BAD IDEAS ABOUT WRITING



Cheryl E. Ball & Drew M. Loewe ed.
West Virginia University

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Bad Ideas About Writing

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Licensing

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Editor Bios and Acknowledgements

Cheryl E. Ball is associate professor of digital publishing studies in the Professional Writing and Editing program at West Virginia University. She is also editor of Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy as well as the #writing book series with the WAC Clearinghouse/Colorado State University Open Press, both of which are open-access publishing venues available to anyone with an Internet connection. She teaches the importance of editing content in a digital world, and offers a special thank you to all
of the undergraduate and graduate students at WVU who helped with the publication of this book. She also thanks WVU Libraries for its support of the Digital Publishing Institute. Finally, she is grateful to Drew M. Loewe for coming up with the idea for this book and for agreeing to let her work on it with him.

Drew M. Loewe is an associate professor of writing and rhetoric at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, where he also directs the Writing Center. His scholarly and teaching interests include rhetorical theory and criticism, argumentation, prose style, legal writing, writing centers, research methods, and the first-year writing sequence. He thanks St. Edward's for supporting this project with time and money, and especially thanks Cheryl E. Ball for being the best co-editor anyone could hope for.

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Introduction

Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe Beginning in 1998, Edge.org has asked a diverse group of scholars, intellectuals, and artists the annual Edge Question, a question designed to spark arguments about provocative ideas to be published online and collected into print volumes intended for a general public audience. Edge Questions have included such questions as “What is your dangerous idea?,” “What have you changed your mind about? Why?,” and the one that inspired this collection: “What scientific idea is ready for retirement?” That last question was the 2014 Edge Question, published in a book titled This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories that are Blocking Progress. Drew first saw the book in a publisher’s exhibit at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication, a big annual convention of writing teachers and scholars. After reading the book, especially in the context of an academic convention, Drew suggested on social media that the field of writing studies should publish its own collective effort to name particularly unhelpful or backward ideas and argue directly to the public about them. Cheryl replied right away that she would be on board, and thus this project was born.

This project is necessary because while scholars in writing studies (just as in any academic field) argue to and against one another in scholarly journals, books, and conference talks, those forms of knowledge-making don’t consistently find their way into the public’s understanding of writing. Yet “the public” in all its manifestations—teachers, students, parents, administrators, lawmakers, news media—are important to how writing is conceptualized and taught. These publics deserve clearly articulated and well-researched arguments about what is not working, what must die, and what is blocking progress in current understandings of writing. So our call for proposals sought contributions that provided a snapshot of major myths about writing instruction—written by experts for the educated public—that could collectively spark debate and have us rethink our pieties and myths. This collection is an attempt by a varied and diverse group of writing scholar–teachers to translate our specialized knowledge and experiences about writing for a truly wide set of audiences, most of whom will never read the scholarly journals and books or attend conferences about this topic because of the closed nature of such publications and proceedings. In keeping with the public purpose of these writings, it was important to us that it be published open-access. Because there are so few options for trade-like academic books that are open access, we decided—in consultation with the authors of this collection— to publish Bad Ideas About Writing as an open educational resource through the Digital Publishing Institute, which Cheryl directs. Bad Ideas will join other books in West Virginia University Library’s nascent digital publishing project, where it will be supported by librarians for a long time to come.

We intend this work to be less a bestiary of bad ideas about writing than an effort to name bad ideas and suggest better ones. Some of those bad ideas are quite old, such as the archetype of the inspired genius author, the five-paragraph essay, or the abuse of adjunct writing teachers. Others are much newer, such as computerized essay scoring or gamification. Some ideas, such as the supposed demise of literacy brought on by texting, are newer bad ideas but are really instances of older bad ideas about literacy always being in a cycle of decline. Yet the same core questions such as what is good writing, what makes a good writer, how should writing be assessed, and the like persist across contexts, technologies, and eras. The project has its genesis in frustration, but what emerges is hope: hope for leaving aside bad ideas and thinking about writing in more productive, inclusive, and useful ways.

The individual entries, which we came to dub as both opinionated encyclopedia entries and researched mini-manifestos, offer syntheses of relevant research and experience along with cross-references to other entries that take up related subjects. Instead of the typical trappings of academic citation styles (APA, MLA, Chicago, Oxford, etc.) that are specific to certain disciplines, we asked authors in the Bad Ideas collection to summarize the available research and present it in a way similar to how a newspaper, introductory textbook, or podcast might deliver such research— not through individual citations, but through a list of resources and further reading that would point readers to follow-up material. The authors of these entries are often published experts in these fields, so searching for their other work at a library or online will produce additional information on these topics. We have provided keywords for each entry as well, which correspond to the academic terms that would appear in other peer-reviewed, published research on these topics.

The entries cohere around eight major categories of bad ideas about writing that are tied to the production, circulation, cultural use of, evaluation, and teaching of writing in multiple ways. The categories are bad ideas about:

- The features of good writing
- What makes good writers
- How grammar and style should be understood
- Which techniques or processes produce good writing

- Particular genres and occasions for writing
- How writing should be assessed
- How technology impacts writing
- Teachers of writing

Although we have categories (and there are thematic clusters visible within the larger categories), we encourage readers to read the entries with and against each other, looking for productive overlaps and disagreements. For instance, there are at least three entries on the five-paragraph essay—the genre perhaps most known by the various publics reading this book, and the most maligned by its writers—and each entry takes a different perspective, disagreeing as needed where the research and the writer's experience pertain.

Without forcing a weak consensus or flattening out the individuality of the chapters, together they offer a practical, action-oriented group of rational manifestos for discontinuing unhelpful or exclusionary ideas about a subject and activity that all have a stake in. We hope that the collection is a conversation-starter, not a conversation-stopper, and we hope that it provides a catalog of support for productive conversations about how and why to stop the bad ideas about writing and start the good.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Bad Ideas About What Good Writing is ...

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1.1: Rhetoric is Synonymous with Empty Speech

Author: Patricia Roberts-Miller, Department of Rhetoric and Writing, University of Texas at Austin

Recently, I was at a meeting of faculty whose research and teaching interests concerned issues of environmentalism. A colleague from another department asked me what my area was. “Environmental rhetoric,” I replied. He looked slightly shocked and then commented, “Good environmentalism doesn’t have a rhetoric.” I’m in a department of rhetoric, so I teach rhetoric, read scholarly pieces on rhetoric, and attend conferences on rhetoric. However, I often forget that other faculty members’ views on rhetoric might be different than mine.

A popular view of rhetoric is that it is a straightforward model of how communication should work: A person can speak the truth simply by using words that refer to true things in the world. If she chooses not to use sentences filled with words that refer to true things in the world, then she is engaged in rhetoric. Rhetoric, in this view, is something you add on to sentences (such as metaphor) that decorates and obscures communication. If I say, “The cat is on the mat,” I am using language correctly. However, if I say, “The elegant feline languishes mournfully on the expensive carpet, waiting impatiently for what he sees as his lazy servants to open a can of salmon,” then I have added rhetoric to the first sentence, or chosen rhetoric over clear communication.

For many people, the simpler, plainer version of the sentence is not just a stylistic choice, it’s a moral one. Many people believe that the addition of more complicated words obscures the meaning of the sentence. Rhetoric, to them, is something that hides the truth. If you look at the two sentences, though, you can see that the elaborated, supposedly more rhetorical one communicates quite clearly. In fact, it communicates more effectively and precisely than “The cat is on the mat.” It might, of course, be false—there might not be such a cat; it might not be elegant; it might not be thinking much of anything; it might be quite cheerful; it might not like salmon. But the same is true of the simpler sentence—there might not be a cat; it might not be on a mat. Thus, linguistic simplicity and truthfulness aren’t necessarily connected, and linguistic complexity and truthfulness aren’t necessarily opposed.

Or, to put it another way, for a long time, philosophers of language insisted that language works by sentences having propositional content—“the cat is on the mat”—which can be expressed in various ways. Rhetoric is what we layer onto the proposition. Or, as the old saying goes, “Rhetoric is clothing on the idea.” In an Edenic world, we would all wander around naked, and we would all simply and clearly speak our thoughts; rhetoric is something we must have in this fallen world.

People who believe that rhetoric hides meaning believe that we could return to Eden by using simple, plain, and rhetoric-free language. One of several underlying assumptions is that it’s harder to lie in plain language, or that lies are more obvious when the language is less complicated. Therefore, we can trust plain language and should treat complicated language with suspicion. Oddly enough, this seemingly straightforward proposition isn’t true. In other words, this simple belief shows that an idea can be untrue and persuasive at the same time. It is also interesting that the master deceivers have generally relied on simple, yet false, claims. It’s quite likely that people believed their assertions were clear and plain and, therefore, assumed that they must be true.

The Edenic view isn’t a helpful way to think about rhetoric. It isn’t even how language works. While it’s true that the same thing can be said in different ways, there is a way of saying that thing without rhetoric. “The cat is on the mat” is still a style—the simple style—with internal rhyming and prose rhythm. It’s also structurally the rhetorical figure of chiasmus—the sentence begins and ends in an almost identical way. We can’t get away from rhetoric, but we can choose its kind.

As in all interesting arguments, it’s a question of how we’re defining terms. And rhetoric has a variety of definitions. It was first used in Platonic dialogues with very little precision. It comes from the Greek word for a person with a certain role in the Athenian Assembly (rhetor). It is believed that it was Plato who added the -ic later.

He used rhetoric in terms of speech-making as opposed to arguing in small groups. Plato wasn’t opposed to argumentation, and he wasn’t even opposed to some verbal sleight of hand. After all, Socrates—often read as a kind of spokesman for Plato’s views—relied heavily on some fairly dodgy logical moves in the dialogues. Plato’s point seems to be that speech-making isn’t a very useful skill because making speeches to large groups (Athenian juries might have hundreds of people) is not very effective for getting to the truth. It might be effective for getting others to accept the truth one has already figured out (that seems to be the point that Socrates is making in the dialogue *Phaedrus*), but, if you want to find out what’s true, argue with another individual. Do not make a speech.

Of course, Socrates makes a lot of speeches in Platonic dialogues. So, it is still murky whether or not Plato noticed the contradiction, was making a different point despite noticing the proposition, or didn't write the dialogues to get to the truth. In fact, Plato's overall attitude toward rhetoric is murky, even though his school, the Academy, did have rhetoric classes. They were taught by a man named Aristotle.

On the other hand, Aristotle, who was a teacher of rhetoric, neither defined rhetoric as style nor as something you add to language. He described it as a discipline and a skill that enables you to see the available means of persuasion. For Aristotle, rhetoric is about public speaking to large groups, and it is different from philosophy. So, he did share those two assumptions with Plato. But he didn't agree with Plato about rhetoric not getting us to the truth. He thought that it could get us to the truth, but that it could also be used to deceive. It depends on the motives of the person using it.

Aristotle loved syllogisms, and seems to have believed that all reasoning could be done through them. In philosophy, to get to the truth, you try to begin with a universally valid major premise (e.g., all men are mortal). Then you have a more specific proposition related to that premise (e.g., Socrates is a man) that enables you to draw a conclusion (e.g., Socrates is mortal). But Aristotle said that this kind of reasoning doesn't work in large assemblies for two reasons. First, during a speech, people don't have the time to reason from universally valid major premises—if you're arguing about whether Philip of Macedon represents a threat, it's useless to try to find universally valid premises about tyrants or war or people from Macedon. You don't have time. Second, the kind of things about which we make speeches—politics, ethics, military strategy, guilt or innocence, honor and dishonor—aren't subject to certainty. There are no universally valid major premises about tyrants that will help us figure out what we need to do now and here to assess Philip. We must rely on what is probably true.

According to Aristotle, what you learn from rhetoric is how to approach political, ethical, and legal problems, how to come up with an argument when you can't be (or, at least, shouldn't be) certain that you're right. You also learn how to assess other people's arguments. Aristotle, unlike many other philosophers, doesn't present rhetoric as an inferior discipline to philosophy (he says it's a "counterpart"). It's just different. It's a pragmatic skill that helps us in decision-making.

Aristotle, being an astute observer, noticed that people argued about different things in similar ways. He came up with 28 approaches, called "lines of argument" (they're also sometimes called "formal topoi," which makes it seem as though they have long dresses and white ties). If I am making a speech trying to persuade people to become more active in politics, I might argue from precedent (listed as #11 of his 28 lines), or argue that the consequences of political activism are good (#13), or point out inconsistencies in the argument for political quietism (#22), and so on. Those different lines aren't ornaments I hang on the proposition that people should be politically active; they are all different ways of thinking about the situation.

Take, for instance, Aristotle's first line of argument: consideration of the opposite, a strategy that might structure my entire case. I might spend all my time trying to show that political activism is good because political quietism is bad. I might, however, make that just part of one speech, in which I move from how good it is to be politically active to a moving description of the tragedies associated with political quietism. Or, I might make it one paragraph, or one sentence. I might say, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." In other words, the forms—such as consideration of the opposite—can be used to structure a clause, sentence, paragraph, speech, or (in John F. Kennedy's case) political philosophy. Rhetoric is a way of thinking. It is not just something added to a thought derived by other means.

Does that mean that rhetoric is always good? Of course not. Rhetoric is a contingent, pragmatic, and generally (but not always) verbal way of approaching problems we face as members of communities. It is the cause as well as the consequence of thought. If we tend to think in binaries and divide everything into this versus that, then we'll probably be drawn to the rhetorical figures that divide things into two. Continually presenting and interpreting issues in that divided way will reinforce our sense that things really are divided into two. We might then act in ways that divide things into two—we might believe that everyone is either an ally or an enemy, and thereby alienate neutral parties. Thinking and talking about everyone as ally or enemy might mean we are likely to end up in a world in which people end up treating us in that manner. Rhetoric isn't always good, and it isn't always bad, but it's rarely neutral.

For instance, we might be tempted to use metaphors of disease, infection, or contamination for those groups that we don't like. That might be a calculated decision to mislead an audience. We might not dislike the groups as vehemently as we project but we still perform for the audience to get votes, money, popularity, sales, sex, or something else. It is insincere. These types of people might make us feel unsettled and disgusted. They might even come across to us as dangerous. Thus, we call them slimy or a cancer on the

body politic. We proclaim that they spread ideas, weaken our community, and threaten our children. Those metaphors and that rhetoric would feel accurate, and it would convey our meaning—it is not added on; it is not ornamentation. It is what we mean. And it can hurt us as a community because it can mean that we then interpret that group's actions through a lens of disease, threat, and danger. We can end up killing them or getting them killed because of the rhetoric we used. We can't get away from rhetoric, but we can choose the kind of rhetoric we use.

Further Reading

For further reading on rhetoric as more than "mere rhetoric," see especially Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, which distinguishes between "rhetrickery" and rhetoric as an inclusive method of deliberation. Eugene Garver's *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* is an elegant introduction to Aristotle, and Debra Hawhee and Sharon Crowley's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, though a textbook, explains classical and current conceptions of rhetoric usefully.

Keywords

conceptual metaphor, deliberative rhetoric, public argumentation, rhetorical topic

Author Bio

Patricia Roberts-Miller is a professor in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Texas at Austin, where she also directs the writing center. Her scholarly and teaching interests include the history and theory of public argumentation— as she likes to put it, she's a "scholar of train wrecks in public deliberation." More about Trish can be found at patriciarobertsmiller.com.

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1.2: America is Facing a Literacy Crisis

Author: Jacob Babb, English, Indiana University Southeast.

In a 1975 *Newsweek* article entitled “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” Merrill Sheils asserted, “Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates.” Sheils worried that technologies such as computer printouts and the conference call were destroying Americans’ abilities to produce clear and concise prose in professional settings, warning that the decline of literacy means that they would soon find themselves back in Babel. Sheils offers a dire vision of late 20th-century Americans who were unwilling to embrace the highly structured rules of the English language and a failing education system that was shoving literacy over the precipice. Literacy, according to Sheils, was in crisis.

The notion that literacy is in crisis is nothing new. Americans have been asking why Johnny can’t write for a long time now. The United States has fought against the perceived decline in literacy since the 19th century when higher education—indeed, education in general—became more widely available to people who were not wealthy white men.

It was during this era that higher education gradually shifted away from its narrow periphery that produced clergymen and lawyers. The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 authorized states to use federal lands to build state-supported institutions that focused on agriculture and technology. In response, many of the best universities in the country were established. Colleges and universities began to put greater emphasis on faculty research, moving away from the more teaching-focused traditions of American higher education. The emphasis on research continued to grow throughout the 20th century as universities worked with the federal government and private corporations to produce the kinds of advances in science that cured diseases, sent people to the moon, and obliterated large quantities of people with atomic weapons.

As the purpose of higher education changed and more academic institutions were established, more people began going to college. The economic and educational backgrounds of new students became more varied. And with each change that was witnessed in students, technology, and media, academics and non-academics alike bemoaned the decline of literacy.

The perennial literacy crisis has been a significant contributor to the spread of composition instruction in American universities. First-year writing emerged in response to a perception among faculty members at colleges and universities as well as members of the broader society outside academia that high schools were not providing adequate instruction in writing and reading, so high school graduates were under-prepared for the rigorous demands of academic writing. At Harvard University, the faculty and administration decided that the crisis in student preparation required a temporary solution, a stopgap until high schools could improve the quality of writing instruction and subsequently send students to college who did not struggle to write clear, coherent, and grammatically correct prose. That temporary solution in the 1880s was English A, a freshman composition course that instantly became a model for other institutions across the country.

The courses envisioned as temporary have since become a staple of American higher education. The reasons for the course’s lasting power are complex, but literacy crises are the primary drive behind the stabilization of first-year writing and the growth of writing instruction throughout undergraduate and graduate education. The academic field of writing studies owes its growth throughout the 20th century to public distress that literacy is failing.

Blame for the collapse of literacy shifts from high-school teachers to technology, television, Internet, smart phones, laptops, and tablets—the same technology we often hope will rescue us from illiteracy—to a lack of adequate funding for teacher education and the institutions that provide literacy instruction. Since education has become more readily available to people of color and the lower middle and working classes, the demand for literacy instruction has increased. Basic writing, a term coined by Mina Shaughnessy through her work with community college students in New York City in the 1970s, provided students with more time and instruction in reading and writing to prepare populations for college who, only decades earlier, would never have had the opportunity to attend college. Writing instruction as a means of improving the literacy of the diverse people living and working in the United States is a worthwhile endeavor.

When framed as a response to the literacy crisis, writing instruction cannot help but carry a connotation of a desperate response to an epidemic. One of the chief beliefs associated with the myth of the literacy crisis is that writing instruction is basically a curricular Band-Aid, an inoculation against illiteracy that will soon go the way of smallpox and polio vaccines. Yet, well over a century after its origination, composition remains a vital part of higher education, not just surviving but flourishing as writing

instructors have developed new approaches to writing instruction in light of the ever-shifting literacy needs of the American populace.

The field of writing studies has developed many excellent strategies for teaching composition that encourage students to reflect on their own writing processes, to interact with other readers and writers, and to produce complex texts in media beyond alphabetic writing. However, scholars have also repeatedly asserted that a single course or two cannot fix student writing. Since the 1970s, scholars such as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, James Britton, and Mina Shaughnessy have shown that writing is not a skill people simply gain and attain. In recent years, scholars such as Kathleen Blake Yancey, Anis Bawarshi, Mary Jo Reiff, and Elizabeth Wardle have argued that writing teachers must face the challenge of transfer, the idea that students often fail to transfer knowledge from one class or field to another, if first-year writing is to succeed in its mission of improving student literacy.

However, no single course or course sequence could solve our nation's literacy woes, especially as the concept of literacy becomes more complex. Culture now maintains a higher standard for information literacy and digital literacy in addition to the expectation that students read and write well. Colleges and universities have built many different initiatives to continue the work of teaching students to write well by building writing centers to offer student writers individualized attention and by providing writing across the curriculum programs to teach professors in other disciplines to use writing as a means of helping students learn.

So when the next version of Newsweek's "Why Johnny Can't Write" emerges and ignites public fears of illiteracy, the public will be looking for answers. It is so easy to blame K–12 schools for the demise of literacy as we know it. Federal and state governments introduce new initiatives to fight against that perceived demise, whether those initiatives come in the form of No Child Left Behind or the Common Core or whatever the next solution to all of education's problems ends up being.

It's also easy to blame colleges for not meeting the literacy needs of the populace. Ironically, many state-supported universities are no longer able to offer remedial courses for students who may need some additional help to succeed in college, in part because state legislatures, ready to trim university budgets, do not want to pay for courses that may limit a student's ability to finish a bachelor's degree in four years. So the courses that have often helped students prepare for the rigor of academic writing and the sophistication of writing informed by knowledge of rhetorical principles are actually being cut even as the public continues to declare that literacy is in decline.

Rather than thinking of writing instruction as a form of triage, inoculation, or clinical diagnostic generated to protect the middle class from the ravages of illiteracy, we benefit from thinking of writing instruction as a means of helping students improve their abilities to engage in public discourse in all its varied forms. What writing teachers have known for generations is that writing is not an end in itself—it is a method of invention that gives shape to our view of the world and empowers us to engage in discourse with our fellow humans. There are few things more important than that.

There is no literacy crisis. Instead, the concept of literacy continues to become more complex as we expect people to know how to produce and understand texts in multiple forms, whether written, visual, or otherwise. Like all human institutions, education is inherently flawed, and teachers, students, parents and others must always consider ways and initiatives to improve literacy education.

Further Reading

For more about the study of literacy in the United States, see Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* (Cambridge University Press), which offers several case studies of how Americans gain literacy by what Brandt calls sponsors of literacy, people or things that control individuals' access to literacy instruction. Additionally, see the *New London Group's Multiliteracies* (Routledge). The New London Group, a group of ten scholars, acknowledges that technology plays a significant role in how literacy expectations have shifted.

For more on how writing scholars are thinking about the transfer

of knowledge, see Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczac's *Writing Across Contexts* (Utah State University Press) and Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know* (Utah State University Press).

Scholars in writing studies have produced a lot of excellent studies that examine the historical relationship between writing instruction and the literacy crisis. Especially notable are Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* (University of Pittsburgh Press), Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals* (Southern Illinois University Press), Kelly Ritter's *Before Shaughnessy* (Southern Illinois

University Press), Robert Connors's *Composition-Rhetoric* (University of Pittsburgh Press), and James Berlin's *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* (Southern Illinois University Press) and *Rhetoric and Reality* (Southern Illinois University Press). These histories provide significant overviews of composition's evolution throughout the 20th century.

Keywords

first-year writing, knowledge transfer, literacy crisis, semiliterates

Author Bio

Jacob Babb is an assistant professor of English at Indiana University Southeast. He has been teaching composition courses since 2004, including first-year and upper-level courses in rhetoric, argumentative writing, professional writing, and digital writing at multiple institutions. He has published articles and book chapters on epideictic rhetoric, writing program administration, and writing assessment. He is the associate editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. His Twitter handle is @JacobSBabb.

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1.3: First-Year Composition Prepares Students For Academic Writing

Author: Tyler S. Branson, English, University of Toledo

I have a memory that really sticks out in my mind when I think of all the bad ideas about writing. I was at the dentist making small talk, and my dentist asked, "So what is it you teach at the university?" Squinting at the bright light above me, I responded, "I teach mostly first-year writing." "Uh oh!" he chuckled, looking back at the dental assistants behind him. "Better watch my grammar around you, huh?" He paused and said, thoughtfully, "You know, I should send my son to you. He can't spell to save his life!" To be fair, these sorts of comments are made innocently enough and, anecdotally, they tend to happen a lot. The reason for this, I think, is because of a particularly bad idea about writing and writing instruction, one that surprisingly hasn't let up in the past 40 years: that first-year writing is a basic course in language, grammar, and syntax that prepares students for something called *academic writing* in the more "legitimate" courses in the university; and that its teachers consist primarily of error-correctors and behavior-modifiers armed with red pens and elbow patches. However, such an antiquated view of what first-year writing *is* and *can be* only scratches the surface of the kinds of learning possible in a writing classroom.

My dentist understands first-year writing as remedial instruction in language, but this is an outdated description for this universal course in U.S. higher education. You can actually trace this back to the 1800s, when more and more men and women started attending college. At the time, first-year writing instructors decided that the best way to provide this new influx of middle-class professionals with the tools to succeed in written communication was to focus on correctness and efficiency. Writing instruction back then taught that good writing was correct writing, and that you can measure good writing by counting errors.

However, people in the field of composition have come to learn a lot about how writing works and how it is best taught in courses like first-year writing. As Seth Kahn has shown in this collection, researchers have known since the 1970s that teaching grammar and mechanics does not improve student writing. Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford even recreated a famous study of errors in Freshman Composition essays and found that "the rate of student error is not increasing precipitously but, in fact, has stayed stable for nearly 100 years." What they mean is that errors in writing are a fact of life. As writing teachers, the idea that errors are a fact of life has been quite helpful because it has allowed them to prioritize *higher order* issues in writing like *argument*, *analysis*, *audience*, *purpose*, and *context.* By having students focus more on argument and audience in their writing, the five-paragraph essay template becomes increasingly irrelevant because it doesn't resemble anything about how writing looks in the real world or what different audiences expect in different reading contexts. Writing isn't a set of formulas that you plug in to get different kinds of texts. Writing is a process of brainstorming, composing, revising, having your work read *by others*, and then revising again. This is a complex, in-depth process that goes way beyond correctness.

Yet, when first-year writing comes up in popular culture (or the dentist's office), people still recall the image of the red pen. In 1975, Merrill Sheils wrote in a *Newsweek* article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," lamenting students' "inadequate grounding in the basics of syntax, structure and style" and blamed it all on the "political activism" among English professors. This tradition of bashing what's being taught in first-year writing continues to this day, from bombastic authors like Stanley Fish who publish *New York Times* editorials lamenting how college graduates of today are "unable to write a clear and coherent English sentence," or popular books on higher education like Richard Arum and Josipa Roska's *Academically Adrift*, which claims that college graduates are vastly deficient in writing. They report that 80 percent of first-year college students and 50 percent of college seniors have never written a paper longer than 20 pages. For many educated, well-meaning folks interested in higher education, these popular portrayals of writing in the university only reinforce the idea that first-year writing is a course that trains students to churn out 20-page academic essays, or worse, that these are examples of intellectual rigor in first-year writing.

It's also important to note that a lot of folks have a vested interest in keeping first-year writing courses tied to correctness and grammar. When writing instructors attempt to do otherwise, they are often met with opposition and charges of attempting to indoctrinate their students and politicize the classroom. Conservative website *Minding the Campus* describes this as little writing, but plenty of activism. When it appears that American students aren't writing well, it's easy to point to first-year writing and ask, well what *are* they teaching in there? In fact, first-year writing teachers are often scapegoats for political debates that extend beyond the writing classroom. So it is important to note that there are political dimensions to the debate about what first-year writing should teach, and ramifications for wanting to push the boundaries.

To be clear, though, I'm not saying that academic writing and correct writing are bad. On the contrary, courses in rhetoric and composition can be very helpful in allowing students to practice academic-level reading and writing in other disciplines, and this often helps students better understand the various kinds of writing they are bound to encounter in the university. And even in professional writing courses, it's important to teach students that making errors in your writing is often a way to turn off your audience, or worse, it impedes your audience's ability to understand what it is you're trying to say. However, the idea that first-year writing exists to train students to write correctly does everyone a disservice. It obscures all the other opportunities for learning in first-year writing that go way beyond the production of essays that are academic in nature.

For one, academic writing is context-dependent. As Elizabeth Wardle writes in this collection, "There is no such thing as writing in general. Writing is always in particular." The expectations in, say, Introduction to Sociology may differ wildly from what another instructor expects in Introduction to Film. Also, while first-year writing can teach students basic skills in conducting research or structuring arguments, it is quite limiting to say that these skills are only specific to academic writing *in general*.

In fact, we might be better off thinking of first-year writing as a course in the practice of citizenship than a course in writing academically. I would argue that society needs students skilled in civic discourse now more than ever. One only has to look to the so-called exemplars of civic discourse—our politicians and other public figures—as evidence. Talking heads on cable news showcase

a malignant style of uncivil, boorish argumentation in which pundits unabashedly bend, distort, or even make up facts to advance their positions. And while this may make for good television (for some), it promotes a pernicious argumentative style that teaches students that winning a debate is more important than exploring their biases, increasing their empathy, and accepting differences. That is why it might be better to imagine first-year writing not as a remedial course in academic writing, but as a productive space for respectful argument. In fact, by having students practice making claims and offering counterarguments in a range of contexts, firstyear writing works like no other course to promote empathy, ethics, and compassion in public discourse. First-year writing isn't just about preparing students for academic writing. It's about modeling and practicing writing as an act of citizenship.

First-year writing also works like no other course to push students to explore the possibilities of language, to work with new and uncomfortable ideas and genres, and to analyze important issues and how they are argued in the public sphere. Part of this means getting students to develop better methods of writing and reading in digital environments, which involves discerning what philosopher Harry Frankfurt has called bullshit. A recent survey found that 84% of American students indicated they would benefit from learning whether or not certain online sources are trustworthy. Another study reported that around 82% of middle-schoolers were unable to determine what was sponsored content and what was a real news story on a website. And being able to sift through the bullshit to find reliable sources, meaningful arguments, and a deeper intellectual exchange in public deliberation is a literacy skill developed specifically in first-year writing.

Getting smarter about the purpose of first-year writing means vanquishing one of the worst ideas about writing: that it consists of mechanical, prescribed, product-centered, decontextualized instruction in language. At its worst, first-year writing teaches students that good writing is correct writing, that the course is merely a hurdle, and that its content is mostly basic instruction without much depth or substance. At its highest potential, though, first-year writing gets at the political and cultural contexts of language use; it asks students to consider how those contexts work to inform their own positions on important public issues; and it pushes students to think about how they can ethically and persuasively position themselves in ongoing public conversations.

Further Reading

For more information about the purpose of first-year writing, see Linda Brodkey's *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only* (University of Minnesota Press), which is a series of essays detailing Brodkey's experiences in the 1990s incorporating a first-year writing course focused on difference at the University of Texas. Her ideas touched a cultural nerve, landing on the front pages of the *New York Times* amid charges of political indoctrination. Additionally, see Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* (University of Pittsburgh Press), which is a meticulously detailed examination of the first-year writing course in American colleges and universities. Crowley makes a spirited case that the universal requirement of first-year writing has severely limited both the course itself and the discipline of composition studies.

For more about first-year writing as teaching citizenship and participation in public discourse, see John Duffy's "Essay on the Value of First Year Writing Courses" in *Inside Higher Ed*, in addition to his chapter "Writing Involves Ethical Choices" in Linda

Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies* (Utah State University Press).

Scholars in rhetoric and composition have also published excellent scholarship on the various paradigm shifts in the evolution of first-year writing. See for example James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality* (Southern Illinois University Press), or Maxine Hairston's "Winds of Change" and Sean Zwagerman's "Local Examples and Master Narratives: Stanley Fish and the Public Appeal of CurrentTraditionalism," both in *College Composition and Communication.* These studies not only offer historical context for the evolution of first-year writing, but also discuss the relationship between first-year writing and its public reputation.

Keywords

citizenship, current traditionalism, freshman composition, process theory, writing studies

Author Bio

Tyler S. Branson is an assistant professor of English and associate director of composition at the University of Toledo. He teaches lowerand upper-division writing and rhetoric courses, including first-year writing, writing for public discourse, and business writing. His research focuses primarily on the practice of rhetoric and writing in public contexts. He also has related interests in civic engagement, histories of rhetoric and composition, and writing pedagogy. He is currently working on a book project focusing on the role of what he calls *problematic partnerships* in the field of writing studies. He occasionally blogs at tylersbranson.wordpress.com and tweets @tylerbranson.

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1.4: First-Year Composition Should Be Skipped

Author: Paul Cook, Indiana University Kokomo

Whenever my dean cajoles me into attending our monthly 8:00am recruitment events for high school students, parents often ask me, “So, what does s/he [here they will nod in the general direction of their student] need to do to ‘skip’ freshman comp?”

I get it. These are anxious and expensive times. And if a college degree is just another product, as many believe, then it’s damn near one’s duty as an American to scrutinize every facet of the investment and save valuable credit hours whenever possible. But as the director of a writing program, I know the positive impact a well-crafted freshman composition course can have on a first-year student’s college career, and it bugs me that first-year composition (FYC) gets lumped in as just another add-on to an already pricey purchase.

State legislators and policymakers, in their efforts to make higher education faster and more flexible, are busy touting MOOCs (massive open online courses) and dual-enrollment programs that allow students to take FYC in high school as an alternative to the traditional two-semester, two-course sequence. Most institutions offer incoming students a way to skip or test out of FYC if they perform well enough on a placement exam. These exams are usually timed, superficial in their assumptions about writing, and not considered an accurate measure of students’ writing abilities, according to a great deal of research that examines how we assess the effectiveness or success of student writing.

Rather than indulging anxieties about having to take FYC, I try to explain to parents and students how useful the course can be for all incoming college students, regardless of majors or career plans. But I’m fighting a tough battle at this point. Everyone has heard of

that kid down the street who skipped freshmen comp, or took it in high school or online, or tested out, or something else. So naturally, you have this seductive idea floating around that by avoiding FYC, one is somehow beating the house.

Second, writing is a curious and ancient technology. Our familiarity with writing and with the many important tasks it performs—from texting to Twitter—leads people to assume that writing is a basic skill they’ve already learned if not mastered. Most of us don’t have the same misplaced confidence when it comes to college algebra. Then there’s the simple fact that a four-year college degree is just too expensive. A degree of some kind is now essential for most upwardly mobile Americans. According to *Bloomberg Business*, tuition has pole-vaulted some 1,225% since the 1970s, a rate that has vastly outpaced other essential costs like food and even healthcare. Given the high cost of a four-year degree, it makes sense that parents and students—nearly 70% of whom will pay for school by taking out some sort of student loan—are looking for any opportunity to save a few bucks. All of this is to say that even though it may be a tempting one, for the majority of incoming college students, skipping FYC is a bad idea.

Here’s why that idea needs to die: Writing and language are like screens between humans and what we (can) know about the world around us. Even that which we perceive as cold, hard facts are ultimately filtered through the words and symbols we use to make sense of...well, everything. Thus, the process of learning to write is a matter of broader intellectual development and survival-gear-for-living. Writing, in other words, embraces much more than relaying a preset message to a reader. As students learn how to approach the written word—how to read it, yes, but also how to read the many voices, ideas, moods, circumstances, and rhythms that influenced and shaped the words on the page—they begin to understand how language is an essential tool for learning and exploration. FYC is uniquely qualified to provide this experience for several reasons.

Students in FYC, whether in face-to-face (f2f) or online sections, benefit from the interactions they have with other writers, texts, and their teachers. College writing teachers consider it an article of faith and a hard-won point of research that texts, meaning, and knowledge are created through the complex social intersections that occur among humans. In other words, meaning does not exist outside of texts and language; even the words and symbols we use to express meaning—like the ones you’re reading now—only *mean* (or signify) by virtue of their difference from other words on the page and from the virtual universe of words that might have been chosen but weren’t. *Meaning*, many in rhetoric and composition believe, is an effect of language, a by-product, so to speak, rather than something that exists before or somehow outside of language and what we call the rhetorical situation: reader, writer, purpose, medium, genre, and context.

According to reams of scholarship, rhetorical training is critical to students’ growing awareness of their readers (audience), their ability to read situations (context, genre/medium, and purpose), and their developing identities as social and political beings

(writers). In practical terms, possessing this capacity to do things with words means that a student can transfer the skills they've developed for one scenario—say, responding to an argument using evidence or even questioning the assumptions behind the argument itself—to other rhetorical situations and courses that require similar skills. Researchers who study this phenomenon, such as Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick, call this concept transfer, for obvious reasons.

This awareness of the essential social-*ness* of language is heightened through the training FYC students receive in the persuasive and purposeful uses of language. FYC is typically a student's first encounter with the ancient human practice known as rhetoric, the original being-together-through-language art of how to be persuasive using words, symbols, and gestures. From the Greeks onward, rhetoric has been central to human affairs. Indeed, until the 19th century, rhetoric dominated formal education in Europe and the United States; now, it's found mainly in graduate programs in rhetoric and composition studies, speech communication, and in FYC.

Students in FYC also receive one-on-one coaching that they are not likely to get in other classes. FYC is often one of the few courses that a student can count on to be small—almost always 25 students or fewer—compared to the massive lecture halls or online courses that characterize one's early college years, especially at larger universities. FYC teachers get to know their students by name, lead discussions, coach students on writing-projects-in-progress, and provide crucial support both in the classroom and in one-onone conferences. Together, students evaluate texts and explore the many facets of meaning and meaning-making. Crucially, they are provided adequate time and space to do so. For these reasons and more, research shows that FYC encourages student engagement and helps retain students during and after their first year.

FYC provides a space in the all-important first year for students to nurture the habits necessary for effective writing, research, and inquiry into complex problems and questions. Data from largescale research studies such as the Stanford Study of Writing and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicate that the ways of writing students practice in FYC—analyzing, synthesizing, integrating contradictory ideas from multiple sources—promote deep learning, which enables students to integrate what they are learning with what they already know. As we've discussed, writing is closely connected to exploration, to putting down on paper and seeing the limits of what we know. Writing in FYC allows students to expand those limits by relentlessly pushing back against the stubborn boundaries between the known and the new.

Students can—and often do—use their FYC experience to engage theretofore untapped interests and passions, thus unlocking possibilities for futures they perhaps were not even aware existed. FYC allows students to break out of their educational molds. They can (and sometimes do) fail the course altogether. And this, too, can be a good thing.

Several forces conspire against the continued success of FYC: decades of waning funding for higher education, bad ideas about writing and how it works, and unethically sourced, flexible labor. Recently, it has become something of an academic bloodsport to poke at FYC's relevance and what it can do. But FYC courses succeed in jogging first-year students out of their comfort zones and into the complex, messy realm of texts, meaning, intent, revision (literally "to see again"), and ultimately *otherness*. As John Duffy writes, "To make a claim in an argument is to propose a relationship between others and ourselves." When students seriously consider ideas, values, and opinions that they themselves do not share, they learn how to, as Duffy puts it, "sacrifice the consolations of certainty and expose themselves to the doubts and contradictions that adhere to every worthwhile question." Even with its primary focus on writing effectively and learning how to enter an ongoing conversation, somewhat ironically, FYC's greatest gift to students may be that it teaches them how to listen.

Further Reading

For a short, timely discussion of what FYC can do for students that also considers the ethical dimensions of the teaching of writing, see John Duffy's article "Virtuous Arguments" (InsideHigherEd.com). And for a book that's equal parts art history, gallery tour, and head trip, check out Geoffrey Sirc's iconoclastic statement of composition's untapped creative potentials in *English Composition as a Happening* (Utah State University Press).

In a somewhat more traditional vein, Robert J. Connors's *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (University of Pittsburgh Press) is a modern classic among standard histories of FYC; the book's introductory chapter alone provides a wide-angle focus on the history of writing instruction in American colleges and universities going back to the 18th century. For a somewhat more theoretical take on FYC's history and fortunes, David Russell's chapter "Institutionalizing English: Rhetoric on the Boundaries" in *Disciplining English: Alternative Histories, Critical Perspectives* (State University of New York Press) is terrific on

the tangled political and curricular histories that continue to bind FYC to English departments at most U.S. institutions. James Slevin's edited collection *Introducing English: Essays in the Intellectual Work of Composition* (University of Pittsburgh Press) is an excellent overview of the disciplinary politics of composition and FYC (see especially Chapter 2).

Considered by many in the field to be one of the more trenchant and politicized statements on the university-as-social-institution to appear in the last decade, Marc Bousquet's 2008 book *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York University Press) takes on such sacred cows as student employment, WPA "bosses," and FYC's complicity in the adjunctification of higher ed (see especially Chapter 5). But if you read one book in the course of your life about the university-as-idea and its role in contemporary Western societies, the late Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* (Harvard University Press) is hands-down the one you should read.

Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (Pearson) is a hybrid rhetoric textbook/history-of-rhetoric tome that's been around for about as long as the Gutenberg Bible (not really, obviously), and it contains everything from artfully written histories of rhetorical theory to end-of-chapter exercises, some of which date back to the ancient Greeks (really!). For a much shorter, article-length articulation of how classical rhetorical principles can be adapted for today's undergraduates, David Fleming's "Rhetoric as a Course of Study" (*College English*) offers a curricular blueprint that is useful for implementing some of the ideas explored in this short chapter.

Keywords

rhetorical listening, contingent labor, deep learning, dual enrollment, ethics, first-year composition, literacy, rhetoric, writing pedagogy

Author Bio

Paul Cook (@paulgeecook) teaches courses in writing, rhetoric, and new media theory at Indiana University Kokomo, where he also directs the writing program. He has been teaching and obsessing over FYC since 2002, despite having never taken the course himself, which he deeply regrets. He lives with his dog, Joni, and two annoying cats in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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1.5: You Can Learn to Write in General

Author: Elizabeth Wardle Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence, Miami University (Oxford, OH).

There is no such thing as writing in general. Do you doubt this claim? Test it out. Go to your desk right now and attempt to write something in general. Do not write for any specific audience, purpose, or context. Do not use any conventions that you've learned for school, work, creative writing, and so on. Just write in general.

You can't do it, because it can't be done. There is no such thing as writing in general. Writing is always in particular.

It's not just common sense that tells us that learning to write in general is not possible. Many studies of writing have been done—in workplaces, in classes across the college landscape, and in social and civic settings. They tell us that every new situation, audience, and purpose requires writers to learn to do and understand new possibilities and constraints for their writing. Writing fan fiction in Wattpad requires understanding what other fans expect, what fan fiction writers and readers think good fan fiction is, and what the technological medium supports and allows. The same is true for any other kind of writing—we write in our journals and think of our future selves or anyone who might find the journal. We write as biologists for other specialists who understand previous findings and value the ideas of some biologists more than others. As students write across their general education courses, they find themselves repeatedly asked to write essays or research papers, but often learn the hard way that their history teacher, poetry teacher, and philosophy teacher all mean and expect very different things by "essay" or "research paper." This is because context, audience, purpose, medium, history, and values of the community all impact what writing is and needs to be in each situation.

There is no writing in general, and thus no single class or workshop or experience can teach people to write. once and for all. But people want to believe that it's possible to write in general because this belief makes writing seem less difficult and allows them to believe that writers can get a one-time writing inoculation that will extend across all settings. If this is the case, then non-English teachers and employers are off the hook; they don't have to help students learn to write in their classrooms or workplaces, they can just criticize writers for not being able to meet their expectations— and criticize English teachers for not doing their jobs.

The idea that we can all learn to "write in general" is not just a harmless myth. It's a dangerous idea that needs to die because it hurts students and frustrates teachers and employers. And writers who believe it are easily discouraged because they don't know how to learn what they need to learn in new writing situations.

A better conception of writing is one in which we all remember (realistically) our own experiences learning to write in different situations, and then apply that memory to our expectations of what we and others are capable of achieving. A better notion of how writing works is one that recognizes that after learning scribal skills (letters, basic grammatical constructions), everything a writer does is impacted by the situation in which she is writing. And thus she is going to have to learn again in each new situation. Yes, she can apply and repurpose some of what she already knows how to do, but she will have to learn new things and not expect that what she already knows about writing is easily applicable in new situations. This means that when an employer hires a student fresh out of college and asks her to write a report for the CEO, he might expect that she knows what a report is in general, but he needs to remember that she's never seen a report at this company (she needs some examples), does not know the CEO and his idiosyncrasies (she needs some insider info), and does not yet understand what people in this setting consider important (she needs a heads-up on that). Similarly, parents should expect that their child might struggle when writing in a new class, or when moving from high school to college because learning takes time and requires being immersed in the context. Journalists and critics need to remember that texting employs certain conventions that are appropriate for their medium and purpose—and those are not destroying writing in general, because there is no writing in general. All of us, then, should give ourselves time to anticipate new writing situations, look at examples, find out what people's. If we can remember that there is no writing in general and no magic formula that will help us write well in all situations, we are more likely to be able to use (or transfer or repurpose) what we know effectively from prior writing situations. This is because we will be aware of the new context, on the lookout for examples, and willing to accept that struggle and practice are simply a part of learning to write in a new situation. Too frequently, writers attempt to rigidly use what has worked for them in other situations, only to find out the hard way that such rigid re-use is not appropriate in the new setting. These ideas—that there is no writing in general, that writers always have more to learn, that failing or struggling are a normal part of writing—are some of the many threshold concepts of the discipline of writing studies. In other words, they are

things researchers have learned, and things that will help writers be more effective, if only they can accept them in place of the common cultural assumptions about writing that are not always accurate.

There is no writing inoculation, because there is no such thing as writing in general. But this isn't bad news. Rather, it gives all writers permission to keep learning, to fail, and to engage in new kinds of writing in new situations.

Further Reading

For more about transfer of learning, see David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's entry on transfer of learning in the *International Encyclopedia of Education, Second Edition*. For more about transfer specifically for writing, see Aviva Freedman and Christine Adam's "Learning to Write Professionally: 'Situated Learning' and the Transition from University to Professional Discourse," Anne Beaufort's *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*, Patrick Dias et al.'s *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*, Elon University's "Elon Statement on Writing Transfer," and a special-issue in the journal *Composition Forum* on transfer of writing-related knowledge and skills.

Keywords

dispositions, genre conventions, genre, literacy, transfer

Author Bio

Elizabeth Wardle is Howe Professor of English and Director of the Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence at Miami University (Oxford, OH). She has directed the writing program at the University of Central Florida and the University of Dayton, experiences that have contributed to her ongoing interest in how learners use and transfer prior knowledge about writing, and how courses and programs can best help students learn to write more effectively. She regularly gives talks and workshops around the U.S. on how threshold concepts and knowledge about writing and knowledge transfer can be used to strengthen writing courses and programs.

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1.6: Writing Knowledge Transfers Easily

Author: Ellen C. Carillo. University of Connecticut Waterbury Campus.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the very notion of writing instruction is based on a myth. Writing courses, like courses in many—maybe all—fields, are arranged in what we would call a vertical curriculum with students enrolling first in introductory courses like freshman English. This course may be followed by a research-writing or similarly advanced writing course and then, perhaps, by a more intense writing course that often serves as a capstone seminar in the student's major. Certainly, there are variations of this model, but the structure is largely consistent across American post-secondary institutions in that students are expected to take introductory writing courses before taking more advanced ones. The reason curricula are designed in this way is so that students apply what they learn in those introductory courses to the more advanced courses that follow. This sounds like common sense, no? Yet, it is a myth that students will automatically apply— or transfer (the term most often used in educational psychology and composition studies) what they learn in their lower-level writing courses to their upper-level ones. They simply won't.

Anecdotally, writing instructors see this all the time: students entering a second-semester writing course as if they had no previous college-level writing course (let alone one linked to that second-semester course), or students struggling with the writing component of their senior seminars despite their taking the required introductory writing courses and writing-intensive course(s) in their majors. Any number of variables might account for the experiences these anecdotes describe, but research corroborates that students don't automatically transfer what they have learned about writing from one class into the next. The key word here is "automatically." Transfer is not impossible, but it shouldn't be taken for granted. It is a bad idea for writing programs and instructors to simply rely on curricula design to do their work for them—students will continue to be unprepared for their next writing course, let alone a course where writing is only one of the components.

Before describing the research that indicates why writing programs and instructors should not assume that knowledge transfer will automatically occur, it is perhaps wise to define the term *transfer* and offer some of its history. Transfer is a concept that has been studied for years by educational and cognitive psychologists, only recently becoming an interest of those in composition studies who teach and research writing development. Educational psychologists Gavriel Salomon and David Perkins define transfer as "instances in which learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials." Research on transfer dates to the turn of the 20th century. Educational psychologists Edward Thorndike and Robert Woodworth conducted the earliest experiments in 1901. They found transfer to be rare and only successful when there were identical elements in the situations or contexts. Less than a decade later, educational psychologist Charles Judd challenged these findings and showed that if the learner was capable of understanding the abstract principle informing the problem or idea, she would be able to apply it in a different context even if all the same elements were not present. Judd showed that transfer was, in fact, possible in situations that were not characterized by identical elements and that the learner herself was an important component in the process.

While Judd showed that transfer was possible, he did not prove that it was automatic; it is the automaticity of transfer that is too often assumed in the teaching of writing. There is simply no basis for that assumption. Writing professors Anne Beaufort and Elizabeth Wardle both found in their research that even when students described their first-year writing courses as valuable, they were largely unable to generalize its teachings and thus imagine how that writing connected to other courses. For example, Wardle explains that students "did not appear to make even near connections of those skills, much less transfer those skills to very different contexts... no students suggested they were being asked to write a persuasive paper to be able to write persuasively in other courses."

Although Judd's experiments in 1908 indicated that transfer was possible, it would take nearly a century for those who teach and study writing to begin thinking about what to do about this.

36 Bad Ideas

The affirmative answer to this question is the antidote to this bad idea. Curricula must be redesigned with the concept of transfer in mind, and instructors must be trained to teach toward the goal of transfer. No matter how one teaches for transfer, the one consistent recommendation for doing so involves incorporating metacognitive exercises into writing courses. Metacognition literally means thinking about thinking, so metacognitive exercises in the classroom would ask students to think about what they

are thinking and learning. These exercises give students opportunities to reflect on what they are learning about writing and—as such— potentially position students to transfer what they are learning. The same applies to everyone who suspects they will want to or need to transfer something they are learning to a future context. It would be useful to reflect on that learning and even anticipate where else it might be useful for people to transfer that knowledge to other situations since it will not automatically transfer.

In fact, it was less than a decade ago that these scholars regularly began asking questions such as: If transfer is possible, are there certain ways we can teach writing to promote transfer?

Most recently, Kathleen Yancey and her colleagues tested the benefits of deliberately teaching for transfer. They found that students in courses with instructors who taught for transfer did transfer their writing skills and knowledge more regularly than students who were in other types of writing courses. My sense is that more studies that corroborate these findings are on their way. If that's the case, and these studies are taken as seriously as they should be, colleges and universities will see the emergence of new curricula and teaching practices that no longer perpetuate the myth of automatic transfer. The broader implications of studies on teaching for transfer are just as striking. By studying transfer, all of us come to a better understanding about how we and others learn in our everyday lives and what types of learning experiences facilitate transfer not just in academic contexts but across all the contexts we inhabit, including—but certainly not limited to—school, home, and work.

Further Reading

For foundational work on the transfer of learning from the field of education, see David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's article "Are Cognitive Skills Context Bound?" and summarizing encyclopedia entry, "Transfer of Learning." Building upon this work, scholars in

rhetoric and composition have written extensively about how learning transfers from one writing course or writing situation to another. For scholarly books on problems of transfer, see Anne Beaufort's *College Writing and Beyond*, my book *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak's *Writing Across Contexts*, and Rebecca Nowacek's *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act*. For journal articles, see Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick's "Disciplinarity and Transference: Students' Perceptions of Learning to Write," Christiane Donahue's "Transfer, Portability, Generalization: (How) Does Composition Expertise 'Carry'?," Julie Foertsch's "Where Cognitive Psychology Applies: How Theories about Memory and Transfer Can Influence Composition Pedagogy," Dana Lynn Driscoll's "Connected, Disconnected, or Uncertain: Student Attitudes about Future Writing Contexts and Perceptions of Transfer from First-Year Writing to the Disciplines," and Gerald Nelms and Rhonda Leathers Dively's "Perceived Roadblocks to Transferring Knowledge from First-Year Composition to WritingIntensive Major Courses: A Pilot Study."

Keywords

composition studies, metacognition, transfer of learning, vertical curriculum

Author Bio

Ellen C. Carillo, Ph.D. is an associate professor at the University of Connecticut and the writing program coordinator at its Waterbury Campus. Her administrative work involves directing the Writing Center, supervising the first-year writing program, and supporting faculty who teach writing-intensive courses across the disciplines. She has written a book, as well as articles and chapters about the importance of teaching for transfer. She incorporates this approach to teaching into the literature and writing courses she teaches. Ellen has earned two grants to explore transfer in different settings and has served as an advisor for graduate students who are completing dissertations on transfer.

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1.7: Reading and Writing is Not Connected

Author: Ellen C. Carillo, University of Connecticut Waterbury Campus.

Since the 1950s we have been hearing that Johnny can't read. In 1975, *Newsweek* informed us that Johnny can't write, either. Over the years, a range of reasons for Johnny's illiteracy have been offered. Most recently, technology has been named one of the culprits. Johnny spends too much time on the computer and not enough time reading books. He spends so much time texting and tweeting that he has forgotten how to write correctly, how to spell, how to develop ideas in more than 140 characters. Public outcries about literacy (or lack thereof) often lead to a closer look at the education system. The public raises questions surrounding why colleges and universities in particular—where Johnny would be expected to gain in-depth and comprehensive literacy skills—are not doing a better job. What is often neglected in these public debates about the best way to teach literacy at the college level is that reading and writing are connected practices and, as such, the best way to teach them is together. It is a bad idea to continue privileging writing at the expense of reading.

This problematic separation of the connected practices of reading and writing is no longer an issue in students' early schooling, where they are taught reading and writing simultaneously. Although it took decades for elementary school teachers and curricula developers to realize that young children need not learn how to read before they learned how to write, language arts instructors now teach reading and writing alongside each other. They do so because research has shown that students learn to read and write better when they are instructed in both simultaneously. This research, for example, shows that students' phonic skills are reinforced when children practice both reading and writing the same

words. As they get a little older, students begin to develop an awareness of genres or types of text, which, like the study of phonics, is also further reinforced by a concurrent focus on reading and writing. As students read (or are read to) they learn to recognize typical elements of fiction, which they then imitate in their own writing and stories. Even a two-year-old who has been read to consistently will recognize that "once upon a time" indicates the beginning of a story, and will often begin that same way when asked to make up his or her own.

By the time students arrive in college, stories beginning with "once upon a time" are long gone, and in their place are difficult and dense texts—often multimedia texts— from a range of fields each with its own set of conventions. Instead of drawing on models of early literacy education that focus on teaching reading and writing simultaneously, college and universities largely privilege writing over reading. This hierarchy is evidenced by the universal firstyear writing requirement in American colleges and universities, as well as by writing across the curriculum programs. The integrated approach to teaching reading and writing falls away to students' peril and causes great frustration in the professors who often attribute students' struggles in their courses to poor writing ability, when these problems are often related to students' reading difficulties. While students' eyes may make their way over every word, that does not mean that students have comprehended a text or that they are prepared to successfully complete the writing tasks associated with the reading, which often involve summary, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.

More importantly, if students are not given the opportunity to continue working on their reading throughout their college careers, they may struggle analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating all that surrounds them since comprehension is a crucial step toward these more advanced interpretive practices. Students may lack the ability to read the world around them because they do not have the tools to recognize the values and assumptions that inform the images, advertisements, news stories, political campaigns, and ideas with which they come into contact on a daily basis. By not focusing on reading as an equally creative and active enterprise as writing—very much writing's counterpart in the creation of meaning—colleges and universities are potentially producing students, or citizens, who think reading is passive. These students might blindly accept whatever comes their way rather than actively engaging ideas, asking questions, and seeking out multiple perspectives.

Although writing is more often thought of as a creative act, reading is just as creative. When one writes, one is creating meaning by putting words and ideas together. When one reads, the same thing is happening. Although someone else has already put the words and ideas together, the reader interacts with those and creates meaning by bringing her perspective, personal experiences, and background to what literary scholar Louise Rosenblatt has called the transaction between the text and reader. This is why a few people might read the same novel but each take something different from it. That personal transaction with the text has affected how each reader creates meaning. When reading and writing are taught alongside each other in the college-level classroom, students can gain practice experiencing and relishing in opportunities to create meaning not just through writing, but through

reading everything from print texts to art to websites to national news events, all of which they will continue to engage beyond school. Focusing on active reading approaches, including everything from comprehension strategies to ways of determining something's inherent values and biases to productive methods of responding, is crucial if students are going to leave postsecondary institutions prepared to be informed, aware, and engaged citizens.

Unfortunately, there is still a great deal of work to be done since recent studies such as The Citation Project, a multi-institutional, and empirical research project show that students' reading abilities are largely underdeveloped. This research seeks to understand how students read sources and use them in their writing. With less than 10% of students using summary in their writing (as opposed to paraphrasing, copying, and citing), scholar Rebecca Moore Howard and her colleagues noted that their findings raise questions about students' abilities to understand what they are reading. Recent studies from Education Testing Services have corroborated these findings as did findings from studies conducted by ACT, Inc. and the Pew Charitable Trust, which found that close to half of the college students in their samples did not meet minimum benchmarks for literacy or lacked reading proficiency. These deficiencies are major problems particularly in this digital age for, as literacy scholar Donald Leu and his colleagues have pointed out, foundational literacies such as reading and writing print text will continue to play a crucial role—and maybe even a more essential role—in this digital age because of the proliferation of information.

Because there is so much at stake, educators and the public must keep the connections between reading and writing in mind as we continue to engage in debates about the best practices for teaching literacy. The value of literacy undoubtedly extends far beyond school. To read and to write is to create, to interpret. If education is, in fact, a means to preparing citizens to function and participate within a democracy then reading and writing—and the interpretive skills they inculcate—are crucial. As research has shown, teaching them alongside each other reinforces both skills.

Even if we want to be a bit cynical and argue that postsecondary education has become nothing more than a necessary, but burdensome, step to gaining employment, both reading and writing are still just as important. A 2011 survey found that 86% of corporate recruiters said strong communication skills were a priority—well ahead of the next skill. In a 2013 survey of 318 employers published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 80% of employers said colleges should focus more on written and oral communication. In these and similar studies, communication is defined by reading and writing abilities. Employers want to hire people who can communicate effectively, and despite our culture's recent celebration of all things STEM, many employers continue to vocalize the importance of effective communication skills. Teaching reading and writing together will help students become more proficient in both.

Developing those communication skills means that those of us within education should look at the curricula we teach and/ or administer and ask ourselves if we have fallen into the trap of compartmentalizing reading and writing to the detriment of our students. If we have, we must ask ourselves: how might we better integrate attention to both reading and writing in order to enrich the literacy education we are providing? We must not assume that simply exposing students to texts of all kinds and across all media will automatically result in comprehension. Instructors must deliberately teach students how to actively read the words and images and, by extension, the world around them. Instructors must do so not only so students can succeed in their courses, but so that students can be prepared to actively engage in the complex interpretive work that is expected of citizens in an information-rich culture.

We are all encountering more text and visual images than ever before. There is a great deal at stake if we don't take the opportunity to teach active reading alongside writing. Instructors need to teach students different strategies for reading the complex texts they will encounter throughout their academic careers and in the world. One of these strategies might be rhetorical reading wherein readers pay particular attention to how a text is working on them, persuading them. A better understanding of this as a reader can also support students' writing as they develop their own arguments. Instructors might also provide a strategy such as reading like a writer, wherein readers notice the choices a writer has made and understands the relevance of those choices to their own writing. Without explicit attention to reading and the relationship between reading and writing, students will not have strategies for making sense of new or difficult texts, arguments, images, and ideas they encounter. Denying students the richness of an education that considers reading and writing alongside each other means denying them the opportunity to become as proficient as possible in these connected practices and, therefore, experience and practice the interpretive work that is specifically human.

Further Reading

For the media's contemporary coverage of the ongoing literacy crisis, see Sofia Westin's "Social Media Eroding Skills?" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*), the *Bloomberg News* report "U.S. Teens Report Decline in Writing Skills," and Michael Rosenwald's "Serious Reading Takes a Hit from Online Scanning and Skimming" (*The Washington Post*). For historical coverage of this phenomenon see Rudolf Fleisch's *Why Can't Johnny Read?* and Merrill Sheils's "Why Johnny Can't Write" (*Newsweek*).

For contemporary, scholarly approaches that emphasize the importance of simultaneous instruction in reading and writing, particularly at the postsecondary level, see Robert Scholes's "The Transition to College Reading," Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem's "Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom," Alice S. Horning and Elizabeth Kraemer's *Reconnecting Reading and Writing*, David Jolliffe's "Learning to Read as Continuing Education," David Jolliffe and Allison Harl's "Studying the 'Reading Transition' from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?," and Mike Bunn's "Motivation and Connection: Teaching Reading (and Writing) in the Composition Classroom."

Keywords

literacy acquisition, literacy, new literacies, reading pedagogies, reading wars, reading–writing connections

Author Bio

Ellen C. Carillo is associate professor of English at the University of Connecticut and the writing program administrator at its Waterbury campus. She is the author of *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*, as well as articles and chapters on the place of reading in the teaching of writing. Ellen has earned grants to conduct research on reading–writing connections in the classroom and regularly presents her findings and scholarship at national conferences. She is also a founding member and co-leader of "The Role of Reading in Composition Studies" special interest group, which meets at the Conference on College Composition and Communication's annual convention.

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1.8: Reading is Not Essential to Writing Instruction

Author: Julie Myatt Barger, English, Middle Tennessee State University

Writing teachers are fond of the adage “good readers are good writers,” but those same teachers frequently fail to assume responsibility for teaching students *how* to read. This often manifests itself in teaching only surface-level reading strategies in K–12 such as skimming and reading for the gist, and in cries of, “They should know this stuff before they get here!” at the university level. This abdication of responsibility has far-reaching effects for students, particularly those from underserved populations, leading them to believe they are poor readers rather than people who have not been taught to read deeply, thus potentially limiting their abilities to compete in a market characterized by ever-changing and increasingly competitive workplace literacies. This oversight is not malicious in intent but rather is the product of four key issues:

First, there exists an educational culture that privileges testing over sustained and meaningful encounters with texts. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation resulted in widespread testing that became a formidable obstacle to helping students develop deep reading skills. As teachers understandably grew fearful about losing their jobs because of low test scores, they devoted class time to preparing students for the tests rather than developing practices that would have helped students improve as readers and writers. Standardized tests often rely on multiple-choice responses that neither allow for complexity of thought nor invite students to draw connections between the text under consideration and their own experiences. In the era of NCLB, these tests typically required readings of short, acontextual passages generated by the testing companies instead of existing publications that, when paired with the right questions, could have allowed students to draw meaningful connections between the larger cultural context and the choices the author made in constructing the text. For example, an English III (junior-level) practice test published by Pearson for the State of Tennessee Department of Education in 2012 included 49 multiple-choice questions asking students to identify correct punctuation, combine or rearrange sentences, and determine the meaning of specialized vocabulary. The practice test prompted students to demonstrate reading proficiency by identifying the main idea of a passage, evaluating forms of evidence, and assessing a source’s validity, but nowhere were students asked to demonstrate their ability to “analyze texts to identify the author’s attitudes, viewpoints, and beliefs and to critique how these relate to the larger historical, social, and cultural contexts of the texts,” even though this kind of rhetorical reading was, as evident on a teacher webpage, identified as a course-level expectation in the Tennessee Language Arts Standards. Students may not have had sufficient engagement of this sort with text because the acontextual, ahistorical test-generated passages did not invite rhetorical reading.

Second, there have been longstanding debates in the field of composition studies about the purpose of first-year composition (FYC), the writing course required of almost all university students, including what role reading should play in the teaching of writing. Ellen C. Carillo explains in *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition* that reading instruction hasn’t been as prominent a feature of the first-year writing classroom as it should have been largely because of debates in the field about what kinds of readings should be assigned. Probably the most famous debate surrounding reading in the writing classroom (known as the Tate–Lindemann debate) addressed the issue of whether or not literary texts are appropriate for use in FYC. In this exchange, Gary Tate represented the position that FYC should exclude no texts, articulating his commitment to preparing students for the conversations they would have in their lives beyond the university and his concerns that in its emphasis on academic discourse, FYC had become a service course for other academic disciplines. Erika Lindemann proposed that the purpose of FYC is to introduce students to academic and professional discourse through a rhetorical approach to writing, complete with instruction in genre, style, purpose, and audience. Lindemann expressed concerns that using literature in the composition classroom relegated student writing to the margins and reduced the academy to one genre—the essay—thus failing to prepare students for future writing tasks. Both Carillo and Sharon Crowley characterize this debate as a product of tensions surrounding the uneasy relationship between FYC and literature. Distancing the composition classroom from literature left reading out in the cold, resulting in less attention to reading instruction in the FYC classroom. Though many composition studies scholars would contend that differentiating what happens in FYC from what occurs in a literature course was a necessary step in the development of our discipline, it appears that in the process of defining ourselves, we lost sight of how very important reading instruction is to the teaching of writing.

Third, there is a lack of recent research on reading in the field of composition studies and a gap in teacher training, particularly at the university level. The majority of research on reading in the field of composition was published over 20 years ago. As a result, those teaching introductory writing classes are, as Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem note, seldom introduced to theories of teaching reading, so they do not feel equipped to make explicit reading instruction part of their teaching. Carillo calls this “a

pedagogical gap" in which "instructors lack the resources to develop reading pedagogies that will complement their writing pedagogies."

Finally, there have been unrealistic demands placed on FYC instructors charged with preparing students to conduct research and write in all disciplines. Many people, among them university faculty outside of composition, tend to expect FYC—in the course of just one or two semesters—to remake students into writers capable of conducting research and writing for their chosen fields of study. Though scholars such as Elizabeth Wardle have challenged the notion that FYC should prepare students for work in their disciplines, arguing instead that the course should expose students to theories of writing so they can understand how writing works, the course remains overburdened, with reading increasingly neglected. This FYC-as-general-academic-literacy-inoculation encourages students to view reading as just another requirement, rather than as an opportunity for discovery and an important form of knowledge making. Take, for example, the research paper, a staple in this model of FYC. All too often, this assignment has no audience other than the teacher, no purpose beyond earning a grade, leaving students with little motivation to locate quality sources and use them thoughtfully.

Misconceptions about what writing is and debates about the purpose of FYC distract from what should be writing teachers' primary goal, what Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak have in their book *Writing Across Contexts* characterized as teaching students to think like writers. An important part of that is teaching students how to read like writers, as Mike Bunn illustrates in "How to Read Like a Writer." Despite instructors' recognition that reading and writing are interconnected, reading instruction all too often receives short shrift in the writing classroom, with instructors failing to offer explicit instruction in a variety of reading strategies, instead promoting content-based readings that emphasize a text's meaning over attention to how it was constructed. Worse yet, instructors may even supply the meaning for students, many of whom expect their instructors to do just that.

The emphasis on content-based readings that resemble literary analysis is a product of instructors' own familiarity with literary analysis, as those teaching writing are often former English majors who tend to be more well-versed in literary critiques (in which the emphasis is on what is written in a fictional text) than in rhetorical analysis (in which the emphasis is on the choices the writer made in attempting to achieve a particular purpose and how those choices influence the ways various audiences respond to the text).

Composition scholars readily agree that students need to be taught how to write rather than merely be tasked with writing. High school English language arts teacher and author Kelly Gallagher argues that the same is true of reading: "If we simply assign reading instead of teaching students how to read, we'll get poor reading"—and, I would add, poor writing. So what exactly should reading instruction involve? To demystify reading and support students in learning to read like writers, writing teachers must:

- Introduce students to the concept that reading, like writing, is a recursive process, meaning that the act of reading is not linear or straightforwardly sequential but instead demands that readers revisit various points in their reading multiple times throughout the process;
- Acknowledge their reading difficulties and guide students in assessing their own reading struggles;
- Share strategies and provide heuristics—or interactive techniques that promote discovery—that help students read actively, work through confusion, make inferences, and connect the text to their own experiences and ideas (see, for example, Mike Bunn's "How to Read Like a Writer");
- Promote collaboration that gets students talking about their reading experiences and exposes them to others' questions, perspectives, and interpretations;
- Assign a wide variety of texts students can use as models for their own writing;
- Guide students in reading rhetorically (analyzing texts not for meaning as one would in a literature class but rather to determine how and why the texts were constructed as they were by asking what the context surrounding the writing is, who the intended audience is, what the author's purpose is, and what effect the author's choices have on the audience);
- Invite students to ask questions of texts, both models and those they compose themselves, in order to consider what the author could have done differently, as well as how these changes could influence the reader's relationship to the text;
- Create a mechanism for students to reflect on their reading experiences, consider how their reading benefits their writing, and envision how the skills they are developing could be of use to them beyond the writing classroom.
- Of course, even explicit reading instruction in a writing-intensive classroom will not benefit students fully if they are unable to recognize how their reading can help them improve as writers. Explicit writing instruction that makes students aware of the

interconnected nature of reading and writing benefits students in numerous ways:

- It leads to increased investment where students are more likely to take responsibility for learning to read carefully and critically, thus gaining more from the learning experience.
- It helps students understand how to use sources in meaningful, responsible ways because students spend time building a relationship between the secondary sources they are reading and the research-based writing they produce.
- It helps students understand that writing is rarely formulaic due to the range of texts with differing rhetorical situations they might study in a reading–writing curriculum.
- It gives students models to emulate in their own writing due to this breadth of reading materials.
- It helps students draw from prior knowledge and transfer their skills in the future.

