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# CONCEPT 1

## *Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity*

### 1.0

#### WRITING IS A SOCIAL AND RHETORICAL ACTIVITY

Kevin Roozen

It is common for us to talk about writing in terms of the particular text we are working on. Consider, for example, how often writers describe what they are doing by saying “I am writing an email” or “I’m writing a report” or “I’m writing a note.” These shorthand descriptions tend to collapse the activity of writing into the act of single writer inscribing a text. In doing so, they obscure two foundational and closely related notions of writing: writers are engaged in the work of making meaning for particular audiences and purposes, and writers are always connected to other people.

Writers are always doing the rhetorical work of addressing the needs and interests of a particular audience, even if unconsciously. The technical writers at a pharmaceutical company work to provide consumers of medications with information they need about dosages and potential side effects. The father writing a few comments on a birthday card to his daughter crafts statements intended to communicate his love for her. Sometimes, the audience for an act of writing might be the writer himself. A young man jotting in his diary, for example, might be documenting life events in order to better understand his feelings about them. A child scribbling a phrase on the palm of her hand might do so as a way of reminding herself to feed the family pets, clean her room, or finish her homework. Writing, then, is always an attempt to address the needs of an audience.

In working to accomplish their purposes and address an audience’s needs, writers draw upon many other people. No matter how isolated a writer may seem as she sits at her computer, types on the touchpad of her smartphone, or makes notes on a legal pad, she is always drawing upon the ideas and experiences of countless others. The technical writers at a pharmaceutical company draw collaboratively upon the ideas of others

they work with as they read their colleagues' earlier versions of the information that will appear on the label. They also connect themselves to others as they engage with the laws about their products written by legislatures and the decisions of lawsuits associated with medications that have been settled or may be pending. The father crafting birthday wishes to his daughter might recall and consciously or unconsciously restate comments that his own parents included on the birthday cards he received as a child. As I work to craft this explanation of writing as a social and rhetorical activity, I am implicitly and explicitly responding to and being influenced by the many people involved in this project, those with whom I have shared earlier drafts, and even those whose scholarship I have read over the past thirteen years.

Writing puts the writer in contact with other people, but the social nature of writing goes beyond the people writers draw upon and think about. It also encompasses the countless people who have shaped the genres, tools, artifacts, technologies, and places writers act with as they address the needs of their audiences. The genres of medication labels, birthday wishes, and diary entries writers use have undergone countless changes as they have been shaped by writers in various times and places. The technologies with which writers act—including computer hardware and software; the QWERTY keyboard; ballpoint pens and lead pencils; and legal pads, journals, and Post-It notes—have also been shaped by many people across time and place. All of these available means of persuasion we take up when we write have been shaped by and through the use of many others who have left their traces on and inform our uses of those tools, even if we are not aware of it.

Because it conflicts with the shorthand descriptions we use to talk and think about writing, understanding writing as a social and rhetorical activity can be troublesome in its complexity. We say “I am writing an email” or “I am writing a note,” suggesting that we are composing alone and with complete autonomy, when, in fact, writing can never be anything but a social and rhetorical act, connecting us to other people across time and space in an attempt to respond adequately to the needs of an audience.

While this concept may be troublesome, understanding it has a variety of benefits. If teachers can help students consider their potential audiences and purposes, they can better help them understand what makes a text effective or not, what it accomplishes, and what it falls short of accomplishing. Considering writing as rhetorical helps learners understand the needs of an audience, what the audience knows and does not know, why audience members might need certain kinds of information, what the audience finds persuasive (or not), and so

on. Understanding the rhetorical work of writing is essential if writers are to make informed, productive decisions about which genres to employ, which languages to act with, which texts to reference, and so on. Recognizing the deeply social and rhetorical dimensions of writing can help administrators and other stakeholders make better decisions about curricula and assessment.

