

1 WHY WRITE?

Exploring the Question

During a class near the beginning of the semester, my students and I make lists of all the writing we've done so far that day. Sometimes students hesitate, and I remind them that texting and Instagramming and tweeting and Snapchatting are forms of writing. Students remember that they have created notes, doodles, lists, and other kinds of everyday writing.

We combine our individual lists to make a fuller class list, and then we take it even further by writing down what we *read*, that day or even that week. You can imagine how the list grows exponentially; once we start paying attention, it seems that written text is *everywhere*. We list stop signs,

CONNECT

Before you begin reading, try this exercise either individually or as a class:

1. List all the kinds of writing you have done so far today, whether you used a pen, a pencil, a computer, a tablet, or a cell phone.
2. List all the kinds of items you have read so far today. Look around you right now to notice writing that may be part of your everyday life.
3. If you can, compare lists with other people. Did anyone list writing and reading activities that involved reading images, objects, people, or situations? Sometimes "writing" and "reading" imply alphabetic texts, but often these words are used to suggest activities of constructing and interpreting meaning that may or may not involve written words.
4. What, if anything, surprises you about the above lists? Explain why.

menus, billboards, room numbers, store names, cereal boxes ... and the list goes on and on.

If we think of writing and reading as activities that involve not only alphabetic text but also images, objects, people, situations, and so forth, the list again multiplies.

CONNECT

What is your initial response to the question “Why write”? To answer this, you might do the following:

1. Choose one of the kinds of writing you do several times a week or more and explain what motivates you to engage in that writing.
2. Now choose a writing assignment you completed in school that you felt motivated to work on. What factors contributed to your motivation?

In short, it doesn’t take long for us to realize that writing and reading are activities that are intertwined with all aspects of our lives in a variety of ways.

Even if we think of writing in terms of alphabetic texts alone, the question arises, **WHY?** Why is writing such an integral activity in our lives? And how can we apply answers to the question of “why” to the very real writing we are often required to do in academic settings?

RELATIONSHIP WITH WRITING: IT’S COMPLICATED

If you’re at all like me, you write regularly without thinking twice about it, but at other times you find yourself making every excuse in the world to avoid writing. When thinking through the question “Why write?” then, it helps to consider what compels us to write in some situations and what hinders our writing in other situations.

Filling a purpose

Much writing is undertaken because it accomplishes something. Remember the note on the refrigerator I discussed in the Introduction?

My favorite son—DON’T FORGET!

Haircut 3:30 Friday

That note operated as a reminder for Fred to keep his haircut appointment. That haircut might have been important because of an upcoming sporting event or formal celebration, which would make the reminder note even more crucial. The motivation for writing the note increases if the purpose for the note is not simply a typical monthly haircut.

The note was also a reinforcement of a particular kind of relationship. It would be unusual for a child to leave such a reminder note for a parent, though it is possible. It would also be unusual for a parent to leave such a reminder note for a very young child. The note itself implies that Fred is old enough to read and to keep haircut appointments himself, but his parents do not believe he is fully independent—not only because they share the same household but also because they think he *needs* the reminder note. It is also possible the child does not need the reminder note but the parents *want* to have a role in his life; the note establishes a role for them.

CONNECT

1. Can you think of other purposes the reminder note might fill?
2. Look at the kinds of writing on your list from the start of this chapter. How many kinds of writing reinforce relationship bonds, even if they simultaneously fill another purpose?

Motivation

Some writing we do is *intrinsically motivated*. We write because we want to, and we find satisfaction or another kind of reward in this writing. You might experience this motivation if you text a friend because you want to share a funny thought or if you write reflections in a personal journal.

Other writing is *extrinsically motivated*. In these situations, we write in order to gain a reward or to avoid a negative consequence. You might experience this if you fill out a form when you visit a doctor or you complete a class writing assignment because you want to earn a high grade.

Many times we might have a combination of motivations when we write. As a matter of fact, I find it difficult to invest in a writing project if I am focused solely on extrinsic factors. If I'm not initially excited about writing I need to complete, I give myself a good talking to until I either feel invested in the work or I convince myself to just get it done.

For example, part of my work as a college faculty person involves writing an annual report about my activities. I have to explain how I have fulfilled my responsibilities in order to be evaluated. Every year when it's time to complete this report, I am not excited, even though the report can result in a salary increase.

To get motivated, I remind myself it's helpful to see what I've done for my own reasons. I can feel good about what I've accomplished, I can think about my current professional status, and I can plan where I am headed next.

I *also* talk myself into just getting the report done so that I can focus on work I enjoy more. When I avoid work, I feel like I'm carrying it around wherever I go, and the best way to feel free is to get the work done.

CONNECT

1. Teachers can be a resource by modeling what to do when writing is difficult. Ask your teachers about times when they did not want to write and how they coped with the situation.
2. How about you? Describe a time when you were annoyed with a writing requirement but you found a way to become invested in it.

I'm not certain if I would complete an annual activity report if I weren't required to do so. I do know, however, that the reason why I complete the work with good will is not because of potential money, but for the intrinsic rewards. I also keep the report in perspective. I know it doesn't need to be a grand masterpiece but instead simply needs to be complete. I enjoy checking that task off my "to do" list.

A burden or a gift?

You might be familiar with Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Early in the book, young Tom has been caught misbehaving, and his punishment involves whitewashing a fence. Tom's friends come by and tease him because he has to work on a beautiful day, but Tom pretends he has chosen to whitewash the fence and he acts like he's having a lot of fun doing it.

Soon enough, Tom's friends want to whitewash the fence because they buy into his pretense. Tom doesn't allow anyone else to whitewash the fence immediately—he keeps that possibility just out of reach to increase desire. The friends end up offering Tom gifts in exchange for an opportunity to paint the fence.

Writing is an awful lot like painting a fence.

If you've grown up in a school system that has required you to write, you might associate writing with work and even punishment. But you might have thought about writing differently when you were a kid. You might have felt excitement when you learned how to write letters, or form words, or create a story.

For many of us, when we were kids and were first learning to write, we were like Tom Sawyer's friends who wanted to whitewash that fence. We saw older people in our lives writing, and we wanted to be able to do it, too.

Unfortunately, that feeling goes away for a lot of us during years upon years of schooling, as we are told to write on demand and much of that writing is evaluated. Grading places the focus on *extrinsic* rewards, and being compelled to write may take some of the pleasure away from the activity. We might also not always recognize the purpose of writing tasks we are assigned in school.

A required first-year composition course may also feel like the punishment form of whitewashing a fence simply because it's *required* rather than being a choice.

Am I depressing you yet?

I like to be honest. Sometimes writing feels like a burden and an obligation. It is much more difficult to write in those circumstances.

But even when we are required to take a course, when we are expected to write, when we are supposed to meet a deadline, and when we are producing writing that is going to be graded—we can still channel our inner Tom Sawyer. We can start *pretending* we want to write and that many people would be jealous if they were witnessing our writing process.

The way it works, however, is that it doesn't take long to realize that we *are* lucky to be writing, even when it's something that someone else has told us to do (like my faculty activity report or a paper you are completing for a class). The truth is, our ability to take time to write and think and process ideas is an incredible privilege that is denied to many people the world over. The truth is, people with few resources often make great sacrifices in order to learn how to write and improve their education.

What sometimes feels like a burden may actually be a gift. And Tom Sawyer probably enjoyed whitewashing that fence more than he ever expected, all because he first *pretended* that it was something he wanted to do.

CONNECT

1. Some people struggle when first learning to write and thus may not associate early writing with a kind of joy. What about you? What were your earliest associations with writing?
2. Can you think of an example of writing being used as a form of punishment?
3. Can you think of an example of writing being used as a form of reward?

Writing for ourselves, writing for others

If you look back at the list of examples of writing and reading completed by you and your classmates, you'll notice there are many ways to categorize the writing. The chapter question "Why write?" suggests that *purpose* matters a lot. In addition, audience affects how we write, and these two factors are often paired in the ways they shape writing.

For example, if you write a shopping list or a "to do" list for yourself, the purpose may be to help you remember. If you write a similar list for another person, your purpose is to communicate what needs to be done to someone who may otherwise have no idea what you're thinking. The way that you write the lists thus changes based on purpose (memory versus communication) and audience (self versus other).

In writing tasks that are more complex than shopping lists, it's easy to feel frustrated when writing to meet the expectations of others. I actually encourage students (and remind myself) to initially write with *some* general sense of readers' expectations but without worrying *too* much about being judged or evaluated.

If you are not used to writing and speaking in a particular setting, you might be confused about the expectations. That can be frustrating from the start. When I have no idea what I'm aiming for, I tend to procrastinate; it seems like a waste of time for me to begin writing without any sense of how the finished product should look. The key for me has been to find an example of the kind of writing I need to complete. Once I have a model, I am better able to begin drafting.

However, I do not get too hung up on what other people will think of my writing when I get started so worries and concerns about being criticized or misunderstood don't get in the way of drafting and thinking on the page.

At some point, it's important to focus on what readers will expect and how we can shape our ideas in order to communicate effectively. Sometimes we will want to fully meet our readers' expectations so our writing will be most likely to fill its purpose.

Sometimes we might know the expectations, but we have a reason for writing in unexpected ways. For example, sometimes when writing my faculty activity report, I'll think about my dean reading a whole stack of these reports and getting bored, so I'll insert something funny. Humor generally does not belong in a faculty activity report. But if I have a dean who appreciates a laugh, my choice to ignore expectations might be smart. I would not, however, refuse to list my activities. Such a refusal would be counterproductive because I would not be filling the purpose of the writing task.

Sometimes people who use unexpected approaches let their audience know they are going to do so and explain why. This dynamic happened at a conference talk I attended. The speaker was an African American professor named Ersula Ore who was speaking to an audience of college professors of various racial and ethnic identities. Ore was discussing black experience and cultural expectations, and she explained at the start of her talk that she would be using African American vernacular *and* the language of academics because both languages fit her identity. Even though one style is considered informal and the other formal, she was showing that the two styles can have a different effect when used together. This practice of bringing various dialects together is called **code meshing** (Young et al.).

The speaker helped audience members adjust their expectations. If she hadn't done so, some people might have thought she was being inauthentic when using African American vernacular, while others might have accused her of being inauthentic when using academic discourse. She might have had a more difficult time communicating effectively if people in the audience focused on her tendency to mix two different speaking styles and were thus distracted from her argument.

Here's the deal. Writer-centered prose means that you're writing for yourself. Reader-centered prose means that you're writing for your readers. Rather than there being only two extreme choices, you can pick and choose what you do and how you do it so your writing meets the purpose you'd like it to meet, or at least has a reasonable chance of doing so. On a good day, your writing may serve you as well as your readers.

When you first write, make sure you have a basic sense of what you're working on, and then just write. If you saw the first draft of this chapter, you'd be wondering, "What is she talking about?" and "Why is this lady so boring?" If you're still thinking that now that I've revised and worked to appeal to you by clarifying ideas and deleting irrelevant tangents, I'm sorry! But please let me know (in a polite way that won't make me cry) so I can revise and improve for the next edition. Thank you!

CONNECT

1. Describe a time you felt good about communicating in your own distinctive way.
2. Describe a time when you appreciated someone else's surprising or unique approach to writing.

WHY WRITE IN A COLLEGE COURSE?

Many writing teachers advocate for *authentic* writing in our classrooms. "Authentic" suggests that the writing engages a real-world audience and purpose, as opposed to writing for the teacher or writing for a grade. Some courses use service learning, civic engagement, online writing, campus publications or research forums, and other tools to position course assignments in wider frames so that students will hopefully find the work meaningful.

If your course writing assignments tend to be positioned in such a way, the answer to "Why write?" may already be apparent to you.

