

**What is Paper ?  
John Phillips**

**Antique paper,**  
**Backing paper,**  
**Cartridge paper,**  
**Duplicate paper,**  
**e-paper,**  
**Flypaper,**  
**Gummed paper,**  
**Hot-pressed paper,**  
**Inkjet paper,**  
**Junk paper,**  
**Kindling paper,**  
**Litmus paper,**  
**Marbled paper,**  
**Notepaper,**  
**Ordnance paper,**  
**Pulped paper,**  
**Quality paper,**  
**Rice paper,**  
**Sandpaper,**  
**Touch paper,**  
**Useless paper,**  
**Velum paper,**  
**Wallpaper,**  
**Xerox paper,**  
**Yellowed paper,**  
**Zerkal paper**

These papers pass from hand to hand; from hand to arse, or nose, or eyes. They are discarded with indifference, preserved in vaults, munched by worms, burnt by dictators, and occasionally viewed or read. Paper surrounds us, and persistently invades our world. It plops on the doormat demanding payment, and rests on shelves awaiting inspection. It covers our walls and soaks up stains. It is the vehicle for a billion silent voices. Our homes and artefacts are immersed in papered webs; title deeds, designs, product specifications, condition reports, invoices, statements, declarations of intent. We are so entwined with paper that its boundaries are indistinguishable from our own. In Spanish 'to make a paper', (hacer un papel), is to have a role in life<sup>i</sup>. In English 'to discard' is to throw a paper from your hand. Wills, letters, testimonials, and witness statements represent us in our absence. They are the self by proxy. The question; what is paper? is synonymous with the question; who are we?

The Maya believe that the gods created man from maize. Muslims, Jews and Christians agree that he is made from mud. But I believe that we are made of paper. Our lives are traced on paper, certified from birth to death. On paper we express our love, draught our plans for war, record our secret thoughts, and lie. Without papers we are trapped in no-mans-land. To the French the stateless are 'Sans Papier', non-persons; mind and flesh without identity, Lose your passport in a foreign land; this event will be recorded and filed by the police, and copied to your insurance company. Your embassy will proffer paper forms, check for the paper records of your birth, and domicile. Lose your country in a foreign war, and these procedures disappear. You will be consigned to un-mapped purgatory. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to a nationality," but today over 11 million people are stateless, (sans papier) and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees employs only two full-time members of staff to address this problem<sup>ii</sup>. But not all 'Sans Papier' are captured by this statistic. An additional 30 to 40 million migrants<sup>iii</sup> who have slipped clandestinely across borders, or overstayed their visas, live second-class lives in partitioned economies. They are exploited by opportunists, loathed by bigots, and protected by anonymity. In the USA they are called *undocumented*, *aliens* and *illegals*. In the UK, they are known as *asylum seekers*, and are subject to arbitrary detention.

Who are you? What is your name? Where are your papers? Provide the proof and you may cross borders, find work, assistance, family and friends. Without papers you may be arrested. You must await the redrawing of a map, or live-on in the statistics of well-meaning commissions, and become the target of malevolent men. Walter Benjamin collected papers. His writings are infused with quotations. Fleeing from the Nazi's in 1940 he was trapped at Pont Bou on the Franco-Spanish boarder. Fearing capture, and unable to obtain false-documents, he committed suicide. His death is part of European cultural history. For countless others, there is no obituary.

