

Opening Conversations

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UMASS AMHERST WRITING PROGRAM



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INTRODUCTION

Writing as Conversation: Cultivating a Rhetorical Mindset

It's hard to imagine living in the world and not being a reader and writer of texts. Our culture is saturated with words and images. We may write emails and messages through social media apps, compose essays for college coursework, fill out job applications, post reviews, voice our concerns about issues in public forums, and so on. We are called upon to write for personal, academic, professional, and civic purposes. Quite simply, writing is fundamental to our everyday lives.

In fact, in *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy*, literacy researcher Deborah Brandt argues that we are encountering a distinct moment in history when writing is becoming more common, more pervasive, and more integral to the mass public. College students have contributed to this groundswell in writing. Researcher Andrea Lunsford has provided ample evidence for writing activity in her five-year study of 1,616 undergraduates and the approximately 15,000 pieces of writing they produced during that period. Interviewed for *Wired Magazine*, Lunsford contends, "I think we're in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since Greek civilization" (qtd. in Thompson). Those who lament the decline of writing in society misunderstand this moment. "For Lunsford," *Wired* writer Clive Thompson explains, "technology isn't killing our ability to write. It's reviving it—and pushing our literacy in bold new directions."

Digital media have created opportunities for a greater volume of published texts (including this one!), more rapid speed in their circulation, and potentially, more extensive reach to readers in our own communities and across the globe. In the 1990s, as the internet became publicly available and we became more attuned to globalization, there was a widespread belief that technology and

globalization had a democratizing effect: *everyone* can write and circulate their writing, *everyone* can be read, *everyone* will have a voice in our world. But the past few decades have called these ideals into question. Even in digital and global contexts, inequalities persist through uneven access to digital technologies and writing education, the prevalence of the English language and a related anxiety—even intolerance—about language diversity in the United States, and serious problems of power and privilege that enable some to be heard more than others. Many of us do have more opportunities to write and circulate our writing; however, the “literacy revolution” turned out to be more complicated than we had hoped.

One way to understand these issues is by continually reflecting on how we each fit into this historical moment. *How might you narrate your own reading and writing histories? What have reading and writing meant to you? What kinds of writing have you valued? Who or what supported or hampered you in your writing life?* Your first assignment for this class will ask you to do just this kind of reflection. In the Initial Writer’s statement you will consider your own writing history and use it as a starting place for the work you will do this semester. Additionally, the five opening essays of Unit 1 also reflect on writing in this way (and others). You might review these to consider which one speaks most directly to your experiences.

The fact that texts can travel faster and farther than ever raises complex questions about communicating across borders and with diverse peoples. Writers learn about and draw from multiple cultures, language and writing traditions, and technologies. However, writers and readers may not share the same cultural heritage, political beliefs, or economic privilege and constraints; as a result, we may have different expectations about what constitutes good writing. The issue therefore, isn’t only that we are writing more these days. Rather, writing itself has become an increasingly complicated cognitive and social activity.

So what does it mean to write well in this brave new world?

Learning to write well means learning how to effectively engage in a conversation in the context of cultural, social, economic, and political differences. Consider this well-worn metaphor for writing:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (Burke 110-111)

If the idea of a “parlor” seems quaint today, we can replace the parlor with a living room, a coffee shop, a blogging community, or a political organization. The idea of conversation, however, is timeless and fundamental to writing. *What conversations do we want to join, and why? As we compose our texts, how do we each draw on our writing traditions, language backgrounds, sociocultural contexts, and technological resources? And how do we engage with others who may not share our beliefs and worldviews?*

Opening Conversations is a collection of essays that embody the spirit of writing as conversation; a committee of college writing instructors at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Writing Program designed this collection for writers, specifically those in college writing courses. These essays explore a diversity of contemporary social issues—including language, immigration, technology, health care, sport, and more—and are wide-ranging in writerly perspective, essay form and style, and publication context.

The editors made a decision to include essays that speak across differences—including but not limited to race, gender, sexuality, class, and language background—because these essays demonstrate the ways in which different writers compose texts to readers who may not share the same worldview. With this collection, we recognize that the essay as a genre is versatile and malleable, far from uniform.

At the same time, we'd like to emphasize what these essays share: all of these essays illustrate the ways in which writers can step into the parlor and join a conversation. While the parlor metaphor quoted above may imply oppositional conversations (note terms above: “defense,” “ally,” and “opponent”), this collection suggests purposes for writing that include but also go beyond argument:

- writers who critically reflect on how their contexts have influenced their worldviews;
- writers who respond to other writers—not simply to fall into facile agree-disagree arguments, but rather to engage in true dialogue;
- writers who are open to discovery, who rethink an existing worldview;
- writers who research and synthesize multiple sources to understand a conversation;
- writers who add to the conversation, whose texts do something in the world.

Readers will find different ways of cataloguing writerly purpose in these pages. For now, we cast writing as conversation in order to highlight that writing is about social engagement. It's important to remind ourselves that texts are integral to our social lives, and writing can act in meaningful ways to help us build relationships with others and create change in our communities.

In short, writing can have an *impact* on our worlds. And for this reason, writing can be powerful. As you read this collection, we urge you to read *as writers*: contemplate the choices that these writers

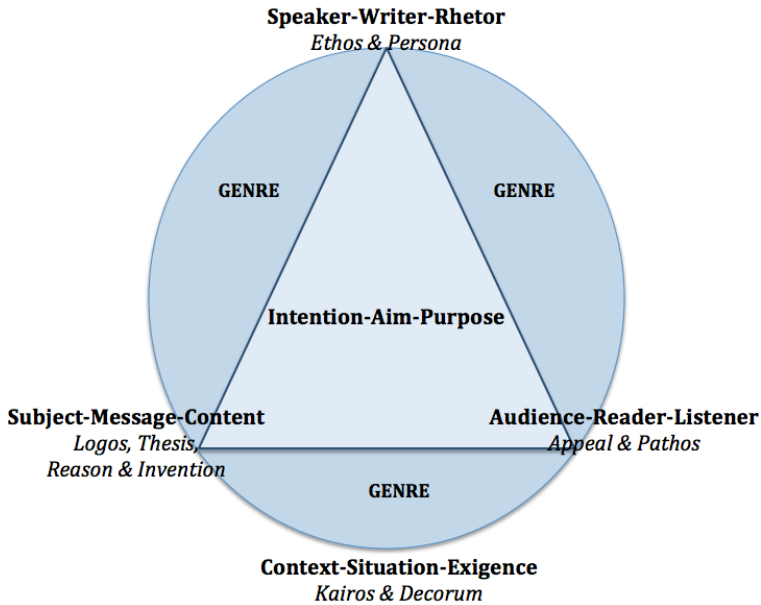
have made to join and even re-imagine conversations. If writing is about acting on our worlds, then learning to write well requires learning to cultivate a rhetorical mindset.

The Rhetorical Situation

Rhetoric is the art of using symbolic resources (e.g., words, languages, genres, images) in order to communicate effectively within a particular social context. Cultivating a rhetorical mindset means carefully examining the ways in which writers and speakers make decisions about symbolic resources according to one's purpose, audience, and contexts. When we communicate in writing and speech, many of us already adapt what we say and how we say it to a given audience. But *cultivating* a rhetorical mindset entails more intentional contemplation about how to develop a set of rhetorical strategies and habits of mind that will help us write deftly and powerfully for diverse and shifting contexts. In what follows, we present a few rhetorical concepts to get started.

All writing is situated. Often represented as a rhetorical triangle, the **rhetorical situation** can help us understand the essential elements of a communicative situation:

Here's one visual representation of this concept:



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In short, a writer composes a text about a topic to readers. But *why*?

Rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer explains that “rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to a situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem” (5). Writers compose texts in response to an **exigence**, a perceived need or desire that calls for a response. Put another way, we are often motivated to write when we care enough about the issue and when we believe that our writing can *do* something to address that question or problem. Exigences arise from our experiences in the world and can move us to write about these issues: e.g., proposed legislation, a cultural event (e.g. football

game, a lecture), an injustice, a blog about a social issue, etc. Exigences are invitations to write.

Writers in a particular rhetorical situation must determine their **purpose** and identify the most suitable **audience**. Who needs to read this text? What can readers do to address the question or remedy the problem? It makes sense to tailor our texts to readers who can help address the exigence—perhaps by changing their mindset or taking action in the world. In addition to identifying an appropriate audience, we need to make decisions about how to compose a **text** by drawing on symbolic resources, including writing traditions, languages, and rhetorical strategies. We consider options for content, form, style, language, and media, and we then compose, revise, and edit a text tailored to the intended readers.

The rhetorical triangle provides a useful start: the basic parts of a rhetorical situation are exigence, writer, reader, topic, and text. But as a static visual, the rhetorical triangle may be deceptively simple. First, the image may not adequately emphasize relationships among the parts of the rhetorical situation. What is the relationship between writer and topic, reader and topic, writer and reader? How do these relationships impact how we should compose a text? Second, a rhetorical situation is only a snapshot within an ongoing conversation; looking only at the situation, we might not see how the situation and its elements are part of wider social and historical contexts. *That is, how is a given rhetorical situation part of an ongoing conversation? How has a particular topic been discussed in the past, and who was involved? What beliefs, past experiences, knowledge, and identities do writers bring to the situation? What do readers bring to the situation?*

See here for one representation of this situation:



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The concept of a rhetorical situation provides writers with a beginning. The next step is to examine how an interplay of contexts can affect a rhetorical situation.

A Writer's Contexts

All writers are shaped by our **contexts**. To each rhetorical situation, we bring our life experiences, our knowledge, and our identities and beliefs. Good writers, we propose, are thoughtful about how our contexts have shaped our sense of self and the perspective that we bring to what, how, and why we write. For this reason, we might ask ourselves, *What social contexts am I a part of?*

How have these contexts shaped my outlook on the world? These are admittedly big questions. As the essays in this collection suggest, contexts may include places, social groups, complex social identities or economic and political systems. Writers carry the experiences and assumptions from these contexts into writing situations and so it's worth critically reflecting on where we've come from.

