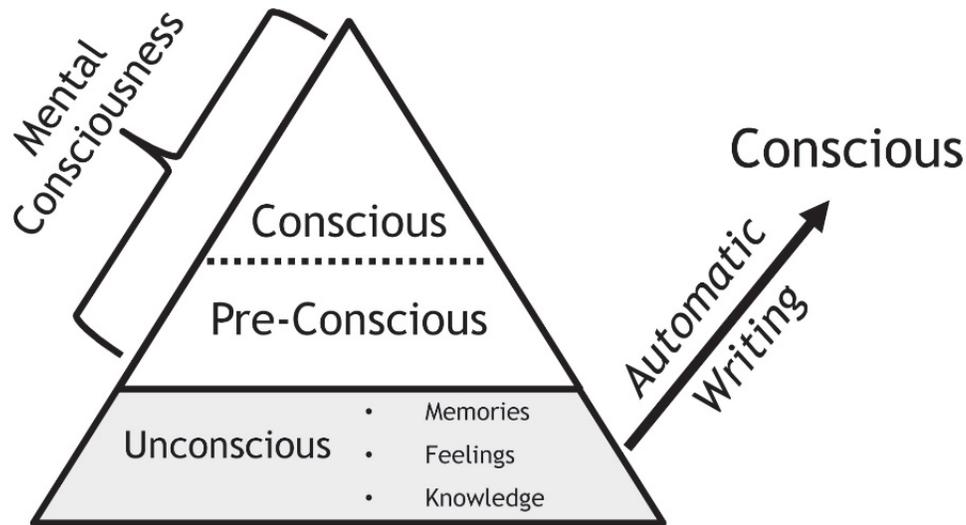
Natural Theory of Automatic Writing

In the late nineteenth century, the burgeoning field of psychology sought to both explicate automatic writing and adopt it as a diagnostic tool. Sigmund Freud, who posited that the human mind has three parts,⁶⁷ described how mental consciousness can be thought of as existing in two sections: the *conscious*, which we use to actively think, and the *preconscious*, which stores information that is readily available to the *conscious*.⁶⁸

66. “The Sorry Tale,” *Theosophical Outlook*, August 11, 1917, 250–51. Richard Lloyd Anderson reviewed the content of *The Sorry Tale*. See “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 65–67.

67. See Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 49–50.

68. Calvin S. Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* (New York: Mentor, 1954), 57.



Automatic writing can supposedly reveal the contents of the unconscious.

A third area of the mind, called the *unconscious*, is a “repository of personal guilt feelings and forbidden wishes.”⁶⁹ A controversial topic in the field of psychology, the unconscious was initially described as a portion of our minds that is continually inaccessible to our consciousness, and “any attempt to get at its content is met by more or less strong resistances.”⁷⁰ This view is considered overly simplistic by more modern researchers, but the basic model has been used to explain the origin of lengthy automatic writings, including the Book of Mormon.

The earliest researchers on hypnosis and the unconscious were the first to connect these topics to automatic writing. In 1923, psychotherapist J. H. van der Hoop explained that a useful “means of enquiring into the contents of the unconscious mind was afforded by automatic writing.”⁷¹ Several years later, Anita M. Muhl, author of *Automatic Writing*, further explicated: “The use of automatic writing in conjunction with psychoanalysis is invaluable in getting at unconscious processes quickly.”⁷² “Automatic writing (with either a planchette on a Ouija board, or a pencil on a paper),” wrote psychologist Herman H. Spitz in 1997, “is an outlet for thoughts that are consciously unexpressed.”⁷³

69. T. L. Brink, “Joseph Smith: The Verdict of Depth Psychology,” *Journal of Mormon History* 3 (1976): 79.

70. William A. White, “The Unconscious,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 2 (1915): 23.

71. Johannes Hermanus van der Hoop, *Character and the Unconscious: A Critical Exposition of the Psychology of Freud and of Jung* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1923), 6.

72. Anita M. Muhl, *Automatic Writing* (Dresden: Theodor Steinkopff, 1930), 96.

73. Herman H. Spitz, *Nonconscious Movements: From Mystical Messages to Facilitated Communication* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), 76.

Expanding on this theory, Scott Dunn, author of “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon,” declares, “Just as individuals under hypnosis have been able to quote lengthy passages in foreign languages which they heard at the age of three, so have automatic writers produced detailed information from books that they have read but in some cases cannot remember reading.”⁷⁴ In a hypnotic state, it is theorized, a person’s unconscious is more than sufficient to generate lengthy texts like *The Sorry Tale* or the Book of Mormon.

In her 2016 book, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*, Ann Taves, professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, explicates this theory in greater detail than ever before. She acknowledged that Joseph Smith’s dictation came as a “flow of words that seem[ed] to arise outside consciousness.”⁷⁵ For Taves, the seer stone “triggered” a “formal hypnotic induction,” prompting Joseph Smith to enter “an imaginative storytelling mode” that greatly enhanced his “imaginative skills.”⁷⁶ Thereafter, he was able to “dissociate control over the flow of words and automate the process so that it flowed quickly and smoothly.”⁷⁷ Through hypnosis, a person like Smith “could tap into levels of mental activity that were not available to the consciousness” while awake.⁷⁸ In the “imaginative storytelling mode,” Joseph Smith’s abilities transcended what he “would have been able to do volitionally,” or consciously.⁷⁹

Acceptance of Automatic Writing Theories

Although hypnosis can provide mental relaxation to overcome inner anxieties hindering a subject’s creative output,⁸⁰ the naturalistic theory of automatic writing is not widely accepted. Scholarship has demonstrated that task proficiency, creativity, cognition, and memory are

74. Dunn, “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon,” 34.

75. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 256; see also 249–50.

76. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 253, 258–59.

77. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 257–58.

78. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 252.

79. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 253, 258.

80. According to James R. Council and others, “Hypnosis facilitates deep involvement with an activity and allows us to lose ourselves in the creative process, ignoring distractions.” James R. Council and others, “Hypnotic Enhancement of Creative Drawing,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 55, no. 4 (2007): 469.

generally not improved by accessing the unconscious through hypnosis. Regarding task proficiency, for instance, J. F. Kihlstrom of the University of California explains: “In general, it appears that hypnotic suggestions for increased muscular strength, endurance, sensory acuity, or learning do not exceed what can be accomplished by motivated subjects outside hypnosis.”⁸¹

The effect of hypnosis on creativity has been studied by University of Waterloo Professor Patricia Bowers, who reported, “Although a feeling of effortless writing might accompany creative work, it does not itself cause the work to be more creative.”⁸² Intellectual capacity is also not improved through hypnosis: “Although concept activation and primitive associative learning could occur unconsciously, anything complex requiring flexible responding, integration of stimuli, or higher mental processes could not.”⁸³ And finally, several scholars have reported on hypnosis’s inability to improve memory. For example, Graham F. Wagstaff and his coauthors concluded, “Hypnotic procedures do not reliably improve the accuracy of memory to a level above that achievable under nonhypnotic conditions.”⁸⁴

81. J. F. Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis,” in *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, 2d ed., ed. Howard S. Friedman (Oxford: Academic Press, 2016), 363; see also Devin B. Terhune and others, “Hypnosis and Top-Down Regulation of Consciousness,” *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 81 (2017): 64.

