1. Writing it down

Writing to remember

In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the earliest and best-known critique of writing, Socrates warns his companion Phaedrus that writing will only make human memory weaker:

> This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them.

[Plato 1925, 274e-275a]

We remember this, of course, because Plato wrote it down. Plato’s problem with letters goes beyond the worry that the new technology of writing will sap our ability to recall. The philosopher, keen to distinguish between reality and its shadow, saw the written word as only a representation of the spoken: for him, writing can never be as *real* as speech.

In the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus that is written as if it were a transcript of an actual spoken conversation, though in Platonic terms it’s not a faithful recreation but a mere shadow of such an interaction, Socrates recounts the story of Theuth, the Egyptian god who invented letters. Reporting on the strength of his invention to Thamus, the chief of all the gods, Theuth claims that writing “will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered” (274e).

But Thamus doesn’t think that writing makes good medicine at all. Instead, he objects that writing aids not memory, but mere reminiscence. Listeners like Phaedrus and Theuth have the opportunity to hear wisdom firsthand. In contrast, readers will display merely “the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom,” because they have had no face-to-face instruction, no encounter with actual words, but only with symbols standing in for spoken words (275a).
Worse still, for Socrates, writing is ambiguous, if not downright deceitful. He cautions Phaedrus that written words don’t mean what they say: “He who receives them in the belief that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person.” Instead, all that writing is good for is jogging the memory: “Written words are of no use except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written” (275c-d).

In addition, because writing is a one-way communication, not an interactive one, it has the same relationship to truth that painting has to life:

[F]or the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing.

[275d-e]

For Socrates, as for other critics of the written word, writing is defective and untrustworthy because symbols on a page can’t respond to questions. The problem with writing, in this view, is that it’s little more than a set of things that one already knows and needs to remember, the ancient equivalent of the shopping list.

For Plato, only speech, not writing, can produce the kind of back and forth – the dialogue – that’s needed to get at the truth. And just as we may have trouble interpreting another person’s shopping list today (yes, it says “bread,” but what kind?), not to mention figuring out what Hamlet really meant when he asked, “To be or not to be?” the written word is always subject to the potentially whimsical interpretation of the all-too-often-unreliable reader. To Plato, the text, orphaned by its author once it’s on the page, cannot defend itself against misreading, and readers can never really know if they’ve got it right. That’s why he has Socrates say,

And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.

[275d-e]

These are strong arguments, but even in Plato’s day they had been rendered moot by the success of the written word. Although the literacy rate in classical Greece was well below 10 percent, writing had become an important feature of the culture (Harris 1989). People had learned to trust and use certain kinds of writing – legal texts, public inscriptions, business documents, personal letters, and even literature – and as they did so they realized that writing, on closer examination, turned out to be neither more nor less reliable or ambiguous than the spoken word, and it was just as real. Even Plato, as he recorded the dialogues of Socrates for us to remember, must have been well aware that writing could do much more than simply remind his fellow Athenians what to buy when they went to the agora.
I want that in writing . . .

It turns out that Socrates was wrong: “I want that in writing” is a common reply that most of us have made to some statement likely to be forgotten, denied or retracted. When the stakes are high, or we’re dealing with someone who may not be on the up and up – a landlord, or a car dealer, or a stranger on a train – we greet a spoken promise with skepticism and a written one with trust.

That was not always the case. When writing was a new and uncommon practice, it was letters on a page, not face-to-face speech, that sparked distrust. When few people could read, and fewer still could write, trusting writing – if trust came at all – required an enormous leap of faith. Plato’s objections aside, writing was still an unproven gimmick, and people might have reasoned that at least with the spoken word, they knew who they were talking to, friend, foe, or total stranger. Friends could be trusted. With enemies, you knew where you stood. Strangers had to prove themselves. But words scrawled on a piece of paper, or a sheepskin, or a lump of clay, those were always strangers, always worthy of suspicion.