This idea of a writer's contexts may feel abstract but the idea starts to become clearer when we look at the particulars of writers' texts. Several writers in this collection engage in critical self-reflection to varying degrees. Further, all writers must decide on how to represent themselves. The rhetorical concept of **ethos**, or an appeal to the credibility or character of the writer or speaker, is instructive here. How do writers decide to represent themselves through content and style? What does each reveal about him/herself, and why? What does each withhold? How would we describe his/her character, and how does this fit with the writer's purpose in the text? What message are they sending about their character? Even when writers are not narrating personal experience, ethos is always present. We imply our credibility and character through our writing choices. In responding to a text, readers will form an understanding of a writer's character and determine whether the writer is ethical, credible, trustworthy. In a sense, when we reflect on our own contexts, we are also reflecting on our relationship to others in the parlor.

Listening to Others: Critical Inquiry & Response

The parlor metaphor points to the fact that we are always in the company of others—others who bring their own contexts. As much as we should listen to our own experiences, it's equally important to listen, *truly listen* to others in the parlor. Reading and writing (listening and speaking, too) depend on one another. As the parlor metaphor indicates, “others have long preceded” us in the conversation. Before we add our voices, we ought to listen in to understand what others say and also to identify who is part of the conversation and how others bring their contexts to bear on

the conversation. Such listening is not always easy: a text may be difficult and complex, the topic may be unfamiliar, we may not connect with a given writer's experiences, and we may even be offended by a writer's worldview. Some voices in the parlor are going to be louder than others, some silenced. Despite these difficulties, listening carefully and respectfully is important: it is not only ethical, but also this act helps writers comprehend the contours of a conversation and to begin to respond to that conversation. In practical terms, listening well can be cued by fair and accurate summary, paraphrase, and quoting of others in the conversation.

It's not surprising that writers in academic communities and beyond will often write in response to a text. Listening to others—or in this case, reading texts by others—can also be generative. If we approach a text with an open mind, with an attempt to understand others, we can also engage in critical inquiry: analyzing aspects of the text, making connections between different claims, extending the ideas presented, complicating an idea with our prior knowledge and experiences, and more. In short, one's interaction with a text can lead to new meaning making. As writers, we may even feel compelled to **respond** where the point of responding isn't simply to arrive at a yes-no or agree-disagree position. Rather, the best responses will help us more fully understand the nuances of a conversation or even re-imagine the conversation altogether. The best responses open up rather than close down conversations.

Entering a Conversation: What Can Writing Do?

In the end, as writers, we must repeatedly ask ourselves, *What conversations do I want to join? If exigence is an invitation to write, where do I find those motivations? What is my exigence, and what do I want my writing to do? What impact do I want my writing to make?* We can find calls to write or respond all around us—in the texts, events, and relationships that make up our everyday world.

For writers, preliminary and then more careful research offer a way to become familiar with a conversation and identify the

stakeholders in that conversation. For those of us who have access to university libraries, we are fortunate to be able to search among huge volumes of sources, including peer-reviewed ones (i.e., sources that have been reviewed and selected for publication by researchers in the discipline). There's a widespread misconception that research is a passive activity (we let existing library research wash over us) and writing about research can be boring (we then pour this information on readers). Instead, we might see research as a kind of investigative listening: finding, evaluating, responding to, synthesizing, and using a variety of sources. Moreover, weaving multiple perspectives together becomes a kind of *invention*, a way of making meaning and generating new, compelling lines of inquiry.

Research is not only for academics. Indeed, research is important for many writers—including, for example, news journalists, creative nonfiction writers, cultural critics, activist writers, and sports writers. Moreover, even for academics, research does not only happen in university libraries and through online search engines. If research is about listening and seeking multiple perspectives and sources of information, then research also may also include field observations, interviews with those who affect or are affected by the topic, surveys, and other methods of gathering knowledge and perspectives from our everyday lives.

Research and writing are often recursive (looping, repeating) and generative processes. As we attempt to analyze, synthesize, and respond to sources, we may discover new lines of inquiry, new exigences, new audiences to reach. We may understand a conversation differently, change our minds, identify new questions. These processes can help us crystallize the most pressing exigence and our purpose in writing. In other words, research is not the end. Research and writing are the means to a goal.

When we write to enter a conversation, the goal is not simply parroting what we've learned. Rather, we use research for a purpose—e.g., to invite empathy, to create change in our society, to argue for a particular position. **Kairos**, the ancient Greek term suggesting timeliness or fitting a specific moment in time, is a useful

rhetorical concept here: *Why is this an opportune moment to add one's voice to a conversation?* Our purpose in writing can become a guide as we make decisions about how to make our texts do something in the world: *Who needs to read this text at this moment? What genre, medium, and style makes sense in light of purpose and intended readers? What publications would reach these intended readers? How can the text circulate?*

Writing, after all, is meant to engage others and create an impact on our worlds. And all texts have power—including those you create! Through their essays, the writers in this collection—and indeed, the writers in your class—affect the ways in which many of us see the world and act in the world.

We Are All Writers

Our hope is that this book opens up conversations about writing and helps you on your own writing journey. In this collection, there are many types of writers. They use humor, passion, measured distance, emotion, contemplation and draw on personal experiences, current events, primary and secondary sources. They include visual images, multiple dialects and languages, genres within genres, and various points of view. As you read these essays and continue to cultivate a rhetorical mindset, we invite you to:

- reread this introduction alongside the essays,
- analyze each writer's choices in relation to the writer's publication contexts described in the brief prefaces to each essay.

That is, take note of each writer's choices, and build a repository of rhetorical strategies to employ in your own writing. But it's not enough to cultivate a rhetorical mindset and critically reflect on others' choices. It's only through practice that you will develop fluency and rhetorical flexibility as well as an ability to add your voice to conversations that matter. So yes, cultivate a rhetorical

mindset, but remember also to write—and to write often and with purpose.

Additional Resources for College Writing

The Writing Program has also created two collections of student work for you to use in College Writing:

1. [The Student Writing Anthology](#): An Open access collection of work from students in College Writing.
2. [In Conversation: Student Voices Across Modalities](#): An open access collection of award winning work from our Best Text context, featuring UMass writers in Englwr111: Writing, Identity and Power; Englwr112: College Writing; and Junior Year Writing courses.

Additionally, we recommend the following open access writing resources:

1. [Tips and Tools from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill](#)
2. [Excelsior Online Writing Lab](#)
3. [Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing](#)

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PART I

UNIT I: ESSAYS ABOUT WRITING

I. Unit I: Interacting with Texts Introduction

Have you ever talked back to a text? Or highlighted a line because it said something provocative or important? Have you ever read something online or in a book that you could relate to in a personal way? Or read something that you felt compelled to challenge or refute? Have you ever written a review of a video game or a movie or a book? Or left comments on a YouTube video or in a public forum? If you've answered yes to any of these questions, you already know what it's like to interact with a text. Even if you haven't done any of these things, it's likely that you have been asked to summarize, analyze, and respond to a text in a high school or college class. In this unit, you'll be building on the skills you've developed in the past to expand how you engage with texts. This process will enable you to reimagine what it means to write for an academic audience while reminding you that you are an important part of this audience.

Of course, some of the writing you'll do at the university level will be similar to what you've done before. If you have to write an essay for a timed exam, it helps to have a ready-made structure to turn to; likewise, an accurate summary in a weekly response post can demonstrate that you have done the assigned reading. But at an institution such as UMass, faculty, staff, and students are engaged in research, writing, and communication for academic and public audiences. Although in some contexts the first person "I" is discouraged, in College Writing, you are encouraged to incorporate your personal voice. The point of academic writing is not to use academic jargon but to contribute to conversations in your academic community. At UMass, this community includes people in different academic fields, asking questions and engaging in discussions about the world. The strategies we emphasize in this unit and in this course also apply to writing in different careers: as

you gain expertise, you will want to share it with other people to meet your purposes. This unit provides an opportunity to practice writing in response to a published text and to deepen the skills you'll need in future contexts.

Here are writing goals that you'll work toward in Unit 1 Interacting with Texts:

- Developing a purposeful response to published texts.
- Fairly representing a writer's ideas through accurate summary, paraphrase, and quotation.
- Discovering new insights by analyzing the intention, meaning, or effect of texts.
- Engaging in the composing process to extend and evolve your initial thinking about the topic and also to explore the conversation in multiple modes, media, or genres.
- Using effective rhetorical choices to write and revise for an academic audience.

Developing a purposeful response to published texts.

While you previously may have written responses to various texts, this unit will explore what it means to do that with purpose. What are you trying to communicate? To what audience? Is your response in agreement, disagreement, or showing how we can move beyond the ideas you have read? Responding with intention requires understanding the rhetorical situation beyond the text.

Fairly representing a writer's ideas through accurate summary, paraphrase, and quotation.

When working with another author's ideas, it can be difficult to know how to effectively and fairly use summary, paraphrase, and quotation. This unit provides space to practice these techniques and understand when it might be better to use one over the other. For instance, when does it make sense to encapsulate the entirety of a text, as you would do in a summary? When should you rephrase several sentences into a shorter paraphrase? And when should you stick to the author's words by including a quotation? Each has its own strengths and purposes, and depending on your intent, you might need to incorporate all three.

Discovering new insights by analyzing the intention, meaning, or effect of texts.

Every piece in this collection appeared on another website, journal, or platform first. What might that source tell you about the original audience or purpose? What information can you find about the author? Does anything about their background help you predict what their writing might be like? What other topics has this person written about or discussed? As you read, be aware of the different

ways you might be responding. What emotions does the piece provoke? What connections can you make to your own experiences, things you've studied in other classes, and other parts of your life? What ideas are more or less persuasive to you, and why? What strikes you as surprising, unfamiliar, or unexpected? There may be words, references, or ideas in these pieces that you haven't encountered before, or there may be passages that you don't fully understand the first time you read them. That's okay. It can be helpful to note these places and go back to them, to reread them, or to look up anything that's unfamiliar.

Engaging in the composing process to extend and evolve your initial thinking about the topic and also to explore the conversation in multiple modes, media, or genres.

As you read through the essays in this section, think about what the authors are saying as well as how they are communicating it. As you draft and revise your Interacting with Texts essay, you will have time to revisit the pieces and wrestle with the ideas in them. You don't need a fully formed response when you first finish an essay. Instead, notice what catches your attention, even if you don't yet know why. There are many ways to respond to texts. Strategies might include reflecting on your own experiences, relating the author's ideas to other contexts, or considering the effectiveness of the writer's language and style choices.

Using effective rhetorical choices to write and revise for an academic audience.

