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CONCEPT 4
All Writers Have More to Learn

4.0

ALL WRITERS HAVE MORE TO LEARN

Shirley Rose

Many people assume that all writing abilities can be learned once and for always. However, although writing is learned, all writers always have more to learn about writing.

The ability to write is not an innate trait humans are born possessing. Humans are "symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animals," and writing is symbolic action, as Kenneth Burke has explained (Burke 1966, 16). Yet learning to write requires conscious effort, and most writers working to improve their effectiveness find explicit instruction in writing to be more helpful than simple trial and error without the benefit of an attentive reader's response. Often, one of the first lessons writers learn, one that may be either frustrating or inspiring, is that they will never have learned all that can be known about writing and will never be able to demonstrate all they do know about writing.

Writers soon discover that writing strategies that are effective for them in one context are often inappropriate and ineffective in another context in which they need or want to write; even when strategies work, writers still struggle to figure out what they want to say and how to say it. They struggle because writing is not just transcribing preformed ideas but also developing new ones; thus a writer never becomes a perfect writer who already knows how to write anything and everything. This difficulty and imperfectability of writing, and the fact that it is not a "natural" phenomenon (see 1.6, "Writing Is Not Natural") is one reason formal writing instruction is typical of schooling in the United States at all levels. But learning about writing doesn't happen only in school. For example, James Gee (2004) showed how a teenage writer of fan fiction learned about writing outside school through the practice, advice, and modeling provided by her online community of other writers. Likewise, instruction in writing does not necessarily end when formal schooling ends. Writers encounter new

contexts, genres, tasks, and audiences as they move among workplaces and communities beyond formal schooling, and these new contexts call for new kinds of writing.

With experience, writers do discover that some writing habits developed in one context can be helpful in another. For example, habits such as writing multiple drafts or setting aside regular, frequent periods for writing in a place free of distractions often prove effective regardless of the writing task or context. Likewise, writing strategies useful in one context, such as using explicit transitional words to signal organization or using illustrations to develop an idea, will work well in many different writing contexts for many different purposes. However, these same writing habits and strategies will not work in all writing situations (see 5.3, "Habituated Practice Can Lead to Entrenchment"). There is no such thing as "writing in general"; therefore, there is no one lesson about writing that can make writing good in all contexts (see 2.0, "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms," and 2.2, "Genres Are Enacted by Writers and Readers"). Writers must struggle to write in new contexts and genres, a matter of transferring what they know but also learning new things about what works in the present situation. The difficulty of drawing on prior knowledge in this way has spawned a thread of research on transfer of knowledge about writing (see Wardle 2012). The working knowledge that enables a writer to select the practices and strategies appropriate for a particular writing context and task is learned over time through experience as a writer and as a reader of writing. Therefore, a demonstration of one's ability to write effectively in one context cannot constitute proof of one's ability to write in other contexts.

Writers—and teachers of writing—might sometimes wish all writing abilities could be learned once and for always, just as one can learn how to spell a particular word correctly or how to punctuate a quotation correctly once and for always. However, many writing abilities, such as choosing the most appropriate and precise word, and exercising good judgment in deciding whether to quote directly or to paraphrase in any given writing situation, cannot be learned just once. This imperfectability of writing ability is even more evident when a writer must learn how to choose and use evidence to make an effective argument in an unfamiliar situation.

This threshold concept can be difficult to understand because the content of most school subjects is divided into categories and levels of difficulty and sequenced in a way that assumes students must learn the content or skills of one level or stage before moving on to the next level. Unlike these subjects, formal writing instruction is usually designed to repeat the same principles or lessons over and over as student writers encounter new situations for writing and learning.

This is an important threshold concept for educators to understand because it enables us to recognize that it is impossible to make a valid judgment of a student writer's ability by examining a single sample of his or her writing, particularly a sample of writing that does not address a specific rhetorical situation (see 1.7, "Assessing Writing Shapes Contexts and Instruction"). For these same reasons, one cannot assume that a student who has demonstrated the ability to write a literary critical analysis of *Romeo and Juliet* as a senior in high school will also be able to write a paper outlining issues currently being discussed in response to new developments in research on childhood diabetes for a college course.