82. Patricia Bowers, “Hypnosis and Creativity: The Search for the Missing Link,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 88, no. 5 (1979): 569; see also Steven Jay Lynn and Harry Sivec, “The Hypnotizable Subject as Creative Problem-Solving Agent,” in *Contemporary Hypnosis Research*, ed. Erika Fromm and Michael R. Nash (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 332; and Julie Regan, “Painting Like Picasso: Can Hypnosis Enhance Creativity?” *Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnotherapy & Hypnosis* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 7.

83. John A. Bargh and Ezequiel Morsella, “The Unconscious Mind,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008): 74; see also Randy Drue Cole, “Increasing Reading and Test Taking Skills with Hypnosis and Suggestion” (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 1976), iv; Peter Farvolden and Erik Z. Woody, “Hypnosis, Memory, and Frontal Executive Functioning,” *The International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 52, no. 1 (2004): 19; Peter W. Sheehan, “Memory and Hypnosis—General Considerations,” in *International Handbook of Clinical Hypnosis*, ed. Graham D. Burrows, Robb O. Stanely, and Peter B. Bloom (Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), 58; and Anthony G. Greenwald, “New Look 3: Unconscious Cognition Reclaimed,” *American Psychologist* 47, no. 6 (June 1992): 775.

84. Graham F. Wagstaff and others, “Facilitating Memory with Hypnosis, Focused Meditation, and Eye Closure,” *International Journal of Clinical and*

These brief citations are representative of dozens of additional references supporting the conclusion that hypnosis does not endow the subject with memory or cognitive abilities that are not present consciously. These overall limitations weaken the natural automatic writing theory.

JOSEPH SMITH'S INTELLECT THEORY

The fifth theory—the “intellect theory”—posits that the Book of Mormon text was produced completely or almost completely through Joseph Smith’s intellectual ability. This was the first naturalistic explanation that critics actively promoted; between the Book of Mormon’s 1830 publication and 1834, naturalists attributed the text to his intellect, usually by berating both. Their argument could be summarized as “Joseph Smith is dumb, and the Book of Mormon is dumb.”

A major difference between the intellect theory of Joseph Smith’s day and the one promoted today is that today the Book of Mormon is generally acknowledged as a complex text that could not have been produced without some intellectual labor. Historian Daniel Walker Howe reflected this view when he said, “True or not, the Book of Mormon is a powerful epic written on a grand scale with a host of characters, a narrative of human struggle and conflict, of divine intervention, heroic good and atrocious evil, of prophecy, morality, and law. Its narrative structure is complex. . . . The Book of Mormon should rank among the great achievements of American literature.”⁸⁵

Recognizing the Book of Mormon’s inherent literary complexity requires an elevation of Joseph Smith’s presumed intellectual abilities. Fawn Brodie explained, “Never having written a line of fiction,

Experimental Hypnosis 52, no. 4 (2004): 434; see also Reed Maxwell, Steven Jay Lynn, and Liam Condon, “Hypnosis, Hypnotic Suggestibility, Memory, and Involvement in Films,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 33 (2015): 172; Joseph Barber, “Hypnosis and Memory: A Hazardous Connection,” *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 19, no. 4 (October 1997): 306; Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis,” 363; Steven J. Lynn, “Hypnosis,” *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, 2d ed. (Boston: Elsevier, 2012), 378–84; and Terhune and others, “Hypnosis and Top-Down Regulation of Consciousness,” 64.

85. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*, Oxford History of the United States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314; see also Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 19–20; and Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61, no. 4 (1980): 381.

he [Joseph Smith] laid out for himself a task that would have given the most experienced novelist pause. But possibly because of this very inexperience he plunged into the story.”⁸⁶ More recently, the intellect theory is reflected throughout Dan Vogel’s 715-page biography, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*.⁸⁷ These biographers are impressed by the intellectual challenges Joseph Smith would have encountered and do not question whether he had the ability to overcome them. “The Book of Mormon was a remarkable accomplishment for a farm boy,” Vogel observed.⁸⁸

Vogel’s description of the intellect theory portrays the dictation of the Book of Mormon as “more-or-less [a] stream-of-consciousness composition,” recited “mostly impromptu and without the aid of notes.”⁸⁹ This is supported by multiple accounts that describe the dictation.⁹⁰

- Joseph Smith and his scribes worked with dictations of twenty to thirty words at a time.⁹¹
- The scribe immediately read back the text to ensure accuracy.
- No books, manuscripts, or other documents were consulted during the dictation.⁹²
- After breaks, he would start where he left off without reading back the previous portion.⁹³

86. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 49.

87. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

88. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 466.

89. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, xix, 120.

90. See Welch, “Miraculous Timing of the Translation,” 126–227.

91. 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, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 67–84.

92. David Whitmer, quoted in *Chicago Times*, October 17, 1881; Emma Hale Smith, quoted in Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb, February 14, 1879, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Mo.; and in Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald* 26, no. 19 (October 1, 1879): 289–90.

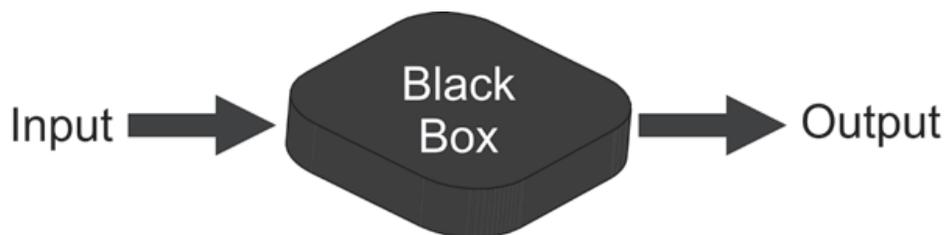
93. See Emma Smith’s comments in Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of History* 9, no. 454 (October 1916): 454.

- The vast word strings of the original draft were eventually typeset into approximately 6,852 sentences averaging 39.3 words each. Joseph afterward did not rearrange the sequence of a single sentence.⁹⁴
- No rewriting or content editing occurred prior to sending the manuscript to the printer.⁹⁵

The intellect theory posits that Smith created the text in the same way other authors have produced long fictional works, except that he recited the words to scribes, rather than writing them on paper. This theory presumes that the required conscious and unconscious workings of his mind as he spoke the text would have resembled the general mental activities of writers in the past as they composed their books and narratives.

Joseph Smith as a Black Box

By denying the possibility of supernatural influences, naturalists promoting the intellect theory use the Book of Mormon as evidence that Joseph Smith must have possessed the necessary abilities to create the book, even though they do not address *how* he created it. A potential weakness of this approach is that it treats Smith like a “black box”—an object understood in terms of its inputs and outputs in which the internal workings remain a mystery.⁹⁶



A black box is evaluated in terms of inputs and outputs.