When working with another author's ideas and writing for an academic audience, it can be challenging to maintain your own voice. Oftentimes, in a bid to fairly represent the work of the

published text you are writing about, your own voice may be sidelined. Sometimes it happens because your views become subsumed by a summary of the original text. Other times you lose your voice as you attempt to imitate what you see as formal academic language, abandoning your home dialect and personal writing style. It can be helpful to remember that you are part of the academic audience, and your individual voice is one of the most compelling features of your essay. This unit works to recalibrate your voice in an academic context, and this process starts with reading. At first glance, this may seem counterintuitive, but you will see that reading texts by different authors and in different genres will introduce you to a greater variety of writing styles. The more you read, the more you start to recognize how widely writing strategies differ, depending on the contexts and purposes. Over time, you will start to build out your own toolkit of strategies to use for writing.

Reading to Grow your Writing

These pieces invite you to carve out a sense of identity in the sphere of academic writing by bringing an awareness to rhetorical choices and their inherent value. By exploring themes such as climate change, immigration, health, policy, and politics, the authors in this section provide models for balancing their own voices and expanding their own ideas.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- How are the writers making personal connections to their topics, and what aspects of the essay do you connect with most powerfully or personally?
- How are the writers asserting and supporting their own purposes?
- What strategies are they using to appeal to their audiences?

- Are there any unique language or style choices that affect the reading experience?

Unit 1: Interacting with Texts offers a starting point for diving deeper into all types of texts. In the coming weeks, you'll have the chance to experiment with these different ways of responding. Reading with curiosity and care will help you get started.

2. What Color Is My Voice? Academic Writing and the Myth of Standard English

KRISTIN DEMINT BAILEY; AN HA; AND AJ OUTLAR

Overview

In this chapter, a community college writing professor and two of her first-year writing students collaboratively address the issue of Whiteness in academic writing. Specifically, we challenge the notion that academic language is neutral as well as the expectation that all academic writers should strive for uniformity. We question notions of correctness and clarity, adopting Jacqueline Jones Royster's definition of voice as "the power and authority to speak and make meaning" (31), and we challenge students to ask hard questions about language, identity, and power. We explain the inextricable bonds between language and community, examine the connections between language and racial identity, and explore the political nature of language, all of which affect a person's voice as Royster has defined it. Then, the two of us who are students share our experiences with writing for school, reflecting on what we've learned both in and out of school about our language and our voice. Together, we invite students to reflect on their own voice in academic writing, asking themselves, "Whose voice do I hear in my writing, and why? What does this voice reveal about my identity as a writer, and how do I feel about what I uncover? What might I want to do more or differently?"

... survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

—Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*

Introduction

In school, we're often asked to write using strict formats and formal language. Writing isn't about personal expression or style; it's about mastering "standard English," "edited American English," "formal English"—whatever you call it. It's about communicating ideas and showing others (usually teachers, sometimes classmates, sometimes ourselves) what we know and understand about whatever it is we're studying. And for many of us (if we're being honest), it's about sounding smart—writing the right things in the right ways to show that we belong, that we're capable of doing the work. Because ultimately, we *need* people to know we're capable so we can pass our classes and get that diploma.

Our success, as we all know, is usually determined by how well we meet the standards that have been indoctrinated into us through feedback and grades for most of our lives. We accept those standards as the ideal because we see them played out in the texts we're assigned to read. We believe that good academic writing is complicated and abstract, that it uses words we don't

know or hear very often, that it is objective and neutral and essentially personality-less. We believe that academic writing doesn't have a voice.

Oh, but it *does*.

Many people don't notice a voice in academic writing because the voice that is there has been normalized and disembodied. In other words, when people talk about "academic" writing, they don't talk about the *people* who are doing that writing, who set those standards. Those standards, we think, simply reflect "correct" language usage, which we think is just how things are. Consider this: How often do you think about what the speaking voice of the person writing the academic texts you're reading *sounds like*? How often do you think about what that person *looks like*?

Regardless of whether you *notice* a voice in academic writing, however, that voice is still there. And because this is college, where you'll learn to ask questions and dig deep for understanding, we're asking you in this chapter to look closely at that normalized academic voice, to ask hard questions about what that voice reflects—and what it covers up.

These kinds of questions are what many researchers in the field of rhetoric and composition, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), have been asking for decades. One leading scholar in the field, Jacqueline Jones Royster, argues that a voice is a "central manifestation of subjectivity" (30). In other words, our relationship to power, as well as the opportunities it affords and the constraints it places on us, is revealed through our voice. Royster defines a voice as something "that is constructed and expressed visually and orally, *and* [...] a *thing* heard, perceived, and reconstructed" (31). Why does this distinction matter for Royster? Because it points our attention not only to who is *doing* the speaking, but also who is being *heard*. To have a voice, Royster argues, is to have "the power and authority to speak and make meaning" (31). This is the definition of voice we're thinking of as we write this chapter.

In a sense, Royster is bringing us back to that old saying, “If a tree falls in the forest, and there’s no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” To have a voice means someone has to hear you. But what does it really mean to be heard? What kinds of sounds are meaningful, and to whom? What assumptions do we make about the listener (or reader) when we think about sounds that are meaningful?

As you’ll learn in college if you haven’t already, sometimes the best answer to a question is another question. In this chapter, our goal isn’t to tell you what to think or how to write. Instead, we share with you what we know and leave you with challenging questions—questions about language, identity, and power that we ourselves don’t have good answers for. But we join many scholars who believe that those who write and teach writing in school *need* to be asking them. You might feel uncomfortable at times, and that’s okay—because discomfort can be productive. We hope that you’ll leave this chapter inspired to explore those questions and to work through any discomfort that comes up along the way.

How We Acquire Language: It’s All About Community

It’s hard to talk about voice without talking about language, because language is one of the primary ways most people communicate. So in order to think critically about voice in academic writing, we first need to think critically about language. Luckily for us, there’s an entire academic discipline called Linguistics where people study language. Linguistics scholars study how sounds and words form patterns, how humans develop language, what features all languages have in common, how language varieties differ, and more.

One of the most fundamental things linguists have found that’s relevant to our discussion is this: language really isn’t something

we *learn* through conscious effort; it's something we *acquire*. In other words, language is sort of something that happens as we interact with other human beings. Research has shown that one of the best ways to acquire language is simply by using it with others, out of necessity to communicate. Language acquisition is one reason why language immersion programs and dual-language programs have become so popular, and it's one benefit of study-abroad programs as well.

Because language is acquired by interacting with others, it's as diverse as the communities we're part of: communities organized by where we live, our religious traditions, our interest groups, and so on. In each of our communities, the language we use is specific to those groups; for example, we use certain words or expressions, we focus on particular things, and we share certain beliefs that form the basis for our interactions. The language we use is also what creates a sense of community; it separates people who are in that community from those who are outside it. For example, writer and cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa says that Chicano Spanish “sprang out of the Chicanos’ need to identify ourselves as a distinct people” (33). This language is one “they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both” (33).

Language is also connected to racial identity but not for the reasons most people think. “[R]ace does not determine what language a child will speak, there is no such thing as a ‘racial language,’ and no race or ethnic group is born with a particular language,” explains Geneva Smitherman, a groundbreaking and important Black linguist who has spent the last 50 years researching Black Language, also known as Black English, African American Language (AAL), and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and formerly known as Ebonics. She continues:

Children acquire their language from the community of speakers they play, live, grow up, and socialize with. [...] Since communities in the U.S. have been separated and

continue to exist along distinct racial lines, language follows suit. An African American child will more than likely play, live, grow up, and socialize in any one of the numerous African American communities of the U.S. and thus will acquire the African American Language of her community. [...] Even though race does not determine what language a child will speak, race does determine what community a child grows up in, and it is that community which provides the child with language. (5)

In short, what Smitherman is arguing is that language tends to differ among differently raced people, but that isn't because language and race are inextricable from one another. That is, being Black doesn't determine which language and dialect you'll know and use more than being Mexican American means you'll know and use Chicano/a Spanish or being white means you'll speak middle-class English.

Why Language Is Political: The Silencing Power of Stigma

The discussion of communities and language gets tricky when we start to talk about *value*, specifically how different communities and languages are valued differently. At its most basic, value is attached to resources: land, money, time, materials, people, and other assets that we need in order to live. The more resources we have access to or possess, the more value we possess. The more value we possess, the more power we have, because we live in a world where resources are finite. More power means more authority, including authority to set standards and make the rules that govern society.

Authority is inextricably connected to language because people are inextricably connected to language. In other words, language is political because politics is all about how humans living in

groups make decisions. They make those decisions by *using* language, and in many settings, they make decisions *about* language: what is and isn't valued, appropriate, correct, and so on. The issue, of course, is *who* is making those decisions—or historically has made those decisions—and whose values are accounted for in the decisions that they make, in the standards that they set.

One of the most difficult concepts for non-linguists to grasp about language is that there really is no such thing as an objective “standard” version of a language. The idea that there is one is a myth. To the contrary, language doesn't exist on its own; it's created through interaction and changes over time, two truths that linguists have discovered through careful observation and deduction. In other words, there simply is no “pure” form of a language, no standard. The belief that standard English exists is called *standard language ideology*.

Nevertheless, people try to *standardize* language—to create and uphold some notion of the “pure” form of a language—out of perceived necessity. Sociolinguist Rosina Lippi-Green explains that because we write to remember things and help others to remember them, and to preserve ideas we find valuable, we place a lot of demands on written language: “we want it to span time and space, and we want it to do that in a social vacuum, without the aid of paralinguistic features and often without shared context of any kind” (18). As a result, she says, people think that “written language needs to be free of variation: it must be consistent in every way, from spelling to sentence structure” (18).

The problem, though, is that language *doesn't* happen in a vacuum; it happens among people of diverse cultures, nationalities, religious traditions, and socioeconomic classes who have different orientations toward gender, sexuality, physical ability, neurotypicality, and so on. The demand for language consistency necessarily results in standards that reflect a particular worldview: the worldview of the people in positions of power. In the United States, these were the people who

historically had access to education (until roughly the 1970s, most were wealthy white men). Smitherman raises a good point: “If Black people were in power in this country,” she says, “Black English would be the prestige idiom” (63).