## 1.1

### WRITING IS A KNOWLEDGE-MAKING ACTIVITY

Heidi Estrem

Writing is often defined by what it *is*: a text, a product; less visible is what it can *do*: generate new thinking (see 1.5, “Writing Mediates Activity”). As an activity undertaken to bring new understandings, writing in this sense is not about crafting a sentence or perfecting a text but about mulling over a problem, thinking with others, and exploring new ideas or bringing disparate ideas together (see “Metaconcept: Writing Is an Activity and a Subject of Study”). Writers of all kinds—from self-identified writers to bloggers to workplace teams to academic researchers—have had the experience of coming upon new ideas as a result of writing. Individually or in a richly interactive environment, in the classroom or workplace or at home, writers use writing to generate knowledge that they didn’t have before.

Common cultural conceptions of the act of writing often emphasize magic and discovery, as though ideas are buried and the writer uncovers them, rather than recognizing that “the act of *creating* ideas, not finding them, is at the heart of significant writing” (Flower and Hayes 1980, 22; see also 1.9, “Writing Is a Technology through Which Writers Create and Recreate Meaning”). Understanding and identifying how writing is in itself an act of thinking can help people more intentionally recognize and engage with writing as a creative activity, inextricably linked to thought. We don’t simply think first and then write (see 1.6, “Writing Is Not Natural”). We write *to* think.

Texts where this kind of knowledge making takes place can be formal or informal, and they are sometimes ephemeral: journals (digital and otherwise), collaborative whiteboard diagrams, and complex doodles and marginalia, for example. These texts are generative and central to meaning making even though we often don’t identify them as such. Recognizing these kinds of texts for their productive value then broadens our understanding of literacy to include a rich range of everyday

and workplace-based genres far beyond more traditionally recognized ones. Naming these as writing usefully makes visible the roles and purposes of writing (e.g., Barton and Hamilton 1998; Heath 2012).

Understanding the knowledge-making potential of writing can help people engage more purposefully with writing for varying purposes. In higher education, for example, faculty from across the curriculum now often include a wider range of writing strategies in their courses. That is, beyond teaching the more visible disciplinary conventions of writing in their fields, faculty also integrate writing assignments that highlight what is less visible but highly generative about writing in many contexts: writing's capacity for deeper understandings and new insights (see Anson 2010 for one historical account of the shift in how faculty from across campus teach writing). Beyond the classroom, people can employ exploratory, inquiry-based writing tasks like freewriting, planning, and mapping—sometimes individual and often collaborative. These strategies can help all writers increase their comprehension of subject material while also practicing with textual conventions in new genres. Through making the knowledge-making role of writing more visible, people gain experience with understanding how these sometimes-ephemeral and often-informal aspects of writing are critical to their development and growth.

## 1.2

### WRITING ADDRESSES, INVOKES, AND/OR CREATES AUDIENCES

Andrea A. Lunsford

Writing is both relational and responsive, always in some way part of an ongoing conversation with others. This characteristic of writing is captured in what is referred to as the classic *rhetorical triangle*, which has at each of its points a key element in the creation and interpretation of meaning: writer (speaker, rhetor), audience (receiver, listener, reader), and text (message), all dynamically related in a particular context. Walter Ong (1975) referred to this history in his 1975 “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,” connecting the audience in oral performances with readers of written performances and exploring the ways in which the two differ. For Ong, the audience for a speech is immediately present, right in front of the speaker, while readers are absent, removed. Thus the need, he argues, for writers to fictionalize their audiences and, in turn, for audiences to fictionalize themselves—that is, to adopt the role set out for them by the writer.

Scholars in rhetoric and writing studies have extended this understanding of audience, explaining how writers can address audiences—that is, actual, intended readers or listeners—and invoke, or call up, imagined audiences as well. As I am writing this brief piece, for example, I am imagining or invoking an audience of students and teachers even as I am addressing the actual first readers of my writing, which in this case are the editors of this volume.

The digital age has brought with it the need for even closer consideration of audiences. We can no longer assume, for example, that the audience members for an oral presentation are actually present. And, especially in a digital age, writing cannot only address and invoke but also create audiences: as a baseball announcer in the film *Field of Dreams* (based on W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*) says, "If you build it, they will come." Writers whose works have "gone viral" on the web know well what it means to create an audience that has been unintended and indeed unimagined. Perhaps even more important, the advent of digital and online literacies has blurred the boundaries between writer and audience significantly: the points of the once-stable rhetorical triangle seem to be twirling and shifting and shading into one another. When consumers of information can, quite suddenly, become producers as well, then it's hard to tell who is the writer, who the audience. In addition, the deeply collaborative and social nature of literacy in a digital age not only calls into question earlier distinctions but allows for greater agency on the part of both writers and audiences.