Several of the benefits described above run parallel to the *habits of mind* introduced in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. These habits of mind include openness, engagement,

responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition, the latter of which is defined as thinking about one's thinking. These ways of approaching learning are important because the reality is that what occurs in the writing classroom is merely the beginning; for students to be successful in meeting the reading and writing demands of their future lives and careers, they must claim ownership over their own learning, be open to new possibilities, and be willing to adapt to the new situations they encounter.

By failing to give reading its due, we are blocking students' access to avenues of inquiry that would support their growth as readers, writers, and thinkers. In an era characterized by changing workplace literacies and the birth of new genres inspired by Web 2.0 technologies (such as wikis, blogs, and social networking sites), a flexible rhetorical education is more necessary than ever. The goal informing writing instruction at all levels should be for students to develop not only the skills that will serve them in the academic realm but also the ability to ask the questions and cultivate the behaviors that will allow them to respond effectively to the diverse composing contexts they will encounter in their future lives and careers beyond the classroom. Parents, students, and policymakers should expect reading, specifically reading actively, collaboratively, rhetorically, and with an eye toward one's own writing, to be a significant part of writing instruction at all levels.

Further Reading

For more about how and why reading is taught as it is in FYC classes, see Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem's "Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom" (*WPA Journal*) and Ellen Carillo's *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*. Rebecca Moore Howard, Tricia Serviss, and Tonya K. Rodrigue's "Writing from Sources, Writing from Sentences" uses data gathered from university students' research papers to support the authors' assertion that educators in all disciplines who assign research writing should provide instruction in how to read and use sources. Colorado State University's *WAC Clearinghouse* is an open-access publisher featuring books and journal articles designed to support instructors in all disciplines in teaching reading and writing.

Mike Bunn's *Writing Spaces* chapter "How to Read Like a Writer" introduces students to the concept that texts are the product of writers' choices and can be studied as models for students' own writing; its inclusion of questions students can apply to texts they read helps students learn how to read rhetorically (also see other helpful *Writing Spaces* readings for students). Kelly Gallagher's webpage (http://www.kellygallagher.org) is directed toward English language arts instructors and offers concrete advice on how to help students discover the enjoyment reading offers even as they work to develop productive reading practices.

Just as people's reading and writing habits change with evolving technologies and social practices, the teaching of reading and writing evolves as we learn more about how people read and write. Numerous writing studies scholars have documented how attitudes toward students, learning, and writing itself have influenced writing instruction. They include Sharon Crowley, whose *Composition in the University* offers an excellent overview of the political implications of literacy instruction. The Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project's *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* identifies behaviors students must cultivate in order to succeed beyond the university, and Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know* (Utah State University Press) offers a comprehensive yet accessible account of what researchers learned about how people write, how writing functions, and how writing should be taught.

Keywords

close reading, metacognition, model texts, reading rhetorically, recursive reading, rhetorical genre studies, standardized testing

Author Bio

Julie Myatt Barger is associate professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, where she teaches first-year composition and graduate courses in rhetoric and composition. She recently revised the university's second-semester first-year composition course into one that constructs research writing as relationships between readers and texts. She received her Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition from the University of Louisville and is a National Writing Project fellow.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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2.1: Writers are Mythical, Magical, and Damaged

Authors:

- **Teri Holbrook, Georgia State University**
- **Melanie Hundley, Vanderbilt University**

In two recent conversations, we heard comments that show the images of writers people carry in their heads. “Oh, you know how *writers* are,” said one guest to another over dinner. “They live in a garret and observe the world from somewhere above the rest of us.” At a bookstore, a middle-school student stood among the stacks of books and stated, “Authors aren’t real people. They’re like fairies who wave their wands and stories get created.” These two views—author-in-garret and author-as-wand-waver—point to an abiding notion about writers circulated in popular culture: They are different from—and perhaps somewhat above—you and me. In addition to being magical beings not of this world, they are also fragile and incapable of dealing with the routines and stresses of daily life, so they drink, do drugs, need help, and occasionally slip into murderous madness. These traits make up four of the most prevalent representations of writers in the media, and they present a problem. After all, given these kinds of on-the-job hazards, who would ever aspire to the writing life?

Popular Portrait #1: Writers Possess Magical Gifts

This view of writers supports the idea that since writing is magical, it isn’t work. Writing just...happens. Journalists may doggedly follow leads, but they pound out articles on deadline with nary a misstep (or an editor). Authors, well dressed and carefully coiffed, appear on talk shows promoting work that is already bound and jacketed. Absent is what Stephen King calls *the grunt work*, which happens when authors wrestle with the page. King himself plays on the portrait of writer as magical in his depiction of Paul Sheldon, the main character in *Misery*. In the film version

of the book, James Caan serenely types “The End” on the last page of his manuscript and adds it to the neat stack of papers on his desk. Done—no fevered rewriting, no crossing out or starting over. His writing is effortless and over in the first few minutes of the film. The rest of the story is devoted to the extraordinary power his words have over his biggest fan. Another common depiction of writer as magical can be found in crime-solving novelists such as *Murder She Wrote’s* Jessica Fletcher, a gifted observer who sees details the police miss. Fletcher and her ilk do not actively write while on screen; their authoring labor is unseen, conducted in spare time not dedicated to stopping crime. These depictions perpetuate the idea that writing isn’t just easy—it’s magical work done by super-exceptional people.

Popular Portrait #2: Writers Are Recluses

The myth that writers are somehow magical and, therefore, not part of this world leads to another perception of writers: They either are not capable of handling the real world or they make the clear decision to remove themselves from it. This myth is perpetuated by the well-circulated mystiques of such reclusive literary figures as J.D. Salinger, Thomas Pynchon, and Harper Lee and is part of the lore about writing perpetuated in elementary through high-school English language arts classes. (A quick Google search brings up numerous sites with listings and articles about famed reclusive writers as well as novels and films directed at middle grades and young adult readers, such as John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* and Gus Van Sant’s *Finding Forrester*.) Several films have traded on the notion of author-as-recluse. In the Jodie Foster vehicle *Nim’s Island*, based on Wendy Orr’s children’s book, a young girl writes to the author of her favorite action stories expecting that she will rescue her, only to discover that the author is agoraphobic, germaphobic, and cannot deal with the world outside her apartment. In *As Good As It Gets*, Jack Nicholson plays a writer who tries to control his obsessive-compulsiveness by devising rules for engaging with the outside world. If we broaden the portrait of writer to include publishers—the people who create the larger structures in which writers construct their works—then we can consider Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*, a film about a brilliant newspaper publisher’s life-long retreat into isolation. These films represent writers as damaged or fragile people whose magical gifts allow them to share imaginative worlds with their readers even as they restrict their participation in the real world around them.

Popular Portrait #3: Writers Abuse Alcohol and Other Substances

As with the writer-as-recluse representation, the writer-as-alcoholic trope is supported by real-life examples. Among famous writers who were alcoholics are Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, to name just a few. Whether or not

alcoholism is an occupational hazard is much contested among authors. Donald W. Goodwin has published some of the opposing views, quoting Alistair Cooke's claim that alcohol "has no more connection with writing than with plumbing" and Michael Crichton's observation of "how many people in 'the arts'... are heavy drinkers, and for that matter how many do not drink at all, in that careful, somewhat embarrassed manner which indicated a drinking problem somewhere in the past." Goodwin presents a variety of data that support the stance that writers have a higher rate of alcoholism than the general population, and writers who create representations of authors in popular culture often echo that perception. From Ray Milland's portrayal of an alcoholic writer in Billy Wilder's movie *The Lost Weekend* to Paul Giamatti's rendition of the wine-tasting struggling writer in Alexander Payne's movie, *Sideways*, writers have been depicted as masking their anxieties and fears with alcohol.

Popular Portrait #4: Writers (And Their Fans) Are Scary

Ever since Mary Shelley penned her famous first novel, in which Dr. Victor Frankenstein tells the story of his creation experiments to an eager young writer-turned-ship's-captain, authors in fiction have been associated with suspense and horror. One of the most widely recognized and satirized examples of this representation is Stephen King's Jack Torrance from *The Shining*. Snowbound in a cavernous hotel with his wife and son, struggling author Torrance slowly descends into madness, as revealed by his chilling and repetitive writings. The writer-as-madman trope is also used in Robert Altman's film *The Player*, in which a studio executive is sent death threats by a rejected screenwriter. In Joel and Ethan Coen's *Barton Fink*, the main character is a writer who is not so much a madman himself but is embroiled in a 1940s Hollywood that is macabre, violent, and surreal. The associations between authors and horror also extend to the depiction of fictional readers; in *Misery*, Stephen King creates a story in which the outcome of a fan's devotion is violence and murder. In these representations of authors (and readers), writers inhabit frightening worlds where they are either threatened or pose threats to those around them.

So Who Are Writers, Really, and Why Does it Matter?

The four portraits discussed here are not the only iconic representations of writers circulating in popular culture, but they are among the most prevalent ones. And they present a problem. In *Inkheart*, Cornelia Funke writes of a character that knew all kinds of people who surrounded themselves with books but had never actually met anyone who wrote books. There are two ways to read this observation: that the character had never met an author, or the portraits of authors she carried in her head did not match the people around her who crafted narratives by putting words on paper. We take up this second reading because it points to the difficulty of accepting the iconic representations of writers popularized in novels, films, and television: They often do not depict the majority of working writers who live the day-in, day-out writing life, and they misrepresent or too easily summarize what writing practices entail.

The view that writing is effortless and done on the side by extraordinary people dismisses the real effort writers put into their work, which has multiple ramifications. For starters, it makes the hard work of writing invisible, discouraging young writers who might dismiss their own labored efforts as evidence that they just don't have what it takes. It also devalues the products of writing, feeding into the idea that a writer's intellectual property is unimportant and the need to pay writers for their work is unnecessary. If authors can lead the writing life in their spare time (when not solving crimes, for example), then how valuable in terms of labor can writing be? Also playing into this dynamic are the unseen others—editors, spouses, agents, assistants—who handle much of the mundane behind-the-scenes business of authoring while the writers themselves appear free to lead tweed-blazered lives penning stories in their studies. The invisibility of all that writing support undercuts the levels of labor needed to produce a manuscript ready for publication.

The psychological portraits of writers popularized in media also need to be more nuanced. There is no question that being a writer is a complex occupation and how each writer embraces that complexity depends on their own resources and outlooks; Olivia Laing offers a haunting examination of that complexity in *The Trip*

to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking, and Jane Piirto has analyzed the work and words of women writers that show many suffer from depression and substance abuse. But through interviews with published authors, Catherine Wald examines how writers build resilience—how they handle the occupational necessity of rejection, the uncertainties of publication, the responses of friends and family. Writing can be tough work, but many writers have developed coping mechanisms and support networks aimed at making themselves healthy in ways that do not include substance abuse or agoraphobia.

The notion of the lone author living reclusively in her apartment (frequently brought into the sunlit world by a precocious child or teenager) also belies the social nature of writing. While writing does include concentrated time working alone, professional writing is never an individual endeavor. Perpetuating the myth of the reclusive author hides not only the roles of all the people who shape a book but also makes invisible the business side of authoring. Social media has made the author's work of self-promotion more evident, but the author as public figure is not new. M. Thomas Inge noted that Truman Capote, who wrote at a time when critics valued reclusive writers, took advantage of 20th century media and his own conversational abilities to develop his persona as a writer who was both literary, social, and media savvy.

The belief that writing emerges, Athena-like, fully developed from the writer's head minimizes both the labor involved and the expectation that writing is a skill that can be improved. Popular culture portrayals of authors are, by narrative necessity, centered on the action in the author's life, and it is challenging to represent the labor that goes into writing; hours typing on a computer may not make for exciting storytelling. But the insidious invisibility of the work of writing perpetuates myths that damage both current and possible writers. The myth that writing is a magical process that only certain people can undertake fosters the view of writers as fragile beings incapable of handling the world in which they live. Because the hard work of writing is not portrayed often in popular media, young writers may not see writing as something they can do or as work that is economically valued. Some authors may embrace the myth and use it to their advantage, but they do so aware that they are playing a game with public expectations. The myth of the magical or monstrous writer is perpetuated.

Undoing the Myth: How Real People Live the Writing Life

It's no easy task to undo the myths surrounding the writing life; after all, they are so persistent because they hold threads of truth (writing does require solitude; some writers do abuse drugs and alcohol and are depressive). Plus, to be frank, they make for good drama. But instead of mistaking these myths as glamorous, desirable, or inevitable, it's important for aspiring authors to stave off cultural portraits that are unhelpful so they can imagine other kinds of writing lives for themselves. This is especially true in the digital age when the notion of being a writer is more available to a greater number of people. One possible move is to analyze common themes circulating about writers and then strategize ways to combat them. For example, fear of rejection is a common character trait in representations of writers, and talk of rejection is common in books about writing. In tandem with fear of rejection, however, is recognition that successful writers are resilient, and as Jane Piirto points out, they learn to take rejection and criticism as part of the life-long writing process.

Another possible shift is to move from seeing writers as mythical and magical to seeing writers, like most of us, as working stiffs. Author and creative writing instructor Kristine Kathryn Rusch argues that the primary problem with writing as a profession is that it isn't seen or taught as a profession. It's a pastime or a passion but not a career. To develop as an author, writers are often advised to workshop their manuscripts-in-progress, but these workshops can be detrimental. Frequently, the focus of peer workshops is on constant critique, leading authors into a trap of revising a single piece until they give up. Instead, Rusch advises, writers should see their work as part of a career where they improve through continued effort, ongoing practice, and frequent submissions, a self-forgiving and practical stance that undercuts portraits of writers as people obsessed about their personal failures and the imperfections of their work.

Part of understanding writing as a profession or career—or even an avocation that isn't destructive—is to recognize the unglamorous day-to-day pace of writing. As author Anne Lamott points out, writing will have its moments when it is exhilarating. It will also have its moments when it is agonizing or flat dull. The key, she stresses, is to sit down and write, even if the words are slow to come and even if when they do come they aren't very good. This is part of the writing life, and it isn't fantastical, magical, and fearsome. It's the job.

Further Reading

In addition to the examples above, for more popular media depictions of writers and authoring, see the television series *Castle* (American Broadcasting Company), William Joyce's *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* (book, short film, or app), or Alan Rudolph's film *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*. For more about the physical and psychological conditions affecting the lives and work of writers, see Donald W. Goodwin's *Alcohol and the Writer* (Andrews and McMeel), Olivia Laing's *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking* (Picador), and Jane Piirto's article in *Roeper Review*, "Themes in the Lives of Successful Contemporary U.S. Women Creative Writers." To read about writers and resilience, see Catherine Wald's *The Resilient*

Writer (Persea Books). And for more about one author's decisions to play against the common ideas of writers, see M. Thomas Inge's *Truman Capote: Conversations* (University Press of Mississippi). Writers themselves have a lot of say about the day-to-day work of authoring. For authors' advice and views of their working lives, see Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (Anchor Books), Kristine Kathryn Rusch's *The Pursuit of Perfection and How It Harms Writers* (WMG Publishing), and Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Pocket Books).

Keywords

workshop, writing as a profession, writing as process, writing lives

Author Bio

- Teri Holbrook, a crime fiction writer turned literacy educator, is an associate professor at Georgia State University where she examines how digital technology and arts-based research affect writing—and vice versa.
- Melanie Hundley is a professor at Vanderbilt University where she studies how teachers learn to write digital and multimodal texts. She is a passionate teacher of writing and young adult literature.

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2.2: You Need My Credentials to be a Writers

Author: Ronald Clark Brooks, Montclair State University

Recently, I launched a public writing project to help people free themselves from writer's block, or to at least free themselves from writer's block for long enough that they could get some part of their own life stories written down. I particularly wanted to reach out to people who normally would not think of themselves as writers. Having considered most of the lessons of the process movement to be commonplace, I didn't anticipate resistance to this project from the people I would meet, but on our first trip out I encountered a young man who very much considered himself a writer, and he told me outright that he found the project offensive. "Not everyone can write," he said, and as he did so, the small group of people who had gathered around my booth started to disperse.

What is it about writing that generates this attitude, often held passionately, that some people are writers and others are not? Is it the romantic ideal of innate genius? The belief that one has to be initiated in a given way to join a special club called writers? Is it something unique to the craft of writing and the anxieties it provokes? I have never heard of a professional baseball player, for example, telling a community baseball league that they should get off the field or that they're a menace to the sport, but I have heard professional writers complain about there being too many people claiming to be writers. Is this an anxiety one sees from the practitioners of all underappreciated arts? Regardless of the answer to these questions, the idea that one has to be a credentialed writer in order to write is definitely a bad idea about writing, one that is pervasive in the general public and oftentimes fostered by writing teachers themselves.

When talking to the young man at my booth, I realized that as a composition teacher, and especially as a trainer of teachers, I have encountered some version of the belief that one has to be credentialed in order to call oneself a writer for most of my professional life. Writing teachers should be credentialed (see Seth Kahn's chapter), and in no way am I suggesting that these credentials are not important, but the kind of credentials that one gets in order to speak authoritatively about a field—whether that field is literature, film, cultural studies, creative writing, linguistics, or even the often now widely divergent fields of composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies—those need to be set apart from the beliefs that one must have in order to teach writing well.

The most important belief that a writing teacher can have about writing is, as Peter Elbow (a well-known teacher of writing) put it, that everyone can write. And at the heart of that belief is the assumption that everyone's experience and perspective is already worth writing about as soon they arrive in the classroom. To expand that belief beyond the classroom, we should generally believe that everyone's experience and perspective is already worth writing about as soon as they arrive at the page or screen. If this belief is essential for teachers of writing, it is even more so for the writers themselves. At some level, when we sit down to write we must believe it can be done, regardless of our previous experiences, or nothing gets written. This is true for beginners, but it is equally true for experienced writers because every new writing situation brings on new challenges and, as many of us have discovered, one often has to learn to write all over again with each new project.

At the same time, believing that one already knows how to write can be as much of a barrier to writing as believing that one can't. Believing that everyone already knows how to write, however, is very different than believing everyone *can* write. Believing that everyone already knows how or should know how to write is a different bad idea (see Elizabeth Wardle's chapter), and it is one that often leads to the production of five paragraph themes and disembodied, formulaic, general writing. Believing that everyone can write is simply starting with the idea that even though writing is complex, sometimes difficult, infinitely varied and variable, and dependent on rhetorical context, everyone is able to start somewhere in the process, and only from that ground can one unlock the potential to do it well.

What is key, then, is to create a space where a writer can develop a more positive, empowered approach to the actual complexity that is writing. Peter Elbow began his career with the book *Writing Without Teachers*, and it might be that this more optimistic ground is more easily fostered outside the classroom, as the culture of assessment that schooling creates constantly wants to reintroduce the bad idea that you need credentials to be a writer. This is not to say that classes can't hold on to the belief that everyone can write, but these kinds of classrooms require vigilance in order to reinforce optimistic attitudes about writing. Despite how difficult it is to do so, maintaining this vigilance has proven to be effective. In *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*, George Hillocks has shown us that optimism is the one factor that continually makes a positive difference in the outcomes of writing classes.

If you find yourself in a writing course (or still remember a writing course) that has not fostered a positive outlook toward writing, it is entirely possible to create this environment yourself by surrounding yourself with supportive writers. Supportive does not mean they will tell you everything you write is great (that's not what everyone can write means). Supportive means that they will hold you accountable to getting writing done and to help you continually improve your writing. That's the beauty of it being a bad idea that you need credentials to be a writer. There is absolutely nothing stopping you from getting started right now.

Further Reading

For a longer exploration of the idea that *Everyone Can Write* and for ways of thinking about assessment based on this philosophy, see Peter Elbow's book of the same title. For qualitative proof of the effectiveness of optimism and the writing process, see George Hillocks's *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*. Because most process theorists share Elbow's optimism about everyone's potential to perform, it is worth studying the works of Ken Macrorie, Sondra Perl, Donald Murray, Wendy Bishop, and many others in order to know the best ways to foster your own supportive writing community. For even more specific information about how to create workshops beyond the confines of writing classrooms, see Pat Belanoff and Elbow's *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited.* More importantly, look for local writers' clubs and readings and community groups in your area. One possible way to find these is to sign up for and take part in National Novel Writing Month, Academic Writing Month, and Digital Writing Month. Many have found success by letting their writing communities develop from there.

Keywords

credentials, empowerment, growth, optimism, process movement, support, writing community

Author Bio

Ronald Clark Brooks is an associate professor and chair of the writing studies department at Montclair State University in Montclair, NJ. One of his primary interests is helping students learn to think of themselves as writers.

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2.3: Only Geniuses can be Writers

Authors: Dustin Edwards @edwardsdusty, Enrique Paz @eepaziii Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Our American culture and education has cultivated quite the romantic idea of authorship. Instruction in language arts and literature consistently and often forcefully exposes students to writers who have been canonized as The Greats: geniuses of thought, master wordsmiths, and inspired creators—in a word, authors— who transcended humanity and mortality. Shakespeare, Emerson, Orwell, and so on—these were truly writers!—they say. These writers sat at grand mahogany desks in remote cabins ensconced in the most still and people-less of lakes and forests. These writers sequestered themselves from all influence and feverishly scribed brilliant works only their peerless minds could produce. But these writers, great as they may be, have been the most damaging to our current perceptions about writing.

The image of this autonomous, genius, and originary author bears great consequences; it designates a coveted status against which many, if not all, writers are compared. It is etched into intellectual property debates, woven into anxieties and uncertainties over plagiarism, and intricately bound to the economics of writing. Worst of all, it stubbornly refuses to die, despite persistent attempts to overthrow its reign on literacy instruction and cultural production.

The Weight of Genius

As graduates of U.S. education, we've personally experienced (and continue to experience) the damage this myth has wrought on those who write. The genius writers were enlightened, wise, and shrewd observers of the world and humanity. They wrote the truth as only they could, and that fount flowed freely and easily. But that's not how writing works for us. Writing is *hard*. So many writing tasks we meet are impenetrable, fortified on every side with

bulwarks tall and steel. We pound and press against those walls— but nothing. Our work often stalls out, halted in place. We obviously cannot be true authors, right? This should be that easy. Why doesn't it just come out? These unrealistic expectations cannot be the only way to be an author.

These genius authors misguide many writers. Their most damaging effects are the unrealistic expectations they pose for everyday writers. Writing scholar and plagiarism expert Rebecca Moore Howard believes the notion of the solitary, genius author has perpetuated a climate where novice writers fear being unoriginal and must strive to prove their own creativity and genius. You need only glance at the branding language of the plagiarism detection service Turnitin, a self-proclaimed "originality-checker," to see how this manifests in real-life scenarios. The demand for originality frustrates many writers, who do not see how they could ever have the genius to discover an original thought.

Other writers, both within and outside of academic settings, similarly struggle when they feel their writing process doesn't live up to the lauded image of The Greats. In a short essay in *The Irish Times*, author and musician Josh Ritter writes about how he wrestled with the image of genius authors. He never felt his songwriting counted as real writing, which can only happen upon grand escritoires, penned with quill and ink and set in parchment. He writes, "Never mind that for my entire writing life I'd been writing at my kitchen table, with my guitar on my knee and a pen and notebook handy, if I wanted to be a real writer, I would need a desk. [...] And without the desk, how could I write my novel?" Ritter finds himself limited by the image of writing and writers that a desk represents. Without a desk, Ritter can't imagine he has the ability to produce a worthy piece of writing, just as many don't feel like true writers if they struggle and strive when they write. But Ritter comes to a conclusion we also share: remote cabins along isolated lakes, grand writing tables carved from cedars, brilliant manuscripts born in one candlelit sitting—these don't accurately represent what writing looks like for anyone.

Well-hidden between pristine white pages and well-crafted words lies the same trying process many endure each time they open a document or hold a pen as well as the same unyielding barricades that keep them out, which often only give way when they are influenced and inspired by others. Tales of genius writers who pour out perfectly structured prose all on their own recount fables rather than reality. (See Teri Holbrook and Melanie Hundley's chapter elsewhere in this book for more on bad myths about writers.) Instead, these writers were certainly very much like ourselves—nervous, frustrated, harried, and tired, looking for help at 1:38 a.m. while trying to meet a deadline. What help we do find rarely comes from genius, self-willed epiphanies. Instead, we find solace, support, and success when we look outside ourselves, borrow ideas, remix other texts, talk to others, and collaborate with their thoughts. The Lone Genius author doesn't exist. And it never did.

Yet, such an understanding of authorship has become so commonplace, so naturalized, that few ever interrogate its origins. A closer look at this myth reveals that the author was forged only recently in Western history. According to literary historian Martha Woodmansee, the invention of the author in its current configuration can be traced to 1st-century Europe. It was during this century, according to Woodmansee's analysis, when a larger cultural shift began to take place, and out of a swirl of change—technological, legal, economic, and cultural—a new definition of the contemporary author began to emerge. This is the author that largely sticks today: the creator, owner, and proprietor of unique, original works such as essays, books, poems, and so on.

The Invention of Genius

Views of writing that lead to modern ideals about authors developed along with the circulation of popular treatises on originality. In 1759, for example, the influential writer and poet Edward Young's "Conjectures on Original Composition" began to draw deep divides between original and imitative authorship. Originality, Young claimed, sprung forth naturally from an inherent root of genius, like a plant bearing fruit. Imitations, on the other hand, were artificial inferiors built from the work of others. Young's essay, and many others like it, began to forcefully redirect the locus of inspiration. They claimed that true authors are not inspired by the outside world; they are inspired by their unique selves. True authors are not imitators; they are originators. True authors are not made; they are born.

This redirection of inspiration also coincided with the birth of a new class of writers: professional authors. Now, essayists, poets, and other public intellectuals claimed an occupation where writing was their primary means for earning a living. Thanks in large part to the expansion of a larger reading public due to advances in

printing technology, a need grew to find ways for professional writers (and the publishing industry) to earn money from their printed works. Enter copyright. Early copyright laws, according to historian Mark Rose's analysis of copyright, helped to form an understanding of the author as an owner and proprietor of his or her individual ideas. In other words, copyright helped to define the author as author: an autonomous individual whose original ideas merit legal protection and deserve monetary rewards.

There are many reasons why this understanding of the author persists today. Tenets of originality, property, proprietorship, and genius have become etched into the fabric of Western authorship. Genius authorship is coded into our legal and economic systems and is further upheld through years of education. Our understandings of an author are also a product of the publishing industry itself. Publishers present a polished and finalized copy of writing and thereby dilute the messiness of the writing process. The idea that authors derive their writing abilities from their natural intellect is difficult to shake because it is inscribed in the very word *author* itself.

But such was not always the case. A deeper look at history, together with today's digital writing practices, reveals how the myth of the lone, original genius can be challenged. Specifically, alternatives to genius see value in imitation, collaboration, and remix. Authors don't act in isolation but rather find themselves surrounded by other ideas, people, and writing.

The Alternative to Genius

Before the idea of genius authorship took hold, Woodmansee notes that authors were commonly depicted either as vehicles (receiving ideas from some outside source) or craftsmen (forging new materials out many disparate sources). An even deeper history reveals a more esteemed regard for imitation. Practices of imitation—drawing inspiration from outside sources by borrowing, adapting, and altering models from a rich stockpile of sources— were largely valued in ancient cultures. Imitation was how students learned their craft, and it was viewed as a way to invent new meanings out of existing materials. In fact, ancient philosophers and poets often used the metaphor of a transformative bee to describe the work of imitation. As Seneca described in the 4th century BCE, "We should follow, men say, the example of the bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in." This metaphor suggests the act of producing a new work involves gathering bits and pieces from many different external sources.

These historical practices and ideas about authorship demonstrate what writing once was and what we believe it still should be: a collaborative endeavor in constant and deep conversation with the works and ideas of others. In other words, instead of the reclusive genius, we aim to be social writers. Instead of inspiration from within, we seek influence from without. Writing requires talking to friends, asking help from colleagues, finding answers and ideas in others' writings, and indulging in those practices. We embrace collaboration over isolation, and it is precisely this model of writing that we argue education should promote to writers and students everywhere.

In a way, it's odd to call for more collaborative writing or writing influenced by others, because it's already happening everywhere. Many scholars attest that collaboration, rather than isolation, is the dominant approach to everyday composing. Writing scholars Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, for example, have studied the work of writers in diverse fields, including engineering, psychology, chemistry, and even sanitation. They find that the professionals in these fields rely heavily on collaboration to succeed in their writing tasks. Likewise, writing researcher Joan Mullin confirms that many artists—painters, architects, fashion designers, graphic artists and more—always feel their work is collaborative and often learn by mimicking, imitating, and even copying the work of others. These writers and artists rely heavily on others' thoughts and ideas to help them learn and succeed, and their success exemplifies why this should be the default approach to all writing.

What's more, collaboration involves more than the act of writing with other warm bodies in the room. It also involves a different kind of collaboration: reusing, recycling, and repurposing existing materials for new uses. In our digital age, everyday people increasingly have access to vast reservoirs of archived materials. Significantly, these materials can be put to use for new purposes. Rhetoric scholars Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss refer to this remix process as "taking old pieces of text, images, sounds, and video and stitching them together to form a new product." Writing, if viewed this way, isn't predicated on values of isolation, inward inspiration, or originality; rather, it sees values in sharing, explicit influence, and renewal. Perhaps surprisingly, as media researcher Henry Jenkins notes, the language of remix resuscitates

older, pre-Romantic ideals of authorship. A turn toward remix and borrowing, for Jenkins, "is not that radical when read against a larger backdrop of human history," despite the deeply entrenched ideal of creative genius propagated in recent history.

As both history and contemporary practice demonstrate, writing has always required deep social engagement and influence, and no writer has succeeded solely due to preternatural intellect or talent. The pervasive idea of the reclusive author and genius birthing prose free from influence must die—and in its wake, a renewed idea of productive and meaningful collaboration (with other writers and their texts) will thrive.

Further Reading

To learn more about how today's writers actually compose, consider Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*: *Perspectives in Collaborative Writing* (Southern Illinois University Press), Carol Petersen Haviland and Joan A. Mullin's *Who Owns This Text?: Plagiarism, Authorship, and Disciplinary Cultures* (Utah State University Press), Majorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (University of Chicago Press), and Kevin Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (Columbia University Press). Additionally, Josh Ritter's article "Paperback Ritter" is his story about how he personally was affected by myths of authorship while writing his book.

For more on remix, look into Lawrence Lessig's *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (Penguin Press), Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss's "Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery," Kirby Ferguson's web series *Everything is a Remix*, and Jonathan Lethem's article "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism" in *Harper's Magazine*.

Conversations about originality often intersect with questions about plagiarism. To explore this connection more, see Rebecca Moore Howard's *Standing in the Shadows of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, and Collaboration* (Ablex), Susan Blum's *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture* (Cornell University Press), and Nicolous Kulish's *New York Times* article about author Helene Hegemann's best-selling book, controversial for its plagiarized passages.

To read more on the history and theory of authorship, look to Andrew Gallax's "In Theory: The Death of the Author," Mark Rose's *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Harvard University Press), and Martha Woodmansee's article "The Genius and the

Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author'" (*Eighteenth Century Studies*).

Keywords

authorship, collaboration, genius, history of authorship, influence, originality, remix

Author Bios

Dustin Edwards's research focuses on writing in digital environments, intellectual property, and authorship studies. He has written about how writing for extracurricular, professional, and civic purposes can—and should—influence the teaching of writing in

university settings. He can be reached on Twitter @edwardsdusty.

Enrique Paz studies authorship and plagiarism and teaches writing. He's interested in how people come to see themselves as writers or authors. Working with many other writers, he's published essays on how writers can collaborate effectively and specifically how educators and students can and should collaborate to promote learning and success. You can find him on Twitter @eepaziii.

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2.4: Some People are Just Born Good Writers

Author: Jill Parrott, Department of English and Theatre, Eastern Kentucky University,

The author-god, according to mid-20th-century language theorist Roland Barthes, embodies the Romantic notion of the artist to whom brilliant epiphanies come to be written down. In fact, at times throughout history, the best authors were believed to have been chosen and directly inspired by God Himself. Because of this cultural paradigm, many of us are deeply and psychologically invested in the idea of individual genius authorship, as discussed in Dustin Edwards and Enrique Paz's chapter elsewhere in this collection. But, Bruce Horner writes in *Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition* that the genius idea separates us from the real world. By seeing authors as genius artists only, we remove ourselves from the activity of writing, which is social and contextual, and are distracted by the product itself. When struggling writers consider writing a piece of art, they become frustrated because they cannot force their writing to look like what they expect art to be, and they have no clue where to begin to make themselves the genius writer they believe teachers, bosses, and readers expect.

Some of this idea—that writing is a talent set in stone—can be directly correlated to the history of writing instruction itself. At the end of the 19th century, proponents of a so-called literacy crisis claimed that students entering American universities needed to become more familiar with their own language and coincided with a push to use our education system to build a uniquely American intellectual identity, which ended up relegating writing instruction to first-year courses. Many critics have attached this literacy crisis to cultural anxiety over the growing pluralism of American society as immigration increased with the Industrial Revolution. This anxiety could also be seen in the approaches taken in these new writing-focused classes. In a narrative all writing studies scholars are familiar with, much of the teaching of writing in late 19th-and early-to mid-20th-century America focused on the *object* produced by writing, not the process of writing a text. This focus on the product of writing reinforced the idea of writing as a skill some people just had. Essays were usually written once and were done, for good or ill. Students who were privileged to be of the right socioeconomic, national, or ethnic background already wrote to the university's standards because they were part of the group in power who set the standards. Therefore, their perceived talent perpetuated the author genius idea because these desirable students were already seen as good writers while the less desirable students were not.

Now, however, our cultural situation is quite different. Because computer-based composition is quicker than pen to paper and because the Internet allows us to share what we have written so quickly, our composition happens quickly, often as a reaction to what someone else has written or posted. One of the effects of word processing and subsequently web publishing is that authors are not just authors; they are also editors and publishers, broadening the individual's daily interaction with language. In other words, while the idea of the individual author genius is theoretically problematic, it is also practically problematic because our everyday authorship practices are socially situated, collaborative, and interactive. People *can* and *do* read and write (and read and write again) all the time. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others offer daily opportunities for reading, creating, and responding to texts. Many people are experts at those activities but then lack the experience and facility to recognize the rhetorical requirements of other contexts or genres.

Unfortunately, many discussions of authorship tend to ignore these interesting aspects of language and focus on what writers should not do: don't plagiarize, don't use "I," don't use Wikipedia. The practices needed to become adept at writing are criminalized, and inexperienced authors are often punished *for being inexperienced*. Sometimes when I hear colleagues complain about student writing, my response is "But isn't that why we're here? Is it not our job to teach them?" But a power differential between inexperienced writers and professional authors perpetuates the idea of learners as helpless children. We paint narratives of new writers negatively, researchers refer to them by first name only in publications rather than last names as we would real authors (in other words, "Julie writes" as compared to "Faulkner writes"), we construct writers as passive rather than active, and we negatively compare them to professional writers. In doing this, as Amy Robillard asks, "How can students *not* come up lacking?" particularly in their own minds.

As a reaction to these cultural forces at play, process-focused teaching uses the steps taken as the writer creates the text—more clearly connecting the *act* of writing with the product in the minds of those participating. Since that shift in the 1960s, writing theorists have been truly frightened to refer to our teaching as skillsbased for fear that it might undercut all the work done to challenge those previously held assumptions of product-focused writing. But skill is not a word we should fear if we define skill not as natural talent but as a set of habits of mind and practices that can be taught and learned.

Indeed, the key to improving novice writers' experiences is improving how they think about their work, a process called metacognition. Opening up cognitive space that allows for metacognition and reflection is essential to experiential and practical improvement. One particularly powerful concept in the current metacognitive conversation is persistence: Persistence emphasizes that experience is more powerful than unchangeable ability, and challenges help move writers forward rather than delaying their progress. Good writers build these habits of mind. A successful writer—whether someone working alone or with a community group, or as a university student, professional writer, or any other way—is not one who necessarily writes more but one who persists and reflects on the work done as a means of improvement. Instructors work not to reward the talented genius and punish the unlucky, but to provide opportunities for writing, feedback, reflection, remixing, and revision of that work as socially located activities with rhetorical awareness. When a previously bad writer sees improvement, sees the value of persistence, and feels the satisfaction of the metacognitive recognition that they have gotten better, they will know that good writers are not born but come to fruition in the social act of writing itself.

To alleviate this disconnect between what culture believes writing is and what the activity of writing involves, many writing studies professionals agree that we should emphasize the contextual aspects that shape writing. We should emphasize writing as a socially located activity and reject it as idealized art object. One potential way to do this is to take writing out of the sole context of the classroom. Traditional essays that are only seen by a teacher (or perhaps a teacher and a peer reviewer) do not build writers' concepts of themselves as authors because they can see those assignments as acontextual hoops to jump through. Writing experiences that broaden the writer's audience or provide real contexts such as blogs or service learning placements in the community can help new writers' see themselves as real authors with real audiences and see the act of writing as a socially located activity.

I will not deny, however, that certainly some authors are naturally more comfortable, more experienced, or more confident than others or may have more practiced facility with certain writing situations. Natural talent exists. Sometimes I compare writing to sports: I am not a naturally talented athlete, but I have trained for and run in dozens of races, from 5Ks to half-marathons. I am a runner. A person may not be naturally strong, but how could they gain strength? Lift weights. Need more flexibility and balance? Practice yoga. Likewise, it is with writing. We are all authors, and all authors can become better authors.

Indeed, research in writing studies shows that improved writing *can* be taught to writers at all levels, but we must first debunk the deeply held idea in the collective psyche that only some lucky people are good writers. If a person thinks their writing ability is stuck in place, improvement is incredibly difficult, further solidifying as a self-fulfilling prophecy the belief that they are a hopeless cause. This idea that some people are good writers while others are not can be truly crippling to a writer. Good writing instruction — either in a classroom setting, a tutor session, or informally with oneself—can only occur if the person believes they can become a good writer with practice and focused feedback, which can only happen if they have debunked the myth of the genius author. All writers can improve their own writing by discovering which strategies work for them and where their strengths and weaknesses lie. We are not bound by an inborn, set level of writing talent. Good writers are not born. They are learned.

Further Reading

For more about authorship theories, see Roland Barthes's famous essays "Authors and Writers" and "The Death of the Author" or Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" Sean Burke's collection *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* is a great resource for historical perspectives of authorship, which have changed dramatically over time. For alternative views from the single genius author, see Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's work *Singular Texts/Plural Authors* or Amit Ray and Erhardt Graeff's "Reviewing the Author-Function in the Age of Wikipedia."

To better understand the struggles and anxieties of inexperienced writers, see "Inventing the University" by David Bartholomae, Peter Elbow's widely read *Writing Without Teachers*, or Rebecca Moore Howard's *Standing in the Shadows of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators*. Further, Jeff Goins's blog post, "The Difference between Good Writers and Bad Writers," aptly gets to the crux of my argument here for helping inexperienced or unconfident writers expand their experiences and confidence: It's mostly practice. Because much of the idea that a person is a bad writer comes from anxiety about being unable to produce that art-product text as some kind of genius, simple exercises such as those found in advice from The Writing Center at UNC–Chapel Hill, which advises new writers to think of themselves as apprentices, or a psychological approach to conquering fears and insecurities, such as that found in Katherine Brooks's "Writing Anxiety and the Job Search" from *Psychology Today*, can be helpful.

Keywords

authorship, critical reading, literacy, metacognition, writing instruction

Author Bio

Jill Parrott (@DrParrottEKU) works in the Department of English and Theatre at Eastern Kentucky University, where she is also the coordinator of the first-year writing program and the Quality Enhancement Plan co-director. She teaches all kinds of writing classes, from first-year courses to advanced composition to grammar and modern composition and rhetorical theory. In the past, she has written about copyright law and how our understanding of what an author is affects and is affected by intellectual property laws. She is researching how collaboration between writing instructors, libraries, and writing centers can help improve the way students interact with their own research and transitions from undergraduate writing to writing in graduate school.

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2.5: Failure is Not an Option

Author: Allison Carr Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, Coe College

Failure, so goes the dominant cultural narrative, is a sign of weakness. Of laziness. Of stupidity and bad breeding and busted bootstraps. Failure will ruin your life. In action, suspense, and sports films, *failure is not an option*. In real life, failure only happens to bad people. Or, more to the point in this context, to bad writers. Failure in writing betrays dullness of mind, smallness of imagination. The failed writer—the one who cannot learn to write well (which is to say, according to accepted conventions of good writing)—is discounted as dim, unprepared, non-serious, wacky, or weird, distracted, behind.

Or, failure is acceptable if we learn from it. If we can recuperate it, if it brings us virtue and strength and morality because what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. And if we never, ever do it again.

No. Stop with this. This is stupid, and the opposite is actually true: Failure should be welcomed, if not actively sought out, signaling as it does both the presence of creative, risky thinking and an opportunity to explore a new direction. To writing especially, failure is integral, and I will go so far as to assert that the best writing (and the best learning-to-write) happens when one approaches the activity from a mindset trained on failure. Failure represents a certain against-the-grain jettisoning of established ideas about what counts as good writing in favor of rogue, original, attention-capturing, and intentional art. To fail willingly in writing is to be empowered by the possibilities that emerge. It is to trust oneself and one's ideas, a quality too rare in the age of hyper-achievement, in which the only progress that counts is progress that moves up.

A History of Failure

Broadly speaking, failure's bad reputation is an inherited relic of another time. Though it would certainly be possible to trace its

origins back to many religious mythologies, I will in the interest of brevity go back only so far as the mid-19th century in America, when the economy shifted from one based in agriculture to one based in industry (closing, in theory, the opportunity gap between rich and poor). From this backdrop grew the recognition that literacy, the ability to read and write (and generally comprehend information), would be the bedrock of a thriving community. Thus, literacy took on the status of social necessity for the masses, not simply a luxury for the ruling class. By the middle of the 19th century, a system of common schools had been codified, and central to its curriculum was grammar instruction and conventions of speech and writing.

According to literacy scholar John Trimbur, from whom I have been piecing together this history, reading and writing instruction functioned "as both a means to regulate popular literacy and a social marker to divide the literate from the illiterate, the worthy poor from the unworthy, 'us' from 'them.'" Given the then-corresponding (perhaps correlative) rates of illiteracy among incarcerated populations, success and failure in this realm came to be perceived not simply as an indication of intelligence or economic advantage, but as a matter of moral fiber. To fail in reading or writing meant a failure of moral fortitude.

But cultural attitudes toward failure remain as sinister as ever, perhaps more so in the wake of standardized testing, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top. Failure continues to represent not just ill preparedness, but weakness in spirit and mind, stupidity, inadequacy, and a lifetime of toiling. And there is something about failure in writing that amplifies these judgments, suggesting that the subject somehow deserves to be judged and disadvantaged in these ways.

An Alternative View

What we have failed to grasp—why the idea that failure is bad needs to die—is the integral connection between failure and risk, creativity, and innovation, not to mention emotional and cognitive resilience. This relationship is well documented, making its tenacious hold on cultural ideology especially confounding. For example, many of us use and benefit daily from innovations discovered by accident: penicillin, Corn Flakes, Post-it Notes, Corningware, WD-40, oral contraception, and potato chips. All of these were discovered when the discoverer was working on a different puzzle. And discoveries like these are the norm, not the exception. This is the primary activity of lab research, after all: A researcher may run hundreds, thousands of trials and experiments, each a failure in its own unique way (and some leading to accidental discoveries) before landing on, say, the polio vaccine or the secret to the expanding universe. Likewise, in the tech industry, we need only look as far as Silicon Valley and the dozens of stories of failed startups to understand how integral failure is to the culture of innovation there (even when it is difficult

to stomach). In fact, failure is so common and so prominent in tech, they've developed an entire annual conference around it, FailCon.

And though writing is not obviously about discovery of life-altering products, it *is* about discovery of a different sort and thus, the virtue of failure should be similarly celebrated. In fact, knowing what I know about learning to write (as a writer and a writing teacher myself), I would argue that it is impossible for one to develop anything approaching a good writing ability without years—decades, probably—of repeated failure. We aren't born pen in hand, fully primed to write sonnets or political treatises as soon as we get a grip on those fine motor skills. Writing is learned slowly, over a long period of time, and with much difficulty, and anybody who says otherwise is lying or delusional or both.

Consider the testimony of renowned journalist and public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates who, in an interview for *The Atlantic*'s "Creative Breakthroughs" series, describes writing as a process of repeated failures that, with persistence, accumulate to create breakthroughs. "I always consider the entire process about failure," he says, "and I think that's the reason why more people don't write." Similarly, novelist Stephen King speaks publicly (and repeatedly) about his impressively large stack of rejection slips before *Carrie* was finally picked up by Doubleday, thereby launching his illustrious career (powered by persistence, no doubt, in the face of his continued fear "of failing at whatever story I'm writing"). Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Junot Díaz writes memorably of his difficulty in writing his second novel, a years-long exercise in failure; it famously took Jane Austen fourteen years to write *Sense and Sensibility*; and Joyce Carol Oates, in her "Notes on Failure," reminds us that Faulkner considered himself a failed poet and that Henry James only became a novelist after a failed turn at playwriting.

There is much disagreement, or shall I say healthy debate, in the community of writing scholars about the best and most effective ways to teach writing. The specifics in this case are immaterial, because these scholars do agree on (at least) one foundational

idea: that writing is a *process*, which is a coded way of avoiding the harsher truth: Writing—and learning to write—involves a great deal of failure. We start a draft; we get frustrated or stuck or sidetracked, or we discover halfway through that we're actually interested in something else. We move to a clean sheet of paper or a fresh document and start again. And the process continues until we've made something cohesive, something that works. We scholars know this not only because we've researched it, but because we are writers ourselves, and we spend a great deal of time with people struggling to improve their writing.

Writing scholars don't use the word "failure" very often (or at all), but we should. There is something bold there, something that a dogged denial of failure closes off: permission to make a mess, to throw something away, to try thirty different ideas instead of toiling away on one. It's a reset button for the brain. That didn't work! Let's salvage what we can and try again! Scholars and teachers don't use this word, but we should—it is the most honest thing we have to say about writing.

Making Failure an Option

What should be clear is that failure is a significant part of the entire scene of learning, an assertion that, again, is borne out by widely respected research. Malcolm Gladwell isn't wrong when he insists upon the 10,000-hour rule, which, in suggesting that it takes 10,000 hours to truly master anything (shooting free-throws, playing an instrument), implicitly builds in a generous rate of failure. It's true that writing is not stable in the way that chess is stable, but the broad message of Gladwell's limited theory—that to excel at anything takes a tremendous amount of practice and persistence— easily aligns with prevailing thought on what is central to development in writing: Writing is difficult and complex, and development is not linear. More recently, Carol Dweck's concept of *growth mindset* suggests that people learn better when their efforts are assessed and praised as opposed to their autonomous being: "You seem to be working really hard" instead of "You're smart." Drawing on this learning paradigm, cognitive researcher Manu Kapur tells us that our brains are actually wired for failure.

Failure is integral to learning and development, more so than external markers of achievement or success. An avoidance of failure in learning, or in writing, or in industry or parenting or any other human/community endeavor, represents an absence of creativity and an abundance of predictability, little to no risk, and perhaps even harmful or counter-productive thinking. This is not a mindset anyone should encourage or reinforce. Instead, teachers, scholars, mentors, and anybody involved in the conversation about writing development should be taking concrete steps toward normalizing failure. This means rethinking the frame of the entire scene of writing, including what it means to learn how to do it and what it means to teach it. As my invocation of Gladwell above demonstrates, it is foolish to imagine writing as a discrete and stable skill that can be mastered, a mindset that unfortunately dominates much writing instruction (especially in this era of testing); instead, it is crucial that the project of developing as a writer

is understood as an always ongoing process of learning and discovery and that writing classrooms should be thought of as laboratories where experimentation and question-asking prevails over rule-memorization and formulaic discipline. Writing is not a list of dos and don'ts, nor is success in writing a universally acknowledged ideal. Writing is about risk and wonder and a compulsion to make something known. Failure—and a willingness to fail often in large, obvious ways—should always be an option.

Further Reading

To learn more about the correlation between organized writing instruction and the rise of industrial capitalism, see John Trimbur's essay titled "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis" in the collection *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary* (Boynton/Cook), edited by Trimbur and Richard Bullock.

Cultural attitudes about education, learning, and literacy have been challenged in recent years, most successfully by advocates for a "growth mindset," which strives to distinguish learners' natural ability from learned and determined effort, ultimately empowering students in the face of struggle and failure. To learn more about this research, see Ingfei Chen's "New Research: Students Benefit from Learning that Intelligence is not Fixed" (*Mind/Shift*), Manu Kapur's "Productive Failure in Learning Math" (*Cognitive Science*), and Katrina Schwartz's "Growth Mindset: How to Normalize Mistake Making and Struggle in Class" (*Mind/Shift*).

Stephen King may be the most well-known writer to address failure, as evident in Lucas Reilly's article "How Stephen King's Wife Saved *Carrie* and Launched His Career" (*Mental Floss)* as well as Andy Greene's interview with him (*Rolling Stone)*. Outside the world of writing, the culture of failure thrives most prominently in technological innovation. For more, consider Rory Carroll's "Silicon Valley's Culture of Failure... And the 'Walking Dead' it Leaves Behind" (*The Guardian*), Kevin Maney's "In Silicon Valley, Failing is Succeeding" (*Newsweek*), Bo Yaghmaie's "A Case of Startup Failure" (*Techcrunch.com*), and "146 Startup Failure PostMortems," compiled by the editor at CBInsights.com.

Keywords

basic writers, failure, growth mindset, productive failure, struggle, writing process

Author Bio

Allison Carr is an assistant professor of rhetoric and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Coe College. Beyond researching the intersection of failure and emotion for her doctoral dissertation, Allison considers herself a failure *savant*, leading her students by example toward riskier, frightening, and sometimes downright stupid undertakings. She tweets about food, politics, writing, and baseball @hors_doeuvre.

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2.6: There is One Correct Way of Writing and Speaking

Author: Anjali Pattanayak, Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, University of Wisconsin–Platteville

People consistently lament that kids today can't speak properly or that people coming to this country need to learn to write correctly. These lamentations are based on the notion that there is a single correct way of speaking and writing. Currently, the general sentiment is that people should just learn to speak and write proper English. This understanding of writing is rooted called *current traditional rhetoric*, which focuses on a prescriptive and formulaic way of teaching writing that assumes there is only one way to write (or speak) something for it to be correct. However, over the past several decades, scholars in writing studies have examined the ways in which writing has a close dialectical relationship with identity, style genre, and culture. In other words, the rules for writing shift with the people and the community involved as well as the purpose and type of writing.

Most people implicitly understand that the way they communicate changes with different groups of people, from bosses to work colleagues to peers to relatives. They understand that conversations that may be appropriate over a private dinner may not be appropriate at the workplace. These conversational shifts might be subtle, but they are distinct. While most people accept and understand these nuances exist and will adapt to these unspoken rules— and while we have all committed a social faux pas when we didn't understand these unspoken rules—we do not often afford this same benefit of the doubt to people who are new to our communities or who are learning our unspoken rules.

While the idea of arguing whether there is one correct way of communicating or whether writing is culturally situated might seem to be a pedantic exercise, the reality is that espousing the

ideology that there is one correct way to speak and write disenfranchises many populations who are already denigrated by society. The writing most valued in this binary is a type of writing that is situated in middle-class white culture. In adhering to so-called correct language, we are devaluing the non-standard dialects, cultures, and therefore identities of people and their communicative situations that do not fit a highly limited mold.

The way in which correctness in language devalues people is already troubling, but it becomes exacerbated by the current trends in education. Please refer to the literary crisis chapter to learn more about the changing dynamics in education. Given this shift and the way that Standard Written English is deeply rooted in white upper/middle-class culture, we see more and more students from diverse backgrounds gaining access to college who are facing barriers due to their linguistic backgrounds.

This means that while minority students and lower class students are ostensibly being given greater access to education, careers, and other facets of society they had been previously barred from, they are still facing serious barriers that their upperclass white counterparts do not, particularly in terms of culture, language, and literacy. J. Elspeth Stuckey argues that literacy, rather than enfranchising students, is a means of oppression and that it does little to help the economic futures of minority students because of how literacy teaches a particular set of values—ways of communicating and identity. In the context of educational settings, the cultures and identities of academia are valued more than those of the students, which sends the message that how they, their family, and members in their community speak and act are wrong by comparison. In essence, it sends the message starting at a very young age that who they are and where they come from is somehow lesser.

In this sense, education, while well intentioned, serves to further the marginalization of certain identities and cultures that do not fit. This is particularly evident in Latino, African American, and English as Second Language communities. In the book *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton note that colleges like the school they studied for five years, which they call Midwestern University, do not help facilitate social mobility. Frequently, the students who entered college best prepared were those who were already middle or upper class, meaning the opportunities the workingand lower-class students received were more limited. When you look at this alongside what Gloria Ladson-Billings calls the *educational debt*, or the compounded impact of educational deficits that grow across generations of poor minority students, literacy efforts as they are currently framed paint a bleak picture for poor, minority students.

The issue is not just one of unequal access to opportunities. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Carmen Kynard illustrate how attitudes toward students as writers are interwoven with attitudes toward them as people. Language cannot be disassociated from people, which has important consequences for those who grow up speaking different dialects. By continuing to propagate the notion of correct and incorrect ways of speaking, we effectively devalue the intelligence and character of students, employees, and colleagues, who, for whatever reasons, don't speak or write what in historical terms has been called the King's English (among

other names). We use the perception of improper communication as evidence of others' lesser character or ability, despite recognizing that this country was united (if only in name) after declaring independence from that King.

This perception becomes all the more problematic because it is not just about devaluing individuals, but about the widespread practice of devaluing the literate practices of those who are already marginalized. David Gold highlights the marginalization of women, working class, rural, and African American literacy in our understanding of writing. Gold writes about how the literacy practices of African Americans in universities laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement. Indeed, the schools he studied were decades ahead of the larger national conversation on how literacy, identity, and power were interrelated. In her work examining how literacy and identity formation were key for African American women and for social change, Jacqueline Jones Royster discusses the importance of understanding the these cultural, identity, and social movements, echoing the impact marginalized scholars had in academia. Both demonstrate the detrimental impact of sidelining groups of people and their literate practices by devaluing their languages and their experiences, not just for those who are marginalized but for our larger understanding of how we as a society write.

The notion of one correct way of writing is also troubling because it operates under the assumption that linguistic differences are the result of error. The reality is that, for many speakers, what we might perceive as a mistake is actually a system of difference. One notable example of a different dialect of English is Ebonics, which has different patterns of speech rooted in the ancestral heritage of its speakers. Similarly, immigrant groups will frequently speak and write English in a way that mirrors the linguistic heritage of their mother tongue.

The way that we conceptualize language is not just detrimental to minorities; it also devalues the identities that workingand lower-class people bring to communicative situations, including the classroom. Lynn Z. Bloom writes that "Freshman Composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise." She argues that one of the reasons composition is required for all students is because it promulgates middle-class values and ways of thinking. These values in the writing classroom are embodied in everything from the notion of property, which undergirds the way that plagiarism and intellectual property are treated, to formality of language and rhetorical choices that are encouraged in papers. Indeed, the way many instructors teach writing, plagiarism, citation, and word choice in papers is not in and of itself good but rather is the socially accepted way of interacting with text as defined by the middle class. Mike Rose and Irvin Peckham write about the tension of middleclass values on working-class students and the cognitive dissonance and struggles with identity that come with imposing such values in writing under the guise of correctness. The idea that there is one correct way of writing devalues the writing, thoughts, intelligence, and identities of people from lower-class backgrounds.

Pragmatically, many argue that standard English should be dominant in the binary between academic English and all other dialects in order for speakers and writers to communicate with credibility in their communities. This argument has been used to justify the continued attention to correctness at the expense of authors' voices, but we can teach people to adapt while also valuing their identities. We can talk about writing as something that they can employ to their benefit rather than a hegemonic standard that supersedes their backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

In order to value the diversity of communication and identities that exist in the U.S., we need to start teaching and envisioning writing as a cultural and social activity. We need a more nuanced view of writing in society that encourages everyone to adapt to their audiences and contexts rather than placing an undue burden on those who do not fit the mold of standard English. One strategy for teaching academic English without devaluing a writer's identity is code-switching, a concept already taught in schools with significant minority populations as a way of empowering young people. While instruction in code-switching is valuable because it teaches students that they can adopt different linguistic choices to appeal to different audiences, it is deeply problematic that the impetus is still placed on minority students with non-standard dialects to adapt. While code-switching is meant to empower people, it is still rooted in the mentality that there is one correct way of writing, because even as code-switching teaches an incredibly nuanced way of thinking about writing, it is still being taught in the context of preparing writers to deal with a society that will use errors in speaking as evidence that they are lesser. As a result, it is a less-thanideal solution because it plays into—rather than undermines—the racism of academic English.

By perpetuating the myth of one correct way of writing, we are effectively marginalizing substantial swaths of the population linguistically and culturally. The first step in combating this is as easy as recognizing how correctness reinforces inequality and affects our own perceptions of people and questioning our assumptions about communication, and a second step is valuing code-switching in a wide swath of communicative situations.

Further Reading

While the notion of what constitutes academic English has remained relatively static in popular culture, the reality of writing in the university has broadened to include many other types of writing. Patricia Bizzell, Helen Fox, and Christopher Shroeder compile arguments for addressing these other types of communication in *Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. In *College Writing and Beyond*, Anne Beaufort provides a framework in which to understand how writing is dynamic. In her article "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise," Lynn Z. Bloom articulates the ways in which the cultural values of the middle class are being taught in the writing classroom as objectively good or true and the impact of this mentality. Additionally, Asao Inoue compiles a collection of articles in *Race and Writing Assessment* that provides frameworks for considering race in assessment practices.

In 1974, the Conference for College Composition and Communication passed the resolution *Students' Right to Their Own Language*. In this time since it passed, there has been a great deal of discussion around the wisdom of that resolution. Editors Austin Jackson, David E. Kirkland, and Staci Perryman-Clark compile short articles for and against the resolution called "Students' Right to Their Own Language."

About Who Good Writers Are 87

Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur write about how the increasing number of English speakers in the world is increasing linguistic diversity in "Opinion: Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." Additionally, Irvin Peckham writes extensively with a focus on working class students in the classroom and the impact of college and academic writing as a middle-class enterprise in "The Stories We Tell." For more on the history and cultural development of African American Vernacular English, consider *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice* by John Baugh.

Keywords

African American Vernacular, cultural rhetorics, Ebonics, non-standard dialect, rhetorical genre studies, writing and class

Author Bio

Anjali Pattanayak is the Academic Enrichment program coordinator for the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville. She currently runs programs that help underrepresented students transition into their first year of college to support retention and matriculation. She has spent over five years doing outreach work with under-represented youth as they transition to college. She has taught both first-year composition and first-year experience classes. You can follow her @ lalaithfeanaro or @arpattanayak.

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2.7: African American Language is not Good English

Author: Jennifer M. Cunningham, English, Kent State University at Stark

What linguist Geneva Smitherman calls African American Language (also called Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, black English, broken English, bad English, or slang) has been discounted as a lesser form of communication than other forms of spoken and written English. Our society perpetuates this stigma, remaining uninformed or misinformed about its linguistic complexity. Understood from a linguistics perspective, African American Language combines an English vocabulary (the words used) with an African grammar (the way the words are ordered and conjugated) and phonology (the way the words are pronounced). In that way, African American Language is not good or bad English because it is not, linguistically speaking, English. Further, African American Language, like other languages and dialects, follows rules and conventions and is correct and good in specific contexts.

Scholars like Lisa Delpit find that teachers in particular are more likely to correct errors related to African American Language, which is why teachers, professionals, and society at large need to understand that African American Language is different from and not a deficient form of Standard American English. The use of "standard" is problematic, suggesting that the United States does, in fact, have an accepted standard language. (Here, "standard" is used to differentiate the type of English preferred in academic and professional settings from other varieties of spoken and written American English; most writing courses aim to teach this type of language use.) Within the classroom or in a professional setting, these so-called errors need to be addressed in terms of language difference, code-switching, and expected conventions rather than a person's misuse of English. These errors are not mistakes but,

instead, occur when a communicator does not understand or is not aware of differences between one language and another or when, how, or why to switch from one language to another. Understood that way, African American Language follows specific grammatical, phonological, and morphological rules—the ways words and sentences are ordered, conjugated, spelled, and pronounced is logical and rule-governed, not arbitrary, or wrong. Instead of following the rules of Standard American English, African American Language obeys specific linguistic patterns that tend to adhere to both American English and African language rules.

There are two primary hypotheses about the origin of African American Language. One theory suggests that African American Language is a dialect with English origins. The other theory maintains that African American Language is a language that developed from a mixture of languages used by people of different linguistic backgrounds in order to communicate and is a separate language made up of mostly English-language vocabulary words and West African grammatical and phonological rules. I am persuaded by the second hypothesis and maintain that Southern American English was influenced by African American Language, but the subject is controversial.

Linguists define languages according to their grammatical origins, not their vocabulary. For example, English is considered a Germanic language because its grammar follows Germanic rules, even though its vocabulary is largely French and Latin. Likewise, African American Language is more grammatically African than English, even though its vocabulary is English. Therefore, it follows logically that African American Language ought to be considered linguistically (according to scholars like Ernie Smith) an African language, separate from English, based on its grammatical origins in the Niger-Congo or western and southern parts of Africa. Defining African American Language as a separate language from Standard American English, situating African American Language as a valid, independent form of spoken and written communication.

Linguist Lisa Green has written an introduction to African American Language where she discusses its grammatical and phonological rules. For example, within African American Language, as with other Niger-Congo languages, there is a grammatical construction called *zero copula*, which means that sentences do not require the verb *be* (i.e., *be*, *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *been*, *being*) to be grammatically correct. Therefore, while some African American Language speakers could say *She reading*, Standard American English speakers would say *She is reading*. Both are correct linguistically. There is also a construction that includes the word *be* known as *habitual be*, meaning that if the word *be* is used in a sentence, an action is consistent or regular. Therefore, *She be reading* means, in Standard American English, *She reads all of the time*.

Another grammatical feature common among African American Language is the *negative concord*; in other words, a double negative. Contrary to what some believe, language does not work like math, so including two negatives in a sentence does not make the sentence positive. In fact, many languages (e.g., French, Spanish, and Portuguese) include multiple negatives within a

sentence for emphasis. That means that the African American Language sentence *I ain't got no time* is grammatically correct and more emphatic than the Standard American English sentence *I don't have any time*. The use of *ain't* is also grammatical in African American Language and can also be translated to the Standard American English word didn't. For example, the African American Language sentence I ain'*t take the money* translates to *I didn't take the money* in Standard American English.

A phonological construction or sound found among African American Language is replacement of the *th* sound. The *th* sound (e.g., wi*th* and *th*ink) is actually an uncommon and difficult sound to produce if it is not part of a person's first language. English is one of the few languages (as are Hindi, Greek, and Scottish) that include this sound, and people for whom English is not their first language make linguistic accommodations to approximate or recreate the sound by using replacement sounds. A person whose first language is French typically replaces the voiced *th* with another voiced sound, which, in French, is often a /z/. This specific replacement produces *zis*, *zat*, *zese*, *zose* for Standard American English *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those*. In African American Language, this same linguistic principle applies, and people for whom African American Language is their first language replace a voiced *th* sound with a /d/, producing *dis*, *dat*, *dese*, and *dose*. Likewise, African American Language speakers tend to replace a voiceless *th* sound (such as wi*th*) with another voiceless sound, usually a /d/ or /t/, which produces *wif* or *wit*.

These few linguistic explanations serve as examples to reinforce the point that African American Language, whether spoken or written, is not bad English. In fact, African American Language follows many grammatical, phonological, and morphological patterns that do not exist in Standard American English. When

instructors, professionals, or society expect Standard Academic English among oral or written communication, but instead find instances of African American Language, it is not simply a problem of syntactical or grammatical errors within a single language.

When we focus on the ways that African American Language and Standard American English are different, communicators are able to better understand, acquire, and switch between both, and society is more capable of recognizing the validity of the language and its users. Conflating the two into one linguistic variety is confusing at best and damaging at worst. We need to understand and explain African American Language and Standard American English as different languages, each with its own set of grammatical, phonological, and morphological rules (even though they share a lexicon or vocabulary).

In the writing classroom, teachers can help students navigate Standard American English expectations while not suggesting a linguistic hierarchy. By speaking about language choices in terms of difference rather than deficiency and in relation to academic and nonacademic conventions, we can value both (or any) languages. Delpit suggests validating students by welcoming their home languages—and, therefore, their cultures and identities—into the classroom so they feel respected and might be more willing to add Standard American English to their linguistic repertoires. If students understand that different audiences and contexts expect different language choices and that African American Language is different from Standard American English but that neither is better or worse than the other, then they are better able to accept and use both proficiently.

Further Reading

For more about the origins, structure, and grammar of African American English, see Lisa J. Green's book, *African American English: An Introduction;* Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin' and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*; and Mike Vuolo's "Is Black English a Dialect or a Language?," online at Slate.com.

To learn more about how to support speakers of African American Language in the classroom, see N. LeMoine's "Teachers' Guide to Supporting African American Standard English Users: Understanding the Characteristic Linguistic features of African American Language as Contrasted with Standard English Structure"; H. Fogel and L. C. Ehri's "Teaching African American

English forms to Standard American English-Speaking Teachers: Effects on Acquisition, Attitudes, and Responses to Student Use"; as well as Lisa Delpit's "What Should Teachers Do About Ebonics?" and Delpit and J. K. Dowdy's *The Skin that We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*.

Finally, PBS.org's "Do You Speak American?" documentary is available online and has information about African American Language that might be useful in classroom discussions.

Keywords

African American Language, African American Vernacular English, black English, Ebonics, grammar, linguistics, Standard American English, Standard English, Standard Written English

Author Bio

Jennifer M. Cunningham is an associate professor of English at Kent State University at Stark. Her teaching and research center on the themes and connections among digital literacies, African American Language, and online pedagogies. Jennifer has a background in composition, linguistics, and education, earning her B.A. in integrated language arts, her M.A. in composition and linguistics, and her Ph.D. in literacy, rhetoric, and social practice. Among other scholarly activities, she has developed and taught online versions of research writing and first-year composition and is currently researching social presence in online writing classes as well as digital African American Language and Nigerian Pidgin English within digital messages. Her Twitter handle is @jenmcun-ningham, and her website is http://jencunningham.weebly.com/.