Language diversity in educational and professional spaces isn’t itself a *problem*, however. People in countries outside the U.S. have found ways to value such diversity; the American system of education is unique in its insistence on standardizing one language variety, says late writer and teacher June Jordan:

In contrast to India, where at least fourteen languages co-exist as legitimate Indian languages, in contrast to Nicaragua, where all citizens are legally entitled to formal school instruction in their regional or tribal languages, compulsory education in America compels accommodation to exclusively White forms of “English.” White English, in America, is “Standard English.” (364)

In other words, kids in the U.S. from ages 5-ish to 18-ish are required to learn and demonstrate proficiency in what Jordan calls “White English,” the language variety that has been standardized by people in power. In effect, the notion that written language must adhere to these standardized rules is a power play that inevitably reproduces white supremacist systems. It is the systems that are problematic, not the language differences within them.

These systems are even more problematic because of how they influence our thoughts about one another. In judging language, we judge the *people* who use that language. Judgements¹ are made through comparison, usually to some standard or ideal. So when

1. Throughout this chapter, we’ve adopted Asao Inoue’s (2021) intentional spelling of “judgement” with an “e” to emphasize that there is always a person doing the judging, acting as judge.

someone who accepts standard language ideology judges our language, assessing it in terms of “correctness” and/or “appropriateness,” they’re effectively judging our own proximity to that ideal. In effect, they “devalue the intelligence and character of students, employees, and colleagues, who [...] don’t speak or write [‘standard’ English] by labeling their language improper, inappropriate, or incorrect,” explains writing scholar Anjali Pattanayak (84).

Over time, humans internalize beliefs about ourselves and others based on judgements of language. Elaine Richardson, an influential Black professor of Literacy Studies at The Ohio State University, writes about these judgements in her memoir, entitled *PHD (Po H# on Dope) to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*: “I had entered this class, this university and been told in so many words that I was illiterate because the words I used were *awkward*, not recognized as college format, because I didn’t know how to punctuate sentences” (202). She later recaps feedback from a writing professor:

Miss Richardson, when your prose breaks down it’s because your logic has broken down ... syntax problems come up not just when someone doesn’t have a command of the language or grammar, but because he or she hasn’t thought the argument through carefully enough. The language from your home and neighborhood is fine in that context, but it doesn’t work for the kind of careful analysis and expression expected in academic writing. (207)

In other words, according to this professor, Black English doesn’t make possible the logical and analytical thinking expected of college students. Her white mentor’s suggestion? “Write more like I talk,” which meant code-switching like she did when “trying to project a positive self-image, especially when speaking to White folks” (207).

Never mind that White linguist William Labov’s analyses of Black speech, published in 1970, clearly “dispel the racist myth that

African American Language is illogical or ungrammatical [...] reveal[ing] the language to be rule-governed and systematic, not a collection of haphazard errors” (Smitherman 11). Never mind that they correct “false impressions about language, race and intelligence” (11). Never mind that Black English “comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants” and was developed through communal resistance to slavery, that it “meld[ed] diverse African ethnic groups into one community [and] was created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class” (3). Standard language ideology is a powerful thing. “Black English don’t make it own-self oppressed,” argues Vershawn Ashanti Young, a prominent Black scholar of African American Studies. “It be negative views about other people usin they own language [...] that make it so” (110).

This stigmatization can have serious consequences for people who speak and/or write anything other than what sociolinguists H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman call White Mainstream English, a term literacy scholar April Baker-Bell uses “to emphasize how white ways of speaking become the invisible—or better, inaudible—norm” (3). Consider, for example, George Zimmerman’s 2013 trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin. The star witness for the prosecution on whose testimony Zimmerman’s verdict hinged was a 19-year-old Black woman named Rachel Jeantel, a speaker of Black Language. An extensive (and dense) analysis of the trial by Stanford linguists John R. Rickford and Sharese King reveals that Jeantel’s “AAVE, though systematic, was misheard and maligned. Her testimony, which provided crucial evidence, was disregarded because of its unfamiliarity to most jurors and social biases against AAVE speakers” (980).

Prejudices about language inferiority and intellectual ability are so deeply engrained through standard language ideology that peoples’ bodies themselves are stigmatized even when they haven’t uttered a word. This, of course, is an inevitable consequence of what writing and rhetoric scholar Asao Inoue calls “white language supremacy” and what Baker-Bell calls “anti-

Black linguistic racism.” “When we read the words that come from [others’] bodies [...], we read those bodies as well,” argues Inoue, “and by reading those bodies we also read the words they present to us; some may bear/bare stigmas, some may not” (“Friday Plenary Address” 144).

It is because of this shared concern that we urge you to ask, “What color is my voice?”

As you’ll see in the narratives that follow, which were written by the two of us coauthors who were community college students in Kristin’s first-year writing courses, we believe this reflective work is an important first step in resisting white language supremacy. It’s especially important to do this work in educational settings, because education influences society, and because a collective voice (such as many voices of students in a class or a school) are more powerful than a single voice. We have three hopes for sharing our stories. We hope that those who’ve been forced to surrender their voice to an impossible standard will find solidarity. We hope that all readers will begin or continue to ask hard questions about voice and power.

And we hope that all readers will do something in response, writing our way into finding our voice even in academic writing.

Writing Privileges from the “Good Writer”: An’s Story

I was lucky enough to grow up in a house that loved reading. My mom was a bookworm who read to me while I was still in the womb. Childhood was full of fairy tales and endless books using all kinds of language. The thee’s and the thou’s and the damsels in distress, I gobbled those stories up like Cheerios. Often, I would get busted for reading under the covers with my Hello Kitty flashlight. I’d say I was sorry, but it wasn’t my fault that stories got so much better after dark. Over the years my books and

personal libraries were replaced by an iPhone, late-night reads became late-night texts, and “fancy language” went from being words of kings and queens to MLA format. As far away as childhood was, I can still say that my background affects the verbiage I use today.

Speaking of background, let’s take it back, way back to 1991, the year my parents arrived.

My parents are Vietnamese immigrants who came to this country riding on the promise of a better future for their not-yet-born kids (me and my sister). America was their ticket to success, and they made sure not to squander a second of it. Both of my parents graduated with Bachelor’s degrees in New York and made it a point to value education above all else. My mom was a Special Ed teacher before she had me, and my dad was a math substitute all throughout my adolescence. As for me, I started pre-school ASAP and although I only remember how fun it was to play with giant bins of sand, I’m sure that going there benefitted me linguistically. Going on to elementary school, I recall reading absolutely anything and everything from cereal boxes to captions on the TV. In middle school the reading tests we did were my best tests (sorry, math teachers). I loved the thrill of reading faster and faster, zooming through the paragraphs and climbing the ladder of success. Sooner rather than later, it was clear to me that I was equipped with an arsenal of vocabulary. Reading felt like a train steadily chugging along with no reason to stop. But this was not the case for everyone. While I counted down the minutes left in class so I could race to the library, others around me avoided reading like the plague. Some simply had better things to do, like talk to their crushes at their lockers or gossip in the bathrooms. However, for some of my peers, the thought of picking up a book for leisure caused more stress than comfort. They only read books assigned for class, and even then those stories felt boring or overwhelming—the farthest thing from enjoyable. While reading for me felt like my greatest escape, my friends saw it as the greatest chore. I did not fully understand why this may have been

until entering college. This was when I started learning more about how reading and writing experiences in childhood can affect people for the rest of their lives.

As an Early Childhood Education major, I am taking courses about childhood development, and some of the things I've learned have been truly eye opening. For example, one of my classes focuses on how to use Art Integration in all subjects in order to give students creative outlets. Something we recently discussed was the concept of “art scars.” Art scars refer to past traumas that students have around art. Often, in childhood, students will experience shame or harsh criticism of their creativity from their peers or their teachers. This trauma can cause people to lose their sense of creativity entirely and can affect them well into adulthood. An example we spoke about in class was a story of a student applying to college. He flew through his application with full confidence, but when he was asked to draw an image of what represented him as a person, he broke down in tears, and ended up throwing his application away.

In the same way, I believe that people have “writing scars.” Throughout school, I had various friends tell me that they were bad at writing. I took that statement as a call to action and stepped in as human Grammarly— reading through numerous essays, tweaking them here and there so that they sounded “more academic.” What I ended up noticing is that the essays that they gave me ended up sounding nothing like the final product that I produced. In making their writing “better,” what I actually did was censor their voices, stripping their colorful essays of what made them profound and thought provoking. Without knowing it, I was reinforcing what their past writing scars had told them, that they were no good at writing and that their language was not deemed academic. Perhaps, and I hate to admit this, I was the one giving them the writing scars and making them feel inadequate about their writing ability. This realization especially sucks because at the time, I genuinely felt that I was being a good friend by helping. I now understand how critical it is to believe that everyone's

stories are important, not just those who use “suburban” vocab or have perfected their citations. Looking back, I wish that I had just encouraged them to use more of the language that made them feel comfortable and heard. Instead, I took their narratives and shoved them into a box when I should have been the friend to set them free.

To me, writing is freedom.

I am a woman who feels with ferocity, and I love to express those feelings and be loud and pissed off and powerful. Writing should be used to empower people, not make them doubt their abilities. Often, writing can be cathartic or an emotional release. I know that that is what it feels like to me. The problem is that the academic writing standards that we currently have in place are way too rigid and, quite frankly, boring. Which is not how it's supposed to be. When it comes to my own assignments, I find that in order to do well, my deep connection to my writing is something that I have to erase completely. But that SUCKS! I want to write the way I speak and to be able to share my story. I want to use expressions and italics and exclamation points. I want my bold points to be **bold** and for my essays to make people laugh or cry. Ultimately, I want my writing to sound like *me*. I recognize that it is much easier for me to excel in writing than it is for others who do not share my background. All my life I have had every chance to do well in English class, and this in itself is a blessing. My language doesn't get nearly as much scrutiny as others do, and that's not fair. I am not “better” at writing, I am not smarter or superior or even the best at writing this. The only thing that separates me from someone who is deemed a “bad writer” is access to opportunities. *Everyone* is a good writer. Because everyone who writes tells a story.

I have so much love for writing, and I wish that everyone else had the opportunity to feel the same. But truly, all it comes down to is the fact that I was lucky enough to grow up in a house that loved reading.

Writing While Black: AJ's Story

Growing up as a young Black man in the white suburbs of Chicago, I have experienced so much judgement and backlash when writing and how I'm viewed as uneducated due to my writing. **Even after completing my associate's degree.** I still feel stuck in writer's block every time I am tasked with a writing project or assignment. Recently I was involved in a motorcycle accident that temporarily made me unable to type. Both writer's block and this accident have made it really hard to write this chapter. So what I decided to do is get creative and try from a different angle. Kristin and I decided to have a conversation, transcribe it, and share pieces of our conversation with you.² Sometimes, life circumstances limit what we can do, so we gotta be flexible, and this is one of those situations.