However, whether in your current course or in another course, chances are that sometimes you are going to be assigned writing that seems aimed at a teacher who will be evaluating your work. That can be a daunting dynamic, and it may be difficult to feel motivated.

It usually helps if you have a sense of *why* the professor has assigned the work. Is it to guide you in writing in a genre that you will be required to use again in the future? Is it to challenge you to synthesize ideas about a topic to increase your understanding of those ideas? Is it to help you practice specific disciplinary conventions? Is it a way of having you engage deeply in a text via close analysis?

If you know the purpose, you might find the work more meaningful.

In addition, composition scholar Toby Fulwiler advises students to “make the assignment your own” by putting the assignment in your own words and relating it to something you care about (9). That way, the assignment may fill a purpose for *you* as well as a purpose within the context of the course. Fulwiler also says that it helps if you “try to teach your readers something,” even if your reader is a teacher (9). Teachers really can and do learn from students! It’s not just a cliché.

From everyday writing to academic writing

Sometimes students tell me they hate to write. I ask if they text people or use social media.

“Yes.”

“Does anybody force you to do that?”

“No.”

“Well, why do you text and use social media if you hate to write?”

When students tell me they hate to write, they usually mean they hate to write for school, on demand, with constraints developed by a teacher, and with a grade at the end of the process.

I am not simply being snarky when I point out times students enjoy writing and do it by choice. I value diverse kinds of writing, and I want us to question why some practices are not perceived as “real writing” while others are, both in academic and non-academic contexts (Winsor).

In addition to valuing texting and social media writing in their own right, I also appreciate how becoming aware of our expertise in one kind of writing can help us develop expertise in other kinds of writing.

My interest in connecting everyday writing to academic writing might seem odd to you. Often people rail against the amount of time teens and young adults

spend in front of a screen, and research certainly shows some drawbacks to spending too much time on social media or on a phone (Twenge). Still, the potential for negative repercussions does not mean that every facet of screen time is bad. People today write and read more than any generation that has come before, and that has to count for something.

One way to improve writing is to begin noticing similarities and differences as you move from one situation to another. When researcher Lucille McCarthy followed a

CONNECT

1. If you had to argue that smartphones are unhealthy based solely on your own experiences, what would you cite as evidence?
2. If you had to argue that smartphones are healthy based solely on your own experiences, what would you cite as evidence?
3. Have you ever changed your phone habits? If so, why? If not, what might compel you to do so?

student as he worked on papers for various college courses, she found he approached each class as if there was no connection to writing he had done before. The student thus struggled, while students who notice both similarities and differences can apply and adapt what they have learned in past situations to help them complete new writing tasks.

For example, students who adapted more quickly and effectively to new writing situations noticed that most academic settings required ideas to be developed with evidence. What counted as “evidence,” however, differed from one discipline to the next.

Just as students who identify the similarities and differences from one classroom to the next have an easier time writing in new situations, noticing what you know about writing in everyday situations can help you think more about how to develop writing appropriate to academic settings.

CONNECT

What similarities and differences can you think of between writing in a high school English class and a high school science class?

How texting and social media writing connect to academic writing

According to both my personal experience and more reliable research studies published online by the Pew Research Center, teens spend a lot of time reading, writing, and viewing digital texts (Lenhart). After a casual conversation with digital humanities professor Amanda Licastro at an academic conference many years ago, I began thinking more about intersections between students’ use of social media and their academic writing. Once I asked a class of about twenty students whether academic writing and social media had more in common or more that was different. Initially, all but one of the students pointed to differences. You can probably imagine the reasons they provided (these are from memory and are not exact quotes):

- “I quickly post on social media to my friends without thinking.”
- “I use social media to make my friends laugh or to flirt with someone.”
- “I don’t worry about my spelling or how I say something when I text.”
- “I use gifs and selfies and emojis when texting.”
- “I would never use terrible language in a paper, but I do all the time when texting with my friends.”
- “When I post on Twitter or Instagram, I know that a lot of people are going to see it. It matters more. Only a teacher sees my papers.”
- “People will say anything online. At least when it’s anonymous.”
- “Social media is short and quick. That’s not at all like writing a paper.”

Certain themes recur in the above paraphrases from a class discussion. When describing differences between one kind of writing and another, students most

CONNECT

Before reading further, think about your own response. To what degree do you find that texting and writing on social media platforms seem disconnected from academic writing? What areas of similarity do you see?

often discussed purpose, audience, content (that is, what material would be appropriate), length of the writing process, and style (informal or formal, text-based or image-based, sloppy or well-edited, short or long, and so forth).

One of the most obvious connections between texting or social media writing and academic writing is awareness that

- 1) *certain elements matter: purpose, audience, content, writing process, and style*
- 2) *writers make choices as we move from one situation to another*

A host of other connections can be drawn from social media expertise and applied to academic writing. Such connections might not be obvious at first because informal digital writing embeds information about author, recipient, date, time, and even sources (via links and sharing), so conscious attention to context and audience is often minimized (Mattingly and Harkin 15). Students who write easily via texting or social media may struggle writing appropriately in professional or academic contexts (Mattingly and Harkin 15–17), but noticing similarities and differences can help writers adjust and adapt.

For example, not all texting and social media writing is alike. If you use Snapchat and Instagram and Twitter, you may notice the way each functions differently, both in terms of possibilities and constraints. These differences between platforms parallel differences between academic **disciplines**, so it's expected that your approach to writing in a history class would be different from a psychology class.

Audiences also shift from class to class, even within a single discipline, just as they do on social media as you write to particular friend groups. Each professor (or friend group) may have slightly different priorities, so part of communicating well is noticing the shift in audience expectations.

Genres, too, make a difference. A private or direct message on social media functions differently than a public post, and we all need to learn what is appropriate in which space in order to communicate and avoid alienating others. Similarly, emailing a professor, taking notes in class, writing an in-class essay exam, and submitting a semester-long research paper are all different genres and need to be treated as such.

I also like to point out that texting and social media writing may often be dashed off without much thought, but many of us have taken our time and labored over a particular post that had higher stakes attached to it. Most students I talk to can recall a time when they revised their writing or asked for advice before making writing public. For some, it was because they were at a turning point in a relationship. For others, it was because they wanted to express a difference of opinion with someone but didn't want to cause offense. Others took their time figuring out what to say because they wanted to share something deeply sad or troubling such as the death of a loved one or their own story of surviving trauma.

In such situations, a **writing process** that involves time, reflection, feedback from others, revision, and editing is part of self-motivated social media writing. A similar process is often expected in academic writing situations, even though the finished product will probably be quite different from the social media posting. The general principle is that **high stakes writing** (writing associated with serious and consequential communication) takes more time and is a more complex process than **low stakes writing** (informal writing that may involve thinking through ideas or gradually building a relationship).

Reflecting on our writing expertise in one situation to better understand expectations in a less familiar situation is an excellent habit to develop. Building strong friendships through texting and social media writing is not exactly the same as developing your academic reputation through course writing assignments, but noticing both the differences and the similarities can help you appreciate the value of the various kinds of writing you do.

CONNECT

1. Much academic writing involves responding to reading or using sources to help develop an argument. What aspects of texting or social media writing have similar dynamics?
2. Most people craft a particular kind of public identity on social media. Think of examples from people you follow. Do people also craft a particular identity in their academic writing? If so, how would this identity be similar to or different from their social media identity?
3. Although I focused on digital writing in this section, you probably have expertise in many kinds of everyday writing. Can you think of an example of writing that might have some lessons to keep in mind as you write in school settings?

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Extending the Conversation

To think more about the question "Why write?" I have gathered together four selections reprinted here and six readings you can find online. Each piece overlaps with my initial approach to the question in some way, but each piece also extends the question "Why write?" in a particular direction. As we answer questions that

may seem simple at first, complexities and nuances develop that call for more exploration.

For each text reprinted here, I tell you why I included it, provide some background about its initial publication, and offer hints that may guide your reading, including vocabulary terms when relevant. I also provide “connect” questions to help you engage and respond as you read.

For each online source I recommend, I offer a brief introduction—just enough to guide you as you decide what further reading might be helpful, inspiring, enjoyable, or challenging.

DEBORAH BRANDT'S “THE PURSUIT OF LITERACY” (2001)

Why I included it

I appreciate that Brandt answers the question “Why write?” by connecting literacy—the ability to read and write—to economic, historical, and social conditions during the twentieth century. Because this is an excerpt of a book introduction, it provides an overview of what the book does rather than specific details from the literacy study. Still, even this overview says a lot.

As you read about Brandt's research methods, you might be inspired to interview one or two people or reflect on your own experiences. You can review the Appendix and focus your own research according to your interests.

Background

Brandt's study looks back at the twentieth century from the vantage point of 2001. This timing allows her to think historically. Her research responds to a wider movement centered on understanding literacy as contextual; that is, reading and writing always take place in particular times and places, so they should not be understood in abstract or universal ways but instead should be connected to other cultural dynamics.

Brandt explains that literacy (the ability to read and write) is a useful resource that some people can access more easily than others and that is tied to economic and historical change. Brandt describes the process of interview that she used to reach conclusions, and she offers a framework (the “literacy sponsor”) that allows her to discuss issues of access to literacy. Brandt's term “literacy sponsor” has been used regularly since this 2001 publication because scholars have continued to research questions of literacy, access, and social power.

Reading hints and vocab terms

Remember that this selection is an excerpt. Where the asterisks appear, text is omitted, and the reading experience may thus be jumpy in those places.

Three sections are included here. The first pages of the introductory chapter provide a sense of the book's focus. The section titled "Parameters of the Study" outlines Brandt's research methods. The third section, titled "The Analytical Framework: Sponsors of Literacy," explains that whenever people are supported in their efforts to read and write, the individual or institutional "sponsor" also stands to benefit in some way. This last section is probably the most difficult part.

Try thinking about each section individually in terms of its purpose, and then think about it in relation to the other sections. Brandt assumes scholarly readers who have an interest and background in studies of literacy, so her text may seem difficult to you at times. In places, however, her writing is straightforward and will likely be clear to you. Using these places of clarity to guide you, try to figure

out what she hopes to accomplish with this text. Why would she ask 80 people about their experiences with literacy? What might she hope to accomplish as she tells of the patterns she's found in their stories?

The Appendix at the end of the selection will help you gain a better sense of the interviews Brandt conducted, so you may want to look at that document early in your reading.

literacy: the ability to read and write, especially within a particular situation. For example, although Brandt doesn't use the term "computer literacy," that is a particular kind of literacy. Literacy thus may look different over time as reading and writing expectations shift.

literacy sponsor: a person or institution supporting the literacy development of a person or group of people. This relationship benefits the person who

CONNECT

As you read, consider responding to the following questions to help you process the material.

1. I said that Brandt is assuming her audience is scholarly and interested in literacy studies. What clues in the first section helped me to draw that conclusion? Are there any signs that she has a wider audience in mind?
2. In what ways do Brandt's study parameters help her discover information about literacy? In what ways is the study limited? If you wanted to find out more, what kind of study would you design?
3. How did you learn to read and write? What people or institutions sponsored your literacy? Were you expected to conform or otherwise meet expectations of those who sponsored your literacy?
4. Have you ever noticed unequal access to literacy? Now that Brandt is pointing it out, can you imagine being raised in different circumstances that would provide you with either more or less access to literacy?

is gaining literacy, but it is often under conditions that also benefit the sponsor; thus, access to literacy may come at a price. Considering the role of the literacy sponsor allows Brandt to move from individual stories to recognizing changing economic and historical conditions.

Excerpt from: Brandt, Deborah. “The Pursuit of Literacy.” Introduction to *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 1–24.