Things have changed. Over time, writing and its many technologies became more familiar. They’re now easier to learn, easier to use, and, in part because writing is all around us, they’ve become easier to trust. As a result, more often than not the balance between speech and writing has shifted toward writing. Our sacred texts are books; our laws are written down; our bets are guaranteed by I.O.U.s; our purchases, both big ticket items and sticks of gum, are all receipted. Still, as we will see, from the first days of writing to the present, each time a new communication technology appeared, people had to learn all over again how to use it, how to respond to it, how to trust the documents it produced. “I want that in writing” is still the goal, but sometimes that demand is qualified: I want it typed, not handwritten; signed and witnessed; in ink, not pencil; a printout, not a digital file. Better still, carve it in stone, ten-commandments style. Of course, just as digital files can vanish into thin air, stone tablets can be smashed or eroded by the elements.
In many parts of the world today, literacy rates are high and writing is everywhere: not just on stone, or in books, letters, and newspapers, but on signs, on television, on t-shirts. Ordinary objects are covered with text. Although few people besides collectors and counterfeiters pay attention to them, there are eighty-one words and twenty-three numbers, including MDCCLXXVI, engraved on a dollar bill. The soft drink can on my desk is covered with over 120 words and twenty numbers, many of them in very small print. While the text on our cereal boxes may preoccupy us early in the morning when we’re not yet awake enough to confront the day, we don’t usually read our money or our beverage containers. We don’t normally think of them as something to read. And yet, in a world where writing creates familiarity and constitutes proof, these objects promise everything from economic value to good taste to zero calories by means of the written word.

We’ve come to expect writing on many things that aren’t primarily documents, and if everyday items like paper money, soda cans, and cereal boxes were suddenly stripped of their words, we’d notice the glaring absence of text and we might even question their contents and worth.

Although there are millions of people around the globe who cannot read, there’s no doubt that the world is filled with print. Certainly in the U.S., driving a car presents us with a plethora of signs and placards telling us where we are, where we’re heading, how fast we should go, and what we should buy when we get there. Not content with the reading matter beyond the windshield, some drivers even read while driving, their book or magazine nestled in the steering wheel. And more drivers are not just talking on their phones while operating a motor vehicle, they’re actively texting, tapping the keys as they steer. Seeing another driver under the influence of text may be a signal to pull over and walk. But walking down the street presents even more opportunities to read the signage on buildings and sidewalks, or on the cars, buses, and trucks going by, and reading while walking can also lead to collisions with lampposts, hydrants, and parking meters, or with other pedestrians similarly distracted by environmental text.
Surrounded as we are by the written word, we have come to treat writing as both normal and reliable, permanent and unchanging. Sometimes it’s even legally binding. As for speech, well, people lie, or forget, or they change their minds. Better to get it in writing.

Writing entertains and informs, but it also remembers. In fact, because we often forget what we think, or dream, or say, as Socrates predicted, writing has become a major tool of memory. The humorist Robert Benchley complained that sure-fire ideas for new stories often woke him up at night, but that by morning they’d be gone. A friend advised him to place a pad and pencil on his nightstand, and to say the words “Write it down” several times before retiring. Benchley tried that. After setting a paper and pencil by the bed, he dutifully repeated his mantra, “Write it down,” over and over as he fell asleep. In the middle of the night Benchley woke with another brilliant idea, scribbled on the pad, and went back to sleep, content that he had preserved his fleeting thoughts on paper. He awoke the next morning having forgotten the idea, as usual, and when he consulted the pad, he found that what he had written was . . .

Benchley probably made up that anecdote, but the written word routinely documents our lives, reinforcing or supplanting memory to provide the official version of what happened. It turns out that the permanent record – that written transcript of grades, honors and misdemeanors that haunted us through our school days – now follows everything we do, both large and small. It’s not just births and deaths, marriages and divorces, awards and diplomas that are routinely inscribed, many of them on certificates suitable for framing. We can also reconstruct our more mundane routine by means of the receipts we collect for each doughnut and candy bar, for each meal or trip to the store, each movie or game of miniature golf. Our commutes are recorded electronically on metrocards stashed in our wallets or fastpasses stuck to our windshields, and on receipts for gas churned out at the pump each time we fill up. Credit card records track our vacations more accurately than any travel journal, though they lack the sentimental value of our snapshots. And web browsers dutifully record our keystrokes as we surf the internet so that advertisers can offer to sell us products related to the sites we visit.