Such shifting and expanding understandings of audience and of the ways writers interact with, address, invoke, become, and create audiences raise new and important questions about the ethics of various communicative acts and call for pedagogies that engage students in exploring their own roles as ethical and effective readers/audiences/writers/speakers/listeners in the twenty-first century.

### 1.3

#### WRITING EXPRESSES AND SHARES MEANING TO BE RECONSTRUCTED BY THE READER

Charles Bazerman

The concept that writing expresses and shares meaning is fundamental to participating in writing—by writing we can articulate and communicate a thought, desire, emotion, observation, directive, or state of affairs to ourselves and others through the medium of written words.

The potential of making and sharing meaning provides both the motive and guiding principle of our work in writing and helps us shape the content of our communications. Awareness of this potential starts early in emergent literacy experiences and continues throughout one's writing life but takes on different force and depth as one continues through life.

The expression of meanings in writing makes them more visible to the writer, making the writer's thoughts clearer and shareable with others, who can attempt to make sense of the words, constructing a meaning they attribute to the writer. While writers can confirm that the written words feel consistent with their state of mind, readers can never read the writer's mind to confirm they fully share that state of mind. Readers share only the words to which each separately attributes meanings. Thus, meanings do not reside fully in the words of the text nor in the unarticulated minds but only in the dynamic relation of writer, reader, and text.

While a writer's meanings arise out of the expression of internal thought, the meanings attributed by a reader arise from the objects, experiences, and words available to that reader. For readers, the words of the text index or point to accessible ideas, thoughts, and experiences through which they can reconstruct meanings based on what they already know (see 3.3, "Writing Is Informed by Prior Experience").

Although meaning is philosophically complex, children readily grasp it in practice as they learn that they can share their experiences through writing about it. As their writing develops, they can express or articulate meanings more fully and precisely concerning a wider range of experiences, with wider audiences and with greater consequences.

The idea that writing expresses and shares meaning to be reconstructed by the reader can be troublesome because there is a tension between the expression of meaning and the sharing of it. Often, we view our expressions as deeply personal, arising from inmost impulses. We may not be sure others will respond well to our thoughts or will evaluate us and our words favorably. Therefore, every expression shared contains risk and can evoke anxiety. Writers often hesitate to share what they have expressed and may even keep private texts they consider most meaningful. Further, writers may resist the idea that their texts convey to readers something different than what the writers intended. Feedback from readers indicating that the writer's words do not convey all the writer hoped is not always welcomed (see 4.1, "Text Is an Object Outside of One's Self that Can Be Improved and Developed"; 5.2, "Metacognition Is Not Cognition"; and 4.4, "Revision Is Central to Developing Writing").

Awareness that meaning is not transparently available in written words may have the paradoxical effect of increasing our commitment to words as we mature as users of written language. As writers we may work on the words with greater care and awareness of the needs of readers so as to share our expressions of meaning as best as we can with the limited resources of written language. As readers we may increase our attention to reconstructing writers' meanings despite the fragility of words. The vagaries of meaning also may become a resource for us as writers, whether we are poets evoking readers' projections of personal associations or lawyers creating loopholes and compromises.

#### 1.4

#### WORDS GET THEIR MEANINGS FROM OTHER WORDS

Dylan B. Dryer

This threshold concept is best illustrated with an example of how a particular word is defined and understood. If asked on the spot to define the word *cup*, an English speaker might say, "Well, it's a smallish drinking vessel, something you'd use for hot drinks like coffee or tea, so probably ceramic rather than glass; usually it has a little handle so your hand doesn't too hot." This is a perfectly serviceable definition, but the way it has been phrased glosses right over this threshold concept. To say that "a cup is a small ceramic drinking vessel" cannot be literally true, after all; the object used to serve hot drinks is not called into being by this sound, nor is there any reason for the phonemes symbolized by the three characters *c*, *u* and *p* to refer to this object (or to refer to it in English, at any rate; in German that object is referred to as *die Tasse*; in Mandarin as *Cháwǎn*; and so on.) Even English speakers don't always use that sound to mean a smallish ceramic drinking vessel. In the kitchen, *cup* is probably a unit of measure; in certain sporting circles, *cup* is the diminutive for the championship trophy (e.g., the Stanley Cup). *Cup* can even mean to hold something gingerly by not closing one's fingers about it, as one would cup an eggshell.