My earliest encounter with the terrible power of paper occurred in November 1956. I was five years old, and had been ill and away from school for a number of days. On my first day back I ran unsuspecting into the playground. "Ghost" came a screech from somewhere in the distance. Then another voice "ghost", "he's a ghost". I looked around. The chanting came closer. "You're dead", said a kid nearby. Soon I was surrounded by a chorus of squeals, giggles and prods. I teacher must have broken it up. A few minutes later I was again the centre of attention, 'Something terrible has happened to a little boy called John Phillips' announced the head-teacher at the morning's assembly. Innocent and self-conscious I stared at the worn-down parquet floor. Three hundred eyes stared at me. Something terrible really had happened to a little boy called John Phillips: his dad had read the papers: 'Russia Invades Hungary' they announced. Convinced that the Red terror was about to plant itself on his doorstep Mr Phillips took pre-emptive measures. He moved his family to heaven. He murdered his wife and son John Phillips with an axe, and was discovered semi-conscious, by neighbours some time later. He had tried to gas himself. These events had been reported in the local paper, and had trickled down to the playground. "But", the head-teacher continued, "it didn't happen to our John Phillips" The word 'our' seemed to echo through the hall. 'Our'? I thought, 'our?' I knew that I had to go to school. I didn't much like it. I hated my teacher. And now I was the school's possession. 'Our John Phillips' she repeated, I had forebodings. I knew that even if something terrible had happened to someone else; someone my age, someone who shared my name, who lived in a neighbouring street, and went to a different school; I knew that something terrible was now happening to me. I knew that the taunts of 'ghost' would persist for days to come, and that limp protection from the head could only make things worse. I've always read the papers with a cautious eye.

Paper is either transient or treasured. Imagine two adjacent sheets from a common pad. On one a note is scribbled, and discarded within the hour. On the other a recipe is copied, and referenced for decades. Envelopes, tissues and newspapers are ephemeral. Certificates and diaries are associates for life.

My grandmother treasured two letters. One, Army form B104- -83, Infantry record office York Station dated 17 2 1917, printed on cheap-brown-paper stated:

(Number) ----- (left blank)  
If replying please quote the above number.

Sir (overwritten by hand Madam) I regret to have to inform you that a report has this day been received from the War Office to the effect that (Number) 28003 (Rank) private (Name) John Hartle (Regiment) 1<sup>st</sup> York and Lancaster was

\*strike out part which does not apply

(\*posted as wounded missing after, \*taken prisoner during) the engagement at Salonica on the third February 1917. Should he subsequently rejoin, or any other information be received concerning him, such information will be at once communicated to you.

I am Sir (overwritten Madam) your obedient servant (signature illegible)

Number the 1<sup>st</sup> section for the Government Infantry Records ~~Officer in charge of records~~ (4 27 1 W12909--- 2398 200,000 S/315 HWV(P)  
Forms B041---80/2

The other letter, she received some months later. Written on tissue paper, in my grandfather's hand, it was smuggled from a prison camp. It told her that John Hartle was alive. My mother became the guardian of this memory, when her mother died.

Paper has a life of its own. It talks to us about itself. We rarely listen because we are too distracted by other things, Stroke paper and it will immediately respond. Squeeze, fold and crumple it, and paper will rustle and crunch. Soft and warmed-voiced, solid and dull, crackly and high-pitched, each paper tells the tale embedded in its making. A paper's ingredients, its beating, pressing and weight, affect this voice. Connoisseurs listen to paper. They hold sheets by a corner, and rattle them to gauge fragility. But mostly; through the crinkle and squeak of sweet-wrappers, or the purr of an opening book, paper speaks to our subconscious, and we intuitively ignore its chatter. Paper also breathes. It expands and contracts with humidity and air. Stacks of paper grow with touch. A factory-sealed 100 gsm ream<sup>iv</sup> is approximately 58mm deep. But shift each sheet onto a new pile, and you will add a couple of millimetres of trapped air. Print it, staple it, annotate it, scrunch it - pass it around, and paper will expand to occupy more space.