For the French novelist Marcel Proust, the fresh-baked aroma of a madeleine brought back enough childhood recollections to trigger a 3,000-page series of novels. Were he alive today, Proust wouldn’t have to worry about remembering things past: he could reconstruct his life from the crumpled bits of paper he had pulled out of his pockets each day and stored in a shoebox. And if that written record proved deficient, with just a few clicks he could summon up this image from the World Wide Web,
madeleines. [photograph by author]

together with this foodnetwork.com recipe:
8 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided
4 eggs
1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
2 tablespoons light brown sugar
1/8 teaspoon salt
2 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
1 1/2 cups cake flour
1/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1 tablespoon honey

[Gand 2004]

And those virtual documents might in turn trigger a memory not of childhood but of the
dangers of cholesterol, which he could then write about on his never-ending blog.

So thoroughly has writing taken over our lives that we have all become Prousts,
externalizing our thoughts, once our most private activities, as we keyboard our way
through work and study and what little free time may remain in a ceaseless stream of
emails, MySpace posts, IM’s, and Twitters collected, backed up, and stored for eternity in
computer memory banks all over the world.

But it’s not novelists, historians or diarists, not government spies or private
snoops, not sociologists or visiting space aliens who use this ever-growing mountain of
digital data to recover our memories or reconstruct the details of our existence. It’s the
data-mining market researchers, the statisticians, the experts on consumer behavior who
are tracking the electronic trail we leave as we work, study, and play our way through the
day, all so that they can better figure out what they can get us to buy next. They are using
the latest writing technology, the computer, to turn us – by means of a few simple
keystrokes – into a vast test market.

We don’t save our grocery lists, because not all writing is memorable, even if its
immediate purpose is to aid our memory. Nor is it all trustworthy. Despite the faith we
place in it, there is nothing about writing that makes it inherently less fraudulent or more
accurate than speech. Certainly writers lie and cheat at least as much as nonwriters: some students fudge assignments; some best-selling authors plagiarize their prose; some contracts are only as good as the paper they’re written on; and some paper money is counterfeit. In addition, the technologies of writing permit objectivity, or at least its illusion, since the text exists independently of both writer and reader. But our world is full of lawyers and clerics, of movie reviewers and literary critics, of political commentators and satirists, whose very existence confirms Plato’s suspicion that written texts can be interpreted in multiple ways, though each of the legal, religious and political experts insists that theirs is the most correct reading of all.

The meaning of laws and sacred texts often provokes controversies, many of which are resolved by imposing one party’s interpretation, sometimes in court, occasionally through violence, rather than through Socratic dialogue or consensual reading. That in itself is just another way of saying that writing is subjective, that its meaning exists only in the eye, and sometimes the sword, of the beholder. Writing also allows authors to cloak themselves in anonymity or to create false identities for themselves. We as readers know this, and as part of learning to trust the text, we’ve developed ways of assessing and authenticating writing, just as we’ve developed means to test whether the speakers who we encounter face to face are telling us the truth.

**Writing is technology**

Writing is a technology, and a fairly recent one at that. Human speech is probably as old as *homo sapiens sapiens*, which means that people began talking anywhere from 100,000 to 200,000 years ago, and it’s possible that an older variety of *homo sapiens*, which has been around for about half a million years, talked even earlier than that. Writing is much newer, a mere 6,000 years old, give or take. In that sliver of geological time, we have gone from thinking of writing as a novelty, or something to be regarded with suspicion, to valuing it in many cases more than speech.

While a few enthusiasts and visionaries surely saw the potential of a technology like writing when it consisted of just a few symbols scratched into clay or painted on a wall, it’s equally likely that some people feared and rejected this new form of communication. But most everybody else probably viewed writing as unnecessarily complicated or too obscure.

When the uses of writing became more obvious, when writing became easier to learn and deploy, when it became cheaper, people took to writing in ever-greater numbers. More people became writers, and still more became readers. Each new development in writing technology – the move from clay to pencils, from manuscript to printed page, from notebook to typewriter, from pencils to pixels – led to the expansion of the authors club, not just those who copy texts, but those who create them.