94. Carmack, comment on Hales, “Curiously Unique: Joseph Smith as Author of the Book of Mormon.”

95. Brian C. Hales, “Why Joseph Smith’s Dictation of the Book of Mormon Is Simply Jaw-Dropping,” *LDS Living*, November 10, 2018, <http://www.ldsiving.com/Why-Joseph-Smiths-Dictation-of-the-Book-of-Mormon-Is-Simply-Jaw-Dropping/s/89568>; see also Brian C. Hales, “Changing Critics’ Criticisms of Book of Mormon Changes,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 28 (2018): 49–64.

96. In his 1926 doctoral thesis, the German scientist Wilhelm Cauer may have been the first to describe a black box. See Emil Cauer, Wolfgang Mathis, and Rainer Pauli, “Life and Work of Wilhelm Cauer (1900–1945),” *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International Symposium of Mathematical Theory of Networks and Systems* (Perpignan, France: Université de Perpignan, 2000), 4.

The black box approach to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon emphasizes input elements like the KJV Bible (including multiple chapters from Isaiah) and other publications such as the 1823 book *View of the Hebrews*.⁹⁷ It also posits that Smith borrowed storylines from his environment and parallel phrases from books he had presumably read.⁹⁸ Naturalists also find evidences in the output side that, for them, demonstrate the Book of Mormon could not be historical and could only have been produced by a nineteenth-century author. The most common critiques involve DNA, archeology, and alleged anachronisms.⁹⁹



Joseph Smith as a black box.

97. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews; Exhibiting the Destruction of Jerusalem; the Certain Restoration of Judah and Israel; the Present State of Judah and Israel; and an Address of the Prophet Isaiah Relative to Their Restoration* (Poultney, Vt.: Smith and Shute, 1823). Other publications that reportedly influenced Joseph Smith include *The Golden Pot* by E. T. A. Hoffmann (Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002], 135–74); the Apocrypha (Jerald and Sandra Tanner, “Book of Mormon Challenge,” *Salt Lake City Messenger* 107 [October 2006]: 10); and Captain Kidd stories (Ronald V. Huggins, “From Captain Kidd’s Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing *Dramatis Personae* in Early Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4 [Winter 2003]: 17–42).

98. See, for example, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith’s Plagiarism of the Bible in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 2010); Palmer, *Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, 36–93; Wunderli, *Imperfect Book*, 69, 82–95, 106–7, 279–315, 325; David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 86, 106–19, 209, 285; Rick Grunder, *Mormon Parallels: A Bibliographic Source* (LaFayette, N.Y.: Rick Grunder Books, 2008), 38.

99. See Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004); Thomas W. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 47–77; Deanne G. Matheny, “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 269–328; Wunderli, *Imperfect Book*, 154–55, 171–72, 279–99.

Ignoring the black box avoids the labor of opening it to ask how Joseph was able to produce all the words in such a short period of time. The writing and dictation models discussed below are examples of what might be going on inside the black box in Smith's case. Naturalists who dismiss the applicability of the creative dictation model will need to replace it or acknowledge their willingness to leave the black box unopened.

A Creative Writing Model

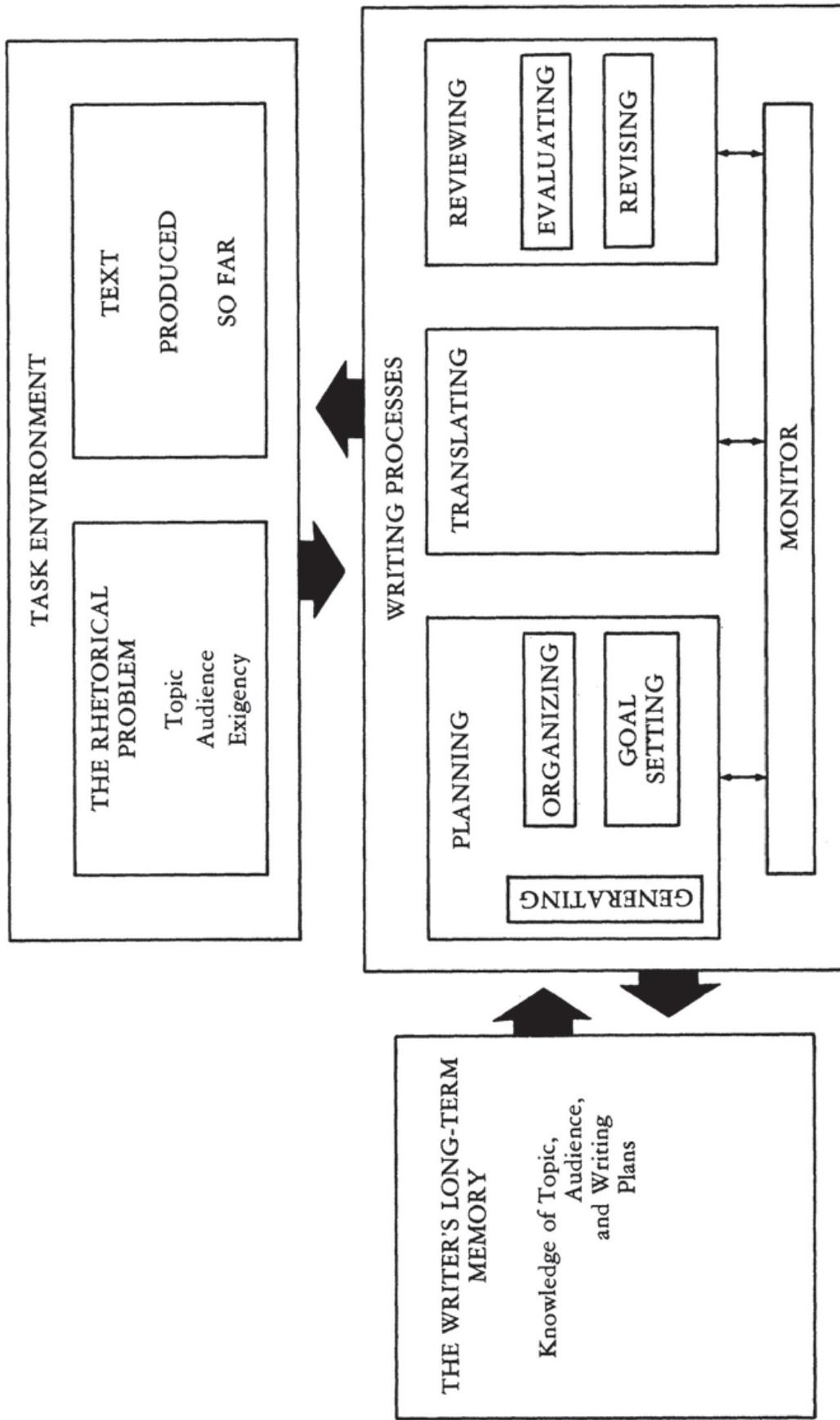
The intellect theory may be better understood by looking at models for how writing is created. Traditionally, the process through which authors create their lengthy novels is called *creative writing*. The term *creative* in these instances refers to works that are imaginative or fictional, as well as a person's ability to create or generate writing or dictation that could be of any genre. Creative writing has been studied extensively in recent decades, and researchers have produced sophisticated psychological theories that describe the mental activities of authors writing their manuscripts.