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2.8: Official American English is Best

Author: Steven Alvarez, English, St. John's University

The debate in favor of English as the official language of the United States focuses on narrowing national unity amid linguistic diversity for the sake of communicative clarity and the betterment of the country. Generally speaking, arguments for English as the national language boil down to assimilating immigrants to the United States. English-only supporters reason that if immigrants come to the United States, they must learn to speak, read, and write English. And more, U.S. citizens should not have to be burdened to speak, read, or write official business in languages that are not English—U.S. citizens should not be inconvenienced with *para español*, *marque número dos* when calling their banks or for footing the bill to translate driver's license applications or signs at the Division of Motor Vehicles into different languages, let alone filling out an application in another language.

Thirty-one states have some form of English-only legislation, most recently Oklahoma in 2010. For over three decades, the political think tank known as U.S. English has been central for shaping legal policies advocating for the unifying role of an official language in the United States. U.S. English has lobbied to enact Englishonly legislation across the United States, or what the organization calls *Official English.* According to U.S. English, recognizing English as the official language of the nation benefits the government and its citizens by fostering a common means of communication among its 325 spoken languages. Official English urges that official government business at all levels be conducted solely in English, including signs, applications, public documents, records, official ceremonies, and meetings. U.S. English argues that making Official English the law of the land would "encourage immigrants to learn English in order to use government services and participate in the democratic process." Immigrants in the Official English movement must be forcefully encouraged to read, write, and speak English, because if they live in America, they better learn English, and learn quickly if they want to catch up with everyone else. Implicit in the argument is that immigrants don't want to learn English, that immigrants don't exercise their democratic rights, and that immigrants don't integrate with the mainstream.

These huge misconceptions are at the root of U.S. English's arguments dismissing bilingual education, literacy learning, and immigrant involvement for a mythologized monolingual United States, which are bad ideas for all writers in a democratic society. Rather than approach the diversity of our voices in the United States as gaps to be overcome toward learning English, we should look to all of our nation's languages as gifts. The question of Official English unifying difference is a smokescreen for nationalist conceptions about immigrant integration and assimilation. Indeed, the argument for Official English swirls into a dichotomy between *us* and *them*, focusing specifically on how becoming American for immigrants means being encouraged to lose a central component of their identity to participate in the democratic process. This way of thinking about plurilingual burdens hurts how the United States thinks of its many linguistic gifts, however. The worst part of this plurilingual benign neglect is the unfair blame individuals and groups receive for their supposed English language lacks, deficits, and gaps. I propose instead that we learn how our writing repertoires move beyond and between languages. Instead of standardized monolingual writing in Official English terms, we can instead turn to how writing grounded in social justice and democratic pluralism connects local, national, and global struggles that challenge language nationalism.

The Myth of an English-Only United States

The English-only myth assigns deficits and gaps to anyone with home languages that are not English. English-only policies make prescriptions about official languages, and such debates also make prescriptions about who can be a citizen or pass as one. Among immigrant families across the nation there is a strong desire to learn English. Immigrants on one level believe in more economic opportunities with English, but also the power of English to be able to defend themselves. In fact, immigrant parents learning

English often blame themselves for not assimilating their children's language identities, and in cases of home language loss, blame themselves for that as well. What the English-only argument misses is the human struggles of immigrants, of individual and collective community struggles for bilingual education. For English-only advocates, immigrants are faceless statistics connected to cost analysis and alleged drains on public systems, such as printing public signs and materials in languages that are not English.

English as the official language of the United States has roots that go back to the founding of the United States. Benjamin Franklin, for example, was notorious for desiring to rid the nation of German-language schools. English-only was one of the Founding Father's major concerns for preserving and conserving the emerging American identity. This is ironic enough considering the English language's Germanic heritage, but nevertheless the sense of linguistic assimilation amid pluralism has deep sediment

within the American monolingual psyche. Native Americans and immigrants from around the world have had their languages forcefully removed in the United States since its beginning and have continually suffered assimilative pressures in schools for generations.

It was not until the 1980s, however, that federal proposals for a constitutional amendment declaring English the official language of the nation became increasingly vocal. In 1981, U.S. Senator Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa, one of U.S. English's founders, introduced the amendment in the Senate, and though the amendment did not progress, the arguments awakened multiple lobbying groups to expand the efforts at the state level, succeeding in some 30 states to date. The U.S. English lobbyists made their biggest strides in California, the home state of Senator Hayakawa. In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 227, mandating that California Limited English Proficient (LEP) students be taught literacy overwhelmingly in English-only immersion programs not normally expected to exceed one year rather than provide any funding for bilingual education. After one year, students were encouraged to sink or swim in mainstream classes. As a result, California removed all bilingual classes and assessed thousands of emergent bilingual students as *limited* in their academic English proficiency. At the time, roughly a quarter of California's students classified as limited.

The arguments for national unity linked to English and assimilation compel bizarre patriotic themes that convince some Americans who would find discrimination on any other spaces shameful. Through the guise of language, however, targeting immigrants turns discrimination into euphemisms about citizenship, belonging, and the public good. The limited in the LEP designation carries the stigma of deficiency, applied to students' languaging abilities and assuming potential and, as a result, opportunities. The children affected by the legislation are not researchers for think tanks or lobbyists, let alone against learning English or their home languages. The real limit for all students is mainstreaming policy that cuts away at the plurilingual gifts of our nation. All Americans stand to gain by learning to speak, read, and write many languages.

Embracing All the Languages of the United States as Gifts

The truth is that immigrants to the United States learn English faster today than at any point in history. Historically, immigrants to the U.S. transitioned from home languages to English within three generations. Today, this timeframe has been compressed for some immigrant groups to a single generation, as linguistic scholars Rubén Rumbaut and Douglas Massey explain. The problem, therefore, is not learning English but rather remaining bilingual.

In addition, the assumptions of Official English that students learning English find little support from their families or that students' home languages have no place in learning both fall flat. Official English assumes that there is no value to fluencies in languages not English and that monolingual English is sufficient for the global language. The narrow-minded view that Englishonly is the only model for literacy learning should be put to rest. English-only does not contribute to meaningful education on any grounds. Decades of research into bilingual learning strongly advocates for all students' plurilingual learning.

Plurilingual writers have extensive vocabularies beyond English and excellent abilities to translate and interpret across and between languages. Bilingual individuals have also proven to develop complex meta-cognitive skills for translating and communicating among diverse audiences. This movement between people and writing makes for complex imaginative and critical writing. Consider this plurilingual gift of writing as a way to move away from the misconceptions about English-only ideologies. In a global economy, the power of English is undeniable, yet the power of bilinguals to communicate beyond and across languages and cultures is invaluable. Further, we can and must appreciate plurilingualism as a gift, a gift that some students bring to our schools from their homes and communities. When we try, we can learn to appreciate that all the languages of our nation are gifts, and those gifts shape our identities as unique individuals in communities who speak to one another between and across languages and differences, even in spaces imagined to be monolingual.

Writing Across and Between Languages

Ultimately, schools bear the responsibility for producing conscientious citizens; hence, the intolerant impetus behind Proposition 227 and efforts to standardize students and their languages do not follow the democratic tradition of U.S. schooling. English-only initiatives at the state level have not produced any evidence to back their arguments about increasing proficiency among emergent bilingual students or for aiding public communication. This lack of evidence is not surprising because in reality there are no language gaps, aside from those that policy makers create out of air. If you catch yourself using ideas of *language gaps*, *limited*, or

playing catch up to arrive at English literacy, don't play into the game. There are no gaps or limits when it comes to languages; there are only gifts. So-called language gaps are bad for writing in all languages—not just English—and bad for democracy.

On a practical level, I write this from the level of students who don't lobby Congress but who must learn to value the dignity of all languages, most importantly the languages of all our nation's communities and families. Rather than mark emergent bilingual students by their limits, we should instead imagine students by their potential and by the strengths they gain from their communities that they carry with them into classrooms. Rather than assume students are limited writers or at fault in their individualized efforts, we must acknowledge that emerging bilingual students are not limited in their community contexts and instead look to the diverse repertoires they perform. Writing that is truly democratic values all languages and identities as they exist across the nation and not as imagined as English-only.

This type of writing means embracing all languages of communities, following the movements in diverse activities, performances, and genres, including across generations and social classes. For English-only purists, this view will remain contrary to their ideology, but a realistic orientation acknowledges that all American communities are plurilingual and that the language hybridity of everyday practices happen in contexts that range from the boroughs of New York City to the Appalachian regions of the South, from Alaska to Hawaii to Puerto Rico. The reading of the word to re-read the world and the opportunity to re-write is where this hybridity can offer the liberating potential to envision social justice across languages.

Further Reading

For more information about linguistic diversity, see Rubén Rumbaut and Douglas S. Massey's article "Immigration and Language Diversity in the United States." Camille Ryan offers census data about American language use in *Language Use in the United States: 2011: American Community Survey*. U.S. English, Inc.'s website offers information about its efforts to make English the official language of the United States.

In 2003, Richard Gonzales reports on *National Public Radio* about kid translators in the context of California Assembly Bill 292, legislation that would have prohibited the practice of using children as translators for their immigrant parents in business transactions. The short film *Immersion* (2009) narrates the predicament of a creative emergent bilingual student coping with language differences at school. Accompanying lesson plan materials are available on the film's official website. Finally, the City University of New York–New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals offers an online guide with practical assistance on how to help facilitate learning content for emergent bilingual students.

Keywords

English-only myths, immigrant communities, literacy, national language, Official English, plurilingual writing

Author Bio

Steven Alvarez is a writing researcher of English at St. John's University. He has studied literacy and bilingual learning among Mexican immigrant communities across the country for over a decade. Read more of his research and writing at www.stevenpaulalvarez.com and follow him on Twitter @chastitellez and Instagram @stevenpaulalvarez.

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2.9: Writer's Block Just Happens to People

Author: Geoffrey V. Carter, English, Saginaw Valley State University

Whenever someone trying to write says that they are suffering from writer's block, the first word that comes to my mind could be misunderstood as uncharitable: *slacker.*

At the end of this short essay, I will tell you why the word *slacker* pops into my mind, but first I want to share some thoughts regarding Edmund Bergler, the person who first developed the term *writer's block.* Bergler was Sigmund Freud's assistant director at the Vienna Clinic in the 1930s. Bergler made all sorts of outrageous claims, not the least of which was his ability to completely cure the malady he coined. Of all Bergler's unsubstantiated psychological declarations, this was the one that bothered me the most. When I think about Bergler's example, what comes to mind are writing techniques that I use to circumvent writer's block rather than further pathologize it.

As a writer myself, I know that writing doesn't always come easily. Fortunately, I've always been good at researching things before I really start writing. I was puzzled, for example, by a claim made by those who had previously studied Bergler: Bergler, evidently, had claimed that he had a 100% cure rate when it came to the malady he had invented. And yet, purportedly, Bergler never explained exactly *how* he treated this problem. Surely, I thought to myself, he would have mentioned a strategy somewhere. Delving deeper into such puzzling claims is an important step in a writing process and, for me, such work often alleviates the feeling of having writer's block.

While searching through his work, I waded through Bergler's pontifications on the frigidity of women and his rejection of homosexuality. (Bergler *seriously* limited his own dating pool with such proclamations.) Along the way, I found an article that gave him credit for articulating a logical connection between gambling and masochism. Perhaps Bergler wasn't completely off his rocker, even if he wasn't able to see past Freud's sexual hang-ups or see fit to disclose his alleged cure for writer's block. In all, I could only find one trivial tactic that Bergler shared—inadvertently, perhaps—in one of his clinical session anecdotes.

Before I share this anecdote, I want to mention how it reinforces some of the other strategies for overcoming writer's block that I've come across. These strategies were noted both before and after Bergler's time. The hesitation to write, after all, has been around since we've been trying to write. Whenever we stare at a blank page, we're in good company.

Perhaps the funniest piece of scholarship that I've ever encountered about the good company of a blank page is one that was actually published in an academic journal. It can be found in the 1974 issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, if you care to track it down yourself. (I certainly would not have delved into this journal had others not mentioned it in connection to Bergler.) When I requested this journal from the library, I most certainly wasn't looking for a laugh. But author Dennis Upper's entire article was summed up in the title—"The Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of a Case of Writer's Block"—because the rest of the article (no joke) is a blank page with a footnote that it was "published without revision" following its presentation at the 81st Annual American Psychological Association Convention the year before and a note from a reviewer who vetted its inclusion into the journal: "Clearly it is the most concise manuscript I have ever seen—yet it contains sufficient detail to allow other investigators to replicate Dr. Upper's failure." Who knew that it would be serious business to publish a blank page in an academic journal that, at the time, had been publishing for over half a century?

The humor of this article often causes people to smile. Curiously, however, just as many people scoff at the idea of a non-article. I'm not sure why the publishing of a blank page amuses some but is an affront to others, but I have another story about writer's block that might offer a key.

Back in the 18th century, there was a French schoolteacher and philosopher named Joseph Jacotot who put bad ideas about writer's block to the test with the help of an illiterate Flemish locksmith. Contrary to commonly held opinion at the time, Jacotot believed that everyone—regardless of cultural hierarchy—had the capacity

for equal intelligence. His notion of *intellectual emancipation* led him to guide an illiterate locksmith in reading and comprehending a 17th-century French treatise. Rather than insisting his locksmith learn through a traditional a*bécédaire* (i.e., learning letters before learning words before learning meaning and so forth), Jacotot's philosophy was simple: "Everything is in everything." He operated under an assumption that it is always easier to utilize what his learners already knew. Thus the first name

mentioned in the aforementioned treatise, “Calypso,” was understood by the locksmith’s recognition of *the square* and *the round* to identify what more traditional learners would label as *L* and *O*.

Jacotot’s “everything is in everything” tact is one that I’ve come to feel embodies my approach to writing: As I was exploring Bergler, I was researching a little bit of everything and incorporating a little bit of everything. I could tell Upper’s blank page was a clue, and as I listened to Jacotot’s story about the locksmith playing with names, I was getting down with a tactic only hinted at in Bergler’s work.

And this is where I come back ‘round to Bergler and an anecdote he briefly shared about one of his writer’s block patients. As it turns out, the patient said he “unlocked his [*own*] literary resources” by playing with his psychiatrist’s name: Bergler. Whether the patient was calling Bergler out as a *burglar* for taking his money when he was solving his own problem can’t be verified. But the key here— and yes, key is a punny reference to the illiterate locksmith—is the idea that one can facilitate writing by embracing the blank page, by remembering “everything is in everything,” and by playing with words and names. Doing so, I believe, negates the very problem of writer’s block.

These stories about writer’s block lead me to suggest that it might be useful to experiment with playing with names to get one’s writing process underway. It’s simple. By looking at your own name and the names of others, we might find puns and anagrams to help move writing along. Bergler–Burglar is simple, but as “everything is in everything,” even finding a certain glee in a name is permissible. I find such play with names and words loosens me up, and perhaps this might help others who feel frustrated or blocked too.

It all comes down to this: When faced with the process of creating something, rather than just giving up, writing about anything that comes to mind—even if it is just fooling around with words— can sometimes motivate real work. Being playful, after all, often leads to storytelling about why one is being playful. If this can be accepted, the reason why the word *slacker* comes to my mind is revealed as the prospect of being *more* than someone who simply isn’t trying hard enough.

Before I leave you with a final impression of myself as having contempt for someone struggling to create, let me clarify that my first thought, mentioned at the start of this piece, is of the movie *Slacker* (1991). This movie, written and directed by Richard Linklater, is one that on paper looks like a bad idea—a *really* bad idea. There are no big stars, no plotline, no main characters or character development, no traditional theatrical structure, no dramatic music—indeed, there’s no soundtrack at all. *Slacker* has no special effects or any real action, and, as such, it contains nothing that a Hollywood Feature would usually feature.

But despite the nonexistence of all these traditional elements, this film is a masterpiece of the mundane. For the entirety of the movie, for a full one hour and forty minutes, nothing of consequence happens. But it is just brilliant. Nothing happens, and yet the film *works*.

One character from *Slacker*, in particular, is an aspiring writer at a coffee shop. At his scene’s start, he is sitting, waiting for a friend. As he waits, we hear him in the background expounding on ideas for what he hopes will be the next Great American Novel. When his friend approaches his table, our aspiring writer forgoes the usual, friendly salutations and, instead, immediately enlists his friend into the fever of his writing brainstorm. The aspiring writer’s various riffs—such as calling for “a full circle aesthetic re-evaluation”—make him sound like a pseudo-intellectual blowhard who, at one point, sees himself as the next Dostoevsky. But then —after all this talk about writing—our aspiring writer reaches a moment of clarity: “Who’s ever written the great work about the immense effort required in order not to create?” This line distills the essence of *Slacker* into a single sentence. Linklater, of course, captures this idea in his film’s title. The line is all about turning the struggle to write back upon itself in order to create. You have to try very hard in order not to create at all.

Further Reading

For further reading on the history of writer’s block and how writing teachers have contended with this idea, see Mike Rose’s *When a Writer Can’t Write* (The Guilford Press), which offers a series of essays on overcoming writer’s block. Additionally, to learn more about how the play of names might be used to overcome writer’s block, see my dissertation, *Rereading and Rewriting Bloc/ ks: Teaching Multi-Modal Literacies Through an Apprenticeship in Proper Names* (Proquest). Jacques Rancière’s book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford University Press) and Edmund Bergler’s article “Does ‘Writer’s Block’ exist?” (*The American Imago*) offer important historical examples of blocked writing. Of course, Dennis Upper’s article “The Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of a Case of ‘Writer’s Block’” (*Journal of Applied Behavior*) needs to be seen to be believed. Better, still, is my recommendation that you link

later to Richard Linklater's movie, *Slacker*, and perhaps embrace the idea that telling the story about blocked writers may offer story enough.

Keywords

blank pages, play of names, puns, writer's block

Author Bio

Geoffrey V. Carter is a tenured assistant professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU), where he teaches undergraduate English classes and graduate courses in the communication and media administration program. His areas of interest include video culture, electracy, and post-cinematics. He has published articles in *PRE/TEXT*, *Kairos*, and *Computers and Composition*, and he has also edited a special issue on "Video and Participatory Cultures" for *Enculturation* and on "The Rhetoric of Pinball" for *Itineration*. He would like to thank his wife, Sara JacobsCarter, for her input on this essay and all her help with the dissertation upon which this is also based.

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2.10: Strong Writing and Writers Don't Need Revision

Author: Laura Giovanelli, Wake Forest University

"The standard perception that revision is something that happens at the end of the writing process is a good place to start revising ideas about revision."—Cathleen Breidenbach

The fantasy that good writers summon forth beautiful, lean, yet intricate sentences onto a page without sweating is an unhealthy fiction, and it is wrong. What writers need is revision. Novice writers, experienced writers, *all* writers. Anyone interested in writing clearer, stronger, more persuasive and passionate prose, even those of us who are procrastinators panicking because we need to get a project finished or a paper written and it's 2:00 a.m. the night before our deadline—writers need revision because revision is not a discrete step. Revision is not the thing writers do when they're done writing. Revision *is* the writing.

It's important to keep in mind I'm not talking about revision as proofreading or copy editing; no amount of grammatical, spelling, and style corrections transforms a piece of writing like focused attention to fundamental questions about purpose, evidence, and organization. That, to me, is revision: the heavy lifting of working through why I'm writing, who I'm writing for, and how I structure writing logically and effectively.

Revision is Writing

My writing students are usually relieved to hear that published authors often find writing just as fraught as they do. Like firstyear college students, people paid to write—the journalists and the novelists and the technical writers—more often than not despair at the difference between what's in their heads and hearts and what ends up on the page the first time around. The professionals are just a little better at waiting things out, pushing through what Anne Lamott calls "shitty first drafts" and all the ones that follow, the revision of a tenth and a thirteenth and a twenty-third draft. I show a YouTube video by Tim Weninger, a computer scientist and engineer at the University of Notre Dame. In the video, Weninger stitches together his revisions of a research paper. In my class, we play a game, guessing how many revisions Weninger did. The answer—463!—almost always surprises them. It still sometimes surprises me. And sure, some of those revisions are small, fiddly changes. But most of the time, even watching this quickly on classroom monitors, my students notice Weninger aims for the jugular in his writing. He's after wholesale overhaul of his argument and of his larger work.

However, talking about revision in terms of numbers of drafts implies that all writing, all writers, and all revision work one way: hit your target draft number, like your daily Fitbit goals, and you magically get good writing. But more revision isn't necessarily better. Effective revising isn't making changes for the sake of change, but instead making smarter changes. And professional writers—practiced writers—have this awareness even if they aren't aware of it. In Stephen King's memoir *On Writing*, he calls this instinct the *ideal reader*: an imagined person a writer knows and trusts but rewrites in response to, a kind of collaborative dance between writer and reader. To writers, the act of *writing* is an act of *thinking*. One writer in a landmark study of comparing the habits of experienced writers to those of novices called their first drafts "the kernel." If you're someone like me who is constantly struggling to demystify this complex cognitive thing we humans do, that metaphor of writing as a seed is revelatory. Revision is not a sign of weakness or inexperienced or poor writing. *It is the writing.* The more writers push through chaos to get to the good stuff, the more they revise. The more writers revise, whether that be the keystrokes they sweat in front of a blinking, demanding cursor or the unofficial revising they do in our heads when they're showering or driving or running, the more the ideal reader becomes a part of their craft and muscle memory, *of who they are* as writers, so at some point they may not know where the writing stops and the revision begins.

Because writing and revision are impossible to untangle, revision is just as situational and interpretive as writing. In other words, writers interact with readers—writing and revision are social, responsive, and communal. Take Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. King gave a rough draft of the most famous American speech of the 20th century to 1,800 people crammed into a gymnasium in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in November of 1962. Seven months later, King gave another revision of the speech to a gathering of political and spiritual leaders, musicians, and activists in Detroit. In August of 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, King riffed and reworked and rebuilt what he preached in Rocky Mount and Detroit, adlibbing, deleting, and flipping lines. "I Have a Dream" is what Americans remember today, engraved in our collective memories, archives, and textbooks as symbols of an entire era, but King's famous refrain singing his vision for a less racially divided country was not even part of his speech's official text that day. Was King writing a new speech? Was he done with the Rocky Mount or Detroit one? "I Have a

Dream" was not one speech, but many, written and re-written. King was not content to let his words sit, but like any practiced writer working out his muscles, he revised and riffed, adapting it for new audiences and purposes.

Revision: Alive and Kicking

All this revision talk could lead to the counterargument that revision is a death spiral, a way of shoving off the potential critique of a finished draft forever. Tinkering is something we think of as quaint, but not very efficient. Writers can always make the excuse that something is a work-in-progress, that they just don't have time for all this revision today. But this critique echoes the point that writing is social and responsive to its readers. Writing is almost always meant to be read and responded to, not hoarded away. A recent large-scale study by Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, and other writing researchers supports the idea that specific interventions in the writing process matter more in learning to write rather than how *much* students are writing. Among these useful interventions are participation in a lively revision culture and an interactive and social writing process such as talking over drafts—soliciting feedback from instructors and classmates. Extending the modern definition of writing more broadly to composing in any medium, revision is as bound to writing as breathing is to living. If anything, humans are doing more writing and revision today. Sure, there are people who call themselves writers and mean that it is part of their formal job title. But then there are the greater numbers of us who are writers but don't label ourselves as such, the millions of us just noodling around on Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram. Facebook and Instagram have an edit feature on posts. Google Docs includes a revision history tool. When we send a text and our buzzy little e-devices kick in with Autocorrect, changing Linkin Park to Kinky Park, we compensate with frantic asterisks. We edit our comments or return to clarify them; we cannot resist. Revision as writing is an idea that we should not abandon or trash. And it may not even be possible to.

Further Reading

For more about the relationships between revision, writing experience, and writing processes, see Alice Horning and Anne Becker's *Revision: History, Theory, and Practice* (Parlor Press) and Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (Utah State University Press), specifically Doug Downs's chapter, "Revision is Central to Developing Writing."

Just a handful of many important studies that have helped writing scholars better understand what's going on when writers revise are Nancy Sommers's "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers," Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte's "Analyzing Revision," Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (Oxford University Press); and Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, Charles Paine, and Robert M. Gonyea's "The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Development: Results From a Large-Scale Multi-Institutional Study."

For more on how to frame revision and feedback for student writers, see Donald Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Wadsworth), Nancy Sommers's *Responding to Student Writers* (Macmillan Learning), and the video "Across the Drafts: Students and Teachers Talk About Feedback." Watch Tim Weninger's YouTube video, "Timelapse Writing of a Research Paper." Read more on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and its origins through the research of Jason Miller.

Keywords

ideal reader, revision strategies, revision, writing about writing, writing as process

Author Bio

Laura Giovanelli is an assistant teaching professor of writing at Wake Forest University. Before she earned her MFA in fiction writing from North Carolina State University, she spent nine years as a journalist writing for daily newspapers. Her personal essays, including one on pushing through writer's block and writing as a writing teacher, have appeared in *The Washington Post.* According to her Google Doc revision history, she revised this article 19 times. You can follow her on Twitter @lauragiovanelli.

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2.11: The More Writing Process, the Better

Author: Jimmy Butts @jimmy_butts, theyellowrobot.com.

"If you spend too much time thinking about a thing, you'll never get it done."—Bruce Lee

Everyone has a writing process. And writing, like anything, takes time. But for quite a while—much too long—writers have increasingly embraced a specific and drawn out model for *the* writing process, which generally refers to five sure-fire steps: prewriting, drafting, editing, revising, and eventually—if one can muster the endurance to get through each of those earlier stages—publishing. As we have increasingly valued this writing process, we have moved further away from valuing writing itself as a wonderful, finished thing that humans can produce, that is, actually get done.

In other words, we have so fetishized the creative process that we've forgotten what we can actually *create*: words strung out into beautiful constellations. The obsession with the writing process rather than seeing writing as a completed product is an increasingly problematic psychological perspective as we increase the speed of production in the 21st century. Beleaguered revision has become the norm. When any view becomes that dominant, it is important to consider revising it. I am worried that we are taking too much time to write. And time is our most important non-renewable resource.

Meanwhile, well-meaning teachers all over still have colorful little posters up in their rooms with those classic five steps borrowed from some fairly dated views on what writing involves. We often do the various steps of the writing process while we write, of course—just not necessarily in the prescriptive order outlined by this slightly archaic structure. Writing is more complex than a five-step program. These steps come from a time when people typed on charming things called typewriters. Hannah Sullivan blames the introduction of the typewriter along with Modernism's aim to present an ideal text for our current obsession with punctilious editing in her book *The Work of Revision*. There, Sullivan warns that "revision can go too far." The technological shift in what writing involves plays a big part in how we view writing—as process or product. For many, the writing process involves checking social media accounts for something like three days. In an age of mass distraction, it is perhaps increasingly important to see our writing finished, or it will increasingly become our collective pipedream—a thing that we desire to do but never realize. (Indeed, in much online writing, posts end up being fluid iterations, but readable published iterations nonetheless.)

Perhaps we should drop writing as a verb and see it more and more as a noun—the thing that writing is. Writing is no longer merely a thing we do hunched over for hours, but a thing we make, and increasingly quickly. This view, then, attempts to pull the rug out from under process stances from the mid-20th century to the present—embracing instead what might be called a *hyperproduct perspective* on writing for the fastest century yet.

The process theory of composition arose with a handful of well-meaning thinkers in the 1960s and 70s. There is a bit of history here about how we got ourselves into an idolatry of a slow process theory of writing. Before the middle of the 20th century, the general theories about writing in schools encouraged finishing products—things like writing themes for English classes. This view is now generally known as current-traditional rhetoric. It was the kind of schooling that we might think of when we think of rulers rapping student's knuckles to finish their work. An alternate model that valued expressivism of creative and unruly thought and the process of writing—and not the product—grew fairly common as a backlash.

Donald Murray and Peter Elbow in particular—those good, friendly, inspiring kinds of writing teachers—advocated seeing "writing as a process, not a product." Many embraced a kind of slower process in the teaching of writing that resisted the kind of production-line expectation of written work that can sometimes arise along with a lot of anxiety. All of this was good. It was a valuing of the human as a writer, but it began—I suspect—to devalue the written work. As such, an era embracing endless drafting, tinkering, and reworking *ad infinitum* began.

The Council of Writing Program Administrators, an organization that thinks about how writing works especially on college campuses, claims that one of the primary outcomes in learning to become a writer is to understand writing as a process. The council states this goal in this way: "Writers use multiple strategies, or *composing processes*, to conceptualize, develop, and finalize projects." To their credit, the objective is stated in a loose way to accept multiple approaches to writing and flexibility and recursivity in the processes that we develop as writers.

We love tinkering. We love delaying that finished, polished draft. But we must complete work. Otherwise, I think we relegate that work—the work of writing—to something less valuable. We blush at the fact that we scramble to complete drafts up to the moment

before they're due. Here, now, we might embrace that kind of breakneck pace—the work finished in the wee hours of the morning. Meanwhile, process has been critiqued since at least the early 1990s through a set of frameworks called post-process theory. Still, process haunts us. Most post-process critiques of the process formula suggest that a process view is invalid by merely embracing more complex, unknowable processes.

Of course, the idea of following a formula to write a perfect draft is a false construction. We write for specific situations, each unique. A certain set of cognitive steps are involved in writing anything—from academic papers to tweets; however, the set of steps used to compose one thing isn't necessarily a learnable and reproducible set of steps. We cannot follow a writing process, because writing is messier than that. Instead, then, revision and process become excuses on the part of writers who have taken a bit too long to finish writing projects, never ending or completing compositional tasks. Holding to dying process-based views, endlessly reworking drafts never to completion, does a disservice to writers who are seeking to make good, new things fast.

We don't often meticulously revise text messages. The written code of iOS 11 revises iOS 10. Each iteration becomes a potential improvement, but always as a valuable—and evaluable—product. In economic perspectives, revision is worthless unless it creates iterations of value. How we view process essentially depends on how much time we spend creating a thing. Is there a process to composing a tweet? Sure. But is there much editing, revision, recursive work? Not anymore.

It is finally time to explore an alternative to our obsession over the writing process in favor of a return to a healthy appreciation of finished drafts—of writing itself. Our culture really does value finished work. The exploratory work done in prewriting is harder to appreciate. And while a concern with overvaluing product is understandable, we should reclaim our writing—those satisfying finished pieces that do what we intend. If we don't value writing, then we can, of course, relegate it to something we endlessly defer by thinking about it. Making writing achievable and real is the goal.

The outcome of a written product is quite important. While how writing gets done (process) may not be able to be demystified, we might be better able to see writing as a thing we make (product). The process of writing is insignificant, unimportant, and immaterial when the product of writing is really good. The thing is what matters. And more than that, regularly finishing written work makes one a writer. Writers must find their own ways of completing all kinds of writing in their normal, everyday lives. But completed writing is really what we're after—not worthless drafts. Those drafts can be bad, and shaky, and loathsome. (They sometimes are!) But they must be finished.

This perspective asks us to write and write a lot, but also to finish and publish wherever we can happily find a space for our work. I think that this view also invites us to stop dilly-dallying, and saying that we are writers when we are sometimes not acting like it and to accept our successes along with our failures. For if we are to write things for the world, then some of it may not be perfect, but it will be completed and made public.

Of course, a hyperproduct view of writing is similar to a view sometimes espoused by hundreds of pithy productivity websites—the kind one might read when being unproductive. However, a strong product-based view of writing values the writing as well as what the writer can do. Famous portrait painter Chuck Close has this wonderful line: "Inspiration is for amateurs, I get to work." Mark Twain and Maya Angelou, among others, notoriously hated the editing process. There are probably more quotations valuing revision from famous writers than not, coming from a natural tendency, which is why this line of thought is so heretical and necessary. Like any creative practice, it is easy to make writing a ponderous sort of artistic practice. And it should involve a bit of pondering and playful exploration, but it cannot stay there. The tension between process and product involves a shift in how we think about time. There is a well-known anecdote about Oscar Wilde confessing that he spent all morning taking out a comma, and all afternoon putting it back. This decadent view of the writing

process simply isn't where we are as a culture. It's like spending all day manicuring your nails. Arrant pedantry!

And it is vanity. Time is a luxury. Revising too much can be unethical—a waste. There are diapers to be changed. More than that: People are dying. You are dying. And you need to write as though your next piece could be your last.

For better *and* worse, we value getting things done. Doing stuff. Making stuff. With words, in our particular case. When we make written work, we fall in line with other productive professions: farmers, smiths, tailors, cobblers, artisans. Writing was analogous to building for the Romans. In this view, writing is construction, but thinking about writing is never arriving at what we might create. Our trade is sentences—complete ones generally. Perhaps we fear finishing drafts because we're afraid they will fail. We writers might nail Nike's maxim to our walls: *Just do it*.

This approach is not the soft handholding of Donald Murray. We should clean the sludgy snailtrail of slow, process-oriented writing that is reminiscent of the Mac Beach Ball of Doom, endlessly spinning. We owe it to the work of writing. We owe it to ourselves. In this view, we say write something next week. And the next! Write all the time. Don't waste another second. Love deadlines. Eliminate distractions. Get it done. Now, go. *Do*.

Further Reading

If you're interested in thinking more about process and getting writing done, you might begin by reading one of the articles that started it all, "Teaching Writing as Process Not as Product" by Donald Murray. Later reconsiderations of process are collected in the edited collection *Beyond Postprocess*, put together by Sidney Dobrin, J. A. Rice, and Michael Vastola. A few more popular and accessible articles on process include "Why Writers Are the Worst Procrastinators" by Megan McArdle and "The Trick to Being a Prolific Scholar" by Tanya Golash-Boza. Another popular article, "The Dilemmas of Maker Culture" by John Tierney, questions our obsession with getting things done, while *Getting Things Done* by David Allen has been a bestseller for a long time and influenced our productivity movement. Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* also explores our work habits along these thematic lines. And finally, perhaps the most in-depth study of our historical trajectory toward process and productivity is Hannah Sullivan's book, *The Work of Revision*.

Keywords

getting things done, post-process, process, recursivity, revision

Author Bio

Jimmy Butts teaches writing and the teaching of writing to impressive, young humans. He likes to get them doing wonderfully weird things with words. He immensely enjoys finishing a draft. You can find him on Twitter @jimmy_butts or at theyellowrobot.com.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Bad Ideas About Style, Usage, and Grammar

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3.1: Strunk and White Set the Standard

Author: Laura Lisabeth, St. John's University

The Elements of Style, by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, is well loved by many writers and teachers as the ultimate reference book on Standard English. Ask any writer or editor, and they are likely to have one of its four editions on their bookshelves or will remember it from some phase of their education. A recent survey of over a million college syllabi showed that *The Elements of Style* is the number one, most-assigned book in English-speaking countries and is also listed in the top ten assigned texts for almost every discipline. It is difficult to imagine that a book this popular with college professors and currently ranked first in sales on four different Amazon lists originated as a 43-page, self-published pamphlet a century ago.

Strunk first assigned *The Elements of Style* as a handbook of punctuation and usage in his advanced composition class at Cornell University in 1918. The popular writer E. B. White (who had been Strunk's student in 1920), along with the Macmillan Publishing Company, turned Strunk's pamphlet into a slightly longer version and published it in 1959. It included minor updates of Strunk's original portion and a new chapter on style, introducing White's signature essayistic voice into the book. Based largely on White's reputation as a prolific writer of short pieces for *Harper*'s and *The New Yorker*, *The Elements of Style* immediately became associated with a tradition of the best English language: grammatically correct, tasteful, clear, and organized prose.

But even in 1959, *The Elements of Style* was greeted with criticism by the field of college composition for being vague and misleading about the complex act of learning to compose academic writing. Its current appearance on so many course syllabi across the disciplines suggests a persistent dissatisfaction teachers have with the quality of student writing coupled with the misguided belief that one writing handbook can solve the problem. But more importantly, the kind of writing Strunk and White put forth as good writing is in fact a discourse that limits and excludes, not reflecting the valuable ways English is practiced in local and digital contexts and by a variety of writers from different language traditions. Insistence on the kind of English constructed by *The Elements of Style* is uninformed at best and, as I will show, unethical and racist at worst.

The genre to which *The Elements of Style* belongs—the writing handbook—is rooted in the mid-19thcentury handbook of conversation, a type of etiquette guide. Conversation handbooks became wildly popular when the prevailing cultural structure in pre-Civil War America was shifting power from an inherited social hierarchy to a larger self-made middle class. Guides to gentility were an aid to self-propelled social mobility and included elaborate rules for every kind of behavior imaginable, including a standard language usage that marked a speaker or writer as both apart from the socially inferior and fit for engaging with society's elite people.

When Strunk and White's style of English is prescribed as the dominant discourse taught in schools and used in other authorized places, it marginalizes the identities, knowledge, and being of many people who come from other literacy practices. Literacy is always attached to the deep ways of knowing embedded in language practices that are localized to different cultures. An individual's cultural or racial identity is often closely linked to specific language practices that are not recognized in school where anything outside of Standard English is framed as error. This connection points to the fact that all literacies, Standard Academic English included, are not neutral but are ideological—always structuring social power as measured against themselves. Believing the Strunk and White style to be the best way to write suggests that Standard Academic English is a neutral transcription system for a universal reality and, therefore, a universal good. But, in fact, as literacy researchers argue, the English language cannot be understood apart from the many contexts in which it is embedded: home, school, workplaces, and social groups. It is not something fixed and unchanging, as the age and minimally revised text of *The Elements of Style* might suggest. Sociolinguists point to the ways English is already operating as a flexible medium, repurposed by American users to include, for example, Black and Latinx variations and the language and punctuation of social media, all of which expand the expressiveness of English and make it relevant to more users. These culturally and linguistically inflected ways of using English help people negotiate the identities and knowledges inherent in all the contexts in which people use language. Access to such uses of language can help many emerging academic writers to develop more competence and to perform better in school as they capitalize on existing meaningful ways of expressing knowledge.

Paradoxically, despite the public's positive associations with prescriptive English as defined in *The Elements of Style*, the discourse has often been called into question by educational leaders who denounce its ineffectiveness in the teaching of writing as well as question the ethics of insisting on its use in a diverse and democratic society. As far back as 1932, the National Council of Teachers

of English (NCTE) published a survey of American cultivated English usage showing that the well-educated group of adults who responded rarely abided by the strict usage rules of writing handbooks. At the time, NCTE president Ruth Weeks predicted that the survey's findings revealing a democratization of language in the world outside school would prove that writing handbooks like *The Elements of Style* were useless and that American students were being unfairly judged by a classed and arbitrary set of standards for their writing. In 1974, the NCTE published a more monumental statement against the continued educational emphasis on Standard English usage. "Students' Right to Their Own Language" holds that teachers of writing must respect the languages students bring with them to school, claiming "[L]anguage scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity."

One way to begin dismantling Strunk and White's bad idea about writing is by understanding Standard Academic English as a historically formed, culturally specific language among many other languages. Reframe the notion of academic writing as a fixed, unchanging, and neutral discourse; think of it instead as a flexible toolkit of language practices that change with the user and the context. Many other literacies that could never conform to a Strunk and White standard continue to enrich ideas of what counts as good writing. With the unfolding of new media language practices, digital literacies are emerging to enable writers to compose discourse beyond anything Strunk and White could have imagined. These networked ways of writing, along with social-media inspired ways of thinking about punctuation, continue to explode definitions for what constitutes meaningful language and educated English.

Further Reading

For further reading on the ideologies of Standard English and the social situatedness of literacy, see Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words* (Cambridge University), Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University), and James Paul Gee's *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies In Discourses* (Routledge). Heath's ethnography of two working class towns—one white and one African American—critiques what she calls the *autonomous model of literacy*, often prevalent in schools, which treats Standard English as a neutral discourse, free of ideology. Gee argues that to understand literacy we must consider the social context in which that literacy takes place.

There are several good books and articles that interrogate specific values of Standard English. Richard Ohmann's "Use Definite Specific Concrete Language" (*College English*) and Ian Barnard's *Upsetting Composition Commonplaces* (Utah State University) discuss the ideology implied in the concept of *clarity*, arguing that this value in writing forecloses the complex language necessary for critical inquiry of social conditions. Richard Lanham's books *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (Paul Dry Books) and *Revising Prose* (Continuum) point to the clarity-brevity-sincerity approach to writing as limiting and problematic.

For further reading about the history of Standard English usage in education, see "Students Right To Their Own Language," NCTE's "Resolution On Language" (1974), and the NCTE publication *Current English Usage* by Sterling Andrus Leonard (1932), historical documents showing English educators' awareness of the contingent nature of English language usage conventions.

Keywords

grammar, literacies, Standard English, style, writing handbook

Author Bio

Laura Lisabeth is an adjunct associate professor at St. John's University. Her research is the cultural history of *The Elements of Style*. She enjoys exploring the intersections of college composition, publishing, and academic and public cultures that form the historical backdrop of each edition of this popular style guide. She is also interested in how new ways of thinking about academic writing might provide counternarratives to Strunk and White's style and a more socially just language culture.

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3.2: Good Writers Always Follow My Rules

Authors: Jennifer Ahern-Dodson, Duke University, @ jaherndodson, Monique Dufour, History, Virginia Tech,

What is good writing? And how does good writing get written? In the first question, writing is a noun—a product made of elements such as words, sentences, and paragraphs. In the second question, writing is a verb—a process by which we create these texts.

Wisdom about writing—as a product and as a process—is often expressed as hard and fast rules. Always begin an essay with a catchy hook. Never use the passive voice. Always make your writing flow. Always make a detailed outline before you start to write. Never edit as you draft.

People espouse unambiguous rules about writing for many good reasons. Writing is a notoriously challenging, complex, even mysterious skill; nevertheless, we are expected to learn it and to do it well throughout our lives. And there is often much at stake when we write. We create texts to persuade others about all manner of significant things: the best course of action, our qualifications for a job, the quality of our ideas, and even the content of our characters. Do we seem smart and capable? Are our claims true and fair? Will things turn out as we wish? With these questions at stake, why wouldn't we want to discover and use foolproof writing techniques? Adhering to clear-cut do's and don'ts could cut through the ambiguity and difficulty of writing, and of making judgments about the quality of texts. So let's identify the rules for good writing, state them unequivocally, and learn to write effectively for once and for all.

The trouble is: An unwavering rule-driven approach to writing often causes more difficulties than it solves. First, there is an important distinction between rules and techniques. Simply put, techniques are ways of doing things. For instance, one can approach the writing process as a sequence of steps that should follow a strict order: Have and refine an idea, conduct all the research, write a complete draft from the beginning to the end, revise the draft, edit it, and let it go. The writer completes each step in the process before moving on to the next. (Writing assignments in school are commonly structured this way.) This linear approach to the writing process is a useful technique that works under many circumstances. But it's not the only way to approach the writing process, and it doesn't work especially well for some tasks. Still, for many writers, it has calcified into a hard and fast rule. This good option becomes the only option.

But good options may not work under every circumstance. Thus, when writers treat options as rules, writing can actually become more frustrating because the writer insists on abiding by the rule, *whether it works or not.* For example, that linear model of the writing process can be very effective—it might work for a writer for virtually every email, report, and research project she writes, year after year. Until it doesn't. Perhaps she's writing a long, complex project such as a dissertation or a book. Suddenly, she will likely need to revise her prose and her ideas, continue her research, and incorporate feedback throughout the process. She might write the introduction last. She may need to write parts without knowing where everything is leading. In short, she may need to abandon the belief that writing must proceed through clearly delineated, linear steps. It's not that the linear model of the writing process never works. The problem arises when a writer treats it as a rule. And it's especially frustrating because writers think they are being good and doing the right thing by following the rules, only to find that those rules more often impede their progress than enable it.

As writing consultants for faculty instructors, we have witnessed many smart, capable teachers who were *undermined* rather than helped by their own staunch rules about the writing process. They believed unequivocally that they could only write when they had big blocks of uninterrupted time. Or that they should never share unpolished, messy works-in-progress. Or that they could only work on one project at a time. Of course, most faculty writers simply don't routinely enjoy big blocks of uninterrupted time. They likely need to write in smaller windows of time—30 minutes here, an hour there—between their administrative, mentoring, and teaching responsibilities (not to mention their lives). They could learn to create time machines, or they could change their rules about the writing process and learn techniques that allow them to write in the time they have. Similarly, writers who refuse to share unpolished or partial works-in-progress for feedback from trusted readers often end up wasting their precious writing time in the effort to advance a project alone. We have seen faculty members end up feeling like bad writers in the midst of personal failure, when in fact they are simply making the mistake of treating a technique as a rule.

Rule-driven writing instruction may intend to make writing easier, but it often undermines the very skills it is designed to foster. For instance, many undergraduate writers have been taught that they must create a detailed outline for a research paper before they begin writing. And they are often told that a first draft of a research paper must be presented in polished, error-free prose, and that

the draft must be complete, from beginning to end. In fact, we know many teachers who refuse outright to read messy or incomplete works-in-progress. So, students put extensive effort into planning just how the essay will proceed and what it will say before they write. And they spend time carefully polishing prose in a first draft. Of course, outlining can be a powerful conceptual and organizational tool. However, when writers believe that they must outline first, they often lock themselves into the ideas as expressed on the outline, rather than allowing their ideas to develop and change as they work. Writers who always create detailed outlines and who write very polished preliminary drafts also tend to resist revision, because they have already committed a great deal of upfront effort on their initial plans and prose. By treating the linear model of the writing process as a rule, teachers can create writers who don't want to and don't know how to revise as a powerful part of thinking and writing.

We propose another way. Think of good writing as the thoughtful use of an evolving repertoire, rather than adherence to a static list of commandments. In order to become a skillful writer, one discovers and experiments with a range of techniques. A writer draws upon this repertoire to meet the needs of the project, the ideas at hand, and the rhetorical situation. As one's repertoire grows, and as one becomes practiced in drawing upon it, one can grow more confident about overcoming difficulties, taking up challenges, and expressing one's ideas effectively. Ultimately, writers become skillful when they are willing to assess and reassess the quality of any idea about writing in terms of its effectiveness in their own experiences.

People will continue to present useful techniques as though they are divine laws. However, we suggest that writers mentally translate rules into suggestions and *what if* questions. Take, for example, the common advice to always begin an essay with a catchy hook. Catchy hooks such as apt, vivid anecdotes can be used to excellent effect, if they meet the needs of the text and the circumstances. A writer can try it out and see what happens. What effect does it have on the text? Does it meet the audience's and context's needs (i.e., the rhetorical situation)? Does it contribute to expressing what the writer is trying to say? How do real readers respond? In this way, writers can experiment with techniques, deliberate about their implications, and make judgments about the best course of action among their options. And, most importantly, writers focus their goals and purposes, rather than on the rote adherence to rules, which is more meaningful, and more fun.

To be clear: We are not suggesting that there are no rules and that rules don't matter. Without adherence to conventions of grammar and usage, for instance, many readers may misunderstand a writer's point or not take them seriously. However, writers are ultimately undermined by a thoroughgoing rule-bound mentality. First, if writing is simply a matter of following rules and plugging in formulas, it's boring to most people. Second, in writing, problems are normal. When we think of writing as an opportunity to use and develop our repertoires to make and express meaning, writers can define the problems and needs before them and draw on their resources to solve them with creativity and aplomb. Perhaps we don't have as much uninterrupted time to write as we once did. We cannot create more time where there is none, but we can learn to write in the time we have. Perhaps our longer, more complex ideas cannot be crammed into a five-paragraph theme. We can learn new ways of organizing an essay to express an ambiguous claim. We don't need to stop writing when the rules don't work. And, we don't need to read and judge one another's writing only in terms of our own strictures. When we acknowledge that many of our rules are in fact techniques, and when we understand that writing is the skillful use of evolving repertoires, we can focus on expressing ideas worth sharing and become the kind of readers and writers who are in a position to listen.

Further Reading

For more about the process of writing, identifying potential pitfalls, and expanding one's repertoire of strategies, see Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power (*Oxford University Press*)*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones (*Shambhala), Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (Anchor*)*, and Paul Silva's *How to Write a Lot* (American Psychological Association). For more on developing revision strategies as a writer, consider Joe Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Utah State University Press), Roy Peter Clark's *Writing Tools* (Little, Brown and Company), and Verlyn Klinkenborg's *Several Short Sentences about Writing* (Vintage).

For more about how writing scholars are thinking about the relationship between beliefs about writing and college writing assignments, take a look at Dan Melzer's *Assignments across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing* (Utah State University Press) and Nancy Sommers's "Across the Drafts" (*College Composition and Communication* journal).

Keywords

good/effective writing, prescriptive writing, style, writer's block, writing process

Author Bios

Jennifer Ahern-Dodson teaches writing at Duke University and consults with faculty across the disciplines on ways to employ and assess writing in their own courses. She studies the relationship between writing and teaching and has been working with student, community, and faculty writers for more than 20 years. She is @ jaherndodson on Twitter.

Monique Dufour is an assistant collegiate professor in the history department at Virginia Tech, where she teaches the history of medicine, the history of books and reading, and writing. She also directs the Medicine and Society minor. Before completing her PhD in science and technology studies, she was a faculty development consultant at Virginia Tech's Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. As a writer and cultural historian, she investigates scenes of encounter among medicine, science, and the humanities from the 20th century to the present. Her book manuscript, *The Embodied Reader*, is a history of bibliotherapy, the use and study of reading as a form of medical treatment and a path to health.

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3.3: Writers Must Develop a Strong, Original Voice

Author: Patrick Thomas, English, University of Dayton

One of the most common pieces of advice to writers (old and new) is that they must spend time cultivating their voice. Far less common are pieces of advice for actually doing this work. Should writers spend months in search of an original topic, researching, and developing brilliant new subjects to write about? Such work seems particularly difficult in an era of excessive information. Or should writers journey on their own, Elizabeth Gilbert-style, eating, praying, and loving their way around the globe? This kind of journey, while glamorous, seems as extreme as it would be expensive.

Part of the reason advice about developing one's authorial voice is scant is because the concept of *voice* usually implies some intrinsic characteristic of the author herself. With such a fuzzy definition, instructive advice about developing one's voice instead gets conflated with two other aspects of good writing: point of view, or the writer's perspective on a topic; and figurative language, the use of descriptive devices.

Why, then, does the idea of the author's voice have such staying power in discussions of good writing? For one thing, voice is a concept that reflects the long-held belief that writing developed from spoken language and that, over time, writing became a substitute for speech. However, recent research from fields of archaeology and art history suggests that this is not the case: Writing developed not from speech but out of a need to represent numbers in the increasingly complex, economic transactions in early cultures (see, for instance, Denise Schmandt-Besserat's work on the history of writing).

Origins aside, writing and speech are two ways of using language, so many people think it is possible to ascribe similar characteristics to each and, in turn, to conceptualize writing in terms of speech. Further, since writing and speech are conceptualized in terms of rhetorical practices—that is, the uses of language as a means of creating knowledge and effectively communicating that knowledge—applying verbal qualities of speech to writing provides a kind of shorthand for thinking and talking about writing. That shorthand also prevents us from thinking and talking about writing as its own form of communication. And the author's voice represents one important limitation of thinking about writing in terms of speech.

No writing happens in a vacuum. Writing, as a communicative activity, is made for an audience of readers. In practice, how readers interpret writing has far less to do with passive decoding or reception of a message developed by someone else. Reading is itself a constructive act—quite literally, reading is meaning *making*. From the perspective of the reader, then, being a part of an audience has power. Much of that power lies in the ways readers infer an author's voice into a text.

Suppose, for example, that you receive a love letter. You would likely interpret this letter differently depending on what you know about its author. If the love letter comes from your spouse, significant other, or paramour, you might cobble together memories of the author's familiar expressions, knowledge of the author's manners of language use, and even particular moments in the history of your relationship that imbue your reading of the letter with what you think the author's motives are. On the other hand, if your love letter is written by a secret admirer, you might find the whole notion of this letter awkward, flattering, intriguing, or intrusive. With this unknown author, you have less to go on to determine what the letter means, and with the knowledge you're lacking, the author's voice is distant, even inappropriate.

Regardless of your letter's author, it is important to remember that all of the conjecture about the author that goes on happens in the mind of the *reader*. It has little to do with the author or her voice at all. Using the author's words, the reader weaves together an interpretation based on the reader's own previous experience with those words, with similar genres or situations, or her own priorities for the text.

Where, then, is the author's voice?

From the perspective of an author, an audience is always an approximation, or, as Walter Ong called it, a fiction. When an author writes, she anticipates when, how, and why an audience might use her text, but this is always a best guess, something in between what the author imagines and what actually happens when real people read her writing. In the same way, when a reader encounters a piece of writing, the author's voice is always a fabrication—a fiction—in the mind of the reader.

This is hardly a groundbreaking observation; after all, fifty years ago Roland Barthes declared that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." Barthes's "The Death of the Author" holds particular importance for revising contemporary myths about the author's voice; specifically, it brings into stronger relief the fact that any rendering of the author's voice rests

solely in the ways a reader encounters a text, and what the reader pays attention to while reading. In other words, any voice of a text is contingent upon the particular ways a reader might apply emphasis to certain ideas, prioritize certain linguistic devices, and make inferences about an author's motives, intents, or aims—all at the expense of other ideas, devices, or aims.

Recognizing that an author's voice is a characteristic created by the reader, the concept and efforts to develop it occupy a less prominent role in the development of writing ability than writing teachers commonly give it credit for. On the other hand, letting go of the myth of the author's voice allows for a number of possibilities that help writers develop their work.

First, letting go of this myth de-mystifies the practice of writing. Prioritizing voice stifles necessary kinds of invention practices needed to produce writing in the first place, because the priority of authenticity or unique ability over content makes writers edit themselves before they've even started writing. Recognizing, too, that writing is audience-driven helps to make the work of writing more manageable.

Second, de-bunking the myth of the author's voice helps to remove the stale notion that writing is some kind of divined gift, talent, or genetic trait that some people have and others do not. Removing this obstacle to writing helps people see writing as not only important to their lives, but also an ability that is learnable, teachable, and can grow with practice.

Third, laying bare the myth of the author's voice draws attention to aspects of good writing that reflect what readers want and need. Specifically we come to recognize that aspects of writing we claim to value—like originality, authenticity, or sheer cleverness—are perhaps less important than more practical issues like the ability to make and support a claim, the ability to select and ethically represent evidence and experience, or the ability to write in a way that readers might recognize as important.

Fourth, removing the myth of the author's voice helps to provide a larger, more cumulative picture of how writing functions in the world. Scholars call this *intertextuality*—the ways writing emerges from, builds on, responds to, acts upon, and provides for other writing. Removing writing from the constraints of a single author's voice helps to trace how writing circulates and brings about the production of more writing and to show how writing is employed in all facets of life.

Finally, relieving ourselves of the myth of the author's voice empowers readers to consider the ways their own abilities to make meaning have an impact on the subjects they care about. It also provides a way to explain how multiple, even competing interpretations of a text can be developed through careful, critical reading practices. This is, in the end, what authors really want from readers: to engage in dialogue about the knowledge they make through the practices of writing and reading.

What's lost by letting go of the myth of the author's voice? Not much—except, perhaps, a clumsy metaphor that gets in the way of more accurate descriptions of a reader's response. Conversely, letting go of the author's voice turns writers' and writing teachers' attention toward more important aspects of learning to write. It allows writers to move beyond what Linda Flower calls *writer-based prose*—in which the primary concern is the author's own ideas and expression of those ideas—to *reader-based prose*, in which the audience's needs take priority. It re-focuses the analysis of production of writing toward what authors can help readers to think about, understand, feel, and believe. In short, letting go of the author's voice makes room to envision the nature and function of writing more accurately—not as a series of individual disruptions, but as a continual integration of knowledge and a way of making sense of the world.

Further Reading

For more about the history of writing, see Denise Schmandt-Besserat's website. For voice and authorship from the perspective of the "original" author, read Roland Barthes's germinal essay "The Death of the Author." Basic theories of audience are explained in Walter Ong's "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction." For a pedagogical discussion, see Linda Flower's "Revising Writer-based Prose" (*Journal of Basic Writing*). For practical advice, see Joseph Moxley's "Consider Your Audience," and Amanda Wray's "What to Think About When Writing for a Particular Audience." The latter two sources are particularly good for students to read.

Keywords

audience, authenticity, intertextuality, origins of writing, reading as meaning-making, speech, voice

Author Bio

Patrick Thomas is an associate professor of English at the University of Dayton, in Dayton, Ohio, where he teaches courses in composition theory, literacy studies, and professional writing. His is interested in how people write outside of school, new theories

of what writing is, and digital culture. His Twitter handle is @ patrickwthomas.

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3.4: Leave Yourself Out of Your Writing

Author: Joseph Rodríguez, English, The University of Texas at El Paso

"You're also two people, writer and reader. This is a tremendous asset."—Verlyn Klinkenborg

Leave yourself out of your writing is a belief that must die. This myth both hinders and undermines deeper learning and thinking in the lives of writers, readers, thinkers, and students. It can be interpreted in various ways that range from removing the personal point of view in a document to altogether distancing oneself from the subject and interest that was once held for a topic or concept worthy of writing for an audience. With one's self removed, the writer is partly absent from the page and conversation. Common lore based around assignments and research papers creates this stance of effacing the writer and essentially one's being. The opposite is true for writing: The writer needs to be present and breathing on the print or digital page. To make meaning through language, the writer must be present to the audience and mindful of beliefs to produce coherent, meaningful, and engaging writing for the reader. Writing in 1914, Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset asserted, "I am I and my circumstance; and, if I do not save it, I do not save myself."

The act of writing is influenced by the writing beliefs learned, adopted, and now followed as a habit in practice to record, or save, our selfhood. In fact, the influence upon our form of expression may have been a teacher, another writer, and even a rule maker. Some of these writing beliefs can become pitfalls, or bad ideas, if reflection is missing from our practice. If there is a connection early on in the writing between the subject and writer, then the arguments, observations, and truths presented to the reader can

hold more attention for the audience. By being told to leave yourself out of your writing, the writer is not building a publicly recognized voice with confidence and a level of expertise that builds trust with an audience. The false conception that the writer must be removed or, even worse, nearly dead to one's audience is anathema. Sometimes, this bad idea is promoted under the assumption that to maintain objectivity the writer must be absent and avoid using the pronoun *I*. Thus, the first-person point of view is missing. Nonetheless, those who write need to have a presence, and, as Toni Morrison wrote, an I/eye for credibility and connection between writer and reader. The audience is counting on the writer to deliver by being committed and present in the writing.

Why must you leave yourself out of your writing? Why and how? Writers adapt to writing conditions and circumstances, and their adaptation has responsibilities and consequences, too. One of the adaptations includes writing the self in communications instead of gradual disembodiment or complete separation. By being present in one's writing as one writes, the writer is creating conditions for the reader to better understand a topic as well as the concepts that drive learning and understanding. The writer achieves this by: (1) writing sentences that establish who the writer is through the pronoun I, (2) revealing the purpose and interest for writing about the topic, (3) stating the argument that holds the content together in the first place, and (4) providing evidence and concepts for the argumentative position or exploratory topic. Klinkenborg describes the reader and writer, who are in a kind of union, as a "tremendous asset" that comes to fruition through language and form. The self is significant in the act of writing to make meaning, present an argument, and come into existence on the page. To repress or remove the self from one's writing is counterproductive for the writer's purpose.

Sandra Cisneros explains, "As a writer, I continue to analyze and reflect on the power words have over me." Cisneros's statement may resonate with emerging writers in classrooms, outside of classrooms, and spaces of their own making to write and create with language. Writers affirm their lives and empower the lives of others who connect with their words and concepts. The first-person point of view is an essential marker in the making of meaning for both the writer and reader and need not be abandoned nor silenced. Even if the self is briefly mentioned and noted in one's written deliberations, its use will suffice in making oneself known and present in the discussion of ideas, concepts, and perspectives.

Some writers across the disciplines, which include the arts, education, engineering, mathematics, technology, and sciences, attempt in various cloaked forms to remove their sense of self as they write under the assumption that writing must be as universal as possible. Unfortunately, this means less personality and presence. This is done in detrimental forms if the writer fails to acknowledge purpose, actions, and influences to an audience. Furthermore, writers and thinkers are connected to their subjects and arguments, which they deem worthy of explanation or description. As such, writers learn about themselves through their writing and the interconnectedness to thought and argument. In fact, writers give authority and credibility to experience through their expertise and in structure and argument. The reader entrusts the writer's self not only by the levels of expertise for having done the

labor and research, but also by the valuable experiences drawn from analysis. In short, it is a false idea to eliminate one's first-person point of view in writing, rather than supporting the writer's personal and communicative voice on the print and digital page.

One learns about oneself as one writes and by asserting the self. Indeed, words and literacies carve the identities of writers who are influenced by the societies they inhabit and the subjects they study. In essence, words empower and define us as Cisneros observes.

Admittedly, writing is an act of free will that calls for the writer to be present with voice while deliberating through language with ideas, concepts, and perspectives for understanding. The new rule to adopt is as follows: *Speak up and be present and known in your writing!* This can be implemented by valuing your own self-aswriter and by answering the following calls for the writer to be present and alive: (1) As a writer, how will I help the readers know what they will be learning through my writing purpose and human presence? (2) In which ways can I hook and engage the readers? (3) Which experiences and skills do I possess that can deepen understanding through my writing? (4) How can I encourage readers to rethink or reimagine what they may already know through reflection and action? (5) What order of my ideas and concepts will be most optimal for reader understanding? In sum, reliance upon oneself and one's writing are essential in developing a writing life and an audience. Make your writing and thinking audible on the print and digital page for two: the writer and reader.

Author Bios Rodrigo

Joseph Rodríguez teaches in the department of English at The University of Texas at El Paso, which is located in the borderlands across from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, México. He believes all writing comes to life when the reader and writer enter and maintain a dialogue on the print and digital page. Catch him virtually @escribescribe. Kimberly N. Parker teaches high school and college preparatory courses in the Cambridge Public Schools (Massachusetts). 138 Bad Ideas Her research interests include English language arts with culturally responsive pedagogy and the teaching and study of African American literature. She is an adjunct instructor at Tufts University and president of the New England Association of Teachers of English. Catch her virtually @drkimpossible.

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3.5: Response- Never Use “I”

Authors: Rodrigo Joseph Rodríguez, English, The University of Texas at El Paso, @escribescribe. Kimberly N. Parker, Cambridge Public Schools (Massachusetts).

The writer is present everywhere on the page. Ultimately, the writer cannot run and hide when thoughts are penned or typed for an intended audience. For instance, when my high-school sophomore student–writers read over the options for their first writing assignment—one that I attempt to make inviting and acts to give me insight into their current abilities—they know a few writing truths already.

The first truth they reveal is that all writing must be confined to five paragraphs. Soon, the second truth is revealed. Frankly, it seems paramount and antithetical as they share it in their words: Writers can never write using the first person. EVER! To use *I* conjures up all types of angst that—compounded with a nearly universal dislike of analytical writing—makes for a difficult beginning between writers and their writing coach. Thus, in my fourteen years with young people in secondary English language arts classrooms and in my writer identity and role, what I value is the importance of helping young people understand who they are as writers and guiding them to use writing as a creative source for liberation. For these endeavors, it is imperative that they bring all of themselves into their writing. This applies to all writers in the practice of our craft.

It’s worth considering how writers first get chastised and come to believe they must leave themselves out of their writing in the first place. When they are just beginning to experiment with language, most of the writing they are asked to produce draws from personal experience: They write about their friends, families, and pets. Personal narrative abounds and overflows within their lines of writing on the page or on the monitor screen of their computer or device. Their writing revolves around who they are and what matters and happens to them.

Poet Claudia Rankine reminds us: “The world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you.” In ideal situations and in classrooms where standardized testing does not oppress creativity, students are their writing and voice. When I ask my student writers when they stopped writing in the first person, they usually

pinpoint to the beginning of middle school. Many also often mark this transition as the stage when they ceased to care about writing with a sense of freedom. Middle school required them to stop writing about their personal experiences (save the annual poetry unit) and instead write responses to literature. Since many of my students are readers and writers in need of revival, they also note this period of their lives when they began to dislike reading. Full-on disengagement is the norm once we meet during their sophomore year. Unfortunately, who they are as writers with ideas about what they want to write about and what matters to them most now becomes a distant, shelved memory. Writing can become a disembodied task they are required to complete, devoid of any joy, connection, or feeling. Admittedly, as writers they are convinced they have nothing to say.

Thus, we spend our semesters together in the attempt to help writers rewrite their understanding of how to be present and alive in their writing. Literacy experts Jeff Anderson and Deborah Dean advise that writers “need options for how to say what they want to say.” We read many models, pulled from all writing genres, where I query, often (incessantly, they would probably say): (1) What do we know about this writer? (2) What is he/she doing that we would like to try? (3) How can this inform or guide our own writing? Before we can dig into these questions, though, a student inevitably raises their hand and asks: What? We can use *I*? I thought we couldn’t do that! There are accompanying head nods from classmates that lead to the ideal invitation to discuss why the self matters in everything we write, and why writers bring themselves to the page and screen in their writing. Otherwise, why write at all? I ask. Furthermore, why read something that disconnects the writer with hardly any care or concern? Again, young writers can be skeptical of this pushback, since they’ve perfected being disconnected from their own writing and human voice. Why engage on a meaningful level now?

As writer, teacher, and coach, I invite them to reconsider their interests in our classroom by conducting a questionnaire survey, participating in writing conferences, and engaging in workshops to learn more about what matters to them. I craft assignments that draw on their interests and require their presence. When I read their writings, I want to know where they are most present in their writing and where they can add more presence in their writing. At this point, I am a motivator and cheerleader for writing one’s self, building on Stephen King’s belief that “it’s all on the table, and you should use anything that improves the quality of your writing and doesn’t get in the way of your story.”

I am trying, they respond. Show me how to do it, they challenge. I wake up my sleeping computer and project a document on the board to write before them. I talk and think aloud, arguing sometimes with myself, but always writing, rewriting. They hear my voice emerging as I write, think. All of my deliberations, all of my writing surfaces, merges, and projects. They witness the writing process as messy and imperfect, yet with wondrous possibilities. Conversely, I make leaps as a writer. I am writing my own truths before them without self-censorship; I am present as I write. This is the moment they hook themselves onto some part of what they're writing: why one cares about a topic with concepts to explore toward writing one's way, which includes meaning and understanding.

In a state of triumph, I read their work and hear them all over again through their deliberate thoughts that are theirs alone, yet interconnected to the worlds they enter and exit so freely and fiercely to write and name themselves through the written word. They may read their draft aloud to me; I smile in affirmation. We marvel and discuss the power of writing when writers invite, bring, and accept themselves into their work.

Further Reading

For more guidance on understanding the writing process and supporting the voices of emerging writers and thinkers, see Lucy M. Calkins's book *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Heinemann), which features student writing with relevant concepts and readable contexts in the teaching of writing. The emphasis on building a community of writers with trust, writing episodes with observations, and growing toward meaning rings true today. Additionally, in *Teaching Literature in the Context of Literacy Instruction* (Heinemann), Jocelyn A. Chadwick and John E. Grassie provide a larger picture about literacy learning with literary works that are both classics and contemporary classics as well as student writers' own lives.

In *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life* (Knopf), Sandra Cisneros, a revered poet and storyteller, guides readers through her life as she gained a reading interest and writing voice. Her journeys, struggles, and triumphs are detailed in the selected essays with photographs, which offer ways of incorporating the first-person pronoun in one's own writings. In *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (University Press of Mississippi), Toni Morrison provides rich perspectives on authorship (I/eye), African America, culture, race, selflessness, and writing, especially as it relates to questions about bias, inclusion, language, and American life.

How does one write from the beginning or revive one's interest in writing? *Several Short Sentences about Writing* by Verlyn Klinkenborg is a start that launches the reader and writer forward. Even if the writer faced corrective and punitive measures or even rule-based agonies in the past, this book offers a fresh voice with energizing concepts to get the writer going again in the craft of writing. Klinkenborg's writing style is engaging and appears in stanza form with insightful ideas and concepts. The dreaded bad ideas about writing are erased deliberately by a writer who understands the struggle writers face and the need to keep writing.

