

## International conference (English version)

### *Ordinary writings: writing and reading practices in domestic and public spaces*

November 12th-14th 2025, Université Paris Est Créteil  
Céditec / The Brief Gender in the Public Space international research network<sup>1</sup>

Living in a ‘written society’ means not only that social relations and the organisation of personal life are structured by the written word, but also that the written word is omnipresent in our environment and that we live in spaces saturated by a multiplicity of written documents, the production and reception of which shape our everyday activities. We plan our journeys, for example, by consulting public transport timetables on notice boards or mapping out itineraries using GPS applications; we write shopping lists to guide us along our routes in shops with signs displaying packaged and labelled products; we record our actions or thoughts in a diary; we admire, deplore or create graffiti on the walls of our city.

This congress will therefore focus on ordinary writing and reading practices that are part of everyday actions and activities, in order to examine the relationship between these writings and the actions and activities in which they are embedded. These routine practices (Garfinkel, 1964) will be considered in two areas of the individual's daily life: domestic space and public space, particularly urban space.

Thirty years after the collective work *Écritures ordinaires* (Fabre, 1993) - which dealt with a wide range of writings, from shopping lists to diaries, correspondence, memories of an evening together, and more specific writings such as the vows to Sainte-Germaine, the chain of Saint-Antoine or letters to a healing priest - we propose to take stock of these objects, particularly in the light of the transformations that digital writing has brought to the writing and reading practices that form part of our everyday activities. As Paul Bertrand shows in his book *Les écritures ordinaires* (2019), which focuses on medieval writings, these objects help to clarify the interactions between writing and society. His codicological, diplomatic and palaeographic analyses show that ‘ordinary writing seems to exist only as an imprint - an impression - of the social order or as an attempt, solitary or collective, to escape it in written innocence, madness or revolt’ (Fabre, 1993: 14).

Ordinary writings are situated writings that involve an ongoing, personal and familiar relationship with writing. They are related to functional writings (timetables, school instructions, notices, etc.), professional writings (reports, accounts, budget statements, etc.), and ‘customary writings’ (such as cards, telegrams or e-mails wishing someone a happy birth or expressing condolences for a loss), or even ‘raw writings’ (Thévoz, 1979) produced by people with exceptional graphic skills who deviate from the norms of ordinary writing. The wedding ritual, for example, involves different types of writing in its various phases: banns, registers, booklets; invitations, announcements, thank-you notes; ceremony booklets, menus, seating plans, wedding lists, etc. “Once established as a rite, the written word reveals [...] the various facets of the social bond. Contract, attestation, transmission, memory... form the basis of the continuity of a shared history.” (Fabre, 1993: 25).

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<sup>1</sup> International research network supported by the universities of Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle, Pau and the Pays de l'Adour, Gustave Eiffel and Aoyama Gakuin (Tokyo).

The aim of this congress is to examine the way in which ordinary written documents help to build and maintain a shared society. Whether they are hand-embroidered tablecloths for the trousseaux of yesteryear, labels stuck on jam jars, train tickets printed on recycled paper, menus laid out on a table, shopping lists slipped into a pocket or recorded on a mobile phone, notes hidden in holes in a wall - all these writings help to build the society we inhabit. In fact, as recent publications (Mahiou, 2023; Heck 2023) show, notions of the everyday and the ordinary are profoundly linked to the writings and scripts that make it possible to grasp the different forms of life. What's more, in the age of hypergraphy, these writings are undergoing a metamorphosis: shopping lists on online shopping platforms, notes recorded in mobile phones, digital diaries, diaries published on blogs. Some practices are resisting, others are changing and new ones are emerging. A century after the Cubists experimented with paper pasted onto canvas, ordinary writing is taking over contemporary art, as demonstrated by the works exhibited at the Art Basel fair at the Grand Palais in October 2024.