In a landmark 1981 article entitled "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," Linda Flower and John R. Hayes—professor and emeritus professor, respectively, at Carnegie Mellon University—reported on a study in which they asked writers to "verbalize everything that goes through their minds as they write." They recorded what the subjects said and later analyzed the findings.¹⁰⁰ They theorized: "The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes, which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing."¹⁰¹ The intellect theory assumes Smith employed these "distinctive thinking processes," or something similar, while composing and dictating the Book of Mormon.

To illustrate their findings, Flower and Hayes created a model that uses boxes and arrows to identify specific cognitive activities and to show how they might interact within the mind of an author who is composing written text.

100. Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 32, no. 4 (December 1981), 368.

101. Flower and Hayes, "Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," 366.



Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 32, no. 4 (December 1981): 370. Copyright 1981 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

The Flower-Hayes writing model comprises three boxes. The *Task Environment* “includes all of those things outside of the writer’s skin”¹⁰²—that is, nonmental components of writing that exist external to the author’s mind. It includes two sub-boxes: the “rhetorical problem” and the “text produced so far.” The “rhetorical problem” represents the specific questions that “writers attempt to ‘solve’ or respond to.”¹⁰³ It also identifies the overarching topic to be addressed, while taking into account the needs of the target audience and “the writer’s own goals in writing.”¹⁰⁴

Once the mental ideas are translated into sentences, they become what Flower and Hayes call the “text produced so far.” That text is continually evaluated for pertinence concerning the “rhetorical problem,” but more importantly, it is also constantly affecting “writing processes,” including provoking evaluation and revision. Revising the text that has already been written is “an important part of writing [because] it constantly leads to new planning or a ‘re-vision’ of what one wanted to say.”¹⁰⁵

The box titled *Writing Processes* circumscribes the interactions occurring within the author’s mind as words are created and become the “text produced so far.” Four specific parts are illustrated: planning, translating, reviewing, and the monitor.

Planning: According to Flower and Hayes, “In the **planning** process writers form an internal *representation* of the knowledge that will be used in writing.”¹⁰⁶ The planning process encompasses three specific activities that interact with one another.

- **Generating:** Ideas are “generated” from information that may already be “well developed and organized *in memory*.” On the other hand, “one may generate only fragmentary, unconnected, even contradictory, thoughts.”¹⁰⁷ Ideas in the generating phase exist across a wide range of development, from rudimentary ideas to refined sentences.

102. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 369.

103. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 369.

104. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 369.

105. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 376.

106. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 372, bold and italics in original.

107. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 372, italics in original.

- **Organizing:** “The process of organizing” contend Flower and Hayes, “appears to play an important part in creative thinking and discovery since it is capable of grouping ideas and forming new concepts.”¹⁰⁸
- **Goal setting:** Goal setting is a “little-studied but major, aspect of the **planning** process” because “setting goals is an important part of ‘being creative.’”¹⁰⁹ As they write, authors continually generate and achieve a large variety of goals. Smaller goals come and go as they motivate the author to complete each mini-step on the way to completing a text.

Translating: Translating “is essentially the process of putting ideas into visible language.” This box represents what might be called (using computer language) the author’s *central processing unit* (or CPU). Here, input from all the processes and subprocesses are integrated within the mind of the writer to create the text that will be recorded in an external document. Flower and Hayes explain: “The process of **translating** requires the writer to juggle all the special demands of written English.” Those demands lie “on a spectrum from generic and formal demands through syntactic and lexical ones down to the motor tasks of forming letters.”¹¹⁰ The heavy lifting of creative writing occurs here.

Reviewing: Flower and Hayes state, “**Reviewing** depends on two subprocesses: **evaluating** and **revising**.”¹¹¹ It occurs in two stages during creative writing. *Internal* reviewing happens continuously as words are being chosen and translated into phrases in the author’s brain. Mental subprocesses constantly evaluate and revise that content before it is written. *External* reviewing occurs consciously as a “process in which writers choose to read what they have written [text produced so far] either as a springboard to further translating or with an eye to systematically evaluating and/or revising the text. These periods of planned reviewing frequently lead to new cycles of planning and translating.”¹¹²

Monitor: “The **monitor** functions as a writing strategist,” assert Flower and Hayes, “which determines when the writer moves from one process

108. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 372.

109. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 372–73, bold in original.

110. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 373, bold in original.

111. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 374, bold in original.

112. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 374.

to the next. For example, it determines how long a writer will continue generating ideas before attempting to write prose.”¹¹³

The third box—*The Writer’s Long-Term Memory*—is located external to the *Writing Processes* box because it includes “outside resources such as books,” as well as the writer’s acquired knowledge and experiences. It exists as “a storehouse of knowledge about the topic and audience, as well as knowledge of writing plans and problem representations.”¹¹⁴

A Creative Dictation Model

In order to reflect Joseph Smith’s creative process of reciting the Book of Mormon, as predicted by the intellect theory, I have adapted the Flower-Hayes model to describe an author’s experience of dictating, instead of writing, a book.