*Cup* does not have an especially elaborate range of meanings (consider words like *go* or *work* or *right*), but it adequately illustrates Ferdinand de Saussure's great insight: "In language itself, there are only differences" (Saussure 1983, 118). Saussure meant that because there is no necessary connection between any sounds or clusters of symbols and their referents (otherwise different languages would not exist), the meanings of words are relational—they acquire their

meanings from other words. Any definition relies on words to explain what other words mean; moreover, words in a sentence or paragraph influence and often determine each other's meaning (which is why children are often advised to puzzle out an unfamiliar vocabulary word from its context). Slang terms for *good* and *bad* are particularly vivid examples of the ways context drives meaning—although these terms change practically overnight, their meanings are usually obvious because of the context of enthusiasm or disparagement in which they're uttered.

While the realization that words cannot be permanently linked to specific meanings can be disconcerting, the effects of this threshold concept are familiar. Most of us, for example, have had the unpleasant feeling that someone else has twisted our words or taken them out of context; we might have bristled at an excessively technical loophole someone finds in a seemingly sensible and obvious rule; we might have been startled by an interpretation of a familiar poem or a text we hold sacred (Meyer and Land 2006, 5). These experiences are reminders that the relations that imbue a sentence with particular meanings come not just from nearby words but also from the social contexts in which the sentence is used. For example, not only does each word in the four-word question "Ready for the cup?" combine with the other three to make the utterance understandable, but social context makes this question mean one thing in a kitchen and another thing while changing the channel at a sports bar. "Language," says Mikhail Bakhtin, "lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's" (Bakhtin 1981, 293).

This phenomenon works the other way, too: if meanings of words shift in response to changes in social contexts, it's also possible to infer changes in social contexts from changes in the meanings of words. In everyday usage, *text* is now almost exclusively a verb as the ubiquity of cell phones has changed our communication practices; changes in our thinking about gender representation have virtually eliminated the word *mankind* from public discourse; *green* has acquired a complex set of meanings in political, economic, and engineering contexts, and so on. And writers often give semantic drift deliberate shoves of their own, either by working to change what a word is perceived to mean (for example, "queer") or by placing familiar words in new contexts to provoke a new perspective; for example, Gloria Anzaldúa and Linda Brodkey have likened writing to "compustura" (Lunsford 1998, 9) and "stitching" (1994, 545–7), respectively—seaming together something different from existing material.

There are three important implications of understanding this threshold concept. First, when writers understand that meanings are not determined by history or *Webster's* prescriptions alone, but also by language users' contexts and motives, they gain a powerful insight into the causes of communicative success and failure. When readers and writers share a workplace, a close relationship, a broad set of assumptions, or the same field of study, they can rely on these social contexts to fill in the blanks with shared understanding (specialists conversing in technical jargon or lovers speaking in their private language, for example). But when readers and writers don't share close, intense contexts like these, they can have surprising reactions to even seemingly self-evident words like *justice*, *research*, *freedom*, *essay*, or *evidence*. To work with another simple example, Saussure used a drawing to represent the concept of tree evoked by the Latin word *arbor* and the equally arbitrary English *tree*. Suppose then that we surround the word *tree* with two different clusters of words, some drawn from communities reliant on the timber industry (*living wage*, *local economy*, *tradition*, and *skill*) and others drawn from communities reliant on tourism (*nature*, *habitat*, *preservation*, and *recreation*). It's not at all far from the truth to say we are speaking of two different trees. Even if we can agree in very broad particulars what *justice* means, our personal sense of what it means, the contexts in which we might use it, and the examples we might use to illustrate it will seldom map precisely onto readers' equally complex private sets of connotations for this word.