Kristin: Can you talk to me about some experiences you've had that stand out to you about your writing for school?

AJ: So you know how when you're a kid, you're taught—what is it called, the—the correct “**English**,” or the correct way how you should write or say things. But then once you're—as you grow up, especially when—growing up Black [...] it's like learning two languages because you go to school and they teach you, “Oh, this word, you know, means this. And this is how you should use this word, this is how you should use it in a sentence, and you use this many words in a sentence and you use a comma, and this is how

2. Whenever you see [...] (an ellipsis), we've cut out a word or words to keep focused on the parts we feel are most important to share.

you properly do something.” And then you go home and then you pick up on vocabulary words, you pick up on how your [...] culture speaks and you’re [...] going in two different worlds because you tryna learn about your culture and how *they* speak, and then you grasp onto *that*. But then you going back to school and you tryna grasp onto *that*. But then let’s say a teacher writes you an assignment about “what do you think?” Oh, like a perfect question I just had recently asked: “What do you think, why is police recruiting down nationwide?” And then “what do you see as the problem, and do you see a remedy?” Now, you could choose two different options on how you can respond. [...] You can respond to the white version and use what you think that the audience would like, which is the white audience, or you could respond [...] how you truly feel about it, but when you try to respond how you truly feel about it, [...] you have to worry about who’s gonna be reading it and [...] what the type of audience is going to be reading it and how people will judge you on writing that. Does that make sense?

Kristin: Yeah. So are you talking about the response that you give, or are you talking about the way that you—your voice in your writing?

AJ: Yeah—it’s kind of both [...], because if you give the response that you believe in [...] I might get graded poorly on it, and I can’t voice how I really feel or speak how I really feel about the [thing I’m supposed to be writing about]. [...] In your mind you thinkin, am I writing for a white audience? When I get the assignment, I gotta think, “OK, who’s gonna be reading it?” If you know your teacher is white, then you’d be like, “OK, my teacher is white. So let me sound *this* way because I think this’ll impress my teacher, but I really don’t *like* how I’m putting this.” I’m not gonna

really add *flavor* to it, or add how I really *feel* about it. But I wanna respond how I think that the teacher would like. Does that make sense?

Kristin: Yeah. So would you say that race is the first, or one of the first, considerations that you think about when you're writing for someone else?

AJ: Oh absolutely. That's the *first* thing that comes to my mind.

Kristin: So what about a topic that's not about police, like anything having to do with law enforcement, for example? Like for your meteorology class, or—

AJ: Doesn't matter. Because the first thing comes to my mind is that—I'm writing something, right? I'm gonna get judged automatically about what I'm writing about. Regardless. And there's always gonna be somebody that don't like what I say, but [...] I'm gonna try to sound *proper* [...] regardless of if I don't know if the teacher is white or black, whatever. I'm gonna try to sound proper because if I try to speak [...] using African-American Ebonics language, if I speak with slang and talk using slang words, then I'm gonna be viewed as *uneducated* or poor—poor choice of words, you know. People are not gonna try to validate my argument because the type of words that I'm using. Now, if I were to sound very *proper*, I'm still gonna get judged, but I may have a slim chance than if I were to use slang words to explain where I'm coming from.

Kristin: Have you ever felt like you could write in ways that felt really authentic to you?

AJ: No, I don't think so. Not at all. I feel like it's all sugar-coated and watered down. It's like you're beating around the bush. You're at the top of the surface, but you're not going *underneath* the surface.

Because why even try if [...] Black people incapable of, aren't capable of writing in a efficient and proper way.

Kristin: Where do you get that message from?

AJ: I just think it's the *experiences* like, you know—I think it has to probably tie back to going to middle school and high school, being shamed in front of the whole class. I just feel like those experiences shape our way of thinking—when you go through an experience like that, it makes you think, like, damn, maybe I *am* not good enough to do this.

Kristin: Would you be comfortable telling me about those experiences?

AJ: Yeah. I had to write this essay for high school; it was called the Pettus Bridge Essay. Of course, it was about violence against Black people, and I fucking hated it. It was traumatizing learning about that in a white setting when you're one of the only Black people in the class. And this teacher—it's not the shit that he would say that would be racist, it was the *antagonizing* shit that he would *do* that made me believe he was racist. We would turn in our essays on Friday, and during class on Monday, he would call groups of people up, have them stand in a line, give them back their essays, and talk to each person for 30 to 45 seconds on what they can do to improve. And he got to the last three people—and what a coincidence that we're all Black—and everybody was up and down in their seats, and no problems. And then like, the three Black people, it was like—I feel like I was standing in the courtroom in front of a fuckin judge, because we're *all* standing in front of him, he's all telling us how, “Oh, this isn't good. Look how all the Black students didn't do well on their assignments.” We all got like Cs and Ds, and we still talk about it to this day, [the teacher said,] “Oh, if you want a good grade, you'll have to

rewrite it over again in a different way—if you do it this way, improve here and there. And that shapes the way of you writing in the future, because now you thinking like, “Damn, I can’t really explain how I feel or what I think about this situation, because now I’m second-guessing every goddamn thing, thinking like, ‘I don’t know where to start. Does this sound good?’” And you know, *that’s* what makes writing so difficult. That shit right there. Experiences like that. Where you have someone that kinda shames you growing up, or someone shames you for your writing like that, it shapes you into a way of thinking that you’re not capable of being a good writer or not being a good, efficient, and proper writer, because everything you do, you feel like it’s not good enough.

Kristin: Are there situations in school where you’ve been having to write and you felt like you *were* able to move past that writer’s block?

AJ: It’s not something that you could just move past. I’m *still* not past it, cuz it’s like even with different teachers, I still have that in the back of my mind when it comes to writing. That’s not the first experience of me dealing with something like that one teacher, but just that one experience could impact you writing in your whole life because it’s just like—that was just too much for me, you know? That was *sophomore year in high school*. And to this day, I *still* have that same problem of second-guessing everything, and that’s [...] why I hate writing assignments so much. I mean, I’ll rather do a essay than do math. But it’s just like it takes so much longer to write because you’re second guessing everything. You write two pages? “Oh, that don’t sound— that don’t—I don’t think that’s right.” You know? You’re thinking you’re not good enough to write. [. . .] All it takes is one experience, is a white

person to say—or, put you, like, make you feel like you're *beneath* them, and then it just impacts your writing, and then it'll fuck you up writing moving forward.

Kristin: And you can't—

AJ: And you can't get past it because that one experience is in your mind.

Where We Go from Here

The goal of empowering writers by preparing them to write in contexts where they *will* be judged for deviations from the “standard” might seem like a good one—people trying to help others to succeed in life. But with code-switching, the fact that the “standard” was set by the people who have historically had the most resources remains unchallenged—and that, we believe, is a huge oversight. “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” wrote Audre Lorde in a book titled for that quote. “They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” In other words, if we continue to follow the status quo with our academic writing and the teaching of it, we’ll never change white language supremacy. Black women like Rachel Jeantel still won’t be believed or taken seriously because she talks (or writes) in a stigmatized dialect (or language, depending on how you categorize AAVE). So even though students in higher education have become more diverse, the standards and expectations have not changed to reflect that diversity—and white supremacy lives on.

Looking back on all the reading we’ve done for college, the books and articles that have stayed with us most are written by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who’ve written about brilliant, complex ideas—with a voice. The language they use reflects the person behind those words and ideas. Their radical academic

writing pushes us to ask hard questions about language and power, questions that unsettle the paralyzing fear of failure that so many students *always* carry because they've been socialized to believe their language and thus their intelligence is inferior, as AJ's story exemplifies. It is for these students and *all* students who believe their voice doesn't belong in higher education or professional workplaces—a belief rooted in white supremacy—that we urge us all to ponder how our own voices show up in our academic writing—or how they're silenced, and what we want to do with that knowledge.

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Teacher Resources for “What Color Is My Voice? Academic Writing and the Myth of Standard English”

Overview and Teaching Strategies

One thing I (Kristin) have learned through experience with doing anti-racist work in writing classes—such as engaging students in discussions about white language supremacy—is the importance of working through the material and hard questions that come up before I ever introduce the concepts to students. I’ve also learned the importance of developing my own racial literacy beyond a basic understanding of white privilege and structural racism as a precursor to doing this work, because antiracism is personal and powerful, white fragility (DiAngelo) is real, and whiteness (Frye) doesn’t depend on a person’s racial identity (though of course white people are more likely to be whitely). And I’ve learned both firsthand and through collaborating with colleagues how difficult this internal work is and how easy it is to unconsciously slip into Habits of White Language (HOWL; Inoue, *Above the Well*) even while we’re consciously trying to confront them.

For these reasons, our teaching strategies begin with the recommendation that teachers do some difficult introspective work first. Write out your responses to the questions for writing and discussion below. Think about your own voice in academic writing, what you like about your voice and what you dislike about it, what your thoughts are on language diversity in academic writing, what unresolved questions linger for you and how you’re working through those questions, who some of your favorite academic writers and/or texts are, and so on. Reflect on the identities you bring to the classroom, how those identities impact your stance on language diversity and antiracism, and in what

ways you will need to pay careful attention to those identities (i.e., worldviews and habits) as you engage students in these conversations. Also think about how your grading policy and assessment practices function in your class alongside these discussions about voice. We strongly urge you to read Asao Inoue's *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*, ensuring that your policies and other elements of the assessment ecology that is your writing class will support the critical work this chapter invites students to do. Once you've laid that groundwork you can think about how this chapter will fit into your overall plans for the course.

We envision this chapter as being most useful early in a course, because it introduces students to concepts that we hope will impact their writing throughout that course. The longer students have to engage with these ideas and think critically about their own voice and the value of language diversity in academic writing, and the more practice students get writing with these ideas in mind, the better equipped they will be to continue and defend this revolutionary work in future classes. In turn, the antiracist work you begin here will be more likely to extend beyond your class.

Because race and voice are deeply connected, and because the nature of race as a social and political construct (and not a biological one) is often unfamiliar and/or controversial, you will likely need to teach students about racial literacy. You will also need to make explicit connections between racial literacy and writing classes, especially when those classes are gen-ed requirements meant to teach writing for academic purposes. We intend for this chapter to help make that connection, drawing students' attention to normalized values and perspectives that inform the standards we're taught are objective and innocuous. We recommend that you and students read this chapter alongside a few other open-access texts that we describe below. These texts will help contextualize and deepen readers' understanding of the inescapably political nature of writing. They will also stimulate critical thought about how students might use their writing for social change.