In *Zing! Seven Creativity Practices for Educators and Students* (2010), Pat Mora collected writing advice in the form of letters written for teachers, librarians, and students to gain and maintain a creative identity. The activities Mora recommended nurture the creative self with writing in the first-person point of view. A complementary text to recommend is *Be a Better Writer* (2016) by Steve Peha and Margot Carmichael Lester. The book provides guidance on strengthening one's writing with an emphasis on the following issues: topics, ideas, organization, voice, words, sentences, punctuation, and literature. The text, suitable for both adolescent and adult audiences, contains readable prose, features recommended habits, and includes checklists for review along with activities for writing well.

Keywords

emerging writers, first-person point of view, writing assumptions, writing instruction, writing voice

Author Bios

Rodrigo Joseph Rodríguez teaches in the department of English at The University of Texas at El Paso, which is located in the borderlands across from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, México. He believes all writing comes to life when the reader and writer enter and maintain a dialogue on the print and digital page. Catch him virtually @escribescribe.

Kimberly N. Parker teaches high school and college preparatory courses in the Cambridge Public Schools (Massachusetts). Her research interests include English language arts with culturally responsive pedagogy and the teaching and study of African

American literature. She is an adjunct instructor at Tufts University and president of the New England Association of Teachers of English. Catch her virtually @drkimpossible.

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3.6: The Passive Voice Should be Avoided

Author: Collin Gifford Brooke, Syracuse University.

Many of the rules that we find in writing handbooks are customs or personal preferences that, over time, pass from the realm of advice to proscription. Some are grounded in the differences between spoken and written language, whereas others represent the stylistic or aesthetic tastes of their inventors. While rules in general may vary with time, place, and genre, the directive that we should "use the active voice," in the words of Strunk and White, is so common (and so enthusiastically repeated) that it might as well be universal. This hostility to the passive voice, however, is misplaced. Active verbs are often our first, best choice when writing, but truly skilled writers know how to use passive verbs effectively, rather than ignoring them out of hand.

What is the passive voice? In linguistics, *active* and *passive* are technical terms used to describe verbs and their position within a sentence with respect to subjects and objects. This in turn is the *voice* of a verb, although this category tends to bleed over into broader claims about the sentences or passages where the verbs appear. Verbs in the passive voice simply reverse the subject-verbobject arrangement of the typical English sentence (e.g., where an object is verbed by a subject). Unlike in Latin, where it is a matter of different verb endings, the passive voice in English typically requires a helping verb, making the sentence longer in addition to altering its construction.

The technical details of the passive voice, however, do not really explain the hostility that many have for it. Some of the distaste for passive verb structures comes from the cultural associations that the terms *active* and *passive* carry. In Strunk and White, for example, active verbs are characterized variously as direct, vigorous, bold, concise, forcible, lively, and emphatic. While some of these characterizations are correct, considering that an indirect sentence structure is often longer, they also carry implicit judgments that make the passive voice seem less desirable. And passive has become a generalized term used to label writing perceived as weak; as linguist Geoffrey K. Pullum observes, "people are simply tossing the term 'passive' around when they want to cast aspersions on pieces of writing that, for some ineffable reason, they don't care for." As one of the writers for the popular linguistics site *Language Log*, Pullum has gathered dozens of examples of such denunciations, most of which misidentify the passive voice in the process of condemning it.

If there is one quality of the passive voice that seems to deserve that condemnation, however, it is the way that it can be used to obscure responsibility or accountability. The classic example of this is the difference between "I made a mistake" and "Mistakes were made." Both sentences are grammatically correct, but the latter conceals the agent of the mistake. The passive voice, we might say, allows speakers or writers to hide behind language, by directing attention away from their involvement or responsibility in a situation. For example, on October 21, 2015, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by Ellen Bresler Rockmore titled "How Texas Teaches History." Rockmore's editorial is primarily concerned with the ways that the horrors of slavery are downplayed in history textbooks approved by the Texas Board of Education. One of the methods employed to do so, according to Rockmore, is the textbooks' frequent reliance on passive voice. "Through grammatical manipulation," she writes, "the textbook authors obscure the role of slave owners in the institution of slavery."

Rockmore is not alone in supposing that "grammatical choices can be moral choices." Both *Slate* ("Why Scientists Need to Give Up on the Passive Voice") and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* ("An Interactive Guide to Ambiguous Grammar") published high-profile (and much-shared) recommendations against the passive voice in 2015. Jacob Brogan, author of the *Slate* article, argues that passive voice is less a matter of morality than effectiveness: "The passive voice makes storytelling more difficult because it hides the characters deep in the sentence—if it shows them at all." Although less dramatic than Rockmore's diagnosis, Brogan's complaint is otherwise similar. Whether conceived as historical agents or characters in a story, the passive voice minimizes or obscures their participation in the activity described by the sentence.

Pullum is skeptical of such claims, however, noting that "the belief that the passive necessarily embodies such qualities [e.g., vagueness, avoidance] is transparently false." He explains that there are "plenty of other ways" to obscure agency or responsibility. To say that "mistakes happened" is no less evasive than "mistakes were made," but only the latter employs a passive verb. And in circumstances where responsibility is distributed throughout a complex web of agents, concrete subjects and active verbs might themselves be ultimately misleading. To return to our earlier example, Rockmore identifies the Texas Board of Education and the textbook authors (employed by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) as chiefly responsible for the distorting language of the history textbook. Both parties certainly share some of the culpability, but "How Texas Teaches History" doesn't adequately capture the

degree to which federal education policy, under both Republican and Democrat administrations, has fostered this outcome. It may be expedient to single out Texas, but textbook content across the nation is determined by a combination of politically appointed state officials and profit-driven corporate education vendors, both responding to broader circumstances. Rockmore herself seems to sense this, as she resorts to the passive voice in her final paragraph, noting that "The textbook publishers were put in a difficult position."

My point here is not to call Rockmore out; rather, I want to suggest the moral implications of our grammatical choices are not intrinsic to the grammar itself. Writing that emphasizes the concrete actions of specific agents can blind us to broader, systemic issues, just as easily as indirect prose obscures those agents' roles. Rather than assuming that the passive voice is somehow immoral, weak, or dishonest, we should instead ask what it is that passive verbs allow us to accomplish.

As we observed above, passive verbs alter the subject-object sequence in a written sentence; this is perhaps their most immediate impact on prose. Reaching back to Strunk and White and beyond, critiques of the passive voice frequently provide several examples of this effect, presenting sentences side-by-side to demonstrate how preferable active verbs are. When we consider a single sentence, more often than not, the most direct version will appear to be the better option. Outside of Twitter, though, we do not write in single sentences. Our prose is much more likely to happen in paragraphs and pages, and the passive voice plays an important role here as well.

Joseph M. Williams argues in *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* that readable prose is more than simply finding the best sentence in each case. Installed in paragraphs, sentences relate to and depend upon each other; what may seem to be the better alternative when viewed in isolation may ruin a paragraph's cohesion, the degree to which the sentences flow and hold together. Cohesion is achieved, explains Williams, when sentences maintain a balance between *given* and *new* information, beginning with the former and ending with the latter. Beginning a sentence with information that is already established in readers' minds allows them to perceive connections and to add new information atop that foundation. Sentences that don't follow the given-new structure will seem choppy and disconnected, requiring additional work on the part of readers to forge the connections among them.

For Williams, cohesion among sentences takes priority over any injunction against the passive voice. He counsels writers to focus instead on context, and to choose the voice best suited for it. Williams provides a number of examples, including the following: "Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring the nature of black holes. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble." The appearance of the phrase "black hole" at the end of the first sentence as well as the beginning of the second provides cohesion. Revising the second sentence to feature an active verb ("The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.") makes little sense in that context. Given how much distance such a revision would introduce between the subject and verb of the sentence, it is doubtful that the active voice improves the sentence, even in isolation.

We can return one final time to Rockmore's essay, and examine the first sentence of her final paragraph ("The textbook publishers were put in a difficult position.") in context. Two of the three preceding paragraphs make specific reference to "the textbook authors" and "the authors" respectively. The new information layered into the sentence actually circles back to the politics discussed earlier in the essay. This small sentence manages both to provide cohesion in the immediate context of the final paragraphs and to supply overall coherence by connecting two of the primary agents that the op-ed considers (the Board of Education and the textbook publishers).

The passive voice can certainly be abused, but in the hands of a skilled writer (like Rockmore), it is an invaluable strategy. There is nothing intrinsically weak, evasive, or bureaucratic about the passive voice, nor anything about it that makes a sentence necessarily inferior. The passive voice is appropriate in some contexts and less so in others, but this is a matter for a writer's judgment rather than a rule to be (dis)obeyed. We should be teaching writers the skilled application of the passive voice, rather than teaching them to avoid it altogether. Understanding sentences in context rather than isolation would allow writers to take up questions of cohesion and coherence.

Further Reading

For more on how passive voice is treated in style guides and handbooks, see Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* (any edition) and Joseph Williams's *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (also any edition). For the way passive voice is used to promote doublespeak in political and scientific rhetoric, see George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" in *Shooting an Elephant*

and Other Essays; Vijith Assar's "An Interactive Guide to Ambiguous Grammar" in the September 3, 2015, edition of *McSweeney's*; Jacob Brogan's "Why Scientists Need to Give Up on the Passive Voice" in the April 1, 2015, issue of *Slate*; and Ellen Bresler Rockmore's *New York Times* story on "How Texas Teaches History" (Oct., 21, 2015). For peer-reviewed research on the trouble with passive voice, see Geoffrey Pullum's "Fear and Loathing of the English Passive" in *Language and Communication* (July 2014).

Keywords

active voice, cohesion, grammar, mechanics, passive voice, sentences

Author Bio

Collin Gifford Brooke is an associate professor in the writing program at Syracuse University. He studies the impact of contemporary technology on writing and language. He has taught college level writing for nearly 25 years.

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3.7: Teaching Grammar Improves Writing

Author: Patricia A. Dunn (@PatriciaDunn1), English, Stony Brook University New York

Teaching grammar improves students' knowledge of linguistics. But if students' writing is to improve, teachers need to teach *writing*.

Long before any of us were born, people were complaining about the writing and grammar of other people, usually younger or less powerful than the complainant. Ironically, "these kids today," who were once criticized for their allegedly bad writing, may now be shaking their own grey heads at the writing of others or laughing about all this drama in a more tolerant afterlife.

What usually follows fast upon a complaint about other people's writing is a wistful longing for the days when traditional grammar exercises were ubiquitous in the schools, as if they're not today. In fact, those who complain that grammar is no longer taught in schools should do a quick Google search of "grammar worksheets" and then sit back to scroll through page after page of links. This postlapsarian longing for allegedly defunct traditional grammar instruction springs from a mistaken assumption that all those grammar drills turned those who did them into flawless writers. Those drills didn't work then; they don't work now.

One way to improve writing is to stop looking for a better way to teach grammar. To improve writing, find a better way to teach writing.

The Research No One Believes

For years, composition/rhetoric professionals (people who conduct research on writing, often have doctorates specializing in the teaching of writing, and teach in or direct college writing programs) have been encouraging new writing instructors to focus on the teaching of writing, not the teaching of grammar, and certainly not isolated grammar exercises disconnected from the students' own writing. There are good reasons for this advice.

Decades of research have shown that isolated grammar exercises are among the worst uses of time in a writing class, given that such practices can result in students' writing actually getting worse. Education researchers did a meta-analysis (a compilation, summary, and recommendation) of many research projects on writing over the years. In their 2007 report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Steve Graham and Dolores Perin found that isolated (traditional) grammar teaching was the only instructional practice to actually have a negative—that's right, negative—impact on students' writing. In the 1980s, George Hillocks, Jr. conducted a comprehensive synthesis of writing research that went back to studies done in the early 1960s. Hillocks's academic article, "Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing," and his book, *Research on Written Composition*, could not have been clearer about the harmful effects of traditional grammar.

However, a technique called sentence combining (where students take a series of short sentences and combine them into longer ones, using a mix of clauses, phrases, and linking punctuation) did fairly well in multiple studies of student writing. In other words, students who did sentence combining (crafting short sentences into longer ones, actively manipulating sections of sentences, rearranging clauses and phrases, adding or deleting modifying words, and punctuating the longer sentence so that it was smooth) saw their own writing improve after this work. But grammar exercises—quizzes on parts of speech, the naming of types of phrases, clauses, and sentences? After those, students' writing got worse.

But no one believes this research—other than those who conduct or study writing as a career. So convinced is the general public that young writers are in desperate need of old-fashioned, rigorous grammar, that writing teachers from grade school through grad school continue to be pressured to teach grammar as a way to improve writing. Even some teachers continue to think that if only grammar could be drilled into students in a fun, engaging way, students would write correctly ever after. It doesn't happen.

Time to Throw in the Towel?

The reasons so many people believe in the almost religious benefits of what they call *grammar* are complex and deep, with disturbing—perhaps unconscious—connections to class, disability, race, national origin, and gender. As a recent rhetorical analysis of grammar rants has demonstrated, many such rants are laced with moral judgments about the departure from allegedly proper grammar. In a disturbing, repeating trend, the offending speaker or writer is seen as uneducated and lazy, the latter judgment being connected not so subtly to one of the Seven Deadly Sins (Sloth).

So maybe it's time to give up—to let people go ahead with their beloved acontextual grammar worksheets, to use them to their hearts' content (they do, anyway, as the massive number of search results prove). But those promoting these grammar drills should also be shown how to observe what happens in their classes when they inflict such lessons on their students, as well as how to document the before-and-after writings of these students. Perhaps their first-hand experience will convince them when other people's research could not.

Those teachers should be encouraged to actually analyze students' writing projects before and after the isolated grammar treatment. Designing such a study takes some hefty background in research methods. What concrete, measurable features have researchers agreed would constitute improvement in writing (no easy task to agree on, actually), and what measureable differences are there in the before-and-after samples? Objectively measured, did the student's writing get better, stay the same, or deteriorate?

And to keep everyone honest and the results as objective as possible, someone *else* should do the analysis—not the teacher of the grammar lessons—in order to avoid confirmation bias, which is when researchers really, really want to see, for example, improvement in writing, so they do see it, even if the writing didn't actually improve. Students, too, can praise their grammar lessons, thinking they are now good writers, when the objective evidence that they've improved is, in fact, not evident.

Better Ways to Teach Writing

Setting aside for a moment the conclusions of future studies, which will no doubt also be ignored, what can teachers do right now to help students improve their writing? They can teach writing in context. They can teach students to write in real-world situations, helping them notice how different writing projects can have very different constraints. No one is arguing here against grammar or against intense, sophisticated language study. In fact, people who know the most about grammar are aware that many so-called rules are not rules at all but merely conventions, which are not universal and can change over time and from genre to genre. The best teachers help their students keep pace with these changes and help them decide when and whether to use a reference from a 1950 or 2016 grammar handbook, or to look online for the most up-to-date guidelines. (The most informed text on language conventions and change is *Garner's Modern American Usage*, which obtains its evidence from a wide range of current usage.)

It goes without saying that everyone appreciates clear, well-edited writing. But teaching grammar won't help because clarity is slippery. What's clear to one reader might be unclear to the next, depending on his or her respective background knowledge. For example, sewing directions would be clear to a tailor, but not to someone who has never picked up a needle and thread. An article in a physics journal would be clear to a physicist, but not to a pharmacist.

Even what is considered so-called *correct* writing can vary depending on the conventions expected in a particular genre or publication. (Google "Oxford comma" if you want to see sparks fly over conflicting views of punctuation.) As Elizabeth Wardle points out in this volume, "There is no such thing as writing in general." Every writing project is constrained by previous iterations of that type of writing. Is it a memo, résumé, game manual, business plan, film review? Its context and publication also shapes its readers' expectations. A letter to the editor of *The New York Times* has some features in common with a letter to the editor of *Newsday* (a local Long Island paper), but even this same genre looks different in these two publications. Everything from punctuation to evidence presented in the respective letters is noticeably different, including sentence structure and length, vocabulary level, and rhetorical appeals aimed at different readerships.

Someone wishing to teach students something about grammar, including syntax, parallel structure, agreement, clauses, verb tense, and so on, could, of course, use these letters or other realworld writing to do so. But what's more important is that students learn to discover for themselves the subtle or substantial differences in the writing, depending on what it's supposed to do in that place and time. It's the educator's responsibility to help students see those differences and to understand how important this skill is. No one knows what students will be asked to write five years from now, what not-yet-invented writing projects they'll face. They need these analytical skills to tackle writing needs in their future professions.

What does it mean to teach students to notice how writing shifts and changes? This analysis can start with examining supposed truisms. For example, young writers are often given the generic advice to vary their sentence structure, a good plan for some college application essays and news stories. But many how-to pieces, including recipes—in the convention of that genre—are usually a list of short, imperative commands, often missing articles or even pronouns. Many teachers tell young writers to increase their use of sensory imagery. Describing in detail more sights, sounds, textures, and aromas might enhance restaurant reviews or travel narratives, but not business plans, meeting minutes, or memos.

If young people are to be knowledgeable, ever-learning, active citizens in a participatory democracy, they must develop a wide-ranging, flexible literacy. Writing instructors should help students become informed, alert, and engaged readers and writers of a variety of texts and contexts, so that they learn to notice, appreciate, and master (should they so desire) all kinds of writing. This nimbleness requires opportunities to be challenged by a variety of writing tasks, not time squandered by having students circle adverbs.

Further Reading

For more than 50 years, researchers have studied how teaching traditional grammar (parts of speech, names of phrases and clauses, types of sentences, etc.) has affected student writing. The results have been consistent: Writing does not improve and sometimes worsens after that instruction. To see a meta-analysis of which studies show these results, start with George Hillocks's 1986 book, *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. His 1987 article in *Educational Leadership*, "Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing," is a shortened version of his book, and there is a chart on p. 75 of that article that shows which approaches to teaching writing work better than others. To see a more recent summary of such studies, see Steve Graham and Dolores Perin's 2007 report to the Carnegie Corporation: *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools*. Comparatively, sentence combining does moderately well in many of these studies, which Robert Connors eloquently explained in his 2000 article, "The Erasure of the Sentence."

Most writing specialists today recommend that students engage in real-world, authentic writing. For a succinct explanation of what authentic writing involves, see Ken Lindblom's widely shared 2015 essay, "School Writing vs. Authentic Writing," on the *Writers Who Care* blog. A more involved explanation is Grant Wiggan's 2009 piece in *English Journal*, "Real-World Writing: Making Purpose and Audience Matter."

For an explanation of why some people get so upset when they see grammar errors (or perceived errors) in other people's writing, see Lindblom and Dunn's 2007 *English Journal* article, "Analyzing Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction." For a more thorough study of this issue, see their 2011 book, *Grammar Rants: How a Backstage Tour of Writing Complaints Can Help Students Make Informed, Savvy Choices About Their Writing*. For a well-researched, comprehensive, and humorous explanation of usage and language change, see *Garner's Modern American Usage*.

Keywords

authentic writing, English language, grammar, rhetoric, usage

Author Bio

Patricia A. Dunn (@PatriciaDunn1) is professor of English at Stony Brook University in New York, where she teaches current and future English teachers and writing instructors. She has taught writing in a high school, a two-year college, a private university, and several large state universities. She has presented on topics related to the teaching of writing at numerous national conferences, and she has published several books, articles, and blogs on the teaching of writing, including a 2011 book (co-written with Ken Lindblom), which is a rhetorical analysis of published grammar rants.

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3.8: Good Writers Must Know Grammatical Terminology

Author: Hannah J. Rule, English, University of South Carolina

As an English teacher, I have become used to dodging eye contact at parties when a grammar question inevitably comes up, as heads crane around to request my discourse on which form of *whom* or *who* can be deemed proper or definitively correct. It's not just expected that I know which form is eternally right (yet another bad idea about writing: that language is an unchanging system of absolute rights and wrongs), but also that I have a range of precise terminology to define the relevant grammatical parts. I don't; I don't always have that terminology at hand. Partygoers are not impressed by my method of listening to the options to see which sounds most fitting or even beautiful. They just expect me to have the names.

This thirst for grammar terms is fairly common, fueled perhaps in part by the enduring stereotype of the English teacher as grammar police or by the ways many imagine grammar lessons in school. The art of sentence diagramming, for instance, is predicated upon seeing and naming grammatical parts—subject, object, adjective, verb, article—and knowing which of those parts earns a slanted, dividing, or straight line. And though sentence diagramming is now mostly a relic, some nevertheless still believe in this kind of knowledge. The vast numbers of hands that go up in my college courses when I ask who did grammar worksheets on parts of speech in high school may be proof enough of this belief's endurance. The grammar worksheet hangs on, though, only by virtue of a bad idea about writing: that good writers must know grammatical terminology.

It's pretty bad, and a bit strange, that some believe writers should be able to circle their every adjective. But it's worse (and stranger still) when grammatical identification is invoked and passed as itself a sign—even *the* singular indicator—of a good writer. This view is suggested in a 2013 CNBC News article, "Why Johnny Can't Write, and Why Employers are Mad," in which author Kelly Holland laments the "inadequate communication skills" of today's job seekers. Holland's piece is meant to evoke *Newsweek's* 1975 article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," a piece that catalyzed a literacy crisis in the public imagination, inspired "back to basics" sentiments and, likely, the renewed persistence of the grammar worksheet. Though Holland's piece hits some familiar notes (indeed, yet more bad ideas about writing: that educators aren't teaching writing; that technology is destroying the written word), it isn't quite the same old song.

Significantly, the employer sentiments about writing summarized in the article generally match those of English educators: that writing should be the focus of education, that skills in organization and context-specific rhetorical strategies are the most important, and that new employees will likely require ongoing workplace training in writing in order to develop fluency in professional discourse. Nowhere a whiff of concern about what a predicate is. In spite of this complex vision of proficient written communication, Holland begins her piece by reinforcing the idea that good writers can be measured by grammar-identification knowledge. "Can you tell a pronoun from a participle," Holland begins, "use commas correctly in long sentences; describe the difference between its and it's? If not, you have plenty of company in the world of job seekers." Holland's barometer is wholly, even comically, inaccurate. It prioritizes identifying and defining, abilities that have no bearing on the complex arts of organization, persuasion, and effectiveness in writing.

It's not that I'm against cultivating the ability to see a pronoun or against learning some of the general conventions of comma use. But what I am against is the still pervasive belief that these abilities are of significant value. Both English educators and the employers in Holland's article generally know this: conscious knowledge about grammar, parts of speech, and punctuation usage rules do not help anyone, in the long run, to perform that knowledge in writing. An effective writer cannot be measured by her ability to identify and define grammatical parts. This is not the same as saying that writers should never learn to identify direct objects or spot a dependent clause, but rather that this kind of knowledge is *tremendously, detrimentally* overvalued.

For a long time (that is, hundreds and hundreds of years), grammar was studied without any concern for, or interest in, its relationship to writing proficiencies. As noted by Constance Weaver, a leading voice on grammar in English education, grammar was a matter only of mental discipline and social refinement for most of its instructional history. It was only rather recently (that is, around the 1960s) that English educators began to focus much more extensively on writing instruction and, in turn, to question exactly how the study of grammar may or may not help make students better writers. And what was discovered is not only that mental discipline alone isn't a great rationale for its pursuit, but also that teaching grammar in traditional ways is actually detrimental to writing. Writing researchers have repeatedly shown that formal grammar instruction—those worksheets,

diagramming drills, or exercises that emphasize the study of subjects, predicates, objects, and clauses with an emphasis on terminology—is fruitless and futile.

Any value attached to knowledge of grammatical terminology for its own sake is thus based upon fully outdated ideas about what the study of grammar might do. An individual's ability to define grammatical parts is perhaps at best a kind of neat party trick, but ultimately not that important and absolutely not related to one's abilities or potentials as a writer.

Conscious, definitional knowledge of grammatical terms simply doesn't impact processes of writing. Doing language in our everyday lives—crafting a meaningful text message to a crush, or penning an elegy for a departed family member—isn't influenced by deliberate, memorized rules about the right form of *who* or *whom*. It doesn't have a thing to do with knowing when you're writing a noun or a participle phrase. That is, it doesn't reflect how individuals come to know and perform language. Research has shown that complex grammar knowledge is *already in us*, in every one of us, in both shared and idiosyncratic ways. As English professor Patrick Hartwell has written, the "grammar in our heads"—the largely untaught, subconscious tacit system of grammar installed in us all at an early age—is precisely "how we make our life through language." But we can't really talk about that fund of knowledge, aside from performing it as we speak and write. Grammarians or sticklers might need the names, but *writers* don't.

A better idea about writing is rather that good writers know *how to do* grammar to myriad effects. The most useful grammar knowledge is much less explicit than naming, formed through exposure to language and its many options, arrangements, and infinite combinations and built upon our intuitive, tacit experiences with sentences. Leading English pedagogues have shown that the best way to increase grammatical effectiveness and style in students' writing is by having them study the choices writers have made in compelling mentor texts and then practice making those moves in their own writing. As Patricia A. Dunn puts it, students must develop their grammar and sentence chops through *engagement* in writing they care about, not through the *estrangement* of decontextualized drills and memorization.

Jeff Anderson, a middle school English teacher and author of many books on teaching grammar and editing, teaches grammatical concepts in context through processes of dialogic questing and discovery, asking students to analyze and intuit syntactical patterns in a range of example texts. This approach builds upon the research-validated claim that writers deploy grammar knowledge unconsciously and through exposure, not through the ability to label parts of speech or other grammatical constructs. Being able to see certain grammatical concepts, like independent clauses or modifiers, is essential to the kind of discovery approach to grammar that others and I advocate. But any work on terms and identification is only valuable insofar as it helps writers meaningfully engage in the complex craft of writing.

Perhaps what has ultimately kept grammar names alive in spite of the research about formal instruction is that writing teachers haven't much articulated the ways this particular kind of grammar knowledge doesn't matter. Once formal grammar instruction was debunked in our literature, some writing teachers have tended to, in Martha Kolln's terms, "avoid the G-word" altogether, suggesting instead that simply "practice, practice, practice" in writing is the key. But writing teachers do a disservice, too, if we think we can or should avoid grammar altogether. Grammar is an internalized, complex human system we all mysteriously acquire and continuously reshape through experience. And it's that rich experience with the magnificent systems of grammar—the discovery and dialogue about compelling examples combined with lots and lots of thoughtful practice in writing—that matters and makes a difference to writing development, *not* grammatical terminology.

Further Reading

To learn more about classroom approaches to grammar that support writing development by prioritizing intuition, experience with language, and grammatical choices in the context of student's own writing, see especially Jeff Anderson's *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer's Workshop* and his *Everyday Editing: Inviting Students to Develop Skill and Craft in Writer's Workshop* (both from Stenhouse Publishers), as well as Harry Noden's *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing* (Heinemann). Constance Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context* (Boynton/Cook) also provides a detailed approach to teaching grammar through immersion, inquiry, and discovery in student's own reading and writing, an approach supported by a thorough history of grammar and the failures of traditional grammar instruction.

Patricia A. Dunn's argument for engagement in meaningful writing experiences rather than estrangement through decontextualized grammar drills and memorization is part of a larger argument for authentic writing instruction. For more on authentic writing

perspectives, see the blog, *Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care*. Hosted and maintained by a working group of the Conference on English Education, *Writers Who Care* features engaging posts emphasizing the importance of ownership, motivation, purpose, and real-world writing experiences. For another specific vision of teaching writing authentically, see Kelly Gallagher's *Write like This: Teaching Real-World Writing through Modeling and Mentor Texts* (Stenhouse Publishers). See also Martha Kolln's article "Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson" (*English Journal*) for more on failing to address the "G-word" in teaching writing.

Keywords

grammar instruction, grammar, pedagogical grammar, rhetorical grammar, writing instruction

Author Bio

Hannah J. Rule is an assistant professor of English at the University of South Carolina, where she teaches college writers and future teachers of writing and English Language Arts. She practices and studies the teaching of grammar through visualization, intuition, imitation, and play. Hannah's research on writing pedagogy and descriptions of her college courses are available at hannahjrule.com.

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3.9: Grammar Should Be Taught Separately As Rules to Learn

Author: Muriel Harris, English, Purdue University

There's a long-held belief that grammar can be taught separately from writing by asking students to memorize rules and to complete exercises to practice those rules. But research has consistently shown—again and again (and again)—that most students do not transfer their memorization of grammar rules to the production of grammatically correct writing. Thus, all the time spent teaching grammar in isolation, and practicing it by completing exercises, has been largely wasted. Such work is neither practical nor successful. Extensive meta-studies indicate that teaching grammar rules in isolation is a waste of time; yet, teachers who seem well intentioned continue to teach grammar and test students for mastery.

If we wonder why explanations of grammar don't lead to errorfree writing, many underlying causes have been nominated, such as students not reading enough (certainly a valid concern), not having enough writing assignments in school (also most likely valid), and not being taught grammar in class (definitely not valid as all those studies have shown). But a particularly troublesome cause that needs more attention—and could possibly lay to rest the notion that grammar should be taught separately in isolation—is the fact that definitions of grammar as offered in textbooks, resources on the web, and in class lessons are perfectly clear and adequate for people who already know what they explain. But such definitions are incomplete and totally inadequate for those trying to learn the grammar rules in question. Definitions understood by people who already know what is being defined, but not understood by people trying to learn what is being defined have been called COIK, an abbreviation for Clear Only If Known, a term first introduced by technical writers.

One way to explain the COIK phenomenon is to consider an example of a COIK definition. If I want to know what the field of physics is about, I'd find this definition: Physics is the scientific study of matter and energy and how they interact with each other. Since I am married to a physicist, I was assured by him that this is a standard definition of physics. He understands it and considers it clear. However, since I don't know what matter or energy are, it's not an adequate definition for me. I might start by asking what *matter* is, and if I looked that up, I'd learn that matter is any substance that has mass and occupies space. Fine, but what is *mass*? Mass is the quantity of inertia possessed by an object, or the proportion between force and acceleration referred to in Newton's Second Law of Motion. There is a lot more to learn here, but I haven't even begun to explore the definition of *energy*, another term in that initial definition of physics. This begins to seem like a game of infinite regress, but while that definition of physics is clear to those who know what physics is about, it does not, for those of us trying to learn, lead to any useful understanding of the field.

The obvious objection to this example is that physics is a particularly difficult concept to grasp. Applying COIK definitions to concepts of grammar might be a better way to understand the problem of a COIK definition to those trying to learn grammar concepts in isolation. One COIK definition is the deceptively simple one for a sentence: A sentence expresses a complete thought. Most people can state this definition, but that does not mean they know how to write clusters of words that form a complete sentence, because the definition depends on knowing what a complete thought is. When a colleague and I asked 179 college students (a mix from first-years to seniors) to read an essay and identify which word groups were sentences and which were fragments, the results were disheartening. Here are students' responses to two of the most problematic sentences in the essay:

A. "Then he goes on apologizing for days."

- Identified as a complete sentence: 55% (98 students)
- Identified as a fragment: 44% (79 students)

B. "Not to mention his mannerisms are good at all times." \

- Identified as a complete sentence: 42% (75 students)
- Identified as a fragment: 54% (97 students)

In these two cases, the first example is a complete sentence, and the second example is not. In no case was there total agreement on any of the 30 sentences in the essay. The obvious conclusion—that we understand the concept of sentences as expressing complete thoughts—apparently didn't help these students correctly identify word groups that were complete thoughts. But the students who weren't able to identify which word groups were sentences no doubt had written vast numbers of sentences of their own. The COIK problem is that the students weren't able to apply the concept to the examples.

But perhaps what's needed is more detail to explain what a sentence is. If I were to expand the earlier definition, I'd say that a sentence has an independent clause with a subject and a verb. I'd probably define what an independent clause is by explaining that it has a subject and a verb and can stand alone. But identifying subjects and verbs is yet another matter, as we'd have to be sure that the person seeking the definition can identify a subject and a verb. There are numerous definitions of subjects and verbs, but we might offer this: The subject is the part of a sentence that performs the action; commonly indicates what the sentence is about; and can be a noun, pronoun, phrase, or clause. Once again, we are on a path regressing back through various terms that need to be understood by the person attempting to learn the rule or concept of *sentence.*

For anyone who already knows the terminology of those definitions, they are acceptable, even though they are COIK. The basic concept of a sentence is clearly a highly complex one. Similarly, trying to help students understand verb tense, pronoun case, punctuation rules, dependent and independent clauses, and other rules of grammar all depend on their understanding of the basic definition of a sentence and the various terms used in that definition. So teaching these rules is not likely to result in students knowing how to actually make use of them when writing. Students can memorize definitions, and can apparently even complete practice exercises, but they don't have the knowledge needed to figure out how to apply those rules when they write.

Instructors who choose not to teach rules of grammar have other approaches, such as identifying grammatical errors in students' own writing. But there are COIK problems here too. Some teachers, hoping to encourage students to learn how to find their own answers, are likely to indicate errors by naming them. Given that terminology, the student will go back to the textbook and back to the COIK problem, where, if the student doesn't have a deep understanding of the concept to begin with, the student can't draw on the general concept to employ it in other instances of writing. So, if marking errors in students' writing isn't particularly productive, what can help students write more grammatically correct prose? In the writing center where I devoted years of my teaching time to meeting with students in one-to-one tutorials, I shied away from explaining rules. Instead, if grammar was one of the concerns that brought students to our writing center, I offered them strategic knowledge. That is, I introduced them to strategies that often—but don't always—work.

An example might include strategies for where to insert punctuation. For commas, I'd invite the student to read the sentence aloud to hear if there's a pause in their reading that might well indicate a comma is needed. This doesn't always work, but it can help, and it's easier to remember and use than to try explaining a comma rule. Focusing on strategic knowledge can work in one-toone tutorials because the tutor and student are working with the student's writing, and in the discussion that follows, there can be back and forth conversation to see if the student knows how to use the strategy, and the tutor can explain that the strategy is not always going to work.

But there are only a limited number of strategies, and they don't encompass all grammatical rules. Nor do they always work. Some classroom teachers look for models from the pedagogy of teaching English to students whose first language is not English. Specialists in the field of foreign language teaching advocate immersion in the target language to be learned, rather than studying its rules. They immerse students in speaking, writing, listening, and reading the target language. Such approaches are only a sampling of various practices and methods for teaching students to be literate users of their language, and there doesn't seem to be a wide consensus as to which are more effective. None of the approaches are simple or guarantee success. But there is fairly consistent agreement that teaching grammar in isolation doesn't work. Studies have demonstrated this over and over. But for those who persist in thinking they can help students achieve grammatical correctness by explaining rules, they should be aware they are very likely to be offering COIK definitions that, finally, don't do much more than remind them of what they don't know.

Further Reading

To read about the ineffectiveness of teaching grammar in isolation, two informative essays are "Teaching Grammar" on the website of the National Capital for Language Resources Center and George G. Hillocks, Jr. and Michael W. Smith's "Grammar and Usage" in *The Handbook on Research on Teaching the English Language Arts.* For suggestions on teaching grammar in the classroom, Constance Weaver has two excellent books, *Grammar for Teachers* and *Teaching Grammar in Context*.

Keywords

COIK, grammar, grammatical correctness, language arts, literacy, rules of grammar, teaching grammar

Author Bio

Muriel Harris, professor emerita of English at Purdue University, initiated and directed the Purdue Writing Lab where she learned a great deal from students she met in hundreds of tutorials, including which strategies for grammatical rules might work and which needed to be tossed out. Working with graduate student tutors, she initiated a website with instructional handouts on writing, the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab). Most of her professional writing has focused on writing centers and individualized instruction in writing. She has co-authored two textbooks on writing, and she edits *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Bad Ideas About Writing Techniques

4.1: Formal Outlines are Always Useful

4.2: Students Should Learn About the Logical Fallacies

4.3: Logos is Synonymous with Logic

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4.1: Formal Outlines are Always Useful

Author: Kristin Milligan, Learning Center, East Central College

In many classrooms around the country, students are handed assignment sheets that nicely detail what is expected of them as writers. Regardless of the genre, one (outdated) mainstay is the mandate for formal outlines. It's good for writers to collect their thoughts before jumping into the physical process of writing, and most people would agree with this concept, but unfortunately, not everyone thinks or writes the same way. As a result, formal outlines required at the beginning of the writing process may hinder creativity and progress. Even more likely, students write the mandated outline after the piece has been revised and edited, as a means of meeting the assignment requirements. Requiring students to create an outline as the first step of the writing process teaches them that writing is a linear movement, when in reality, it's actually recursive.

There's an age-old argument among those in the composition field. Should teachers and writers be focused on the product or the process of writing? Writing can be understood in a variety of ways, but one consistent factor is the idea of planning before actually writing the intended piece. For quite a while now, this idea has translated to the mandatory inclusion of outlines as a means of helping students organize and develop their thoughts before writing a draft. In general terms, the use of outlines as a pre-writing strategy is thought to afford writers the ability to more cohesively structure their written work. While organization and form are important aspects to the writing process, just because someone has organized ideas in a prefabricated and hierarchical form does not mean the actual writing is going to reflect this linear pre-writing strategy. For instance, one study concerning the behavior of good writers found that only one of the writers studied used anything close to what one could call an outline, but there were 14 other good writers in the study, too. Does that mean that the one student who used an outline is the best writer? How can teachers qualify writers' abilities and strengths, especially based on a linear document that vaguely represents a recursive process? This disconnect highlights a major gap in the understanding of how good writers compose texts.

Howard Gardner is well known for developing the idea of multiple intelligences (or the different ways that people learn, such as kinesthetically, visually, aurally, etc.). Through an exploration of multiple intelligences, it has been found that mathematically minded people are the ones who do their best work using outlines. One out of six intelligences prefers outlines, and yet in some classrooms, outlines are still a required part of writing assignments. Essentially, requiring students to create a formal outline for their written work excludes other valuable organizational strategies, such as mind mapping, picture drawing, and manipulating physical representations of ideas, such as rearranging Post-It notes on a whiteboard. Instead of only choosing a familiar and mandated organizational form, students should instead be allowed to use strategies that work best with their own intelligences to foster their growth.

Another reason mandatory outlines should be given their proper burial is that outlines seem to only serve students in a particular manner: organization. Students' final drafts are more organized when they use electronic outlining, but it doesn't help them in strengthening a paper's argument. In other words, outlines help students organize ideas, but don't help students develop those ideas. Furthermore, a study on how students use prior knowledge to develop new skills toward writing established that outlines alone don't help with student understanding. Ultimately, outlines make students focus on writing as a product instead of a process, even though they are meant to do the latter.

Even if students weren't required to create formal outlines, an organizational process would most likely be used in some manner, based on how people learn through observation of others' writing processes. Research highlights how students naturally use outlines as they fit into particular assignments. Not only do students have the ability to apply the concept of outlining when needed, they also marry this strategy with others that benefit them in the writing process. Even so, research shows that the use of outlines has

no correlation with the success of student papers. So, it can be assumed that students have the capability of using an outline (in whatever form it may take) as it serves their writing purposes, but students should not be forced to use a pre-writing strategy that is inorganic to their writing process, such as a formal outline with Roman numerals, *a* and *b* subdivisions, and the like. When students only need to plug in information into an already established structure, they lose multiple opportunities to engage in critical thinking and development of their ideas.

In most cases, required outlines become a contrived formality, not a tool to help student writers succeed. Personal experience reminds us that students learn how to create outlines by being told what to do. (I can still hear my junior-year high school English

teacher repeating to us that if our outlines "have an A they must have a B. If they have a 1 they must have a 2," as if this alone constituted pre-writing.) A more fruitful approach is to encourage students in their writing by allowing them to explore multiple writing strategies at every stage of the process. In doing so, there's the possibility that students' beliefs about their writing efficacy will increase because they will be focusing on what helps them develop their skills in writing and not their skills in following directions.

But not all uses of outlines are pernicious. One way that outlines can serve a vital function is to use them in the reverse. A small amount of literature has been shared about how writing a draft, then an outline of that draft, gives the writer the chance to see where revisions are needed. It's important to note that some students just don't know what they're going to write about until they've started writing. Using outlines to organize thoughts that don't exist yet has the capability of stifling students' thinking processes, but when students decide to adapt outlines to benefit their personal writing method, it reinforces the fact that writing is a recursive and non-linear process. Teachers should be teaching outlines as a way to highlight the progress that students have made, instead of as a way to dictate where students are supposed to end up before they've even started.

Reverse outlines not only help students pinpoint whether Paragraph 2 should become Paragraph 4, but they also emphasize many other aspects of writing as well. As Rachel Cayley points out, reverse outlining helps students pinpoint general structural problems and begin the process of detailed revisions. Additionally, depending on what is included in the reverse outline, students may end up noticing errors in topic sentences, flow of ideas, transitions, or the development of their argument. Reverse outlining helps to delineate the need to circle back, review, and revise, while encouraging students to realize that hierarchical structure and organization are important factors in creating a well-developed text.

Writing is a messy practice, and it's important to be gentle with one another and ourselves, especially when we decide which tools we want to use to make sense of our mess. It's vital to realize and remember that outlines are a tool at our disposal when we write; they aren't the only mode of organization, nor are they necessarily the best mode for our particular writing process.

Further Reading

To learn more about writing processes, see Linda Flower and John R. Hayes's classic article, "The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," along with Anne Becker's "A Review of Writing Model Research Based on Cognitive Processes," Charles K. Stallard's "An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers," and Veerle M. Baaijen, David Galbraith, and Kees de Glopper's "Effects of Writing Beliefs and Planning on Writing Performance."

For further reading about outlines and reverse outlines, along with practical tips and examples, see "Types of Outlines and Samples" on the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab), Aaron Hamburger's "Outlining in Reverse," Kurtis Clements's podcast "Revision Strategy—Post-Draft Outlining," and the Kansas State University Writing Center's handout "Reverse Outlining," all available online. See also Milou J.R. de Smet, et. al.'s "Electronic Outlining as a Writing Strategy: Effects on Students' Writing Products, Mental Effort and Writing Process," and Barbara E. Walvoord, et. al.'s, "Functions of Outlining Among College Students in Four Disciplines."

Keywords

outlines, post draft outlining, reverse outlining, writing as a process, writing process

Author Bio

Kristin Milligan is currently the associate director of the Learning Center at East Central College. In her more than six years of experience as a writing center tutor, Kristin has seen all kinds of outlines, messy and neat, informal and formal, and she has observed the effects of writing process choices on student texts.

Kristin holds a Master's degree from Texas State University in San Marcos, TX, and a teaching degree from Webster University in St. Louis, MO. She embraces multiple modes of brainstorming and organization as a way to reach diverse writers.

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4.2: Students Should Learn About the Logical Fallacies

Author: Daniel V. Bommarito, Bowling Green State University

One measure of effective writing, when taught alongside argument and critical thinking, is the extent to which a writer identifies and roots out logical fallacies, both in others' arguments and in one's own. Variously defined as errors or flaws of reasoning, logical fallacies are generally thought to be violations in an argument that keep the truth of the matter, whatever it may be, somehow beyond the grasp of the writer and reader. In fact, such a view is so ingrained in our popular consciousness that it's not uncommon for discussions of fallacies to slip into a hyperbolic, even religious tenor, as in the case of one highly trafficked blog on fallacies that commands across the top of its homepage, "Thou shalt not commit logical fallacies!" Such commandments rest on an assumption that by stamping out fallacies a writer's ideas can stand firmly on the foundations of logic, thus free of obfuscation and open to unadulterated analysis. However, as with most rules associated with writing, the proscription of logical fallacies is more complicated than commonly thought.

Logical fallacies earn the bad idea label because their application to writing and argument often serves as much to obstruct communication as not. I'll admit this is an ironic claim, since fallacies are preserved in most writing guides because their identification and eradication are presumed to put arguments on firmer ground—but hear me out. Logical fallacies should be put out to pasture for three reasons: (1) defining logical fallacies is notoriously difficult and leads to selective attribution and enforcement; (2) identifying logical fallacies can actually work to shut down communication rather than energize it; and (3) attempting to adhere to proper logical form can stifle creativity and undermine one's ability to wrestle

with uncertainty. Taken individually, maybe none of these reasons would be enough to warrant casting fallacies aside altogether, but, taken together, they suggest a need to rethink how we define and use fallacies in the context of writing.

An initial strike against logical fallacies is the lack of a clear definition or explanatory theory, despite having a rather long history. The notion of a logical fallacy can be traced back to Aristotle's *On Sophistical Refutations*. There, Aristotle describes fallacies as "reasonings" that seem to be genuine "but are not so." He illustrates with a few examples: Some people are beautiful, while others "seem to be so, by dint of embellishing themselves"; some people are physically fit, "while others merely seem to be so by blowing and rigging themselves out"; some inanimate objects really are gold, "while others are not and merely seem to be such to our sense." You get the picture. Suffice it to say, on Aristotle's account, fallacies are arguments that appear on the surface to be reasonable or logical but are not in reality.

However, the philosopher Ralph H. Johnson believes that such a characterization doesn't hold water because the recognition of a fallacy is entirely subjective. That is, what appears to be good reasoning to one person might very well be bad reasoning to another. Similarly, the philosopher Stephen Toulmin, whose work has been highly influential in the discipline of rhetoric and composition, puts an even finer point on it, saying that "we shall not be able to identify any intrinsically fallacious forms of arguing." In other words, one person's appeal to authority—to, say, the Bible for a historical account of the origin of life—might be perfectly reasonable to a person with the same set of values and expectations while that explanation would seem totally faulty to a person with different values and expectations. And no technical description of the reasoning itself, without reference to the particular circumstances in which the reasoning occurs, can explain why it may satisfy some and not others. For those committed to flagging fallacies and incriminating others for their misuse, these charges are at least a setback, if not a critical blow.

But it gets worse. Even the ancients suspected that Aristotle's notion of fallacies wasn't all it was cracked up to be. For example, around the second century C.E., Sextus Empiricus—skeptical of logicians, philosophers, and just about anyone who claimed to have secure knowledge of any sort—found identifying fallacies to be misguided and ultimately useless. He held that fallacies could tell us nothing more about an argument than what we already knew. That is to say, an argument's conclusion might be deemed false, not because of any technical knowledge of the way an argument unfolded, but because of the arguer's prior knowledge of the issue under debate. As Sextus put it in an example, a person does not avoid a chasm at the end of the road because of his penetrating study of the road; rather, it is prior knowledge of a chasm at the road's end that leads him to ignore the road altogether. In making such a claim, Sextus took dead aim at his contemporaries who believed they could diagnose arguments and explain why and how reasoning failed or succeeded as it moved from premises to conclusions. In effect, Sextus leaves us with a functional definition of fallacies that goes something like this: An argument is fallacious when it leads to conclusions that we already dislike

or know to be problematic. Wholly unsatisfying, I should think, and contrary to what we tend to presume when it comes to studying the role of fallacies in arguments.

Despite the problems identified by Sextus, Toulmin, and Hamblin, the tradition of fallacies has remained largely intact for over 2,000 years. Sure, theorists have rearranged the furniture a bit, as Hamblin tells us, but little if anything has been added or developed. Today, we continue to rely on the authority of tradition without paying much mind to that tradition's shortcomings.

A second strike against fallacies is that they can easily shut down debate rather than energize it. In fact, shutting down debate is precisely what Aristotle's original discussion of fallacies was designed to do. The opening portion of *On Sophistical Refutations* indicates the type of argumentative dialogue Aristotle has in mind for the application of fallacies—namely, "contentious" dialogue. Contentious dialogue referred to the verbal sparring that took place in public contests between a protagonist and an antagonist, those who, in Aristotle's words "argue as competitors and rivals to the death." The aim of such competitions was the metaphorical death of an opponent, and there were five ways to bring about such a demise: (1) to win by refutation outright, (2) to show an opponent's argument to be fallacious, (3) to lead the opponent into a paradox, (4) to force him into making a grammatical mistake, or (5) to reduce him to "babbling." And of course, as Aristotle notes, it would also suffice "to give the appearance of each of these things without the reality." The fallacies, then, were strategies taught to students so that they could learn to take down the opposition. Cast in this light, it's not surprising that fallacy talk shows up frequently when someone wants to silence the opposition —literally to leave an opponent with nothing else to say, rather than engage in fruitful debate.

A third strike, related to the second, is that too much concern for identifying and rooting out fallacies can inhibit creativity and keep people from wrestling with the uncertainties of daily life. The Italian professor of rhetoric, Giambattista Vico, made a similar claim as far back as the 18th century. Vico believed that his contemporaries' preoccupation with formal logic was harmful to students because it dulled their natural creativity and, once they grew up, left them unpracticed in dealing with pressing social issues of the day, issues about which formal logic had little to offer. In place of teaching students to target and purge seemingly faulty reasoning, as was common in his day, Vico advocated teaching what rhetoricians call *invention* by way of the *topics*. Invention is the activity of drumming up arguments and is one of the key intellectual practices the discipline of rhetoric offers writers. The topics were helpful forms of reasoning that offered people strategies for producing arguments in a variety of contexts. Vico believed that this inventive process would capitalize on the natural creativity and imagination of young students and, most importantly, give them the tools needed to be well-rounded, prudent adults by the time they entered public life. For Vico, and indeed even for rhetoricians today, the narrow preoccupation with debunking flawed reasoning can stand in the way of such development.

So what's the take-away? Let me make three last points. First, writers benefit when they realize that fallacies exist in the eye of the beholder and that, by and large, people only search for fallacies when they already dislike something in an argument. Being on the lookout for fallacies will tell you more about the person doing the looking than it will about the argument itself.

Second, writers benefit when they avoid seeing fallacies as endpoints or conclusions to arguments. Too often, fallacies conjure up combative exchanges that are focused more on winning than on moving toward some shared understanding. Rather than errors to identify and eradicate, fallacies can be indicators of something amiss that needs to be investigated further. At their best, fallacies can serve as *starting* points for fruitful dialogue, not endpoints.

Third, writers benefit when they recognize that fallacies are a necessary part of the day-to-day, lived-in world, where incomplete knowledge and leaps of logic are a practical necessity. When writers approach communication as the messy business that it is, fallacies go from being violations of reasoning to the very reasons we continue conversing at all.

By making this case against the traditional treatment of fallacies, I of course don't mean to suggest that argument strategies cannot be deceptive or that reasoning cannot be abused. They can, and it often is. However, it is important to realize that the problem with fallacies (informal ones, at least) is not the thinking itself in any technical sense, but the spirit in which that thinking is undertaken and defended. Writers benefit when they understand and control fallacies, rather than see them as errors simply to be avoided.

Further Reading

Aristotle's classic work discussing fallacies, *On Sophistical Refutations*, is accessible online through MIT's *The Internet Classics Archive*, as is Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which can serve as useful complementary reading. For critiques of the tradition following Aristotle, see C. L. Hamblin's *Fallacies* (Methuen Publishing) and Gerald J. Massey's "The Fallacy Behind Fallacies" (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy*). Similar critiques of fallacies can be found in other volumes that also discuss practical reasoning more

generally, including Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge University Press); Toulmin, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik's *Introduction to Reasoning* (Macmillan); and James Crosswhite's *The Rhetoric of Reason: Writing and the Attractions of Argument* (University of Wisconsin Press).

For examples of contemporary approaches to the teaching of fallacies, see Anne-Marie Womack's article "From Logic to Rhetoric: A Contextualized Pedagogy for Fallacies" and Sharon Crowley and Michael Stancliff's *Critical Situations: A Rhetoric for Writing in Communities* (Pearson). Womack's approach moves fallacies to the center of class discussion and shows how fallacies can be used to conduct audience analysis. Crowley and Stancliff, while not discussing fallacies explicitly, emphasize rhetorical reasoning, which works to ground arguments, and the practice of argumentation itself, in particular historical contexts.

Contemporary scholars of rhetoric have sought to develop alternatives to the agonistic view of argumentation that is so widely circulated. Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Blackwell) is a fine volume that offers an accessible discussion of the virtues and limitations of rhetoric and argumentation from a 21st-century perspective. Another fine work that considers alternatives to agonistic dialog is Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (Southern Illinois University Press). Ratcliffe shows how understanding the logics underlying systems of thought can facilitate communication across cultural differences.

Keywords

argument, invention, logic, reasoning, rhetoric

Author Bio

Daniel V. Bommarito is an assistant professor at Bowling Green State University, where he teaches in the doctoral program in rhetoric and writing. His research explores composition theory and pedagogy, writing program administration, collaboration, doctoral education, and cross-cultural discourse.

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4.3: Logos is Synonymous with Logic

Author: Nancy Fox, English, University of West Florida

Logos. Ethos. Pathos. The three basic rhetorical appeals. Surely Aristotle laid them down for all writers over 2,300 years ago, right? In his text, *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle presents logos as argument itself, aligned with ethos, the appeal of a speaker's character, and pathos, the appeal to audience attitude or feeling. Together, these appeals infuse an argument with its persuasive power. However, an often simplistic, formulaic, and transactional use of these complex terms detaches them from their potential meaning. Such is the persistent problem, or bad idea, about logos.

Logos, the "argument itself" according to Aristotle, consists of material such as data and narrative, as well as the cogent reasoning that allows us to make sense of our stories. However, through careless practice, mistranslation, or misconception of the word's origins, logos is often defined simply as logic. Logic, in Aristotle's terms, is a tool for scientific calculation and investigation. Aristotle is considered the father of logic because he invented a structure called the *syllogism*, exemplified by the famous statement: "Socrates is a man. All men are mortal. Therefore, Socrates is mortal." The first two assertions—"Socrates is a man. All men are mortal"—are premises that lead "of necessity," in Aristotle's terms, to the only conclusion: "Socrates (a man) is therefore mortal."

But logic that serves scientific investigation is a different strategy from the logos appeal of rhetorical argument and storytelling. Logos is grounded in audience and situation—not scientific deduction. In fact, the ancient Greeks had a variety of definitions for logos, including computation and exposition, as well as forms of verbal expression, such as oratory and poetry, that represent an expansive and faceted story. None of these definitions were so

reductive as merely *logic*. It is confusing, then, that the entry on logos in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition* opens with the words "logical appeal," which also appear consistently in many other canonical works in the field, not to mention in textbooks that translate scholarly concepts for students. Logos is commonly defined as a set of logical (and therefore inevitable) conclusions drawn from assertions or claims, such as the syllogism.

Audiences and particular rhetorical situations may require logical reasoning and even syllogisms, but situations are rarely completely encompassed within one form of reasoning or arguing. Perhaps the best example would be a court case, in which syllogistic arguments, narrative appeals, and community values intertwine. The case is not fully explicable or approachable through one kind of proof. Writers are not constrained by formal and limiting systems like logic, which are highly useful for some circumstances, but irrelevant or even inappropriate to others, including the kinds of writing situations in which students often find themselves. Students are often challenged to understand and make arguments about political, social, artistic, policy, or cultural topics that cannot be demonstrated or logically proven.

All sources that dispute the logic-only definition speak of logos as complex, a bit mysterious, and resistant to easy analysis. It's true that Aristotle defined logos as "the argument ... (and) proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself." However, textual evidence of logos existed centuries before the systematizing hand of Aristotle traced the strands of rhetorical proofs through logos, ethos, and pathos in 350 BCE. Ancient texts reveal competing perspectives of logos, from spiritual to structural. The Online Writing Lab (OWL) of Purdue University gathers these disparate views in one succinct statement that poses and resolves the problem of this potent word: "Logos is frequently translated as some variation of 'logic or reasoning,' but it originally referred to the actual content of a speech and how it was organized."

Teaching logos as logic in rhetorical arguments sets students up for confusion. They may study the myriad ways we build arguments, from articles to films, stories, songs, and marketing or political campaigns. Yet when asked to analyze arguments and make their own, students are often ill-served by a hunt for logical entailments among situated arguments about issues for which there is no one, entailed, necessary answer to be demonstrated. Recognizing logic's innate limitations to encompass all that logos is and can be, some folks in computer programming and the writing world itself propose such hybrid terms as *fuzzy logic* and *informal logic* to resolve this issue. They open the term logic itself to less predictable—and more human—ways of thinking and speaking about ourselves. In a closely related issue, beyond the reach of this chapter but worthy of further investigation, an appreciation of the true meaning of logos can allay concern that digital landscapes are distorting our interactions and relationships. It's the reduction of our human communication to logical systems based on algorithms that logos, our robust language story, can redress, enliven, and enlighten.

Further Reading

The primary texts collected in *Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Bedford Books), trace the use of the term logos through time and cultural development of rhetorical practices. But the origins of the word logos can be discovered in the earliest texts by Heraclitus, "Concerning the Logos," which describes the sacred nature of logos, and Aristotle's *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, the source for a practical understanding of logos as it informs our daily communications with one another.

Scholars who trace the various strands of logos—spiritual and practical—in the context and texture of ancient Greek culture include Debra Hawhee and Sharon Crowley in *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (Allyn and Bacon); Susan Jarratt in her foundational *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Southern Illinois University Press); and Jeffrey Walker, who investigates the deeper sources of logos in human communication, beneath strategy, in *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (Oxford University Press).

Print and online sources that offer a fast but effective consultation about logos, its history, and its current practice, are the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, edited by Theresa Enos (Garland); *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies*, by James Jasinski (Sage); *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, by Richard A. Lanham (University of California Press); and "Logos" in the websites, *Silvae Rhetoricae* and Purdue OWL.

Keywords

logic, logos, persuasive discourse, philosophy, rhetoric, rhetorical theory

Author Bio

Nancy Fox is a faculty member in the English department at the University of West Florida and a doctoral candidate in English language and rhetoric at the University of Washington, Seattle. She has published poetry, essays, and a children's book, as well as work in feminist studies, multimedia, and writing. Her subjects have ranged from analysis of the film *The Kids Are All Right* and Andy Warhol's *Dream America* to a new discovery in the Mouse's Tale in *Alice in Wonderland*. She lives on the Gulf Coast with her spouse and two children.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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5.1: Excellent Academic Writing Must be Serious

Author: Michael Theune, English, Illinois Wesleyan University

Surely, you can't be serious! After all, very smart people have been slaying ignorance while slaying audiences by delivering intelligent ideas with comedy's passion, edge, urgency, and punch for quite some time: Samantha Bee. John Oliver. Key and Peele. Matt Stone and Trey Parker. Dan Perkins, a.k.a. Tom Tomorrow. Aaron McGruder. Sarah Silverman. Tina Fey. Bill Maher. Dave Chappelle. Wanda Sykes. Dennis Miller. Roseanne Barr. Richard Pryor. Lenny Bruce. Dorothy Parker. Mark Twain. William Hazlitt. Voltaire. Jonathan Swift. Lear's fool. Aristophanes. And, if you want to go into the deep past, Stephen Colbert (the real one, the one who hosted The Report). And further still, Jon Stewart. (Too soon?)

But those who think academic writing must exclude the comedic *are* serious. (And a writing teacher should NOT call them Shirley. That is, not if that teacher wants to keep her job.) Of course they rarely say so in public. Mostly they keep silent on the topic of teaching humorous yet legitimately academic, persuasive writing, and let the Western tradition's tendency to privilege tragedy carry the big stick. Sometimes, though, they pass laws and create policies that say nothing overt about comedy in the writing classroom —still, the instructions about how to do well on high-stakes, state-sanctioned writing examinations call for writing that carefully lays its foundations, creates its structure, and establishes its points serious brick by seriouser brick. (And then, in the conclusion, one dutifully retells the story of the turgid grid one's made.) And should they happen to acknowledge the existence of something like comedy in good writing, they often allow it for momentary purposes, as a way to punch up some otherwise ponderous prose, say, or to show with a touch of ethos that the author indeed is a real person. But that's it—two or three titters, and your humor limit's reached. (And those isolated titters will seem so weak and misplaced they likely should be omitted anyway....)

So just who are these gradgrinds, these crabtrees, these killjoys, these robocops with big sticks up their bums? Alas, unless you've taught or supported the teaching of writing using comedy, the kicker is: very likely they is you. And it's a shame: there's much to recommend the endorsement and teaching of humorous academic writing, the conveyance of the big schtick.

In fact, composition theorist Peter Elbow declares that writing pedagogy could be improved by "more honoring of style, playfulness, fun, pleasure, humor," so clearly it's time for a right ribbing. Humor demands close attention to language at all levels. Making comedy requires a writer to consider diction, of course, but also to be deliberate about intricacies such as sound and rhythm —after all, it's often just a matter of a few syllables that enables one to be silly. Humor also is an effective means by which to teach the second-most-difficult thing to teach young writers: style. (The most difficult thing is how to spell *ukulele*.) Style often is the first element of writing to go when it comes to teaching young writers—in favor of elements such as developing a thesis, supporting that thesis with evidence, and putting a staple in the upper-lefthand corner. But in comedic writing, style is an absolute requirement. In comedy, it's not word choice, but the hunt for the choicest word. And sentences must be tightly woven to serve as the fuse that carries the spark right to an ending that blows readers away. And maybe even enlightens them. On a much larger scale, humor requires vivid descriptions, dazzling metaphors, splendiferous speech acts, and the skillful interrelation of such elements. Writing comedy entails seeing and creating in content and language those productive occasions and opportunities, requiring the writer's willingness to capitalize on them, to see everything as potential set up, and then to land the punch. About poetry, William Butler Yeats, in his poem "Adam's Curse," states, "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught...." The same holds true for academic writing, especially the kind that also hopes to leave readers in stitches.

Bruce A. Goebel, a professor at Western Washington University and the author of *Humor Writing: Activities for the English Classroom*, notes, "[H]umor is nothing less than the careful and effective use of language." But humor also is so much more. Former president of the Modern Language Association Gerald Graff argues that teachers need to work to connect academic writing courses with "students' youthful argument culture." Teaching comedy surely is one strong, energetic way to do so. At the level of concept, of ideas about what to write, humor is always attuned to the new: new possibilities, new perspectives, jazzy combinations. Mel Helitzer, the author of *Comedy Writing Secrets*, instructs his readers to "[t] rain your mind to constantly ask *What if?*," noting that "*What if?* imagination allows you to realign diverse elements into new and unexpected relationships that surprise." If you ask, for example, what if the hillbillies in a horror movie became the beset-upon, virtuous characters, while the college kids vacationing at the cabin are cruel and vicious? Well, then you might get as an answer the hilarious *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil*. Such big conceptual shifts can help students think anew about texts they're considering. What if there's a counterexample for the case being made in that essay we read for class? What if I tried to argue the exact opposite of what this famous thinker is suggesting? What if I

tried to apply here the comedic rule of three, which dictates that a priest, a rabbi, and a Chihuahua is totally freakin' funny—what kind of hilarious joke might I create?

In terms of process, it's industry standard for comedy writing to be collaborative. (My friends had to leave before we finished the last paragraph.) About writing in general, many are convinced of the myth of the lone genius, those gassy know-it-alls, picking off ideas in isolation. But that notion of the writer is so bad there's an essay on it in this collection! With humor, students will need each other in order to generate and to test out material. And there's a model for it: the comedy writers' room. And this model has even made it into pop culture—the writers' room is visited again and again in the television shows *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* and *30 Rock*. Sure, the writers' room in *30 Rock* smells, and the writers play pranks on each other, but they get their work done, and seem to have fun doing it. And they eat a lot of pizza. The collaboration humor calls for is not just collaboration with other people—it's also collaboration with other texts, other sources. It takes a great deal of knowledge to make a joke work. True, a lot of it can be done with oodles of Googling, but who knows? That could be a gateway drug, something to fight the lack of information fluency.

Humor not only can help teach the elements of writing and thinking while emphasizing collaboration, but it also powerfully makes the case for writing. For so many students an explicit argument needs to be made for writing because they are always asking themselves this: Why write when I can speak it into my phone and the phone will dutifully transcribe my thoughts? (And the NSA will keep a back-up file!) Humor makes the writing process matter. In this process, invention is true invention: You're creating something never thought of before. (Unless your essay is about airplane peanuts. In which case, change your topic because you're writing a *Seinfeld* rerun.) Comedy helps authors barnstorm brainstorming. It makes the drafting and revising process more multifaceted, open, searching, continuous—it moves from dafting and reviling to drifting and revving, to riffing and devising, through drafting and revising to afterdrafting and revisinging (it's not unusual for performance to be a part of the creation of comedy, which must have voice... even if it's Gilbert Gottfried's). Authors who try to create comedy at the spur of the moment most often find out it simply can't be done—it's just too demanding. It's like... like...like...see? It's really hard!

In *Everything's an Argument*, a 1,000+ page college writing textbook, the authors—who spend a total of six pages discussing humor, not one of which offers any insight into how to create humor—note that "it's usually better to steer clear of humor." With colleagues like that, who needs nuns with rulers? The good news is that anyone who wants to try to teach comedic academic writing can: Other resources are available. There's Mel Helitzer's great *Comedy Writing Secrets*, the book that taught me about most of the techniques I've used in this essay. (My apologies to Mr. Helitzer and all his descendants.) There's also Arthur Plotnik's *Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style*, which offers great techniques—"megaphors," anyone?—for making edgy, brave, often funny, certainly engaging writing. Even better, *Spunk & Bite*'s first chapter takes on Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, arguing that it's a guidebook for "millions of struggling language users" who are "seeking a quick authoritarian fix for shaky writing skills." Additionally, the growing body of pedagogical research and reflection by teachers who have their students write using the techniques and processes of comedy contains a number of great assignments. These adventurous instructors are trying hard to be respected and loved—just like the comedians and humorists who inspire them.

Those who have used comedy to teach writing have begun to share the results of their labor, and initial reports—while not exactly unbiased—are promising. Assessing the quality of the work she received from students who took a creative nonfiction course that focused on humor writing, Marietta College professor Bev Hogue notes that the baseline was really good: "Some of these papers were structured very much like the typical research paper produced by a competent freshman composition student, but with this important difference: These students had spent the entire semester paying close attention to the elements of style while playing games with language, form, and content, so the final papers were polished, sophisticated, and often very funny—but still recognizably research papers." And that was just the baseline. Above this, the writing sang: "Other students were more adventurous, taking the sorts of risks they had observed in other authors, coloring outside the lines to create their own new and effective forms of expression. And a few—a very few—created final papers that approached art."

Of course, just as in any writing class, in a writing class that focuses on comedic technique and process, some communal rules very likely should be established. Is there anything that can't be included in a humorous piece? How do we work together to make the classroom respectful but also lively and productive? Is it really okay to admit that Carrot Top is occasionally funny? It certainly is the case that, as founding members of the International Society for Humor Studies, Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen, note, "humor is a good tool for teaching about censorship"; however, it also must be recognized that humor simply tends toward the irreverent, and that this is, frankly, ideal. Thus, empowered, young writers—who can feed off of transgression, off of calling power

into question—are more likely to tip over and crack up some sacred cows. How much better than to have students be scared cowards! Studying comedic techniques, students also become better, more perspicacious (look it up!) readers—they know how humor works, and so might be less apt to fall for it when some pernicious politician or idiot ideologue trumpets venom cut with a little laughter. Armed to the teeth, they're also better able to bite back.

There are three theories of humor: incongruity (putting together what doesn't fit leads to fits of laughter), superiority (seeing others slip on bananas is appealing), and relief (comedy as the jocular discharge of subconscious energies). So, clearly, though initially it may seem incongruous to teach humor while teaching academic writing, such writing—edgy, engaged, careful and powerful—will be superior to so much of what's come before it. And what a relief that will be!

Further Reading

In addition to the works by Bruce Goebel, Bev Hogue, and the Nilsens noted above, for more about how and why to use comedy in high school and college writing classes, see John Bryant's "Comedy and Argument: A Humanistic Approach to Composition," Paul Lewis's "How Many Students Does it Take to Write a Joke?: Humor Writing in Composition Courses," and Nina Murakami's "Not Just a Humor*ous* Text: Humor *as* Text in the Writing Class."

In addition to the works by Mel Helitzer and Arthur Plotnik noted above, another great resource for use in the composition-and-comedy classroom is Kathleen Volk Miller and Marion Wrenn's *Humor: A Reader for Writers* (Oxford University Press—so it's legit!).

For more stuff that'll make you laugh, check out the internetz.

