Plato, from *The Phaedrus* – a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus written down by Plato, the pupil of Socrates, in approximately 370 BC.

In reading this excerpt from *The Phaedrus*, which reports a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, crucial to your understanding of what bothers Socrates about writing is knowing a bit about his history and his own philosophical method. Socrates himself never wrote anything; all his ideas were written down by his student, Plato. Socrates had perfected a kind of oral technology of thought called the "Socratic dialogue." Socrates worked -- that is, he did his thinking work as a philosopher -- by asking questions, interrogating the people who presented him with ideas to find out where those ideas broke down logically into contradictions. So when Socrates wants to be able to interrogate the author of a book, to ask him or her questions, he really wants the opportunity to do some good, hard thought-work with that author, overturning contradictory claims and getting at underlying assumptions through a process of question and answer, of dialogue.

From: http://www.units.muohio.edu/technologyandhumanities/plato.htm

SOCRATES: Enough appears to have been said by us of a true and false art of speaking.

PHAEDRUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But there is something yet to be said of propriety and impropriety of writing.

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Do you know how you can speak or act about rhetoric in a manner which will be acceptable to God?

PHAEDRUS: No, indeed. Do you?

SOCRATES: I have heard a tradition of the ancients, whether true or not they only know; although if we had found the truth ourselves, do you think that we should care much about the opinions of men?

I can tell you the tradition that has been passed down from our forefathers, but they alone know the truth. However, if we could discover that for ourselves, should we still be concerned with the fancies of mankind?

PHAEDRUS: Your question needs no answer; but I wish that you would tell me what you say that you have heard.

Well, that’s a ridiculous question, but go ahead and tell me what you’ve heard.

SOCRATES: At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god
Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt; and he dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt which the Hellenes call Egyptian Thebes, and the god himself is called by them Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

Very well. The story is that in the region of Naucratis in Egypt there lived one of the old gods of the country and to whom the bird called Ibis is sacred. Theuth invented math and calculations, geometry and astronomy, checkers and dice, and most importantly writing. Now the king of the whole country at that time was Thamus, or Ammon to the Greeks and who dwelt in the great city of Upper Egypt, which the Greeks called Egyptian Thebes. Theuth came to Thamus and showed him his arts, saying they ought to be passed on to the rest of the Egyptians. Thamus asked of what use they all are, and after Theuth explained, Thamus condemned what he thought were the bad points and praised the good ones. But when it came to writing, Theuth said, “Here is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wit.” The king answered, “The creator of an art is not always in the best position to judge how that art might harm and of profit those that shall employ it. And so it is that you, by the reason of your tender regard for writing that you gave life to, have wrongly declared it more valuable than it is. For writing will implant forgetfulness in people precisely because they will not use their memories, instead choosing to rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance that are no longer within themselves but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory but for reminder, and it will provide not truth but the semblance of truth; they will appear to know much but have learned nothing. And they will people filled not with wisdom but with the conceit of wisdom.”

PHAEDRUS: Yes, Socrates, you can easily invent tales of Egypt, or of any other country.

SOCRATES: There was a tradition in the temple of Dodona that oaks first gave prophetic utterances. The men of old, unlike in their simplicity to young philosophy, deemed that if they heard the truth even from "oak or rock," it was enough for them; whereas you seem
to consider not whether a thing is or is not true, but who the speaker is and from what country the tale comes.
The authorities at the temple of Zeus at Dodona said that the first prophetic utterances came from oak trees. In fact the people of those days, lacking the wisdom of you young people, were willing to listen to rocks and trees, as long as they told the truth. Whereas, for you it appears to make a difference who the speaker is and where is from.

PHAEDRUS: I acknowledge the justice of your rebuke; and I think that the Theban is right in his view about letters.
You’re right, and I agree that Thamus was correct in his view.

SOCRATES: He would be a very simple person, and quite a stranger to the oracles of Thamus or Ammon, who should leave in writing or receive in writing any art under the idea that the written word would be intelligible or certain; or who deemed that writing was at all better than knowledge and recollection of the same matters?
Then someone who would leave behind a written piece on the supposition that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent must be exceedingly simple-minded; he must really be ignorant of Thamus’s point if he imagines that the written word can do anything more than serve as a reminder in comparison to the one who actually knows that which the writing is concerned with.