Second, since we must often communicate with those outside of our close social contexts, this threshold concept also helps us see how we can reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings. Certainly students are often exhorted to define their terms, but this concept helps explain why particular meanings for key terms in their writing can require careful framing. Part of this understanding involves a sense of when readers might need their expectations for certain words managed and/or redirected. These moves will not guarantee perfect understanding, but they can help increase the chances that readers will produce the particular meaning the writer intended. Instructors, too, should remember that common assignment verbs like *analyze*, *interpret*, *explain*, and *respond* have discipline-specific contexts.

Finally, and most excitingly, writers who understand that the definitions of any word develop from its usage realize that they, too, are part of this process; every instance of their language use works to preserve certain meanings and to advance others.

## 1.5

## WRITING MEDIATES ACTIVITY

David R. Russell

Writing is a technology, a tool (see 1.9, “Writing Is a Technology through Which Writers Create and Recreate Meaning”). It is, in a material sense, nothing more than making marks on surfaces, whether of paper, stone, liquid-crystal screens, or a child’s hand (the girl reminding herself to feed her dog we met in 1.0, “Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity”). The marks may represent the sounds of speech (as in alphabetic scripts like English) or ideas (as in ideographic scripts like Chinese) or pictures (as in pictographic scripts like Cuneiform). But as we’ve seen in 1.1 and 1.3 (“Writing Is a Knowledge-Making Activity” and “Writing Expresses and Shares Meaning to be Reconstructed by the Reader”), the marks do not “contain” ideas or emotions or even meaning. People make something of them. They must read them and interpret them to act on them or think with them.

This physical presence of writing mediates—comes between, intervenes in—the activity of people (Russell 1995; Russell 1997). The white marks *S T O P* on a red hexagonal surface mediate the activity of the drivers who arrive at the intersection at about the same time. (Those written marks also help mediate the activity of a scofflaw driver with the police and the courts.)

Writing occupies an intermediate or middle position to form a connecting link that people use to coordinate their activity. Sometimes this is obvious, like the stop sign or laws or the constitution of a club or a nation. Sometimes writing mediates activity that is conflictual, like court proceedings—or even massively violent, like wars fought over interpretations of holy scripture. Sometimes it mediates the deepest human bonds (like the father writing a birthday card in 1.0, “Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity”).

Although other forms of communication (like speaking) also mediate activity, writing has several advantages (and disadvantages) over those forms. Depending on the surface and the writing instrument used, writing lasts longer than speech (unless a recording device “writes” the sound waves). More importantly, the marks can be copied and distributed over great distances, unlike (unrecorded) speech and most other symbols. Thus, writing can coordinate the activity of far more people over much longer periods of time. For example, the Ten Commandments, first written on stone, have shaped human activity for some three thousand years now.

People can also return to writing over and over, revise it and shape it relatively easily (though more easily with a word processor than a quill pen or chisel!). In this way writing is very useful for mediation of cognitive processes—thinking. Writing can mediate the *internal* activity of thought and emotion as well as *external* behavior. Internal thoughts and feelings can be externalized relatively quickly in writing, manipulated and revised rather easily (individually or with other people), then reinternalized, or stored for later comparison. People can compare earlier states of mind to later states and act accordingly (like the young man with his journal in 1.0, or scientists in a lab examining successive print-outs from an instrument). In this way, the mediation of writing has been central to the development of knowledge, in science and the arts, and to education, as people write to learn as well as learn to write.

The concept that writing mediates human activity is troublesome because it goes against the usual concepts of writing as “just” transcribing (“writing down” or “writing up”) thought or speech (see 1.6, “Writing Is Not Natural”). But it is a concept people unconsciously use every time they choose a medium of communication because of its properties (a text rather than a phone call, for example)—or forget those properties (when an affair is discovered by means of work emails that the lovers thought were “just” their intimate conversation). More importantly, it is a concept that lies behind the durable, and seemingly permanent, structures of our modern human institutions, whose ongoing activity would be impossible without the medium of writing. The institutions that form our modern lives—government, commerce, industry, the arts, sciences, and so on—are mediated by written marks in databases, laws, regulations, books, the Internet.