This threshold concept is helpful for all writers to understand because it will enable them to recognize that encountering difficulty in a writing situation is an indication that they are ready to learn something new about writing.

Writers never cease learning to write, never completely perfect their writing ability, as long as they encounter new or unfamiliar life experiences that require or inspire writing.

4.1

TEXT IS AN OBJECT OUTSIDE OF ONESELF THAT CAN BE IMPROVED AND DEVELOPED

Charles Bazerman and Howard Tinberg

In the course of writing, whether preliminary notes, a sketch, or a full draft, a writer inscribes signs that now exist on paper, digital display, or some other medium. While these signs may have their origin in meanings within the mind of the writer and the initial spontaneous choice of words, they now have been externalized into an independent artifact that can be examined, revised, or otherwise worked on by the writer, collaborators, or other people.

For writers, this externalization decreases the amount of material they must remember and attend to while composing (reducing cognitive load) and allows them to focus attention on limited issues. Externalization also allows writers to look at the text produced so far to see how clearly it reads, what it conveys, whether it can be improved in any way. This working on a text now external to the writer allows a more technical examination, distancing the writer from an idealized sense of meaning and what they feel internally in order to see what the words actually convey. The writer potentially can take the part of the reader. This distancing, however, is not automatic, as the writer may assume the words convey all that they

imagine. Thus, becoming aware that the text exists outside the writer's projection and must convey meaning to readers is an important threshold in developing a more professional attitude toward the act of writing and what is produced. Insofar as writers see the text as not yet fulfilling initial ambitions, they can work to improve the text to convey as much as their technical skill and craft allow.

Collaborators, team members, supervisors, editors, and others who may share the work of producing text do not share the initial writer's attachment to the anticipated meaning and have only what the inscribed words bring; they thus provide better measures of what the text actually conveys. While they may view the text with a cooler eye, noting its limitations and failures to convey, they also may lack a sense of all the text may become and of the initial author's intentions. The emerging and changing text then becomes a site of negotiated work to produce the final document.

In response to the view that writing is expressionistic—revealing primarily writers' thoughts and emotions—composition scholars have over the last several decades promoted a view of writing as socially constructed, "crowd-sourced" we'd say these days (Flower 1994; Gere 1987; LeFevre 1987; Lunsford and Ede 1990). More fundamentally, this view is an extension of George Herbert Mead's (1934) understanding that we form our sense of the self through taking the part of the other in our struggle to make ourselves understood. Such a view, while no longer positing that the author is dead, does encourage us to see the text as existing independently of the author and thus capable of being changed and perfected by the author and others.

4.2

FAILURE CAN BE AN IMPORTANT PART OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Collin Brooke and Allison Carr

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that the teaching of writing should focus as much on puzzling out failure as it does on rewarding success. We often forget, however, that successful writers aren't those who are simply able to write brilliant first drafts; often, the writing we encounter has been heavily revised and edited and is sometimes the result of a great deal of failure (see 4.4, "Revision Is Central to Developing Writing," and 4.3, "Learning to Write Effectively Requires Different Kinds of Practice, Time, and Effort"). As renowned writer

Anne Lamott observes, "Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere" (Lamott 1995, 303).

As students progress throughout their educational careers and the expectations for their writing evolve from year to year and sometimes course to course, there is no way we can expect them to be able to intuit these shifting conditions. They must have the opportunity to try, to fail, and to learn from those failures as a means of intellectual growth. Edward Burger (2012), professor of mathematics and coauthor of *The 5 Elements of Effective Thinking*, explains that "in reality, every idea from every discipline is a human idea that comes from a natural, thoughtful, and (ideally) unending journey in which thinkers deeply understand the current state of knowledge, take a tiny step in a new direction, almost immediately hit a dead end, learn from that misstep, and, through iteration, inevitably move forward."

In the writing classroom, when assessment is tied too completely to final products, students are more likely to avoid risking failure for fear of damaging their grades, and this fear works against the learning process. They focus instead on what the teacher wants and simply hope to be able to get it right on the first try. Burger (2012) advocates building "quality of failure" into his courses and reports that his students are willing to take greater risks and to examine their missteps for what they can change about them.