Keywords

academic writing, comedy, composition, humor, writing

Author Bio

Michael Theune is professor of English and writing program director at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois. The many courses he teaches include a first-year writing seminar called S.W.A.T. (Sass, Wit, and Text) and Stand-up Poetry, both of which focus on comedy and writing.

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5.2: Creative Writing is a Unique Category

Author: Cydney Alexis, English, Kansas State University

To many, if not most, the phrase creative writing marks a genre. It's as simple as breakfast. A man writes in a garret, his pages lit by the faint glow of a lamp. Ideas are spilling madly from his cerebral cortex to the page. He probably has a cup of coffee next to him. Or a dog. And he is writing a story—perhaps about a road trip.

I know this is the image in most people's brains because it is the one I've read or heard described hundreds of times by the media, in popular culture, by writers themselves, in books written by writers on writing, by my students, and by friends. It is also the image most strangers (or distant family members) produce when I tell them my field is writing studies, a discipline dedicated to the study of academic writing of all kinds: college writing, digital writing, and workplace writing, just to name a few examples. Upon hearing this, a man I met in a hostel, over breakfast, asked me to listen to his poem to see if it was publishable, even though, not being a poet, I had no credentials for evaluating his text. My distant cousin, after years of asking at Thanksgiving dinners, still can't understand why I don't want to edit his novel. Most of us learn to laugh off the glaze that comes over people's faces as we academics in writing studies explain what we do write.

The problem is that one image of writing dominates the popular imagination and is weighted with value more heavily than all others: creative writing, which is treated as if it's interchangeable with fiction and poetry. Over the years, I've come to understand a few pervasive problems that stem from the view of creativity as tied to fiction and poetry, from the public's lack of awareness of what academics and other workplace writers do, from problematic attitudes held within the so-called field of creative writing itself about what types of writing are creative, and from the ways writing studies scholars reinforce problematic ideas about creativity. These problems include:

One sphere of writing is marked off as creative while others are de-valued.

People who write everything except poetry and fiction—that is, people who contribute the vast majority of writing to the world in the form of lists, essays, emails, blog posts, texts, instruction manuals, and so on—see their work as less creative and less important.

This mass of unrecognized writing and labor is virtually unrepresented in popular culture, and academics and other workplace writers are not part of the cultural narrative around creativity (save some exceptional examples, such as the way writing is represented in the television show *The West Wing*, often a powerful meditation on the importance of collaboration and revision in workplace writing, and in the film *Her*, which celebrates vernacular ghost writing).

I first took note of the emotional weight and impact of this phenomenon when conducting interviews for my dissertation on the impact of materials of all kinds on the writing process. I interviewed 48 people, and in countless interviews, people expressed the heartbreaking sentiment that there once was a time when they wrote creatively (poems and stories), but now, they are just academics or just workplace writers. Even more troubling was that when asked if they considered themselves writers, they resoundingly answered no. Even for people who write daily for their trade, writing has become synonymous with poetry and fiction writing, which has become synonymous with creative writing. They uttered statements such as these: "I used to write [for pleasure]...throughout childhood....I wrote little fiction stories, I wrote in a diary, I wrote autobiographical stories.... Writing a dissertation is kind of like a job.... I don't write that much anymore. Well, I don't write creatively."

I began asking more people whose livelihoods depend on the written word, and who write daily, if they see themselves as writers. I also began asking graduate students who came to see me at various writing centers I worked at whether they considered themselves writers. And again, most said no. There was something in the identity label of *writer* that people have attached to a particular kind of writing. Deborah Brandt voices this powerfully when she points out that while the identity label of *reader* is available to most people, meaning that most readers could confidently say "I'm a reader," the identity label of writer is not available in the same way.

In one of her book chapters, Brandt demonstrates how cultural narratives around the importance of reading enable families to understand the value of this act and to support reading as a family value and practice. This practice, of course, has a long history—reading was, until quite recently, a family, and not a solitary or even silent, activity (scholars debate exact dates, but some point to silent reading as a late 19thor even a 20th-century phenomenon). Writing, on the other hand, has often been associated with privacy, secrecy, and solitude, as Brandt asserts. It is also associated not with workplace forms, but with poetry and fiction. A

question that comes to mind is that if families do not see themselves as skilled writers (because the designation of *writer* is reserved only for poetry and fiction), then how can they encourage writing in all of its forms as a family value? Brandt notes that in her hundreds of interviews with families, people rarely remembered writing around parents. For many families, being a writer is not seen as a valuable trade—it's the stuff of fiction.

What persists are damaging stereotypes about writing and creativity that continue to reinforce troubling dichotomies about the nature of creativity. Consider the famous joke that "those who can't do, teach," which parodies the work of individuals dedicated to fostering creative thinking in others, requiring them, also, to constantly be creating. Or consider that teachers and professors are almost always depicted in popular culture as practitioners, not talent. Although not necessarily a film about writing, *Good Will Hunting* pits an *enfant terrible* against a practiced and pragmatic mathematics scholar whose hard work will never be valued as much as Will's spontaneous ability to solve genius-level problems. To take a more recent example, in *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl*, Nick Offerman plays a ridiculous sociology professor whose intellectual contribution to his field is portrayed solely via his penchant for wearing tribal clothing from around the world. His son characterizes him as a person who basically sits around a lot. When faculty aren't being ridiculed in popular culture, all sorts of other problematic stereotypes are propagated, such as the effectiveness of White teachers or teacher figures inspiring at-risk or inner-city students, usually students of color, to be creative by writing fiction or poetry (see, e.g.,, *Dangerous Minds*, *Finding Forrester*, *Freedom Writers*, *Up the Down Staircase*). Try to imagine these movies teaching writing skills that would be valuable outside of these singular moments of fictionalized inspiration? In *Dead Poets Society*, we even see the symbolic gesture of a teacher tearing up a syllabus, perhaps imagined to be the dullest of literary genres, even though as a material representation of a 16-week experience, a syllabus can be one of the most creative and rewarding of writing forms. Indeed, if creative writing is about world creation, as many argue it is (though this, too, is debatable), what is closer to this than the creation of a new experience? These films couldn't conceive of encouraging other forms of writing—which is why we should be thankful for the model of creativity we are treated to in *Her*, in which Joaquin Phoenix plays a ghost writer of love letters—not generally a celebrated writing genre.

How did the field of creative writing, and the public's idea about this type of writing, emerge? In *The Elephants Teach*, D.G. Myers presents ample evidence that the institutionalized field of creative writing barely resembles the ideals and movement that produced it in the 1920s United States, when it exploded in popularity largely due to the writings of educator Hughes Mearns. Mearns developed and popularized what's considered to be the first creative writing workshop for junior high school students. He was tired of English courses that used literature as a means of drilling students on vocabulary or grammar or as some other means to an end. Mearns proposed the practice of writing literary texts for self-expression, so that kids would enjoy literature, and for promoting an understanding of literature by writing it. His published description of his creative workshop spread quickly and was rapidly adopted across the United States, largely because he traveled to present the model in schools and published student work in various texts that were publicly devoured.

However, according to Myers, in contrast with current conceptions of writing that treat fiction and poetry as more cultured than genres such as workplace writing, emails, lists, or even theses, Mearns would not have abided by a view of creative writing as somehow more cultured or valuable. Neither would prominent early 20th-century progressive educator John Dewey, Mearns's influencer. In fact, both Dewey and Mearns were highly critical of the notion of culture, which seemed to be a means of discriminating against the masses for abilities that people held due to various privileges and advantages (such as speaking proper English). Myers demonstrates how the rise of creative writing paralleled the rise of post-World War II college enrollments due to the G.I. Bill, as well as the rise of federal student aid. The rise of creative writing programs also divorced creative writing from its study of literary texts, and the field emerged as one that, rather than train future

writers, instead trained future teachers of fiction and poetry. He notes that "Creative writing was devised as an explicit solution to an explicit problem. It was an effort to integrate literary knowledge with literary practice," but that "what had begun as an alternative to the schismatizing of literary study had ended as merely another schism." Now, English departments are divided, with the study of fiction and poetry quite divorced from other parts of the program.

An effect of popular attitudes about writing is that much public, popular, and workplace writing is devalued, despite its ubiquity, importance, creativity, and potency. The division impacts so-called *non-fiction*, too (a genre defined by a lack). As Barbara Tuchman articulates, "I see no reason why the word 'literature' should always be confined to writers of fiction and poetry while the rest of us are lumped together under that despicable term 'non-fiction'—as if we were some sort of remainder."

Too often, binaries are leaned on in order to praise one thing and devalue another. This is the case with the phrase *creative writing* and just about every form of writing that is set apart from it. For example, in his powerful book chapter on housewives' shopping lists, Daniel Miller demonstrates how the lists he studied reflected an awareness of the organization of grocery stores that housewives were calling on when producing them. Rather than items being listed in random order, their writers were, instead, listing items to reflect food categories and writing them to reflect their planned future movement through those stores. Once again, this is the creation of an experience through a particular writing form.

And also too often, what's placed on the other side of the binary is work that is critical in nature. Consider an article by scholar and literature professor, Graeme Harper, who, in championing the creative writing workshop, repeatedly utters sentences like these: "[My students] are required to write both creatively and critically." When the critical is opposed to the creative, it's easy to understand why public *and* academic attitudes so pervasively represent persuasive writing as uncreative, particularly when pitted against those in the so-called creative arts.

Over the years, the students I have worked with, and particularly students who see me in the writing center, have reported that after I talk with them about some of these ideas, and after they begin thinking of themselves as writers, their positive feelings about writing intensify. No one wants to feel that the daily work they do is valueless, dull, uncreative. And everyone should be able to access an identity that they are proud of related to their trade.

I am concerned that narratives about what it means to be creative and a creative writer are to blame for much of what I've described. I would love to see English and related departments banish the use of creative writing in titling disciplines, tracks, and departments. Instead, bring us all together under the banner of writing studies, writing, or writing arts.

In my courses, I tell my students at the beginning of the term that they will not hear me use the phrase, and I tell them why. Most of my students are not going to be fiction writers and poets; they are going to be journalists, technical writers, emailers, texters, medical record writers, memo-writers, proposal writers, and list writers. And I want them to practice their craft in each of these genres and to understand that if they enjoy this work, it is as valuable to them as fiction and poetry. It's time we banish the idea that certain writing forms are creative and certain aren't. And the idea that those who write in the workplace aren't artists. Or that academic writing is dull. Let's challenge ourselves to expand our ideas about what it means to be creative, to stop using the pernicious phrase *creative writing*, and to produce more public texts that depict the creativity involved with forms besides fiction and poetry.

Further Reading

For more information about the development of creative writing, see D.G. Myers's *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (University of Chicago Press). Scholars have traced the history and evolution of the interrelated fields of creative writing, literature, and composition and rhetoric/writing studies, all of which have traditionally been housed in English departments. Notable examples are Robert Connors's *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, Pedagogy* (University of Pittsburgh Press); Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press); and Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* (Southern Illinois University Press).

Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* transformed the writing studies field's view of how literacy is acquired by arguing that our acquisition of it is dependent upon large-scale, powerful, rich, and often invisible structural forces, or sponsors, that enable or thwart access to literate resources such as technology, reading materials, and money. In the chapter, "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading," she demonstrates how families and society contribute to literacy acquisition, noting that individual self-concept as a reader

or writer are not only tied to family practices around reading and writing, but to cultural ideas about the value of those activities that are themselves culturally, nationally, and institutionally sponsored and are passed down, often unremarked, through generations.

Theorization of identity (also referred to as *self-concept*, *selfhood*, and *self-identity*) is robust in fields such as consumer research, psychology, and philosophy. My research frequently draws on the following works: Russell Belk's "Possessions and the Extended Self"; Erik Homburger Erikson's *Identity and the Life Cycle* (W.W. Norton & Company); Dorothy Holland, Williams S. Lachicotte, Jr., Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain's *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Harvard University Press); Robert E. Kleine, III, Susan Schultz Kleine, and Jerome B. Kernan's "Mundane Consumption and the Self: A Social-Identity Perspective"; Jean-Paul

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (Routledge). Good synopses of Erikson's and Sartre's work are also available on Wikipedia.

Keywords

composition and rhetoric, creative writing, creativity, genre, reading, workplace writing

Author Bio

Cydney Alexis is an assistant professor of English and writing center director at Kansas State University, where she teaches courses in composition pedagogy, digital rhetoric, the material culture of writing, literacy studies, professional writing, and writing center theory and practice. Her alma mater is the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she was assistant director of both the first-year writing and Writing Fellows programs. Her research primarily focuses on the material culture of writing—those material goods, rituals, and practices that support writers in their trade. She is interested in tracing how writers' adult practices are impacted by their early writing environments. You can find her on Instagram @materiallives and @writinglandscapes and on Twitter at @cydneyalexis.

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5.3: Popular Culture is Killing Writing

Author: Bronwyn T. Williams, English, University of Louisville

For more than a century, common sense has been telling us that popular culture is killing writing. In 1887, Adams Sherman Hill, of Harvard, bemoaned the effect of popular culture on writing this way: “To read nothing but newspapers and second-rate novels is surely a waste of time... (and) tends to weaken the powers of attention and concentration, to diminish, if not destroy, freshness of thought and individuality of expression.” While the culprits have changed over the years, from newspapers to movies to television in the 20th-century, to digital games and social media today, the concerns and complaints remain remarkably the same. Popular culture texts, according to these laments, are intellectually undemanding, too reliant on emotion, too informal, and often morally compromising (the last was also a concern of Hill’s). Students who read too many comics, watch too much television, or play too many digital games, according to this narrative, will produce naïve, emotional writing that is riddled with errors.

Curiously, however, literacy has not disappeared in the years since Hill developed the foundational first-year writing course at Harvard, to combat the poor writing he attributed in part to popular culture. Literacy rates continue to increase in the U.S., as do the number of words people read and write every year, thanks to the rise in online writing. In university classrooms, as Stanford University’s Andrea Lunsford demonstrates in her research, undergraduate writing students are not only writing longer papers in their courses today, they are making fewer errors of usage and style. Clearly, popular culture has not led to a generation of illiterate people. What’s more, popular culture is not, in itself, the cause of poor writing and when young people engage with popular culture they are learning valuable rhetorical concepts and skills.

Yet when I tell people, whether members of the public or other writing teachers, that popular culture is not the nemesis of writing they assume it to be—and I’ve been researching the interplay of popular culture and student writing for close to twenty years—they can’t believe what I’m saying is true. Across the political spectrum, they are convinced that popular culture is killing writing. Critics on the right fear the intellectual and moral laxity of popular culture, while those on the left fault popular culture for reinforcing harmful stereotypes and brainwashing them into becoming mindless consumers. Across the board, they are convinced that popular culture harms writing because it is too easy to understand and students learn nothing from it. In short, popular culture wastes time and minds. People complain that students refuse to read novels, or that they write emails containing typos, or that they include *text-speak* in college papers.

Even though research contradicts these anecdotal experiences, these narratives persist for several reasons. For one thing, research on memory and narrative makes it clear that all of us are notoriously bad at accurately remembering how we learned things, or how we struggled to learn things, when we were younger. In addition, people tend to distrust or discount new technologies and media with which they are unfamiliar, while maintaining nostalgia for what they did as youth. As Mitchell Stephens notes, in tracing the complaints that have accompanied new communication media dating back to the Gutenberg printing press (and including the telephone, pencils, and television, among others), “We rarely trust the imposition of a new magic on our lives, and we rarely fail to work up nostalgia for the older magic it replaces.” Such nostalgia leads to narratives of a perpetual literacy crisis that are remarkably consistent decade after decade.

Perhaps most important, however, is the general misunderstanding of how people acquire rhetorical and literate abilities, particularly as they move from one genre or medium to another. A substantial, and growing, body of research on the relationship between popular culture and writing shows time and again students engaging in literacy practices that are complex and constantly evolving. There are ways in which popular culture helps student writers, some ways in which it doesn’t seem to make much difference, and, yes, some ways in which it collides with the writing students do in school.

One prevailing myth about popular culture is that it is easy or simple and that’s why young people like it. It’s true that some movies or video games or television programs are not all that challenging in content or form. The same can be said of many books, plays, and poems. Even as critics of popular culture find it easy to summon uncomplicated reverence for established media and genres, such as the print novel, the reality is that there is no medium or genre in which every work is a masterpiece, and no medium or genre that cannot carry substantial intellectual insights. Young people talk to me and other researchers about being heavily invested in popular culture such as television series, comics, movies, and games that are complex, innovative, and engaging their minds. People who still think television is a vast wasteland aren’t watching series such as *The Americans* or *Westworld*, with their complex

characters and narrative structures. People who think all computer games are mindless and don't require thought haven't played the range of games I see students playing, which require diligence, creativity, and learning to complete.

The reason students read popular culture with facility and enthusiasm, including complex and sophisticated forms, is not a matter of simplicity, it's a matter of practice. Learning how to navigate any genre takes time and practice to figure out how it works. Think about the first time you tried to figure out something in a genre with which you had little practice, whether it was a legal contract, poem, opera, or heavy metal. It probably slowed you down, was a bit confusing, and was neither pleasurable nor confidence building. Yet, if you had more practice, your familiarity and facility would increase. There is no doubt that, for the great majority of students, they have much, much more practice reading and making sense of popular culture than they do with academic articles or textbooks. Although, it is also the case that, for every student, there are genres of popular culture they do not have much experience with and are not able to make sense of easily. When I talk with students about popular culture, it is not long before they'll tell me of a form or genre that they just think is weird or that they don't get, whether it's hip hop or country music or horror films or Twitter. It is practice with reading and interpreting genres that has developed their skills in reading, movies, popular music, television, computer games, social media, and more. They read with ease, but not because the content is always easy.

The ease with which students can interpret a form of popular culture has developed with practice, which at some point included struggle, help from others, and accumulating knowledge—in other words, learning. Another myth about popular culture and writing is that people learn nothing from it. Students learn a tremendous amount about rhetoric and communication from their engagement with popular culture, most notably about rhetorical concepts such as genre, audience, and style. When researchers talk with students about their popular culture reading, the students talk knowledgeably and even critically about these rhetorical aspects. Students may talk about a romantic comedy in terms of genre conventions, for example, discussing the kinds of character types that typically show up, whether as protagonists or sidekicks. Or, ask students to discuss the people who frequent an online popular culture discussion forum and they will be able to describe the audience there, as well as the kinds of posts that are viewed positively or negatively. Young people may not always discuss these elements using the specific terms we use in academic settings, but they are familiar with these key rhetorical concepts.

It is not the case that the rhetorical abilities students learn through their extensive engagement with popular culture transfer seamlessly to their classroom writing. Like any of us learning to write in a new genre, students need writing classes that help them understand the conventions, and the reasons for the conventions, of that new genre. Still, when we talk with students about key rhetorical concepts of audience, genre, and style—elements crucial to negotiating any writing situation—we need to understand that students enter the classroom with a vast range of experiences with these concepts. If we help students understand and articulate the knowledge they have learned from popular culture in terms of audience, genre, and style, it is easier to get them to consider how all writing works within particular genre conventions. If we can help them see how they have learned the conventions of popular culture through practice and discussion, they can see how they can do the same if they learn and practice the conventions of academic texts. I should also note that when students understand more about genre and rhetoric, they also become more creative and critical readers and writers of popular culture. Learning is best when the bridge goes both ways.

People do not necessarily connect the ideas of guidance and instruction to how students learn popular culture. Certainly, it is true that young people are exposed to some popular culture forms, such as television, from an early age and do not need to learn how to interpret many television programs in the same way they have had to learn to read. On the other hand, there are popular culture forms, such as computer games, that take more explicit instruction and guidance to learn. Even within familiar forms such as television or music, new genres and unusual songs or programs can be confusing to young people. They do, in fact, need instruction or guidance to help them with their struggles to understand unfamiliar popular culture. At these moments students typically turn to their peers for advice. You don't need to spend much time around young people before you can hear them arguing about, or explaining to each other, the meaning of a song or movie. The development of online forums has offered another popular source of advice and guidance. Research with students with a variety of interests demonstrates that they go to online forums about everything from computer games, to music, to movies for reviews, tips, or discussions. It is important to remember that these discussions happen through writing and reading.

Indeed, one of the results of the advent of an online, participatory popular culture is that it has led to an explosion of reading and writing. Although there are other modes of communication online, such as video, there is still a tremendous amount of reading and writing taking place in online spaces. In fact, compared with thirty years ago, when television and film dominated popular culture practices, young people today are engaged in significantly more reading and writing. What they are learning from writing and

reading in online spaces is, again, a more sophisticated and critical appreciation of concepts of audience, genre, and style, as well as concepts of authorial presence, collaboration, and remix. If you make the time and effort to listen to young people who write and read online, they can talk at length and with insight about how, for example, they consider audience and their online persona when creating a social media profile and posting comments on that page.

Again, when students talk about rhetorical concepts such as audience or genre, they may not articulate their knowledge using these terms unless we make that connection for them. Even so, they do understand the effect of rhetoric on communication. They understand that context influences the choices they make when communicating, and consequently they usually understand that they should use different rhetorical approaches in different contexts. I have not interviewed or observed a single student over the years who did not understand that there were differences in expectations for genre and style between posting an update on social media and writing an essay for a university course. They understand that they are supposed to switch from popular culture genres and language use when writing for a course. (Indeed, linguist David Crystal, among others, demonstrates that stories of students incorporating text-speak in academic papers is largely an urban myth.) That students understand that writing in an academic setting necessitates a different kind of writing than popular culture does not mean they can do so automatically and effortlessly. Learning to write in a new genre always results in uneven moments of struggle and a tendency to make more errors of usage. Still, the issue is switching from one genre to another, not that one of the genres happens to be some form of popular culture.

Finally, while this is not the place to address concerns people have about the effects of popular culture on morality, I do want to challenge the idea that popular culture makes young people lazy and shortens their attention spans. Simply put, how do we reconcile the argument about shorter attention spans with young people flocking to popular movies that are more than three hours long, or playing video games for hours until solving a particular problem, or reading book series such as *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games* that run for thousands of pages? Instead, we should ask why they are willing to spend so much time and effort on these popular culture texts and yet are often less interested in lengthy academic texts. One reason, as I noted above, is that having had more practice with popular culture they are able to engage with it more skillfully. Yet, another reason for the appeal of popular culture for students is that the movies, games, and music they engage with on their own time are usually under their control. Students' interpretations of popular culture are not dictated by their parents or evaluated by their teachers. According to researchers on motivation, control over our activities and of the meaning we make of those activities usually increases our motivation to engage in such activities. We rarely take as much pleasure in work that is assigned to us as in projects that we engage in by choice. Perhaps rather than fretting about popular culture we should be worrying more about the damage that relentless standardized assessment is having on student motivation.

Please understand, I am not going down the road to "everything that is bad is actually good for you." Popular culture can be problematic in many ways. The representations of gender and race and violence can be deeply disturbing, as can cynical appeals to emotion—from advertisements to cable news talk shows. What's more, the kind of extended, evidence-based argument common in academic writing is much rarer in popular culture, where narrative and collage are much more prevalent rhetorical forms. Students who have more of their experience reading and writing popular culture will have some learning to do in college to practice and master the genres of writing expected there. The point is, however, that students would have to learn to read and write in new genres when they get to university, regardless of the genre knowledge they had when they arrived on campus.

If we understand this last point—that students will always have to learn, and struggle with, writing in new genres at university—then we can understand why popular culture, regardless of the form, has been the source of so much complaint for more than a century. Too many people still believe that you can be taught to write once, and that such knowledge should serve you for the rest of your life. First-year writing courses are often regarded as providing the single inoculation for writing—and against popular culture—that students need. Instead, we must understand that writing and reading are abilities that we acquire through learning and practice, and that we never stop learning them. The more we are immersed in texts, the richer understanding we have of the genre, style, audience, and rhetorical context for which they were produced. Students are adept at reading and writing popular culture because they practice it, learn it, control it. Given the same conditions, and motivation, they can learn to do the same with other forms of writing.

Further Reading

For more about the many literacies that students negotiate in and out of school, see Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration* or Jennifer Rowsell's *Working with Multimodality: Rethinking Literacy in the Digital Age*, along

with these collections of essays, listed by editors' names: Donna Alvermann and Kathleen Hinchman's *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives* (3rd ed.); Cathy Burnett et al.'s *New Literacies around the Globe: Policy and Pedagogy*; Ito Mizuko et al.'s *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*; or Marc Lamont Hill and Lalitha Vasudevan's *Media, Learning, and Sites of Possibility*. I have also written about these subjects in *Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture and Reading and Writing Online*; *Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing*; and *New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders* (co-edited with Amy Zenger). To learn more about fan communities, identity, and online writing, see Rebecca Black's *Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction* and Angela Thomas's *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age*.

Keywords

fan communities, genre, participatory culture, popular culture, remix

Author Bio

Bronwyn T. Williams is a professor of English and director of the University Writing Center at the University of Louisville. He has taught writing and studied the connections between popular culture and students' writing and reading practices, both in the U.S. and abroad, for more than 25 years. He is the author of a number of books on the teaching of writing, popular culture, and student identity. Twitter: @bronwyntw. Website: bronwyntwilliams.com.

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5.4: Popular Culture is Only Useful as a Text for Criticism

Author: Mark D. Pepper, English, Utah Valley University

Popular culture, once written off as lacking depth and importance, is now the subject of in-depth analysis both on college campuses and in non-academic venues. Students write extended considerations of how cult TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* explores teen insecurities through their embodiment in the show's demonic villains. Bookstores sell essay collections with titles like *Myth, Media, and Culture in Star Wars* and *The Sopranos and Philosophy*. Online think pieces analyze how Taylor Swift's lyrics may or may not be feminist. A public wiki devoted to the television show *LOST* still has devoted fans trying to figure out what it all meant (maybe even figuring out what those accursed numbers were all about).

All this writing increasingly problematizes the argument that popular culture is primarily dumb, simplified fodder for the masses. In his book, *Everything Bad is Good For You*, Steven Johnson builds a sustained argument that popular culture (especially in the past three decades) has become more complex, better written, and cognitively stimulating. The existence of so many college courses, mass-marketed books, and online pieces of analysis suggest that popular culture warrants close textual scrutiny. The popularity of this writing also suggests a desire for consumers to dig deeper into what their entertainment is about and what broader cultural effects it may have. Considering the actual depth of pop culture texts, it's not surprising that performing deep reading is so popular in the classroom.

This textual analysis of popular culture for its deeper meanings or cultural effects is not a bad idea in and of itself; in fact, getting popular culture taken seriously was a hard-fought struggle in academic circles throughout the latter half of the 20th century. However, that battle was seemingly won on the idea that popular-culture texts should be treated in the same manner as classic literature where textual features such as symbolic and metaphorical messages are treated as important elements of the texts. Therein lies the problem. When popular culture is predominantly written about from the perspectives of textual analysis and cultural criticism, this writing often fails to capture the personal, varied, and complex experiences of consuming popular culture. Students often balk at these writing assignments because they recognize that something is missing (or murdered, in the words of William Wordsworth). Without different kinds of writing assignments that balance the rush to critique content, students are seemingly asked to disregard a lifetime of experience with these texts that do not seem valued by an educational setting that is laser focused on textual dissection.

The Unique Place of Popular Culture in Daily Life

When popular culture is brought into a classroom as analytical fodder for student papers, the results are often smart and well written. Such writing often presents the popular text in a "here's its deeper meaning" light, sometimes to counter the still-common misconception that pop culture is lower or dumber than other forms of texts. Other written analysis often suggests how a popular text is damaging because of the problematic representations of society's marginalized and disenfranchised groups through encoded, normalized messages and symbols. And the assignments work. Students writing in this vein hit all the checkboxes currently heralded by educational goals and outcomes statements: critical thinking, inquiry, close reading, and working with diverse texts. However, saying this type of writing works means something very specific and potentially limiting.

When instructors ask students to write about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Breaking Bad* with the same focal points also applied to *Hamlet* or *Moby-Dick*, there's an implied message that pop culture is not more than that. Sure, the texts may operate similarly in some ways (they all have symbolically charged, complex plots, characters, and themes), however, the popular texts operate in some uniquely different ways too. These are the texts we get hyped for and binge in encaptivating doses. These are the texts that inspire us to buy related t-shirts, toys, and memorabilia. These are the texts we avoid spoilers for and geek out with our friends about (sometimes while wearing costumes of characters from the text). These are the texts sometimes so bad that we watch them simply because they are so bad (hey, *Sharknado)*. These are the texts that are sometimes just on or just there—a background tapestry for everyday living. Pop culture is a unique and contradictory site of meaning making that often (and usually) goes far beyond the definition of meaningfulness required by a textual analysis/critique writing assignment. It's a realm of personal connections, emotional nuance, and messy contradictions that defies most traditional grading rubrics.

This is not to suggest that literature (or even essays) offered for analysis in the classroom don't also come with personal connections, entertainment value, and emotional perspectives. However, standard-issue writing assignments far too often ask that those factors be stripped away or ignored in the actual writing (some instructors of writing still inexplicably discourage the use of

"I" in any situation). So it's not hard to imagine how some students react negatively when they're suddenly asked to dissect pop culture in ways that explicitly (or implicitly) ask them to disregard everything they know and feel about a popular text and reduce it to a textual artifact for parsing.

Textual analysis often come with an implied demand for the readers of such pieces to reject their enjoyment (or, at least, feel guilty about it), and adopt the correct stance when a problematic element is being dissected. Fans may rightly ask: Why should this author's critical interpretation affect my personal relationship with the text just because he or she has a degree or book contract? Another response may be: I see now that this text is problematic, but I still like it. After all, close textual analysis might change minds (or add some nuance) for some readers and writers, but it more likely allows readers who already have these specific critical tendencies to feel good about being on the right side of what they already know.

Here, the unique status of popular culture must be noted again. Students likely expect that the authors of critical essays about Toni Morrison or Kafka know more about the texts than they do. Students often (but not always) have little prior experience with the work. And students write cautiously and with reservation about *Beloved* or *The Metamorphosis* because they're treading new ground. But when pop culture becomes the topic of writing, students may have the feeling that something is missing because they bring so much prior experience with them to the blank page. They have a knowledge base from which to confidently observe, "Well, that hasn't been my experience with the text." Not to be misunderstood, it's obviously good to encounter new perspectives and question previous assumptions. Nonetheless, the question becomes: What is being taught about writing when textual/critical analysis asks students to disregard their outside expertise, turn off their personal investments, and attack (from their points of view) texts that they know are more complex than narrative meaning and cognitive impact?

Fandom Studies and Affective Musings

Again, the problem is one of ratio. These textual/critical analyses wouldn't be so potentially limiting if they were more frequently balanced with other ways of writing about popular culture. One alternate direction is summed up under the loose banner of fandom studies.

In fandom studies, textual critique takes a backseat to observing how texts are reacted to, invested in, and made part of fans' identities and daily lives. While textual critique often assumes a text's particular effects, fandom studies goes to the source and lets fans and their practices speak for themselves (though still filtered through the critical lens of the observer). Fandom writing also brings a myriad of possibilities to the classroom. Students can write ethnographic research reports on face-to-face or digital communities that chart the movement of writing practices within a network of fan activity. Fan fiction can be analyzed (and even compared to the original work) as an exercise in learning style and voice. The clever and surprising alterations in fan fiction also have much to teach about creativity and invention. Finally, fandom offers avenues to analyze or produce *transliteracy*—the process of writing across different media with a variety of tools. For example, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a popular YouTube channel that video blogs (vlogs) the modernized lives of characters from *Pride and Prejudice*. Along with the vlogs, the characters use Twitter and Google+, which allows fans to co-create and shape the ongoing story.

Popular culture may also be written about in ways that go beyond the confines of textual content. Lawrence Grossberg argues that outside the actual content being considered, the pleasure people take in popular culture, is primarily based in affective investments. Affect (admittedly a complex concept too broad for full exploration here) can aptly be understood as the motivating force that adds intensity to our daily interactions and subsequently leads to an individual's sense of what matters—the feeling of life. Obviously, textual and ideological content sometimes matter in our enjoyment or dislike of a text; however, they are just two pieces of the puzzle because affect privileges the depth and complexity of feeling over textual meaning. Grossberg suggests that our encounters with popular texts are intensified (or come to matter) by the complex investments of emotion, passion, mood, and energy that we bring to them in the process of actively integrating popular texts into our identities and social lives. This is the element of popular culture consumption missed in a million close, textual readings. This is where textual meaning is merely a starting place for a text's integration into a person's identity and social performance.

So what does affective popular culture writing look like? Such writing is less concerned with criticism and more focused on what the text means to the author's life. The writing is more personally revealing and socially inviting as it attempts to chart the author's investment in a text, while simultaneously inviting the audience to recognize themselves and reflect on their own relationship to the subject matter. Put differently, affective writing shows authors speaking directly for the texts that usually speak for them. The work of Chuck Klosterman, a pop culture essayist, provides an apt example. Though Klosterman does not avoid textual criticism and

cultural effect (as in his essay critiquing how MTV's *The Real World* created "one-dimensional personalities"), he consistently connects pop culture to his personal experiences in a memoir-like style. Whether he's writing an ode to the universality of Billy Joel, analyzing how porn feeds our need for amateur celebrities, noting how people dismiss country music to sound cool, or what he learned from extensively playing *The Sims* video game, Klosterman's work highlights how popular culture makes us feel, makes us connect, and makes us discuss.

Embracing affect leads to a more personal style of student writing about pop culture but does not have to lead to completely subjective journaling (not that there's anything wrong with that either). Though students are encouraged to write about their participation and engagement with popular culture, the focus is more on the intensity and complexity of that enjoyment. Pleasure (and distaste) is a complicated orientation that, from an affective perspective, is created by any number of extratextual features: early memories of the text (or its genre), opinions about the texts' fans, how the text is publically disseminated, public images/narratives of the artist, and ways the text encourages social investment. By the nature of affect, some of these aspects will necessarily matter more or less. As student writings map this complex web of personal/ social investments (intensely engaging with some while possibly ignoring others), the writer understands that textual effects and reactions (plus the motivations texts may or may not spur) are often unpredictable, contradictory, and incomplete. Such a lesson is fundamentally important when a purely textual focus often implicitly teaches that writing has a unified effect and preferred interpretation.

Textual/critical analysis certainly has an important place. However, as the dominant form of writing about popular culture, it often fails to account for the ways pop culture is used when the viewer isn't specifically focused on critique. Pop culture is a complex space that creates diverse, contradictory, and messy ways to consume, participate, identify, discuss, and make meaning. And pop culture is too entrenched in the daily lives of millions to let one type of writing oversell its importance. Through balancing pop culture use in the classroom, students continue to learn analytical criticism while simultaneously being awarded for their current expertise and complex relationships with the source material.

Further Reading

For more information on the history of popular culture analysis and criticism, see *Culture, Media, Language* (Routledge), which charts the theories and methodologies of The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies throughout the 1970s. Though obviously not the only group of thinkers to influence how pop culture became a subject for textual criticism, many of the school's members and writings form important historical touchstones for the type of analysis critiqued in this chapter. The book includes Stuart Hall's (director of the Centre from 1974–1979) famous work, "Encoding/ Decoding," which highlights how cultural producers create and distribute ideology and meanings through texts that readers can either accept/naturalize or critique/resist.

For more on the theories and methods of fandom studies, Henry Jenkins is arguably the most well-known name in what is often a diverse field. His books, T*extual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge) and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age* (NYU Press), both allow textual criticism to take a backseat to the practices and dispositions of fans. For a broader take on fandom studies as a whole, Mark Duffett's (Bloomsbury) explores fan stereotypes, representations, and practices while citing many thinkers in the field along the way. His chapter, "Beyond the Text" is most applicable to this chapter, in that, it explores how criticism and analysis alone will always miss out on the lived experience of the text under scrutiny.

As this chapter mentions, affect theory is complex and really needs a fuller study to appreciate both its usefulness and limitations. Lawrence Grossberg's *Bringing it All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies* (Duke University Press) collects some of his earliest writings on the relationship between affect and pop culture consumption and enjoyment. But for a more current take on competing definitions and applications of affect theory, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's collection, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press), probes much deeper into the nuances and ramifications of this pre-conscious, intensity producing force that shapes our attachments and affinities for popular culture's offerings.

Keywords

affect, cultural studies, fandom, popular culture, taste studies

Author Bio

Mark D. Pepper is an associate professor of English at Utah Valley University where he teaches courses in composition, technical writing, popular culture, and graphic novels. Much of his research deals with how people use and talk about popular culture in their daily lives to create both personal identity and social belonging. His dissertation looked at how the popularity of texts is created and spread in a digital age of blogs, wikis, and social media. His own pop culture fandom started with comic books as a kid and carries on to a Netflix queue full of television series with far too many seasons to ever reasonably catch up on.

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5.5: The Five-Paragraph Essay is Rhetorically Sound

Author: Quentin Vieregge, Department of English, University of Wisconsin–Barron County

The five-paragraph essay (5PE) doesn't have many vocal defenders in Departments of English in higher education, but for some instructors, the 5PE remains a useful tool in the pedagogical kit. Most college writing instructors have eschewed the 5PE, contending that it limits what writing can be, constricts writers' roles, and even arbitrarily shapes writers' thoughts. Yet, defenders of the 5PE counter that beginning writers need the guidance and structure that it affords. It works, they say, and it gives writers a place from which to start.

The 5PE may sound familiar. In its most basic form, it is an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. Students are often given a topic to discuss, a passage to respond to, or a question to answer. The introduction and body paragraphs typically follow prescribed conventions regardless of content. For instance, the introduction has an attention-getter and explains what others have said about the topic, and the thesis usually comes close to the end of the paragraph. Each of the body paragraphs has a topic sentence that makes a claim that can be backed up with evidence and that refers back to the thesis. Each topic sentence is followed by sentences that provide evidence and reinforce the thesis. The body paragraphs end with a wrap-up sentence. The conclusion reminds the reader of the main idea, summarizes the main points, and might even leave the reader with one lasting impression.

If all that sounds familiar, then it might be because you were taught the 5PE. Defenders of the 5PE can sometimes be found in high schools or two-year colleges, where they might work with students who struggle with writing or are learning English as a second language. One such teacher, David Gugin, writes about how the five-paragraph model benefits students learning English as a second language. Like many proponents of the 5PE, he assumes that the main impediment to expressing an idea is knowing how to organize it. As he puts it, "Once they have the vessel, so to speak, they can start thinking more about what to fill it with."

This type of metaphor abounds. Byung-In Seo compares writing to building a house: One builds a basic structure and the individual spark comes from personalizing the details, either decorating the house or the content of the essay. She refers particularly to her experience with at-risk students, usually meaning students who come into college without the writing skills needed to immediately dive into college-level work. Similarly, Susanna L. Benko describes the 5PE as scaffolding that can either enhance or hinder student learning. A scaffold can be useful as construction workers move about when working on a building, but it should be removed when the building can stand on its own; the problem, as Benko observes, is when neither teacher nor student tears down the scaffold.

Here is the thing, though: When writers (and critics) talk about the 5PE, they're not really talking about five paragraphs any more than critics or proponents of fast-food restaurants are talking about McDonald's. Most defenders of the 5PE will either explicitly or implicitly see the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay as reflections of each other. Just as an essay has a thesis, a paragraph has a topic sentence; just as a paper has evidence to support it, a paragraph has detail. An essay has a beginning, middle, and end; so does a paragraph. To quote a line from William Blake, to be a defender of the 5PE is "To see a World in a Grain of Sand." There are circles within circles within circles from this perspective. If you take this approach to writing, form is paramount. Once you understand the form, you can say anything within it.

This focus on form first (and on the use of the 5PE) is a hallmark of what composition scholars call the *current-traditional* approach to writing instruction. The current-traditional approach is traceable to the late 19th century, but still persists today in the 5PE and in writing assignments and textbooks organized around *a priori* modes of writing (the modes being definition, argument, exposition, and narrative). Current-traditional rhetoric valorizes form, structure, and arrangement over discovering and developing ideas. In current-traditional pedagogy, knowledge does not need to be interpreted or analyzed, but merely apprehended. Writing processes are mostly about narrowing and defining ideas and about applying style as external dressing to a finished idea.

Detractors of the 5PE claim that it all but guarantees that writing will be a chore. What fun is it to write when you have no choices, when the shape of your words and thoughts are controlled by an impersonal model that everyone uses, but only in school? Teaching the 5PE is like turning students into Charlie Chaplin's character from *Modern Times*, stuck in the gears of writing. The 5PE allegedly dehumanizes people. A number of writing specialists from University of North Carolina–Charlotte wrote an article called, "The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education." One of their critiques is that this model means that students aren't taught to think and feel fully; rather they're taught to learn their place as future workers in an assembly line economy: topic sentence, support, transition, repeat. Finally, as several writing instructors have observed, the 5PE doesn't comport with reality.

Who actually writes this way? Who actually reads this way? Does anyone care if an essay in *The Atlantic* or David Sedaris's non-fiction collection *Me Talk Pretty One Day* doesn't follow some prescriptive model? If the model doesn't connect to how people actually write when given a choice, then how useful can it be?

Well, as it happens, formulaic writing has some support. Two such people who support it are Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, coauthors of one of a celebrated writing textbook, *They Say/I Say*. Graff and Birkenstein's book rests on the assumption that all writers—especially skilled writers—use templates, which they've learned over time. For instance, there are templates for thesis sentences, templates for counterarguments, templates for rebuttals, templates for introducing quotes, and templates for explaining what quotations mean. One example from their book is this: "While they rarely admit as much, _____ often take for granted that _____," which is a template students might use to begin writing their paper. Students are supposed to plug their own thoughts into the blanks to help them express their thoughts. Graff and Birkenstein tackle the issue of whether templates inhibit creativity. They make several of the same arguments that proponents of the 5PE make: Skilled writers use templates all the time; they actually enhance creativity; and they're meant to guide and inspire rather than limit. This doesn't mean Graff and Birkenstein love the 5PE, though. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, they contend that templates are an accurate reflection of how people write because templates are dialogic, but the 5PE is not.

Formulas, including templates, can be effective, and arbitrary formulas can be useful under the right circumstances too. They can be useful if they are used as a point-of-inquiry, meaning if writers use them as a starting place rather than a destination when writing. In what ways does the five-paragraph model work for this particular assignment? How should I deviate from it? Should I have an implied thesis rather than an explicit one?

Now, you might be thinking, that's well and good for beginning students, but what about advanced students or professionals? They never use formulas. Well, when my proposal for this piece was accepted, the two editors sent me explicit instructions about how to organize the essay. They divided their instructions into "first paragraph," "middle paragraphs," and "later paragraphs," and then instructions about what comes after the essay. Within each part, they gave specific directions; everything was spelled out. I had a problem; I planned to argue in favor of the five-paragraph essay, so I couldn't use their formula, which presupposed I would argue against the bad idea.

Hmm. That conundrum required me to ask myself questions, to inquire. How should I innovate from the model? How should I not? Their prescriptive advice was a point-of-inquiry for me that forced me to think rhetorically and creatively. Maybe the five-paragraph model can be a point-of-inquiry—a way to start asking questions about rhetoric and writing. When I wrote this piece, I asked myself, "Why do the editors want me to write using a specific format?" And I then asked, "In what ways does this format prevent or enable me from making my point?" Finally, I asked, "In what ways can I exploit the tension between what they want me to do and what I feel I must do?" Asking these questions forced me to think about audience and purpose. But, perhaps more crucially, I was forced to think of the editors' purpose, not just my own. By understanding their purpose, the format was more than an arbitrary requirement but an artifact indicating a dynamic rhetorical context that I, too, played a role in.

Once I understood the purpose behind the format for this essay, I could restructure it in purposeful and creative ways. The 5PE follows the same logic. Teachers often, mistakenly, think of it as an arbitrary format, but it's only arbitrary if students and teachers don't converse and reflect on its purpose. Once students consider their teacher's purpose in assigning it, then the format becomes contextualized in consideration of audience, purpose, and context, and students are able to negotiate the expectations of the model with their own authorial wishes.

Further Reading

If you're interested in reading defenses for the 5PE, you might start with Byung-In Seo's "Defending the Five-Paragraph Essay." A longer more formal argument in favor of the 5PE can be found in David Gugin's "A Paragraph-First Approach to the Teaching of Academic Writing." In the essay, "In Teaching Composition, 'Formulaic' Is Not a 4-Letter Word," Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff criticize the 5PE but defend writing formulas done in more rhetorically effective ways.

For more information about the connection between the five-paragraph essay and current-traditional rhetoric, you might read Michelle Tremmel's "What to Make of the Five-Paragraph Theme: History of the Genre and Implications." For a critique of the 5PE, you might read Lil Brannon et al.'s "The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education."

Defenses of the five-paragraph theme often frame the genre as a scaffolding device. Susanna Benko's essay, "Scaffolding: An Ongoing Process to Support Adolescent Writing Development," explains the importance of scaffolding and how that technique can be misapplied. Though her essay only partially addresses the 5PE, her argument can be applied to the genre's potential advantages and disadvantages.

Keywords

basic writing, current-traditional rhetoric, discursive writing, five-paragraph essay (or theme), prescriptivism

Author Bio

Quentin Vieregge is a faculty member in the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Barron County, a two-year liberal arts college. He teaches first-year composition, advanced composition, business writing, literature, and film courses. He can be followed on Twitter at @Vieregge. His website is quentinvieregge.com.

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5.6: The Five-Paragraph Essay Transmits Knowledge

Authors: Susan Naomi Bernstein, Arizona State University–Tempe. Elizabeth Lowry, Arizona State University,

“But I learned how to write an essay in high school! All you need is five-paragraphs with five to eleven sentences per paragraph. Why am I even taking this class?”

Most first year composition instructors have, at one time or another, heard this complaint from a student, who has been taught that writing should be no more complicated than knocking out the requisite five-paragraphs: In your first paragraph, warn your audience that you are planning to make no more (or less) than three points which they will know to look for in paragraphs two, three, and four respectively. After that, use the fifth paragraph to remind your audience of the three points you just made. For firstyear college students, the five-paragraph essay is considered to be a kind of catch-all for the would-be writer, a formula that students are often taught works for any kind of essay, on any topic, upon any occasion. Except when it doesn’t.

We argue that the emphasis on the five-paragraph essay at the high school level is emblematic of what internationally well-regarded Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire refers to as the banking model of education. According to Freire, the banking model is a form of teaching and learning in which knowledge is understood to be a kind of currency that is literally deposited into students’ heads by an expert. The banking model is promoted by an educational system that relies on standardized tests and other quantitative methods of analysis. Within the banking model, students accrue facts and formulas like interest, drawing on that interest when it is time to show what they have (l)earned from school. Another way to conceive of the banking model could be garbage in, garbage out. Or, as Freire himself puts it: “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.” Here, Freire references *storage*, suggesting an eventual reallocation (or trading) of information that is presented as being empirical and objective. Freire critiques this model of education because it renders learners passive and dependent on the authority figures from whom the knowledge is ostensibly disseminated. Students educated within this system can too easily become complacent, accepting whatever they are told without question. Just as disconcertingly, students are not always supplied with knowledge that they can use in meaningful ways outside of school.

If our education system promotes modes of learning that apply only to school but not to the rest of our lives, chances are minimal that any of us will retain what we have learned beyond our lives out of school. In a similar vein, the five-paragraph essay is an exemplar of the banking model of education as a means of demonstrating how information is stored, rather than as a means by which students can interrogate and transform the world around them. To be successful in the banking model of education, students merely need to regurgitate (in some recognizable form) the knowledge that has been deposited in their heads. The five-paragraph essay is that recognizable form. Easy to read, easy to grade, and easy to teach.

The five-paragraph essay is widely believed to be useful in terms of making students assimilate, absorb, store, categorize, and organize new knowledge, but it is not useful in terms of getting students to actually use that knowledge creatively or critically for productive problem posing and solving. In this sense, the idea of knowledge transfer from high school to college via the five-paragraph-essay form is untenable. Although popular wisdom holds that assimilating some structural empirical knowledge of writing will help to promote efficient knowledge transfer between high school and college, in fact, the five-paragraph form can become a limitation when students are confronted with various new structures of knowledge significant to post-secondary success.

Put another way, knowledge is not meaningfully transferable through the five-paragraph-essay form because the banking method of education conceives both learning and students themselves as products rather than as works in process. The five-paragraph form emphasizes shutting down processes of inquiry—that is, it dismisses the need for future conversation by providing the illusion of having resolved complex problems. The role of the five-paragraph essay in the move from high school to college is analogous to using training wheels when learning to ride a bike. Useful—maybe even necessary at first—but, as the rider becomes more proficient and broaches more complex terrain, those little wheels will collect debris, or become snagged on rocks. Thus, these once-useful training wheels become a liability. They may slow the rider down or, when they catch on obstacles, may throw her from the bike. At best they are a nuisance, while at worst they are a danger. Without training wheels it may be tough to get started at the beginning of a ride, but eventually we figure out how to do it. Bumpy rides may pose a challenge, but they make us resilient.

That said, at what point is it time to move away from the five-paragraph essay? We believe that the time comes to move away when one is focusing on a problem that defies pat answers. That is, when working on a piece of writing that is designed with a purpose beyond simply organizing information by reporting on uncontroversial facts (e.g., “smoking is bad for you”). As soon as a student is in a position to enter a process of inquiry to explore (and perhaps offer solutions to) an issue that may provoke more questions and yield myriad answers, the five-paragraph format should be thrown to the wind. We want authors to be resilient, to be independent thinkers, to be problem solvers and interrogators. Such is the purpose of teaching beyond the supposedly foolproof formula of the five-paragraph theme. When students are challenged to write beyond memorized formulas, to travel beyond the *how* of writing to the *why* of writing, they learn skills of academic resiliency that will transfer to college and beyond. Freire also addresses this. To counter the banking model of education, he offered the idea of *problem posing*, in which students take on problems and issues from their everyday lives and from their communities. Such problems, Freire believes, would engage students’ hearts and minds and would offer critical motivation and support for *learning* rather than (l)earning inside and outside the classroom.

Susan recounts the story of a time when the five-paragraph formula seemed helpful—at least at first. She had applied to teach in an emergency teaching-certification program in a large Northeastern city. She met with other applicants in a school cafeteria to complete a series of tests including an essay-writing test.

The applicants were to respond to the question, “What are the three most important skills that teachers need in our city’s classrooms?” Of course, this topic easily lent itself to a five-paragraph essay: An introduction (including a thesis listing the three main skills), one skill per paragraph, and a conclusion that repeated the most important points. Susan fit the essay together as neatly as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, robotically meeting unarticulated expectations. Just as the jigsaw puzzle encourages the assemblage of a mass-produced factory image already conceived by another entity, the five-paragraph essay seemed to be prompting the construction of an argument that was always already anticipated.

The testing session seemed an appropriate analogy for writing instruction itself. Administrators offered a writing test that implied a five-paragraph response, a response that could be easily vetted to identify uniformity and adherence to conventions. Applicants who followed these unspoken rules would be deemed qualified to teach the five-paragraph essay to the next generation of students. Anyone who interrogated this standard method for writing, whether teacher or student, need not apply.

After the essay-writing test ended, the applicants met for a short break and discussed with one another the essays they had just written. Somehow everyone had automatically done what Susan had done. All their essays sounded remarkably similar, except for one applicant who asked in disbelief, “We were supposed to divide that essay into paragraphs?” The rest of the applicants exchanged glances. In her head, Susan answered, “Well, yes. If we choose not to think outside the box. And if we expect every writer to follow the same formula rather than the more complicated nuances that come from real thinking.” Even as the directions for the writing test did not mention paragraphing explicitly, the five-paragraph theme seemed implicit for structuring an effective response.

The fact that the emergency certification applicants were slated to teach in the city’s most at-risk schools was also disconcerting. The banking model of education depends upon formulas such as the five-paragraph essay to deliver its most efficient lessons, especially in working-class schools, in which teachers instruct students to follow the rules. This “hidden curriculum,” as Jean Anyon describes it, rewards “rote behavior,” readying working-class children “for future wage labor that is mechanical and routine.” Such instruction replicates, rather than interrogates, U.S. social class structures. The link between the banking model of education and classism has been drawn because the banking model does not encourage students to challenge the status quo by entering into a process of inquiry. Instead, the banking method suggests that the knowledge conferred upon students (or deposited within them) is all those students will need in order to be successful. In fact, this is not the case. Students need to think critically and creatively in order to become community leaders and to gain social and political power.

Critical thinking should begin as early as possible—and it should begin by challenging the five-paragraph form. For example, students could be asked how they might rewrite five-paragraph essays in more imaginative ways. What happens if they add more paragraphs? What happens if they remove some? What happens if they begin to change the order of the paragraphs? How might meaning change and how might students better control the intended message of their writing? After all, meaningful writing is far from formulaic.

Further Reading

Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a foundational text on pedagogy, particularly with respect to disenfranchised communities. First published in Portuguese in 1968, the book was eventually translated into English and became an instant classic in the United States. Readers interested in further foundational work on socioeconomic class, agency, and education should see Jean Anyon's 1980 article in the *Journal of Education*, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work." This piece argues that the kinds of work students are asked to do in school often reifies social divides.

Keywords

academic writing, banking model of education, five-paragraph essay, problem posing, transition to postsecondary education

Author Bios

Susan Naomi Bernstein is a lecturer and co-coordinator of the Stretch Writing Program at Arizona State University–Tempe. She teaches Teaching Basic Writing Practicum and Stretch courses at ASU, and also teaches in an American Indian Community in central Arizona. Her most recent publication is "Occupy Basic Writing: Pedagogy in the Wake of Austerity" in Nancy Welch and Tony Scott's collection, *Composition in the Age of Austerity.* She has published four editions of *Teaching Developmental Writing* (Bedford/St. Martin's) and is a regular contributor on basic writing issues for the *Bedford Bits* blog.

Elizabeth Lowry received her Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition from Arizona State University, where she now holds a lecturer position in rhetoric and composition. Her research interests include public spheres, material culture, and 19th-century women's rhetorics. Her work has been published in *Rhetoric Review, Word and Text*, and in edited collections.

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5.7: The Five-Paragraph Theme Teaches “Beyond the Test”

Author: Bruce Bowles, Jr., English, Texas A&M University–Central Texas

“Tell them what you are going to say, say it, tell them what you said.” I remember learning this strategy from my English teacher my senior year of high school. While mentioning this might seem like a cheap shot at a former teacher, it is quite the contrary—he was one of the best teachers I have ever had. This strategy was taught to us as a general format to follow, yet modify, for a variety of writing tasks. However, with the increase in high-stakes testing that education has seen over the last 10–15 years, this strategy frequently becomes a rather rigid, prescriptive formula: the five-paragraph theme (FPT).

Most of us are familiar with this structure, even if we do not refer to it as the five-paragraph theme. Traditionally, the FPT contains an introductory paragraph that moves from a general overview of a topic to an explicit thesis statement that highlights three main points. The three supporting paragraphs each take up one of these three main points, beginning with a topic sentence and then moving into more detailed description. Finally, the FPT ends with a standard conclusion that is, oftentimes, merely a restatement of the thesis statement and reiteration of the three main points. (Yes, this theme is referred to as a five-paragraph essay, FPE, elsewhere in this book, but the concept is exactly the same. That it goes by different names while having the same outcome shows its ubiquity in school-based writing situations.)

Advocates for the FPT contend that it is a phenomenal tool that teaches all students a basic organizational structure that can be built upon in the future and, in addition, is especially useful for teaching students who struggle with basic organization when writing. While such a view may indeed have a small degree of merit, the persistence and popularity of the FPT has a more sinister source—standardized testing. With its mechanical formula, the FPT is the perfect vehicle to ensure inter-rater reliability (consistency amongst test graders), allowing for both efficient and economic scoring sessions for testing companies. Essentially, the FPT influences writing instruction as a result of what is referred to as *assessment washback*, with standardized testing indirectly dictating curriculum. Thus, the FPT has become the primary genre, not because of its educational merit or real-world applicability, but as a result of its pragmatic benefits for testing companies. Even worse, as a result of its rigidity and the manner in which testing companies assess the FPT, it imparts a hollow, formulaic notion of writing to students that emphasizes adherence to generic features rather than focusing on quality of content, informed research practices, effective persuasive techniques, and attention to the specific contexts in which students will compose.

To understand why the FPT is immensely beneficial for testing companies, it is essential to understand the concept of interrater reliability. The original attempts at assessing writing ability on large-scale, standardized assessments relied on multiple-choice questions that dealt with grammar and stylistics primarily. However, such assessment methods were scrutinized since they did not actually have students compose (and, as other chapters in this collection discuss, acontextual grammar instruction that multiple choice tests rely on doesn’t improve writing). Such methods were critiqued as lacking construct validity; in essence, they were not measuring the actual construct (writing ability) they were purported to measure. Instead, they merely focused on specific skills that did not reflect one’s overall ability to write.

As a result, testing companies were forced to transition to holistic scoring—evaluating writing as a whole as opposed to its isolated components. Yet, this presented quite a dilemma. At its core, the evaluation of writing is a subjective, interpretative endeavor. After all, we have all disagreed at one time or another with an friend or colleague about the quality of a particular book, newspaper article, and so on.

However, such disagreement is especially problematic for the standardized testing community. How can a standardized writing assessment be an accurate reflection of students’ writing ability if the people scoring the students’ writing disagree wildly as to the quality of it? Thus, it is necessary for these testing companies to produce consistency amongst scores. That’s what inter-rater reliability is meant to do—create reliability among the raters, and it is paramount for testing companies to justify the accuracy and fairness of their writing assessments. At its core, inter-rater reliability is a measure of how often readers’ scores agree on a specific piece of writing. An inter-rater reliability of 1 indicates perfect agreement and, for standardized testing purposes, an inter-rater reliability of .8 (80% agreement) is usually seen as the benchmark for reliability. However, obtaining a .8 inter-rater reliability is not as easy as it may seem. Even on a holistic scale of one to six (one poorest, six highest), raters will frequently disagree.

As a general rule, the more rigid and precise the criteria for evaluation of a piece of writing, the more likely a high inter-rater reliability will be achieved. This is why the FPT is so efficient in scoring standardized writing assessments; with its prescriptive

formula and distinct features, raters can be normed (i.e., trained to agree) on the presence and quality of these rather specific features. Is there a clear and concise thesis statement with three main points? Check. Does each supporting paragraph have a topic sentence and move into a more detailed description? Check. Did the conclusion effectively restate the argument? Check.

Although the scoring session for a standardized writing assessment may not necessarily be as mechanical in nature, the general premise still holds. If raters can be trained to identify specific features or qualities in writing, they will be more likely to agree on an overall score; this agreement saves testing companies time and money since they do not need to resolve disagreements between raters. While such a practice may seem to be merely a practical solution to a troubling assessment problem, it actually has profound consequences for writing instruction at the elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels.

Ideally, assessments should reflect the curriculum taught in schools. Yet, when high-stakes testing tethers students' scores to school funding, teacher bonuses, students' acceptance to colleges, and so on, the reverse frequently happens—the curriculum taught in schools begins to align with the assessments. The state of Florida provides an illustrative example of this. Surveying students across four Florida high schools, Lisa Scherff and Carolyn Piazza have found that persuasive and expository writing (styles frequently associated with the FPT and standardized testing) were heavily emphasized in the 9th and 10th grades, not surprisingly the grades in which the students took the state's standardized writing test. Instead of receiving instruction on composing in a variety of genres and for a variety of purposes, students are rigorously drilled on how to effectively compose for the genre featured on the state assessment, which—to no one's surprise—is a five-paragraph persuasive or expository essay.

Beyond restricting writing instruction to a formulaic genre, this assessment washback has other negative effects on students' writing development as well. Prominent composition scholars Chris Anson and Les Perelman (featured in this collection) have found that students can be coached to perform better on these standardized writing assessments by following a few general guidelines: Follow the structure of the FPT, write more words (length of essay tends to directly correlate with score), use big words (the higher the vocabulary the better, regardless of whether the words are used correctly), use multiple examples (whether they are relevant to the overall argument or not), and provide a lot of supporting details and evidence, whether they are factually correct or not, since raters are trained not to account for factual accuracy. (One of the students Perelman coached wrote that the Great Depression was primarily a result of American competition with Communist Russia, admitting that he made something up since he could not remember the specific details.) These standardized writing assessments reinforce notions about quantity over quality in writing. I believe it is fair to surmise that most English teachers would not support these practices as methods for improving writing!

The simple solution to all of these problems would appear to be merely reducing our reliance on, or removing, the FPT from our curricula. However, as long as policy makers rely on standardized writing tests, and those writing assessments rely on the FPT, such a change in curriculum will not be possible. The manner in which we assess writing will always exert a tremendous influence over how we teach writing. Since, for inter-rater reliability and economic purposes, standardized testing relies on the FPT, the only sure-fire way to reduce—or eradicate—the use of the FPT in our curriculums is to reduce or eradicate our reliance on standardized testing.

Over the last two decades, we have consistently been fed a lie that teacher evaluation is biased; as a result, standardized testing is necessary to hold schools accountable for student learning. This cunning ruse has deceived us into believing that standardized assessment evaluates student learning better and predicts future growth and performance more accurately. The logic is that teachers and administrators are biased; standardized testing provides a level playing field for everyone involved.

And yet, surprisingly (or not surprisingly), the reverse is true, at least when it comes to predicting future academic success. Pop quiz: Which measure is the most accurate predictor of high-school students' success at the collegiate level? If you answered SAT scores or performance on state-wide assessments, you would be wrong. Time and time again, studies show that a student's high school GPA is the most accurate predictor of collegiate success! Essentially, the supposedly biased and poorly trained local educators are the most apt at assessing students' growth, learning, and future performance. The expertise and localized knowledge of our teachers is rendered irrelevant by standardized testing; in an effort to remove the purported bias of local educators, standardized testing removes a wealth of local knowledge and expertise from the process of assessing writing.

Transitioning to localized writing assessments would not only take advantage of educators' local knowledge and expertise, it would enable more authentic, valid forms of writing assessment. Students could produce capstone projects that require them to compose in genres and media that adequately reflect the composing challenges they will face in college or their future professions. Writing

portfolios would enable local educators to assess how students perform on a multitude of writing tasks across a variety of contexts. Electronic portfolios would even allow students to practice technological literacy skills. Local educators could work collaboratively with state and federal agencies to create challenging writings assessments that would accurately reflect the composing challenges students will face in their futures, while ensuring oversight to prevent any possible bias or padding of the results of these assessments.

As long as we remain tethered to standardized testing as our primary method for assessing students' writing proficiency, the FPT will exert a prominent influence over curricula. However, by allowing local educators—who work diligently with our students and children throughout the school year and know students' abilities and needs best—to play a prominent role in developing and administering such localized assessments, more valid writing assessments can be developed that will influence curriculum in a positive, educationally productive fashion.

Further Reading

If you are interested in learning more about the negative influences of standardized testing on curriculum and instruction, and

the benefits of localized assessment, Chris Gallagher's "Being There: (Re)Making the Assessment Scene" (*College Composition and Communication*) provides profound insights into the dangers of drawing upon business practices in an educational context, critiquing the idea of using accountability as the driving logic behind educational practices. Diane Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (Basic Books) also provides a scathing critique of standardized testing from the perspective of someone who initially advocated for testing and school choice.

In regard to the damaging effects of the FPT and standardized testing, Chris Anson's "Closed Systems and Standardized Writing Tests" and Les Perelman's "Information Illiteracy and Mass Market Writing Assessments" (both found in *College Composition and Communication*) discuss the adverse consequences of these assessments on students' development as writers.

Finally, if you are interested in alternatives to standardized testing, Bob Broad's *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing* (Utah State University Press), Brian Huot's *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* (Utah State University Press), and Darren Cambridge, Barbara Cambridge, and Kathleen Yancey's *Electronic Portfolios 2.0: Emergent Research on Implementation and Impact* (Stylus Publishing) provide valuable models of more localized, context-sensitive writing assessment practices.

Keywords

assessment washback, curriculum, five-paragraph theme, interrater reliability, localized assessment, portfolio assessment, standardized testing, validity

Author Bio

Bruce Bowles, Jr. is an assistant professor of English and director of the writing center at Texas A&M University–Central Texas. His research focuses on formative assessment practices, in particular responding to student writing, as well as methodologies for writing assessment, the ethics of writing assessment, and the influence of writing assessment on curriculum and pedagogy. He has taught writing and rhetoric at the college level for several years and, unfortunately, has seen the negative influence the five-paragraph theme has on students' writing development.

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5.8: Research Starts with Answers

Author: Alison Witte,Trine University, Angola, Indiana

The research paper has become a rite of passage where students choose a topic (or are assigned one) about which they present a claim, and then look for ways to confirm it with evidence located through some ambiguous thing or process called *research*. One of the primary problems with the research paper is that it teaches students that to *do research* is to look things up—to use the library or the Internet. Skills for locating information are essential to being a successful researcher, as is familiarity with the library and the rich variety of sources available, but it represents only a small part of the research process.

So, what does it really mean to *do research*? Research is a threestage process: (1) seeking information that is new to the researcher, (2) interpreting, evaluating, and organizing that information, and (3) reporting that information to others to affect some action. Richard Larson emphasizes that the nature of research is active. The researcher—whether student, academic, or professional—takes an active role in *seeking*. Seeking is not limited to locating what exists, but also extends to creating new data or information in service of answering a question or solving a problem.

Perhaps some of the confusion over the role of research in writing, and the writing process, comes from the structure of classical argument that is often included as part of the organizational pattern for the research paper. When argument is taught, it's frequently connected to the historical practices of Greek and Roman rhetoric. Rhetoric, the study of the ways to use language to persuade a listener, was one of the core subjects of formalized education in Greek and Roman times and was seen as a necessary component of democratic citizenship. The study of rhetoric focused on argument as an oral practice of making clear claims in an effort to persuade. Speakers would present their positions, respond to

challenges to their positions, listen to speakers presenting opposing positions, challenge those positions, and adjust their own claims and approaches. Argument was the primary means of conducting governing and legal activities, so participants were expected to be knowledgeable in both the conventions of arguing and in possession of acceptable, logical evidence to support their claims. The process was messy, time-consuming, and in some cases, not the most efficient way to conduct business or legal proceedings. It was viewed as a dynamic interaction that involved speakers going back and forth, and sometimes round and round, in an effort to come to a conclusion. Classical argument, in its basic principles, was meant to be a continual process rather than strictly a completed product.

Oral argument was a cornerstone of university curricula through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and into the 18th century. Written forms of argumentation did not take precedence in university settings until the 1800s, and coinciding with increasing specialization found both within and outside of the university. The research paper replaced oral exams and public speaking as a measure of intellect; and it was initially successful at fostering and promoting the creation of knowledge in local communities. The use of the research paper proliferated until it became the primary genre students write—a genre less about creating knowledge and more about compiling it.

Subsequently, the research paper became a tool for teaching students how to use the library, find the right words, and skillfully search through the words of others. Such a task eliminates the writer's voice from the conversation—as they are not required to participate in the discussion of the subject at hand, but simply to report what others have said about it. Because they are not active participants in the conversation, when students are taught by their textbooks and teachers to make a claim supported by reasons at an early stage of developing their argument, they have no real stake in the claim they make, nor any real grounds for making such a claim. Their choices are often arbitrary and rote, based in what they believe they know, in what they are comfortable with, or in what they believe will lead to many easy-to-find, readily accessible sources. They see no purpose for their claim other than completing the assignment. Nonetheless, this claim becomes the thesis statement of the paper and is to be the foundation of the work that follows.

Teaching students the purpose of doing research is supporting an idea or belief one already holds is not teaching students about research. In fact, the name *research paper* is, in itself, misleading, as it implies that research is a practice only used in a particular genre or instance, rather than as a fundamental element of nearly all forms of academic, workplace, or personal writing. Researching isn't meant to be a narrow task of looking up information, but of creating and discovering new information in response to problems. Describing research in these limited terms does not prepare students to participate in actual research in their courses of study and in their professional fields.