LITERACY IS SO much an expectation in this country that it has become more usual to ask why and how people fail to learn to read and write than to ask why and how they succeed. In a society in which virtually every child attends school and where some kind of print penetrates every corner of existence, only the strongest sorts of countervailing forces—oppression, deprivation, dislocation—seem able to exclude a person from literacy. Asked to imagine how their lives would be different if they didn’t know how to read and write, people I have spoken with are often baffled and pained. “I would be totally in the dark,” they say. Or, “It would be like not having shoes.”

To think of literacy as a staple of life—on the order of indoor lights or clothing—is to understand how thoroughly most Americans in these times are able to take their literacy for granted. It also is to appreciate how central reading and writing can be to people’s sense of security and well-being, even to their sense of dignity. At the same time, these analogies ask us to take a deeper look. They remind us that, as with electricity or manufactured goods, individual literacy exists only as part of larger material systems, systems that on the one hand enable acts of reading or writing and on the other hand confer their value. Changes in these systems change the meaning and status of individual literacy much as the newest style of shoes—or method of producing shoes—might enhance or depreciate the worth of the old. Further, these analogies remind us that, despite a tendency to take the resource of literacy for granted, acquiring literacy—like acquiring other basic staples of life—remains an active, sometimes daunting process for individuals and families. This process is exacerbated by turbulent economic changes that do not merely raise standards for literacy achievement from one generation to the next but often ruthlessly reconfigure the social and economic systems through which literacy can be pursued and through which it can find its worth.

This book is about how ordinary people have learned to read and write during the century just concluded. It is also about how they have made use of that learning at various stages of their lives. Learning to read and write has taken place amid convulsive changes in economic and social life, educational expectations, and communication technologies. This has been a time when the meaning of what it is to be literate has seemed to shift with nearly every new generation. Inevitably, pursuing literacy in the twentieth century entailed learning to respond to an unprecedented pace of change in the uses, forms, and standards of literacy. One of the major aims of this book is to look closely at the sources of the changing conditions of literacy learning and especially at the ways that Americans have faced the escalating pressure to provide for themselves and their children the kinds of literate skill demanded by life in these times.

Literacy has proven to be a difficult and contentious topic of investigation largely because its place in American culture has become so complex and even conflicted. Expanding literacy undeniably has been an instrument for more democratic access to learning, political participation, and upward mobility. At the same time, it has become one of the sharpest tools for stratification and denial of opportunity. Print in the twentieth century was the sea on which ideas and other cultural goods flowed easily among regions, occupations, and social classes. But it also was a mechanism by which the great bureaucracies of modern life tightened around us, along with their systems of testing, sorting, controlling, and coercing. The ability to read and, more recently, to write often helps to catapult individuals into higher economic brackets and social privilege. Yet the very broadening of these abilities among greater numbers of people has enabled economic and technological changes that now destabilize and devalue once serviceable levels of literate skills. Unending cycles of competition and change keep raising the stakes for literacy achievement. In fact, as literacy has gotten implicated in almost all of the ways that money is now made in America, the reading and writing skills of the population have become grounds for unprecedented encroachment and concern by those who profit from what those skills produce. In short, literacy is valuable—and volatile—property. And like other commodities with private and public value, it is a grounds for potential exploitation, injustice, and struggle as well as potential hope, satisfaction, and reward. Wherever literacy is learned and practiced, these competing interests will always be present.

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Parameters of the Study

This is a study, then, about how people across the past century learned to read and write, actively, passively, willingly, resistantly, and, always, persistently, over a lifetime. It focuses on the experiences of ordinary people, some who read or write constantly and some who do so rarely, some who are able to take reading or writing with them into virtually any sphere of life where it can do some good and others who usually must trade on other means to make out. In any case, in this study, an understanding of literacy is built up from people's accounts of their lived experiences, embracing those instances in which anyone said they learned anything about reading or writing. Although encounters with literacy often blended with other activities (some people learned about writing, for instance, while drawing, calculating, reading, listening to the radio, watching television, talking), the study maintains a primary focus on the acquisition and use of alphabetic script. The interest is in reading and writing as people would mundanely and practically distinguish them from other sorts of recognizable activity (or at least as they were being recognized in the 1990s!). The study makes no attempt to measure people's literacy skills against any kind of standard (although it notices, at times, how such measurements are made). Rather, the driving concerns have to do with how people say they came to acquire or develop the resources of reading or writing—at all.

It has been commonplace, as I mentioned, to consider literacy in the plural, as sets of social practices, diverse routines that must be understood in relationship to the particular social aims and habits associated with their contexts of use. In this study, perhaps because the focus is less on how people practice literacy and more on how they have pursued it, literacy appears less settled than the term *practice* might imply. It appears more elusive, as a want, as an incursion, as an unstable currency. When literacy does appear in this study as a social practice, it is as a practice that is often jumping its tracks, propelled into new directions by new or intensifying pressures for its use.

This study is based on 80 in-depth interviews I conducted in the mid-1990s with a diverse group of Americans ranging in birth date from the late 1890s to the early 1980s. In the interviews, we traced together their memories of learning to write and, to a lesser extent, their memories of learning to read. The inquiry focused especially on the people, institutions, materials, and motivations that contributed to literacy learning, both in school and out, from birth to the present. I also explored with the people I interviewed the uses and values that literacy has had for them at various stages of life. This study follows in the tradition of life-story research, which is a loose confederation of historical,

sociological, psychological, and phenomenological inquiry. This form of research serves multiple purposes and employs various methodologies, including the collection of open-ended autobiographical monologues, structured and less structured interviews, and biographical surveys. What these diverse traditions have in common is an interest in people's descriptions of their own life experiences. A significant focus for analysis is the life span. Social psychology uses life stories to explore people's subjective worlds, seeking relationships among social structure, personality, and behavior. Other sorts of inquiries examine the linguistic forms and functions of narrative accounts themselves to uncover the meaning structures that people call on to bring order to their experiences. Perhaps the best known line of life-story research is oral history, which uses interviews to gather information about the social conditions of ordinary lives, information that is otherwise unrecorded and often overlooked in conventional histories of important people and events. In other cases, oral history is used to document multiple perspectives on public events. My study is aligned in many ways with oral history perspectives as articulated by Paul Thompson (1975, 1988, 1990) and Trevor Lummis (1987) and with the biographical sociology of Daniel Bertaux (1981, 1984).¹ I treat autobiographical accounts for their historical value, for their illumination of people's relationships to the social structures of their times and places, especially those in which literacy learning is implicated. Rather than searching for uniqueness or subjective differences, this study concerns itself with similarities of experience among people who experience similarly structured positions and relations. As Trevor Lummis explained,

... people live their lives within the material and cultural boundaries of their time span, and so life histories are exceptionally effective historical sources because through the totality of lived experience they reveal relations between individuals and social forces which are rarely apparent in other sources. Above all, the information is historical and dynamic in that it reveals changes of experience through time.²

1 Also see Bertaux and Thompson (1997). Social structure and social change are at the heart of the investigations of these three researchers. Individual cases are valued for what they can reveal about economic and social relationships. For weaknesses in this approach, see the Popular Memory Group's (1982) critique of Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* (1988), which they fault for not attending to the cultural constructions involved in life-story interviewing and life stories themselves, for disguising premises of researcher and researched in "the empirical fact." My study, in fact, is limited in the same way.

2 Lummis, 1987, page 108.

Direct accounts about how ordinary people have acquired reading and writing and their motivations for doing so are largely missing from the record of mass literacy development. Most studies of the past have had to rely on indirect evidence, such as signature rates, book circulation, or the growth of schooling, with only an occasional excerpt from diaries or letters or autobiographies to provide a more contextualized sense of the means and meaning of literacy in various eras. Only recently have we begun to accumulate more systematic and direct accounts of contemporary literacy as it has been experienced. Nevertheless, many current debates about literacy education and policy continue to be based largely on indirect evidence, such as standardized test scores or education levels or surveys of reading habits. It is the persistent interest of this study to characterize literacy not as it registers on various scales but as it has been lived.

The point of view of this investigation is roughly through birth cohorts, a method of analysis meant to capture literacy learning within what Lummis called “material and cultural boundaries” of a time span. Norman Ryder discussed the merits of birth cohort analysis in studying social change:

Each new cohort makes fresh contact with the contemporary social heritage and carries the impress of the encounter through life. This confrontation has been called the intersection of the innovative and the conservative forces in history. The members of any cohort are entitled to participate in only one slice of life—their unique location in the stream of history.³

This approach has proven especially amenable to a treatment of the changing conditions of literacy learning, especially given the ways that literacy-based technologies have been introduced across the century, entering people’s lives at different ages and so with different impacts and possibilities. At the same time, though, tracing literacy through successive generations illuminates the “conservative forces” that Ryder mentioned, as we can see how older, fading forms of literacy roll along with new and emerging ones, creating new material and ideological configurations for literacy learners at any stage of life. Literacy preserves, and one of the things that it is best at preserving is itself, so an encounter with literacy will always in some sense be an encounter with its history.

³ Ryder, 1965, page 844. Ryder captured the value of this perspective for the study of literacy learning when he wrote that “the principal motor of contemporary social change is technological innovation. It pervades the other substructures of society and forces them into accommodation” (p. 851).

Consequently, what is new in literacy learning comes not merely from new technologies and their implications but from the creation of new relationships to older technologies and ways of writing and reading. Cohort analysis is especially useful for apprehending this process. Finally, the comparative perspective recognizes the close connections between social structures and communication systems and how changes in both are interrelated; literacy is not merely an expression of social structure but a dynamic element in it. What people are able to do with their writing or reading in any time and place—as well as what others do to them with writing and reading—contribute to their sense of identity, normality, possibility.

Of course, as with any investigative approach, life stories have their limitations and dangers. Especially complicating is the fact that accounts of past events inevitably are rendered through the perspective of the present. People reflect on—indeed, refashion—a memory in terms of its significance for how things have turned out, whether in terms of personal circumstances or shared culture. This is a thorny matter for the interviewer as well as those interviewed. It is especially tricky in an investigation of changing meanings of literacy, as past senses of writing or reading are apprehended through more recent realities and perspectives and the blend is hard to separate. One way to mitigate this problem, as Daniel Bertaux has suggested, is to focus people's attention on the past by remembering concrete activities and material surroundings.⁴ Such a tactic cannot claim to yield something more objective or true but does potentially grant a return to the material scenes of past learning, a move that especially interested me. I devised an interview script by which I tried to lead participants through a chronological account of both ordinary and extraordinary encounters with writing and reading, lingering to explore their detailed recollections of the literal settings, people, and materials that animated their memories. (See Appendix [at the end of this excerpt].) Of course, such an approach only leads to the additional complication of the role of the questions and questioner in structuring life-story accounts. In an effort to be cooperative, those being interviewed will try to render their responses according to the perceived desires of the questioner.⁵ Undoubtedly, the heavy hand of

⁴ Bertaux, 1981, page 130.

⁵ Briggs's (1986) book is a useful reminder that oral history interviews are as systematically related to the present (especially the ongoing demands of the interview itself) as to the past. He also called for more attention to what he called the "metacommunicative repertoires" of the social groups from which interviewees come, especially so that the interviewer can learn the lessons offered in a particular exchange.

my interview script, shaped by the theoretical interests motivating my study, imposed itself on the participants, becoming at times at odds with the communication norms they preferred and knew best. Other times, of course, the script receded as conversations meandered into stories, jokes, jibes, and other tangents during which I tried to listen closely for the lessons about literacy that they offered. In any case, one of the great advantages of conducting autobiographical interviews at the end of the twentieth century was the ubiquitous models of the interview format available through television, radio, and print, making the roles of interviewer and interviewee not quite so strange for either party. Nevertheless, the methodological limitations I mention as well as the ones I fail to notice myself are indelibly present in (and absent from!) this presentation, there (and not there) for the discriminating reader to weigh against my claims.⁶

A few more deliberate limitations must be noted. First, although reading development is not ignored in this study, the central focus is on writing and learning to write. One reason is simply to help to redress the neglect of the social history of writing in comparison to reading. As Michael Halloran has observed, "Writing has been a virtually invisible topic in the material history of modern culture."⁷ I have been amazed throughout the process of researching for this book at how invisible writing remains as a researched phenomenon in economics, history of education, and communication studies.⁸ Although the situation is improving, much more is left to be known about the practices, meanings, and values of writing for ordinary citizens. A focus on writing is especially pertinent now because the pressure to write is perhaps the main new feature of literacy to have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a second wave, one might say, of the mass (reading) literacy achieved for many groups by the second half of the nineteenth century.