Three chapters in *Writing Spaces*, Vol. 4 complement this chapter. Mary Lee Grayson's "Writing toward Racial Literacy" explains the relevance of race and racism to writing classes and guides readers in thinking through how race and racism impact their lives no matter their racial identity. We recommend that students read Grayson's chapter before ours to develop a foundational understanding of the systemic issues underlying voice as we discuss it here. Students might also find Cristina Sánchez-Martín's chapter, "Beyond Language Difference in Writing: Investigating Complex and Equitable Language Practices," helpful for thinking about how multilingual writers commonly engage in "'translingual' practices by which writers move across traditional understandings of separate languages" (270). Sánchez-Martín shares multiple examples of translingualism in both popular *and* academic texts, arguing that translingual approaches to writing can address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Translingualism and its contributions to academic writing are also core concepts in "Workin' Languages: Who We Are Matters in Our Writing," by Sara P. Alvarez, Amy J. Wan, and Eunjeong Lee. In this chapter, Alvarez, Wan, and Lee offer strategies for and approaches to integrating diverse language practices in academic writing that they have gleaned through personal experience.

This chapter might be especially useful as a follow-up to our discussion of voice because it provides a theoretical lens that students can adopt as they write: that of the "language architect." Significantly, these authors account for the constraints a writer's subjectivity places on her rhetorical situation, clarifying that "many of us whose languages are racialized in various ways may have to work their academic writing contexts more so, or differently" (6). This point alone yields opportunities for discussing how voice and subjectivity function in tandem, which we discuss in our chapter, and how that reality impacts the choices available to individual writers.

In addition to these *Writing Spaces* chapters, we recommend that teachers (and possibly students) familiarize themselves with

the concept of *whiteness*, which Marilyn Frye distinguishes from whiteness and defines as “a deeply ingrained way of being in the world” (qtd. in Kim and Olson 87) and Dae-Joong Kim and Bobbi Olson add is an “epistemological worldview, a lens of judgment” (124). This distinction might help to mitigate eruptions of students’ (and teachers’) white fragility by conveying that just as race isn’t a biological reality, so too the whiteness worldview that sustains white language supremacy (Inoue, *Antiracist Writing*) isn’t intrinsic or limited to white people. In other words, some Black, Indigenous, and People of Color adopt whiteness perspectives about language, and some white people actively challenge those perspectives. This clarification can help to abate tension that might otherwise stall important and productive conversations about linguistic racism.

Following are some questions to stimulate critical thought and activity suggestions to help students identify standard language ideology in their everyday worlds and reflect on its impact on their own and others’ lives.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

The following questions would work well for writing in class or out of class and then discussing. They could also be seeds for projects investigating language difference and ideology, perhaps resulting in presentations or a gallery of multimodal or written texts about students’ findings.

Often, we don’t notice something’s existence until we feel its absence, so you might not realize how important language is to your identity or your communities. It might help to think of a time when you felt you couldn’t write or speak in ways that felt natural to you, authentic. Or a time when you felt like you had to translate a concept from one of your communities (for example, a religious community, a scientific community, or a cultural/heritage community) to someone outside that community. It could be a

minor moment or a more involved conversation about a concept. What was that experience like? How did you feel during it? What made you realize that you were a part of that community to begin with?

Make a list or draw a mind map of four or five communities you're part of, like a church community, a neighborhood, an online interest group, etc. Then, for each community listed, answer the following questions: What does it mean to be part of this community? In other words, what values do you share? What interests do you share? What specific beliefs about people, things, reality, etc. do you share? What are some common terms or phrases that you use—terms or phrases that someone outside your community might not understand but that anyone in your community would most likely understand? What do those terms or phrases mean to you, and why are they significant to your community? How do they reflect what is important to you?

In a speech addressing college writing teachers, Asao Inoue asked, “Which bodies historically have had the privilege to speak and write the most in civic life and in the academy? Whose words have been validated as history, truth, knowledge, story, the most throughout history? Who sits in the teacher’s chair [...]?” (“How Do We Language” 136). Based on your experiences in K-12 and even college so far, how would you answer Inoue’s questions? How might sharing identity characteristics (like race, gender, socioeconomic class, etc.) with these teachers, writers, speakers, politicians, and so on affect students who share them both in school and outside school? Think broadly about potential effects on students’ thoughts and/or emotions as well as situations they might (or might not) encounter. Make your ideas here as specific as you can. Then consider the alternative. What is at stake for the people who do not share these identity characteristics? How might their experiences in school be impacted? How might their thoughts and emotions be impacted, and how might those impacts affect their experiences?

“The idea that there is one correct way of writing devalues

the writing, thoughts, intelligence, and identities of people from lower-class backgrounds,” argues Anjali Pattanayak (85). What are some examples of interactions you’ve either experienced or observed where a strongly held belief in standard English led someone’s intelligence or identity to be stigmatized? Have you had these thoughts yourself? What do you make of them given what you’ve read in this chapter?

Spend a few minutes reflecting, in writing, on these questions: Whose voice do I hear in my writing, and why? What does this voice reveal about my identity as a writer, and how do I feel about what I uncover? What might I want to do more of, or differently? What might happen if I make these changes, and how do I feel about those potential outcomes? What kinds of support do I need for finding my voice in academic writing, and where can I find that support at this school?

In their introduction to *Code-Meshing as World English*, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Aja Y. Martinez, and Julie Naviaux pose an incisive question: “What if, during formal language instruction, native English speakers and English language learners were exposed to a variety of Englishes, both from regions of their countries and from around the globe? [...] What if all English users were not only encouraged to understand varieties of English but also allowed to fluidly use them in both formal and informal contexts?” (xx). What do you think of this proposal to resist standard language ideology in classes where writing is taught? How might this change affect teachers? How might it affect students? Do you think it might affect life outside of school? If so, what possibilities do you imagine?

Sample Activities

Following are a couple of activities or activity ideas that I (Kristin) have used to raise students’ awareness of standard language

ideology and its implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion and of the central role of language to being human.

Standard Language Ideology in Memes and TikToks

Have students find memes or short videos (like TikToks) about language that demonstrate standard language ideology. One I often bring to class is a meme with a white man in a three-piece suit holding a top hat and saying, “When you say ‘I seen,’ I assume you won’t finish that sentence with ‘the inside of a book.’ I see. I saw. I have seen.” We discuss whose languaging the meme critiques (speakers of Black English) and what it communicates about the people associated with that languaging (Black Americans). We also discuss the significance of the image and what it communicates, and we discuss the sociocultural significance of memes in general, connecting back to the roles that educational institutions play in reproducing and/or resisting harmful stereotypes.

After students find their own memes or short videos, ask students to write about each one, describing it and answering the following questions: 1) What does this meme/video communicate or imply about “correctness” in language use?, 2) How does this meme/video affect, reinforce, or challenge your own perceptions of people?, 3) What assumptions is the creator of this text making about communication, and how do those assumptions connect to your own?, 4) How might these assumptions and perceptions reinforce inequality? You can also have students analyze the rhetorical situation of the text and where they found it and reflect on the significance of various parts of this rhetorical situation (like when and where it’s published and how it circulates).

Language as “The Measure of Our Lives”

Assign students to watch, listen to, and/or read Toni Morrison’s Nobel Lecture for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, available as an audio file and transcript at NobelPrize.org. In this lecture, Toni Morrison speaks of language as a living being—a bird—held in the hands of some young people who visit a wise, old, blind Black woman to mock her for her blindness. The old woman considers this bird they bring—language—to be “partly [. . .] a system, partly [. . .] a living thing over which one has control, but mostly [. . .] agency—as an act with consequences.” In the story Morrison tells, the woman draws the young people’s attention away from the hands holding the bird, those with power over it, and to the bird itself—language—“the instrument through which that power is exercised.” Near the end of the lecture, Morrison says, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” That agency, the verb-y-ness of language, and the extent to which we use it is our legacy.

Morrison’s lecture is especially relevant to this chapter because in it, she identifies several threats to language-as-agency, or voice as we have used it in this chapter. For example, she directly critiques “the proud but calcified language of the academy” and “the commodity driven language of science” as “oppressive language,” which she says “does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.” And she explicitly connects “the policing languages of mastery” to discrimination, to “sexist language, racist language, theistic language.” Just as the story Morrison tells ends by calling attention to the young people’s agency—“[W]hat I do know is that [the bird] is in your hands. It is in your hands,” says the old blind woman—so Morrison concludes the lecture by imagining the woman’s response as a reflection on the agentive power of languaging together. Having read Morrison’s text and this chapter side-by-side, students could then develop a written or multimodal

project where they create their own metaphor for their own voice and explain that metaphor along with its significance to them, especially in light of this chapter. I (Kristin) am purposefully leaving assignment possibilities vague here to encourage creative teacher responses that 1) make use of the wide-ranging analog and digital technologies available to students and 2) honor individual teachers' knowledge of/comfort with assigning and responding to multimodal projects.

Language Structure and Style in Students' Own Communities

If you're using this chapter with advanced undergraduates and beyond, you might want to invite students to think even more deeply and critically about the relationships between language and identity (specifically, worldview). You could, for example, ask students to find texts in their communities and analyze the language in those texts, looking carefully at sentence structure, style, and so on. Two texts that work well to set up such more advanced assignments are Lera Boroditsky's 2018 TED Talk, "How Language Shapes the Way We Think," and June Jordan's "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan."

Language isn't just something we create, Boroditsky, a cognitive scientist, argues; it creates us, how we think and view the world: "research shows us that the languages we speak not only reflect or express our thoughts, but also shape the very thoughts we wish to express. The structures that exist in our languages profoundly shape how we construct reality" ("Lost" 145). For example, languages shape how we think about space and time as well as cause-and-effect relationships. They also reflect and shape our value system. Black English, for example, reveals a person-first value system, "a distinctive Black value system" embodied through "the presence of life, voice, and clarity" in words and sentence structures, explained

the late writer and professor June Jordan (367). “You cannot ‘translate’ instances of Standard English preoccupied with abstraction or with nothing/nobody evidently alive, into Black English,” she continued. “That would warp the language into uses antithetical to the guiding perspective of its community of users. Rather you must first change those Standard English sentences, themselves, into ideas consistent with the person-centered assumptions of Black English” (368).