But even today, with computers turning people into writers at a record pace, critics still attack the newest technologies of writing not simply as deceptive, but also as impersonal, mechanical, intellectually destructive, and socially disruptive. Such attacks on new technologies of literacy always come too late: digital writing is quickly replacing the older ways, just as print replaced script, and while pencils and traditional books still fly off the shelves, both writers and readers are shifting more and more of their literacy practice from the page to the screen.
Inventing the wheel

Most technologies that we now take for granted didn’t become popular overnight. The first writing seems to have been used not for transcribing human language but as an accounting tool for tracking inventory (Schmandt-Besserat 1996). Only when writers saw that the new technology could also record speech did it become attractive to people who weren’t just engaged in bean counting. And even then it took centuries, if not millennia, for writing to outrank speech in our esteem. Other communication technologies that we can’t imagine doing without today, like printing, took a while to catch on as well. Centuries after the printing press had become the primary means of duplicating texts in Europe, writers were still composing their books, letters, diaries and office documents with pencils and pens. The typewriter, and more recently the computer, eventually changed all that.

New inventions are often expensive or tricky to use, both obstacles to their widespread adoption. But the shock of the new often brings out critics eager to warn us away. We don’t know how the wheel was received when it first came on the scene, but we can assume that the early supporters of the wheel saw it as the best thing since sliced bread – or they would have seen it that way had anybody at the time known what sliced bread was.

But it’s also reasonable to assume that the wheel, like all new technologies, had its detractors. The anti-wheelers probably argued that the old ways of locomotion – walking, running, skipping, crawling, riding on the backs of unfriendly animals – were better; that the wheel sped up the pace of modern life way too much; that round technologies would place mankind on a slippery slope leading precipitously downward to the end of civilization as they knew it.

Image 5. The oldest wooden wheel, discovered in the Ljubljana Marshes of Slovenia in 2002, was built more than 5100 years ago out of two radial boards of ash-wood 72 cm. in diameter and was attached to an oak axle which turned along with the wheel. [photograph courtesy of Dr. Katarina Čufar and Dr. Anton Velušček, University of Ljubljana]
In response to the wildly optimistic promises and dire warnings about the wheel, the average person probably took a sensible, wait-and-see approach to the new technology. As it turned out, while antediluvian Luddites may have gone around smashing wheels the same way that nineteenth-century Luddites smashed looms or twentieth-century ones attacked computers, it eventually became apparent that the wheel was not going to go away, and today the wheel ranks alongside writing and the silicon chip as the most important human achievements of all time.

As it was with the wheel, once writing came on the scene, there was no turning back. Trust in writing grew slowly, as people gradually saw how reducing words to symbols on a page could help them remember or transmit information. But in order for writing to really catch on, not only did it have to become easier to learn and to do, but the cost of writing technologies, whether they were clay tablets, quill pens, or laser printers, also had to come down. Furthermore, the new technologies required cheap and ready sources of parchment, ink and paper. Even though paper is common enough to be a throw-away item today, the first dot matrix printers required special tractor feed paper, sold only in large quantities, that was both expensive and hard to find. Today 24-hour grocery stores sell reams of computer paper. Staples and Office Depot didn’t create the computer revolution in America, but they certainly facilitated its spread by setting up a reliable supply infrastructure.

But even after people accepted the basic assumption that the written word could be useful and reliable, they greeted each new writing technology with renewed suspicion. At the outset, the majority of readers and writers typically thought that the old ways were better, preferring handwriting to typewriters, or mechanical typewriters to electric ones, or pencils to computers, which even now are always breaking down, and initially they saw no need to learn yet another difficult and expensive way to process their words.

Once people finally accepted the usefulness and authenticity of handwritten texts, or of words carved in stone, they balked at the new technology of printing, which threatened both to democratize reading and to depersonalize it. A few hundred years later, the typewriter upset our literacy practices once again. It was bad enough that the clacking typewriter joined the equally-noisy adding machine in the increasing mechanization that was permeating, and in the eyes of many, dehumanizing, the modern office of the early twentieth century. Typewriters also threatened to render handwriting obsolete. These new writing machines produced reasonably clear, consistent letters with each keystroke, which meant it was no longer necessary for writers to keep up a uniform and legible penmanship. Typing threatened to supplant with cold, unfeeling uniformity not just routine business correspondence, but also the thoughtful individuality of the handwritten note as a vehicle for polite as well as intimate personal interaction, and what was even worse, because typing resembled printed texts, critics groused that typewriters gave too many would-be writers access to authorship.