Exploring this vast field would shed light on aspects of writings and the dynamics of writing that have remained in the background, as well as their role in the structuring and functioning of ancient, modern and contemporary societies, by opening up a space for observing norms and processes of standardisation affecting both writing and society (cf. *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques*, on the semiotics of norms, forthcoming). As Fabre puts it, 'the social order generates writing' (1993: 26). In turn, ordinary writings generate norms. The very etymology of 'ordinary' is a reminder of the constitution and maintenance of an order, both semiological and social one, whose dynamics and issues we can try to understand through different areas of exploration. "Far from being, in its ordinary uses, a 'natural' accompaniment to life, this writing is ordered in both senses of the term. An authority solicits it, or even imposes it, and it is in itself the bearer of an order. Occasion and form, social reason and graphic reason are inseparable. In this sense, writing is not just the outward sign of power, it has become the universal vehicle for an anonymous ordering carried by the very act of writing" (Fabre, 1993: 17).

The aim will therefore be to analyze and question "the writings that our societies demand, require and provoke" (Fabre, 1993: 26), using the various epistemological tools provided by the human and social sciences, by exploring the two spaces of writing that structure our society: the domestic space and the public space.

### **Ordinary writings in domestic and public spaces**

The domestic space, i.e. the interior space of a dwelling, flat or house, "organises domestic and family life at the same time as it is structured by it" (Staszak, 2001: 340). It constitutes a private space, that of the home, in which the sphere of intimacy is defined, and which is laid out and organised according to the activities that take place there.

The ordinary written documents we find in a domestic space may serve very different functions (care, memory, assistance, classification, accounting, etc.) within equally different spheres of action and discourse (cooking, DIY, administration, communication, etc.). In addition, writing practices depend on the choice of various media (loose-leaf, notepads, notebooks, diaries, etc.; paper or digital) and the adoption of specific formats (accounting sheets, address books, digital spreadsheets, etc.) which guide the handling of written material and its integration into very different practices. The act of writing is not just the production of writing, but an act of writing that helps to organize everyday life. It thus becomes an integral part of the action mechanisms put in place (care, housework, commerce, curing, etc.). For example, writings containing apotropaic formulas or prayers form part of the curative process in the same way that a recipe forms part of the process of preparing a dish. Writing practices within the domestic space vary from the

management of daily life to the construction of identity in the context of intimate writings or correspondence with loved ones. Writing can also have a therapeutic function, with a view to healing others (see the vows addressed to saints) or self-healing (diaries or confessions addressed to oneself).

In addition to diaries, which have long been the focus of literary studies, we might also be interested in desk diaries, calendars and planners, notebooks and post-it notes, recipe books, shopping lists and to-do lists, herbariums, account books, but also postcards and various personal or administrative letters and their envelopes, or even emails or exchanges, posts and comments on social networks, as well as instructions and user manuals.

Here, public space will be understood in its spatial and geographical dimensions, as a concrete and material space where people move around and meet. It thus encompasses the notion of public place as “an entity that can be geographically located and materially defined, a fragment of countryside, a village, a neighborhood or a particular building in the city” (Pinson, 2015). From this perspective, public space encompasses the diversity of places open to the public: enclosed spaces with more or less restricted access, such as schools, universities, hospitals and town halls, as well as the various open spaces on the public highway, such as streets, squares and gardens, and all urban and rural spaces for movement and temporary settlement, as well as private spaces open to the public and offering services, such as shops, stations (and trains), airports (and airplanes) and the metro.

Depending on the environment in which it is placed, a written message displayed in the public space may fulfill various functions, including “informative, empractic, directive, evaluative, persuasive, aesthetic ones [...] A regulatory message (Behr, 2005), for example, will be an empractic discourse: based on an idealised script, it will prescribe a certain action or prohibit another (parking in a certain place, depositing objects that are authorised or not, observing the speed limit; cleaning the hotel room [...]) at a certain moment in the script's realisation by an actor” (Behr and Lefevre, 2019). Public space is thus saturated with messages that prescribe behaviour (use prohibited in the event of fire), direct traffic (road signs, public transport signs), incite consumption (advertising), support (political tracts), contemplation or revolt (graffiti).