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3. Punctuation's Rhetorical Effects

KEVIN CASSELL

Overview

Many students tend to think of punctuation as governed by a set of rules. This chapter encourages them to conceive of punctuation as a system of conventions, which includes standard expectations of correct usage—certain “rules”—but applies them within a broader rhetorical context. After distinguishing between punctuation and grammar (the two terms are often associated), students are provided with three reading strategies to help them become aware of how punctuation operates in printed texts. The first strategy, explicit reading, adopts *Writing Spaces* author Mike Bunn's Reading Like a Writer (RLW) approach, but emphasizes a reading style that is sensory. The second strategy, visual reading, asks students to adopt a “typographical perspective” when reading so that they literally *see* how punctuation operates. The third one, aural reading, asks them to *listen* – possibly by reading aloud – to how punctuation conveys an author's tone of voice, which can help to illustrate context. Palpably experiencing punctuation usage while reading will help students use it with confidence and facility in their own writing.

This chapter accommodates readers with hearing or visual impairments so they may participate in this sensory reading.

I recently shared a few short written expressions with students in my first-year writing class at the University of Arizona.* Each

one was a sentence or two long and conveyed a different idea that related to language use. I didn't tell my students who wrote them. I just projected each one on the classroom screen and asked them what they thought. They responded to the ideas of each quite well— until I put this final one up for them to read:

Always's; use the proper name, for thing's. Fear, of a name
increase's fear, of the thing, itself.

Not a single student engaged with the *idea* here – that the way something's named can cause people to have an emotional response to it. Instead, they severely critiqued the writing itself. As I had expected, they said the writer had “bad,” “clumsy,” even “horrible” grammar. When I asked for examples of this bad grammar, they said the apostrophes were wrong, the semicolon didn't belong there, and there were too many incorrectly placed commas. I completely agreed with the problems they pointed out – except one.

If you ignore the apostrophes, the semicolon, and the commas, then you'll see that the *grammar* of this two-sentence expression is fine. In fact, the original version had none of those punctuation marks. I put them there after taking it from one of the most popular books in the world – J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. If you've read this book, you may remember the half-blood wizard Professor Dumbledore explaining to young Harry why he calls the villainous Voldermort by his real name and not “the Dark Lord” or “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,” which are terms that undeservedly inflate his status to mythic proportions (298). Here are the actual two sentences before I got my hands on them:

Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name
increases fear of the thing itself.

I incorrectly punctuated these sentences to demonstrate two things. First, I want to point out that there is a difference

between grammar and punctuation. Grammar refers to the structure of sentences. If I had changed the *grammar* of the first sentence, it would have come out as *The proper name for things always use* or, worse, *Things the proper name always use for*. Instead, I just added a number of punctuation marks in places where they didn't belong, which demonstrates my second point: nonstandard use of punctuation not only can confuse or distract readers, it gives them the impression that you can't write well, that you have "bad grammar" even though your sentences may be grammatically sound.

Many of us automatically connect the words *grammar* and *punctuation* because we tend to think of them together. Why is that? I think it goes back to our early school days when we first started to learn how to write in English. We learned that we couldn't arbitrarily string phrases into sentences and sentences into paragraphs on a whim. There were "rules" to follow—and if we didn't follow the rules, our papers would come back scrawled upon with lots of marks we couldn't comprehend.

Let's talk for a moment about these "rules." You may be surprised to know that many writing instructors, including me, are uncomfortable with this term because it sounds so fixed and rigid. We know that language is fluid and changes when we use it in different situations. Therefore, instead of "rules," we prefer to use the more flexible word *conventions*, which includes standard expectations of correct usage—certain "rules"—but applies them within a broader context in which authors frequently have options on how and when to use punctuation. In other words, we need to use punctuation effectively, not *just* correctly.

This chapter isn't going to teach you the right and wrong ways to use punctuation marks. Instead, it's going to make explicit things we already *know* about punctuation so that we can understand it better and use it with expression and facility. I just punctuated

the word “know” using *italics*¹ to stress that, yes, we are all pretty familiar with punctuation simply through our ongoing exposure to written English. All learners of English implicitly acquire this familiarity by reading books, social media posts, posters, road signs, recipes, and even the privacy policies of software products that we download to our computers (yeah, right!). Still, many of us – including native English speakers – need to explicitly learn how punctuation operates. One way to do that is to consult the handbooks and online tutorials where we can read about the standard usage expectations – including “rules” – of punctuation and see correct examples. But there are other ways to learn about punctuation that are not beholden to rules, and this essay is going to show you a couple of them. All you need are these pages you’re reading now and a perceptive reading style that another *Writing Spaces* author, Mike Bunn, calls RLW – “Reading Like a Writer.” In order to help you understand how punctuation operates in written English, I’m going to ask you to adopt an RLW approach that is *sensory* – that is, I want you to both *see* and *hear* how punctuation operates on whatever page you’re reading, including this one. There are three strategies I’m going to go over with you that I think will help you learn how to use punctuation effectively in your own writing:

1. Explicit Learning: We all learn punctuation in two ways:
implicitly (by being exposed to it whenever we read something in English) and *explicitly* (by consciously becoming aware of

1. In “How to Teach Punctuation,” Ralph H. Singleton argues that *italics* is one of several devices that ought to be taught along with punctuation, since their purpose and use are the same (112). In this chapter I treat *italics* as a form of punctuation.

how it's used and for what purposes). RLW is a form of explicit learning and the initial strategy upon which the next two are based.

2. Visual Reading: This RLW strategy involves *looking at* the typography of a page or screen that you're reading and *seeing* how punctuation structures the meaning and expression of what we read and write. (If you are nonsighted, of course, this kind of visual reading would be accomplished by setting your screen reader – if possible – to call out all the marks of punctuation on the text being transcribed. I'll tell you when to do that.) When we read with such awareness, we learn explicitly things we already have an implicit familiarity with, including certain rules governing punctuation usage.
3. Aural Reading: This RLW strategy involves *hearing* how the prose in a text flows, often by *listening* to the “tone” of an author's voice. Italics, dashes, exclamation points, and even semicolons help express an author's tone – their attitude toward what they're writing about – as well as illustrate the context of the situation being described. Although this strategy can involve reading aloud and listening to how your own voice is shaped by punctuation, listening *imaginatively* – as some hearing-impaired readers or people who identify themselves as Deaf do – also works wonderfully.

These strategies are not meant to replace standard usage expectations of punctuation described in writing handbooks or online tutorials. They're simply ways to enhance your familiarity with how punctuation operates in written English so that you will use it effectively – *and correctly* – when you write your own texts. You can learn a whole lot about punctuation by becoming explicitly conscious of it while reading. My hope is that by doing so you will begin to think of it less as a set of “rules” and more as a system of conventions with considerable flexibility and important rhetorical effects.

Strategy 1: Learning Explicitly

If you've been writing in formal English for a long time, you probably don't think twice about putting periods at the end of sentences, commas after items in a list, or apostrophes in contractions like "I'm." You just do it out of habit because you've always done it that way (except perhaps when you're texting or messaging with family or friends). Why is that? In some cases, you were taught these standard usage conventions and have remembered them so well that you don't need to think about them anymore. In other cases, your repeated exposure to written English – through story books, novels, textbooks, menus, news articles, signs and posters – has allowed you to learn things without realizing you were learning. Cognitive psychologists and educational researchers call our ability to learn without conscious awareness *implicit learning*. By contrast, they define *explicit learning* as when we are consciously aware of what we're learning, like when we memorize grammar rules or times tables (Ellis, 3). Nancy Mann, a composition and rhetorical theorist, has described punctuation as something that "is often learned without teaching and more often than not learned despite much teaching" (359). She claims that punctuation decisions are often made by writers not because of what they've been explicitly taught in school – the "rules" – but because they have acquired an *unconscious* awareness of its structuring principles simply by reading and writing.

Since day one, we've been learning about the world implicitly as well as explicitly. We don't realize the implicit things we're learning, though, until we become conscious of them. This is how it is with punctuation. Rarely do we become explicitly aware of it unless it's really, not working the, way it should. When punctuation doesn't pop out and announce itself to readers like it does when it's not properly employed, it's invisible.

That's why it's important for us to make it visible. In his *Writing*

Spaces essay “How to Read Like a Writer,” Mike Bunn describes trying to read books while working in a theater with a lot of noise coming from the stage. By focusing intently on the language as he tried to concentrate, he realized that he was no longer reading like most of us read – as *readers*; instead, he was reading like a *writer*, paying close attention to “the interesting ways authors string words into phrases into paragraphs into entire books” (72). In school, we’ve been taught to read mainly for information and ideas. When we read for these things we default to reading like *readers*. When we read like *writers*, Bunn tells us, we pay attention to the text, to the choices authors make, the “techniques” they employ, which influence how readers respond to their writing (72). What is this author’s main idea? What’s their² purpose? What facts, descriptions, statistics, and historical accounts do they offer to illustrate or support their purpose or idea? He cites Charles Moran, an English professor at the University of Massachusetts, to illustrate what it means to RLW:

When we read like writers we understand and participate

2. Do you wonder if I made a mistake here? Should I have used “he or she” for “the author,” which is singular, instead of “they”? In this instance, I’m using what’s called the “singular they.” The singular they is used in common expressions like “Somebody left their credit card on the restaurant table.” Not only is it less cumbersome than “he or she,” it’s also a gender-neutral term that respectfully includes people who do not identify as either male or female. For these reasons, I use the singular they throughout this essay (More here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they).

in the writing. We see the choices the writer has made, and we see how the writer has coped with the consequences of those choices... We “see” what the writer is doing because we read as writers; we see because we have written ourselves and know the territory, know the feel of it, know some of the moves ourselves. (qtd. in Bunn, 75)

It’s interesting that Moran uses the verb *see* several times in this passage – even “quoting” it for emphasis – to illustrate the act of reading like writers. While Moran’s seemingly *sensory* approach to reading is more figurative than literal, he’s clearly advocating developing habits designed to make us explicitly learn what we already implicitly “know the feel of.” Let’s literally apply Moran’s reading-as-seeing metaphor by explicitly *looking* at the texts we read and *seeing* how punctuation functions in them. I call this next strategy “visual reading.”