A more useful approach to teaching students about research, and how to do research, begins with re-thinking how we define research and research skills. If research is the process by which a researcher seeks new information, makes sense of that information, and then reports that information to someone else, then research ought to begin with a question, not an answer. Students need to be taught not to look for answers, but to look for problems that need solving and for questions that need to be answered.

Rather than limiting the conception of research to a search for certain facts or pieces of evidence or to a trip to the library, it needs to include the processes of primary research—research collected directly by the researcher using tools he or she has designed to find the information needed to answer a particular question. I am not suggesting that secondary research—the locating of previously published materials—be eliminated, but that it not be presented as the paramount form of research, as is often done in the research paper. Secondary research is a key part of the research process and usually precedes any primary research. Once a researcher has a question, it's logical to see if and how others might have answered the same question. To be successful, students, and any researchers, must have a working knowledge of the question they are investigating. However, that information serves as a starting point for researchers, who then ask further questions to spur and design their own primary research.

Primary research provides students with opportunities to engage with people around them, to work collaboratively, to think critically about the best way to accomplish the task of getting the information they need to answer their questions, to learn how to manage and organize data, and to learn to interpret data. Because students need to work with people around them to develop ideas and locate problems to research and solve, primary research encourages students to see the ways in which research might help or benefit the people around them in their local communities.

Additionally, working on primary research as a component of a class engages students with one another as they share their struggles, progress, and successes. They have the opportunity to learn both from their own experiences and each other. Students engaged in primary research also have to design their own tools (surveys, interview questions, experiments, etc.) to accomplish their particular goals. They can test versions and make modifications, adapting to changes in their research question, or problems that arise during the process. The need for such adaptability breaks students of the conception that there is *a* way to get the answers that they need, preparing them to be adaptable in situations beyond the classroom.

Once the definition of research shifts from information locating and idea confirmation to information generating and problem solving, the ways students write about research needs to change. The genre of the academic research report requires students to present the findings of their research in a clear, logical fashion, while also documenting their processes and opening their work to be critically examined by others. The research report also typically necessitates a literature review—a collection of published and cited research related to the topic at hand—that provides the impetus for the student's project and to show how the project extends what has already been done and provides new insight or knowledge. Thus, the research report gives students practice at both primary and secondary research, while allowing them to pursue genuine research questions.

Having students design and pursue genuine research projects that generate rather than simply locate information teaches them that research is about innovation—about doing what hasn't been done. It also demonstrates to them that research is a useful tool not only for learning, but also for action. Information gained from research can be used to impact their schools, homes, workplaces, and communities. Then, much as the ancient Greeks viewed classical argument as an essential part of citizenship, participating in genuine research and research writing becomes a key part of engaged and productive citizenship in the 21st century.

Further Reading

For further information about the historical understandings and practices of rhetoric, see Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*. Additionally, Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge) and David Russell's *Writing in the Academic Disciplines 1870–1990: A Curricular History*

(Southern Illinois University Press) discuss the shift from oral to literate culture and how the introduction of writing affected the ways people thought about and communicated about the world around them.

For more on the prevalence and use of the research paper, see James Ford and Dennis Perry's "Research Paper Instruction in Undergraduate Writing Programs: National Survey" (*College English*). Richard Larson's "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Form of Non-Writing" (*College English*), Robert Connors's *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (U of Pittsburgh Press), and Audrey Roth's *The Research Paper: Process, Form, and Content*. (Cengage Learning) look at the

pedagogy of the research paper, while Robert Davis and Mark Shadle's "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking" (*College Composition and Communication*) offer some mixed/ multi-genre alternatives to the traditional research paper.

Keywords

argument, claim-based writing, classical argument, data-driven writing, research paper, research writing, rhetoric

Author Bio

Alison Witte is an associate professor of humanities and communication at Trine University in Angola, Indiana. She has been teaching research writing to college students for 10 years. She regularly teaches courses in research writing, research methods, technical writing, and advanced composition, and has co-developed curriculum for teaching research writing to international graduate students. She also chairs her university's Institutional Review Board, which reviews and approves all campus research projects with human participants. Her research interests include student research practices, digital pedagogy, digital pedagogy preparation, and non-classroom writing. Her twitter handle is @acwitte82.

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5.9: Research Starts with a Thesis Statement

Aujthor: Emily Wierszewski, Seton Hill University, Pittsburgh, PA

Our collective belief in the importance of definite answers impacts many areas of our lives, including how we understand the process and purpose of research. Specifically, it leads to a thesis-first research model in which research is only used to verify our existing ideas or theses. (Alison Witte discusses this bad idea in a previous chapter.) In this model, there is no room for doubt or ambiguity. We assume we need to know the answers to our problems or questions before the process gets underway, before we consult and evaluate what others have said.

Research can be productively used in this way to verify assumptions and arguments. Sometimes what we need is just a little support for an idea, a confirmation of the best approach to a problem, or the answer to simple questions. For example, we might believe the new iPhone is the best smartphone on the market, and use research on the phone's specs to prove we're right. This kind of thesis-first approach to research becomes harmful, however, when we assume that it is the only or the most valuable way to conduct research. Evidence of this widespread assumption is easy to find. A simple search for the research process on Google will yield multiple hits hosted by academic institutions that suggest a researcher needs a thesis early in the research process. For instance, the University of Maryland University College's *Online Guide to Writing and Research* suggests that a thesis should be developed as soon as source collection gets underway, though that thesis may change over time. In the book, *A Writing Process*, author Vinetta Bell suggests that the thesis-writing process begins during the "preliminary research" stage. This strategy is endorsed by multiple research library websites, such as the University of Minnesota.

And yet, genuine inquiry—the kind of research that often leads to new ideas and important choices—tends to begin with unsettled problems and questions, rather than with thesis statements and predetermined answers. Wernher von Braun, an engineer whose inventions advanced the U.S. space program in the mid-21st century, famously describes research as, "What I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing." The understanding of research as discovery is echoed in the recent "Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education," a document authored by the Association of College and Research Librarians (ACRL). They write that research often begins with open-ended questions that are "based on information gaps or reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information." In other words, research isn't just for backing up our hunches. It can, and should, also be used as a method of investigating areas of uncertainty, curiosity, conflict, and multiple perspectives.

As the ACRL's framework also emphasizes, when researchers review published source material around their topic, points of disagreement will be discovered; these points are expected as scholars propose ideas to address complicated issues. When we are open to selecting and engaging with these multiple published perspectives in our research, we're also forced to consider how they extend or challenge our beliefs and ideas about a topic. Considering all sides, we can then make a more informed decision about our questions or topics.

Another potential harm of the thesis-first model of research is the attendant assumption that the research process is linear. In a thesis-guided research process, a question is posed, an answer is generated, and sources are found that match up with that answer. Truthfully, research rarely progresses on an uncluttered path toward a clear solution. Instead, research is a recursive process that involves many diversions, bumps, and missteps. Clark College's library website describes the research process as a daisy, rather than a line. Like a daisy's petals, research is described as cyclical and fluid. As we research, we may find ourselves returning to and changing our question, or we may near the end of a project and think we're done but discover we need to go back to find more or better sources. The messiness of research requires us to be flexible, often modifying our approaches along the way. When we enter the research process with a narrow and rigid focus on our thesis, we can become discouraged and inclined to abandon our ideas when the research process does not unfold neatly.

In place of a thesis-first model, we would be better served to begin research with a question or a statement of a problem. We should conduct research not just to back up our pre-existing assumptions and prove we're right about something, but also when we feel curious or confused and do not have answers. Why is something the way it is? Why doesn't the data quite add up? How could something be changed for the better?

When we understand research as a process of discovery rather than a process of proof, we open ourselves up to be changed by our research—to better our lives, our decisions, and our world. We acknowledge that we do not have the only or the best answer to every question, and that we might learn something from considering the ideas of others. While research definitely has the power to

impact our lives and beliefs, research doesn't always have to be life altering. But in a thesis-first model where our only goal is just to prove we're right, there is no possibility of being changed by our research. Here's a practical example of the difference. Just imagine the results of a research process beginning with a thesis like "Human trafficking should have harsher legal penalties" versus one that starts with an open-ended question like "Why does human trafficking persist in the democratic nation of the United States?" In the thesis-first model, a researcher would likely only encounter sources that argue for her pre-existing belief: that harsher penalties are needed. She would probably never be exposed to multiple perspectives on this complex issue, and the result would just be confirmation of her earlier beliefs. However, a researcher who begins with an open-ended question motivated by curiosity, whose goal is not to prove anything, but to discover salient ideas about a human rights issue, has the chance to explore different thoughts about human trafficking and come to her own conclusions as she researches why it's a problem and what ought to be done to stop it, not just create stronger consequences for it.

Viewing research as a process of discovery allows us to accept that not every question is answerable and that questions sometimes lead only to more questions. For instance, the researcher in the previous paragraph exploring the issue of human trafficking might find that there is no clear, single explanation for the prevalence of this human rights violation, and that she's interested to know more about the role of immigration laws and human trafficking—something she never even thought of before she did her research. When researchers do discover answers, they may find those answers are fluid and debatable. What we have at any 234 Bad Ideas time is only a consensus between informed parties, and at any time, new research or insights can cause that agreement to shift. Kenneth Burke, a philosopher and literary critic, explains the constructed nature of knowledge in his unending conversation metaphor. According to Burke, the moment in which a researcher reads and participates in scholarship around the research topic or problem is just a speck on a continuum of conversation that has been ongoing well before the researcher thought of the question, and will continue long after the researcher has walked away from it. As Burke writes, "The discussion is interminable."

So how can we move toward embracing uncertainty? In his book, *A More Beautiful Question*, Warren Berger suggests that parents and those who work with young children can foster curiosity by welcoming questions. Parents also need to learn to be comfortable with saying "I don't know" in response, rather than searching for a simple answer. Berger also recommends that as children go through school, parents and educators can work together to support children's questioning nature, rather than always privileging definite answers. When students graduate and move into the working world, employers can encourage them to ask questions about policies, practices, and workplace content; employees should be given freedom to explore those questions with research, which can potentially lead to more sustainable and current policies, practices, and content. The same goes for civic and community life, where any form of questioning or inquiry is often misconstrued as a challenge to authority. To value questions more than answers in our personal and professional lives requires a cultural shift.

Although our culture would tell us that we have to know everything, and that we should even begin a research project by knowing the answer to our question, there is obvious value in using research as a tool to engage our curiosity and sense of wonder as human beings—perhaps even to improve our lives or the lives of others. If all researchers started the process with preconceived answers, no new findings would ever come to be. In order to truly learn about a topic or issue, especially when it involves important decision making, we need to learn to embrace uncertainty and feel comfortable knowing we might not always have an answer when we begin a research project.

Further Reading

For additional information about the power and purpose of inquiry in our everyday lives, consult Warren Berger's book, A More About Genres 235 Beautiful Question (Bloomsbury), which provides an overview of how to engage in authentic inquiry in a variety of settings. Berger offers practical advice for learning to develop research questions that are driven by discovery and innovation. Robert Davis and Mark Shadle also provide a defense of inquiry in their article, "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Art of Seeking" (College Composition and Communication).

For more specific information about all of the stages of the research process including formulating a question, Bruce Ballenger's classic guide to research, The Curious Researcher (Longman) and Ken Macrorie's canonical text I Search (Boynton/Cook), which focuses on research with personal value, may both be useful. Clark College Libraries' website also provides a quick reference chart outlining the research process entitled "The Research Process Daisy." Finally, Wendy Bishop and Pavel Zemliansky's edited collection, The Subject Is Research: Processes and Practices (Boynton/Cook), provides perspectives from multiple authors about various research techniques such as interviewing and observation that can be used to engage in the inquiry process.

Keywords

discovery, process, research, thesis, thesis-first research model

Author Bio

Emily Wierszewski has been teaching writing for over ten years, most recently at Seton Hill University outside of Pittsburgh, PA. Her graduate work focused on nonfiction writing, including the study of what makes writing persuasive, as well as how people learn to read and write. As a professor, she's very interested in how her college students understand and have used the research process before coming to her class, including how their preconceptions about the purpose and process of research impact their attitudes toward and proficiency with college-level inquiry. She recently wrote a book chapter about how comics can help students more effectively engage with research in the writing classroom. Her Twitter handle is @ewazoo23.

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5.10: The Traditional Research Paper is Best

Author: Alexandria Lockett, English, Spelman College

To understand the research paper and its contemporary significance, we must acknowledge how the Internet makes the process of research and of writing research much more complex. A vast majority of Internet users use the web and social media multiple times per day. Long gone are the days when one major function of the research paper was to bring students into contact with libraries. Today's students need to also know how to navigate the Internet—a vast digital source of information whose system architecture affects the work of teaching and research.

Typically, a first-year college student's research paper assignment might require 5–10 sources, whereas advanced students are probably asked to cite no more than 30 sources. These figures may stem from research concerns that emerged during an entirely different technological history. This number makes sense if we consider the physical labor involved in visiting the library, communicating with a librarian, finding the card catalog, writing down serial numbers, walking up several flights of stairs, locating the correct stack, browsing the stack, and using a step stool to reach the source in question—rinse and repeat. These spatio-temporal aspects of composing a research paper most likely affected source selection. For example, some textbook writers used to complain about how research papers often lacked primary sources and relied on questionable secondary materials despite physical libraries' numerous resources.

The number of sources a paper should include remains an essential guideline that defines the research paper, which affects how students prioritize their efforts. Most college students will not have to worry about physically setting foot in a library building to meet the research paper's quantitative source requirement. In fact, finding the number of sources is the easiest part for student writers, because a broad search will take less than one full second to retrieve millions and millions of sources on any given subject.

Of course, finding sources may be easy, but strategically incorporating them into an argument may seem impossible to today's writers. How could any teacher reasonably expect a student to come up with a thesis when they are seconds away from an uncountable selection of sources and communities of knowledge? What incentive does any researcher have to make new ideas in the data deluge? When almost anything that can be conceived is searchable via the Internet, what is the researcher really responsible for? Verifying data? Deliberating about its significance? Informing their social media networks?

Unfortunately, the labor involved in researching and using the Internet for research tends to be ignored. Instructors may underestimate the nuances of popular databases and overestimate students' frequent use of databases as competency. However, Internet research really is a lot of work. Researching "the research paper" via Google, Google News, and Google Scholar retrieves almost 19,000,000 results. Unaccompanied by quotes, the number of results exceeds one billion. Without awareness of the importance of Boolean logic, or operators that affect the scale of results, a researcher may find herself drowning in data. When plugged into proprietary databases available to most college and university students such as Proquest, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Academic Search Complete, the research paper displays several thousands of sources per database.

Consuming data dumps, whether by the dozens, hundreds, or thousands, would take decades to read, summarize, annotate, interpret, and analyze. These processes do not include the creative task of evaluating the patterns between data or learning more about the backgrounds, values, and beliefs of their authors—all of which were easy to take for granted when working with a limited number of print sources. Therefore, the 21st-century politics of research is defined by the problem of scope. There is simply too much information.

Although traditional research papers undoubtedly address the problem of how to evaluate and integrate sources, a contemporary first-year college writing student will probably be sensitive to her limitations as a single writer. What kind of *original* contribution can teachers reasonably expect the average high school or college student to create that they can't instantly access via the Internet? It hardly seems appropriate, or fair, to ask any student, regardless of classification, to wade through oceanic swaths of online data for the purposes of making an original contribution, as a single author, to some public policy debate or academic discipline.

Moreover, there are few incentives to ethically conduct research when the paper is taught as a bureaucratic necessity of the high school or college experience. I could wax poetic about the joys of discovery and the wonderment of wandering aimlessly through scholarly work, but the research paper does not tend to encourage this openness. Students may believe that if they include a certain number of sources of a particular kind, and use the instructor's preferred documentation style, that their research paper will be

successful. Too often this simplistic approach is mistaken for laziness. But, most people cannot handle the chore of deciphering the data deluge. Plagiarism, then, becomes a major effect of the Internet's causal effect on teaching and learning the research paper.

Thousands, if not millions, of students will use Google and Wikipedia as first steps towards plagiarizing work—plunging into an abyss of boredom or cultivating their curiosity about a subject. Their teachers will obediently, and sometimes zealously, police plagiarism with the assistance of Google's robust search engines and Turnitin. Both the student and teacher will use social media to talk about their frustrations and joys in real-time. The student's plagiarism will most certainly deserve a status update, some likes, and perhaps some comments. The teacher's boring instruction and the difficulty of the assignment will end up discussed in text messages, and who knows which social media platforms or blogs. At worst, the student will complain about it to RateMyProfessor.com or in the teacher's evaluations. These examples illustrate that the Internet and mobile technologies extend the reach of the research paper far beyond classrooms and institutions. In fact, Research 2.0 converges with offline human activity, extending its causal force across several media, very much affecting real life.

The Research Paper 2.0

The entire Internet user experience is embedded in knowledge economies, which impact how people learn. For example, Internet users' attention is managed and directed by large private corporations like Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon, and their partnerships and affiliations with the handful of multinational

conglomerates that produce and own the media. The data collection practices and design of these companies' websites direct users' attention, which affects their research skills. The same Internet users will also participate in the development of revolutionary open-source, collaborative archives like Wikipedia, which models an unprecedented effort in collective intelligence.

By virtue of accessing and using the Internet, its users *are researchers.* As a landscape of big data, the Internet's primary purpose is to facilitate research and its subsequent acts of storing, producing, and retrieving huge amounts of information (as it was when it was conceived at CERN). Unfortunately, the Internet's global multidisciplinary, multi-sector, and multi-generational history and culture are largely unknown by most contemporary students—even though they interact with it every single day. Thus, the research paper in contemporary web settings should be designed to directly address any of the technological politics of blended learning and emerging technologies.

At best, research papers 2.0 will encourage students and instructors to reflect on how the Internet and its complex networked features mediate their research and writing process. Specifically, research 2.0 might include a much stronger emphasis on collaborative and professional writing. Students may organize online writing groups via Google+ or LinkedIn based on their topical interests to provide evidence of their ability to lead and contribute to a team. They might also contribute to crowdsourced, annotated bibliographies of paper mill websites to help the school's integrity office, or participate in one of the Wikipedia edit-a-thons sponsored by Art + Feminism. Research 2.0—be it delivered through a paper, ePortfolio, Wikipedia, or Prezi—might include ethical evaluations of research scandals, the legality of citizen surveillance footage of police brutality, and a comparative analysis of big data websites like Data.gov or WikiLeaks.com. But not all of its topics need to be digitally themed, but it can and should use digital technologies and resources to refresh what the research paper can do in the 21st century.

One of research paper 2.0's primary objectives should be bringing students into contact with research communities that synergize online experiences with offline social events. Towards this end, Wikipedia is an ideal space for (and subject of) research in 2.0 because it has been a subject associated with research writing conduct for over a decade. Most students' experience with Wikipedia and academic writing is that its use is strictly forbidden.

When it is cited as a source in a research paper, teachers are annoyed or infuriated because they can't understand why students don't *know better.* Regardless of how much suspicion surrounds the veracity of Wikipedians' knowledge, every Internet user consults this information resource. Furthermore, students and teachers would have a much different experience with Wikipedia, and research, if students understood the site from the perspective of its editors. Thus, the Wiki Education Foundation, an affiliate of the Wikimedia Foundation—the non-profit organization that runs Wikipedia among several other projects—has made strong attempts to connect Wikipedia to educational institutions through their Wikiedu.org platform.

Due to technological, and thus pedagogical limitations, the traditional research paper is incapable of translating the affordances of research writing to online environments. Therefore, research 2.0 should respond to the significance of human interaction with the Internet and the politics of big data. We live in a superabundance of learning spaces, and thus, infinite possibilities for research.

However, few educational institutions and disciplines are cultivating the technical, scientific, and artistic competencies necessary for editing, navigating, and managing the Internet's infinite retrieval mechanisms. When students are taught how to recognize that they have the power to diversify Internet content with high-quality research, the research paper 2.0 could play a major role in balancing the dynamics of knowledge production between traditional institutions and emerging media.

Further Reading

To learn more about how the purpose and genre of the American research paper has changed since the late 19th century, see John Scott Clark's *A Briefer Practical Rhetoric*. Also important is Robert Morell Schmitz's *Preparing the Research Paper, A Handbook for Undergraduates.* Additionally, Cecile Williams and Allan Stevenson's *A Research Manual* and Florence Hilbish's *The Research Paper* show that the research paper continued to be the central subject of writing manuals and textbooks throughout the mid-20th century.

For more information about the popularity of the research paper assignment, as well as teacher training in the genre, see James E. Ford and Dennis R. Perry's *Research Paper Instruction in the Undergraduate Writing Program*, and *Rethinking the Research Paper*, written by Bruce Ballenger. Robert Davis and Mark Shadle's *Building a Mystery: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking.*

also discusses non-traditional approaches to research writing. Researchers Tere Vaden and Juha Suoranta have critically evaluated some of the ways in which educators ought to make sense of the politics of making information in Web 2.0 contexts in their book *Wikiworld*. In addition, for information on how researchers are measuring data and its volume, the following studies may be useful: "UC San Diego Experts Calculate How Much Information Americans Consume"; J.E. Short, R.E. Bohn, & C. Baru's study, "How much information"; and Martin Hilbert's "How to Measure 'How Much Information?' Theoretical, Methodological, and Statistical Challenges for the Social Sciences."

Keywords

big data, Boolean logic, data deluge, traditional research paper, web 2.0

Author Bio

Alexandria Lockett is an assistant professor of English at Spelman College. Her areas of applied expertise include technical and professional writing, teaching with technology, and writing program administration, with research interests in digital history, new media, surveillance, social movements, discourse theory, transdisciplinary communication, and cultural rhetoric. In the capacities of tutor, mentor, editor, career assistant, administrator, and instructor, she's worked with diverse groups of college writers representing all classification levels including multilingual (ESL), first-generation, and students from underrepresented and diverse backgrounds at the University of Oklahoma and Pennsylvania State University. Her twitter handle is @MzJaneNova. Her public portfolio link is www.alexandrialockett.com

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5.11: Citing Sources is a Basic Skill Learned Early On

Author: Susanmarie Harrington, English, University of Vermont.

Citing sources can seem simple: Follow the rules to show readers what you read. Many English classes usually teach a particular system for citing sources designed by, and named after, the Modern Language Association (MLA). College students soon discover that professors working in other disciplines have similar (yet different!) systems for citing sources (one designed by and named after the American Psychological Association, APA, is particularly common). The belief that citing sources is simple can be traced back to formative experiences: Many writers connect their later success to a thorough assignment in middle or high school that required them to use the library, create an extensive bibliography, and write a long paper that used quotations to support their points. People who become expert in a field may not recognize the implicit skills they have developed since that first experience. It can seem almost second nature to follow rules for inserting footnotes, indenting long quotations, and constructing lists of works cited: Citation is merely a matter of following directions.

It turns out it's more complicated than that: All the directions about citing sources assume deep prior knowledge. Citing sources is a specialized, almost ritualized, skill that provides readers with information in specific, routinized ways. Style guides provide rules about everything from how many spaces to put between sentences to how to organize and format the bibliography. Style guides direct academic writers to use footnotes or parenthetical notations, in combination with bibliographies at the end of a piece, to tell readers where information comes from—who wrote it, when, and where it was published. For skilled writers, following complicated rules comes easily—for beginning students, not so much.

Why are these systems so complicated? One reason often emphasized in school is accountability. Citing sources in very particular and detailed ways allows readers to find any source material the writer used, and allows readers to evaluate the quality of the source material the writer used. But complex citation systems have other purposes as well: They let writers demonstrate strong command of highly specialized work. In other words, the rules let writers show expertise.

This expertise unfolds in nuanced ways. Writers choose texts to quote in order to connect themselves to particular traditions of thinking or researching; to put their arguments in the context of other, more prominent authors, whose views are already accepted by readers; or to put forth arguments or examples a writer wants to contest, examine, or elaborate. So, selecting and discussing sources is a matter of savvy diplomacy, persuasion, and argumentation. Sure, it involves learning how to follow detailed directions about how and where to place punctuation in order to indicate where quotations start and end; more importantly, it involves learning how and why writers associate themselves with sources, whether they seek to agree with what they've read, argue with what they've read, or apply what they've read to a new context. It involves understanding that there are reasons for using evidence other than to support a claim; writers might use sources to identify trends in order to argue with them.

Capturing Complexity

Different systems for citing sources may require different formats on the page, but the variation in how research is presented is intellectually even more significant. Humanists generally value work that dwells closely and slowly on particular passages or moments in text, and quotations are to be presented and analyzed. Scientists generally value work that presents trends in phenomena, with previous work grouped and summarized, with far fewer, if any, quotations. There is no simple formula for citing or using sources, or for organization that can teach writers everything there is to know about what they are expected to do.

Will today's seventh graders be prepared to pick up these lessons in college without additional instruction? Probably not, even though the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) *do* put a premium on learning to cite evidence for claims and conclusions. The Reading Standards mention that students should be able to cite material accurately, and the expectation that students support claims with evidence appears in grades 6 through 12. But the CCSS don't distinguish the ways in which different disciplines might have different ways of approaching the use of sources, and they don't go into detail about the particular conventions writers should follow to cite sources. The CCSS emphasize the kind of close reading that is likely more common in the humanities. So students coming from high school English classes will be prepared to move into college English literature expectations for handling sources—but they may not be prepared to do exactly what a sociology or political science course expects, let alone biology or math.

Students arrive in college prepared not only by high school curriculum standards but also by their experience of reading and writing in the world. In school, the details of citation systems carry authority. Out of school, other strategies help readers evaluate

information. Material on the web provides live links rather than formal citations. Journalists don't use parenthetical citation systems to indicate where their information comes from—they simply identify it in the text by putting the source's name and qualification. Graphs and charts, seen in posters, pamphlets, textbooks or journalistic sources, may have a legend identifying the organization that supplied data. Nonfiction books have varied styles for citation—from copious footnotes, extended lists of sources at the back, to a list of works consulted without any attempt to map where they influenced the book. Sometimes experts supply information without citing sources: Reputable food bloggers dispense authoritative information about, say, how to safely can produce without necessarily linking to or identifying the scientific sources for those recommendations. Outside of school, there are many ways to convey credibility and indicate relationships to the sources used for a piece.

Writing with authority is complicated and needs to be learned anew in each situation: successful writing isn't just about following rules, but about establishing connections among readers and writers. Writing with sources is about participation in ongoing conversations, situated in the complex, messy politics of social networks.

Further Reading

Lionel Anderson and Katherine Schulten's blog, "The Learning Network," published in the *New York Times*, discusses the complications of citing sources and plagiarism in high-profile cases in journalism, politics, music, and comedy. For a look at how context matters in how citations work, see Chris Anson and Shawn Neely's discussion of citation in writing for the U.S. Army and at West Point: "The Army and the Academy as Textual Communities: Exploring Mismatches in the Concepts of Attribution, Appropriation, and Shared Goals," published in *Kairos*. Linda Adler-Kassner, Chris Anson, and Rebecca Moore Howard discuss the ways we should look beyond traditional school expectations to learn how writers in many contexts—such as government work and agricultural extension sites—attribute information. See their essay "Framing Plagiarism" in the collection *Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism: Teaching Writing in the Digital Age* (University of Michigan Press).

To learn more about the many reasons writers cite sources, see Amy Robillard's essay, "Young Scholars Affecting Composition: A Challenge to Disciplinary Citation Practices," published in *College English*. For a historical take on this point, see Robert J. Connors's "The Rhetoric of Citation Systems, Part II: Competing Epistemic Values in Citation" (Rhetoric Review). Connors's historical study illustrates the ways citation styles have shifted over time, influenced by arguments in professional associations. Citation styles have never been simple and obvious; they change over time.

For a look at how one university helpfully introduces students to writing effectively with sources, see Gordon Harvey's material for the Harvard Expository Writing Program: *Writing with Sources, A Guide for Harvard Students.*

Keywords

citation, plagiarism, researched writing, working with sources, writing development

Author Bio

Susanmarie Harrington is professor of English and director of Writing in the Disciplines at the University of Vermont. She has taught researched writing for over twenty years, teaching at all levels from first-year students to graduate students. She has collaborated with faculty across the disciplines in workshops and teaching, and she has taught in both urban and rural institutions. Most recently, she has worked with librarians, faculty in the disciplines, and the writing center to promote attention to department-based learning outcomes for students. She has co-edited and co-authored many different types of publications, working with quantitative and qualitative methods. Her variety of writing experiences and working relationships with faculty in many departments inspired her interest in citation and research development.

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5.12: Plagiarism Deserves to be Punished

Author: Jennifer A. Mott-Smith, English, Towson University.

"College Plagiarism Reaches All Time High"

"Studies Find More Students Cheating, With High Achievers No Exception"

Headlines like these from *The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times* scream at us about an increase in plagiarism. As a society, we feel embattled, surrounded by falling standards; we bemoan the increasing immorality of our youth and of our society. Plagiarism, we know, is an immoral act, a simple case of right and wrong, and as such, deserves to be punished.

However, there is nothing simple about plagiarism. In fact, the more we examine plagiarism, the more inconsistencies we find, and the more confusion. How we think about plagiarism is clouded by the fact that it is often spoken of as a crime. Plagiarism is not only seen as immoral, it is seen as the stealing of ideas or words. In his book, *Free Culture*, Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig questions what it can possibly mean to steal an idea:

I understand what I am taking when I take the picnic table you put in your backyard. I am taking a thing, the picnic table, and after I take it, you don't have it. But what am I taking when I take the good idea you had to put a picnic table in the backyard— by, for example, going to Sears, buying a table, and putting it in my backyard? What is the thing that I am taking then?

Lessig was getting at the idea that when a person borrows an idea no harm is done to the party from whom it was taken. His example is important because it makes us question whether theft is an apt way to think about plagiarism.

But how is Lessig's idea of taking a picnic table different from taking an idea and reusing it in writing? One obvious difference is that in writing it is the acknowledgement of one's sources that makes taking something okay. But another, less obvious but more important difference is that taking ideas and using them in your own writing is a sophisticated skill that requires a good deal of practice to master. There are at least three important things to understand about the complexity of using sources. First, ideas are often a mixture of one's own ideas, those we read, and those we discuss with friends, making it hard, or even impossible, to sort out who owns what. Second, writers who are learning a new field often try out ideas and phrases from other writers in order to master the field. This process allows them to learn, and is a far cry from stealing. Third, expectations for citing sources vary among contexts and readers, making it not only confusing to learn the rules, but impossible to satisfy them all.

It is quite hard to separate one's ideas from those of others. When we read, we always bring our own knowledge to what we're reading. Writers cannot say everything; they have to rely on the readers to supply their side of the meaning making. One difficulty arises when you read an argument with missing steps. As a good reader, you fill them in so that you can make sense of the argument. Now, if you were to write about those missing steps, would they be your ideas or those of your source?

Knowing about such difficulties, teachers and writers often question whether it's possible to have an original idea. Many have come to the conclusion that we always write recirculated ideas that we have borrowed from others and reworked. But surely we know when we reuse words? Surely we should be able to attribute them? Perhaps not. Words are not discrete entities that can be recombined in countless ways, but rather, they fall into patterns that serve certain ways of thinking, the very ways of thinking (habits of mind, you might say) that we try to instill in students. The fact is that language is formulaic, meaning that certain words commonly occur together. There are many idioms, such as "toe the line" or "cut corners" that need not be attributed. There are also a whole lot of co-occurring words that don't quite count as idioms, such as, "challenge the status quo," "it should also be noted that...," and "The purpose of this study is to...," that similarly do not require attribution. These are called *collocations*. When it comes to academic writing, there are a great number of them that student writers need to acquire and use. What this means is that not every verbatim reuse is plagiarism.

Moreover, imposing strict rules against word reuse may function to prevent student writers from learning to write in their fields. When student writers reuse patterns of words without attribution in an attempt to learn how to sound like a journalist, say, or a biologist, or a literary theorist, it is called *patchwriting*. In fact, not only student writers, but all writers, patch together pieces of text from sources, using their own language to sew the seams in order to learn the language of a new field. Because of the complex way in which patchwriting mixes text from various sources, it can be extremely difficult to cite one's sources. Despite this lack of attribution, much research has shown that patchwriting is not deceitful and therefore should not be punished. In fact, some scholars are interested in exploring how patchwriting could be used by writing teachers to help student writers develop their writing skills.

The third reason that it is not always easy to acknowledge sources is that expectations for referencing vary widely, and what counts as plagiarism depends on context. If, for instance, you use a piece of historic information in a novel, you don't have to cite it, but if you use the same piece of information in a history paper, you do. Journalists typically do not supply citations, though they have fact checkers making sure they're right. In business, people often start their reports by cutting-and-pasting earlier reports without attribution. Furthermore, research has shown that the reuse of words and phrases in science articles is much more common and accepted than it is in the humanities; this may be because words are regarded as neutral tools to be reused in objective discussions, or because many scientific terms and collocations do not lend themselves to being paraphrased.

Additionally, in high school, student writers likely used textbooks that did not contain citations, and once in college, they may observe their professors giving lectures that come straight from the textbook, cribbing one another's syllabi, and cutting and pasting the plagiarism policy into their syllabi. They may even notice that their university lifted the wording of its plagiarism policy from another institution! In addition to these differing standards, which seem to turn on differences in genre or field of study, research has also shown that individual experts such as experienced writers and teachers do not agree whether or not a given piece of writing counts as plagiarism. Given such wide disagreement over what constitutes plagiarism, it is quite difficult, perhaps impossible, for writers to meet everyone's expectations for proper attribution. Rather than assuming that writers are trying to pass off someone else's work as their own and therefore deserve punishment, we should recognize the complexity of separating one's ideas from those of others, of mastering authoritative phrases, and of attributing according to varying standards.

While the feeling that plagiarism deserves punishment is perhaps widely held in society, the understanding that plagiarism is often not deceitful and does not deserve punishment is also present. The latter understanding is held by writers who recognize that originality is not about divine inspiration. Today, many writers and writing teachers reject the image of the writer as working alone, using (God-given) talent to produce an original piece of work. This image of a lone author capturing never-before-heard-of ideas simply is not supported by writing research, which shows that writers both recombine ideas to create something new and collaborate with others when generating their texts. Interestingly, the image of the lone, divinely inspired writer is only a few hundred years old—a European construct from the Romantic era. Before the 18th century, there were writers who copied and were nevertheless respected as writers. Rather than seeing copying as deceitful, copying can be taken as a sign of respect and as free publicity as well.

Today, millennial students may copy without deceitful intent, but for different reasons. Reposting content on their Facebook pages and sharing links with their friends, they may avoid citing because they are making an allusion; readers who recognize the source share the in-joke. In school, millennials may not cite because they are not used to doing so, or they believe that it's better not to cite some things because using too many citations detracts from their authority. In either case, these are not students trying to get away with passing someone else's work off as their own. In addition, writers from some cultures (particularly those educated outside Western schooling contexts) may not see copying without attribution as plagiarism because it is culturally accepted that communal ideas are more favored than individual ideas. It is also believed that educated audiences will know the source material, so students may not recognize plagiarism as stealing; instead it is a sign of respect and sophistication in writing.

Despite these complexities of textual reuse, most teachers nevertheless expect student writers to do their *own work*. In fact, student writers are held to a higher standard and punished more

rigorously than established writers. What is more troublesome is that teachers' determinations of when plagiarism has occurred is more complicated than simply noting whether a student has given credit to his or her sources or not. Some research has shown that teachers let inadequate attribution go if they feel the overall sophistication or authority of the paper is good, whereas they are stricter about citing rules when the sophistication or authority is weak. They tend to more readily recognize authority in papers written by students who are members of a powerful group (e.g., whites, native English speakers, or students whose parents went to college). Thus, in some instances, plagiarism may be more about social inequity than individual deceit.

As we come to realize that (1) writers combine their ideas with those of others in ways that cannot always be separated for the purposes of attribution, (2) writers often reuse phrases in acceptable ways, and (3) citation standards vary widely and are often in the eye of the beholder, the studies and articles panicking over plagiarism make less and less sense. In looking at plagiarism from the different perspectives offered by collaborative and culturally different writers, we can see that much plagiarism is not about stealing ideas or deceiving readers. Unless plagiarism is out-and-out cheating, like cutting and pasting an entire paper from the Internet or paying someone to write it, we should be cautious about reacting to plagiarism with the intent to punish. For much plagiarism, a better response is to just relax and let writers continue to practice the sophisticated skill of using sources.

Further Reading

For college teachers who want to help students learn to avoid plagiarism, guidance is available from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003). The document "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices" defines plagiarism, discusses its causes, and provides a set of teaching suggestions.

For more on how millennial culture shapes attitudes toward plagiarism, see Susan D. Blum's (2009) book, *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture* (Cornell University Press). Based on interviews with 234 university students, Blum argues that the values of communalism and shared authorship, and not the belief that plagiarism is deceitful, influence this generation's use of sources. For more on how plagiarism is entwined with issues of social identity, Shelley Angélil-Carter's (2000) book, *Stolen Language? Plagiarism in Writing* (Longman), is helpful. Based on a study conducted in South Africa, Angélil-Carter argues that students have difficulty with writing, including avoiding plagiarism, when there are differences between the ways that language is used at home and at school.

For more on how the construct of the lone, divinely inspired writer contributes to current understandings of plagiarism, see Rebecca Moore Howard's (1999) book, *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators* (Ablex). Howard argues that designating patchwriting as a form of plagiarism prevents student writers from developing as writers.

For those interested in hearing more from an author who was plagiarized but not offended by it, Malcolm Gladwell's (2004, Nov. 22) article in *The New Yorker* called "Something Borrowed: Should a Charge of Plagiarism Ruin Your Life?" is an engaging read.

Keywords

borrowing, citation, patchwriting, plagiarism, referencing, source use, textual

Author Bio

Jennifer A. Mott-Smith, associate professor of English, has been teaching college writing for over twenty years, so she knows firsthand how scary and confusing students may find plagiarism to be. Working mostly with multilingual writers, she has had the benefit of exposure to other traditions of source use and textual construction. As a scholar, she has been researching plagiarism since 2009. Her book, *Teaching Effective Source Use: Classroom Approaches That Work*, co-written with Zuzana Tomaš and Ilka Kostka, is being published by University of Michigan Press in 2017.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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6.1: Grading Has Always Made Writing Better

Author: Mitchell R. James, Lakeland Community College.

"To grade is a hell of a weapon. It may not rest on your hip, potent and rigid like a cop's gun, but in the long run it's more powerful."—Larry Tjarks

There are a number of problems surrounding the ubiquitous practice of grading student writing. In *Schools Without Failure*, William Glasser notes that grading tends to be perceived by students as various levels of failure. In addition, Marie Wilson argues that a focus on failure leads teachers to approach student writing in search of deficiencies instead of strengths, which puts students in a state of preventative or corrective mindsets when trying to learn. These mindsets are especially troubling for students in writing classes, where errors must be made in order for students to grow and develop.

Another problem with grading, Brian Huot notes in *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*, is that it rarely communicates anything of value to students. When I take a narrative that a student has written in one of my courses—something that has evolved through several drafts and has greatly improved—and I tell that student the paper is an 85%, what am I saying? 85% of what? Am I saying the narrative is in the top 85% of the class, the top 85% of narratives written by all college freshmen in the U.S., or in the top 85% of all the narratives I've ever read? Or maybe I'm comparing what was executed in the narrative to a rubric, and I'm suggesting the student met 85% of the objectives on the rubric, such as effective dialogue, strong verbs, and detailed description. But might a narrative that uses all three objectives still be a poorly written narrative?

The breakdown of communication inherent in this kind of *summative-only*, end-of-the-paper/project grading is a grave issue. As a case in point, Liesel K. O'Hagan and colleagues demonstrate the lack of useful information gleaned by students when grading is implemented in a classroom. As a part of the study, one student wrote, "I don't even understand what the grade means on my paper. The top says something like a B and then all the comments say positive things and then there are all these errors marked. Then the person next to me wrote only half as much as I did and has even more errors marked and he got an A. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

So why are we still so dependent on grading? The simplest answer is growth in student numbers. Education used to be only for the wealthy and privileged. That changed at the start of the 20th century, and continues through our present time with such acts as mandatory attendance laws, the GI Bill, and the growth of open-enrollment colleges. As student numbers and diversity rose in the classroom, the models of grading we use today came to fruition, and those that had been used before were relegated to near obscurity. However, it might be in the past where we can find the answers to the present question: If grading writing is counterproductive, what else can we do?

The grading process in place before the late 19th century hinged more on direct contact between student work, course content, the student, and the teacher. For example, in English classes, teachers would respond to student writing in both written and spoken form. There were many levels of communication between the student and teacher, which provided more opportunity for the student to gain an understanding and command of course content. In addition, a student's success depended on demonstrating the skills taught. If students could demonstrate the necessary skills (reading, writing, or speaking) then, and only then, did they pass the course. This more attentive and interactive approach is akin to what occurs in *assessment*.

Assessment and grading are not synonymous. Grading is a silent, one-way evaluation, where a teacher assigns a letter, rife with a set of socio-cultural significances, to a piece of student writing. Assessment, on the other hand, provides the opportunity for two kinds of evaluation—formative and summative.

Formative evaluation—done typically by responding to in-process student writing several times during the semester—replaces the punishment or praise of student learning, typically demonstrated

through grading a final product or test, with a process that encourages communication as a part of learning. When using formative evaluation, teachers and students speak with one another often. In addition, formative evaluation creates safe spaces for student learning because students are not focused on trying to avoid failure but, instead, are searching for insight and growth. As grades lose their power, the desire to evade punishment or failure can dissolve into the desire to seek knowledge and learn something new. Finally, because of the communicative nature of formative evaluation, students develop the capacity to talk about and, in some instances, even teach the material themselves as they work with their peers to explain what they know.

Summative evaluation follows extensive formative evaluation. Summative evaluation is superior to grading because it assesses a student's ability to meet *a priori* criteria without the use of a letter grade. Summative evaluation methods such as student self-reflection on the learning process, ungraded portfolio assessment, and contract grading all provide the opportunity for teachers to assess and respond to student learning free of the socio-political, socio-economic letter grade.

Unfortunately, like most teachers, I have to provide grades in the summative sense. If I don't submit a letter grade at the end of a semester, I will not have a job. But providing end-of-semester grades doesn't preclude providing formative assessment that can help students revise a text or project so they will better understand why they might receive an 85% as a final grade. If I had a choice by my institution whether to provide summative grades, however, I wouldn't do it again. In short, the enterprise of grading student writing should be replaced by a combination of formative and summative evaluation.

Further Reading

To learn more about grading, assessment, and higher education, read Stephen Tchudi's *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*, Brian Huot's *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*, and William Glasser's *Schools Without Failure*. If looking for the most contemporary material on the subject of grading in education, consult the work of Mark Barnes, who has published a number of books such as *Assessment 3.0* and has an intriguing TED Talk on the need to eliminate grading altogether. Carnegie Mellon University's Assess Teaching and Learning website also contains informative definitions for and practices of assessment techniques.

Keywords

assessment, formative assessment, grading, grading alternatives, summative assessment

Author Bio

Mitchell R. James is a fiction writer, poet, and assistant professor of composition and literature at Lakeland Community College. He received a B.A. in literature from Eastern Illinois University, and both an M.A. in literature and a Ph.D. in composition from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Mitch's research interests are classical rhetoric, interdisciplinary approaches to creative writing, formative and summative assessment, alternatives to grading, and responding to student writing. Mitch has been writing, researching, and teaching in these topics for many passionate years. Track Mitch down on Twitter @mrjames5527.

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6.2: Rubrics Save Time and Make Grading Criteria Visible

Author: Anna Leahy, Chapman University

In K–12, and in higher education, rubrics have become popular for evaluating students' writing. The straightforwardness of a rubric—a list of criteria, of what counts, often in a checklist form—appeals to the instructor or evaluator and to administrators collecting data about students because it is a time-saving tool for measuring skills demonstrated in complex tasks, such as writing assignments. Rubrics, however, are a bad idea for writers and for those who teach writing.

A Rube Goldberg machine is an overly engineered mechanism for a simple task. A rubric, by comparison, looks fancy and is often quantitative—it looks incredibly well engineered with its seemingly airtight checklist. In fact, it's overly engineered to organize feedback into criteria and levels, rows and columns. Instead of responding to writing in language—with oral or written feedback—many rubrics mechanize response. At the same time, a rubric is an overly simple way to ignore that an essay is a complicated whole; it is impossible to tease its characteristics completely apart, because they are interdependent. A rubric, then, is an odd way to simultaneously overcomplicate and oversimplify the way one looks at and judges a written text.

Let's begin with a look at the word's origins and uses to understand where the problem with rubrics begins. The word *rubric* comes from the Latin word for *red*. The red to which the word originally referred was the color of earth that contained the impure iron that is ocher and that was used to make ink. A rubric is, unfortunately and perhaps inadvertently, a way to focus on the impurity; it's a red pen, with all its power to correct and to write over what has been created. If one evaluates writing by looking for what's wrong or what needs to be corrected or fixed, one misses potential and fails to point toward improvement in the future. Moreover, the rubric's simplicity implies that all writing can be fixed or corrected and that this correction can be done in the same way across pieces of written work and across students, instead of suggesting that revision—sometimes re-envisioning—is a more rewarding and fruitful step in becoming a better writer.

Contemporary definitions for *rubric* suggest that it's a term equivalent to *a rule*, especially for how to conduct a liturgical service (like stage directions printed in red), or an established tradition. In other words, rubrics work to maintain the status quo and prevent experimentation, deviation from the norm, and innovation. If you do *x* and *y* and *z*, the rubric says, your writing is good. But what if you do *x* and *y* and *b*—and discover something you'd not known before and isn't on the rubric? The rubric does not accommodate the unexpected.

Following the rules—the rubric—to the letter is the opposite of what good writing does. Even writers as different as Flannery O'Connor and Joan Didion have said that they don't know what they think until they write it. So, writing is a way of thinking, of inventing one's thoughts through language and inventing sentences that represent thoughts. But a rubric is a set of preconceived parameters—designed before seeing the products of the task at hand— that applies across the board. While a set of assignment guidelines can allow a writing task to be carried out in various ways, a rubric becomes an evaluative tool that doesn't make sense if writing is the individual exploration that many writers experience. A rubric suggests that the task and its goals are understood before the writing itself occurs and that writing works the same way for everyone every time. Even when a rubric works adequately to evaluate or provide feedback, or even when teachers ask students to practice particular techniques or know what they're looking for, using such a tool sends the message to students that writing fits preconceived notions. Students know that, on some level, they are writing to the rubric, instead of writing to think.

Another contemporary definition of the word is as a heading or category. That definition suggests that using a rubric to evaluate writing is a way to label a piece of writing (and, perhaps unintentionally, label the writer as well). The more comprehensive and detailed a rubric is, the less it is able to label efficiently. Rubrics, then, cannot be all-inclusive or wide-ranging and also good at specifying and categorizing. These labeling tools do not often include the possibility of *either/or* that recognizes multiple ways to achieve a given goal.

Rubrics, learning outcomes, assessment practices, and the quantitative or numerical scoring of performance emerge out of the social sciences. That's the underlying problem for using these methods to evaluate writing and to encourage improvement. Why must social science approaches (techniques adapted from science to study human behavior) be used to evaluate work in the arts and humanities? Tools like rubrics ask those of us trained in the arts and humanities to understand the difference between direct (product-based, such as exams or papers) and indirect (perception-based, such as surveys) outcomes. Social science methodology asks teachers to see a text as data, not as language or creative production. These terms, such as *data*, are not ones that writers use to

describe or understand their own writing and learning. Writing instructors and administrators like me, especially those who use rubrics not only for grading but for assessing entire programs, are using tools with which we are not properly trained and that were designed for other academic disciplines and data-driven research. While rubrics may be moderately helpful in assessing a program on the whole or providing program-level benchmarks, they are generally unhelpful, as currently used, in helping individual students improve their writing.

According to *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, a book by Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, the top teaching goals for English are *writing skills*, *think*[ing] *for oneself*, and *analytic skills*. The arts, humanities, and English share *think for oneself* as a high-priority goal. In addition, the arts, of which writing (especially creative writing) might be considered a part, lists *creativity* as a top goal, and the humanities considers *openness to ideas* (as an extension of thinking for oneself) as a priority in teaching. These skills are all very difficult to measure, especially via a preconceived rubric, and much more difficult than goals like *apply principles* or *terms and facts*, which are among the top teaching goals for business and the sciences. In other words, the most important goals for writing teachers are among the most difficult to evaluate. The standard rubric is better suited for measuring the most important aspects of learning in other fields than in writing.

Some rubrics attempt to be holistic, but when they begin to succeed, they are already moving away from being good rubrics for labeling or scoring. The more holistic the rubric is, the less effective it is at saving time—a feature that makes rubrics attractive in the first place. While rubrics can be used for narrative or qualitative feedback, they are unnecessary scaffolding in such cases and, worse, invite prescriptive responses. That's what's needed in the evaluation of writing: a move away from the prescriptive and toward the descriptive, a move away from monitoring toward formative and narrative feedback. Novelist John Irving has said that his work as an MFA student in fiction writing saved him time because his mentors told him what he was good at and to do more of that, and what he was not as good at and to do less of that. What Irving points to is formative and narrative response from expert mentors and engaged peers who revise their work and explore their options as writers.

Formative and narrative feedback (as Mitch James writes about in a previous chapter) involves the student in analyzing and thinking about his or her own writing. Self-reflection and awareness, which are key in learning over the long haul, become part of these types of evaluation. The simple technique of posing the question "What if?" can compel a writer to try out options for writing, even when the writing task is specific in topic, audience, or length. Importantly, these types of feedback are individualized, not a one-size-fits-all response to a writing task. Feedback can be given at any time, not only when the task is complete and there's no going back, not only at a time designated to give all students feedback. While rubrics can be employed in process, the form encourages end use in practice and discourages real-time or back-andforth exchange of information. Nearly real-time response can have an immediate effect, and you don't need a rubric to do that. The summative response that is based on rubrics takes time, becomes linked with grading, and becomes removed from the ongoing practice of writing itself, all of which make rubrics a bad idea. Instead, using formative types of feedback that are separated from grading often propels a writer into revision as he or she attempts to strengthen the written piece and his or her own writing skills.

Further Reading

For more of Anna Leahy's thoughts about assessment, see "Cookie-Cutter Monsters, One-Size Methodologies and the Humanities." For advice on using rubrics, see "Designing and Using Rubrics" from the Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing at the University of Michigan. In addition, W. James Popham provides a different take on rubrics in the journal, *Educational Leadership*. To learn more tips on providing formative feedback, see "10 Tips for Providing Formative Feedback."

Keywords

assessment, formative feedback, revision, rubric, summative feedback

Author Bio

Anna Leahy has taught composition and creative writing for 25 years. She has three books out in 2017: *Aperture* (poetry from Shearsman Books), *Generation Space* (co-authored nonfiction from Stillhouse Press), and *Tumor* (nonfiction from Bloomsbury). She is an editor and co-author *What We Talk about When We Talk about Creative Writing* of and *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*. She has published numerous articles and book chapters about teaching creative writing and being a professor and is working on a book about cancer and communication. She teaches in the MFA and BFA programs at Chapman University,

where she also directs the Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity, edits the international literary journal *TAB*, and curates the Tabula Poetica reading series.

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6.3: Rubrics Oversimplify the Writing Process

Author: Crystal Sands, Walden University and Southern New Hampshire University, @ CrystalDSands.

I still remember my first rubric-assessment training I received from an educational assessment expert. I stared at the categories from a sample rubric used to assess writing and began to panic. I knew there were things that happened in my classroom, things that happened in writing, that were not listed on that rubric. I was a new writing teacher in my first tenure-track job, afraid to speak up, but I finally did. “There’s so much more to writing than what’s in this rubric,” I said. A few other faculty members in the training session clapped and cheered. I had not used rubrics when I assessed my students’ writing before, and I was about to be required to do so by my institution. I was resistant, and I was not alone.

Using rubrics to assess writing is a common, but sometimes controversial, practice with a laundry list of pros and cons. While I had some strong resistance to using rubrics early in my career, I came to see their value before long. In that first job, I was teaching 13 sections of basic writing classes per year, each of which was capped at 30 students. Before I learned how to use rubrics, I did not leave my house most weekends because I was too busy providing feedback on essays. After I completed my rubric-assessment training, I found that I was able to leave my house on the weekends more often, although still not much. That alone was enough to sell me, as I was barely handling my heavy grading load.

Opponents of rubrics argue, and understandably so, that there is no way to reduce writing to a rubric, no matter how strong said rubric might be. Rubrics that set out to provide a predetermined focus for evaluating a piece of writing cannot possibly capture all that there is to a text. Five or six categories, or even eight or ten, would not be enough to measure the complexity of even a simple

text. As Bob Broad noted in *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, while good rubrics effectively capture some of the important elements in assessing writing, they do not capture all of them. Does using a rubric send the message that we are only evaluating the elements of the rubric? Perhaps. But I would argue that this does not have to be so.

Despite their limitations, rubrics have become a common method of evaluating writing for a wide variety of sound reasons. Research shows that students can benefit from rubric assessment when rubrics are presented and discussed in advance. Knowing basic expectations in advance can help students respond well to an assignment and ease their writing anxiety, which is one of the biggest struggles my students, especially online students, face during their writing processes. Because rubrics provide clear expectations and assessment criteria, students also improve self-assessment and critical thinking skills when they are used. As students engage in conversations about the rubrics and then work with course rubrics to self-evaluate, they are engaging in the writing process in a more confident manner.

While not all rubrics are created equally, my experiences working with my students to build rubrics for essay assessment confirms the findings of research indicating that having students help develop rubrics produces a significant increase in engagement in peer review and self-evaluation. In my classes, students were engaged and reported high satisfaction. I was working at a community college with a high number of non-traditional working adults. They approached their educations pragmatically and did not appreciate being evaluated in a way that would be a mystery to them. For these inexperienced writers, the rubrics provided an opportunity for transparency, which was extremely important, especially as a high number of them suffered from some fairly extreme writing anxiety. I made it clear that even the best rubrics could not encompass everything I was looking for in a text, but the rubrics gave me a short-cut in providing my students with some basic information about what makes a good piece of writing. This guidance was especially important for students who were coming to my classes with little to no knowledge of what might make a strong college essay. On top of this, my grading load was reduced, and because I was working with nearly 400 students per year, this was important.

As an alternative to an over-simplified dismissal of rubric use, I argue for something in the middle—an understanding that good rubrics can play a role as a part of writing assessment. I have worked for several institutions that required standard rubrics for all courses, and I cannot defend these rubrics. They have often been extremely brief, limiting, and seem to focus more on program assessment than on providing students with quality feedback. And while program assessment is another potential benefit of rubrics, I would argue that a rubric used for program assessment should not be the same as a specific, detailed rubric written with a student audience in mind. My experience as both an administrator and a faculty member has taught me that, while program assessment and student feedback should be separate, this is not always the case in all programs or institutions. However, I think dismissing rubrics

outright is a mistake because doing so refuses to acknowledge the benefits rubrics provide students and teachers, particularly for the latter in terms of decreased workloads. We deserve at least part of a weekend off.

A paradigm shift that explores a balance between rubrics as a part of writing assessment, and the realities of the teaching loads of many writing faculty would be most beneficial to our field. The reality that there are elements of writing that rubrics of any reasonable length cannot capture should not be ignored. However, neither can the research pointing to the benefits of more timely feedback and stronger student self-evaluation. Additionally, my work with rubrics has aided students struggling with fear and confidence issues. And, while some could argue that rubrics might provide students with a kind of *false confidence*, I would argue that the benefits of the greater confidence I have seen in my students outweighs any problems associated with students thinking writing is somehow being *reduced* to the rubric. In fact, I would argue that conversations about rubrics can prevent this kind of thinking from occurring in the first place. I let my students know that the rubrics I use provide descriptions for the *key* elements I am looking for, but I explain that there are more elements, some of which I won't know until I see them. We discuss writing as a complex beast, and the rubric discussion gives me a great opportunity for this. Additionally, if a faculty member can use rubrics to cover key elements of assessment, and then include several more specific or unique comments on the student writing, then we are not, as some might suggest, using rubrics to replace written feedback.

Further Reading

For more information on the use of rubrics in writing instruction and evaluation, see Bob Broad's *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, which provides a thorough exploration and critique of rubrics based on a long-term study. See also Danielle D. Stevens and Antonia J. Levi's *Introduction to Rubrics*. This work provides a detailed look at some of the benefits of well-made rubrics. Anders Jonsson and Gunilla Svingby also explore the potential benefits of rubrics in a review of 75 studies in "The Use of Scoring Rubrics: Reliability, Validity, and Educational Consequences" from *Educational Research Review*. In "Scoring Rubrics and the Material Conditions of our Relations with Students" from *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, David Martins explores the conditions of our work and our connections to rubrics. Finally, in *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*, Maja Wilson argues against the use of rubrics in writing assessment.

Keywords

critical thinking, faculty course loads, rubrics, self-evaluation, writing assessment

Author Bio

Crystal Sands earned her Ph.D. in rhetoric from Texas Woman's University in 2005. She has nearly 20 years of experience teaching writing at the college level. Having worked in the field as a full-time adjunct, a writing program director, and a director of an award-winning online writing lab, Sands has a wide variety of experiences working with students, teaching, and assessing writing. She is now an adjunct writing instructor at Walden University and Southern New Hampshire University, a full-time mom, and a hobby farmer with her husband, Ron. Her twitter handle is @ CrystalDSands.

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6.4: When Responding to Student Writing, More is Better

Author: Muriel Harris, English, Purdue University

When teachers of writing grade student papers, they include written comments aimed at helping students improve their writing skills. The rationale for such teacher comments and corrections is based on two assumptions: (1) that the instructor and the institution need to know how well students are performing, and (2) that students need to know how their writing skills measure up and what they can do to improve. The expectation is that students will read the comments and corrections and learn from them. While some may think instructor comments and grades have long been an integral part of a student's education, paper grading—as Mitchell R. James explains elsewhere in this book—is a relatively recent phenomenon in academia. And so now, highly conscientious teachers, wishing to be effective and helpful, read students' writing and offer a lot of advice, write suggestions for future work, note corrections, and perhaps ask questions for the student writer to think about. Teachers who spend extensive time writing on student papers are apparently convinced that students learn from their responses. Parents and administrators are happy because they too assume that more teacher verbiage results in more learning—with a corollary that an exceptional teacher therefore offers extensive feedback. Unfortunately, there is a point of diminishing returns when the comments become so extensive that students are overwhelmed, unable to sort out what is more important from what is less important. Some students react negatively because they are convinced that a lot of comments equals a lot of criticism.

Teachers take on the time-consuming mental and physical effort with the best of intentions and dedication. They assume students will read all the comments, find out what they need to learn, and will work on problems that have been labeled and perhaps explained by these instructors. Similarly, when teachers use correction symbols for students to locate in the textbook and include encouragement and praise for what is well written, that would seem to round out the kinds of feedback that students benefit from. It also increases the amount of teacher comments on the paper. Thus, a thoroughly graded paper might include along with words of praise: suggestions; questions; indications about organization, clarity, and accuracy concerns; recommendations for future writing; and annotations to indicate grammatical, spelling, and word choice problems—plus, an explanation of how the grade was determined. It would be comforting to note that such over-grading of student papers is a rare phenomenon, but unfortunately, that's not the case. Some teacher responses even exceed the total word count of a student's essay. Such extensive response by the well-intentioned, dedicated instructor is widely viewed as the expected result that follows when students hand in their papers. There are, of course, some who see written teacher responses as less effective and have turned to methods that do not include commenting on every paper, such as students getting feedback from other students in peer-response groups.

Although extensive commenting on student writing is not a universal practice, it is widespread, widely accepted, and widely practiced. Moreover, if writing comments and questions on the paper has educational value, then for many teachers, even more written response results in even more learning. Oh, that it were so. The over-graded paper too often has little or no educational value. Extensive written response is not productive for instructors because it is highly labor intensive in the time that it takes instructors to read and write a response for each paper, much less those for a whole class or multiple classes. Most teachers simply do not have that much time to slowly, carefully read papers and then think about what to note in the comments because they also need additional time to prepare for and meet their classes. Extensive marginal notes, along with a paragraph or four at the top or end of the paper summarizing the teacher's feedback is counterproductive. Yet it persists. Unfortunately, the over-graded paper is a waste of a teacher's time and far too often a total loss in terms of the student's ability to understand and learn from all that instructor prose.

Multiple factors contribute to students' problems with reading fulsome teacher responses and learning from them. One of the most obvious student problems in decoding all that teacher commentary is that students' critical reading abilities have steadily declined. The class of 2015 had the lowest SAT scores in critical reading—along with writing and math—since the SAT test was overhauled in 2006. In 2006, the average critical reading score was 503, out of a possible 800; in 2015, the average critical reading score had dropped to 495. As a result, too many students struggle to critically read and understand their instructors' prose. To compound the problem, many teachers now offer their responses online, but as some studies have shown, reading online reduces comprehension and memory of what was read.

Another problem with reading teacher comments is that some students lack an adequate command of English because of inadequate literacy skills in general. Even students whose literacy level is adequate for college-level writing can be mystified by jargon that some teachers inadvertently use, such as *development* or *coherence*. I've heard students trying to guess what *coherence* means and

fail utterly. They wonder if their writing is stupid or wrong or just not what the teacher wanted. Or, as another example, teachers may note the need for *transitions* between sentences or paragraphs or for more *sentence variety*. Even comments such as "your thesis needs a tighter focus" is not intelligible for students who don't have a firm grip on what a *thesis* is or what *focus* in a paper means. These terms are part of an extensive vocabulary describing aspects of writing that instructors become used to because it is the jargon of the field, used in teacher-training classes and books on teaching pedagogy. But most students, other than those studying to become teachers of writing, do not spend class time learning this vocabulary. Knowing a goal and having a strategy for how to get there can be, for too many students, mission impossible.

Yet another problem with extensive feedback from teachers is that in the welter of prose, there is often a lack of hierarchy. Which of the many comments does the writer focus on? As they read through the instructor's writing, student writers all too often don't know what to tackle first or what is most important. Sadly, such students become overwhelmed by the lengthy marginal notes and questions or excessively long responses so carefully crafted by their instructors. Papers requiring revision tend to be especially overgraded, perhaps because the teacher envisions how much better the next draft will be when the writer works on all the aspects of the paper that need to be rewritten. But writing center tutors hear, instead, students' views on all the comments. They say a teacher

"ripped all over my paper," or they ask tutors to tell them what they should do. They don't know what to focus on first or where to plunge in when thinking about what to revise. Students in this situation usually don't know how to prioritize among all the verbiage.

When there is too much for the student writer to attend to, another result is students' preference for selecting the low-hanging fruit. They choose to focus on the more easily edited sentencelevel comments, such as correcting a misspelled word, rather than tackling the more challenging comments about clarity, organization, or clarifying a main point. They want to know how to fix the comma error that is checked or how to revise the sentence marked as *awkward*. And then there are students who choose to ignore what the teacher has written because, if they don't need to revise the paper, why bother plowing through the endless prose? But they have been assigned to come to the writing center and often don't want to hang around and talk about a paper they consider no longer on life support. They refer to such papers as dead, as *done with* or *history*. Why bother with a post-mortem?

If there are so many reasons why extensive teacher response to student writing is unproductive, and if more is generally less in terms of what students learn from all that commenting, what does a well-meaning teacher do? One possibility is to focus only on a very few concerns the student can work on, and that includes reducing the number of marginal comments. Make it clear that while there are other aspects of the assignment that the student has handed in that need work, the student writer should, for this paper, concentrate only on a few aspects the instructor suggests. Decreasing the amount of teacher response can lead to closer attention to those matters instead of getting lost in trying to cope with an overload. If time permits, teachers can meet with students in conferences to discuss revisions and explain on the spot when students need more explanation.

Another way to consider responding to student writing is to recognize that not all writing needs to be graded. Taking the pressure off by not grading every single bit of composing allows writers to experiment, to ease the burden of a grade. That is liberating for some students who constantly worry about the repercussions of a grade as they compose every sentence. Students can also get feedback from peer groups, and in schools and colleges where there are writing centers, they can get reader response from tutors. For teachers who recognize that less really is more in terms of responding to student writing, students will be more likely to absorb and learn from the limited, specific feedback they offer. Such students will have a greater chance to improve their writing, and teachers, instead of staring at their desks with piles of papers to grade, will have more time to think about how to make class time more productive.

Further Reading

Chris Anson's *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research* is a particularly helpful guide for commenting on student papers. For options other than grading and offering feedback on student papers, two excellent books are John Bean and Maryellen Weimer's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* and Stephen Tchudi's *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*.

Keywords

evaluation, feedback, grading, response, writing center

Author Bio

Muriel Harris, professor emerita of English at Purdue University, initiated and directed the Purdue Writing Lab where she spent decades learning from students she met in many hundreds of tutorials. She also learned how awesomely effective it is for tutors to meet one-to-one with students to work with them on their writing skills, in a setting where there is no evaluation or grading. In the process, she also marveled at how varied each writer's needs, literacy background, and learning styles are, and most of her professional writing has focused on writing centers and individualized instruction in writing. Harris spends time promoting writing centers as a superb learning environment and editing *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*.

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6.5: Student Writing Must be Graded by the Teacher

Author: Chris Friend, English, Saint Leo University

It's a common assumption that when students write something for a class, the teacher should evaluate that writing and return it with a grade. Chances are, those you work with take a different approach to the writing you do professionally. When was the last time *your* writing was graded? Odds are, not since you left school. Since then, anything you've written had a specific purpose, and you worked on it until it met your goal. Maybe a colleague or manager decided when it was good enough, and maybe they even gave you feedback about what worked well or not, but you didn't get a score, a letter grade, or have your writing ranked against your colleagues' work. But for some reason, this scoring/ranking system has become the norm as a method of labeling the relative quality of student writing. The whole arrangement teaches students to write for an arbitrary measurement from an authority figure rather than for a real audience.

As Mitchell R. James explains elsewhere in this text, grades are a fairly recent invention, in terms of the history of education. It would seem that grades have been imposed upon a system that had been getting along without them for hundreds of years. This imposition is a reductive one, replacing feedback, commentary, suggestions for improvement, and opportunity for discussion with merely a single letter or number. The idea of an *A paper* and giving numeric or alphabetic grades needs to end. Instead, we need to help students think of writing as adults do—in terms of inciting action and achieving goals. We need to help students become skilled reviewers of other people's writing, a skill that is much more useful than learning to write to please the teacher.

That last point poses not only a problem prominent in the history of writing assessment but also a perspective that may help lead to improvement. Assigning a grade to a piece of writing is fraught with inconsistencies (which James discusses at length), as different graders notice different things within the same text. But when students have only one teacher in their classroom, and that one teacher's assessment carries all the weight and authority, students learn to write for the teacher instead of expecting the writing to do anything on its own. (See also Elizabeth Wardle's chapter in this book on "writing in general.") Grading becomes a mysterious label, reducing meaningful commentary to a single letter or number. It puts the teacher in charge and abolishes the opportunity for students to learn how to evaluate quality. Writing in graded situations becomes writing *for* a grade, whereas writing in other circumstances seeks effectiveness as a standard. When students write for a grade, they come to see writing as *transactional* (given to someone in exchange for credit) rather than *actionable* (created with purpose and designed to achieve a goal). That's somewhat like a journalist writing news reports to please the layout designer rather than to meet the needs of the publication's readers. Writing for the teacher creates an artificial environment that's harmful to a writer's development.

Writing for a teacher rather than an intrinsic goal may produce work that the teacher deems excellent, but wouldn't it be better to help writers develop the ability to independently assess the quality of writing, either theirs or other people's? By expecting students to write so that teachers can rate, rank, and label them, we implicitly tell students that our satisfaction is more significant than their intrinsic aspirations. Writers should develop the purpose of their writing, rather than having it determined elsewhere. Students must learn that process through experience; grading will not teach them.