Despite such complaints, the typewriter proved as unstoppable as the printing press in taking over major writing functions both on the job and off. But after a century in which they progressed from an oddity manufactured as a sideline by rifle and sewing machine makers to a fixture on every desk in the American office or at home, typewriters have gone the way of the dinosaur. According to the latest generation of critics and naysayers, today it is computers that are producing texts whose value and credibility we question; computers that are giving too many people control over the creation and
publication of text; computers that are wreaking havoc with our handwriting. And to top it off, digitally-enabled writing like email, instant messaging, and texting are now causing us to rethink the differences between speech and writing while at the same time they are redefining the boundaries between public and private communication.

Whether we embrace them or fear them, the technologies that we use to compose, disseminate, and archive our words – the word machinery that ranges from pencils to pixels, from clay tablets to optical disks – not only make reading and writing possible, they have affected our reading and writing practices. The technologies of our literacy – what we write with and what we write on – help to determine what we write and what we can’t. But the technology works two ways: it channels what we do, but it also changes to meet the needs of writers and readers, who play a role in modifying the direction that writing technology takes.

Visit us on the Web

Right now that technology is taking us to the World Wide Web, where more and more Americans are reading and writing, and more and more people around the world are following suit, communicating online. Today’s computer screen looks like a page but functions like a portal, leading the reader into a multidimensional as well as a multimedia space. That can be very exciting, offering writers new ways of composing and readers new ways of reading. Or it can be threatening. It turns out that Marshall McLuhan was only partly right when he said that the medium was the message. Wrapping texts in the exciting layers of a new technology, moving us from one link to the next, may be fun at first. But when the newness of the latest writing upgrade wears off, the content, as always, will have to make it on its own. The digital word can be as important or as trivial, as effective or as meaningless, as the analog variety. Sometimes, it turns out, a great American novel is great, no matter what its format, while a sales pitch is just a sales pitch, whether it jumps off the page or off the screen.

Here’s an illustration of such a sales pitch:

About ten years ago, after coming home from a routine trip to the grocery store, my family began to unpack and sort our purchases at the kitchen table. Examining the fine print on a box of detergent, perhaps because she found the words so compelling, or just to get out of having to put things away, my daughter suddenly cried out, “Look, Tide has a website.”

Sure enough, there on the carton was an invitation that read something like, “Visit us on the World Wide Web at www.tide.com.” It was already common for everyday products like shampoo to list 800-numbers on their labels so consumers could call up and get more information. I myself have never had any shampoo-related questions – what more is there to know after, ‘lather, rinse, repeat’? But I assume that the existence of shampoo customer support meets a significant consumer need. What I couldn’t fathom at the time was why a laundry soap would need a website.
Rushing to the computer, we dialed up (this was long before broadband) and logged on to discover that Tide had indeed mounted a website. There, for customers who needed more to read after they were done reading the Tide box, we found screen after screen detailing the many uses of Tide. For example, it can be used to wash dirty clothes. We found information on how to get out all sorts of pesky stains on our clothes (predictably, we were told to pretreat stains with Tide before washing them in yet more Tide).

Perhaps conventional print media could have conveyed the same message: buy our product, use as much of it as you can, then go out and buy some more. But the Tide website offered both an amount of text and a level of interactivity that magazine ads or soap boxes couldn’t begin to equal.

With a few simple clicks of a mouse we could buy Tide online (shipping and handling charges rendered this an option only for the very rich). Or we could get free Tide. Website visitors were invited to submit essays about interesting ways they had used the product to clean their dirty clothes, and any essay picked for publication on the web won the writer a year’s supply of the detergent. I admit that as a writer who has also dealt with dirty clothes, I was tempted to try my hand at a twenty-five-words-or-less laundry op ed, but when I actually sat down to count the ways I had cleaned things, I couldn’t come up with anything more original than “lather, rinse, repeat.”