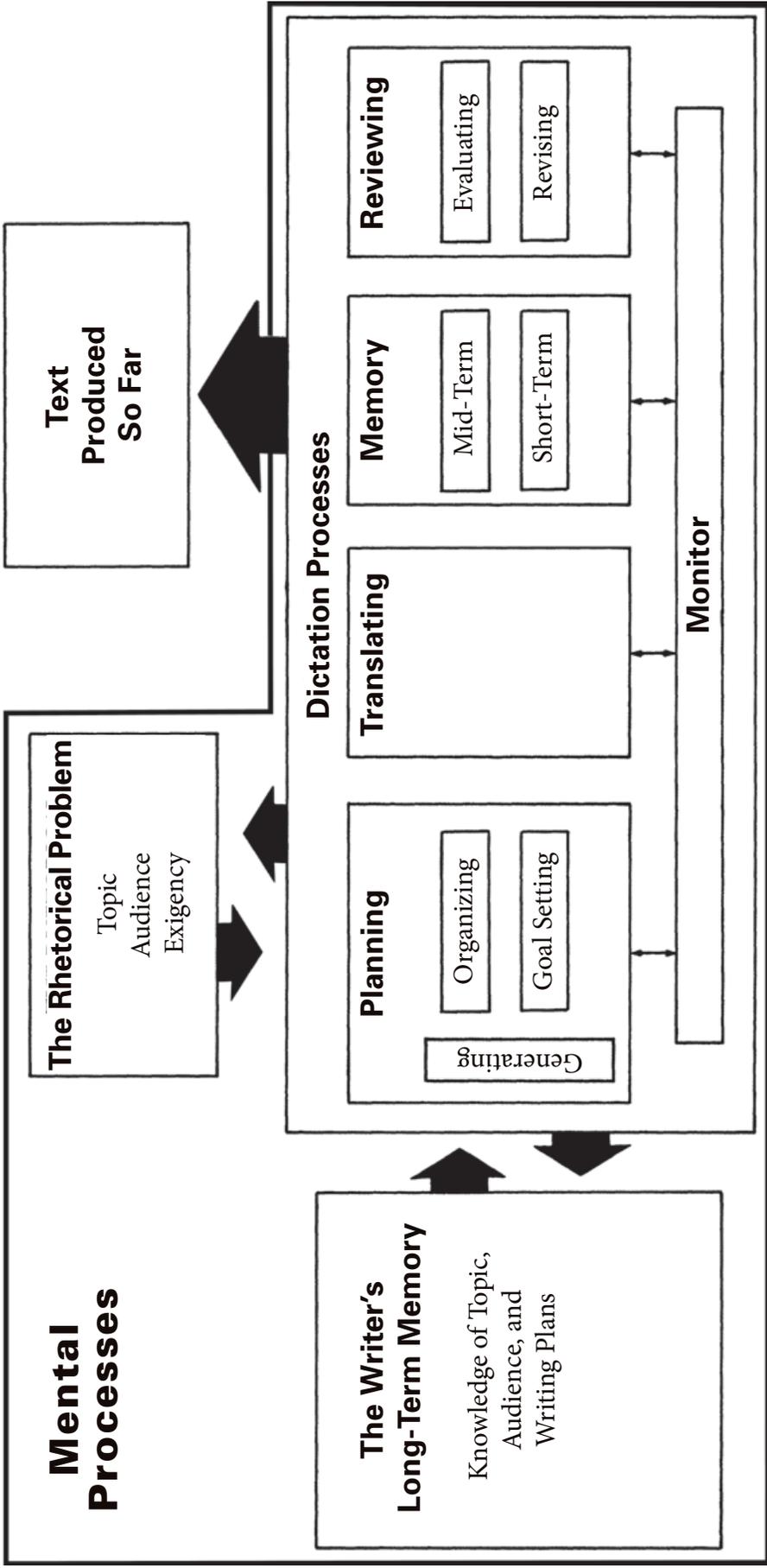
Many of the mental activities identified by Flower and Hayes—generating, organizing, goal setting, evaluating, and revising—seem to apply to both writing and dictation. Similar to the writing model, dictation begins by addressing the rhetorical problem (the author’s goals and the needs of the audience) while the author’s long-term memory provides basic outlines and pertinent information. Once the recitation begins, a complex interaction ensues in which ideas are simultaneously generated (through planning), modulated (based on data from the mid- and short-term memory), and mentally reviewed and revised before being translated into spoken words and sentences. The dictated text is recorded and then exists outside of the author’s brain and is not modified further.

Despite the similarities, there are several differences between the creative dictation model and the Flower-Hayes diagram. First, the former brings all of the boxes and processes except “text produced so far” into a new box labeled “mental processes” since all the steps of composition must occur in real time within the mind of the author. The new diagram also relocates the rhetorical problem inside the author’s mind.

A second modification is the increased reliance on memory, including short-term, midterm, and long-term memory. During dictation, anything interjected into the text must be recalled at the time it is needed. This unavoidably increases the memory burden at every level of text synthesis. An additional memory process box has been inserted into the dictation model to represent this expanded cognitive function.

113. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 374, bold in original.

114. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 371.



A creative dictation model, modified from Flower and Hayes's creative writing model.

Creative dictation also taxes long-term memory more than creative writing because it eliminates access to external sources, such as outlines, research materials, notes, quotations, books, and maps. While the quantity of the material recalled will vary by genre and length of the work being composed, the role of long-term memory can be significant. Eighteenth-century lexicographer Samuel Johnson explained a general principle: “The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading, in order to write: a man will turn over half a library to make one book.”¹¹⁵ To be successful, creative dictation may require preloading vast amounts of information into long-term memory prior to beginning the recitation.

Beyond the enhanced responsibilities of long-term memory, the first words of the dictation trigger additional memory activity. Mid-term memory begins storing all of the “text produced so far,” a small database at first, which expands with every new phrase spoken. Flower and Hayes explain that “each word in the growing text determines and limits the choices of what can come next.”¹¹⁶ In order to create a coherent narrative, the dynamics of choosing the two hundred thousandth word cannot completely ignore the twenty thousandth word, the two thousandth word, or any word that has been spoken up to that point. As the dictation enlarges, the midterm memory is increasingly tasked with maintaining a consistent message throughout the fabric of the text.

In forming the very first words of the manuscript, the short-term memory in the author’s brain activates. Its role is to retain in the author’s consciousness the words and sentences just spoken long enough for them to be cross-referenced with the potential lexical and syntactic choices the author confronts in wordsmithing the phrases about to be spoken. In other words, short-term memory’s primary responsibility is maintaining word-to-word and sentence-to-sentence coherency.

The third important difference between creative writing and creative dictation is illustrated by the large one-way arrow from the “dictation process” box to the “text produced so far” box. In the dictation model, when “translating” finally creates the verbalized text, its work is done. No revising of the spoken narrative occurs. This unburdens the translating process thereafter but intensifies the need to get the dictation right the first time.

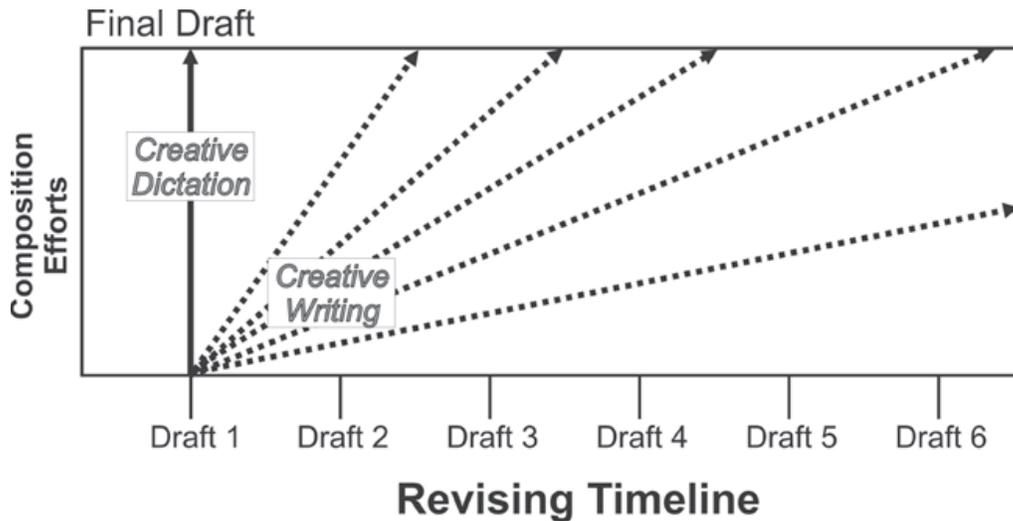
115. Samuel Johnson, quoted in James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Henry Baldwin, 1791), 476.

116. Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” 371.

Eliminating the external revision stage of composition is a somewhat dramatic deviation away from standard creative writing techniques. In her college textbook, *Steps to Writing Well*, Jean Wyrick explains:

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 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.¹¹⁷

Though not reflected in the diagrams, the lack of an editing stage in creative dictation changes the inherent timing of the final draft deadline when compared to creative writing. Writers may have a cutoff date for their manuscripts from publishers or college instructors. With creative dictation, however, the final deadline occurs at the moment each word is communicated.¹¹⁸



Contrasting creative dictation and creative writing composition timelines.

117. Jean Wyrick, *Steps to Writing Well*, 9th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 91–92, italics in original.

118. Though Joseph Smith made numerous grammar and spelling changes in the 1837 and 1840 editions of the Book of Mormon, neither he nor others did any content editing or even minor reworking of the paragraphs. See Hales, “Changing Critics’ Criticisms of Book of Mormon Changes,” 49–63.

For several reasons, creative dictation is more challenging than creative writing. The associated memory burden and the inability to revise the previously composed text are constraints that may explain why other authors (with the possible exception of automatic writers and Joseph Smith) in the past have evidently never chosen creative dictation as a way to compose lengthy volumes.

To cohere to the demands outlined in this dictation model, the intellect theory speculates that in the years prior to 1828, Smith was involved with multiple undocumented activities that preloaded his long-term memory with data. Ostensibly, he memorized parts of the King James Bible and multiple other books, from which he could later recall parallel phrases. Visits to bookstores and libraries to view maps and encyclopedias along with his frequent attendance at religious revivals and camp meetings provided information that was mentally stored. By mentally synthesizing this information, he conceptually archived and materialized outlines of the eventual content of the Book of Mormon.¹¹⁹

The intellect theory then affirms that once dictation began on April 7, 1829, the elements stored in Joseph Smith's memory fed into the cognitive-processing part of his brain, where he manipulated multiple levels of data simultaneously to produce coherent sentences without subsequent revisions. He repeated this process until mid-June, when all of the 269,320 words had been spoken and recorded by scribes.

The dictation process would have also required Joseph Smith to manifest a vigorous short-term memory capable of rapidly transferring information. Creating each phrase and paragraph in succession without the need to resequence any sentences of the Book of Mormon after dictating represents a high level of short-term memory function. Joseph's midterm memory would have been responsible for keeping track of more than 425 geographical relationships of over 175 individuals and groups who existed in at least 125 different topographical locations.¹²⁰ Accompanying these are hundreds of doctrinal discussions. Since Smith did not refer to notes or the previously dictated text, the midterm memory would have been responsible for keeping track of who was talking or journeying, as well as maintaining the progression of religious topics as they unfolded in the text.

119. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 120–21.

120. See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 217–326; Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Book of Mormon Names," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:186–87.

Acceptance of Intellect Theories

In the years since the Book of Mormon was published, other naturalistic theories have waxed and waned in popularity, but similar to the early 1830s, Joseph Smith's intellect theory is today the most accepted naturalistic explanation for the origin of the Book of Mormon. Although the intellect theory is the most popular, it is not universally accepted by naturalists. Observers disagree over whether Joseph Smith possessed the creativity, the cognitive abilities, and the experience with composition and rhetoric needed to recite the text as described.¹²¹

Some evidence in the historical records indicates Joseph Smith had a fairly sophisticated intellectual capacity. Lucy Mack Smith recalled his creativity, saying that in 1823, "Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined."¹²² Pomeroy Tucker wrote that Joseph was an active reader of "dime novels,"¹²³ and Orsamus Turner remembered that Joseph helped "solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics, in our juvenile debating club" and "was a very passable exhorter" at Methodist camp meetings.¹²⁴ When learning Hebrew in 1835, Joseph Smith was surpassed only by Orson Pratt in his ability to memorize the language.¹²⁵

Certainly Smith was smart and innovative, but overall, recollections in the historical record are mixed. Pomeroy Tucker also wrote that Smith was "uneducated and ignorant."¹²⁶ Orsamus Turner believed Smith "possessed of less than ordinary intellect."¹²⁷ Isaac Hale, Emma Hale Smith's father, recounted in 1834 that "I first became acquainted

121. See Michael Morse, quoted in William W. Blair to editors, May 22, 1879, in *Saints' Herald* 26 (June 15, 1879): 190–91; and John H. Gilbert, quoted in William H. Kelley, "The Hill Cumorah, and the Book of Mormon," *Saints' Herald* 28 (June 1, 1881): 165–66.

122. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 85.

123. Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, 17.

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

125. 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*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 266.

126. Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, 120–21.

127. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement*, 213.

with Joseph Smith, Jr. in November, 1825. . . . His appearance at this time, was that of a careless young man—not very well educated.”¹²⁸ Similarly, John H. Gilbert, who typeset the Book of Mormon in 1830, remembered: “We had a great deal of trouble with it [the Book of Mormon manuscript]. It was not punctuated at all. They [Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery] did not know anything about punctuation.” When asked, “Was he [Joseph Smith] educated . . . ?” he responded, “Oh, not at all then.”¹²⁹ There is also no evidence that Joseph visited local libraries, and Emma Smith, David Whitmer, and Lucy Mack Smith reported that his knowledge of the Bible was limited.¹³⁰

Though naturalists have made few attempts to explain how Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon using his own intellect, new technologies enable almost anyone to attempt to try to replicate his efforts. For example, the advent of smartphones allows virtually anyone, independent of psychological or historical research, to duplicate Joseph Smith’s book-dictating activities as described by the intellect theory. By using voice-to-text apps, the need for a dedicated scribe is eliminated. Instead, an author could recite a series of text messages of twenty to thirty words each to a recipient who would then compile them to create a manuscript. To more closely emulate Smith’s efforts, the text blocks should be consistently spoken in a vernacular that is different from the author’s daily speech.¹³¹ Then before hitting “send,” spelling and grammar could be corrected. Once sent, the sequence and meaning of the sentences would not be altered. After repeating this sequence around ten thousand times to create a continuous string of words of about 270,000, the text would be delivered directly to a publisher for typesetting and printing.

128. Isaac Hale, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 262–63.

129. John H. Gilbert, quoted in William H. Kelley, “The Hill Cumorah and the Book of Mormon,” *Saints’ Herald* 28, no. 11 (June 1, 1881): 165–66.

130. Emma Smith, in Briggs, “Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” 454; M. J. Hubble, interview, November 13, 1886, located at Missouri State Historical Society, Columbia, Mo., cited in *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 210–11; Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 84.