Second, I decided early on not to ask participants to show me their writing. Partly this was a practical matter, for most of the writing done by ordinary people is by nature transitory, consumed, discarded. Most of the texts people recalled no longer existed anyway. Partly this was a philosophical matter, for too much of our understanding about literacy and writing development is based on the analysis of texts, and this study is meant to emphasize other dimensions.

6 For additional psychological treatments of autobiographical memory, see the collection by Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, and Betz (1996).

7 Halloran, 1990, page 155.

8 More attention needs to be paid to the fact that many reading assessments require students to write out their responses to reading as proof of comprehension. The intermingling of writing ability with reading ability in these settings is not usually addressed. The National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading, for instance, judges reading comprehension on the basis of students' written answers.

Partly, too, this was a personal matter, a reluctance to force into my relationship with the participants the long shadow of the teacher ready to uncover shameful inadequacies of expression. As the interviews demonstrated, the disapproving teacher looms large enough still in many people's memories and was best, I thought, left alone. In several cases, people spontaneously offered me examples of their writing, sometimes journals, letters, poems and fiction, autobiographies, old school reports, or professional projects and publications. But they were never solicited.

Finally, I steered away in the interviews and certainly in the write-ups from probes and disclosures of most personal matters. These excisions from the presentation, even when bits of the shape of literacy learning might have been cut along with them, were motivated by a desire not to hurt or embarrass the people who helped me so much in this project. I hope I have succeeded.

A note about transcriptions: All quotations from the interviews have been edited into standard written English with hesitations, misstarts, and pauses eliminated. Such editing indeed washes out the dialectical diversity of the people I spoke with. However, not trained as a linguist, I lacked the skill to transcribe accurately the range of regional accents and dialects that I heard. Although the racism of our society often invites researchers to hear and inscribe aspects of the most stigmatized dialects (for instance, Ebonics or the "broken" English of second-language speakers), the speech of the nonstigmatized is not so closely scrutinized for its deviations from the accepted standard. It is out of a sense of evenhandedness, then, that I have converted all the speech that I quote into standard edited English. Dropping the hesitations and misstarts risks loss of nuance, but in each case I listened carefully to the contextual meaning of passages I have chosen to quote to be sure that such editing would not flagrantly distort meaning as I understood it. What is gained by these decisions, I hope, is greater clarity and efficiency for the reader.

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The Analytical Framework: Sponsors of Literacy

In his sweeping history of adult learning in the United States, Joseph Kett described the intellectual atmosphere available to young apprentices who worked in the small, decentralized print shops of antebellum America. Because printers also were the solicitors and editors of what they published, their workshops served as lively incubators for literacy and political discourse. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, this opportunity faded when the invention

of the steam press reorganized the economy of the print industry. Steam presses were so expensive that they required capital outlays beyond the means of many printers. As a result, print jobs were outsourced, the processes of editing and printing were split, and, in tight competition, print apprentices became low-paid mechanics with no more access to the multiskilled environment of the craft shop.⁹ Although this shift in working conditions may be evidence of the deskilling of workers induced by the Industrial Revolution,¹⁰ it also offers a site for reflecting on the dynamic sources of literacy and literacy learning. The reading and writing skills of print apprentices in this period were an achievement not simply of teachers and learners or of the discourse practices of the printer community. Rather, these skills existed vulnerably, contingently within an economic moment. The pre-steam press economy enabled some of the most basic aspects of the apprentices' literacy, especially their access to material production and the public meaning or worth of their skills. Paradoxically, even as the steam-powered penny press made print more accessible (by making publishing more profitable), it brought an end to a particular form of literacy sponsorship and a drop in literacy potential.

Kett's study, which focused on the competition among providers of education in the United States, helped me to formulate an analytical approach to literacy learning that I came to call sponsors of literacy. As I suggested earlier, literacy looms as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth century: a lubricant for consumer desire, a means for integrating corporate markets, a foundation for the deployment of weapons and other technology, a raw material in the mass production of information. As ordinary citizens have been compelled into these economies, their reading and writing skills have grown sharply more central to the everyday trade of information and goods as well as to the pursuit of education, employment, civil rights, and status. At the same time, people's literate skills have grown vulnerable to unprecedented turbulence in their economic value, as conditions, forms, and standards of literacy achievement seem to shift with almost every new generation of learners. In my analysis of the life histories, I sought ways to understand the vicissitudes of individual literacy development in relationship to the large-scale economic forces that set the routes and determine the worldly worth of that literacy.

My own field of writing studies has had much to say about individual literacy development. Especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, we have

9 Kett, 1994, pages 67–70.

10 Nicholas and Nicholas (1992).

theorized, researched, critiqued, debated, and sometimes even managed to enhance the literacy potentials of ordinary citizens as they have tried to cope with life as they find it. Less easily and certainly less steadily have we been able to relate what we see, study, and do to these larger contexts of profit-making and competition. This even as we recognize that the most pressing issues we deal with—tightening associations between literacy skill and social viability, the break-neck pace of change in communications technology, persistent inequities in access and reward—all relate to structural conditions in literacy's bigger picture. When economic forces are addressed in our work, they appear primarily as generalities: contexts, determinants, motivators, barriers, touchstones. But rarely are they systematically related to the local conditions and embodied moments of literacy learning that occupy so many of us on a daily basis.¹¹

This study does not presume to overcome the analytical failure completely. But it does offer a conceptual approach that begins to connect literacy as an individual development to literacy as an economic development, at least as the two have played out over the last century. The approach is through what I call sponsors of literacy. Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way. Just as the ages of radio and television accustomed us to having programs brought to us by various commercial sponsors, it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use. Although the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge (and, in fact, may conflict), sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty. Sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited.¹² Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes.

Intuitively, *sponsors* seemed a fitting term for the figures who turned up most typically in people's memories of literacy learning: older relatives, teachers, religious leaders, supervisors, military officers, librarians, friends, editors, influential

11 Three of the keenest and most eloquent observers of economic impacts on writing and teaching and learning have been Faigley (1999), Miller (1991), and Spellmeyer (1996).

12 For a more positive treatment of sponsors, see Goldblatt (1994), who explored the power of institutions to authorize writers.

authors. Sponsors, as we ordinarily think of them, are powerful figures who bank-roll events or smooth the way for initiates. Usually richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored, sponsors nevertheless enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite. They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association. *Sponsors* also proved an appealing term in my analysis because of all the commercial references that appeared in these twentieth-century accounts—the magazines, peddled encyclopedias, essay contests, radio and television programs, toys, fan clubs, writing tools, and so on, from which so much experience with literacy was derived. As the twentieth century turned the abilities to read and write into widely exploitable resources, commercial sponsorship abounded.

In whatever form, sponsors deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access to what they have. Of course, the sponsored can be oblivious to or innovative with this ideological burden. Like Little Leaguers who wear the logo of a local insurance agency on their uniforms, not out of a concern for enhancing the agency's image but as a means for getting to play ball, people throughout history have acquired literacy pragmatically under the banner of others' causes. In the days before free public schooling in England, Protestant Sunday schools warily offered basic reading instruction to working-class families as part of evangelical duty. To the horror of many in the church sponsorship, these families insistently, sometimes riotously demanded of their Sunday schools more instruction, including in writing and math, because it provided means for upward mobility.¹³ Through the sponsorship of Baptist and Methodist ministries, African Americans in slavery taught each other to understand the Bible in subversively liberatory ways. Under a conservative regime, they developed forms of critical literacy that sustained religious, educational, and political movements both before and after emancipation.¹⁴ Most of the time, however, literacy takes its shape from the interests of its sponsors. And, as we will see throughout this book, obligations toward one's sponsors run deep, affecting what, when, why, and how people write and read.

13 Laqueur (1976, p. 124) provided a vivid account of a street demonstration in Bolton, England, in 1834 by a "pro-writing" faction of Sunday school students and their teachers. This faction demanded that writing instruction continue to be provided on Sundays, something that opponents of secular instruction on the Sabbath were trying to reverse. The legacies of this period on contemporary reading and writing are explored in Chapter 5 [of Brandt's book].

14 See Cornelius's (1991) absorbing study, which provides ample evidence of how competing interests—economic, political, and religious—set the conditions for literacy and illiteracy among African Americans in slavery.

The concept of sponsors helps to explain, then, a range of human relationships and ideological pressures that turn up at the scenes of literacy learning—from benign sharing between adults and youths to euphemistic coercions in schools and workplaces to the most notorious impositions and deprivations by church or state. It also is a concept useful for tracking literacy's materiel: the things that accompany writing and reading and the ways they are manufactured and distributed. *Sponsorship* as a sociological term is even more broadly suggestive for thinking about economies of literacy development. Studies of patronage in Europe and *compadrazgo* in the Americas show how patron-client relationships in the past grew up around the need to manage scarce resources and promote political stability.¹⁵ Pragmatic, instrumental, ambivalent, patron-client relationships integrated otherwise antagonistic social classes into relationships of mutual, albeit unequal, dependencies. Loaning land, money, protection, and other favors allowed the politically powerful to extend their influence and justify their exploitation of clients. Clients traded their labor and deference for access to opportunities for themselves or their children and for leverage needed to improve their social standing. Especially under conquest in Latin America, *compadrazgo* reintegrated native societies badly fragmented by the diseases and other disruptions that followed foreign invasions. At the same time, this system was susceptible to its own stresses, especially when patrons became clients themselves of still more centralized or distant overlords, with all the shifts in loyalty and perspective that entailed.¹⁶

In raising this association with formal systems of patronage, I do not wish to overlook the very different economic, political, and education systems within which US literacy has developed. But where we find the sponsoring of literacy, it will be useful to look for its function within larger political and economic arenas. Literacy is a valued commodity in the US economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge. This value helps to explain, of course, the length people will go to secure literacy for themselves or their children. But it also explains why the powerful work so persistently to conscript and ration the resource of literacy. The competition to harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it, intensified throughout the twentieth century. It is vital to pay attention to this development because it largely sets the terms for individuals' encounters with literacy. This competition shapes the incentives and barriers

15 Thanks to Ann Egan-Robertson for suggesting patronage as a useful model for thinking about literacy and sponsorship. See Bourne (1986), Hortsman and Kurtz (1978), and Lynch (1986).

16 Hortsman and Kurtz, 1978, pages 13–14.

(including uneven distributions of opportunity) that greet literacy learners in any particular time and place. It is this competition that has made access to the right kinds of literacy sponsors so crucial for political and economic well-being. And it also has spurred the rapid, complex changes that now make the pursuit of literacy feel so turbulent and precarious for so many.