PHAEDRUS: That is most true.

SOCRATES: I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of prepared speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.

PHAEDRUS: That again is most true.

SOCRATES: Is there not another kind of word or speech far better than this, and having far greater power—a son of the same family, but lawfully begotten?
Is there not another form of discourse, a brother to the written or prepared speech, but of unquestioned legitimacy? Can we see how it originates and how much better and more effective it is than writing?

PHAEDRUS: Whom do you mean, and what is his origin?

SOCRATES: I mean an intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent.
The sort that goes together with knowledge and is written in the soul of the learner, the
sort that can defend itself and knows to whom it should speak to whom it should say nothing?

PHAEDRUS: You mean the living word of knowledge which has a soul, and of which written word is properly no more than an image?
You mean the living word of speech, to which the written word is nothing more than an image?

SOCRATES: Yes, of course that is what I mean. And now may I be allowed to ask you a question: Would a husbandman, who is a man of sense, take the seeds, which he values and which he wishes to bear fruit, and in sober seriousness plant them during the heat of summer, in some garden of Adonis, that he may rejoice when he sees them in eight days appearing in beauty? At least he would do so, if at all, only for the sake of amusement and pastime. But when he is in earnest he sows in fitting soil, and practices husbandry, and is satisfied if in eight months the seeds which he has sown arrive at perfection?
Exactly. And now tell me this: if a sensible farmer had some valuable seeds that he wanted to bear fruit, would he plant them during the heat of summer and enjoy watching them produce short-lived and out of season fruit in eight days? If he did so, wouldn’t it be just to amuse himself? For serious purposes, wouldn’t he behave like a learned farmer by sowing his seeds in suitable soil, and be satisfied when they came to maturity within eight months?

PHAEDRUS: Yes, Socrates, that will be his way when he is in earnest; he will do the other, as you say, only in play.

SOCRATES: And can we suppose that he who knows the just and good and honorable has less understanding, than the husbandman, about his own seeds?
And so can we believe that he who understands the just and good and honorable is any less aware of his knowledge than the farmer with his own seeds?

PHAEDRUS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Then he will not seriously incline to "write" his thoughts "in water" with pen and ink, sowing words which can neither speak for themselves nor teach the truth adequately to others?

PHAEDRUS: No, that is not likely.

SOCRATES: No, that is not likely—in the garden of letters he will sow and plant, but only for the sake of recreation and amusement; he will write them down as memorials to be treasured against the forgetfulness of old age, by himself, or by any other old man who is treading the same path. He will rejoice in beholding their tender growth; and while others are refreshing their souls with banqueting and the like, this will be the pastime in which his days are spent.

PHAEDRUS: A pastime, Socrates, as noble as the other is ignoble, the pastime of a man
who can be amused by serious talk, and can discourse merrily about justice and the like. A pastime, Socrates, of a man who enjoys serous talk and can discuss justice and similar ideas.

SOCRATES: True, Phaedrus. But nobler far is the serious pursuit of the dialectician, who, finding a congenial soul, by the help of science sows and plants therein words which are able to help themselves and him who planted them, and are not unfruitful, but have in them a seed which others brought up in different soils render immortal, making the possessors of it happy to the utmost extent of human happiness. True, Phaedrus, but far nobler is the dialectician who, when he finds someone of similar ilk, “plants” words that are able to help both themselves and he who planted them. And that have within them a seed that those raised in different soils find equally truthful, making those who own it as happy as they can be.

PHAEDRUS: Far nobler, certainly.

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SOCRATES: Any one may see that there is no disgrace in the mere fact of writing.

PHAEDRUS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: The disgrace begins when a man writes not well, but badly.

PHAEDRUS: Clearly.

Much of the text is adapted from “situated learning and a post-modern epistemology in Plato's time” found at http://www.scribd.com/doc/6913845/notesplatophaedrus#document_metadata