One of the most important things students can learn is that failure is an opportunity for growth. As sites of language development, writing classrooms, especially, should make space for quality of failure, or what Lamott describes as "shitty first drafts," by treating failure as something all writers work through, rather than as a symptom of inadequacy or stupidity. Writers need the time and space to explore Thomas Edison's proverbial ten thousand ways that won't work in order to find the ways that do. Such practices will enable writing teachers and students to develop a healthy dialogue around the experience of failure, perhaps leading to the development of what we might call *pedagogies of failure*, or ways of teaching that seek to illuminate the myriad ways writing gets done by examining all the ways it doesn't. Embracing failure in the writing classroom in these ways makes failure speakable and doable.

Outside of the classroom, the capacity for failure (and thus success) is one of the most valuable abilities a writer can possess. The ability to write well comes neither naturally nor easily; the thinkers we praise and admire are not the lucky few born with innate talent. Rather, they are the ones who are able to make mistakes, learn from them, and keep writing until they get it right. J. K. Rowling (2008), for example, is quite

open about how she "failed on an epic scale" before she was able to write the *Harry Potter* series. In her 2008 commencement address at Harvard University, she explained, "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default."

4.3

LEARNING TO WRITE EFFECTIVELY REQUIRES DIFFERENT KINDS OF PRACTICE, TIME, AND EFFORT

Kathleen Blake Yancey

When someone wants to swim, they get into the water: if we want to write, we put pen to paper, fingers to keyboard, or fingertips to touch screen.

Through practice, we become familiar with writing; it becomes part of us. What we practice is who we are; if we want to be writers, we need to write. And in the practice of writing, we develop writing capacities, among them the ability to adjust and adapt to different contexts, purposes, and audiences.

One kind of practice provides fluidity. Much like a swimmer becoming familiar with the water, writers become familiar with writing—with the feel of a pen in the hand; with the sense of putting individual words on a page that then come together to form larger blocks of meaning, whether sentences, paragraphs, full texts; and with the habit of reviewing what we have just written to see how it fits with what we thought we were writing and with what it is we thought we wanted to say and to share—whether, from our perception, the writing will speak to situations and contexts using conventions of a genre and medium we recognize and think our audience(s) will, too (see 2.0, "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms").

Another kind of practice can refine technique, whether that be dialogue in a narrative, citations for a scientific research paper, or a rhetorical appeal to an elected official. With practice, we can create what seems otherwise out of reach or totally foreign, can compose a text—of words or of words and other elements—shaped by and in response to context. Practice can focus on the whole of a composing process or on different aspects of composing: inventing, researching, drafting, revising, sharing, editing, and publishing.

Practice can involve writing in different spaces, with different materials, and with different technologies. Some writers prefer to write at the same time of day in the same location; others like to change locations;

some like to compose with the same pencil or in the same writer's note-book. As digital technologies have become ubiquitous, writers have become more aware of all technologies, from a pen designed for cal-ligraphy on a piece of fine paper to the dynamic touch screen of a cell-phone, and the ways these affordances may influence writing. Likewise, writers necessarily also work in multiple modalities—whether the modal-ity be on the page through document design or on the networked screen bringing words, images, videos, and sound into a single text. In an age when so many spaces and affordances are available, writers need considerable practice keyed not only to fluidity and technique but also to differentiated practice across different spaces of writing, working with different technologies of writing.

Practice can also involve other people, who can help us see what is working in a text and what is not; with their responses, we can revise so as to communicate more clearly. In school, organized around disci-plines, practices can vary, and this is yet another sense of the word *prac-tice*: a set of recurring activities located in a specific community. The practice of writing a poem may require no research; the practice of com-pleting a research project in anthropology may require research in the field, and research in the library as the project is being drafted. These practices support participation in different areas of inquiry, themselves situated in what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger call "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 2000).

The threshold concept that learning to write effectively, especially in different contexts or communities of practice, takes different kinds of practice, and such practice takes time and effort, is troublesome for three reasons. First, writers are often assumed simply to be "born": that is, a good writer is assumed to be a good writer "naturally" (see 1.6, "Writing Is Not Natural," and 4.0, "All Writers Have More to Learn"). In this view of writing, the amount and kind of practice is irrelevant and superfluous because practice would make no difference. Second, some people believe that when we learn to write in one genre, we have learned to write in all; but to write in any genre, we need practice in that genre and in the con-ventions defining that genre. Third, this threshold concept locates writing specifically as a practice situated within communities, which suggests how complex writing is and how, as an activity, it spans a lifetime.