Each of the following chapters [in Brandt's book] applies the analytical concept of the sponsor to life-history accounts to address fundamental questions about literacy learning in the twentieth century: How do regional economic transformations change the conditions for literacy learning for people in that place? What do sharply rising standards for literacy feel like in the lives of ordinary Americans? How is literacy passed across generations under conditions of rapid social change? What barriers and opportunities in social structures matter to literacy learning at the current time? In several chapters, I have chosen to concentrate on extended exemplar cases to provide detailed examination of the material and ideological conditions that carry potential answers to these questions. Where exemplar cases are used, they have been chosen for the clarity and robustness with which they illustrate findings from the larger body of life accounts. In other chapters, the data have been sliced more thickly, across groups and at times across the entire set of interviews. Although in the end it has been necessary to focus in depth on only a few of the many interviews that I collected, it was only by collecting and analyzing many interviews (indeed, I wish there could have been more) that I could find the recurrent patterns and themes that I here illustrate with fewer, in-depth cases.

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Appendix: Interview Script

Demographic Questions

Date of birth

Place of birth

Place of rearing

Gender/race

Type of household (childhood)

Type of household (current)

Great-grandparents' schooling and occupations, if known

Grandparents' schooling and occupations, if known

Parents'/guardians' schooling and occupations, if known

Names and locations of all schools attended
Other training
Degrees, dates of graduation, size of graduating class
Past/current/future occupations

Early Childhood Memories

Earliest memories of seeing other people writing/reading
Earliest memories of self writing/reading
Earliest memories of direct or indirect instruction
Memories of places writing/reading occurred
Occasions associated with writing/reading
People associated with writing/reading
Organizations associated with writing/reading
Materials available for writing/reading
Ways materials entered households
Kinds of materials used
Role of technologies

Writing and Reading in School

Earliest memories of writing/reading in school
Memories of kinds of writing/reading done in school
Memories of direct instruction
Memories of self-instruction
Memories of peer instruction
Memories of evaluation
Uses of assignments/other school writing and reading
Audiences of school-based writing
Knowledge drawn on to complete assignments
Resources drawn on to complete assignments
Kinds of materials available for school-based writing/reading
Kinds of materials used
Role of technologies

Writing and Reading with Peers

Memories of sharing writing and reading
Memories of writing and reading to/with friends
Memories of writing and reading in play
Memories of seeing friends reading and writing

Memories of reading friends' writing

Extracurricular Writing and Reading

Organizations or activities that may have involved writing or reading

Writing contests, pen pals, and so forth

Self-Initiated Writing or Reading

Purposes for writing and reading at different stages

Genres

Audiences/uses

Teaching/learning involved

Writing on the Job

Same questions as above

Civic or Political Writing

Influential People

Memories of people who had a hand in one's learning to write or read

Influential Events

Significant events in the process of learning to write

Purposes for Writing and Reading Overall

Values

Relative importance of writing and reading

Motivations

Consequences

Current Uses of Reading and Writing

All reading and writing done in the six months prior to the interview

Sense of Literacy Learning

Interviewee's own sense of how he or she learned to read and write

Sense of how people in general learn to read and write

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ALEEZA LASKOWSKI'S "DOMESTIC SPHERE VS. PUBLIC SPHERE" (2016)

Why I included it

I appreciate the way Laskowski made a course assignment her own while still meeting the requirements. Her writing helps me think about the way families and schools have ways of approaching learning that may be in conflict with one another. Although she writes about attitudes towards learning in general, I think her ideas can be applied more specifically to learning how to write more effectively.

Background

Laskowski submitted this in response to her first essay assignment in a writing course during her first semester of college. The class read several selections offering both positive visions and critiques of education systems. In response, students were asked to write a narrative asking them to identify key words that defined what it meant, in their experience, to be a student. This narrative was to be shared with me, the instructor, and with the rest of the class. Laskowski engaged in writing workshops during class and revised her writing several times with this audience in mind.

CONNECT

As you read, consider responding to the following questions to help you process the material.

1. Laskowski's narrative casts her in a negative light at one point. How does this part of the essay contribute to the overall impact on readers?
2. Laskowski unpacks one set of contrasts between her family's values and her school's values. Are there other contrasts between family values and school values that you've encountered, whether in your own experience or in the experiences of people you know?
3. To what degree have you embodied the values of Laskowski's mother? To what degree have you embodied the values that Laskowski recognizes in her school experiences?
4. Are there any downsides to the values that Laskowski's mother encourages?

Reading hints

Because the assignment asked for a “narrative” rather than an analysis, Laskowski uses storytelling to develop her ideas. As you read, notice the way the title sets up a contrast and see if you can trace the two kinds of attitudes Laskowski has identified. Pay particular attention to places where Laskowski breaks from storytelling to directly state her point for her readers.

Laskowski, Aleeza. “Domestic Sphere vs. Public Sphere.” ENG 120 Critical Writing, Pace University, Fall 2016.

IF MY MOTHER has taught me anything, it is the true meaning of pride and motivation. To her, these two values are key to being a successful student, and over time they have become mine. However, these teachings inside of my own household were hard to grasp easily because they ran counter to the two very different teachings I learned in the classroom.

Mariana, my mother, came from humble roots. She was one of ten children born and raised in the slums of Dominican Republic. Education was accessible but not in the way it had become when she entered the United States. Like many other immigrants my mother is a strong believer in the “American Dream.” America was like Heaven; you entered the gates expecting only the best of the best. “I came here at the age of sixteen,” she’d say to me, “and only knew one English word—No.” She often repeated this, as a way to etch it into my mind that this came from the same woman who went on to take AP Physics and AP Calculus. My mother did not let things like language barriers get in her way. She was motivated and cared enough to express her gratification for her seat in the classroom. As a student she felt as thankful as a servant would be to his king, and this was what pride meant to her.

At the age of nineteen Mariana had received her high school diploma and also gave birth to her first child. She worked numerous jobs but a stable career was out of reach due to lack of education. To my mom a college degree would be synonymous with prosperity. In 2016, my mother graduated with her Bachelor’s Degree in Nursing (with honorable mention), three kids and thirty years later. As a single mother raising four kids, she worked full time as a nurse in surgery and still managed to sit through her classes for 12 hours one day out of the week each week. My mother cared enough for the opportunity to even

sit in a classroom. She was proud to be studying and mastering something that only she motivated herself to do.

Growing up as a student of hers, I wanted to completely believe and devote myself to this view. But for the forty hours a week I spent in school, those same beliefs on what it means to be a student were not being taught. I received two very different perspectives that battled with the one my mother had been trying to instill in me.

I went to public school from kindergarten all the way to eighth grade. In public school, the kids rarely care about their actions and consequences. If they fail there's always summer school; if they fail summer school then they get held back or switched to another school. If they're constantly fighting, they get removed and placed into another school. The whole system felt like a constant cycle, a repetitive routine, and this aura was upheld in the actual classroom as well. Teachers followed the guidelines for what was to be taught strictly and there was no room for creativity. This confinement that was upheld by the Board of Education caused me to lose sight of what I was actually doing this for. The pride that was upheld in public school was carelessness and complete lack of motivation.

My mother was trying to teach me how to "take an education rather than merely receive a schooling" (Gatto 115). The Prussian system in which my public education originated from (Gatto 117) worked to stifle my mother's teachings at home. I'd watch my mother sit on the porch for hours when she first attempted to get her bachelors when I was in middle school. She'd have huge textbooks laid out with notes open, ready to absorb all the information. I'd get up from bed to get a drink of water and there'd she be, still working. I couldn't help but admire how she didn't give up. I wondered though what motivated her to do this, because I myself had nothing to push me to do well in school. Not even the sight of her struggling pushed me because I had learned over the course of nine years in public school that motivation and pride had nothing to do with being a student. Conformity and routine on the other hand was the epitome of it.

My switch to Catholic school for my high school experience was a drastic change. Education now became a product I bought, and it better be the best product I ever spent my money on. I held a certain pride, "you can't do this, you can't take away my phone, you can't suspend me, and you have no right." I noticed instantly how the money we poured into the school gave us power. One day I entered into my trigonometry class still waking up and realized we had a scheduled test that I forgot to study for. Instead of freaking out and rummaging

through notes to try to absorb anything, I sat in my seat nonchalantly and waited for my teacher to walk into class.

“Okay class, take out a sheet of loose-leaf and number it—”

“We won’t be taking the test today, Mrs. Conklin.”

I did not ask. I stated a fact: we would not be taking it. And we would not be taking it because I pay for this class so no, you are not in charge, I am. She eventually agreed without much having to convince her and I was able to avoid a potential failed grade.

Because I was paying for the education I felt entitled to do as I please. I began to treat my teachers as “cashiers at a department store, who [were] there to serve and satisfy [my] every need” (Lugo-Lugo 195). And, more often than not, the teachers would succumb to the demands and preferences the students presented. Instead of identifying a student with humility and care like my mother would, I began to identify it with arrogance and entitlement.

My mother taught me how to be humble. There was no room, no time, and no money to waste. Being a student required her to be selfless. After time away from the teachings I learned in the classroom setting, I have become committed to the teaching my mother has taught since day one. Being a true student is about pride—associated with caring about your work—and motivation.

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MARCEA K. SEIBLE'S *THE TRANSITION FROM STUDENT TO PROFESSIONAL: A PEDAGOGY OF PROFESSIONALISM FOR FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION* (2008)

Why I included it

This dissertation excerpt synthesizes a good bit of research about what motivates students to write. As you read what researchers have discovered, you can compare their findings to your own experiences. This reading also provides a nice

counterbalance to the other selections in this book because it focuses exclusively on secondary research.

Background

Seible's doctoral dissertation argues for focusing on professional writing in the first-year classroom. Even though the excerpt below synthesizes secondary research rather than proffering an argument, Seible frames the information to eventually introduce her own research study.

Usually, a dissertation would be read in its entirety. The primary readers would be Seible's dissertation committee—a few professors in the field who guided the research project and suggested revisions and edits as she completed her work. Seible might be thinking about eventually turning her dissertation into an article or a book, so she likely considered a wider audience of composition professors.

Reading hints and vocab terms

It's important to remember that this reading is an *excerpt* rather than a complete piece. You'll notice it begins and ends abruptly because I pulled this section out of a longer text.

This excerpt is part of a *literature review* (often shortened to “lit review”) that recaps past research on a particular topic. That way, readers can understand how the new research being conducted is responding to earlier research. You're probably familiar with “literature” referring to creative texts such as poetry and fiction, but when used with academic research writing, the term “literature” refers to secondary research that addresses a topic.

As mentioned above, this particular dissertation focuses on attention to professional writing in the first-year composition classroom. The lit review thus provides information about what has already been found about motivating students and teaching first-year composition effectively. You'll notice two sections of the lit review excerpt. You can use these divisions to trace the way the discussion shifts. Consider reviewing relevant vocab as you read each part.

The first section focuses on general principles regarding student motivation. As you read the first section, notice what improves motivation and why it's sometimes difficult to motivate students in a first-year composition course.

mastery goal learning: associated with intrinsic rewards; based on interest in the learning task and self-motivation

CONNECT

As you read, consider responding to the following questions to help you process the material.

1. Identify a part of Seible's research that resonates with your own experience. Paraphrase or summarize Seible's explanation of research findings, and then tell a relevant story about your experience.
2. Based on the excerpted lit review, how do you imagine Seible might respond to the course website of professional interview profiles, Writing When I Grow Up? <sites.google.com/a/maryu.marywood.edu/lauriem/course-websites/writing-when-i-grow-up>.
3. Review the vocabulary. Choose two terms that seem most helpful in thinking about writing and explain why.
4. Compare the benefits of this kind of informational text versus the benefits of a narrative essay such as that of Aleeza Laskowski. What does each offer readers?

performance goal learning: associated with extrinsic rewards; based on competition against others

flow: becoming absorbed in an activity so that you want to continue; happens when there is a good balance between challenge and ability to meet the challenge

service writing course: a writing course usually taken in the first semester of college that is designed to prepare students to write in other classes; the course is thus viewed as "serving" other college courses

future time perspective (FTP): thinking about what's important now based on how useful it will be at a future point

Generation NeXt: name for millennial generation with a focus on future goals

The second section focuses on approaches to first-year composition that help motivate students.

current-traditional approaches: methods of teaching writing by focusing on the end product and providing students with typical structures and rules to apply; considered outdated in contemporary composition research

process approaches: focus on complex processes of writing; writing is treated as rhetorical, social, and a means of learning

post-process approaches: continues to consider writing processes, but also recognizes writing as public, interpretive, and situated

Excerpt from: Seible, Marcea K. *The Transition from Student to Professional: A Pedagogy of Professionalism for First-Year Composition* (Order No. 3323939). ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I. (304606678). 2008.