131. Stanford Carmack, “How Joseph Smith’s Grammar Differed from Book of Mormon Grammar: Evidence from the 1832 History,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 25 (2017): 239–59; Royal Skousen, “The Archaic Vocabulary of the Book of Mormon,” *Insights* 25, no. 5 (2005): 2–6.

Completing such an exercise could validate the intellect theory by providing additional examples of complex texts produced through purely natural means, similar to the historical descriptions of the Book of Mormon dictation. Current research has yet to identify any successful projects, but new experimental models could be constructed in the future.

CHARTING THE FIVE PRIMARY THEORIES

Charting the writings of over 170 secular authors published between 1830 and 2018 shows general shifts over time among the most popular naturalistic theories.

Year	Author	Theory				
		<i>Solomon Spaulding</i>	<i>Collaborators</i>	<i>Mental Illness</i>	<i>Automatic Writing</i>	<i>Joseph's Intellect</i>
1829	Jonathan Hadley					X
1830	Abner Cole					X
	S. A.					X
	Editor of the <i>Cleveland Herald</i>		X			X
	Editor of the <i>Rochester Republican</i>					X
	Editor of the <i>Auburn Free Press</i>					X
1831	Alexander Campbell					X
	David S. Burnett					X
	Editor of the <i>Morning Courier N.Y.</i>		X			
	William Owen		X			
	Gimel					X
	Editor of the <i>Cleveland Advertiser</i>		X			
1832	N. Y. Evangelist					X
1833	Editor of the <i>Wayne Sentinel</i>	X				
1834	Editor of the <i>Sacket's Harbor Courier</i>		X			
	Eber D. Howe	X				X
	Editor of the <i>Chardon Spectator</i>	X				
	Isaac Hale					X
	Editor of the <i>Painesville Telegraph</i>	X				
	J. A. Briggs	X				
1836	Habitator Montium	X				

Year	Author	Theory				
		<i>Solomon Spaulding</i>	<i>Collaborators</i>	<i>Mental Illness</i>	<i>Automatic Writing</i>	<i>Joseph's Intellect</i>
1838	William S. West	X				
	Samuel Williams	X				
	Richard Livesey	X				
	Origen Bachelier	X				
1840	"John Robinson"	X				
	W. J. Morrish	X				
1841	Barber and Howe					X
	Justus	X				
	Tyler Parsons	X				
	E. G. Lee	X				X
	William Harris		X			X
1842	LaRoy Sunderland					X
	Daniel P. Kidder	X				
	J. B. Turner					X
	H. J. A.	X				
	John A. Clark	X				
1843	Henry Caswall	X				
	George Peck	X				
1844	Editor of the <i>Congregational Magazine</i>	X				
	D. E.	X				
	James H. Hunt					X
1851	Orasmus Turner	X				
	Charles Mackay	X				
	John L. Dunlop	X				
1852	Joseph Mayhew	X				
1853	W. Sparrow Simpson	X				
	Benjamin G. Ferris	X				
1854	William John Conybeare	X				
1855	O. S. Belisle	X				
1856	John W. Gunnison	X				
1857	Samuel M. Smucker	X				
	John Hyde	X				

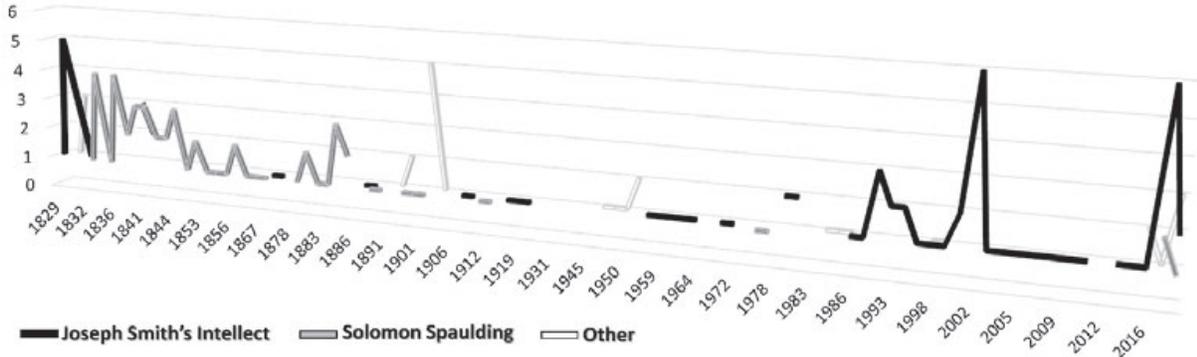
Year	Author	Theory				
		<i>Solomon Spaulding</i>	<i>Collaborators</i>	<i>Mental Illness</i>	<i>Automatic Writing</i>	<i>Joseph's Intellect</i>
1860	H. L. Williams and others	X				
1867	Pomeroy Tucker	X				
1873	Charles Marshall	X				
	T. B. H. Stenhouse				X	X
1877	William D. Purple					X
1878	William S. Sayre		X			
1880	Ariel McMaster	X				
1881	John Codman	X				
1882	Mrs. Horace Eaton	X				
	Robert Patterson	X				
1883	Daniel S. Tuttle	X				
1884	Clark Braden	X				
1885	Ellen E. Dickinson	X				
	William H. Whitsitt	X	X			
1886	Wilhelm Wyl	X				
	L. L. Rice	X				
1887	Martin Thomas Lamb	X	X			X
	Robert Welsted Beers					X
1888	James H. Kennedy					X
1890	M. W. Montgomery	X				
	Thomas Gregg					X
1891	William H. Whitsett	X				
1897	D. H. Bays		X			
1899	Lily Dougal			X	X	
	Lu B. Cake	X				
1901	Edgar E. Folk	X				
1902	I. Woodbridge Riley			X	X	X
	William A. Linn	X				
	G. B. Hancock					X
	William James				X	
	W. L. Crowe		X			X
1903	Joseph Jastrow			X		

Year	Author	Theory				
		<i>Solomon Spaulding</i>	<i>Collaborators</i>	<i>Mental Illness</i>	<i>Automatic Writing</i>	<i>Joseph's Intellect</i>
1906	Theodore Schroeder	X				
	Daniel Sylvester Tuttle	X				
1909	Josiah F. Gibbs					X
1910	Samuel Traum					X
1912	Eduard Meyer	X				
1914	Charles Shook	X				
1916	Robert C. Webb				X	
1917	Walter F. Prince					X
1919	William Earl La Rue					X
	George Seibel			X	X	
1926	James H. Snowden					X
1930	Bernard DeVoto	X				
1931	Harry M. Beardsley			X		
1932	George Arbaugh	X				
1944	Alice Felt Tyler			X		
1945	Fawn Brodie					X
1947	Joseph Welles White	X	X			
1948	James Black			X		
1950	L. Rumble		X			
1954	Kimball Young			X		
	Dwight C. Ritchie			X		
1957	Thomas F. O'Dea					X
1959	Leslie Rumble			X		
	Arthur Budvarson					X
1962	Jack Free					X
1963	Hal Houghey					X
1964	Wesley M. Jones					X
1970	Howard J. Booth				X	
1971	Dale L. Morgan					X
1972	Sydney E. Ahlstrom					X
1977	David Techter				X	
	Howard Davis and others	X				