Finally, the Tide website offered t-shirts and caps with the logo of the Tide racing team, which visitors could buy on line (hint to fans of Team Tide: don’t clean those gasoline- and oil-soaked rags in the same machine you use for your fine washables, and by all means keep them away from a hot dryer). That Tide had a racing team was as much news to me as the fact that Tide had a website.

A good ten years on, the Tide website is still going strong, and it still offers the same sorts of articles on fabric care. Readers can now sign up for an e-newsletter offering even more ways to use Tide to get clothes clean, and the graphics today seem more sophisticated: on my initial visit I recall moving through links on the site by clicking a series of pastel t-shirts waving in jerky animation on a clothesline. It’s clear that enough people who have questions about washing, or who simply have nothing else to do, are visiting Tide dot com to make it worthwhile for the company to maintain and expand its web offerings.
Nowadays every self-respecting business has a website. Many individuals have one too, but not as many as one might have predicted from the headlong rush to get on the web. A few years ago I began asking my students whether any of them kept a web page. Initially only two said yes – one did it for a class assignment, the other just for fun. Students never really joined the personal website craze, which today remains the preserve of businesses and organizations. Individuals surf those sites routinely, finding them a major source – if not their primary source – of news and information, as well as a major marketplace. But students in particular have found a more attractive alternative to having their own url: today it’s the rare young American who doesn’t have a personal page – what I will refer to as space pages – on Facebook or on MySpace.

It’s common for the more highbrow among us to sniff at vanity publishing – the practice of writers paying to put their own work between covers rather than going through the conventional process of submitting work to a publisher who accepts or rejects it on its merits and salability. Though there are occasional exceptions, conventionally-printed self-published writing doesn’t typically draw many readers. In contrast, self-published websites, and more recently, highly-personal blogs and space pages, seem not to go unread. It’s not clear that website visits translate into soap sales, but at least critics who worry that computers are ruining our literacy should be reassured by indications that the people who visit Tide on the web, or the growing number of blogs and Facebook entries, are actually reading what they find there. In fact, the web has become so compelling that one enterprising manufacturer of high-end appliances actually put a web-browsing computer into a refrigerator, right next to the ice dispenser.

Computers are everywhere these days: they sit on our desktops, on our laps, in our palms, pockets and purses. Soon computers will shrink to fit our cell phones and our wristwatches. But with LG’s computer on ice, we can also get connected by means of a large kitchen appliance. According to the full-page New York Times ad for this fashion-forward appliance, the future is now, in the form of a refrigerator able to compete with the cereal box for our early-morning attention. The 26 cu. ft. model – now discontinued – let consumers keep abreast of terrorism, check their stocks, update their Facebook page,
IM with relatives, and buy chotchkes on eBay, all for a retail price of about $8000. And, because LG had the foresight not to include a webcam in its digi-fridge, they could do all this while standing barefoot and unkempt in their kitchens at six-thirty in the morning, clutching mugs of coffee, staring glumly at the screen.

LG extolled its product’s ability to interact with the homeowner: the refrigerator’s computer could let owners know when the light bulb in the freezer needed changing or when the icemaker was due for service. And it could show videos or display a slide show of the owner’s digital photos or their children’s artwork.

That’s all well and good, but besides the prohibitive price and the need to install a cable outlet behind the refrigerator, what might have kept people from buying the web-enabled fridge is its lack of a keyboard or mouse. There’s no direct way to upload videos or graphics to the LG’s computer, and to input text, which seems to be what most people want to do with their computers these days, users must stand in front of the refrigerator, stooping awkwardly if they’re even average-sized adults, to tap out an instant message or key in a URL on the touch-sensitive screen.

Although writing it down on the digital refrigerator may be almost as hard as writing on the first computer mainframes, the internet refrigerator doesn’t simply allow interaction, it will actually initiate that interactivity, emailing its owner if it needs service. And since LG makes cell phones too, it may not be long before the fridge actually texts to let someone know they’re out of milk. Imagine this scenario: you’re in the middle of an important meeting when suddenly, RING RING . . . . “Uh, excuse me, I have to take this. It’s my refrigerator calling.”