But what is this stuff that we call paper? Is it simply, as my dictionary suggests, 'a substance made from pulped rags or vegetable fibre used in thin sheets for writing, printing drawing, packaging etc ?'<sup>v</sup> Is paper a mere cheap, dumb screen for frozen thought and secret ballots? Is it a messenger without intent, a dispassionate whore, a slave to any mind that leaves a trace upon its surface? Ask anyone who draws and he or she will tell you otherwise. No artist's mark is his or hers alone. It is the outcome of a complex game that merges materials and mind. A paper's surface, rough or smooth, its absorbency, brilliance or weight, seem to possess intentions of their own. Paper, you might reason, is not alive. It cannot reproduce itself. But neither is it inanimate. We make it, and it incorporates our thoughts. It is predisposed to respond to our intentions. Drawing on paper awakens its temperament, and paper breathes life into our gestures. It informs the flow of ink. It catches graphite grains. It freezes ghostly traces, and becomes a palimpsest of stains infused with meaning. We like to think that we are rational, and that paper helps us to clarify our thoughts. By fixing words upon its surface we extract them from the stream of time. By tracing around shadows, we likewise capture forms. Once arrested upon paper, these ideas are open to inspection. We can lay them to one-side, and return to question them. Thus paper

facilitates reflection. It allows us to stand-back and rearrange our thoughts. But paper is a multi-layered mirror not a surface. It is enchanting. We bury memories in its folds, and dissolve the boundaries between our real and symbolic self. Take, for example, a photograph of yourself. It is just a piece of paper, Take a pin and stick it through the eyes. Could you do this without wincing, or even without fear?

My desk is piled with paper. Business cards, exhibition invites, letters and reports, policies and procedures, drafts and draughts, which I regularly purge, file, and dump. But the tide of ordered chaos soon returns. To 'create space' I dig deeper in manila folders. I throw out paper to make room for paper. But space and value are not equivalent. Yesterday I ditched another file. Among its contents was a hand-written letter, which offered advice on raising funds. The opportunity was long-passed, the letter no longer relevant. Its author was a close-friend, who died three years ago. Suddenly, confronted with her writing, searching its squiggles for her smile, flooded by memories of her laughter, I felt sad and stupid as I placed it in the bin.

Paper is beautiful and tricky. We overlook it too much. It is matted and entangled; diaphanous and tough. It is visceral, dimpled, fibrous and crisp. Its edge can slice your flesh, its surface can seduce. It is Artisan and Lace, Royal and Velour. A handmade paper may draw qualities from the spring-melted snow of a remote mountain pass. An industrial paper will be finely tuned to the foibles of a gigantic machine. Subtle changes in the mix, handling, coating, drying, and so on, will change a paper's qualities. These variations and attributes multiply the tasks that paper may fulfil. Several papers will not tear or burn, others will dissolve in sweat-soaked hands. Some papers can be crushed into a tiny ball, yet unfold into an unscarred pristine leaf.

We mainly think of paper as a surface carrying images and text, but paper can be twisted into yarn, woven into fabrics and cast in building blocks. It has been employed for making boats, armour, raincoats, tables, tampons, carriages and wheels. In the eighteenth century paper balloons elevated people to the sky, in the twentieth century paper stimulated the invention of plastic. In Japan it is the traditional material for making windows. In Bali it forms elaborate funeral pyres. In Mexico it is engaged in magic. In China it is ritually burnt. In the west we wear paper crowns at Christmas, and across the globe we exchange paper money for our goods. Yet despite, or perhaps because of its ubiquity, we rarely see paper for itself. We see a slip for making cigarettes, the instruction for an examination, an academic proposition, or a journal carrying news. And each of these we call a paper. We expect paper to be invisible, or a metaphor for other things. When something is said to be not worth the paper that it is written on, we never protest, we are silently complicit with paper's non-identity and apparent worthlessness. We are content to leave paper in the background, to define it as neutral and blank. But paper's apparent passivity is a deceit and camouflage, which hides a powerful instrument that is otherwise called *Carte Blanche*.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Role' is likewise derived from the rolls of paper from which actors learned their lines

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<sup>ii</sup> Refugees International <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/issue/detail/4835>, accessed 11 Dec 2005

<sup>iii</sup> Papademetriou, Demetrios G. *The Global Struggle with Illegal Migration: No End in Sight*. Migration Policy Institute, September 1, 2005, <http://www.migrationinformation.org>

<sup>iv</sup> 500 sheets of paper, from Spanish *resma*, derived from Arabic *riizmah*, a bundle, especially of paper

<sup>v</sup> The Penguin English Dictionary p 511