Students don't learn how to write from a grade. They learn how to write well by getting feedback from readers and from reading and analyzing examples of similar writing from other authors (such as their peers or professional authors writing the same type of material the students are writing). Sure, teachers can add marginal comments on drafts to provide some of this feedback, but as Muriel Harris argues in her chapter of this text, such commentary frequently becomes overwhelming and meaningless to students. Regardless of how many comments appear on a paper, students know the grade is the only thing that counts in the long run. But how exactly does a letter count? How does it fit in with an overall view of a student's ability? And more importantly, given the complexities of writing, how can one letter reflect the myriad

aspects by which writing quality might be judged? If a letter grade represents completion, how can teachers determine when writing is finished? If the letter reflects accuracy/correctness, how can teachers account for style? And whose opinion of the quality of the writing matters most?

Indeed, grading does very little. Music theory teacher Kris Shaffer says that "letter grades do an absolutely horrible job" of three things that would help students improve their writing: (1) determining whether students understand a concept well enough to implement it, (2) identifying elements of student writing that need improvement, and (3) helping students learn to better self-assess. Shaffer makes his argument specifically about writing music, but I've recast it here for writing words. Each of these three goals

presents a helpful perspective on developing authors' needs. An author's ability to compose requires skill, understanding, and situational familiarity. None of those goals are met through a letter grade. Grades help label, sort, and rank students; they don't inform students, target instruction, or encourage self-awareness. Those who have left school and begun their careers have long stopped expecting grades to help determine what they do and don't do well because grades aren't appropriate measures of learning. Schools need to stop relying on grades, too.

Instead, we should teach people how to improve their writing through peer review. Variations of peer review help us write in many of our day-to-day situations. We learn what sorts of text messages work best by observing how our friends text and respond to us. We learn what makes an effective email by reading the ones we get and responding or deleting as we see fit. We learn how best to craft Facebook posts by seeing what kinds of content can garner the most likes—at its heart a form of quick (and addictive) peer review. Consider, too, all of the review features available on websites such as Yelp, Amazon, LinkedIn, Angie's List, and so on. Reviews offer feedback and critique by users/peers.

With all these systems of peer feedback already available to us, students need to learn to make use of them. Teachers could benefit from saved time and energy if they incorporated peer review systems of various flavors in their classes, reducing their workload and providing a variety of feedback for their students. Students, then, would learn to trust—and derive practical value from—the feedback of a real audience beyond their teacher. Writers who can peer review effectively become purposeful readers, thinking of texts, from classmates' work to their textbooks, as devices used to achieve goals, rather than as static documents designed only to inform. The mantra that "you can't believe everything you read on the Internet" makes rational sense but seems to fail us at crucial moments. Thinking critically about the things we read takes longer than clicking Like, retweeting, reblogging, or sharing; the efficiency of social tools discourages complex questioning that challenges and validates claims. In-class peer review helps writers think carefully about the implications of writing and the ways writing can help solve problems.

The interactive, social nature of writing (not just tweets) makes peer review not only an effective source of feedback but also an essential skill. True participation in peer review systems requires that we act as reviewers ourselves. These peer-review skills should be assessed by teachers, as they help us learn the real work of writing. Because writing allows us to coordinate and collaborate, it serves as an essential element in the effort to get things done. In other words, *situations*, not teachers, define the importance of writing. Learning about situations and the effects of writing comes from reading and writing, not from being graded. Students should learn to assess writing situations and learn how to improve that writing—both theirs and their peers'—in situations that have more at stake than just a grade.

If grades tell nothing meaningful about writing ability, and if learning to work as/with peer reviewers provides insights into and feedback about writing performance, then the traditional structure of writing education is backward. If writing helps groups of people get things done, then students need to learn how to form, negotiate, and benefit from those groups. Grades get in the way, and teachers cannot guide students through their own writing, assessing, and reviewing processes if they are too distracted by issuing grades. The teacher's view of student writing is but one voice among a chorus of peers. Writing benefits from collaboration, not top-down dictatorship. Learning to write means learning to write with the support of peers, in an authentic situation, and with a genuine purpose. Writing should not be done for a grade. Teachers should not grade writing; instead, they should empower their students to meaningfully assess the effectiveness of writing.

If students learn to improve their understanding of writing by collaborating in groups that use writing to achieve a specific goal, then those groups should determine whether they met their own goal. A teacher should help students learn to assess quality fairly, to collaborate professionally, and to identify differences between their own work and model writing they wish to emulate. Writing classrooms can be laboratories in which students develop meaningful, relevant writing skills. If teachers stop grading student writing and instead focus on review and collaboration skills, each classroom would have a team of people qualified to assess the quality of writing. Teachers, then, could grade whether students provide beneficial peer review feedback and collaborate effectively—the meaningful work of writing.

Further Reading

For an overview of assessment practices in the teaching of writing, see Brian Huot and Peggy O'Neill's *Assessing Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*, by Bedford/St. Martin's. For scholarly research on why engagement as part of assessment is important, see Jeff Grabill's *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action* (Hampton Press), Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser's *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement* (Utah State University Press), and the "father of

assessment," Ed White's "Holisticism," published in the print journal, *College Composition and Communication*. For examples of how and why teachers assess holistically instead of for micro-grades, see Cathy Davidson's 2009 crowdsourcing grading discussion on the HASTAC blog, Kris Shaffer's blog post, "Why grade?", and Shaffer's discussion on "Assessment and Generosity" with writing teachers Chris Friend, Asao Inoue, and Lee Skallerup Bessette at the *HybridPod* podcast from *Hybrid Pedagogy*.

Keywords

open peer review, peer review, rhetoric and civic engagement, student writing self-assessment, writing community engagement

Author Bio

Chris Friend has been teaching writing classes since 2000, originally as a ninth-grade English teacher with Seminole County Public Schools and most recently as assistant professor of English at Saint Leo University. He believes that testing disempowers students and makes them resent writing, and he jumps at any opportunity to give students more control over their learning and writing. As managing editor of *Hybrid Pedagogy*, Chris works with authors and editors in an open peer-review process that he believes brings out the best in writers and those who work with them. He tweets about these and other topics from @chris_friend.

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6.6: Machines can Evaluate Writing Well

Author: Les Perelman, Comparative Media Studies/ Writing, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Across the United States, writing is being evaluated by machines. Consider the situation of Maria, a typical high school student. In a high-stakes test situation that could decide whether she's admitted to the university of her choice, she's given a prompt to write about a topic such as whether originality is overrated, or whether our society values certainty over skepticism. For the next 25 minutes, she tries to create a purposeful piece of writing, developing its ideas, shaping its structure, considering its style and voice, choosing appropriate examples, and honing it to suggest to its readers—her evaluators—that she can think and write effectively enough to be admitted to a good college. She even drops in a bit of humor to lighten up the essay.

She writes her essay for people who she imagines are like her teachers—people who can read and form conclusions about her essay from multiple angles, know irony or humor when they see it, can spot an unsupported generalization, or can forgive a minor grammatical error while taking note of a more serious one. But instead of reaching those human readers, her essay is fed into a computer system for evaluation. The machine scans the paper for a handful of simple features, such as length and the percentage of infrequently used words. In a few milliseconds, it spits out a score that seals Maria's fate.

To testing agencies, machine scoring is irresistibly alluring. Instead of hiring, training, and paying warm-blooded human beings to read and judge tens of thousands of essays, they think that investing in a computer scoring system will save them large amounts of money and time and will generate big profits. They have faith that parents, students, school officials, and the general public will think the machines are better than human readers. After all, computers are so accurate and consistent and reliable, right? Why run the risk that the evaluator reading Maria's essay is cranky or tired on the day of the evaluation, or is coming down with a cold? Machines offer razor-sharp precision and metallic solidity, never giving in to frustration or exhaustion.

But as we'll show, although computers are brilliant at many things, they're really bad at understanding and interpreting writing—even writing produced by fifth-graders—and that fact will not change in the foreseeable future. Understanding why this is true can prepare teachers, parents, students, and taxpayers to push back against testing agencies and politicians who think that people will be placated by the complexity of technology and seduced by the promise that writing can be evaluated cheaply and efficiently, justifying further cuts in educational funding.

Why Machines Make Lousy Humans

First, it's important to understand that computers are not the enemy. In fact, computers play an important role in research on the language and writing that humans produce. There are some things a computer can do in a couple of seconds that would take a human researcher a lifetime (or two). Scholars of writing are the last people to resist the further development of computers to work with natural language—a term referring to the spoken or written language produced by humans as part of their daily lives.

But when it comes to evaluating writing, computers perform badly. That's because natural language is extraordinarily complex—far more complex than even the most sophisticated computers can understand.

Let's consider a few reasons why.

- **Computers don't understand meaning.** They can compute the likelihood of two words appearing close to each other, but their judgment is always based on statistical probabilities, not an understanding of word connotations. Think of the verb *to serve*. We can serve our country, serve in a game of tennis, or serve the president. We also can serve a casserole to you. (A cannibalistic restaurant could even serve presidents for lunch, though the supply would be pretty limited.) Humans can easily differentiate between the realistic and absurd meanings of a simple word like serve; computers can't.
- **A computer can't differentiate between reasonable and absurd inferences either**. In fact, computers are really bad at making any inferences at all. When we speak or write, large amounts of information are left out and inferred by the listener or reader. When we read, "Fred realized he couldn't pay for his daughter's tuition. He looked up his uncle's email address," the space between the two sentences is filled with information that we infer. Almost all human language works this way. Making inferences requires vast amounts of information and astronomically large networks, connections, and permutations in infinite contexts. Although computers can obviously store and search for massive amounts of data, they don't know how to put it together to infer. The computer would read the two statements above exactly the same as it would read, "Fred realized he couldn't pay for his daughter's tuition. He looked up his pet elephant's email address."

- **Most computer scoring programs judge logical development and effective organization by the number of sentences or words in a paragraph. If a system is programmed to see one-sentence paragra**phs as undeveloped, it will apply this principle to all essays even though one-sentence paragraphs can be used to good effect (as in the sentence at the top of this bullet list). When one of us (Perelman) tried to write the best essay he could, one of the most popular machine graders admonished him that a paragraph was underdeveloped because it had only three sentences. He then expanded the paragraph by inserting completely irrelevant material—the opening line of Alan Ginsberg's poem "Howl": "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked." The computer then considered the new paragraph to be both adequately developed and coherent.
- **Computers get progressively worse at evaluating writing as it gets longer** (for obvious reasons—there's more to mess them up). The programmers know this. Although all commercial computer-scoring systems give higher scores to longer essays, paradoxically most limit the length of papers to around 1,000 words, about four typed pages. The Educational Testing Service's program Criterion, for example, almost always gives high scores to essays of 999 words but will refuse to evaluate an essay containing 1,001 words. However, many college papers are more than 1,000 words.

The first myth to debunk about computer scoring systems is that they can read extended discourse, especially to evaluate students' writing abilities. They can't. They don't understand or interpret anything that's fed into them. They miss humor and irony, or clever turns of phrase, or any of a dozen aspects of prose that we try to teach students. They can't discern purposeful stylistic decisions. They think gibberish is acceptable, and they mark perfectly reasonable prose that violates some simplistic criterion such as the number of words in a paragraph as unacceptable. They always interpret some aspect of writing the same way, without considering the writer's intentions and context. They can't make inferences between the lines of text. The complexity of human language simply baffles them—or, more accurately, goes right over their semiconductors. Writing experts have exposed these and other limitations of machine scoring using both coherent and incoherent essays. The computers can't tell the difference.

In one experiment, researchers at MIT created the Basic Automated Bullshit Essay Language Generator (BABEL), which produces gibberish essays. When they submitted essays produced by BABEL to a system that scores tens of thousands of student test essays, including the Graduate Record Examination, the computer awarded the gibberish essays the highest possible score. Here is an excerpt of a Babel Generated Essay that received the highest score (6) from ETS's e-rater, along with the canned comments from ETS's GRE preparation website.

Careers with corroboration has not, and in all likelihood never will be compassionate, gratuitous, and disciplinary. Mankind will always proclaim noesis; many for a trope but a few on executioner. A quantity of vocation lies in the study of reality as well as the area of semantics. Why is imaginativeness so pulverous to happenstance? The reply to this query is that knowledge is vehemently and boisterously contemporary.

The score: 6

In addressing the specific task directions, a 6 response presents a cogent, well-articulated analysis of the issue and conveys meaning skillfully. A typical response in this category:

- articulates a clear and insightful position on the issue in accordance with the assigned task
- develops the position fully with compelling reasons and/or persuasive examples
- sustains a well-focused, well-organized analysis, connecting ideas logically
- conveys ideas fluently and precisely, using effective vocabulary and sentence variety

demonstrates superior facility with the conventions of standard written English (i.e., grammar, usage, and mechanics) but may have minor errors.

Obviously, the Babel gibberish essay does none of these things. So why, with all these limitations, has computer essay scoring even seen the light of day? We've pointed to the economic reasons and the desire for profit. But there's another reason, and it's about humans, not computers.

Why Humans Make Lousy Machines

When we look at how humans read and evaluate students' test essays, we find an interesting paradox. For years, groups of readers have been trained—*normed* and *calibrated*—to read thousands of essays in the most consistent and accurate way possible. This is because when we allow people to read writing normally, they see it subjectively, through the lens of their experiences (think of a

book club discussion). If a testing agency allowed this—if it couldn't guarantee consistently of evaluation—it would be instantly sued. Through a long process, readers can often develop consensus on how to evaluate many aspects of papers, but such a process takes more time and money than the testing organizations are willing to spend. Instead, their training process turns humans into machines so that they will look for exactly the same features in exactly the same way, as quickly as possible. They're told to ignore facts because they can't verify everything they read. They're constrained to see the essays only through the lens of what the evaluators think is important. They want to read *beyond the lines* of the assessment criteria, but they can't. Because humans are required to read 20–30 essays per hour, they end up evaluating essays using the same simple features used by the machines.

In reading high-stakes, one-shot essay tests, then, both machines and humans make lousy evaluators when we reduce their reading process to a few limited features. Machines do this because they can't do anything else. Humans do this because they're trained to ignore everything else they might see and interpret in an essay, including even how factual its assertions are, in order to score only those things that the test makers deem significant and, more importantly, can be scored very quickly (slow, thoughtful reading costs money).

To take a (not so extreme) case, imagine that we assume good writing can be measured entirely by the number of grammatical and punctuation mistakes in a text. A human can be trained to act like a machine, hunting for grammatical mistakes and ignoring everything else. A computer can be similarly trained to recognize a lot of mistakes, even while missing some and flagging false positives. But both evaluators, human and computer, miss the point. Writing is far more complex than a missing comma. The testing agencies that fail to understand fully what writing is and how the ability to produce it is best measured are at fault.

Taking the Machine Out of Writing Assessment

When it comes to testing and evaluating our kids' writing, machines alone aren't really the problem. It's what we're telling the machines to do. And that's very similar to what we ask human evaluators to do. What, then, is the solution?

First, we need to stop testing our kids' writing to death. Computer scientists (who are not writing specialists) were attracted to the possibility of machine scoring precisely because the regressive kind of human scoring they were presented with looked so simple and replicable. We must start by critiquing the testing machine writ large—the multibillion-dollar industry that preys on school districts, misinformed politicians, naïve parents, and exploitable kids under the guise of providing assessment data designed to improve education. Nothing is improved by relentless testing, especially of the kind that reduces writing to the equivalent of running on a hamster wheel. No standardized writing test is purposeful, motivating, or engaging, and it almost never gives the writer any response other than a number.

If the methods of this testing and evaluation are misguided, what happens with the results can be deplorable. Because of relentless and unfounded accountability coming from politicians and government officials who often know next to nothing about how education really works, schools must demonstrate their success through standardized tests. Teachers' pay raises or even their jobs are linked to their students' scores on these tests, and entire schools can be defunded or closed if they fall too far below a norm, even though they may be located in an area of urban blight and populated by kids who, through no fault of their own, do not have advantages that support their early literacy development. So what happens? The teachers, fearful of the consequences of poor test scores, begin narrowing everything they do in anticipation of the standardized tests. This process can bankrupt kids' education by denying them richer learning experiences unrelated to the narrow parameters of the tests. Worse, it bankrupts teachers' creativity and freedom to apply skills and strategies they've learned as educators to create a meaningful, engaging curriculum—in other words, to *teach*, in the best sense of the word.

What's the alternative? It's not in evaluation, but in *support*. It's to get testing off the backs of students and teachers. It's to help young people to develop their writing abilities in authentic situations that give them time to think and formulate ideas, gather necessary information, structure and draft pieces of writing, and hone them to accomplish meaningful goals, such as to inform or persuade or entertain people who can make sense of what they write. It's to put far more time into teaching than evaluating. It's to re-empower teachers to use their best, most creative abilities to nurture students' writing and give them multiple purposes, contexts, and audiences. It's to recognize the meaning that writers are conveying and not just simple formal elements of their prose. It's to recognize that students are at different stages of development and language proficiency and to teach accordingly.

Why are we reducing writing situations to sterile, purposeless tasks designed to yield a few metrics that are poorly related to the meaning of the word "writing?" Test makers and evaluation agencies will say that they aren't denying learners all the rich,

meaningful writing situations they should encounter, but that their tests are a convenient, simple, cheap way to measure what they can do. But they're not. More authentic kinds of evaluation, such as student portfolios carefully read by teachers, are much better and more humane methods because they focus as much on the development of ability as they do on its measurement. And if computers can't read a 1,000-word test essay, they won't even begin to know what to do with a portfolio.

Further Reading

For more about the problems with machine evaluation of writing, see Ellis B. Page's prescient essay from 1966, "The Imminence of Grading Essays by Computer," Patricia Freitag Ericsson and Richard Haswell's edited collection *Machine Scoring of Student Essays: Truth and Consequences*, Les Perelman's "When 'the State of the Art' is Counting Words," Doug Hesse's "Who Owns Writing?," as well as two pieces by Anne Herrington and Charles Moran: "What Happens when Machines Read our Students' Writing?" and "When Writing to a Machine is Not Writing at All." For a major professional organization's stance on machine evaluation of writing, see the National Council of Teachers of English's position statement, "Machine Scoring Fails the Test." For more about standardized testing and its problems, see Chris Anson's "Closed Systems and Standardized Writing Tests," Todd Farley's *Making the Grades: My Misadventures in the Standardized Testing Industry*, and a piece in *Slate* by Matthew J.X. Malady titled "We are Teaching High School Students to Write Terribly: The Many Problems of the SAT's Essay Section."

Keywords

essay grading, high-stakes writing tests, machine scoring, standardized tests, writing assessment

Author Bios

Chris Anson is Distinguished University Professor and director of the Campus Writing and Speaking Program at North Carolina State University, where he works with faculty across the curriculum to improve the way that writing is integrated into all disciplines. For almost four decades, he has studied, taught, and written about writing and learning to write, especially at the high school and college levels. He is past chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication and past president of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. He has studied and written about writing and computer technology and is a strong advocate of increased attention to digital modes of communication in instruction, but his research does not support the use of computers to score the evaluation of high-stakes writing tests.

Les Perelman recently retired as director of Writing Across the Curriculum in the department of Comparative Media Studies/ Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he has also served as an associate dean in the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Education. He is currently a research affiliate at MIT. He is a member of the executive committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication and co-chairs that organization's Committee on Assessment. Under a grant from Microsoft, Dr. Perelman developed an online evaluation system for writing that allows student access to readings and time to plan, draft, and revise essays for a variety of assessment contexts. Perelman has become a well-known critic of certain standardized writing tests and especially the use of computers to evaluate writing.

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6.7: Plagiarism Detection Services are Money Well Spent

Author: Stephanie Vie, University of Central Florida, @digirhet.

With the advent of the World Wide Web, a kind of plagiarism paranoia has begun to grip us with a growing sense that we must do something to address the ease with which authors can copy and paste their work. This issue certainly crops up in the university setting. Some instructors may begin to see it as a personal affront to their teaching, questioning whether students think they are too clueless to notice. As plagiarism paranoia takes hold, faculty begin to wonder how many other students are plagiarizing or have plagiarized in the past. Maybe John, since he seems to never be paying attention. Or maybe Kim, since she doesn't write all that well. Or what about Bob, because his essay was so well written? It seems sad when instructors begin to fear that students are plagiarizing because they've turned in well-written essays.

In the wake of ongoing intellectual scandals, plagiarism (and its resultant paranoia) has been a subject of discussion outside the university as well; newspapers have reported on multiple ethical lapses by famous writers. Noted historian Stephen Ambrose was accused of plagiarizing several of his books almost word-forword; he apologized immediately, blaming it on sloppy footnoting. Similarly, Doris Kearns Goodwin was accused of plagiarism and faulted poor note-taking. Susan Sontag, also accused of plagiarism in 2000, excused her borrowing as literary effect. Jayson Blair, Kaavya Viswanathan, Jane Goodall, Alex Haley, Fareed Zakaria, Jonah Lehrer: The list continues, with many of these authors settling out of court or pulling copies of their work from further publication. Famous speakers, including those in the academic and political arenas, are also regularly called out for plagiarizing parts of their speeches. Naturally, in response to what seems like rampant plagiarism, and what author David Callahan has called a "cheating culture," we look for solutions. Initially, plagiarism detection technologies like Turnitin.com or Blackboard's SafeAssign sound like ideal solutions. These technologies promise to detect how much writing is unoriginal in a piece, allowing the viewer of one of their originality reports to assess the level of potential plagiarism in a written document.

However, plagiarism detection technologies are not a magic bullet, nor the solution to the perceived problem of increasing plagiarism in an Internet age. For one, research has shown that plagiarism detection technologies like Turnitin don't work particularly well. Debora Weber-Wulff, author of *False Feathers: A Perspective on Academic Plagiarism*, has tested various plagiarism detection technologies from 2004 to 2013. Her tests illustrate a variety of problems with the use of plagiarism detection technologies for their intended purpose. They flag false positives readily—that is, indicating material is plagiarized when it is not. Without careful reading, the results make it look as though authors are plagiarizing when they are not (e.g., flagging a bibliography or common phrases, and thus indicating a high level of unoriginality in a document). False negatives are also an issue, where the software does not discern unoriginal material. In this case, actual plagiarized material is overlooked by the plagiarism detection technology. This is a significant issue when dealing with a technology whose main purpose is to ferret out unoriginal material. If individuals are going to rely on plagiarism detection technologies, they need to interpret the originality reports, which often include reports on the percentage of potentially plagiarized material, incredibly carefully.

In addition to the time it takes to review these reports, plagiarism detection technologies are expensive. Many academic institutions must pay for subscriptions to popular plagiarism detection technologies like Turnitin.com or Blackboard's SafeAssign. Because of the high price invested in purchasing these tools, certain schools will either mandate or strongly encourage faculty members to use the software to offset that heavy investment. For example, I work at the University of Central Florida, and at our institution, we get a price break on Turnitin because we were early adopters of this technology. This means we *only* pay $20,000 per year for mandatory access to Turnitin. I was taken aback when I started in 2013 and was told all faculty members supervising dissertations and theses must submit their students' work to Turnitin before a defense. In addition, all faculty members' grant applications must go through iThenticate, another arm of iParadigms LLC's massive conglomeration of services that include GradeMark, PeerMark, OriginalityCheck (aka Turnitin), and iThenticate for Admissions. Other institutions will pay higher prices, such as the University of Glasgow in Scotland, where a 2013 Turnitin renewal quote was £25,000 per year, or around $37,000 USD. Florida State University in Jacksonville was quoted a one-year renewal cost of $57,000 USD in 2012. Compared to these prices, Blackboard's SafeAssign may seem like a much better investment—after all, it's free because it's available bundled with the learning management system Blackboard. But of course, the learning management system itself costs money to an institution, and these costs are comparable to Turnitin—anywhere from $50,000 per year up to six figures for large institutions.

Plagiarism detection technologies have been critiqued because they often disrespect the intellectual property of the author whose work is being submitted. An author's work is submitted to a plagiarism detection site and then usually saved as part of the tool's

databases to be used in the future when new works are submitted for originality checks. I use the passive voice intentionally here: An author's work *is submitted*. It is often not the author himor herself submitting work to the plagiarism detection technology; it is more frequently someone else submitting another person's work to the tool for it to be checked. The problem then lies in whether the author consented to his or her work being submitted to the plagiarism detection tool.

In the instance of Turnitin, for example, student authors at schools like McLean High School in Virginia have collected signatures on petitions against the mandatory use of the service. These students and others like them argue that, because their writing is saved as part of Turnitin's massive database for use in checking future papers for plagiarism, the company is profiting from their intellectual property. The four student plaintiffs from McLean asked for compensation, arguing that their papers were added to Turnitin's database against their will; however, the district court ruled in favor of Turnitin, setting a precedent for future arguments. The district court granted summary judgment to iParadigms (creator of Turnitin) on the basis of two things: The court argued that the students entered into binding agreements when they clicked "I Agree" upon uploading their work. Second, the court found that —according to the lawsuit *Vanderhye v. iParadigms LLC*—Turnitin's use of the students' work in its databases was "transformative because its purpose was to prevent plagiarism by comparative use," and this did not impact the market value for high school term papers.

There may not be much of a market value for high school papers, but these papers are indeed students' original work—and if they don't consent to include that work in a massive database for a for-profit plagiarism detection service, it is troubling that they can ultimately be forced to do so or else risk their grades or their ability to graduate. In the case of the graduate students I work with at the University of Central Florida, I must submit their dissertations or master's theses to Turnitin's iThenticate system—and I can do this without notifying them and without their consent. It's a condition of their degree completion, and if they care about their intellectual property being stored forever in a plagiarism detection technology's database for future use and profit, there's not much they can do about it.

So What Do We Do?

I have noted here that plagiarism detection technologies are expensive, don't work particularly well, and often profit from the intellectual property of others—frequently without their consent. Plagiarism detection technologies engage in stereotypical understandings of writing and the composing process, and they frequently fail to embrace current writing studies scholarship and best practices regarding the writing process. In that case, what should we do?An entirely refreshing option is to give up on catching every plagiarist. This would entail embracing some of the features of the so-called Internet Age that I mentioned at the beginning of this piece. Yes, it's true that the wealth of material available online has made it easier to copy and paste. On one hand, this is true literally: I can highlight text, type control-C on my keyboard, and then control-V to paste that text into a word processing document. As easy as that, I have copied and pasted online material. But on the other hand, this is true metaphorically as well. The idea of copying and pasting—or what scholars like Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig have termed *remix*—is well suited to the Internet Age. Today, I can find hundreds of thousands of images, songs, sounds, and, yes, words online, and I can mix them together in new and interesting ways to create soundscapes, collages, and other transformative works. This creativity has led to the creation of sites like Creative

Commons, where authors can choose from a variety of ways to license their original works, such as "Attribution—ShareAlike," which the site describes as allowing "others [to] remix, tweak, and build upon your work even for commercial purposes, as long as they credit you and license their new creations under the identical terms." Rather than the traditional *all rights reserved* emphasis of copyright laws, Creative Commons licenses allow creators of works to reserve some rights and indicate to others their level of comfort with transformative use of their materials.

What would be the value of giving up the fight to catch all plagiarists and instead embrace more fully a remix culture? As filmmaker Kirby Ferguson explains, "Everything is a remix." Everything already is borrowed, in some way or another, from earlier ideas. Ferguson's TED Talk on the subject draws on examples like Bob Dylan's and Danger Mouse's music, technological features like the iPhone's multi-touch, and the movie *Avatar*, among others. His goal is to illustrate that the boundaries between plagiarism and homage, copying and allusion, are porous and these seemingly black-and-white boundaries are truly gray areas. As Henry Ford noted in a 1909 interview, "I invented nothing new. I simply assembled into a car the discoveries of other men behind whom were centuries of work."

The advantage here of casting aside the hunt for plagiarists and embracing a remix culture is that we can embrace the idea that nothing we create will be entirely new and that's okay. For many writers, we become blocked when we feel as though good writing must only be game-changing writing, the kind of thing that says something new and entirely different, that no one has ever said before. And who can blame students for finding it difficult to compose something supposedly new when faced with timeworn prompts asking them to write a five-paragraph essay about gun control or the death penalty? Indeed, for those of us who teach writing, helping new authors get past this focus on game-changing writing is crucial; they frequently believe that, in order to enter into the conversation, they have to find something out there to write about that no one has ever said or done before. But even for more seasoned writers, the expanse of the blank page coupled with the expectation of genius is incredibly daunting. The use of remix allows for the creative inclusion of others' ideas, making a space for works that are derivative or transformative of other people's work. For all authors (not just students), this might involve deliberately weaving in others' words as a form of collaborative collage to illustrate the transformative potential of such work, or relying on Creative-Commons licensed materials and other public copyright licensed materials in projects. It also might ask us to learn more about fair use rights and, further, exercise our fair use rights as a form of empowerment.

Further Reading

Readers who are interested in learning more about plagiarism detection technologies may find Debora Weber-Wulff's multi-year study of these tools satisfying. Her book *False Feathers: A Perspective on Academic Plagiarism* (Springer) draws on her research in this area. For more on plagiarism and cheating in general, David Callahan's *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) is an excellent book.

Many scholars draw connections between plagiarism and the role of *remix culture* in the arts. Many beneficial articles tackle the idea of creative remix: Adrian Chen's short *Gawker* article "Remix Everything: BuzzFeed and the Plagiarism Problem" is a good place to start, as it discusses how social media plays a significant role in today's remix culture. Daniela Duca's "The Irreverent Plagiarists: After Sherrie Levine, Michael Mandiberg and Hermann Zschiegner" introduces readers to these artists and their groundbreaking stances against more traditional understandings of copyright in art; Duca refers to them as "appropriating artists," arguing that they ask us to question authorship and meaning through their works. Another good example is Richard Prince's work —his art installation *New Portraits* makes viewers question "What is art? What is originality?"

Readers interested in learning more about the Creative Commons can visit their website where one can discover the different licensing options available as well as search for licensed work to use in their own creative endeavors. To get inspired, Kirby Ferguson's TED talk "Embrace the Remix" and companion website, "Everything is Remix" (are fantastic inspirations. And probably one of the foremost names in remix culture is Harvard professor Lawrence Lessig; his title *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* is exceptional.

Keywords

Blackboard, Creative Commons, plagiarism, SafeAssign, Turnitin

Author Bio

Stephanie Vie has been writing and speaking about plagiarism detection technologies for over a decade. She has presented at academic conferences and various institutions and has been interviewed about plagiarism detection in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She works at the University of Central Florida in Orlando and can be found on Twitter at @digirhet.

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6.8: SAT Scores are Useful for Placing Students in Writing Courses

Author: Kristen di Gennaro, Pace University

In the United States, many students planning to attend college are required to take standardized tests, such as the SAT, as part of the college application process. Currently the SAT includes sections measuring critical reading, math, and writing skills considered necessary for success in college. In 2004, the College Board (that controls and revises the SAT) introduced an essay component as part of the test. Many college writing programs applauded this change, as it supported the position that a test measuring writing ability must actually require test takers to write, rather than simply respond to multiple-choice or short-answer questions about grammar, spelling, and mechanics.

College administrators welcomed the change as well, seeing it as an opportunity to reduce or even eliminate the writing placement exams that incoming students take upon their acceptance or arrival on campus. Indeed, using students' scores from externally administered admissions tests for internal purposes was immediately seen as both time-saving and cost-effective for colleges. The practice also appealed to those who believe that students are subjected to too much testing. Who would object to this multi-purpose test?

Yet in 2014, just a decade after the SAT essay component's debut, the College Board downgraded the essay to optional status, meaning it is no longer a required section of the test. If the essay is so useful for college writing faculty and administrators, why would its creators essentially discourage its use? Wouldn't demand from stakeholders ensure its ongoing success?

When test users multi-task SAT scores, however, they fail to realize that the test lacks validity for these additional uses. Most people understand *test validity* to mean that a test measures what it claims to measure: A driving test measures driving skills and a writing test measures writing ability. What many people fail to realize, however, is that a test in and of itself does not have or lack validity, but the purposes for which it is applied can be more or less valid. According to the American Educational Research Association, a test's validity depends upon its intended use. For example, using results from a driving test to award or deny someone a driver's license is a valid use of a driving test, but using the same results to award or deny high school diplomas would not be considered a valid use. The driving test has little or no validity as an indication of who deserves a high school diploma. A clear-cut case such as this is easy to understand. Less clear are cases where different tests adopt a similar format, such as the SAT writing component and a college writing placement test.

The SAT is a *norm-referenced* test. This means that scoring the test involves identifying the median, or middle score, produced by a group of test takers. Test takers' scores are then arranged above and below the median to create a so-called normal curve (hence the term *norm-referenced*), also called a bell curve given its shape. The curve takes this shape because the vast majority of test takers' scores fall under the largest area of the curve, slightly above and slightly below the median score, creating the bell shape.

Norm-referenced tests are designed to compare test takers to the norm and to one another. Thus, spreading scores along a normal curve allows for easy classification of test takers' scores as average, above average, or below average in relation to the group. For this reason, the results of norm-referenced tests are reported in percentiles, not percentages, as percentiles indicate a test taker's score in relation to the rest of the group. For example, a score at the 95th percentile indicates that the test taker performed better than 95% of the other test takers who took the same test, not that the test taker answered 95% of the questions correctly. In fact, a percentile score says nothing about how many questions a test taker answered correctly or incorrectly, or about the test taker's mastery of any particular area of knowledge or skill, but only how the test taker compared with the rest of the group.

Norm-referenced tests are useful for making decisions based on group comparisons. The primary purpose of the SAT is to allow test users, including students, guidance counselors, and college admissions officers, to make comparisons across test takers from a variety of secondary schools in order to determine which students are most likely to succeed at certain colleges. The SAT, by design, is not aligned with any particular curriculum, since it must be relevant for test takers from a vast range of programs and schools across the United States.

The primary purpose of a placement test, on the other hand, is to determine where in a specific program students should begin their coursework. Programs following developmentally based curricula, such as mathematics, foreign languages, and writing, may rely on some form of placement testing for incoming students. Unlike nationally relevant tests such as the SAT, placement tests must be closely linked to the curriculum of the specific program for which they were designed. Tests aligned with a particular program or curriculum fall under the category of *criterion-referenced tests*.

Criterion-referenced tests are useful when test takers need to demonstrate mastery of specific knowledge, ability, or skills. The driving test mentioned earlier serves as a good example of a criterion-referenced test, since test takers have to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the rules of the road to not create a hazard to other drivers or pedestrians. A test taker's performance, or score, in relation to other test takers is irrelevant. If a test taker performs better than 95% of other test takers but all failed to respect the rules of the road, no one is awarded a driver's license. Likewise, if everyone studies and practices for the test and all perform well, they all receive licenses.

The purpose of a writing placement test is to determine which course within a specific program best matches a student's writing strengths and weaknesses. For a placement test to be useful, it must be aligned with a program's course offerings. The best way to achieve this necessary alignment is through the development of locally designed placement tools, or tools that are adapted for the local environment.

In many cases, local placement testing involves having students submit writing samples that are then evaluated by faculty members familiar with the local course options. Students might be asked to create their writing samples on-site, in response to writing tasks designed by faculty, or may be required to submit portfolios showcasing a variety of writing samples. More recently, several programs are experimenting with directed self-placement, a type of self-assessment process where students respond to questions intended to raise self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in writing. Students might then select a course based on their self-assessments, or programs might combine students' self-assessment responses with their writing samples to make placement decisions. So, there are at least two reasons for rejecting SAT scores as a substitute for placement testing. One is that a test's validity depends on its intended use, and since the SAT was not designed as a placement test, it lacks validity for this purpose. The second reason is that the SAT is a norm-referenced test not aligned with a particular curriculum, while a college writing placement test is a criterion-referenced test with results linked to specific course content.
Many people, especially college writing faculty, interpret the

College Board's decision to minimize the role of the SAT essay test as an admission that it was a poor measure of writing ability. According to Les Perelman, retired MIT professor and outspoken critic of the SAT essay test since its inception, giving test takers only 25 minutes to read, reflect, and respond intelligently to a topic in writing is an "absurd" task. (See Chris Anson and Les Perelman's chapter in this book for more on the validity of standardized writing tests.)

While it's popular to criticize those in the testing industry for creating bad or invalid tests, a test is not inherently good or bad, valid or invalid. Judging the validity of a test goes beyond considerations of format and content. Even a 25-minute writing task can have validity for certain uses. And a test that has the desired format and content coverage is only valid when used for the purpose for which it was created. As soon as a test is used for an additional purpose, its validity is called into question. Thus, rather than blame the College Board for not designing the SAT essay along the model of a criterion-referenced placement test, writing assessment experts should blame those who multi-task SAT scores, misusing them for purposes for which they were not intended. Perhaps the College Board's decision to downgrade the SAT essay component will prevent further irresponsible uses of their tests.

Further Reading

For a brief and accessible overview of basic concepts in educational assessment, see Gerald W. Bracey's "Thinking About Tests and Testing: A Short Primer in Assessment Literacy." For a more in-depth look at academic testing and how educators measure student knowledge, see the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, developed jointly by the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education. The National Council of Teachers of English and Writing Program Administrators also jointly address issues specific to post-secondary education contexts in their "White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities." Finally, Les Perelman has been very open with his criticism of the SAT, as exemplified in Joanna Weiss's piece "The man who killed the SAT essay" (*The Boston Globe*) and "Interview with Les Perelman" by Karyn Hollis (*Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy).*

Keywords

criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced tests, placement testing, SAT, test use and misuse, validity, writing assessment

Author Bio

Kristen di Gennaro is assistant professor and director of composition at Pace University in New York City, where she also teaches undergraduate writing courses. She specializes in writing assessment and pedagogy with a particular focus on second-language writers. Her research has appeared in numerous academic journals.

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7.1: Texting Ruins Students' Grammar Skills

Author: Scott Warnock, English, Drexel University

There is a sturdy tradition of generalized complaints that student writing is terrible. While these complaints are an age-old problem, in 1975 *Newsweek* published "Why Johnny Can't Write," alerting its readers about the nationwide bad writing of "your children" and zeroing in on a few culprits, which included a newfangled emphasis on "'creativity' in the English classrooms" and "the simplistic spoken style of television." Recently, this criticism has been articulated in a different way: Digital technology is ruining students' grammar. So, as young Johnnys and Jennys peck out texts or emails or social media posts, they are paradoxically—and unwittingly—fueling arguments that their ability to use language is disintegrating. People look at texting shortcuts or the abbreviationand jargon-filled communicative environments of Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and other social media sites, and lament that digital writing is causing young people to butcher grammar. An unstated implication of these beliefs might be that digital writing is harming the next generation's ability to think clearly.

We need to put to rest the idea that digital forms of writing pose a threat to overall writing ability. In particular, we must address claims of specific cause-and-effect between digital writing and bad grammar. There are three main problems with this bad idea: (1) Complaints about writing deteriorating because of digital technology are simply part of a history of complaining about the worsening grammar, writing, mechanics, or style of younger generations; (2) the definition of grammar in this context is often wrong; and (3) this bad idea is based on an unproven link between digital writing behaviors and other kinds of writing.

Language Panics

First, the assertion that new forms of communication signal the end of the world is nothing new. Even an intellectual giant like the philosopher Plato was worried. Plato took a look at writing itself—that odd, scribing technology emerging during his time—and sounded the alarm; in his work, *Phaedrus*, he expressed concern that writing might be dangerous because it could damage our ability to memorize and offered only the semblance of wisdom. Since Plato's ancient worries, concerns have continued unabated. Education professor Harvey Daniels calls these moments *language panics* that "are as familiar a feature of the human chronicle as wars." Daniels says that there has always been "the inevitable sense that everything was fine until the moment at hand, 1965, or 1789, or 2500 B.C., when suddenly the language (be it American English, British English, or Sumerian) began the final plunge to oblivion."

Writing has a special place in our cultural commentary: Everybody thinks they are an expert, but only when it comes to seeing that things are getting worse—what some writing experts call *grammar rants*. These rants and the beliefs they represent become intertwined with the way people see writing, particularly in terms of what is thought of as grammatical and mechanical mistakes. In his article, "The Phenomenology of Error," writing scholar Joseph Williams lists this history of fierce tirades against poor grammar and writing, but he also demonstrates that many "rules of grammar lack practical force." Williams takes a clever approach to make his point. He repeatedly shows that people, including some famous writers who express strong views about specific writing errors, fail to notice such errors *in their own writing*. Williams states that we often do not see errors unless we look for them, and he makes this assertion directly about the way teachers read and criticize their own students' writing. To further emphasize this point, Williams embeds 100 such errors in his own article and asks readers, mostly English teachers, how many they saw; doubtless, few noticed the vast majority of them. As readers, we tend to see errors where we want to, and we ignore errors where we do not expect to find them (such as a published article about writing!). Williams ultimately asks this: If an error is on the page but no one sees it, is it really an error? Does it matter?

The observations or even fears of digital technology-driven or -facilitated error patterns are merely the latest in a long history of misplaced generational critiques about writing. Whether it has been pencils, television, computers, or cellphones, technological culprits of bad writing have always been found: Arguments blaming people ("kids these days!") extend back through time and are based on skewed views of error and correctness. Those who study the matter understand that languages shift as cultures evolve and technologies change, and seeing such shifts as a kind of deterioration is to fall into step with the same, long history of uninformed pessimism.

What Grammar is—and is Not

These recurring language panics stem from the ongoing suspicion that, for one reason or another, language is being eroded—however flawed such suspicions may be. In this case, specific complaints that digital writing behaviors affect grammar negatively are grounded in misunderstandings about what grammar is. Grammar can have a variety of meanings. In an often-quoted essay, English professor W. Nelson Francis says the way people use the term grammar can range from "the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings" to "linguistic etiquette." This difference of definition is important because when people express opinions about poor grammar, they use the word grammar as if they are talking about sacred, official, absolute rules when they are instead providing views (and accompanying biases) about how they think language *should* be used correctly. In fact, commenting about Francis's article, English professor Patrick Hartwell points out that *linguistic etiquette* is not grammar at all, but usage.

Williams, in his book *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, offers a further clarification of how people muddle ideas like grammar and correctness; Williams identifies three kinds of rules that people often confuse:

- *Real Rules*: These "define what makes English English," such, he says, as an article preceding a noun: *the book*, not *book the.*
- *Social Rules*: These "distinguish Standard English from nonstandard," such as not using *ain't.*
- *Invented Rules*: "Some grammarians have invented a handful of rules that they think we all *should* observe," Williams writes, such as not splitting an infinitive: *to quietly leave* would thus be wrong to a purist.

Native speakers of English, Williams says, follow Real Rules as a matter of course. The Social Rules, though, are not based on fundamental, inherent language quality; he says the only people who self-consciously follow Social Rules are those "not born into Standard English who are striving to rise into the educated class." The Invented Rules are closer to what Williams (similar to Robin Zeff) calls *folklore*. The grammar of the language and the systems and structure of word order and word forms are not the same as preferences of style or perceived niceties of language. When people say "grammar" in such contexts, they mean something closer to "how writing is seen by a particular audience," and, again, finding error in such contexts is a function of a reader's judgment of a text, not of the writer's abilities, talents, or knowledge.

Of course, human beings have always used language to judge and control one another. We understand what it means to say, "She sounds educated." Teaching grammar in a rigid, this-is-inherently-better-than-that way is irresponsible—and it can be dangerous. English professors Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia Dunn state that such teaching "can help to perpetuate cultural prejudices regarding class and race that are mirrored in what is often referred to as the difference between 'correct' and 'incorrect' or between 'proper' and 'improper' language use." In a critical response to that 1975 *Newsweek* article, linguist Suzette Haden Elgin articulates this problem of heavy-handed, absolute correctness, pointing out "there is a real problem in trying, however gently, to 'correct' language, since there is no firm agreement about what is "correct':

"Correct" English, by which I assume *Newsweek* means the so-called Standard American English, is a kind of consensus agreement among numerous differing dialects as to which shared items they are all willing to throw into the stylistic pot. "Correct" English is things like ending written sentences with periods rather than commas and putting "-ed" on the end of regular past tense verbs. "Correct" English is things like not using "ain't," and restricting the negatives to one to a sentence, and putting most direct objects to the right of the verb. Things like that.

These types of mistaken ideas about correct English can drive the language panics mentioned. They fuel how people look for and interpret errors and what they see as bad writing of all sorts.

Carrying over the Bad Habits of Digital Writing?

Now digital technology has been tossed into the midst of these flawed ideas. The few studies that have attempted to correlate connections between digital writing behaviors, specifically texting, and grammar woes have used instruments like multiple-choice quizzes to measure things that have little to do with grammar. Linguists have had a field day attacking this kind of research. Linguist Josef Fruehwald says such studies demonstrate the misunderstandings about language and grammar, pointing out that the quizzes that drive most of the research really measure "punctuation, comma rules, spelling conventions, etc.," and these things are "arbitrary decisions settled upon a long time ago, and have nothing, *nothing* to do with human language." In other words, you may not know the spelling difference between "accept" and "except," but that is not a grammatical issue.

Going further, the idea that digital tools harm writing requires not just a misunderstanding about grammar, but a belief that one form of writing, such as texting, would influence or *transfer*, perhaps inexorably, to another form, such as an argument paper in school. Numerous studies have found this not to be the case. One research team puts it bluntly: "Textism use does not appear to harm children's literacy." In the journal *Reading and Writing*, another group of researchers studied the relationship between texting and grammar and found considerable inconsistency in writing patterns for different tasks and age groups, concluding that "parents and educators need not be concerned that children's grammatical knowledge is being consistently or directly compromised when they make grammatical violations in their text messages." A small study by writing researcher Michaela Cullington, in which she reviewed papers from a number of students, finds no examples of texting shortcuts in otherwise formal school writing. Michaela writes that "texting is not interfering with students' use of standard written English." People often vigorously complain that texting is influencing other sorts of writing, but most of those who have studied the matter do not find such a connection.

Questions Not Just about Grammar

The idea that digital technology is destroying grammar is founded in new misunderstandings about digital writing and age-old, generationally tinged misunderstandings about language and grammar. Children today are creating texts at a greater rate than any other generation in history. Indeed, the digital writing they do can often appear unfamiliar to those who did not grow up with such technologies. Historically, a default reaction has been to view such unfamiliarity as a problem, to see the writing as lesser— with the accompanying claim that the "grammar" is bad (perhaps an articulation of "my generation is better than yours!").

Quelling this bad idea might raise bigger-picture definitional challenges—and not just about grammar. It may call into question, now that digital communications are so ubiquitous, just what people mean when they say "writing." As Zeff notes, even back in 2007, students were seeing a difference between digital writing and school writing: "They write constantly. Only they do not see that format of communicating as writing." She says, "My students tell me that writing is something you do in class for a grade. All the other modes are talking." Redefining what we mean by writing could help clarify some of these critiques.

Regardless, as it stands now, screenagers, digital natives—or whatever people choose to call them—may be the most literate generation ever, yet some stubbornly persist in criticizing their grammar and even claiming that they cannot switch from texting shortcuts to other forms of writing. Instead of viewing e-communications as a cause of worry or harm, perhaps we might instead see the use of digital writing as yet another example of how humans find ingenious ways to make language, in all its systems and nuances, work in new contexts.

Further Reading

Merrill Sheils wrote the "Why Johnny Can't Write" *Newsweek* article (December 1975). Suzette Haden Elgin responded with "Why *Newsweek* Can't Tell Us Why Johnny Can't Write" (*The English Journal*, November 1976). For more about language panics, see Harvey Daniels, *Famous Last Words: The American Language Crisis Reconsidered* (Southern Illinois University Press). There are a number of good pieces focusing on flawed ways of viewing grammar and error; one of the best is Joseph Williams's article "The Phenomenology of Error" (*College Composition and Communication*). Patrick Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" (*College English*) is also good, as is the first chapter of Williams's *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*.

For more about how technology has inflected the conversations about eroding language and grammar, see Robin Zeff's article "The Convergence of Technology and Tradition: An Examination of the Folklore of College Writing Instruction" (*Computers & Writing Online*). British researchers Nenagh Kemp, Clare Wood, and Sam Waldron have conducted several investigations of this topic, described in articles such as "do i know its wrong: children's and adults' use of unconventional grammar in text messaging" (*Reading and Writing*) and "Exploring the Longitudinal Relationships Between the Use of Grammar in Text Messaging and Performance on Grammatical Tasks" (*British Journal of Developmental Psychology*). Linguists have pounced on "digital tech hurts your grammar" studies. Two quick, readable reviews of such research include Josef Fruehwald's "Teens and Texting and Grammar" and Mark Liberman's "Texting and Language Skills."

Keywords

computers and composition, correctness, digital writing, error, grammar, linguistics, texting

Author Bio

Scott Warnock is an associate professor of English and the director of the University Writing Program at Drexel University. He is the author of *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* and numerous chapters and journal articles about online learning, computers and writing, and education technology. He has presented and conducted workshops, both onsite and online, about teaching and technology at national conferences and for many institutions. From 2011 to 2016, Warnock served as co-chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction, and he co-authored that committee's spring 2013 publication, *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction*. Since 2016, he has served as the vice president of the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators.

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7.2: Texting Ruins Literacy Skills

Author: Christopher Justice, University of Baltimore

Text messaging, or texting, refers to the communicative practice of sending brief messages on cell phones, other personal digital devices, or online instant messaging services using conventional, but more often abbreviated, graphic, or otherwise non-conventional uses of language. One who texts is generally referred to as a texter, and although texts are often composed with alphabetic letters, texters are using an increasingly more sophisticated range of visual and sonic media to communicate through this medium.

Texting became commercially available for the public in the mid-1990s, and since then, its popularity has skyrocketed. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 75% of Americans in 2011 sent and received text messages. Due to this popularity and the unconventional ways texters use language, a potent public backlash against texting has emerged, propagated further by the media and other cultural elites. As David Crystal points out in his book *Txtng: The gr8 db8*, headlines like these from the mid-2000s have become the norm for how many people understand texting: "Texting and Emailing 'Fog Your Brain like Cannabis'"; "Texting Does Not Influence Literacy Skills"; and "Texting Deprives Children of Sleep."

Unfortunately, the myth has continued into the present: In a 2012 *Baltimore Sun* article, the author reports on a study from Pennsylvania State University that found texting negatively affects students' grammar skills. More troubling, the article begins with these words, "It probably comes as no surprise to those of us who have read our kids' composition papers," and ends with these, "OMG! One more challenge to teaching our kids to write!" Both comments suggest that texting is a major problem causing students to write poorly, a position that oversimplifies and overlooks numerous other important factors that influence how people, especially students, write. Additionally, in a 2014 *Los Angeles Times* article, a columnist argues that texting produces linguistic and intellectual laziness, predictability, and desperation.

The examples of these doomsday scenarios are too pervasive to fully review here. Nevertheless, according to these positions, texting causes people, especially children, teenagers, and college students, to misspell words, poorly punctuate sentences, and grammatically pollute sentences. (For a counterargument to this bad idea, see Scott Warnock's chapter elsewhere in this collection.) Given the often-limited space texters have to compose messages (like Twitter's 140-character limit), many argue that texters' abilities to compose complex, well-supported arguments is dwindling. Texting also shortens attention spans and distracts significantly when engaging in otherwise important, necessary activities such as reading, working, or driving.

In general, these arguments make this clear: Texting is a major threat to our literacy skills. However, as linguist John McWhorter claims, texting is a "miraculous thing" that marks "an emergent complexity" with how we use language. Texting is a "new way of writing" that we can use alongside traditional writing and "an expansion of [our] linguistic repertoire," marking a new type of bilingualism that reflects a positive development in our constantly evolving linguistic selves. Or, as Crystal states, "Texting is one of the most innovative linguistic phenomena of modern times." Texting should be respected and taken more seriously as a sophisticated form of discourse that has the potential to revolutionize how we write and our overall relationship to language.

Texting offers society many positive benefits. For starters, texting's economic impact is significant: The industry that supports texting's infrastructure is a lucrative business that employs many people. In general, texting offers efficiency and convenience in how we communicate. Texting allows us to receive information quickly in catastrophic or dangerous situations or when conditions are not conducive to speaking, such as in loud settings or when privacy is needed. Texting offers us useful reminders along with advice, tutelage, and help. As Crystal notes, texting also offers intimacy while preserving social distance. Moreover, Crystal argues, texting cultivates a playfulness in how we use language and communicate with others. Play, as many who study ludology (the study of play) note, can have a powerful, positive impact on communication, creativity, self-esteem, and other behaviors.

More specifically, the myth that texting leads to illiteracy must stop for several reasons. One reason is that in many contexts, texting allows writers more time than speech to formulate their thoughts, and like other types of electronic media, texting also allows ample opportunities to revise and organize one's thoughts. Second, the sudden and rapid popularity of texting is radically disproportionate to illiteracy rates. If texting causes illiteracy, and if so many people are texting, why are literacy rates not rapidly declining?

Additionally, while abbreviations are popular in texting, they are not a new linguistic phenomenon; one need only read a government contract issued through agencies such as the National Science Foundation or Environmental Protection Agency to

realize how useful and ubiquitous abbreviations are. Our language is filled with abbreviations such as a.m. or p.m. to denote time; B.A., M.A., J.D., Ph.D. to denote degrees; Mr., Sgt., VP, CEO to denote titles; HIV, DNA, LSD, and others to denote scientific language; and MD, JAN, or W to denote states, months, or directions. Acronyms (abbreviations with vowels that spell new words) are equally popular: scuba, laser, NATO, OSHA, and AWOL are just a few examples. Contractions are equally popular. Moreover, many of the abbreviations and otherwise truncated uses of language are instigated by efficient uses of the keyboard, which is a provocative and clever use of media and an important hallmark of literacy. Ultimately, the abbreviated language that characterizes texting discourse is a continuation of a historical trend that reveals how people have creatively used language for conciseness and efficiency.

A common criticism levied against texting points to how texters' literacy skills supposedly decline *after* texting; however, what more people need to realize are the impressive literacy skills texters possess *before* texting. To some degree, texting is a magnet for the literate. For example, the ability to text already suggests relative media savvy. You can't text without having a basic understanding of how texting, cell phones, keyboards, and other media work. Also, when people use informal language in their texts, many understand there are already levels of formality appropriate for different communicative contexts. Try abbreviating or truncating language when you don't already know the correct spelling of a word or syntax of a phrase.

Moreover, texting positively exercises texters' rhetorical skills. Since texts are written in various styles, people must know how to match the style of a text with its message, audience, and tone, which for many is a sophisticated rhetorical act that we too often take for granted. For example, texters often already have a sophisticated sense of audience when texting because the medium facilitates frequent communication with vastly different audiences: spouses, parents, bosses, friends, health professionals, grandparents, colleagues, lovers, and so on. Texting also requires people to understand the rhetorical context of a situation: where they will receive the message, what their location is. Understanding these factors is critical in rhetorical communication. Tone is also important in texting since the medium allows for different ways to present tone through punctuation marks, attached photos, and emoticons. Additionally, given the instantaneous nature of texting, many frequent texters are often engaged in *kairos*, or the rhetorical concept of understanding when the timing and overall context for making an argument is ideal. In fact, Crystal even speculates that perhaps a new branch of linguistics will be needed to study texting. Such a field would acknowledge texting's many complexities and draw from fields such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, socio-linguistics, orthography, and others.

Since texting typically occurs on devices with access to multiple forms of media, texting also can cultivate and encourage texters to utilize various modes of communication. For example, instead of relying only on alphabetic letters, texters can include voice messages, images, photographs, music, emoticons, web links, and other types of multimodal elements to make their points. More importantly, determining which type of modality to use given one's audience and message is an important rhetorical skill. Texting enhances this skill, and given the popularity of cell phones, many students have easy access to platforms that emphasize texting, which enables them to quickly apply lessons learned about rhetoric and communication to their personal, academic, and professional lives.

In fact, several researchers have found positive correlations between texting and people's literacy skills. For example, Kate Fox finds that texting improves texters' summarizing skills and their overall ability to write more concisely along with their diplomacy skills. A group of researchers at Coventry University discovered that the more pre-teenage children used text abbreviations, the more likely they were to score higher on reading and vocabulary tests. Conversely, in that same study, students with higher-level spelling and writing skills tended to use the most texting abbreviations. Another researcher at the City University of London found that texters' spelling or grammar skills were no better or worse than that of non-texters', suggesting that texting itself doesn't specifically affect one's literacy skills. Another group of Finnish researchers concluded that texting's often informal style allowed texters to engage in more creative uses of language. Other researchers found that texting enhances students' ability to write collaboratively. Another set of researchers argue that texters use paralinguistics – or additional written or scriptive cues—to clarify their meaning, thus potentially enhancing communication. Or, as Clare Wood, a scholar who studies children's literacy development and who has been at the forefront of texting research for years, states, "Overall, there is little evidence that ungrammatical texting behavior is linked to grammatical understanding or knowledge of orthographic representations of language in children."

Texting may even be particularly useful for helping people of various ages specifically improve their writing skills. McWhorter argues that when people think of language, they usually are referring to speech, not writing. Because writing and speech are radically different, the two should be distinguished. However, McWhorter argues that as writing—a far more recent phenomena

than speech—advanced, some speech emulated writing, but some writing also emulated speech. That's where texting first emerged. For McWhorter, texting is a unique hybrid of speech and writing because it is loose and informal, like speech, although texters still rely on the "brute mechanics" of writing to communicate through this type of "fingered speech." McWhorter points to how texting is changing our conceptions of writing and speech because new linguistic structures are emerging such as LOL or the use of a slash (/) to denote what linguists call pragmatic particles. These particles are usually spoken, but with texting, new forms of written communication are used to socially negotiate meaning among texters. Within the context of linguistics and writing studies, this is an important development.

New technologies have consistently threatened old ones, so cries that "texting is killing civilization" are part of a long history of trashing new media. In fact, even writing was despised by philosophers such as Plato in ancient Greece. In the 20th century, when film threatened radio, movies were demonized. When television threatened film, according to film historian Virginia Wright Wexman, the word "television" was forbidden in some studios. And the same backlash is currently directed toward texting, video games, social media, and other forms of digital media.

However, if we consider the National Council of Teachers of English's definition of 21st-century literacy, we see a notable emphasis on the role technology plays in literacy. Two specific goals stand out: In this century, literate citizens should be able to "develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology" and "create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts." A third goal—"manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information"—challenges the notion that texting distracts us. In the mediaand information-saturated worlds we live in, preventing distractions seems anachronistic; managing them seems the wiser, more contemporary goal. We should consider texting as not replacing formal writing, but instead, as a complex complement to formal writing that allows people to augment their existing writing skills in fresh, complex ways. Instead of perceiving texting as a threat to literacy, we should start understanding texting as an ally. Scholars who study writing and language should investigate more rigorously texting's many complex dynamics.

Encouraging students to use texting to communicate with each other while working on group projects seems logical. Using examples in class about language usage that relates to texting is relevant to students' lives. Comparing texting's conventions to those found in other types of writing is valuable. Asking students to reflect on their texting behaviors will raise their awareness of texting's strengths and weaknesses. Cultivating within students the notion that texting is one useful medium within a spectrum of various communications media will only help them discern when it's best to text and when it's not. In a world rife with alternative discourses and media, embracing the diverse opportunities for communication marks the best path to literacy.

Further Reading

See David Crystal's book *Txtng: The gr8 db8;* Jessica Gross's *TED* blog post, "Texting as a 'Miraculous Thing': 6 Ways our Generation is Redefining Communication"; a YouTube clip by John McWhorter titled "A Surprising new Language—Texting"; and Lucy Ward's article in *The Guardian*, "Texting 'is no Bar to Literacy'."

Keywords

colloquial language, digital literacy, digital rhetoric, linguistics, nonstandard language, orthography, standard language, texting

Author Bio

Christopher Justice is a writer and lecturer at the University of Baltimore and a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. From 2007–2012, he helped establish UB's University Writing Program and served as its writing program administrator. His research and scholarship focuses on writing theory and non-traditional writing systems such as texting and different forms of animal communication. His writing has appeared in numerous publications and presses. For more information about his work, please visit http://christopherjustice.weebly.com.

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7.3: Gamification Makes Writing Fun

Author: Joshua Daniel-Wariya, Oklahoma State University

Recently, I received an email titled “Gamification: The Next Frontier in Student Achievement.” It asked, “When is a game more than just a game?” The answer followed: “When it takes a classroom from completing 30% of their assignments to completing 100%.” This, I suppose, should sound great—if not too good to be true—to any teacher having difficulty getting students to complete assignments. When I clicked the link for more information, I was taken to a newsletter about a teacher named Beth who was struggling with student engagement. By using a particular platform to gamify her classroom, I read, Beth was able to “turn learning into an adventure” and “spread her enthusiasm” to her students. Within one year of this gamification experiment, Beth achieved 100% student completion rates. The newsletter went on to state that Beth “even led her district’s professional development because, well, you can’t ignore that 30% to 100% jump.”

I have no clue if Beth is real, though I do suspect she is the embodiment of the urban legend of gamification’s many promises. The email allows interested instructors to join Beth’s online course to see for themselves how she achieved her astonishing results. Instead of units, assignments, and activities, we have *quests*, *levels*, and *Easter eggs*. Instead of grades, we have experience points and the ability to level up. Students can even *power level* by collaborating with classmates who have already completed major quest lines. One area of course content provides the following instruction to students for “Training for Epic Essays”: “Many of your most epic battles on this journey and in the rest of your life will require you to communicate well. Good communication earns large amounts of XP and unlocks many achievements. Refer to this folder any time you need help writing the most epic essay possible.”

This course rehearses the notion that students view school in general, and writing in particular, as not being much fun. But by covering the monotony of writing with the excitement of games, Beth achieves undeniable results. As philosopher and game designer Ian Bogost says, “Everyone seems to agree that games are powerful. And that power is mysterious and wild, like black magic.” Beth’s course quantifies that power in the 70% increase towards perfect student engagement. The underlying theory is that by making her course look like a game, Beth made it fun.

But what is actually required to make something fun? What gives any activity the quality of fun? And why are games universally recognized as being so good at creating it? Is it because games use the descriptive terminology of quests and levels, of epic battles, or because they award experience points and trophies instead of grades and diplomas? Following Bogost, here I take the position that gamification rehearses a common, yet misleading, conception of fun as something like easy pleasure. To have fun means people feel as though they are not working hard, or even not working at all, simply because they are escaping the monotony of hard work to the adventure of a whimsical game. This process is sometimes described metaphorically as chocolate-covered broccoli. Gamification covers the bitterness of something that is important, yet undesirable, with the sweetness of something that is not important, yet desirable.

This metaphor occludes something deeper about what makes games fun and how writing might be made so. According to Bogost, games are fun because they are “experiences we encounter through play.” Here, I want to suggest that a better way forward in making writing fun is not to make it more like a game, but instead to consider the specific conditions in which writing allows for and invites *play*. While the terms game and play often seem synonymous, they are not the same. While games can be described as a *context* of rules, space, people, materials, and valorized outcomes, play is an *activity* or way of moving about that context. Game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman describe play as “free movement within a more rigid structure.” This means that any material, medium, or environment has the capacity for play. People play when they move their avatars through virtual spaces. People also play when they move words and phrases around with respect to genre conventions. Games, then, are not unique from writing because they *have* play, but because they are conceived as experiences of play and recognized as such. Writing has the same potential.

My position is that writing can, and will, be fun when it is conceived as an experience encountered through play. So what would it mean to conceive writing as such an experience? First, play is contextual. This means that play takes place within a rule-bound network of people, objects, and space. The relationship between play and rule structures can seem counterintuitive because common sense tends to associate play with unconstrained freedom, such as children playing freely in a yard with no apparent rules or purpose. Pressed further, however, it becomes clear that play is meaningful due to its situated-ness within specific rule-bound contexts. For example, take the act of swinging a bat at a ball. While people may play in this way nearly anywhere, any particular

swing only becomes meaningful when situated within a particular context, such as a little league baseball game or a cricket exhibition. Play—and even fun—does not equate to making writing *easy*. In order to truly engage with the play of writing we have to embrace its difficulty, not gloss over it or cover it up with a gamified lexicon. Gamification masks difficulty, when writers need to engage it directly.

Play is also creative and personal. When people play, it often feels like it is purely for the sake of play. This does not mean that play has no purpose, but that its purpose in any given moment might be unpredictable, its context and duration indeterminate, and its motivation idiosyncratic. I might, for example, for no other reason I can articulate than because *I feel like it*, grab a tennis ball and play with my dog in the backyard until she and I arbitrarily decide we are finished. While such play might be highly personal and done for the sake of itself, the paradox of play is that it is simultaneously creative.

This means that, even as I play with my dog for reasons I cannot articulate, I'm connected with the world through the technology of the ball, the familiar form of the game *catch*, and how poorly my dog plays it. Through catch, I am confronted with the paradox of play as both autotelic—individual and creative—that is inevitable and inescapable. To conceive writing as an experience encountered through play, writers must likewise embrace this unresolvable paradox. Even when our motivations for writing feel mysterious and isolating, we must remember that even the tools of our trade—a pen and notebook, a tablet and blank screen—call attention to our *never aloneness*. We simply cannot write without the world around us, and yet as we write, we create our own little world. To embrace the paradox buried in that interplay is to make writing fun.

So here we have it. Writing can and will be fun when it invites and makes possible opportunities for play. Because writing situations provide writers with familiar rules and conventions, writers have the opportunity to move within and through those forms to create and strategize. And even though, like play, writing feels to us so very personal, people paradoxically cannot go about the act of writing or playing, without being deeply enfolded in the world around them through their interactions with symbols, technologies, and objects.

Certainly, gamification does have its potential upsides. The act of turning a complex task like writing into something game-like by breaking it down into simpler parts, organizing it into small missions and quests, and providing clear pathways for teamwork might help writers set and maintain achievable goals. But on a deeper level, it misses the opportunity to explore and exploit the always already fun-making possibilities inherent in writing. In terms of actual practice, what this realization suggests is that teachers, students, and writers in general should not expect writing to come easily, for it to not feel frustrating at times, or for it to not require hard work. Perhaps ironically, to truly conceive writing as an experience encountered through play means to take it seriously enough to realize how hard it can be. When we use gamification to "add something sweet" to the surface of writing, we miss all the playful opportunities present just below the surface that are simply waiting for us to take them seriously enough that they might unravel and reveal their many possibilities.

Further Reading

For further information on the variety of ways gamification is being used today, see Brian Burke's *Gamification: How Gamification Motivates People to Do Extraordinary Things* (Bibliomotion), as well as Kevin Wervach and Dan Hunter's *For the Win* (Wharton Digital Press). Both provide current examples of the use of gamification in professional and educational contexts.

Game designers and scholars of rhetoric and writing have published several notable works that critique gamification and offer other ways of using play and games for educational purposes. See, for instance, Jane McGonigal's *Reality is Broken* (Penguin), which discusses the use of games to solve the problems of today's world, such as hunger and climate change. Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* (MIT Press) illustrates the ways games mount arguments through computer processes. And Miguel Sicart's *Play Matters* (MIT Press) is an excellent discussion of what play is and why it is important.

Finally, scholars in writing studies have written a number of books on the potential of games to help shape the future of writing studies. See Albert Rouzie's *Serio-Ludic Rhetoric* (Hampton Press), an early look at the ways digital writing technologies emphasize and enable play. Additionally, Richard Colby, Matthew S.S. Johnson, and Rebekah Shultz-Colby's collection, *Rhetoric/Composition/Play Through Video Games* (Palgrave MacMillan) offers essays from a wide variety of writing studies scholars and gives examples of gamified classrooms, as well as more theoretical discussions about teaching with and through videogames.