## 1.6

### WRITING IS NOT NATURAL

Dylan B. Dryer

English speakers routinely talk about writing as if it were speech, characterizing their inability to understand a text as difficulty understanding what that text is “saying,” speaking of a writer’s “voice” or “tone,” describing readers as an “audience,” and so forth. This habit conceals an essential difference: speech is natural in the sense that as modern homo sapiens, we’ve been speaking to one another for nearly two hundred thousand years. Our speech has been bound up in complex feedback loops with our physiology (evidence suggests that our larynxes adapted during these

millennia, gradually acquiring an extraordinary expressive range) and our cognition (note how quickly and easily almost all children acquire expressive fluency in their native language[s] and how eagerly and seemingly involuntarily most adults participate in children's efforts at language acquisition). It is at this point exceptionally difficult to tease human socialization and language apart (see Burke 1966). But it's essential to remember that while many older children and adults also routinely write, they do so by combining arrays of symbols *for* those sounds.

These symbols can do many things, as this collection illustrates, but they cannot "record" speech or thought in their original forms; they *translate* speech and thought into inscriptions. Others (if they know the code) must then try to reactivate these symbols into meaning. Writing is not even inevitable: after all, not all languages have writing, and no particular system of inscribing symbols (alphanumeric, ideographic, syllabic, abjad, etc.) is an obvious complement to any particular family of languages. And even more to the point, we haven't been doing it all that long: as far as anyone can tell, inscriptive systems didn't start cropping up here and there until about 3000 BCE, and only a few members of those cultures would have used those systems. The century or so in which some cultures have attempted to teach inscriptive systems at a nearly universal scale is definitely not long enough to be able to identify specific selective effects this technology has had on our cognitive architecture or overall physiology.

Words like *inscriptions*, *symbols*, *code*, and *arrays* are intended to emphasize the *technological* dimension of writing, first systematically explored by Walter Ong over thirty years ago. While we usually reserve the word *technology* for recent innovations, any cultural artifact that mediates activity is a technology, including those that have become invisible through long use: roofs, coats, hammers, electric lighting, cooking pots, and so forth. While some typists no longer need to peek at their QWERTY keyboards, and most children gradually stop "drawing" letters and start "writing" them as the symbols for certain sounds become interiorized, these writers have naturalized their relationship with technological arrays, not taken the next logical or organic step in language acquisition and practice. Keyboards and other tools of inscription—pens, pencils, chalk, dry-erase markers, software for computers and cellphones—fade from consciousness through use, and it becomes hard to remember that even a stick used to scratch *L-O-V-E* in the sand is using a technology of conventionalized symbols for sounds. However, neither writing produced with technologies—all writing, in other words—nor written language itself can be said to be "natural" in the way that speech is.

While counterintuitive, denaturalizing writing is not difficult: the startling experience of attempting to sign a document with one's nondominant hand, for example, can be a disconcerting reminder of the time before muscle memory and cognitive routine habituated us to certain symbol shapes. Pairing a familiar translation with its original-language version or an hour spent learning to read short texts in a simple code like Wingdings font can expose the arbitrariness of symbol-phoneme relationships. But why do this at all, especially since habituated fluency with these symbols and their technologies of inscription are generally considered important indexes of our maturity as writers?

It's useful to remember that writing is not natural because writers tend to judge their writing processes too harshly—comparing them to the ease with which they usually speak. Speech, however, employs an extensive array of modalities unavailable to writing: gesture, expression, pacing, register, silences, and clarifications—all of which are instantaneously responsive to listeners' verbal and nonverbal feedback. Once it is understood that writing *itself* is a technology, comparisons to speech become obviously limited or downright misleading since no inscriptive system could possibly capture a language's full range of communicative potential.

Writers can also benefit from the realization that they needn't blame themselves for the shortcomings of the system they've inherited. The limitations of this system—confounding illogicalities in pronunciation and spelling (*choose* but *loose*; *wood* and *would*; *clout* but *doubt*); exasperating inconsistencies in what constitutes an "error" and for whom; the persistent gulf between writers' intentions and readers' interpretations—are simply inherent to a piecemeal technology encumbered with centuries of patchwork solutions to antiquated designs. This is not to say that these limitations are unimportant or ignorable. It is to say, however, that all writers are negotiating workarounds to the limitations of a technology they have inherited rather than bungling an obvious complement to the speech in which they have been naturally adept since childhood.