There is also a wide variety of written material in public spaces, including billboards and posters, signs and signposting, signs, graffiti and latrinalia, ex voto, labels and packaging for consumer products and underground tickets, train tickets and tickets for shows.

Since the end of the last century, the writings present in these spaces have been the subject of Linguistic Landscapes Studies, which are interested in the texts displayed in open public spaces from a socio- and ethnolinguistic perspective (see, in particular, the presentation given by Kelleher in 2017 and the issues of the journal *Linguistic Landscape* devoted to this topic since 2015). For just over a decade, these writings have also been the subject of research by the international network ‘*Le genre bref dans l'espace public*’, which focuses more broadly on brief texts present in public places and is interested in the linguistic and semiotic forms they actualise from an enunciative, grammatical and pragmatic perspective (Dhorne 2018; Behr and Lefevre 2019a, 2019b; Bédouret-Larraburu, Copy and Nita 2023; Dhorne 2024).

In each of these areas, a wide variety of texts are used, some of which relate to the organisation of domestic and private life, others to the organisation of public and social life, and some of which link these two spheres in the same way that they link these two types of area.

### **Dimensions and fields of study of these writings**

These writings may be approached from the diversity of their media (see Cormier and De Angelis, 2023), their formats (see Cormier and De Angelis, 2024) and their inscription techniques - handwritten, printed, digital - but also from the point of view of the transformations implied by changes in the techniques,

technologies and functions of writing, from its beginnings to the present day (Souchier et al., 2019). The analysis of these writings may thus be considered from a synchronic (current or historical) or diachronic perspective, and from the point of view of their production or reception, in order to account for the writing or reading practices associated with them. Papers may focus on the different components of these writings, their diversity, their functions and their circulation within the society they help to build, as well as on the methods of collection and analysis that make it possible to account for them.

The aim will be to examine the genres of ordinary writing from a linguistic and semiotic perspective, and more broadly in scientific fields that include writing among their subjects, such as sociology or anthropology, history or archaeology, but also philosophy, didactics or information and communication sciences.

Papers may focus in particular on the material, enunciative, discursive, grammatical, textual or pragmatic aspects of these writings, and aim to identify the dynamics of stabilisation and formalisation that characterise them, in order to define and distinguish the editorial standards that produce them, paying particular attention to the articulation between media, formats and textual content, as well as to the action-orientation of these writings and their integration into programmes of activity.

The scientific aim of this conference is to contribute to the development of a theory of ordinary writing which - in the wake of a semiolinguistic approach, and through a collective exploration of these fields - could account for the meaning and impact of our everyday writing and reading practices in the construction of the world.

### **Paper format and submission procedures**

Papers will be 30 minutes long, with 10 minutes for discussion.

Proposals for papers, in French or English, should be anonymous and not exceed 500 words excluding bibliography. They should include the title of the paper, a summary presenting the research problem, the theoretical approach and methodology adopted, the data analysed and the expected results, as well as a bibliography.

**Proposals must be submitted on the SciencesConf platform by March 3rd 2025 on the following page:**  
**<https://ecritsord.sciencesconf.org/>**

**Conference languages:** French and English

**Contact:** [ecritsordinaires@gmail.com](mailto:ecritsordinaires@gmail.com)

### **General timetable**

November 26th 2024: publication of the call for papers

March 3rd 2025: deadline for submission of paper proposals

June 2nd 2025: notification of authors

June 16th 2025: conference registration opens

July 31st 2025: deadline for registration for the conference

September 29th 2025: distribution of the final programme

**Registration fee for conference speakers: €150**

## **Guest speakers**

Béatrice Fraenkel (EHESS)  
Paul Bertrand (Catholic University of Louvain)  
William Kelleher (University of Rennes 2 - LIDILE)  
Cécile Mahiou (LAMO)  
Rudolf Mahrer (University of Lausanne)  
Jean-Marie Klinkenberg (University of Liège)

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