Self-interest Practicality and Control: Understanding Student Motivation

FINDING WAYS TO motivate students about course content has long plagued educators. Because motivation depends on one's personality, it is difficult for educators to speak to the needs of several students, each with different motivators, at once within a single classroom. However, research on student motivation shows there are general principles, or values, that drive students' motivational impulses. Marilla Svinicki's research into student learning and motivation has helped instructors focus on increasing student motivation. Svinicki describes five different values students place on goals that contribute to their motivation for learning: value from expected outcomes (what is "the reward at the end of the line"?), (147), value from satisfying a need (achieving basic physical needs) (148), value from intrinsic qualities of the task (personal interest of the material to students) (152), value derived from utility (what is the need for learning the material?) (154), and value from choice and control (having the freedom and power to choose what is interesting) (155).

Donelson R. Forsyth and James H. McMillan, in their seminal piece "Practical Proposals for Motivating Students," also call upon such established motivating factors as students' need to achieve, expectations for success, and setting and recognizing valuable goals. Others like Wlodkowski and Ginsberg in their Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching list such motivational elements as a feeling of inclusion (students feeling respected and connected); positive attitudes about learning (students maintaining choice and finding relevance in the material); meaningfulness (classroom experiences provide students with challenges and value students' perspectives and ideas); and competence (students believe they have the potential to be successful) (qtd. in Svinicki 168). Similarly, Michael Theall and Jennifer Franklin's motivational model lists inclusion, attitude, meaning, competence, leadership, and satisfaction as elements affecting student motivation (qtd. in Svinicki 169). More recently, educational theorists such as Ken Bain choose to highlight students' need for control, stating that students who feel more in control of their learning will exhibit greater motivation and success in a course.

Though this is only a sampling of what theorists claim is important to understanding student motivation, this list demonstrates general similarities

found among researchers. Self-interest, control over learning, and setting valuable goals are commonalities that motivational models share, and given their significance, they should not be ignored when investigating how to improve students' learning experiences in higher education courses today. Forsyth and McMillan claim that all students have basic needs in the classroom and that instructors can help improve student learning and success by focusing on these basic needs they have as learners. Thus, research indicates that the key to motivating students lies heavily in tapping into these needs, including students' intrinsic motivators, by discovering what they really value and what interests them. One way that instructors can do this is by allowing students to set personal and professional goals and by giving them control and responsibility over their learning.

Teaching by tapping into students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivators has long occurred in classrooms. Carole Ames in "Classrooms: Goals, Structures, and Student Motivation" more fully examined student motivation by discussing the difference between students' mastery and performance goals. Performance goal learning, also known as extrinsic motivation, promotes one student's success over another's, fueling a desire for public recognition and competition in the classroom. While some students are more motivated by this sense of competition, it can ultimately affect their sense of self worth and ability, and as a result, negatively influence their learning (Ames 262).

Conversely, mastery goal learning involves motivating students intrinsically, which is often considered the preferable side to the age-old intrinsic/extrinsic motivational binary. Researchers consider mastery goal learning to be a more positive way of encouraging students to learn because it encourages them to do so for the sake of learning and not for an extrinsic reward such as a grade. In their seminal article, Forsyth and McMillan describe mastery goal orientation as a way of providing students with attainable goals that are within their reach, in essence showing them that their success in the class is within their control (553). Carole Ames builds on Forsyth and McMillan's ideas, stating that mastery learning is more successful because it "promotes a motivational pattern likely to promote long-term and high-quality involvement in learning" (Ames 262–63). Like Forsyth and McMillan, Ames believes that utilizing students' mastery goals in any classroom is vital to building student motivation because students need tasks that engage them personally and push them toward personal success rather than public competition.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi uses the term "flow" to describe a person's behavior when motivated intrinsically about a topic or task. Essentially, "flow"

describes the state of consciousness a person undergoes when taking part in an activity that causes him or her to become so absorbed by that activity that he or she becomes unaware of all surroundings. Such absorption into a topic or task leads to a state something like euphoria:

It [flow or psychic entropy] obtains when all the contents are in harmony with each other, and with the goals that define the person's self. These are the subjective conditions we call pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, and enjoyment. (Csikszentmihalyi, "The Flow Experience" 24)

Writers, too, often experience a sense of flow when fully engaged in a writing task, so much so in fact that they become engrossed in the act of writing to the point where they lose track of time and self. Their motivation for the task is driven by an intrinsic need and desire to move forward and to continue experiencing the pleasure of the moment. For students to experience flow, they need to have a "balance between the challenges perceived in a given situation and the skills" they bring to it (Csikszentmihalyi, "The Flow Experience" 30). In other words, they must believe they can do the task (experience the ability to succeed), but they must also find the task challenging enough to pursue it; if it becomes too easy, the sense of flow, enjoyment, and motivation to continue is lost. To help students find their intrinsic motivation and attain a sense of flow about writing in the classroom, one that positively affects their motivation to write, instructors must be able to provide challenging experiences that allow students to work with what interests them and what challenges them at the same time.

When it comes to motivation, students in service writing courses such as first-year composition typically exhibit low motivation for a variety of reasons, one of which is because of a course's required general education and non-major status. Because they are required to take the course, students may experience a loss of control over their learning. This negatively affects their motivation because control, according to motivational theorists, is one of the primary features of motivation for learning. Additionally, the generality of the course content, given that many service writing courses teach general academic writing meant to be applied in any academic situation, affects students' sense of challenge because they may feel they already know how to write for academic contexts. Such generality may have a negative effect on students because they cannot see the usefulness of the course, leaving them to question its purpose and relevance. As Csikszentmihalyi would describe it, students are not

motivated to find their sense of flow because they find no challenge in doing something they think they already know how to do.

In his article, “Enhancing Student Motivation in Freshman Composition,” Larry Anderson supports the theory that students need a greater sense of personal motivation in order to succeed in the course. Anderson claims it is difficult to get students to become intrinsically motivated, or to become mastery learners in service courses such as first-year composition, because their interest in writing is strictly performance—they write to get a grade and to be extrinsically rewarded (30). Anderson calls for writing instructors to use student motivation as a “lens to view (your own) pedagogy”; ultimately, he calls for instructors to better understand what motivates students and to use that to alter their pedagogical practices, for he believes that an instructor’s approach to teaching writing can positively or negatively affect student motivation (31). To positively affect students’ motivation, Anderson claims instructors need to help students see the relevance of writing to their lives because when students see the value of what they do, they become more successful learners (31).

In his article “Enhancing Student Motivation: Make Learning Interesting and Relevant,” Edward Hootstein supports Anderson’s claims about relevance and motivation. Hootstein believes that learning in any classroom, including composition, can and should be made relevant to students’ lives. Using expectancy-value theory, stating that “motivation is determined jointly by the learner’s expectancy for success and by incentive value of the goal,” Hootstein claims that teachers should place more emphasis on what students value because those who are not invested in activities (such as writing) will not be motivated to do them (475). His theory corresponds with the beliefs of scholars like Ames; Anderson; and Forsyth and McMillan: when students expect success and see the value in what they are doing, they will be more motivated and successful in the classroom (Hootstein 475).

Scholars such as these all claim that part of understanding student motivation is recognizing what students value, including practicality, usefulness, and the personal challenges associated with a task. As a result of understanding this, instructors can incorporate those student values into their course design. Hootstein claims that not enough instructors are attending to the importance of what motivates students, and, therefore, students are not given the chance to explore and discover what is meaningful about the course to them. In the end, this lack of personal and professional relevance has a significantly negative effect on student motivation, which can result in decreased learning and a negative, if not hostile, learning environment for both teachers and [students].

Students' need for practical and professional relevance is detailed in Jenefer Husman and Willy Lens's concept of Future Time Perspective (FTP), or "the degree to which and the way in which the chronological future is integrated into the present life-space of an individual through motivational goal-setting processes" (114). In other words, the term FTP describes how students perceive what they are doing now with how useful it will be to their future; this, according to Husman and Lens, directly corresponds to students' motivation for learning. Since many college students state they are in college for practical purposes—to get an education, to get a degree, to get a job—for instructors, knowing the value students place on the future (FTP) can greatly affect their learning in class. Ames believes that students who see the relevance of a task to their overall goals, what Husman and Lens describe as students' FTP, become more engaged with the task and approach learning in a different, more motivated way (263).

FTP and student motivation share a common link in the notion of professional relevancy. When students see the relevance of the course to their present, and, more particularly, to their future, they exhibit more motivation for learning. Similarly, when students understand the professional relevancy of a course, their ability to recognize what it means to be and act as a professional in their field is also affected. For them, developing the skills needed to become a professional is something seen as important to their future and something they believe they should get from their college courses. When they do not see the immediate connection between their coursework and their majors/future careers, their motivation for the course and their ability to learn the subject matter of the course suffer.

In service writing classes, instructors can attend to this understanding of students' intrinsic motivation and their FTP/need for professional relevancy by adding a dimension of professionalism studies to the course, in particular, by expanding the dimensions of writing in the classroom or in an academic context to taking writing into situated sites of practice. In essence, by showing students how writing is relevant to their personal and professional lives and by asking students to consider what it means to be and write like a professional in their field, instructors will utilize students' intrinsic motivation to teach them about writing. Doing so invites students to make the course professionally relevant to them and calls upon them to create linkages between writing, their academic majors, and their future roles/jobs as professionals. Keying into students' needs for professional relevance is even more important in light of today's generation of students.

Modern scholars of student behavior and motivation have described today's students' behavior and learning styles as unlike any generation to come before them. Mark Taylor, a scholar of student behavior, has recently described today's generation of college students as "Generation NeXt," claiming that the generation formerly considered "Millennials" actually has several characteristics that make them unlike any other student group. Students of this "Generation NeXt" population reflect major shifts in how our society functions, including exhibiting a greater dependence on parents, television, and entertainment in addition to exhibiting a greater consumerist attitude in relation to education (Taylor, "Generation NeXt"). Given the major shift in how these students learn and interact with each other and instructors, Taylor claims that instructors need to (re)learn how to interact with students by shaping their pedagogies to meet their needs as learners.

Much like the students Husman and Lens discussed in their 1999 article, Taylor believes that students today need to see how the work they are doing will benefit them in the future. But today's generation of students is faced with even greater challenges than their counterparts ten years ago. They are faced with more choices and more distractions (personal, technological, and otherwise) which make it more difficult to get them to recast their view of education as something they, as consumers of education, "purchase" and get them to focus on making learning meaningful in a learning-for-the-sake-of-learning way. Thus, it becomes essential for educators to (re)examine today's students' intrinsic motivators, including their need for personal and professional relevancy, in order to find the best pedagogical methods for reaching them.

