The Model of Writing: A Brief History of Templates and Boilerplate Language

A Report by

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For

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**Introduction**

Templates and prepared language, also known as boilerplate language, are used quite often today, in many different fields. Chen (2022) defines the term “boilerplate” as “standardized text, copy, documents, methods, or procedures that may be used over again without making major changes to the original.” (para.1). As for the word “template”, Merriam-Webster gives its definition as “something that establishes or serves as a pattern” (n.d.). Thus, when comparing writing with construction, templates can be seen as a blueprint for the future house, while boilerplate language is its building blocks. No creation can exist without a plan, and a “template” of some form always exists in any practice, from writing to shipbuilding. This report will explore the history of template and boilerplate language use in professional writing.

**History of Template Use**

There does not seem to be much publicly available information on when humans first started using templates. Merriam-Webster reports the first ever known use of the word “template” as having been in the year 1549 (n.d.). Due to the thousand-year-old history of writing, it can be safely said that the practice of using templates existed long before then. According to the University of Texas at Austin (2021), “Writing...has been invented independently in the Near East, China and Mesoamerica. The cuneiform script, created in Mesopotamia, present-day Iraq, ca. 3200 BC, was first.” (Schmandt-Besserat, Abstract). Clayton (n.d.) also reports that as it advanced and evolved over time, writing “has been adopted and embedded in law, the marketplace, learning, religion, storytelling and politics” (Writing has always changed over time, para.1). All these fields require speed and efficiency to achieve their goal or spread their message, so it was approximately around that time that prewritten, ready examples for documents, laws, agreements, and decrees started appearing. The human desire for an easier and readily made way to complete work is evidenced in the evolution from clay tokens used to measure quantities, to written symbols (letters) on stone, to print writing on paper (Schmandt-Besserat, 2021). The benefit of these developments is further proven by Clayton (n.d.), stating that the invention of printing allowed for “making large numbers of identical copies of written artefacts”, and that “In East Asia, printing from carved wooden blocks had proved a reliable low-cost method for reproducing multiple copies of books and other documents since at least the 8th century CE.” (Writing Technologies, para.7). All these facts demonstrate that ever since writing came into existence, humans have been trying to produce large amounts of it, even if identical or similar, in the most efficient way possible. It is most likely this same strife to save time and resources that lead to the development of readily made samples for professional writing, commonly known as templates today.

**History of Boilerplate Language Use**

Boilerplate language has a history slightly longer than its use as a writing practice. The word “boilerplate”, when used on its own, refers to “a plate of steel used as a template in the construction of steam boilers.” (Chen, 2022). The reason for its eventual application to writing was the standardized appearance of these plates, which often reminded publishers of the low-effort, recycled pieces submitted to them by some writers. The first time the term was ever applied in writing was in the 1950s, in the field of law. It was then that an article from the Bedford Gazette expressed criticism against the use of fine print in boilerplates, which was being done by writers to avoid mentioning any uncomfortable details (Chen, 2022).

Boilerplate language has greatly evolved over time and is used in many ways today. Businesses use standardized language to prepare official documents such as reports, memos, letters, agreements, etc. Public relations and marketing teams also follow such practices to promote services and speed up the process of making products known to the public. In addition, people in Information Technology, such as programmers and developers, often use “boilerplate code”, standard code samples that can be used to create a new program faster, due to the incredible complexity of creating one from scratch (Chen, 2022). Finally, academics use templates and boilerplate language to write essays, reports, reviews, and other materials. Therefore, boilerplate language is not only common but also helpful for many professionals in modern society.

**Conclusion**

Just like anything humans create, writing needs a basis and format. Templates and boilerplate language serve exactly that purpose, giving writers something to begin with. Technology and practices change with time but given the strong historical presence of the two concepts discussed above, it can only be said that writers will continue using such prefabricated examples for a long time, even as they change mediums and styles. Just as the great literary works of the world could not exist without an archetype, an essay would not be an essay without a clear format for the writer to follow.

References:

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