“Who would not respect a king,” asked the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus, “who dispatches a letter that he himself has written?”2 Prior to the late fifteenth century, most political commentators would have answered Erasmus’s question in the negative. Medieval rulers saw writing as an arduous and unnecessary form of manual labor best delegated to secretaries. Although the “word of the king” carried legal authority and numinous power, the “hand of the king” was not needed to apply ink to paper in order for a document to be “authored” by him. Yet over the centuries, as attitudes toward literacy shifted, administrative departments grew, and humanist scholars began to emphasize a new conceptual link between authorship and authority, letter writing came to be seen not only as a hallmark of courtly cultivation, but as a demonstration of a monarch’s active engagement in affairs of state. Although the extent of a ruler’s involvement in letter production varied according to temperament, by the mid-sixteenth century, letter writing had become an integral part of a monarch’s job description.

This chapter briefly charts the history of royal letter writing in England and explores how variations in royal literacy affected the way politics and diplomacy were conceived and practiced over time. It examines how royal authorship was defined in the medieval period and how cultural expectations about royal literacy became
interlinked with humanist ideas of good governance. The different writing habits of the Tudor monarchs give insight into their personalities, the expanding role of the secretariat, and the rapidly evolving nature of diplomacy. Elizabeth had a particular fascination with language, which naturally geared her mind toward letter writing, but she was not the only ruler of her generation to produce large amounts of holograph material. In order to fully understand the innovative ways in which Elizabeth and her secretaries adapted her correspondence to different circumstances, it is necessary to locate her letters within the context of evolving diplomatic and bureaucratic practice.

Throughout the early medieval period, reading and writing were skills practiced almost exclusively by the clerical elite. Reading was more common among the secular nobility than writing, since the written word was considered a secondary extension of the primary, spoken word. In John of Salisbury’s eloquent phrasing, letters were “shapes indicating voices.” Reading was a social activity, and most texts (including letters) were read aloud and passed around for public consumption. Writing, on the other hand, was a messy, solitary, and time-consuming business that involved a range of expensive equipment—quills, membranes, ink, dusters, knives etc.—as well as specialized knowledge of script styles, letter formats, and Latin grammar. As M. T. Clanchy has aptly noted, it is more useful to think of medieval writers as “artisans of script” rather than as authors in the modern sense. Early Christian rulers were encouraged to emulate Old Testament paragons of educated kingship, but they usually chose to display their literary skills through mastery of the art of dictation. Thus Charlemagne, one of the most cultivated rulers of the eighth century, could read and speak Latin fluently, but never learned to write it.

The first Anglo-Saxon king to engage in international politics, King Aethelbert of Kent (c. 560–616), could neither read nor write. Aethelbert ruled in a warrior culture that cherished martial values over literacy and, like Procopius’s Goths, he probably viewed letter writing as “far removed from manliness.” It is ironic that through his marriage to the pious Frankish Princess Bertha, whose presence in England encouraged Pope Gregory I to send a mission of Christian monks to that distant island, Aethelbert presided over the biggest literary revolution in England since the Roman invasion. Along with the “religion of