Taylor suggests that universities and educators attend to one of the time-honored suggestions of motivational theorists: "provide meaning through real-life application" ("Gen NeXt" 104). Because many of today's postmodern students fall into the student-as-consumer population, Taylor claims that students need very pragmatic, applicable content. In "Generation NeXt Goes to Work: Issues in Workplace Readiness and Performance," Taylor suggests that for students to be fully prepared for the workplace, they need academic programs that help them connect to the professional world and that help them work on their future orientation and goal setting skills. Taylor states:

Given the high proportion of students who are working while attending college, especially at community colleges, schools must make every effort to see that these work experiences relate meaningfully to students' career exploration, career choices, and career skills and help students develop

realistic expectations of what will be required of them after graduation ... Cooperative education, internships, assistantships, job help and job matching, required contact hours, and all mechanisms for getting students into the career-oriented workplace can help students develop both clearer expectations and meaningful workplace skills. (Taylor 39)

Taylor clearly emphasizes the importance of FTP in today's students' success as well, noting:

Much of the extreme focus on their immediate personal development, especially in the core and liberal arts classes where links to the workplace are often more tangential than in major or vocational classes, encourages students to not look ahead. As has always been true for young people, but especially for Generation NeXt, goal setting is critical. Students' ability to see themselves in the future helps more of today make sense, especially the less fun parts. The conflicts students face daily to study or play, if looked at immediately, tend to favor the fun of play. Looking ahead to tests, grades, and workplace competitiveness and success is what can make study a better choice. ("Generation NeXt Goes to Work" 39)

To meet the needs of today's students, instructors in service writing classes can integrate content that speaks to students' needs for professional relevancy to enhance students' motivation for learning. Pedagogies that integrate forms of situated learning are particularly useful in helping students find the professional relevancy they desire because these help students visualize the connections between the classroom and the real world. Because situated learning pedagogies situate students in realistic professional contexts, performing realistic tasks and immersing them in the culture and discourse of the workplace, they can offer ways for students to see their academic work in a professional context and give them the chance to develop a sense of self as a professional in their field. Students in situated learning experiences are often asked to engage in activities with working professionals and observe the tasks and communication patterns that take place in non-academic contexts. As a result, situated learning pedagogies can have a positive effect on student motivation in writing classes, for not only do they aim to teach students about writing, but they may also help prepare students for their roles as professionals, contributing to the goals set by both teacher and university.

In the next section of this literature review, I discuss how current composition pedagogies already lend themselves to building student motivation by attempting to help students see the relevancy of writing to their lives. Building on process and post-process composition theories, I show how activity theory and situated learning pedagogies can contribute to building student motivation in writing classes, in particular those considered as service classes to the university.

Motivation and Situated Learning: Aligning the Writing Classroom with the “Real” World

In some ways, today’s university writing classes already attempt to connect writing to the world outside of the classroom. The process approach to writing teaches students that writing is a complex activity and that in order to learn about writing, students need to understand the “process” that real writers undergo. By making the shift from the current-traditional paradigm to more rhetorically-focused process and post-process approaches to writing, composition studies is already taking writing out of a classroom-only context and bringing it more in line with the activities of “real” writers.

Since the 1960’s process movement, more writing instructors have been teaching students to view writing as a process, one that is, among other things, non-linear and that involves what Gary Olson describes as a generalizable process with systemized elements (8). Process theories support instructors’ attempts to help students see writing as recursive, as a social activity, as a means of learning and discovery, and as rhetorical (Olson 7). Such a view helps situate writing in a new light, one that aims to create a more complete picture of writing as both academic and professional practice. Such a shift in writing pedagogy also clearly emphasizes the importance of teaching writing as a complex and dynamic activity, requiring student writers to perceive writing as more than just knowing the modes of writing or learning writing through a set of skills and drills. Essentially, it aims to teach students that knowing the process of writing will be useful to them for the rest of their lives.

While process approaches have all but replaced current-traditional practices with newer, more comprehensive frameworks for teaching writing, such an approach does not yet fully articulate the complexities associated with “real” or “professional” writing. As a result, post-process theorists have argued that though teaching writing as a process has been a necessary component of writing education, the act of writing itself involves a larger and more complex system, one that is less easy to generalize or that can be “applied to all or most writing

situations” (Olson 7). As Thomas Kent describes, post-process theorists claim three assumptions about writing: “(1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated” (“Introduction” 1). Within these assumptions comes an understanding that writing is more than just a systematic process, one that is easy for student writers to emulate; instead, when viewing writing through the lens of post-process theory, writing becomes situated in a complex interplay of audiences, communities, beliefs, and values. The combination of these elements (plus others) produces complex rhetorical situations that writers also need to consider as part of their larger understanding of the “process” of writing. As Bruce McComiskey explains, post-process writing more fully develops students’ abilities to extend writing beyond the classroom by placing knowledge construction within “the social world of discourse” (41).

Given that instructors know that writing involves complex interplays between language, societies, communities of practice, and ideologies, it becomes clear that teaching students about writing, and the practices of real writers, requires attending to the world outside of the classroom. In this capacity, post-process approaches to teaching writing work well with other “real world” theories and pedagogies to align students’ perceptions of writing as a process with the complex processes at work in real writing situations. As a result of this view of writing, students gain better insight into how writing functions in the non-academic professional world and how it can contribute to their professional lives as well. As David Russell argues in his article, “Activity Theory and Process Approaches: Writing (Power) in School and Society,” organizations have their own writing processes, and in order to become “real” writers, student writers need to analyze “the various writing processes of different networks of human activity—variously theorized as social or discursive practices, communities of practice, or discourse communities” (81). Such organizational writing processes are described by Clay Spinuzzi as “Activity Networks,” or the ways in which organizations utilize various tools and subjects to reach their objectives and outcomes (340). In order for student writers to become a writer within such a network, they must understand how such an Activity Network functions with all its interrelated parts (Spinuzzi 340).

In the next section [a reference to Seible’s dissertation; you can read an excerpt from her next section in Chapter Two of this text], I discuss how instructors of writing can strengthen their process and post-process approaches to teaching writing by combining these theories with other pedagogical practices and theoretical lenses in order to build on the belief that writing is indeed complex. Activity theory and situated learning practices provide useful

pedagogical frameworks for post-process writing classes, and as a result of such integration, instructors can help students build their awareness of professionalism practices and engage them in writing that is both professionally relevant and, ultimately, more motivating.

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ANDREA LUNSFORD'S "LITERATURE, LITERACY, AND (NEW) MEDIA" (2012)

Why I included it

Andrea Lunsford is one of my personal heroes. That alone is not enough reason to include her writing, of course. Lunsford is not only widely respected by her peers but she also shows a sense of appreciation and respect for students. I do not look at students through rose-colored glasses; I know you're human and have as many imperfections as the rest of us. I *do* appreciate, however, the many writing researchers who seek to help and support students while recognizing that students already have plenty to bring to the table. This approach seems important for two reasons. First, it fosters healthy teacher-student relations, and such relations make effective teaching and learning more likely. Second, recognizing what people already know helps us build on those foundations, which, again, makes effective teaching and learning more likely.

Lunsford summarizes some of the ways writing and reading practices have changed as students have participated actively in online platforms. Her method of observing practices, recording observations, and extracting patterns and lessons from the collected data is something you might be asked to do, both in academic and professional settings.

Background

Lunsford's article appeared in the *ADE Bulletin*, a professional journal that is widely read by English department faculty and administrators. It favors short articles rather than full research pieces, and most of the articles focus on teaching, running a department, and other issues related to the work of an English department.

While many of the composition articles I've included in this textbook have been published in journals or books with an audience of writing professors, this particular journal has a large readership of professors who specialize in literature rather than writing. Literature faculty might not hold the same assumptions about students, social media, digital writing, and literacy that composition (writing) faculty might hold. Lunsford's positive characterization of "new literacies" may thus be surprising to many of her readers, a point she only briefly hints at as she ends her essay. Lunsford uses the phrase "the dumbest generation" at the end of her essay without citing it, but it alludes to a book by another English professor, Mark Bauerlein, titled *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)*. Lunsford's article challenges Bauerlein's argument, but Lunsford only acknowledges that agenda as she concludes.

Reading hints and vocabulary

Lunsford quickly presents her topic and her research methods in her first paragraph. This is an unusual move, but she is summarizing findings rather than offering the kind of full research article that would be appropriate in another kind of journal. Lunsford briefly defines terms by relying on other researchers, and then she cites a few examples to develop her argument. At about the halfway point, she begins offering her own interpretation of what students are doing in the digital age, first in terms of writing and then in terms of reading. She ends by calling for new ways of teaching and summing up a perspective that values the new literacies students are using.

old literacies: academic argument, research, adherence to copyright codes, and other writing and reading habits associated with schools prior to the rise of digital literacies

new literacies: digital reading and writing associated with new media and the ability to not only read or consume public texts but also to write and produce public texts, often using or directly responding to texts that already exist

web 2.0: in its early stages, the world wide web was a place people visited to read, access, and perhaps download content; as various platforms allowed and encouraged people to interact, participate, produce, and upload content, the term “web 2.0” was coined to mark the shift in digital activities

textual ownership or intellectual property: these phrases reference the idea that writing (and other creative endeavors) is authored by a particular person (or group of people), and that people ought to receive credit or compensation if their writing (or other creative work) is used by others

CONNECT

As you read, consider responding to the following questions to help you process the material.

1. Why does Lunsford wait until the end of her essay before explicitly opposing the association of digital media and stupidity? Think about her audience and how they might respond differently if she had begun her essay with such a stance.
2. How many characteristics associated with twenty-first century students fit you? To what degree do the characteristics seem inaccurate?
3. Look at the five ways of reading Lunsford identifies. Can you think of an example of each one from your own life?
4. Lunsford does not necessarily offer a utopian view of digital literacy, but she definitely focuses on the positive aspects for students. What downsides might digital literacy have on students?
5. Compare Lunsford's views with those of Michaela Cullington (whose research is available online; see the article citation below). How do their research methods seem similar? different?

Lunsford, Andrea A. “Literature, Literacy, and (New) Media.” *ADE Bulletin*, vol. 152, 2012, pp. 49–53.

IT'S NO LONGER an exaggeration to say that writing has changed more dramatically in the last two decades than during any previous time in the last 2,500 years. Like many others, I have been invested in tracing such changes in the biggest literacy revolution the world has seen in a very long time, a revolution that is affecting all of us and our ways of communicating, especially our ways of writing and reading. To do so, I followed a group of Stanford University undergraduates, tracking their writing and learning and interviewing a subgroup of them at least once a year for six years. I have learned more than I could ever have imagined at the beginning of this research, and certainly more than I can easily summarize. But I can focus on some of the most significant

findings about student uses of literacy today and consider the implications they hold for us as teachers of writing and reading.

To begin with, this group of students embodies what many are calling the “new literacies,” as opposed to the “old literacy” that I grew up with and still value. What are these new literacies? Most researchers agree with Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, who argue that new literacies—those encouraged by Web 2.0—are “more ‘participatory,’ ‘collaborative,’ and ‘distributed’ in nature than conventional literacies. That is, they are less ‘published,’ ‘individuated,’ and ‘author-centric’ than conventional literacies. They are also less ‘expert-dominated’ than conventional literacies” (9). One way to sum up the shift Knobel and Lankshear describe is to say that student writers today are turning from consuming texts (often those deemed most worthy by schools and other institutions) to producing texts. Thus new literacies involve a different kind of mind-set than literacies traditionally associated with print media. In their introduction to *A New Literacies Sampler*, Knobel and Lankshear contrast what they refer to as a “physical-industrial” mind-set—the mind-set that I certainly grew up inhabiting—with a “cyberspatial-postindustrial mind-set” (10).

According to Knobel and Lankshear, those whose experience grounds them primarily in a physical-industrial mind-set tend to see the individual as “the unit of production, competence, intelligence.” They also identify expertise and authority as “located in individuals and institutions.” Those who inhabit a cyberspatial-postindustrial mind-set, in contrast, increasingly focus on “collectives as the unit of production, competence, intelligence” and tend to view expertise, authority, and agency as “distributed and collective” (11).