Research has demonstrated that for effective writers and writing, practice is the key: engaging in the different kinds of practices identified above—to acquire fluency, to focus on techniques and strategies, and to engage with other humans—is the way for all human beings to develop into competent writers.

4.4

REVISION IS CENTRAL TO DEVELOPING WRITING

Doug Downs

To create the best possible writing, writers work iteratively, composing in a number of versions, with time between each for reflection, reader feedback, and/or collaborator development. The revision implied in this process—that is, significant development of a text's ideas, structure, and/or design—is central to developing writing. (*Revision* here is distinct from line editing or copyediting to "polish" a text.) In the same way that writing is not perfectible, writing also is not in the category of things that are often right the first time (see 5.1, "Writing Is an Expression of Embodied Cognition"). This principle also implies two corollaries. First, unrevised writing (especially more extended pieces of writing) will rarely be as well suited to its purpose as it could be with revision. Second, writers who don't revise are likely to see fewer positive results from their writing than those who build time for feedback and revision into their writing workflows. When we teach the centrality of revision to writing development, therefore, we must also teach writers to develop workflows that anticipate and rely on revision and to discover what methods of revision best suit their own writing processes.

Revision works because writing shares a characteristic of other language-based endeavors: using language not only represents one's existing ideas, it tends to generate additional language and ideas (see 3.0, "Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies"). Writing something usually gives the writer something new, more, or different to say. Therefore, while writing, writers usually find something to say that they didn't have to say before writing. This phenomenon creates an effect analogous to driving with headlights. The headlights reach only a fraction of the way to the destination; a writer can only begin writing what they "see" at the beginning. Driving to the end of the headlights' first reach—writing the first draft—lets the headlights now illuminate the next distance ahead. A writer at the end of their first draft now sees things they did not when they began, letting them "drive on" through another draft by writing what they would have said had they known at the beginning of the first draft what they now know at the end of it (see 4.1, "Text Is an Object Outside of One's Self that Can Be Improved and Developed").

From another angle, revision works by building into the textual-production process time and space for further consideration of a writing problem by the writer, for garnering additional perspectives from other

readers and collaborating writers, and for review of a draft against specific criteria (e.g., the directness of a claim or the strength of evidence for it). The expectation of revision—the building of time into a writing process (see 4.3, "Learning to Write Effectively Requires Different Kinds of Practice, Time, and Effort")—creates both the opportunity for, and sometimes directed prompting for, looking at the text again, differently.

The threshold concept that revision is central to developing writing can be difficult in a number of ways. Novice or unreflective writers, especially students, may see revision as punishment for poor performance. Being told to write again or write more, especially if the assigned writing has little intrinsic value to the writer or is used primarily to judge them, may hardly seem like a positive opportunity. Teachers may heighten this effect by making revision optional (rather than every bit as expected a phase of the writer's workflow as drafting) and even reserving the option only for weak pieces of writing. ("I let them revise if they get a low grade.") Students, teachers, writers, and educational policymakers must understand the implication of this threshold concept: revising, or the need to revise, is not an indicator of poor writing or weak writers but much the opposite—a sign and a function of skilled, mature, professional writing and craft.

4.5

ASSESSMENT IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF LEARNING TO WRITE

Peggy O'Neill

Assessment is often associated with external mandates and formal accountability systems. Yet, assessment is also a critical component of writing and learning to write. Assessment conceived of in this way is not about grades, exams, or standardized tests but rather about teaching and learning (Shepard 2000). In writing, it is essential for writers to learn to assess texts written by others as well as their own work—both the processes used to create the texts and products that result. Brian Huot calls this pedagogical approach "instructive evaluation" and explains that it "involves the student in the process of evaluation, making her aware of what it is she is trying to create" and it "requires that we involve the student in all phases of the assessment of her work" (Huot 2002, 69).

