**[Word from stones](https://www.dawn.com/news/1628567/word-from-stones)**

[F.S. Aijazuddin](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1314/f-s-aijazuddin)Published June 10, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is an author.

WRITING my first book, over 40 years ago, was as primitive an enterprise as incising hieroglyphics onto a stone.

All I could afford in those days was a second-hand Remington typewriter — the one with a metal keyboard with round buttons, and an uptight carriage into which one fed a single sheet of paper at a time. Mistakes were unforgivable. One had to start a fresh page. This was brought home to me when my UK publishers demanded an error-free manuscript. Excisions, deletions, tipex-ed corrections were not allowed. Pages with a single mistake had to retyped afresh. The manuscript had to be as error-free as a holy book.

Gradually, technology made the work of authors somewhat easier. Computers replaced the typewriter, floppy disks became the rage until one discovered their mortality. Information on them could be erased as instantly as the name of an out-of-favour pharaoh. Hard disks, external hard drives, and USBs are now as common as ink and erasers were.

To modern authors, it is no longer the printer’s devil that shortens their lives but auto-spell. You type a word and move on, little realising that auto-spell has chosen its own alternative spelling. The most clichéd ones are when ‘lawfully wedded wife’ becomes an ‘awfully wedded wife’, or ‘elected’ becomes ‘selected’.

A more useful tool is the command that enables one to replace a word or letters with another. Type in ‘Replace’ and at the click of a cursor, changes that would have taken forever take effect instantly. But like all tools, they should be handled with care. The other day, I thought I was being clever by commanding my computer to replace the word ‘Dr’ with ‘Dr.’ On rereading the text, I discovered that every word that began with ‘dr’ had been converted into ‘dr.essed’, ‘dr.iven’, or ‘dr.eadful’.

Today, computers compress time into economic efficiency.

When I bought my first computer in the mid-1980s, I entered the shop in Abu Dhabi as one would a fancy jeweller, distracted by the dazzling choices on display. The Palestinian salesman was compassion itself. He asked me why I needed the computer — for video games or for writing. I told him I needed it for writing a book. Don’t waste your money on a coloured screen, he advised. Take a monochrome screen. I did. He sacrificed his commission so that I could make a purchase I would not regret.

My 22nd book is now in the press. I have been sitting with the compositor at the printers and watching him perform minor miracles with practised dexterity — shifting paragraphs from one page to another, deleting sections without losing them, expanding and shrinking images to fit the space available. Within a couple of hours, he had produced the entire layout of a 160-page book. Labour that took mediaeval scribes a lifetime of scribbling on vellum has been compressed into the span of half a working day.

Someone once observed that time is compressed money. Today, computers compress time into economic efficiency. They enable us to achieve more in less time, and leave us free then to do nothing better with the time so freed.

Certain literary crafts such as proofreading or editing or indexing cannot be replaced by machines. A conscientious proofreader is as difficult to find as water in a stone. A competent editor is an endangered species. And any person who is willing to prepare an index needs to be as familiar with the book as the author is, and few possess such parenting skills. Such crafts require a human mind and super-human concentration. They are, like the rigours of childbirth, a labour of love. The accomplishment is a newborn book that will live hopefully beyond many lifetimes.

Many years ago, during a hiatus, a dear and much missed friend Mr Ijaz Hussain Batalvi asked me why I had stopped writing. I replied that no one reads anymore. You are right, was his sage response. Shakespeare had the same complaint. “Fakir sahib,” he chided, “Your duty is to write. A readership will be born, whenever!”

That unpaid advice has been a lodestone in my life. It spurred me to write and to publish, even when my books have been admired (like Marilyn Monroe) for their good looks rather than their intellectual capacity.

Some critics have complained that they needed a dictionary to decipher my vocabulary. Customers have complained about the prices, little realising that books are the product not of a few months’ sweat but assiduous learning over a lifetime.

Why then does one persist in this Sisyphean task of rolling manuscripts uphill to see them roll down as finished books?

Because one writes for Batalvi’s future audience. My appeal to that unborn readership is: please opt for a premature birth. My books are on the shelf, waiting for you.

*The writer is an author.*

[www.fsaijazuddin.pk](http://www.fsaijazuddin.pk)

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