Students in twenty-first-century universities exhibit the mind-set Knobel and Lankshear describe: they work in teams on everything; they work effortlessly across genre and media; they tell us that good writing is writing that makes something happen in the world, that is performative; and they no longer hold to traditional notions of copyright and textual ownership (see Lunsford and Ede). I’d like to introduce you to a few students and their work, stressing another important finding from our longitudinal study: the literate practices about which students are most passionate occur outside class. Meet “sparker2,” for example, an avid contributor to *Twitter*:

Rain’s over, going to Trader Joe’s to buy some Healthy stuff to fight this cold ... suggestions? (13 Mar. 2010, 9:21 a.m.)

Watching Queen Seon Duk 선덕여왕 on @dramafever, love it so far!
 Your assessment? <http://www.dramafever.com/drama/56/#nowplaying>
 (10 Jan. 2011, 1:16 a.m.)

Here sparker2 tweets with a purpose, whether it's to get or to give information from those who follow her. An avid fan of Korean cinema, she tweets every day or two with what amount to 140-character film reviews. Her writing is performative and collaborative and aimed at action.



A second example comes from Stanford's required second-year course on writing and rhetoric. Not content with doing the course assignments, which were hefty enough, these students set out to use the skills they were learning to create ads of their own—ads that would, in turn, parody their course, PWR 2.

This spoof ad was created by a group of students working together on their laptops and making use of programs like *Photoshop*—and they were producing discourse rather than analyzing advertisements or reading what others have to say about them. They

were doing such analyses in class, but they also insisted on creating advertisements of their own. And they certainly were practicing new literacies, that is, literacies that are participatory, collaborative, and performative. Note also that these students don't blink at using photos from the Web. Indeed, no finding was more interesting to me in our longitudinal study than the complex notions students held about textual ownership. In short, we found that deeply participatory electronic forms of communication provide new opportunities for writerly agency, even as they challenge notions of intellectual property that have held sway now for over three hundred years, leading to diverse forms of multiple authorship and to the kind of mass authorship that characterizes sites such as *Wikipedia* and *Google News*.

To make this point, let me introduce you to Mark, a student who wrote and performed a spoken-word poem during the first weeks of his first year. Titled "The Admit Letter," this poem was performed at the Writing Center's annual celebration of writers held during Parents' Weekend. It opens with a "so-called friend" saying to the writer of the poem, "Oh sure, you got into Stanford: you're Black." What follows is Mark's imagining of what his "so-called friend"

thought his admission letter to Stanford might have said. The two imaginary versions of the letter are biting—and very, very funny. Together, they not only put the so-called friend in his place forever but manage to send up the university as well. On the Stanford campus, news of this poem spread like proverbial wildfire, and Mark was called on to perform it in numerous venues. During one such performance, the poem changed significantly: now it was performed by Mark and a Chicana student, who powerfully wove together versions of their “admit letters.”

“The Admit Letter” went through additional permutations over Mark’s college career, and during one of the interviews with him I asked, “So is this poem yours? Do you own it?” In a lengthy conversation, Mark said that he considered the poem to be his—but not exclusively his; in fact, he said, his work is usually written and performed collaboratively, and he sees it as part of a large poetic commons. He was already effectively moving into new media literacy and into new territory regarding textual ownership. Mark’s poem also illustrates what students have told me over and over again: that “good writing” is performative; it makes something happen. Mark’s poem certainly did that (in fact, it is still being performed on campus).

But students are using writing and rhetoric to make things happen in many other ways as well. Amrit made a poster as part of the work he and fellow students were doing to support AIDS research. Anna and her colleagues in the Stanford Labor Action Coalition designed a Web site to call attention to the plight of temporary workers on the Stanford campus and to convince campus administrators that these workers deserve a living wage. Another student resisted writing a traditional essay in favor of producing a film and using it as a way to raise issues he felt he could not address as tellingly in print. After a series of negotiations with his teacher, this student went on to make the film and then to present it along with an analysis and a set of recommendations to the campus community. In this instance, the student was able to satisfy both the demands of old literacies for analysis and academic argument while also embracing the new.

What we learned from these and many other students and their uses of literacies challenged us to rethink our curricula and, in fact, to focus the second-year writing course at Stanford on the oral and multimedia presentation of research—that is, to try to combine the best of the old literacies (academic argument and research) with opportunities for engaging in new literacies and to do new media writing in the way that the student making the film did. In this course students move from articulating a research question and doing the research necessary to answer it in a traditional academic essay to “translating”

that essay into other media. Thus this course focuses on the fifth canon of rhetoric, delivery, recognizing the many choices that student writers now have available to them.

At the same time that we are looking at how writing is changing, we are also tracking changes to readers, since new literacies and new media writing are influencing reading practices as well as the texts students read. In addition, new literacies are challenging us to rethink what we mean by *literature* and to entertain broadening that term to mean *letters*, as it did in earlier times. Moreover, we might expend the kind of effort we have given to high literary texts to other texts as well, the kind of attention Michael Armstrong displays so brilliantly in his reading of stories written by children. Most of all, our findings suggest that the new literacies ask us to diversify our notion of texts. As Juan Poblete argued during the 2011 ADE Summer Seminar West, we urgently need to pluralize reading (“What Is a Reader?”).

In my graduate seminar *The Future of English Studies*, we have been investigating these claims, and recently we have been trying to monitor and describe our different ways of reading. Our findings match in some ways what the students in the longitudinal study have told us about how they read, and on that basis we’ve been talking about five particular ways of reading:

- The informational reading students do every day—such as searching the Web to look for some particular fact or date. This kind of reading is similar to that which Louise Rosenblatt labeled “efferent” in her groundbreaking *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, opposing it to “aesthetic” reading for pleasure.
- The ludic or playful reading students also do daily, from checking status updates and *Twitter* feeds to “reading” games and films.
- The rhetorical reading students do when they want to know not what something means but how it means, that is, how it creates its effects on readers. This kind of reading also often aims at action, at making something happen in the world, to make or support a case or claim.
- Hermeneutical reading, the kind of close reading students learn to do in school. While my students often say this kind of reading is “nit-picking” and “hunting for symbols and other hidden things, especially in poems,” they value the ability to read between the lines.
- The creative reading students do when they use reading to make something of their own. As Richard Miller put it during the 2010 ADE Summer Seminar East, in this kind of reading, “the value of the aesthetic object is to invite readers to create on their own.”

This list only gestures toward the many kinds of reading we and our students might identify, but it suggests the need to broaden our understanding of reading practices in general and to pay more careful attention to students' ways of reading in particular.

If we need more expansive ways of understanding and describing our students' reading practices, I believe we must also engage a broader range of texts students are reading. I try to follow this advice in my courses by including texts such as Lynda Barry's *What It Is*; Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*; Apostolos Doxiadis, Christos Papadimitriou, Alecos Papadatos, and Annie Di Donna's *Logicomix*; Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*; Gilbert "Beto" Hernandez's *Chance in Hell*; Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*; David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*; Dwayne McDuffie's *Icon*; and Steve Tomasula and Stephen Ferrell's *TOC: A New Media Novel*. This selection includes comic books, hypertexts, and works that mix media or play with format in other ways, and one (*Tree of Codes*) is a "remix" of the author's favorite book, Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*. Reading these texts calls for all the kinds of reading I mentioned above—and then some—and for recognizing that literature is a category capacious enough to include these texts in provocative and productive ways. I find that reading together with students challenges all of us to work together, to do a kind of social, group reading that opens the texts up to us in ways that individual reading does not. Thus if writing is increasingly collaborative, participatory, and social, so I would argue is reading.

To sum up, the research and teaching I have done over the last decade convince me that students today are reading and writing more than ever before and that they are increasingly insistent on producing as well as consuming texts. They are accustomed to and comfortable with mixing media and genre, with producing remixes and mash-ups, with transforming what they find (usually online) into still other kinds of texts. Unlike those who think that literacy is on the decline and that today's students are the dumbest generation, I am struck every day by the intelligence and creativity of the readers and writers I see at work. They have a lot to teach us about what it means to be a reader and a writer today.

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RECOMMENDED ONLINE SOURCES

For direct links to these sources, please visit <sites.broadviewpress.com/focusonwriting>.

1. To enjoy personal expressive writing with a poetic style: Williams, Terry Tempest. “Why I Write.” 1998. *Why I Write: A Celebration of the National Day on Writing*. National Writing Project, 2011, <rvannoy.asp.radford.edu/rvn/312/whyiwrite.pdf>.
2. To consider motivation in school writing and to appreciate accessible academic research: Strasser, Emily. “Writing What Matters: A Student’s Struggle to Bridge the Academic/Personal Divide.” *Young Scholars in Writing*, vol. 5, 2007, <cas.umkc.edu/english/publications/youngscholarsinwriting/documents/MATTERS.pdf?cn21>.
3. To explore accessible scholarly research about the kinds of academic assignments students find meaningful: Eodice, Michele, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal

Lerner. *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*. Conference on College Composition and Communication Research Grant, 2010–11, <<http://meaningfulwritingproject.net>>.

4. To hear how a thoughtful writing professor connects our everyday lives to our classroom work: Cusick, Christine. “Reflections on Teaching.” *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, 29 Jan. 2018, <<https://assayjournal.wordpress.com/2018/01/29/christine-cusick-reflections-on-teaching/>>.

5. To trace how a student researcher journeys from wondering whether texting has a negative effect on student writing to finding answers to her question: Cullington, Michaela. “Texting and Writing.” *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, vol. 8, 2011, pp. 90–95, <<https://arc.lib.montana.edu/ojs/index.php/Young-Scholars-In-Writing/article/view/164/116>>.

6. To see how one scholar might respond to another in a public venue: Cooper, Julia. “A Response to Michaela Cullington.” *Young Scholars in Writing*, vol. 11, 2014, pp. 91–93, <<https://arc.lib.montana.edu/ojs/index.php/Young-Scholars-In-Writing/article/view/283/210>>.

Joining the Conversation

The following formal writing prompts are ways of helping you think through the ideas you’ve been reading about by *using* the ideas in some way to help you create a text of your own.

LITERACY NARRATIVE

Compare a time when you were motivated to write to a time when you were not motivated to write. How might you apply what you discover to future writing situations, especially when it is difficult to find motivation?

PROFILE

Interview a professional to discover how writing, reading, and research are part of a career field. Present your findings in a genre that might reach people interested

in that profession. Consider, for example, a blog post, an article for LinkedIn, or a YouTube video. You might even ask the professional for samples of writing that are appropriate to share publicly. For inspiration, visit this website: *Writing When I Grow Up*. Class Website, Marywood University, 2009, <sites.google.com/a/maryu.marywood.edu/lauriem/course-websites/writing-when-i-grow-up>.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Find a common theme such as motivation, audience, purpose, or identity addressed in two reading selections (including the online readings). What can writers understand better from reading both selections rather than just one of the selections?

For a more creative version of this assignment, write an imaginary dialogue between two or more authors based on the ideas they discuss and the approaches or styles they use.

PERSONAL ESSAY

Choose a specific kind of writing you do regularly and write about your motivation in the style of Terry Tempest Williams's essay, "Why I Write." For example, you might title your essay "Why I Take Notes," "Why I Snapchat," or "Why I Write 'To-Do' Lists."

MULTIMEDIA PROJECT

Work either individually or with classmates to create a multimedia project that answers the question "Why Write?" for a specific audience. For example, you might create a Pinterest board that highlights the importance of writing for people who engage in craft projects, or you might compose and perform a song that helps remind musicians of the roles writing might play in their work. Consider what kind of genre you might use to celebrate writing used by baseball players, people who love to cook, or the staff of your high school yearbook.