Keywords

avatar, design, gamification, gaming, ludic, play, procedural rhetoric

Author Bio

Joshua Daniel-Wariya is an assistant professor of rhetoric and professional writing at Oklahoma State University, where he also serves as associate director of First-Year Composition. His research interests involve the intersections of new media, computer games, and play, especially as they relate to the teaching of writing. He has published research about the ways people interpret and express both themselves and the world through the act of playing. He can be reached—and welcomes questions about his work—through his Twitter handle @jdanielwariya.

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7.4: The More Digital Technology, the Better

Authors: Genesea M. Carter, Colorado State University. Aurora Matzke, Biola University

With the increasing dominance that cell phones, tablets, music devices, apps, FitBits, Xboxes—you get the picture—play in everyday life, the notion that humans are cyborgs, has emerged. Technology has become fully integrated and relied upon in everyday life, whether it's Amazon's Echo turning on hallway lights, or the iPad blaring on the back seat of the minivan. Without a doubt, technology makes our lives easier, better, and even more enjoyable: It can be our secretary, butler, doctor, private tutor, and companion all in one. And the tech boom isn't just for the home or the office; it can support student learning, too. Educators, parents, and tech enthusiasts are eager to strategize how technology might help support student learning—including the writing classroom.

Beliefs about technologies have changed the way we think about and understand the entire enterprise of writing education. Marc Prensky, the researcher who coined the terms *digital native*— to describe those born with unfettered access to technology (born between 1982–1991)—and *digital immigrant*—to describe those not born with this unfettered access to technology (born before 1982)— tells us that today's students are digital learners, who, because of the ease and access of technology in their everyday lives, expect, if not demand, to use technology in the classroom. Prensky, and the digital education scholars who agree with him, would have us believe that educators, who primarily tend to be digital immigrants in his definition, are "struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language." Yet, is this really the case? Furthermore, what if emphasizing the technologies that students find familiar and engaging in the writing classroom actually hinders learning?

While many young people today may be digital natives, they are also digitally naïve. Many don't know how to change their Facebook privacy settings, check their school email accounts, or even how to adjust the margins in a Word document. Consequently, parents and writing educators (the digital immigrants) are tasked with teaching their children and students how to safely and productively integrate what we would now consider very basic technologies into their writing processes. So, while integrating cellphone activities and applications into a course can be quite useful to engage students, students' ability to understand and use digital devices and information streams effectively and ethically—what we call *digital literacy*—may hinge on less sexy (but much needed) instruction. We also might need to consider the premise that iPads and other tablets in writing classes aren't all they're cracked up to be. Or at the very least, we need to recognize that students are often missing foundational digital literacy skills desperately needed for their success beyond the classroom.

One of the foundational digital literacy skills students need is concentration. Several studies have shown that children who are exposed to a lot of technology have rewired brains. They're better at scanning for information and retrieving information, but they are less able to concentrate deeply. Students are becoming habituated to change and less able to sustain attention toward a task. Yes, increased reaction times and visual–spatial abilities are linked to technology use and media exposure, but being able to turn a page or write a word *really fast* is minimally connected to making one a stronger critical thinker or a more capable reader or writer. Consequently, when writing educators make recent technologies and media rich projects ubiquitous to their classrooms—when they privilege audio essays, vlogs, digital storytelling, and Snapchat collages—they should recognize that technology in the classroom is not necessarily making students better writers and thinkers. Teachers who use technology in the classroom should first "decide what we want students to do" and then "find the best technology to encourage that behavior," explains University of Colorado Boulder professor Doug Duncan. Educators, administrators, and policy makers cannot simply throw iPads through the door and hope for the best.

When technology isn't mindfully incorporated into the classroom, it can become a distraction that significantly impacts learning. In 2015, Anya Kamenetz of National Public Radio reported on a study about texting and technology use in the classroom that was conducted by several science and engineering faculty at the University of Colorado Boulder. The researchers determined that on their campus "more than 75 percent of undergrads reported texting while in class, and that in-class texting was linked to an average drop of half a letter grade in the course." Additionally, Princeton researcher Pam A. Mueller and University of California at Los Angeles researcher Daniel M. Oppenheimer together determined that classroom cultures that have open-access technology policies are linked to decreased grades and "shallower processing" of course content. While the research more expansively takes on education as a whole, the findings are worth noting. The habits that are formed in the biology classroom will impact the habits exhibited in the writing classroom. All students—not just writing students—need to be taught how to be effective users of a range of composing technologies. Writing teachers "need to inhabit an ecology that supports their efforts over time," say Richard J. Selfe

and Cynthia L. Selfe, writing and technology experts. In order to create these ecologies, technological initiatives must include funding and support to ensure that teachers' objectives for integrating technology into the classroom are generating the results they hoped for.

Technology alone isn't a magic bullet. A 2015 study conducted by independent researchers from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development compared the computer use and evaluative reports regarding academic gains of children in over 70 different countries. Their findings? There are "'no appreciable improvements' in reading, mathematics or science in the countries that had invested heavily in information technology." Furthermore, initiatives that have focused almost solely on providing technologies to impoverished areas have not resulted in appreciable gains in learning. Non-profits like One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) fall short of the promise. OLPC itself laments that, "The great excitement, energy, and enthusiasm that brought us together is gone. OLPC is dead. In its place, is the reality that technology is a force in education, and we all need to be vigilant about when, where, and how it's used." Audrey Watters with *Hack Education* cited the real issue at hand in 2012: "That last (missing) piece—training for teachers—has long been something that gets overlooked when it comes to ed-tech initiatives no matter the location, Peru or the U.S. It is almost as if we believe we can simply parachute technology into a classroom and expect everyone to just pick it up, understand it, use it, hack it, and prosper." Laptops won't help if we continue to ignore substantive, longitudinal teacher support.

We agree that technology has the potential to enable neurologically and physically diverse student populations to engage in learning and writing in new and exciting ways—the importance and necessity of these developments cannot be overstated. Yet, for situations when digital technologies are thrown unreflective into many classrooms, shouldn't we pause, reflect, and demand evidence of the success of such applications and devices? Of course. To do otherwise would be foolish.

So, what *is* technology's place, then? Good technology use in the writing classroom happens when teachers figure out what they want their students to learn *first* and then determine what technology might help. There are ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers regarding media and technology use in the classroom. Teachers can also balance technology in the classroom with more traditional hand-to-paper note-taking and writing activities, erring on the side of less tech and not more tech, unless they know why they're asking students to use it. Students can use technology deliberately, to problem solve, collaborate, and engage with a variety of real-life audiences that remain unavailable without the technology. Finally, and perhaps most importantly: Writing teachers, educators, and parents don't have to cave to the pressure that comes with the belief that students are digital natives and, therefore, need or require technology in the classroom for effective learning. Let's better think through why technology is being used and to what ends.

Further Reading

Writing scholars have extensively studied how writing and learning is enhanced and affected by technology in the classroom. Most notably, Richard J. Selfe and Cynthia L. Selfe's article "'Convince Me!' Valuing Multimodal Literacies and Composing Public Service Announcements" published in the academic journal *Theory into Practice* provides an overview of and recommendations for how to effectively incorporate technology into the writing classroom. Barbara Jean Monroe's *Crossing the Digital Divide: Race, Writing, and Technology in the Classroom* (Teachers College Press) and Anne Herrington, Kevin Hodgson, and Charles Moran's *Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change, and Assessment in the 21st Century* (Teachers College Press) explore effective and ineffective strategies, assignments, and assessment methods for teaching writing with technology.

Keywords

cognition, digital literacy, digital writing, multimodal writing, technostress

Author Bio

Genesea M. Carter is associate director of composition and assistant professor of writing, rhetoric, and digital literacy at Colorado State University. Aurora Matzke is an associate professor of writing, rhetoric, and digital literacy at Biola University. As members of the iGeneration who teach at laptop-heavy campuses, they enjoy researching and teaching how to use technology in the classroom effectively and mindfully. Because of the importance placed on technology in society and on their campuses (and their love for their iPhones), they have first-hand experience with how technology can interfere with daily life and learning. As such,

Genesea and Aurora are always looking for ways to get some tech-balance in their classrooms and after hours. Follow Genesea on Twitter @ GeneseaC or visit her website at geneseacarter.com.

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7.5: Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants

Author: Phill Alexander. Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

As a mixed-blood Cherokee, I've always been troubled when people use Indigenous phrases or images inaccurately to try to present an argument: from mascots to the overworked use of the phase *pow-wow.* I understand the precarious nature of using words like *native*. That was why I rolled my eyes the first time I heard the phrase *digital native*.

Conceptually, the idea of the digital native *almost* makes sense. The theory is that there is a profound difference between those born during the most recent age of the personal computer and the Internet and those born prior to the ubiquitous onslaught of digital technologies. Those born during this technological boom would be *native* to digital and computer technology, and those who were older would be the *digital immigrants*, coming to digital technologies later in their lives. The implication is that the digital native is familiar with and proficient with technologies that the digital immigrant is not, and because of this split in digital skill, it will be difficult for the two to communicate. For context, imagine the stereotype of the parent or grandparent who needs a child to set the clock on the microwave or to program the VCR.

In some small ways, this concept is rooted in reality. The cliché is out there. A quick search reveals over 1,000 articles with the phrase "digital native" in the titles, many claiming they will help the non-native to understand how the digital native thinks and works, treating those labeled as native as if they are alien to the norm, or more frightening still, that the digital native has become the norm and those who are not natives are now an outmoded minority. An even less nuanced version of this argument is often invoked as well: "These kids know everything about technology!"

Such a statement reveals the ultimate folly of the digital native as a construct: It too easily leads to a sense of conflict or resignation. What we have to realize is that while it is indeed useful to think about the differences in the ways that people born in an age of digital computing and those born prior to these digital technologies use these tools, to assert that the mere presence of digital technologies so dramatically changes a skill like writing is simply misplaced.

More troubling is the other side of the binary. In 2017, when there is talk of building a wall on the southern border of the United States and discussion of mass deportations, "immigrant" is word that carries the baggage of subjugation, fear, and the questioning of legal rights. Words matter. To use the dichotomy of native/immigrant is dangerous. Such loaded words aren't fodder for avoiding the more nuanced and important conversations about how to write with the best available means of communication in an era when the available means are multiple. When the digital native is conceived to exist in rarified air above the digital immigrant, problems arise. *CNN* features declare the world the property of the digital native, while the digital immigrant becomes a "relic." *Huffington Post* declares flatly that the digital native brings an idyllic "equal level" to all people. The underpinnings of "native" are that a thing or a place is home for a certain group. This leads to subtle implications that those who are not digital natives are attempting to colonize, invade, or co-opt. It also falsely asserts that just because a person is a certain age that person automatically knows and possesses certain skills.

The presence of digital technology has changed the way we think about writing. There are new tools at our disposal, and those digital tools are at times quite intimidating to those who learned to write before computers were an available or viable technology. There is a significant need to understand the way these technologies have changed our composing practices, but at the same time, the computer (or tablet or smartphone) is just another step in the evolution of a writing process that has always depended on technologies (paper, pencils, ink, etc.).

The most common methods of communication *are* changing, and that does matter, but it's not due to anything other than people using the best available means to convey their messages to each other. They can use pictures and video, but that's because the means to use Instagram and YouTube and SnapChat exist now. It doesn't mean that other people cannot, or that technology is the domain of a specific generation. Indeed, multiple research studies (such as those from the Pew Research Center) confirm that the uptake of digital technologies isn't strictly tied to generational groups—it's tied to socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, and access to broadband and smartphones. Digital technology is now accessible in ways it wasn't previously, and those with access and without pre-existing habits of using a specific format choose what they judge to be the best mode of writing, while those who do have pre-existing habits can either be curious about new modes of writing, or not. We have always written, and we will always write. To assert that whole generations either own or are alienated from the technologies used for writing is a needless limiter that attributes false mastery and fosters a sense of futility. It doesn't represent any reality on the ground. It's a myth.

It's easy enough to see how writing with technology works by looking at specific cases instead of attempting to generalize a *native* skillset. Texting, for example, is changing the ways that people understand communication, as they can now work in a method of communication that teeters between real-time and archived, not a phone call but also not an email (or a letter or note). It offers affordances that older methods of personal communication did not. It's a good thing. But there's the down side, too. Most people are now confident—falsely—that they can find any information they need with a Google search, making the gathering of support for arguments sloppy. At the same time, a small percentage of people in many age ranges don't understand the word *Google* as a verb and do not possess the skills to critically analyze websites to know what is reliable and what is simply material someone else published online without concern for its validity.

And more importantly, we can see that age—being "born into" the digital world—doesn't bring greater proficiency if we simply look at how young people understand digital security. A person with an innate knowledge of the digital would understand secured networks, Facebook permissions, complex passwords to avoid hacking, and so on. But those same Pew studies noted above show that 50% of young people don't use privacy settings and that nearly 40% don't understand the differences between secured and non-secured communication. If anything, studies show that young people think their parents understand security issues better and handle that for them, a sure fire indicator that their native status in the digital realm doesn't pass the first threshold of understanding the gravity of digital environments.

The first thing we can do to correct the misuse of digital native/ immigrant language is to recognize that the terminology itself is troublesome. We can just stop calling younger generations digital natives and that will resolve part of the problem. We can refer to them in some other way that recognizes their status as those who have always lived with technology when that is important to a discussion, but we can also try to move beyond considering this a major issue. We could also relegate the divide to history, as those of us who were among the first who were designated digital natives are now in our 40s and are, in some senses, now the "old" that was the original digital immigrant in this equation. It might be time to stop thinking so hard about differences in experience based on age, particularly when there's a larger difference based on economics. And one based on gender. And one based on race. There are differences that are much more important.

The harder work is in confronting the misconception itself. This is best done by simply not treating users differently based on a generational divide. One of my colleagues, Bob DeSchutter, works with a group of seniors who regularly play the game *Minecraft*. They don't behave differently, in terms of user-experience and knowledge acquisition, than the young players from the local schools who come to our open *Minecraft* play sessions. Regardless of age— something we forget due to the fallacy of the digital native—is that anyone who hasn't played a video game will need to be oriented to game play, whether that person is 70 or 7. We have to untangle the belief in inherent literacy from the anecdotal experience of encountering more literate people of a specific age range. Much like the issue of race, it can be difficult to separate people from their reliance on stereotypes and cultural expectations, but that is the only solution to an issue of misconception. Observing instead of expecting is the answer to combatting the myth of the digital native.

We have to understand that as technology changes, culture also changes, and as writers we have to think about how audiences change and how composing practices change across time. This is a difficult and nuanced, an always changing and complex practice. We must always think about the words we use to speak about important concepts. We have to work against the fatalistic generalization that the young understand technology and the old do not. Digital is not a place. You are not native to it, nor do you need to apply for residence on its shores. You're not too old, nor are you so young that you'll have magic powers that cause you to innately understand everything digital. But digital technology does shape how you write and will continue to shape how you write. You need to watch, and take note, and learn, and follow the writing wherever it takes you.

Further Readings

For more information on the bad idea of the digital native, see Marc Prensky's work, which is available on his website at marcprensky.com. For more on the acquisition of digital literacies, see Stuart Selber's *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, and N. Katherine Hayles's *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*. See also the Pew Research Center's reports on "Digital Readiness Gaps," "Social Media Fact Sheet," and "Generations and their Gadgets."

For more information on race in digital contexts, see Lisa Nakamura's *Cybertypes*, Adam Banks's *Digital Griots*, and Angela Haas's "Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice." Using the Boolean

strings “Native American” and “digital technology” will provide current, and quite interesting, readings on how tribes are using digital technology to preserve tribal histories and languages.

Keywords

digital literacy, digital native, technoliteracy, tech savvy, prosumer

Author Bio

Phill Alexander is an assistant professor in the Games and Simulations program for the Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he is also the co-director of the Varsity Redhawks Esports Team. Phill is also a mixed-blood Cherokee rhetoric scholar affiliated with the professional writing and American studies programs. His research deals with race, communication, collaboration and identity formation in digital spaces, particularly video games. More about Phill can be found at phillalexander.com.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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8.1: You're Going to Need This for College

Author: Andrew Hollinger, University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley

When I first heard a teacher say, "You're going to need this for college," I was a high school student. I heard the phrase again when I began teaching 10th grade English, and I wondered, as a first-year teacher, whether that was the teacher version of "Because I said so," or if, more tragically, it was what teachers said in response to the often asked, "Why do I have to learn this?" when they didn't really know the answer. The teachers I worked with, however, were very smart and some of the most student-centered educators I've ever known, so it's hard for me to fully believe that.

In fact, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement, high school teachers and college writing instructors agree about what skills and concepts are important: things like the writing process, creating multiple drafts, peer review, practicing certain genres. However, the survey also shows that the activities of high school students do not include writing as many drafts, practicing as many genres, or reviewing as many peers' essays as their teachers agree is important. I don't believe that teachers are intentionally giving their students short shrift. Instead, my guess is that between creating and executing lesson plans, dedicating class time to benchmark assessments and testing practice, and staying on top of all the paperwork and levels of management, practice time slips away. So, when teachers say, "You're going to need this for college," they might actually be saying, "Pay special attention to this skill. I know that this will help with your college work, and we won't be able to spend a lot of time practicing."

If "You're going to need this for college" is shorthand for "Pay attention to something important," why should we stop saying it?

Ignoring the Student

Teaching doesn't need to be a magic show; there's no reason not to let students see behind the curtain. Every year, about half my course load is first-year composition classes, and every year someone asks, "Why do I have to take this class?" Often, the student asking is frustrated that they have to spend money and time on a general education course whose benefit isn't immediately obvious to them.

Dismissing the situation might lead the student to suspect you don't know the answer or don't care about the student–teacher relationship. Either way, at that moment, you've lost the student's respect, interest, and motivation. Students who understand the mechanics of learning may become better at learning; if we can't answer "Why do I need this?" or "Why are we doing this?" then maybe we should reconsider the necessity of that lesson, skill, or learning objective.

Ignoring the Transition

As a learning rationale, using the shorthand phrase "You're going to need this for college" passes on the responsibility of meaningfulness to the next level of education. This is not to say that scaffolding skills (creating a sequence of learning/classes that build on each other—what is otherwise called *vertical alignment*) isn't valuable. It definitely is. Practicing a specific genre like a research report, for example, doesn't make much sense if the student hasn't yet learned about structure and organization and why a writer would want to impose a form on a piece of text. Passing the buck isn't scaffolding, though. It would be like telling students that we have to practice writing reports because college classes require lots of reports—as though the only reason to teach that genre before a student gets to college is because college teachers don't have time to teach it themselves. For example, while writing research papers students will often ask, "What does it matter how or if I cite my sources a specific way? Can't I just include the link where I found it and be done?" A you're-going-to-need-it-forcollege teacher might respond, "This is just how they want it in college." Another teacher might, instead, pause and break for a mini-lesson on citations: why they look the way they do, what each method of citation values or reveals about the values of the potential audiences, and how citations have evolved with each stylebook. The second scenario is messier and takes more time, but the students will better understand the *why* behind attribution; it might even make their writing better as they spend time thinking about the value systems of potential audiences.

Worse than passing the buck, telling students that they'll need something for college suggests that it is a school-only skill and not something that might be important to their future work or life. So the skills, lessons, and concepts that we teach have time limits and boundaries. We know that isn't true, but students don't yet see that. The campus where I work serves a larger-than-normal non-traditional student community—students who have come back to school after years in the real world. Almost to a person, these students are focused. They know what they want to accomplish. And almost to a person, they say something like, "I wish I had paid more attention in high school/the first time I came to college." Too many people seem to understand that calculus or chemistry is

necessary to being an engineer or pharmacist, but people often only see writing as a means to an end: the stockholder annual review brochure that communicates all the cool, *real* work the company did that year.

Ignoring Potentials

Our national obsession with college creates a social rift, a caste system, between the educational haves and have-nots. Education, as an institution, is a self-propagating system: We create our own audience by recommending more and higher courses, certifications, and credentials, and then we induct the best and brightest back into the system to further propagate that system. This, in itself, is not inherently unethical. All systems are interested in developing self-sustaining processes. What is problematic is to suggest that anyone not participating in the system is less for doing so.

For students who do not plan on going to college (for whatever reason), hearing "You're going to need this for college" is permission to stop paying attention because that skill has no larger context than school now and more school later. What we teach, however, does have larger implications. Sometimes it is the skill or concept, and sometimes the reach is about helping students learn how to learn, and how to enjoy or value their education. Whether or not a person's formal education includes college, surely we want our friends, neighbors, and coworkers to actively enrich their own lives. Creating a knowledge and ability line in the sand at college is a socially disruptive practice. We undermine our lessons, our field, our accountability, and our expertise when we tell students, "You're going to need this for college." More important, though, is this: We quietly corroborate the argument that education is only about economics, that there is no reason to learn other than to achieve better pay or a nicer title. Those things are nice, to be sure. But being educated should ultimately be a personal endeavor. We learn because it's fulfilling, because we are meant to grow.

If saying, "You're going to need this for college" is how we sidestep admitting that we don't know why we are teaching something, then we need to think carefully about the assignments we foster or prevent, the thresholds we set, and the discussions that accomplished and emergent teachers have about them. And if saying, "You're going to need this for college" is a way to truncate the conversation about *why* we are doing something in the classroom and *how* it will benefit students, we need to give ourselves and our peers permission to let learning get messy. In fact, it's not that telling students the learning they are doing now will make more sense later or have a bigger payoff later (possibly, even, in college) that is bad. It's ending the conversation there that's wrong, suggesting that "later" is the pedagogical rationale and learning goal for some lesson or skill. If we want students to be sophisticated learners— and we should—whatever their personal and professional goals might be, then we need to let them see behind the curtain, pick at the machinery of learning, and let them ask difficult questions. We need to show them how learning works, and that it can also work for them.

Further Reading

For more about the role of creativity in education, Ken Robinson's book *Finding Your Element* is a good start. He also has a number of TED talks, including the most viewed lecture in the history of ted.com on what the purpose of school is and could be.

For data about the transition and transfer between high school and college writing, read Joanne Addison's and Sharon James McGee's article, "Writing in High School/Writing in College: Research Trends and Future Directions." For a good discussion on what writing is and how it is learned, see Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's book *Naming What We Know*.

Finally, Mike Rowe's Facebook page is a challenging source for thinking about education vs. Education. Steven Johnson's book, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* is helpful for thinking about the kinds of environments that encourage innovative thinking. And Kathryn Schulz's book, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* is perhaps my favorite text, challenging the social and academic stigma that surrounds error.

Keywords

FYC/first-year composition, high school to college transition, threshold concepts, writing pedagogy

Author Bio

Andrew Hollinger is a lecturer at the University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley. A former high school teacher, he is interested in exploring the transitions students make between high school and college. He co-founded/co-edits *crosspol: a journal of transitions*

for hs + college writing teachers. He also researches the (de/re)professionalization of the teaching class. Find him on Twitter @ashollinger.

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8.2: Dual-Enrollment Writing Classes Should Always be Pursued

Author: Caroline Wilkinson, English, New Jersey City University

Dual enrollment is a program that allows a high-school student to take a college course and receive credit for both high school and college. According to the most comprehensive study on dual enrollment, in the 2002–2003 academic year, 70% of high schools allowed students to take college courses. Depending on where the student lives, many school districts and states also pay for the student to take the college class. High schools and universities offer dual enrollment because it addresses the growing national interest in college readiness. This course would seem to be a benefit to both the high-school students, who can make an early start on their college careers, and the university that can target potential applicants for enrollment. However, dual-enrollment programs are problematic because the cultures of high school and college are so distinct that a dual-enrollment course cannot provide the institutional context of college (such as the instructor, the classroom, the campus, fellow students, the technology in use, and so on).

Unlike a college composition course, a dual-enrollment course is held at a university campus or at a local high school. A college instructor or high-school instructor will teach it. The constant is that high-school students will be involved. When dual-enrollment courses began to spread in the 1990s, composition scholar David Schwalm explained that dual enrollment implies that a college class can be duplicated in a different environment when, in fact, it cannot because of the disparity between a high-school setting and a college one. Institutional norms at the secondary level, such as shorter class times and a higher number of students per class, impact the pedagogy of a dual-enrollment writing course when it occurs at the site of the high school.

College composition courses usually focus on writing as a process so that a student will go through the actions of drafting and revising one or more texts throughout the semester. Many composition courses focus on peer review, where students read each other's work and give guided feedback to one another, and on conferences, where the student meets with a professor one-on-one to go over what the student can most improve. This drafting and revision process functions well in the college environment, where class times can be flexible. However, at the high-school level, class times can typically run 45 minutes with seven periods every single day. Thus, there is less time for class discussion in dual-enrollment courses. Since the class meets more during the week than a college class would, the amount of reading or homework required changes because of the institutional environment. In a dual-enrollment course, it is nearly impossible to conference with students one-on-one because the instructor has to be in the classroom at all times to watch over all the students. The instructor cannot cancel class so that conferences can occur; therefore, the way that writing is taught is different because of the context of the classroom.

If the main issues with dual enrollment are institutional, then it would make sense to offer dual-enrollment writing courses at the sponsoring university instead of the high school. This would negate some of the problems with timing and number of students that impact pedagogy. What the change in environment would not account for is the maturity of the students in the class. Composition scholars Kara Taczak and William H. Thelin studied the impact of adding high-school students to a mixed composition course on campus with college students. Although most of these dual-enrollment high-school students performed well academically, they were also considered a distraction to the instructor and college students. The high-school students' familiarity with each other meant they behaved in ways that potentially disrupted the norms of a first-year college classroom that would otherwise be filled with students who do not know each other. Although the institution of instruction had changed to an on-campus classroom, the culture of high school continued.

There will be cultural issues in dual-enrollment courses because of the varied factors unique to these kinds of courses that impact the teaching of writing. In order to save money, most universities and high schools enter a partnership in a dual-enrollment program so that a high-school instructor teaches the course. Efforts at collaborative partnerships between high schools and colleges frequently leave the dual-credit writing instructor in a precarious space because this instructor will represent the college curriculum and culture to high-school students. This high-school instructor will need to be trained effectively by the sponsoring university. Ideally, this training will ensure that the instructor understands and possesses a specific curriculum to teach, is well versed in the objectives of the specific composition course, and employs the composition assessment policy of the university. If the university fails to provide the instructor with this training, the course will then fail the students because it will not represent the same culture of writing as a course taught on campus.

Additionally, high-school instructors may not have any experience in teaching college-level writing courses; most have experience only in teaching literature, creative writing, and speech or journalism courses. This lack of experience teaching at the university level—compounded by a lack of training from the university— could result in conflicting information being relayed to students about what college-level writing means. To complicate matters even more, students who earn dual enrollment writing credit will typically not need to take the first introductory writing course at a college; as a result, they will remain unfamiliar with the writing expectations of that college until later courses.

Alternatives in Dual-Enrollment Writing Courses

If dual-enrollment programs are here to stay, as indicated by the number of students that participate in them, then there can be more effective ways to prepare students for writing at the college level. There are already collaborative relationships between high schools and colleges throughout the United States in the form of the National Writing Project (NWP). The NWP offers professional development for educators in writing for local schools, districts, and higher education. Faculty from universities and K–12 schools co-direct sites in their local area. This collaboration has been successful in that there are nearly 200 sites in all 50 states. One way to make dual-enrollment programs more effective is for colleges to create better collaborative relationships with local high schools building on the sites of the NWP.

Colleges and high schools need to be in closer conversation with one another about the purposes and curriculum of the dual-enrollment courses. They can do so by the college sharing its composition objectives, curriculum, sample syllabi, sample schedules, and sample assignments with the schools. The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) serves as a national accrediting body for dual-enrollment partnerships. NACEP works to make sure that the dual-enrollment courses are just as rigorous as the on-campus college courses by applying measurable criteria in five categories: curriculum, faculty, students, assessment, and program evaluation. Currently, NACEP has accredited 98 dual-enrollment programs according to these standards. Dual-enrollment programs that want to be more effective can concentrate on the following standards recommended by NACEP:

- Courses reflect the theoretical and pedagogical orientation of the sponsoring department at the university.
- University faculty members perform classroom observations to demonstrate validity of the class.
- High-school instructors meet the standards required of teaching a course at the college.
- Professional development activities occur that offer both the college and high school a way to have conversations on what writing means and how it functions in a dual-enrollment class.

These standards provide college and high-school instructors with strategies that will not only help them to address the institutional and cultural issues of dual enrollment, but also instruct them how to work within this setting to create a beneficial learning environment.

In order to make these partnerships effective, there should be one contact at the university, such as the Writing Program Administrator, that high-school instructors can come to with questions about materials and institutional knowledge of composition. This same contact would also observe the instructors who teach dual-enrollment at the high-school level and provide feedback on the classroom. These liaisons could also provide high-school instructors with representative assignments for college-level writing courses so that high-school instructors do not end up teaching a literature course as a composition course.

Colleges could provide a more collaborative relationship with a high school through program work in the dual-enrollment writing program. Respect for where students are coming from in their writing is central to composition. There should also be respect for other levels of educators by college instructors. One way to create a partnership between a college and high school is to provide funding for high-school instructors to participate. Christine Farris has started a program at Indiana University, where she offers 35-hour seminars in the summer that introduce high-school teachers to current methods in college composition and ways to teach the composition course in a manner that is consistent with the university approach. The high-school teachers are also funded for the summer seminar and participate in the fall and spring colloquia and classroom site visits. This set of support mechanisms establishes a clearer idea of what is expected of college writing in the dual-enrollment course and ensures high-school instructors have a relationship with the college writing program. Dual-enrollment programs are seen as ways to make money by many universities because students or high schools have to pay a discounted tuition in order to take them. It seems only fair that the university should pay for the professionalization of the high-school instructors who are teaching this course.

Although the contexts of high schools and colleges will be different no matter what, dual-enrollment instructors can also reflect on ways to prepare students more in class, such as having group conferences so students have the experience of discussing their revision plans, and taking a field trip to the university campus so students can see where the library and writing center are. These experiences provide another way to show students they are in a college class that differs from high school. Drawing upon the relationships formed in the NWP, following guidelines under NACEP, mandating one person as the contact for dual enrollment in the department at the university, and providing professionalization benefits for dual-enrollment instructors will create more effective dual-enrollment writing programs.

Further Reading

For more about the standards and assessment of dual-enrollment writing programs, see the Council of Writing Program Administrators' "CWPA Position Statement on Pre-College Credit for Writing." This statement discusses pedagogy, student readiness, and curriculum for dual enrollment compared to Advanced Placement and other pre-college credit programs. For more information on these programs, see Rob Jenkins' "Advanced Placement vs. Dual Enrollment." Additionally, see the National Alliance of

Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships' "Statement of National Concurrent Enrollment Partnership Standards" for more understanding of how to assess an effective dual-enrollment writing program.

For more about how writing scholars are reflecting on the growing number of dual-enrollment programs, see Kristine Hansen and Christine Farris' *College Credit for Writing in High School: The 'Taking Care of' Business* (National Council of Teachers of English). This edited collection explains the economics of dual-enrollment writing programs and the institutional and cultural issues that face dual enrollment. Additionally, see Kara Taczak and William H. Thelin's "(Re)Envisioning the Divide: The Impact of College Courses on High School Students" in *Teaching English in the Two Year College* and Howard Tinberg and Jean Paul Nadeau's "Contesting the Space between High School and College in the Era of Dual-Enrollment" in *College Composition and Communication*.

Keywords

college-level writing, composition/rhetoric, dual enrollment, writing studies, writing-program administration

Author Bio

Caroline Wilkinson is an assistant professor of English at New Jersey City University. She writes about dual-enrollment writing courses and the relationship between high schools and colleges. She also writes about the portrayals of what college-level writing might mean.

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8.3: Secondary-School English Teachers Should Only be Taught Literature

Author: Elizabethada A. Wright, University of Minnesota–Duluth

In a 2015 *Inside Higher Education* blog post, author and teacher John Warner recounts the frequent complaints heard across the university about students' inabilities to write well. Warner's blog illustrates why first-year college writing classes cannot fully remedy these complaints. Offering suggestions to counter bad writing practices, Warner's article is one worth reading. Most first-year university teachers of writing are guilty of issuing similar complaints about incoming students' writing abilities, often asking, "What is happening in high-school English classes?" College instructors lament students' infatuation with the five-paragraph essay, the idea that grammatical correctness equals good writing, or personal statements that assert opinions without support. While university writing instructors bemoan what is happening in highschool English classes, they would be better off looking at what is happening in secondary English education classes—the classes that prepare high-school English teachers for their difficult tasks in the classroom. These classes teach very little about writing. As Robert Tremmel wrote in 2001, the training of high-school English teachers does not exclude lessons in writing, but it certainly minimizes such lessons.

A perusal of the requirements for secondary English education programs across the country illustrates that while some such programs do focus on instructing students how to teach writing, a majority marginalize writing in favor of instruction on the teaching of literature. However, a significant part of high-school education focuses on writing (or should focus on writing). Those high schools that have not decided writing is essential find problems meeting Common Core standards or, far more importantly, find their graduates are ill-prepared for college or the demands of a professional work position.

There are plenty of secondary English programs at universities around the United States that focus heavily on the teaching of literature instead of or to the detriment of writing. For example, in the State University of New York system, SUNY Fredonia's secondary English education training program makes its graduate English education students take three of four core courses in literature. Students there must choose an additional 27 credit hours, and the only choice not in literature is a course that emphasizes not writing but grammar. Students only take one course in writing pedagogy. And SUNY Fredonia is not an anomaly: I could list many colleges that almost exclusively offer classes in literature, requiring only one or two writing classes beyond first-year composition. It is a huge problem that our focus on the discipline of English in this country almost entirely circles around the study of literature, and while literature is certainly worthy of study (I am happy to note both my B.A. and M.A. are in English literature), it should not subsume or replace the study of writing and rhetoric.

Although the term *rhetoric* has pejorative popular connotations in American culture, people who understand rhetoric (as Patricia Roberts-Miller explains in the opening chapter to this collection) know that a grasp of rhetoric and the ability to analyze the rhetorical choices made by a writer are essential to good writing. While literature classes do require students to write papers, the purpose of these papers is to analyze a literary text and reveal a nuanced literary understanding of that text. However, rhetoric classes focus on persuading audiences. These classes teach students how to make writing choices appropriate for specific audiences and situations; in other words, they teach students how to consider who might read their texts and what this audience's relationship might be both to the writer and the writer's purpose. Writing rhetorically then is not just creating sentences and paragraphs that are grammatically correct; writing rhetorically involves understanding how an audience feels about the situation that the writer is focusing on, how the audience feels about the writer, and making sound choices with this understanding. Teaching such writing involves teaching strategies that will move the audience to accept an idea they might otherwise reject. Teaching writing through rhetoric also involves instructing students how to analyze other people's rhetorical texts to see what strategies were used to persuade their audiences. Such rhetorical analyses can help writers find strategies that they, themselves, might use.

meeting Common Core standards or, far more importantly, find their graduates are ill-prepared for college or the demands of a professional work position. Recognizing the importance of rhetoric is not a new trend. Students have been studying rhetoric far longer than they have been studying literature. Aristotle wrote an important treatise for his contemporaries on rhetoric. The earliest American universities, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, offered years of study in rhetoric. On the other hand, academic study of literature only started a little more than one hundred years ago; prior to that, the study of English meant the study of subjects in the English language (rather than in Latin, Greek, or French). Only in the early 20th century did the study of English come to mean a focus on literature, and with this focus, the study of writing diminished significantly. In recent decades, many scholars have written about this shift from the study of rhetoric to the study of literature. A common understanding is that as the study of rhetoric shifted from the study of oratory to the study of writing (because of changes in technology), it became far more onerous to teach

rhetoric. As one of these scholars, James Berlin, has observed, critiquing a number of orations is one thing, reading up to 3,000 essays a year is another. The study of literature, on the other hand, has not been as onerous—and far more prestigious, because of its freedom from the grading of so many papers. Writing is a component of literature classes, but there tends to be far less of it and far less study of how to write effectively.

While some people might not think it really matters whether secondary English education focuses on literature or writing, the current concerns and complaints about students' writing abilities reveals that it does matter. Without understanding how to approach a rhetorical situation—a situation where a writer wants to address an audience who has its own ideas about the situation—a writer cannot understand how to make writing effective. If teachers themselves do not know about the importance of understanding rhetorical situations as a part of writing, students will be less likely to become effective writers.

Increasingly, however, high-school teachers recognize the importance of rhetoric in the teaching of writing. As a group of rhetoric scholars observed at a national conference on high school and college writing, high-school teachers work very hard to teach writing well. However, because of their educational background, they end up focusing on grammatical correctness or personal writing. The teachers recognized the importance of rhetoric and have been introducing rhetorical concepts into their classrooms; however, without a thorough understanding of rhetoric, the concepts remain formulaic, such as the writing of five-paragraph essays.

My work with the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) English Language program also illustrates how the secondary English education curriculum's lack of writing instruction hinders both high-school teachers and students. This program offers a college-level writing class to high-school students, as well as workshops and other training to help high-school teachers get ready to teach a college level course, although this training is not mandatory. The program offers an annual exam to any students who pay to take it, whether or not they have been in the AP class. The exam tests students' abilities in reading comprehension and writing.

The typical essay on the *AP Central* website suggests both the student and the teacher are doing their best with what they know; the teacher is teaching what she has been trained to know from the few writing and many literature courses required in secondary English education teacher training. Typical responses to an AP essay question that asks students to analyze the rhetoric of a writer or speaker illustrate that students can do much well. For the most part, students understand that they need a central claim, and they need to support this claim. However, in their analyses, too many students focus solely on elements of style, such as tone, diction, or tropes and figures—aspects common to literary analyses, not rhetorical analyses—suggesting that high-school teachers rely on their education in literature to teach rhetorical strategies. While elements of style certainly can be fodder for excellent rhetorical analysis, without a fuller understanding of rhetoric, a student cannot analyze and connect the writer's stylistic choices with the writer's situation. In other words, the student essays do not connect the writer's or speaker's use of the stylistic devices to the rhetorical situation: the writer's purpose, audience, and context for the text. Teacher training in English and its emphasis on literature does not indicate that either teachers or students know that rhetoric is more than having a thesis and using a style.

There are other examples of secondary English education teacher training having a focus on literature to the detriment of rhetorically based writing instruction. These examples can be found in websites full of programmatic responses by English teachers who want students to write well for the AP English Language and Composition Exam. The instructions on such websites provide formulaic methods, including fill-in-the-blank sentence structures, that do not help students actually analyze a sample text to comment on the relationship between the writer, purpose, and audience, or why the writer made particular choices in the text.

Hepzibah Roskelly, writing for the *AP Program*, suggests that the way to understand the relationships between writer or speaker, audience and context or purpose cannot be reduced to a simple formula or dictum; there are too many variables. However, because high-school teachers do not have the background in rhetoric necessary to teach writing well, they too often rely on formula and dictum. Such reliance does a disservice to students. It is part of what creates the negative commentary about students' writing abilities. However, it is not the fault of the high-school English teachers who teach it. It is a systemic problem created by our focus on English literature at the near exclusion of rhetoric and writing. While this system may have helped decades of college professors focus on literature to avoid reading the thousands of papers created by students, it clearly is not benefiting students or highschool teachers.

This problem, however, is not unique to high-school teachers of writing. It is similarly a problem for first-year writing classes, a majority of which are taught by graduate students in literature or non-tenure-line faculty with degrees in literature, not writing. My attempt in pointing this out is not to condemn these poorly paid instructors but to focus on the system that encourages literature at

the expense of writing. If we are going to be serious about writing instruction in this country, we need to realize that the study of literature does not prepare a person to teach writing—and students of all disciplines need to know how to write.

The teaching of writing is difficult. As someone who has been teaching writing for almost thirty years, I still struggle in classes. However, I have millennia of tradition to rely on. I know the many elements that must be considered in writing. I know how to lead students through an investigation of writing's context, of understanding the rhetorical situation. A quick tutorial in rhetoric cannot compensate for the lack in our secondary English education system. While a few prescient teacher-training programs do focus on rhetoric, these few are not enough. Literature is not rhetoric. Nor is grammar instruction. As a matter of fact, grammatical correctness is a rhetorical strategy, as is grammatical incorrectness. What works for a writer entirely depends on the situation: a writer's purpose, context, and audience. The educational system needs to recognize the importance of rhetoric and put the time into training all English teachers how to teach writing. Literature is still important as it teaches us about ourselves and our world, but literature ain't writing—and writing and rhetoric are essential for our students, and for the high-school teachers who teach English.

Further Reading

For more about the evolution of the discipline of English, see James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985* (Southern Illinois University Press); James Murphy's three editions of *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Contemporary America* (Routledge); and William Riley Parker's "Where Do English Departments Come From?" (*College English*). Each of these texts detail the changes in curriculum corresponding to changes in the country, as does Theodor W. Hunt's "The Place of English in the College Curriculum" (*Transactions of the Modern Language Association*, 1884-85), a primary source that illustrates how the discipline of English was viewed at the founding of the Modern Language Association.

More information about the College Board's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Exam can be found at *AP Central* where readers can also find Hepzibah Roskelly's "What Do Students Need To Know About Rhetoric?" For more on the gap between high school and university instruction in writing, see Robert Tremmel's "Seeking a Balanced Discipline: Writing Teacher Education in First-Year Composition and English Education" (*English Education*) and John Warner's "The High School/College Writing Classroom Disconnect" (*Inside Higher Ed)*. More on the discussion about the gap between high school and university instruction in writing can be read in the *College Composition and Communication* 2009 Special Symposium, "Exploring the Continuum...Between College and High School Writing," as well as in Robert Tremmel and William Broz's *Teaching Writing Teachers* (Boynton/Cook). John Warner's *Inside Higher Ed* editorial, "I Cannot Prepare Students to Write Their (History, Philosophy, Sociology, Poly Sci., etc...) Papers," discusses problems with and the limits of writing instruction.

Keywords

secondary English education programs, rhetoric, AP Central, writing pedagogy, first-year writing

Author Bio

Elizabethada A. Wright is writing program administrator at University of Minnesota–Duluth and has taught first-year writing classes for almost 30 years. She is also the chief reader for the College Board's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Exam where she works with approximately 1,500 first-year university writing instructors and high-school teachers of writing.

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8.4: Face-to-Face Courses are Superior to Online Courses

Author: Andrew Bourelle, English, University of New Mexico.

Academia has seen a shift to online education, with many courses being taught from a distance to accommodate students who cannot attend traditional face-to-face (f2f) classes on campus for various reasons, including familial obligations or work schedules. To accommodate these students, the environment in which classes are taught has changed to include correspondence courses taught via mail and television-broadcast lectures, to courses taught solely in a digital platform with students communicating remotely through asynchronous (i.e., discussion boards) and synchronous (i.e., video conferencing) methods. The method of ease associated with online education makes access possible for students from the comfort of home without actually setting foot in a classroom. But make no mistake: The easiness comes from convenience of access, not necessarily from the coursework itself. Online classes can be just as—if not more—rigorous, educational, and pedagogically sound than f2f classes, with the scholarship surrounding distance education reporting no significant difference between learning in online classes versus classes taught in f2f environments. However, there remains a common misconception among instructors and students alike that the online class will be less challenging or rigorous than its f2f counterpart. From students to the general public— and even among college instructors—most people continue to think that traditional classes held in a brick-and-mortar classroom are, simply put, *better* than online classes.

In fact, a survey of online education conducted by the Babson Research Group reported that many instructors question the value of online education's worth. Words like *validity* and *legitimacy* often arise when instructors discuss the merits of online education, and when it comes to writing, they ask how and if students can learn to craft their writing without forming a community of peers or when f2f interaction with the professor is missing. This skepticism from the faculty trickles down to the students and even filters into societal thinking at large, with a 2013 Gallup poll suggesting that Americans remain "tepid at best" when rating their experiences or opinions of online classes and programs. Even businesses tend to prefer graduates with degrees earned in f2f programs over those who received solely online degrees.

How did this myth associated with online education take shape? In the past, some universities and the best faculty members within refused to teach online for various reasons, including the inability to see the student benefit from online education. When powerhouse universities such as Arizona State University led the charge in expanding education opportunities for those students who would not normally have access, critics thought the gain was only monetary, benefiting the university and not the students themselves. Many universities have joined the ranks of ASU, scrambling to keep the pace in order to secure their share of distance students. In addition, administrators may push departments to offer online classes because they do not require a physical space, thus costing less money to facilitate. Other concerns include the higher rate of withdrawals from online students and the tendency for students with a lower GPA to perform at an even lower level in the online environment. Perhaps one area of cynicism surrounds the increase of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, with thousands of students taking a course simultaneously. Some may wonder just how an instructor can interact with hundreds of students one at a time, and in terms of a writing course, how she can respond to thousands of pages of writing in one semester; however, these open classes are markedly different than the average writing course that strives to maintain low numbers and one-on-one interaction with students.

Certainly there are monetary benefits to universities adding online courses, and all students may not succeed in the online space; however, these factors are not necessarily synonymous with a diminished education. Within writing courses, students' participation and writing practice improves when classes are shifted online. Additionally, the online classroom opens up a space for diversity, with more students being willing to share opinions in the safe space of an online classroom. For writing classes, the majority of the interactions among peers and between peers and the instructor is communicated in written form, suggesting that students have the opportunity to practice writing more than if they were taking an f2f class. In terms of simple word count, online students write a lot more than f2f students. Scholars also suggest that students think more critically about the discussion prompts they respond to because they are not required to think on the spot; instead, they can carefully craft their posts and even revise and edit afterward. Thus, numerous elements of the course encourage writing and thoughtful peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher interaction. Those interactions are *different* than f2f but certainly not inferior.

While online education continues to grow at a rapid rate, the pedagogy within remains cutting-edge, comparable to f2f classes. For instance, societal changes and technological improvements have prompted writing instructors to encourage students to create multimodal texts, or texts that use more than one mode to communicate. These multimodal texts could be videos, podcasts, or websites, just to name a few. Instructors often encourage students to create these types of texts because students are interacting with

similar media on a daily basis in their extracurricular lives; therefore, it seems natural to ask them to not only analyze these documents for rhetorical effectiveness, but to also create similar documents, in an effort to promote new literacies and effective communication skills necessary for the 21st century. Teachers of online classes have adapted their practices to include this type of curriculum. For instance, in any specific unit that corresponds to a writing prompt, an instructor may offer different media to analyze, including podcasts, videos, and written text, encouraging discussion among peers of the rhetorical effectiveness of such media. Not only do students have the ability to return to this media at any point in the online course, but they can also reread the archived discussion posts for further clarification of concepts. Successful practices of multimodal composition only solidify that writing, in its various forms, can be taught just as well, if not better, than in an f2f format.

The online classroom itself can also be a democratic space: The digital platform can further encourage inquiry and interaction, as ideas are constructed as a community, with community being society at large, not just peers in the class. When an instructor asks students to find artifacts, research, and other items of interest in pop or other cultures, those artifacts become representative of communities outside the classroom setting, thus widening the learning sphere. Students move from being merely passive consumers of media, including books, videos, advertisements, and so on, to becoming collaborators in knowledge-making who think critically about the plethora of media they come in contact with both in and outside the class. While this critical thinking can also be possible in f2f and blended (part f2f, part online) classes, it is perhaps not encouraged or acquired as seamlessly as in a solely online environment where students have access to such media at their fingertips, both in the classroom curriculum and on the Internet.

However, even with these advantages and enhancements that the online classroom promotes, an online course is only as effective as the instructor and the way she has designed the course. Instructor ambition and attention may cause student interest and motivation to wane. If an instructor isn't active in the course, the students may put in little effort as well. Online writing courses can be successful at promoting writing skills, but only if the instructor re-envisions her pedagogical practices. For instance, instructors must create assignments that promote students taking control of their learning, challenging them to share ideas and collaborate with one another through the digital technology available in online courses. Indeed, we would argue that f2f writing instructors can learn from online pedagogy. As the world becomes increasingly influenced by digital technology, f2f instructors can learn a lot about enhancing their traditional classes with digital, multimodal enhancements and online writing tools.

Instead of using f2f classes as the barometer to measure online writing instruction, the time has come for instructors, administrators, students, and others interested in the quality of education offered in our universities to start recognizing that both f2f and online writing classes can provide challenging, intellectually stimulating educational experiences for students. Instead of viewing online and f2f courses in opposition to each other, we need to view them as parallel means of educating students. One fear may be that online classes will replace traditional f2f courses; however, as distance education continues to grow, universities remain committed to offering online classes *in addition to* f2f courses to accommodate both students who need access to remote courses and those who need the local constraints of a f2f classroom. Online and f2f classes are two paths available to students on their educational journeys, and both can lead students to the same destinations.

Further Reading

For popular, researched texts on online education, see "Chasing the Elusive 'Quality' in Online Education" by Anya Kamenetz, on *National Public Radio* and "Americans Doubt the Rigor and Quality of Online Education" by Allie Bidwell at *US News and World Report*. For practical advice on preparing to teach online, see "Benefits and Challenges of Online Education" by the Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions, which also provides additional reading.

Keywords

asynchronous methods, face-to-face instruction (f2f), MOOCs, multimodal composition, online writing instruction (OWI), synchronous methods

Author Bios

Tiffany Bourelle is an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico, where she teaches technical communication and firstyear writing courses in both face-to-face and online environments. She is currently the co-administrator of the eComp (electronic composition) first-year writing program at UNM that she developed with Dr. Andrew Bourelle. Her research focuses on

training graduate instructors to teach multimodal composition online, and her scholarship can be found in scholarly journals such as *The Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *Computers and Composition*, and *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy.*

Andrew Bourelle is an assistant professor of English at the University of New Mexico. His research interests include online writing instruction, multimodal literacy, and the intersection of creative writing and composition. His scholarship has been published in *Composition Forum*, *Computers and Composition*, *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *Kairos*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and other journals and anthologies.

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8.5: Anyone Can Teach an Online Writing Course

Author: Beth L. Hewett, Global Society for Online Literacy Educators

Online writing instruction (OWI) is an offshoot of traditional writing instruction that occurs in classroom settings. Students prior to the 1990s learned to write with a teacher in the physical classroom; they composed their research papers and other essays in the on-site setting, too. The use of computers and learning management systems (the software that contains the course) for teaching writing was somewhat experimental in the 1980s; however, it is more common now, and more people are learning to write for their courses online. Twenty-first-century writing instruction—which occurs both in writing-specific courses and in other disciplines where students write to demonstrate understanding of course material—is increasingly offered online. Writing instruction can be engaged in fully online settings, where teachers and students meet solely online and at a distance using either the *asynchronous* (occurring in non-real time and with a time lag between interactions) or *synchronous* (occurring in real time and simultaneously) modalities. In these cases, all of the teaching and learning occur without any *in-person*, face-to-face interactions. Writing instruction also can be engaged in hybrid settings, where teachers and students sometimes meet in person and other times interact via computer. When an unprepared teacher—or just *anyone*—is assigned to teach writing-intensive courses online, problems abound. Teaching writing online—in any subject, including a writing course itself—requires extensive disciplinary knowledge, frequent online interaction with students, and professional skills beyond those that are needed in traditional, on-site classroom settings.

The increasing popularity of OWI is partially due to educators recognizing a global need for distributed education that digital technologies fill. It is also due to decreasing education budgets, where fewer teachers are being asked to teach more students without adding to the on-site institution's infrastructure. And, it can be connected to a jump-on-the-bandwagon approach in that, "If other institutions are offering online instruction, we should, too." Finally, the popularity of OWI is influenced by students who want to take courses online for convenience or necessity.

Unfortunately, a top-down, administratively driven requirement for online writing-intensive instruction reveals an implicit, pervasive belief that to teach writing online is intuitive and therefore simple to do. This belief results in pre-service online training limited to the learning management system and how to complete such tasks as providing content to students, collecting assignments, offering exams, and posting grades. For example, writing itself is a discipline with its own content and skills. However, professional development for OWI rarely addresses it as a discipline, subject, or skill. In an online history course, teachers need to be able to teach and write about history sufficiently well that students learn the appropriate content. Asking students to write papers, respond to short-answer prompts, and conduct contentrich online discussions is a primary way to ensure some level of content mastery. Therefore, history teachers (as well as chemistry, sociology, mathematics, psychology, and any content-rich course instructors) need to learn how to help students read and write well in online settings. They also need to be able to read students' sometimes weak writing well enough to understand their meaning and to write well enough to communicate clearly with their students. This essential literacy work is their job as much as it is the job of English instructors.

In a recent survey about OWI training at the college level, writing instructors expressed that they may receive online teacher training more appropriate to other disciplines, such as how to quiz for content knowledge through multiple choice and other tests. And, although training in generalized online course design is often provided to new online faculty, workshops regarding how to teach writing online are rare. This lack of discipline-specific and writing-focused online training and professional development suggests that administrators may have an idealized belief that instructors are innately able to migrate writing instruction from the traditional on-site to the online setting. Such reasoning implicitly suggests that *anyone can teach online writing-intensive courses.* To teach writing online (especially asynchronously), people often think that teachers just need to frontload the content into the learning management system, grade the papers, and check the discussion boards for whether students are participating. This reasoning has the unfortunate result of placing unprepared teachers in online writing-focused courses.

Administrators may wrongly believe there is little work for writing teachers to do, leading them to dismiss the heavy literacy load of such courses. In fact, online teachers—especially those who teach writing online—both read and write a great deal, in part because teachers must write to students what they would normally say orally in class. There is an intensive reading and writing cycle of teachers writing instructions, reading papers, providing feedback primarily through writing, and reading and responding to written discussions. Any of these options require teachers to be especially conversant with writing instruction, to be explicit and clear writers, and to be able to see what is occurring in student writing without the opportunity to conference in person. Therefore,

when administrators do not recognize this heavy literacy load, they may increase course sizes, wrongly thinking that since teachers are not physically meeting students, they don't have much to do and they can teach more students. Such ideas about teaching writing online are both widespread and wrong, and they impede student success just when more people are taking online courses that require them to write.

On the contrary, educators need extensive OWI-focused training. Effective online writing teachers need three types of skills: They must be able to (1) teach writing, (2) specifically in a digital environment, and (3) primarily through written communication.

The first critical skill set is especially important to all teachers who address literacy. Students learn to write by having opportunities to read, think, write, reflect, receive feedback, and write again. Someone who teaches writing in any discipline should be a good writing teacher with abundant knowledge and what might be called a full toolbox of literacy skills and abilities. Unfortunately, all too often, writing instruction is viewed as a lower-level skill set designated to writing teachers alone or a subject most suited to inexperienced graduate students and underpaid, often undertrained part-time faculty. Furthermore, teachers of disciplines other than writing often are not aware of or refuse to believe that their job is also to teach and reinforce reading and writing literacies. Among the knowledge all teachers need are basic theories of reading and writing, such as how to teach students to annotate their books and to summarize important concepts. All teachers should know how to assign papers with identified steps (called scaffolding) like writing a proposal and a series of increasingly stronger drafts. Teachers should know how to create writing assignments that require students to learn the desired material efficiently, how to provide useful feedback to help students improve their writing, and when to address higher-level concerns like content and organization versus when to address lower-level concerns like style and grammar. Furthermore, teachers need to develop content, instructions, and assignments that make sense for their writing outcomes. This core literacy knowledge and these skills are ones that training can offer and reinforce, helping instructors to teach writing in any content area more successfully. Without them, teachers cannot move to an online setting successfully.

The second critical skill set requires that teachers be able to teach reading and writing in an online setting. The basics of teaching these skills online begin with an understanding of the learning management system the school uses (there are a variety of such applications, including Canvas, Blackboard, and eLogic). All of these systems have course spaces for providing announcements, posting assignments, prompting discussions, enabling group work, and returning completed assignments and papers—all of which would be handled orally and with handouts in an on-site classroom. To know the learning management system also means to think differently—less linearly and more three-dimensionally—to connect and scaffold discrete actions into a series of intuitive, integrated interactions. Beyond thinking they can just migrate their teaching from the traditional classroom setting to the online one, teachers must learn when, why, and how their communication should be addressed individually to one student or through the larger class or small peer group. Using digital applications requires learning their functionality for learning success. Equally important, online teachers must understand both the legal and moral requirements of equal access as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. They must be able to understand how to use digital tools to enhance learning for students with physical disabilities, emotional challenges, learning differences, multilingual abilities, and varied socioeconomic backgrounds. These are learned, not inherent, digital teaching skills.

The third critical skill set requires that teachers use text, or *writing itself*, as the primary means of communication in the online environment. Although online teachers can offer video and audio recordings and they can phone the student, their work typically occurs through their own writing; similarly, students learn through their own abilities to read and write. There is, therefore, a heavy literacy load for both, which means that the teaching and learning are readingand writing-intensive and primarily without benefit of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Online writing-intensive courses therefore force students to read content, instructions, peer writing and comments, and teacher feedback; in other words, they get to read a lot. Online writing courses also enable students to write much more than in traditional on-site courses. They write their essays, respond to discussions in writing rather than through talking, write comments about each other's essays, and write to teachers and peers to communicate. Similarly, their instructors teach primarily through writing and mostly in response to student writing. Whereas in a traditional face-to-face setting, the writing teacher certainly must know the qualities of good writing, there are more opportunities for talking with students and determining together where there are problems and what writers need to strengthen. In an online writing course, however, such opportunities for individual, oral conferences are fewer—sometimes nonexistent—and teachers' written feedback and instruction must correctly and clearly convey all of that crucial information. Furthermore, teachers must write especially comprehensible assignments and instructions, use vocabulary about writing that students can understand, write about the most important elements that will take the students to the next proficiency level in subsequent drafts, *and* do all this work using written language that conveys the teaching

intention clearly. Even experienced teachers need professional development in how to write for students who may read at suboptimal levels.

Because teaching students to write about their subject matter online is more complex than merely taking a traditional course and migrating it to the learning management system, teachers and their supervisors benefit by actively learning from skilled OWI teachers. Both initial training and ongoing professional development opportunities help them grow as online educators and increase their chances of retaining students who are improving their skills. Students can have good experiences in online writing-intensive settings, and they can improve their knowledge and writing abilities in online courses. As long as their teachers—of all disciplines—receive appropriate training, professional development opportunities, and instructive assessment that help them to improve their online teaching skills, students will receive useful writing-intensive instruction.

Further Reading

For more information about online students' literacy needs, see Beth L. Hewett's *Reading to Learn and Writing to Teach: Literacy Strategies for Online Writing Instruction* (Macmillan); Alice S. Horning's *Reading, Writing, and Digitizing: Understanding Literacy in the Electronic Age* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing); Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration* (Utah State University Press); Ian Jukes, Ted McCain, and Lee Crockett's *Understanding the Digital Generation: Teaching and Learning in the New Digital Landscape* (21st Century Fluency Project); and Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (HarperCollins).

For more information about skills specific to teaching writing online, see the CCCC Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction's "A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction"; Beth L. Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors* (Macmillan); Beth L. Hewett and Kevin Eric DePew's edited volume *Foundational Practices in Online Writing Instruction* (WAC Clearinghouse) (with special attention to Lee-Ann Kastner Breuch's "Faculty Preparation for OWI" and Scott Warnock's "Teaching an OWI Course"); Beth L. Hewett and Christa Ehmann's *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes* (NCTE); and Scott Warnock's *Teaching Writing Online: How & Why* (NCTE).

Keywords

online learning, online writing instruction, OWI, reading online, reading to learn, writing feedback, writing online, writing process

Author Bio

Beth L. Hewett is an expert in training teachers and tutors for online writing and reading instruction, and she is the president of the Global Society for Online Literacy Educators. She has served on a national committee for researching online instructional practices and developing principles and effective practices that guide online teachers in literacy instruction. Hewett provides educational consulting and online literacy instruction. She also coaches academic dissertation, book, and article writers primarily using online technologies through her company, Defend & Publish.

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8.6: Anyone Can Teach Writing

Author: Seth Kahn, English, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Every time I hear somebody complain about the poor writing ability of today's college graduates and students, I can't help but wonder what people would think if they knew more about the circumstances of many college writing instructors, who go by the titles *adjunct*, *contingent*, *term*, or *non-tenure-track faculty* (I'll use the word adjunct to stand in for all of those possibilities). In 2013, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce found that adjunct faculty members were teaching more than 70% of general education writing courses (first-year composition, or ENG 101, so to speak) in the United States, reinforcing results from the Association of Departments of English in 2007.

Who is Anybody?

Unlike the stereotype of a college professor—a giant office stuffed with books, an antique desk, expensive shabby chic clothes, you know the image—adjunct faculty often face difficult working conditions that, I believe, rest on the myth that anybody can teach writing. As of 2015, the current average salary for adjuncts in English is $2,700 per section; teaching 10 courses per year (which is a huge work load) would gross only $27,000 total. Yet, many campuses won't offer full-time work (usually 8 to 10 courses a year) as a result of the Affordable Care Act's requirement that employers provide health insurance to anybody working more than thirty hours per week. Because the pay is so low, it's not unusual for adjuncts to become "freeway fliers" (teaching courses on multiple campuses) in order to cobble together enough money to live. Most adjuncts get no insurance or retirement benefits. Adjunct teaching loads can also change semester by semester (so that somebody might have two courses, then four, then one, then three, etc.). Often, adjuncts don't know their schedules until a semester is about to begin, when it's too late to find replacement work anywhere else, it's too late to prepare for any new assignments, and it's too late to update materials from prior semesters.

Adjuncts, almost by definition, have no job security or protection against being fired at will. On many campuses, adjuncts share incredibly cramped office space (I've heard of as many as 20 assigned to an office with four desks and one telephone), if they have offices at all; adjuncts often discover that the safest place to store books, laptops, phones and so on during classes is in their cars. Imagine the challenge of needing to have a confidential discussion with a student about a grade, or something sensitive somebody wrote in a paper, and not even having a semiprivate place to do it. Under those conditions, the truth of the matter is that nobody can teach writing, at least not well.

How we got to the point where so many faculty doing such important work can be treated so poorly is a long story. English Composition became an actual course in the late 1800s. According to historian Donna Strickland, for decades most teachers of writing were English professors trained primarily to teach literature, graduate students in literature (because there weren't graduate programs in composition until the late 1970s), and faculty spouses or retirees who had at least taught high-school English. If you've never thought about specialized training for people who teach writing, that's no surprise—the idea itself hasn't been around for long. Because it's low level (English 101 is about the lowest number a credit-bearing college course could have), and because of its content (traditionally grammar concerns, citation formats for research papers, and similar remediation that most people think students should have learned in high school), it's not surprising that decision makers would conclude that anybody can do it.

Unfortunately, high-ranking administrators (deans, provosts, presidents, chancellors) on university campuses often use that conclusion to justify hiring and offering poor working conditions to adjunct faculty. If anybody can teach writing, the argument goes, then why pay experts well to do it? For whatever reason, even though it's common to hear people complain about the poor writing skills of kids these days, it's just as common to hear the assertion that teaching them to do better shouldn't be hard. We hear these two arguments surprisingly often, and worse is that they reinforce each other. If the people who teach writing don't need real professional training, then why treat them professionally? And if we're not offering to treat them professionally, then why would anybody pursue the training necessary to do it well?

Poorly Trained Faculty Can't Teach Writing Well

I wish it were obvious that people better trained to do something would do it better than people who aren't trained as well. That feels like such a truism it's hard to know what evidence to offer to support it. But here's what we know: People without advanced training in writing pedagogy tend to rely on outdated ideas about writing, particularly that mastery of sentence-level skills like

punctuation and word choice leads to mastery of more complex writing tasks. As early as the mid-1970s, researchers had established that this assumption was incorrect. (Several chapters on grammar instruction in this book show why.)

Mina Shaughnessy, who was a professor at the City University of New York during the period when the system became open admissions (so that anybody with a high-school diploma or equivalent could be admitted without question), published an influential book called *Errors and Expectations* in 1979. One of her key findings is that students struggle with sentence-level problems for any number of reasons that often have little to do with their mastery of mechanics; simply teaching them mechanical skills doesn't solve those problems. Likewise, compositionist Patrick Hartwell reports in a well-regarded 1985 scholarly journal article titled "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" that students are much more likely to care about mechanical issues if they consider those issues in the context of their own writing purposes instead of worksheets and handouts.

Another outdated but still common practice among non-specialist writing teachers is teaching the modes of writing: narration, description, analysis, and argument. Teaching the modes suffers from the same basic problem as starting from the sentence level—the assumption that writers move neatly through these stages of complexity simply doesn't hold. And Hartwell's argument that students learn more when they work on writing they care about also applies here as well. A course built on a series of tasks students must do even if they have nothing to say that motivates or interests them is a course with, let's just say, limited potential. But too many writing teachers are either required to teach such courses in programs designed by non-specialists, or they design courses this way because their models are the courses they took themselves.

I could keep listing practices that writing programs heavily dependent on adjunct faculty often use, but I hope the connection is clear—poorly treated instructors often work in programs without much regard for professional knowledge of the field, which both disempowers the instructors and reinforces the sense that what they do isn't important. The system at too many colleges is stuck in a cycle of insisting that some work is lower value than other work, then using the fact that it abuses the people who do it as proof of its low value.

Exploring Alternatives

In its simplest form: Anybody who is trained and supported well and treated like a professional can teach writing. The key word is professional. The people teaching college writing courses have graduate degrees, often more than one— many have spent years on the job. Many conduct research into effective teaching or do other kinds of research that help them teach writing. Their training, experience, and expertise have earned them the support they need in order to do their work well. That support comes in many forms: resources they need like office space, computer access, photocopying and library privileges; engagement in their departments by being invited to participate in department meetings and curriculum development; job stability instead of constantly fluctuating schedules that may change suddenly and without explanation; and better compensation than most writing instructors currently receive.

All too often "Anybody can teach writing" translates to "It doesn't matter who teaches writing," and as a result, nobody needs to pay attention to writing instructors at all. In multiple surveys conducted over the last five years, adjunct faculty report that even more than pay and benefits, they want to be treated as professionals and colleagues. Also at the top of the list is job stability—knowing they have work from one semester, or better yet year, to the next helps them avoid freeway flying and alleviates the stress of uncertainty. It also helps them teach better by giving them time to reflect on and improve their teaching in a stable environment.

Finally, treating professionals as professionals means paying people more than many of them earn now. The Modern Language Association, which is one professional organization that represents faculty in English and Writing Studies, recommends a minimum salary of $10,700 per course. The National Council of Teachers of English, MLA, and many other organizations also recommend that faculty teaching at least half of a full-time load receive benefits (health insurance, retirement contributions) in proportion to their teaching load. The finances might be complex, but it's clear that investing in faculty leads to better results; most recently, Amanda Griffith of Wake Forest University and Kevin Rask of Colorado College have found strong correlations between the instructional budgets of institutions and the earning power of graduates from those institutions. Investing wisely gets better results.

It's fair to demand better for students, but not to demand magic from a system that's currently built on a bad premise that anybody can teach writing. If you're thinking about colleges for yourself or anybody you care about, ask how writing courses are staffed and how well supported the instructors are. The American Federation of Teachers offers a useful list of questions in their "Just Ask"

brochure. If the answers sound like the college's representatives think anybody can teach writing, think very hard about what they're really saying.

Further Reading

Donna Strickland's history *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies* helps illuminate the labor problems at the heart of commodified composition instruction. Laura McKenna's "The Cost of an Adjunct," Colleen Flaherty's "The Case for Better Faculty Pay," and the joint report by the Modern Language Association and Association of Departments of English, "Education in the Balance: A Report on the Academic Workforce in English," illuminates the false economy behind under-paying and under-supporting writing teachers. Finally, the American Federation of Teachers webpage titled "Just Ask" gives students and parents information necessary to decide whether a particular college truly supports teaching and learning.

Keywords

academic labor, adjunct, contingent, non-tenure-track faculty, writing program administration/administrators, writing studies

Author Bio

Seth Kahn is an English professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. He researches and writes about academic labor, especially adjunct labor equity. He also serves on the board of the New Faculty Majority Foundation and has co-chaired labor/contingent faculty committees in several professional organizations.

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