## 1.7

### ASSESSING WRITING SHAPES CONTEXTS AND INSTRUCTION

Tony Scott and Asao B. Inoue

In school settings, writing assessment refers to the formulation of a judgment or decision based on the reading of student writing with a particular set of expectations or values in mind. Assessment thus encompasses a range of activities, from responding with revision in

mind to evaluation or grading of final products to large-scale programmatic assessments.

Writing assessments are a social activity and can be shaped by a variety of individual or institutional factors, including stated goals for writing education; disciplinary philosophies of literacy and learning; political agendas; efficiency imperatives; or common cultural assumptions about writers and literacy. Because the judgments reflected in assessments are informed by factors like these, assessment is not neutral: it shapes the social and rhetorical contexts where writing takes place, especially in school. Any assessment or evaluation applies specific values and also encourages writers to adopt those values. How teachers or others assess student writing, what products those assessment processes produce (e.g., grades, comments on papers, decisions about students, responses to peers' drafts, etc.), and the consequences of those products all can *create* the very competencies any writing assessment says it measures (Gould 1981; Hanson 1993).

In other words, whatever is emphasized in an assessment produces what is defined as "good writing" in a class, a program, or a curriculum. Likewise, what is not emphasized becomes less important and may not be considered characteristic of good writing. For example, a classroom activity that asks students to identify and comment on the critical thinking occurring in peers' drafts emphasizes critical thinking as a part of what is good writing. By asking students to look for and evaluate critical thinking in drafts, teachers signal that they value critical thinking and encourage students to value it, possibly more than other elements one might find in drafts.

Writing assessment constructs boundaries for learning and student agency in learning environments and frames how students understand writing and their own abilities. It can therefore affect curricula, students' senses of their legitimacy and chances of success, and a teacher's job status, intellectual and creative agency, and merit.

Finally, assessment shapes relationships and power between teachers, students, and institutions. Depending on the institutional setting, teachers and students have varying degrees of agency to determine the character of their work, and teachers and students negotiate their relative authority, in part, through the ways students' writing is evaluated and the consequences associated with those evaluations. Institutions can use assessments to inform teachers and students while lending them agency, or they can align prescribed curricula with assessment outcomes to determine the focus of teaching and circumscribe the scope of students' writing. Writing assessment can thereby function as

an intentional means of controlling the labor and creative latitude of teachers and students.

The assessment of writing shapes contexts and learning environments: it is a set of practices enacted by people in specific circumstances for specific purposes that have consequences for both the people whose writing is being judged and for those who are judging.

## 1.8

### WRITING INVOLVES MAKING ETHICAL CHOICES

John Duffy

We tend to think of writing as an activity that involves communicating information, or making an argument, or expressing a creative impulse, even when we imagine it as something that creates meaning between writers and readers (see 1.2, “Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences”). Writing is indeed all those things. But writing is equally an activity that involves ethical choices that arise from the relationship of writer and reader.

Writing involves ethical choices because every time we write for another person, we propose a relationship with other human beings, our readers. And in proposing such relationships we inevitably address, either explicitly and deliberately, or implicitly and unintentionally, the questions that moral philosophers regard as ethical: What kind of person do I want to be? How should I treat others? How should I live my life? (Shafer-Landau 2007). For writers, these questions may be rephrased: What kind of writer do I wish to be? What are my obligations to my readers? What effects will my words have upon others, upon my community?

To say that writing involves ethical choices is not to suggest that individual writers should be judged as ethical or unethical in the sense of being moral, upright, honest, and so forth. Nor is it to say that writers necessarily reflect on ethical concerns as they write. They may or may not. Neither is it to assert, finally, that every text can be regarded as ethical or unethical based on its content. Many texts, perhaps most, are devoid of the subject matter typically associated with ethics.