In this sense, assessment is essential in all stages of the writing process. Through the prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing of a text, writers assess various components of the rhetorical situation as well

as a variety of texts (their own and, frequently, others'). They must assess options and make decisions based on those assessments. For example, writers assess the situation to determine the purpose of the writing, its audience(s), and the context. They select the appropriate genre, writing technology, and publishing medium (see 2.2, "Genres Are Enacted by Writers and Readers," and 2.4, "All Writing Is Multimodal"). Writers must also evaluate their own processes. They may need to examine their approaches to a task, such as searching for information, to determine if it is effective or if a different approach would be more productive (e.g., Is this database useful for my topic? Am I using the appropriate search terms?). Writers must also assess feedback on writing, asking whether suggestions are useful and how they might respond. Once texts are drafted, a writer must assess the product, considering issues such as the appropriateness of style and content, the persuasiveness of evidence, the extent to which conventions of grammar and usage have been followed. Writers also assess texts written by others: for accuracy, legitimacy, and bias, for genre conventions, or for the audience's expectations.

To learn and improve, writers need to develop assessment abilities; therefore, students benefit when teachers integrate assessment throughout the learning process through a variety of activities. These assessment activities can be open, fluid, and tentative (Huot 2002), as in feedback on an early draft that may include a few critical questions or a conversation in which the writer explains why they made a particular choice. The assessment activities may also be more formalized, such as a structured protocol for a self-assessment of a text. By teaching students how to assess both the product and processes of their work, writing teachers are helping students prepare for future writing tasks and opportunities.

4.6

WRITING INVOLVES THE NEGOTIATION OF LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES
Paul Kei Matsuda

All writing entails language—or more specifically, the internalized knowledge of words, phrases, and sentences and how they are put together to create meaning. This statement may seem obvious to some. Yet, language is often taken for granted in the discussion of writing, especially when writers and writing teachers assume that all writers share more or less the same intuitive knowledge of language structures and functions—a condition described by Paul Kei Matsuda as the

"myth of linguistic homogeneity" (Matsuda 2006). In reality, however, the knowledge of language held by individual language users varies. No one is a perfect language user, and writers from distinct sociolinguistic contexts (i.e., regional, socioeconomic, ethnic) often come with notice-ably different language features in their heads—and in their writing. Furthermore, in today's globalized world, where the audience for writ-ing is increasingly multilingual and multinational, it is more important than ever to see the negotiation of language as an integral part of all writing activities.

As writers strive to use a shared code that allows for effective commu-nication, it is important for all writers and readers to develop the aware-ness that we are all participating in the process of negotiating language differences. In any writing context, the audience will likely include translingual individuals—those who grew up using different varieties of the target language or another language altogether. For this reason, language features (e.g., vocabulary, idioms, sentence structures) as well as rhetorical features (e.g., persuasive appeals, cultural references and reader-writer positioning) that were once unmarked may need to be negotiated by writers and writing teachers. For instance, writers cannot assume that the phrase *to beat a dead horse* will be understood by all read-ers universally; to be effective, writers may need to consider embedding contextual clues or even building in some redundancies.

By the same token, readers and writing teachers cannot assume that what were once considered errors are indeed errors; they may reflect language practices perfectly acceptable in some parts of the world—or even in different parts of the same country. For example, including some Spanish words or phrases into sentences is perfectly acceptable for an audience of English-Spanish bilingual writers or users of English-Spanish contact varieties—as long as they do not violate the language rules shared by both users. For a mixed audience that includes non-Spanish users (which is often the case in international academic writ-ing), writers may need to provide additional information (translation, footnote, etc.) in order to facilitate the rhetorical goal of writing (see 1.0, "Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity").

This renewed realization about the changing nature of language and the presence of language differences has several implications. Teachers who use writing as part of their instruction must develop an understand-ing of the nature of language, principles of language development, and language features situated in various contexts of use. Such knowl-edge is especially important in facilitating the development of commu-nicative competence (Bachman 1990) among writers who come from

nondominant language backgrounds. Teachers also must become more aware of the fuzzy boundary between appropriate usage and inappropriate usage (i.e., errors) to help students understand when and how language differences become negotiable. To help students negotiate language differences successfully—including making principled decisions about whether or not to adopt dominant language practices—teachers must understand various strategies for negotiating language differences. Finally, teachers must help students understand the risks involved in negotiating language differences. Beyond the classroom, all writers today need to fully understand the diversity within a language as well as how languages continue to change.

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