Year	Author	Theory				
		<i>Solomon Spaulding</i>	<i>Collaborators</i>	<i>Mental Illness</i>	<i>Automatic Writing</i>	<i>Joseph's Intellect</i>
1978	Walter Martin	X				
1979	John R. Kruegar					X
	Floyd C. McElveen					X
1981	Klaus J. Hansen					X
	Wesley Walters					X
1983	Vernal Holley	X				
1984	Ernest H. Taves					X
	Sterling McMurrin					X
	Lawrence Foster				X	X
1985	Scott C. Dunn				X	
1986	G. St. John Stott				X	X
1989	Nathan O. Hatch					X
1992	Robert N. Hullinger	X				X
	D. I. Holmes					X
	Harold Bloom				X	X
1993	Brent Metcalfe					X
	Anthony A. Hutchinson					X
1994	John L. Brooke					X
	W. Walters-M. Marquardt					X
	Byron Marchant		X			
1997	Marvin W. Cowan					X
1998	William D. Morain			X		X
1999	Robert D. Anderson		X			X
2000	David Persuite					X
	Lamar Peterson					X
2002	Richard Abanes					X
	Grant H. Palmer				X	X
	Edwin Firmage Jr.					X
	Susan Staker					X
	David P. Wright					X
	Robert M Price					X

Year	Author	Theory				
		<i>Solomon Spaulding</i>	<i>Collaborators</i>	<i>Mental Illness</i>	<i>Automatic Writing</i>	<i>Joseph's Intellect</i>
2003	Jon Krakauer					X
2004	Dan Vogel					X
	Jon Gary Williams					X
2005	H. Michael Marquardt					X
2007	Ray Anderson					X
	Dale Broadhurst	X				
2008	Rick Grunder					X
2009	Latayne C. Scott	X				X
	Craig Criddle					X
2010	Lee B. Baker					X
	Jerald and Sandra Tanner					X
2011	Thomas Riskas					X
	March Van Outen	X				
2012	Meredith/Kendal Sheets		X			
2013	Earl M Wunderli					X
2014	Elwood Grant Norris	X				X
2016	Ann Taves				X	
	Richard Van Wagoner		X			X
2017	Joel H. Allred					X
	Chris and Duane Johnson					X
	Wayne Cowdrey, et al	X				
	Rafael Martinez					X
	Michael W. Goe					X
	C. B. Brooks					X
	Paul A. Douglas	X	X			X
2018	Jeremy Runnells					X
	MormonThink	X	X	X	X	X

Graphing the data from this chart over time demonstrates the initial popularity of the Joseph Smith's intellect theory, followed by the predominance of the Solomon Spaulding theory, which disappears around 1884, when the Spaulding manuscript was discovered. During the past few decades, the vast majority of proponents of a natural explanation of the Book of Mormon have embraced the intellect theory.



Charting naturalistic explanations for the Book of Mormon.

As illustrated by the figure above, no single theory has consistently dominated secular viewpoints.¹³² The most popular naturalistic theories regarding the origin of the Book of Mormon have been disputed within secular circles since its publication. “Over that book and its origin there hangs yet a mystery,” wrote James H. Kennedy, editor of *The Magazine of Western History* from 1888 to 1890, “which many able men and women have sought to solve, which some have solved to their own satisfaction, but which none have removed altogether from the region of doubt.”¹³³

In his 1899 critique, entitled *Peepstone Joe*, humorist Lu B. Cake demonstrates his frustration with the lack of a plausible naturalist explanation:

One of these fool questions is: “How could ignorant Joe Smith, scarcely able to read and write, how could he produce the Book of Mormon?”

132. An additional potential weakness of all five naturalistic theories is that none address the declarations from the Three and Eight Witnesses (and several others) describing angelic visions or tangible ancient artifacts. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); and Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1983) 131–68.

133. James H. Kennedy, *Early Days of Mormonism: Palmyra, Kirtland, and Nauvoo* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), 43.

That is your side of the case, Mister Mormonism! On you is the burden of proof, and it is for you to *prove* how he got it. You have the affirmative, that Joe got the Book of Mormon from God. You fail to make a *prima facie* case that he *did*, and I conclusively show that he *didn't*! You show where he got it, for that is your business, not mine. You trickily try to throw up your job by giving me one to do. Then you want to bedevil me all the time I am doing it so that I will never get the job done and get back to Joe.¹³⁴

Fast-forwarding a century, Mark D. Thomas acknowledges that the subject is still controversial: “There are good reasons for bracketing the issues of authorship of the Book of Mormon.”¹³⁵ Bracketing avoids the question of whether the Book of Mormon is historical as well as the tension among the various naturalistic theories, none of which seems to dominate in persuasiveness.

CONCLUSION

Even before Joseph Smith received the gold plates, critics called him a deceiver. The problem is that deceivers are actors, and the Book of Mormon turned out to be much more than a simple stage prop.

Skeptics immediately responded to the Book of Mormon with naturalistic explanations. The Spaulding theory garnered huge support until the manuscript was rediscovered showing overwhelming dissimilarities. The collaborator theory requires complicated subtheories to explain a hidden, prolonged alliance with a second author and Joseph’s ability to sneak the manuscript into the process or memorize thousands of sentences. While a manic phase of a bipolar illness could increase energy, and narcissism could improve confidence, mental illness could not augment cognitive function sufficient to explain Smith’s intense three-month creative output.¹³⁶ Automatic writing shares similarities to the Book of Mormon production, but it does not constitute a naturalistic explanation unless the authors’ automaticity is first explained naturally. Lastly, the intellect theory assumes Joseph Smith possessed exceptional

134. Lu B. Cake, *Peepstone Joe and the Peck Manuscript* (New York: By the author, 1899), 48, italics in original.

135. Mark D. Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 2.

136. For more on the timing of the translation of the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, “Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: ‘Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,’” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 10–50.

intellectual capacity and innate abilities, assumptions that have yet to be verified.

What is the most plausible of all naturalistic theories of the origin of the Book of Mormon? This longitudinal study does not isolate a single answer. Neither does it attempt to prove a supernatural component. However, it affirms a Joseph Smith revelation that declared that the coming forth of the book is “proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old” (D&C 20:11; see vv. 6–10). Compared to the variety of naturalistic explanations, the documented divine process that produced the Book of Mormon can be as faith sustaining as the book itself.

Brian C. Hales is the author of seven books dealing with the restoration of plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints—most notably *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013). His *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006) received the 2007 Best Book Award from the John Whitmer Historical Association. Brian works as an anesthesiologist and has served as the president of both the Utah Medical Association and the John Whitmer Historical Association.