Rather, to say writing involves ethical choices is to say that when creating a text, the writer addresses others. And that, in turn, initiates a relationship between writer and readers, one that necessarily involves human values and virtues. A writer attempting to communicate an idea or persuade an audience, for example, may write in ways that privilege

honesty, accuracy, fairness, and accountability. These qualities imply an attitude toward the writer's readers: in this case, attitudes of respectfulness, open-mindedness, goodwill, perhaps humility. Conversely, an informational or persuasive text that is unclear, inaccurate, or deliberately deceptive suggests a different attitude toward readers: one that is at best careless, at worst contemptuous. (A close examination of what are commonly referred to as *logical fallacies* will show that these are better understood as ethical dispositions rather than as lapses of logic.) Writers of fiction or poetry, to take a different kind of example, may write in ways that privilege other virtues, such as playfulness, opacity, or originality. These, too, speak to the writer's conception of the reader and therefore to the ethical considerations that follow when entering a relationship with another human being.

The understanding of writing as an act of ethical decision making unsettles conceptions of writing as solely instrumental, polemical, or aesthetic. Beyond these, writing is also and perhaps ultimately understood as an activity that engages us with others and thus with problems associated with the moral life: What shall I say? To whom do I speak? What obligations follow from my words? What are the consequences? Whether or not the writer voices such questions, they are inherent in the act of communicating with another (see 1.3, "Writing Expresses and Shares Meaning to be Reconstructed by the Reader").

When we see writing this way, as an activity involving ethical choices arising from the human relationship of writer and readers, we cross a threshold that both expands and complicates our understandings of what it means to write.

## 1.9

### WRITING IS A TECHNOLOGY THROUGH WHICH WRITERS CREATE AND RECREATE MEANING

Collin Brooke and Jeffrey T. Grabill

I. A. Richards once observed, "A book is a machine to think with" (Richards 2001). While we may think about texts differently than we do our automobiles or kitchen appliances, there is something suggestive about Richards's comparison that is worth pursuing. Writing is a technology, and thinking of it in this fashion can be productive for both students and teachers of writing.

Writing has always been a technology for thinking and communicating. Early inscription technologies enabled the organization of social

practices (like commerce), and innovations in the organization of writing itself, such as the emergence of the book, helped create new social relationships. Whether we are talking about sound waves, physical marks on a page, or pixels rendered on the screen of a computer, tablet, or phone, writing makes material some version of the thoughts and ideas of its composer (see 1.1, “Writing Is a Knowledge-Making Activity”). The audience for such writing must similarly devote material resources to understanding it, even if simply in the form of attention (see 1.2, “Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences”). Meaning doesn’t just happen.

The tools we use to produce writing (pens, keyboards) and those media where writing takes place (pages, books, screens) are all a part of what we mean when we describe writing as a technology. Tools and media shape what we are able to write and the ideas we can express, and they condition the expectations of those who read our writing. We might describe these qualities as the affordances of particular technologies (and environments), those features that permit certain actions (while perhaps limiting others). Writing an essay on a computer, for example, affords certain actions, such as the quick erasure or manipulation of text from words to sentences to paragraphs. Media carry different affordances. We think little of seeing hashtags in a Twitter feed, for instance, but many of us would find it quite distracting to read a novel with such language practices. Likewise, the ability to click on a hashtag in a tweet (and to see all the posts tagged thusly) is not an affordance of the printed page.

With the emergence and diffusion of digital technologies, however, the impact of technology on the making of meaning has never been more visible, socially and culturally. The power of networks can perhaps be most easily understood in terms of connectivity: the ability to connect readers to writers, to turn anyone with a network connection into a publisher. Connectivity allows writers to access and participate more seamlessly and quickly with others and to distribute writing to large and widely dispersed audiences. Many writing technologies have streamlined the writing process, but the computer network has had a dramatic social impact. Consider, for example, platforms like Facebook and *Wikipedia*, arguably two of the most significant collaborative writing projects in human history. The affordances of particular writing technologies participate in the construction of new and changing rhetorical contexts.

Writers may prefer different tools and/or environments depending on their affordances, yet it has become more difficult to separate the scene of writing from the tools we use to produce it. This is because

writing, as it always has been, is a technology for thinking, and so it may be the case that we interiorize the technology of writing itself to shape the possibilities for meaning.

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