Strategy 2: Visual Reading

This RLW strategy isn’t hard to do, but it can take a little getting used to. Reading visually is something we do all the time. For example, at the beginning of this essay I described a moment in a *Harry Potter* novel when the half-blood wizard Professor Dumbledore explains to young Harry why he calls the villainous Voldemort by his real name and not “the Dark Lord.” Even if you have never read a single *Harry Potter* book or seen any of the movie adaptations, when you read my brief description, did you not picture in your mind a smart, wizard-like man giving advice to a young boy about some mean-looking antagonist? If so, then you were in a sense reading visually; the words “wizard,” “professor,” “young Harry,” “villainous,” and “Dark Lord” helped paint a picture of a situation involving three different characters.

This kind of visual reading, though, is imaginative; we see the situation with our *minds*, not our actual eyes. In order to “see” how punctuation operates in written English, we need to look at it with our eyes. If, however, we are nonsighted or visually impaired (I am actually blind in one eye), then we need to imaginatively “see” the punctuation using a screen reader.

We seldom pay attention to the important ways punctuation shapes our reading of a text because few of us have been encouraged to adopt what composition theorist John Trimbur calls a “typographical perspective.” Typography is the appearance and style of printed language. Trimbur points out that essay writing has long been taught as a “process” in which “the page itself is of little account.” “As readers,” he points out, “we are supposedly not looking at the visual design but following the writer’s thoughts” (367). When reading for information, we seldom register what our eyes are actually *seeing*: that “writing is a visible language that is produced and circulated in material forms” (363) like the page you’re reading / looking at / seeing right now. When we visually read the typography, we begin to see things that we often take for granted. Punctuation is one of them.

While we may not be accustomed to reading with an explicit awareness of a text’s typography, we all do it occasionally. Have you ever had to write a research paper using MLA citation style? If so, you’ve probably looked at a sample Works Cited page to see how it’s set up. You saw, for example, that when citing an article from an academic journal you put the “article’s title in quotation marks” and the *journal’s title in italics*. You *looked* at the format, *saw* the conventions, and then did the same thing for your own Works Cited page. That’s an example of visually reading the typography of a text. With this in mind, I’m now going to ask you to do something kind of strange. You’ve probably never been asked to do this before, and it may take a moment or two to get used to it. But here goes. When you get to the end of this paragraph, come back and read it again *visually*, from a typographical perspective, so that you “see” the punctuation. With

this explicit awareness in mind, think about the purpose or effect of each mark. Are you ready? If so, open your eyes wide (or set your screen reader to call out all the punctuation marks). OK, let's do it. Ready. Get set . . . Go!

In the paragraph above, you “saw” ten different marks of punctuation. Some of them I had to use to meet standard usage expectations: periods to end sentences, apostrophes to make contractions or show possession, question marks to indicate questions, and commas to set apart clauses. Other punctuation marks I used – like the em dash, exclamation points, italics, ellipses, quotation marks to create emphasis, and even the parentheses— were optional, *rhetorical choices* I made to emphasize certain things and give my writing a colloquial style. I chose to use an ellipses (. . .) before the italicized exclamation Go! in order to create a slight pause and give dramatic effect to the assigned task. I could have used an em dash (Get set – Go!) or just a period (Get set. Go!), but I know from my own RLW experience that the ellipses is sometimes used to indicate a pause, and I wanted you to get a sense of anticipation, kind of like track runners feel when they're all lined up waiting for the start to a race.

I also know from my own RLW experience that my version of the ellipses is used primarily in informally written texts where readers are supposed to get a sense of the author's personality or attitude toward what they're writing about. Writing informally is another thing I and other *Writing Space* authors do with the hope that you, our student audience, will become engaged by silently listening to our voices as you read. Our writing often “sounds like” we're speaking. And punctuation plays a big role in conveying the tone – be it informal or formal – of an author's voice. Let's turn now to how punctuation can help our writing *sound*.

Strategy 3: Aural Reading

The word *aural* refers to the sense of hearing and, hence, the act of listening. The writing scholar Wendy Bishop tells us that “[i]f all our sentences, all our prose, followed ‘the rules’ . . . we’d lose something. We’d be bored to death. We wouldn’t ‘hear’ much from texts.” She advocates having a “flexible sentence strategy” that is shaped less by our concern with rules than with a desire “to create what we call style—your own best way of saying” (121-22). It’s interesting how Bishop describes one’s writing style as a way of “saying.” A sensory RLW approach involves more than looking at and seeing the elements of a printed text; it involves *listening* to the prose made up of those words as we read. We hear what the writer “says” while reading what they’ve written.

In addition to contributing to the flow and rhythm of a text, punctuation plays an important role in conveying an author’s voice. Voice is a rhetorical convention in multiple genres – blogs, news articles, opinion pieces, business letters, novels, poems, how-to guides, and, of course, essays. When we hear the term *voice* we immediately think of spoken articulation. But writing has voice too, and often that voice has a particular tone. As you read this chapter, can you hear my voice? If so, you’ll notice that, like others in *Writing Spaces*, it has an informal tone. I use contractions (*it’s*, *don’t*) and personal pronouns (*I*, *you*, *we*) in an attempt to convey the impression that I’m talking to you. My purpose is to share with you, my audience, my belief that punctuation matters more than we realize, and part of my rhetorical strategy is to write in a way that personalizes your reading of my essay. If my voice is friendly, conversational, and even a little passionate about (*drumroll, please!*) punctuation, then hopefully you’ll keep reading and come to share my view. And as you can see with your own typographically trained eyes, I draw from a battery of punctuation marks to help me out.

I began this chapter with a two-sentence expression that was

so poorly punctuated it distracted people from engaging with the meaning. If you go back and read it again, you'll realize that it's almost impossible to read aloud. Because we couldn't really hear what it was saying, it failed to create a context – convey meaning – that we could relate to our own experiences. Let's bring this chapter to a close with another two-sentence expression, but this time I'm going to punctuate the sentences correctly, but in different ways, to demonstrate how punctuation gives a tone of voice to writing. As the punctuation changes, so too does the tone and, along with that, the context of each sentence. When he wrote "How to Read Like A Writer," Mike Bunn asked former students for feedback about how to read effectively in the writing class. One student said it was important to have a "context" for the text you're reading (76). Often that means identifying the author's purpose and intended audience. But context can often be discerned by listening to their tone of voice and identifying their attitude toward the subject or situation being described. As you will see, even though the words remain the same, the punctuation conveys a very different tone and context for a certain situation.

First, let's begin with no punctuation whatsoever. Here is the two-sentence expression:

they didnt mislead they flat out lied

If the author has an attitude here, it's hard to hear because something essential – punctuation – is missing. It may work as a text message where the writers know the context of what's being discussed, but here it's just messy writing on a page. Let's meet the expectations of readers by putting in some standard punctuation marks. Here's the first version, which I'll call expression A:

They didn't mislead. They flat-out lied.

After capitalizing the first word of each sentence, I put the required apostrophe in the contraction "don't," two periods at the

end of both sentences, and a hyphen in the compound adverb “flat-out” (when two words are joined to modify a noun or verb, we connect them with a hyphen). Now that the writing doesn’t distract by violating any “rules,” I can better hear the writer’s voice. It’s informal. I can tell by their use of “flat-out” – which is a colloquial, somewhat slangy term meaning *blatantly*, *purposely*, *without hesitation* – and their use of the contraction “don’t,” the informal version of “do not.” In addition, the tone of voice provides a little context to the situation being described here. The author seems to be directly stating a fact: They didn’t do this. They did that. Period. When I read it aloud and listen to my own voice, it sounds relatively informal but also kind of “factual.” There may be a little bias by the author toward the situation here, but the limited punctuation doesn’t emphasize it that much.

Now let’s listen to how the tone of voice changes when we punctuate this expression differently. First, please visually read the following two expressions from a typographical perspective (or set your screen reader to call out the punctuation marks), seeing how the punctuation marks help to give each one a distinct context. Then, with each context in mind, aurally read it – aloud if possible, or imaginatively with your inner voice – and listen to how your own voice changes to express the differences:

B. They didn’t mislead? They flat-out. . . lied?

C. They didn’t “mislead.” They flat-out *lied*.

The context implied by expression **B** is quite different from expression **A** that we just read. In expression **B**, the writer seems to be surprised by the news that this group of people lied, which is a more egregious act than simply misleading. The ellipses (. . .) gives me the impression that the harsh truth of the matter is slowly dawning on the writer. I therefore aurally read **B** with a naïve and incredulous tone of voice that tilted upwards (which English speakers tend to do when asking questions) and then paused – with a little shudder even – before uttering that fatal final word. The punctuation of expression **C**, on the other hand,

gives me the impression that the writer knows precisely what this unethical group of people did. The quotation marks suggest that this group actually used the word “mislead” to diminish the severity of their dishonesty. The author “quotes” their misleading use of “mislead” and then emphasizes that dishonesty by italicizing the word *lied*. Unlike expressions **A** and (especially) **B**, I get the impression of a pretty strong bias here, and so I read aloud **C** with a sarcastic tone of voice, emphasizing the quoted term “mislead” and emphasizing even more strongly the italicized term *lied*.

Do you see how punctuation, by conveying the tone of an author’s voice, can also illustrate the context of a situation being described? Although expressions **A**, **B**, and **C** have the same basic structure and describe a specific situation, the punctuation provides us with different ways of perceiving that situation. Interesting, huh? Just don’t lose sight of the fact that the punctuation in all three expressions is correctly employed so as not to break any rules and distract readers.

Final Words

As you can see, we can actually learn a lot about writing simply by paying explicit attention to those inconspicuous punctuation marks we’re accustomed to gliding over as we read. Sometimes we can even learn the rules themselves, though it’s always a good idea to double-check our assumptions with reference to a trustworthy source. Ultimately, though, we should care about punctuation not because of the rules but because of our readers. Writing that’s well punctuated is more than just “correct.” It’s readable, informative, and often even engaging. In short, it’s rhetorically effective.

Questions

1. This chapter encourages you to read both visually and aurally so that you *see* and *hear* how punctuation functions in writing. Is this kind of reading something that comes easily to you, or do you have to work at it? Do you think it's possible to read for entertainment or information at the same time that you are paying attention to the look and sound of writing?
2. Some writers who "listen" to writing acknowledge the role punctuation plays in making texts appeal to the ear. Theodor Adorno, a 20th century philosopher, compared punctuation to music (300). The writer Lynn Truss claims that "punctuation directs you how to read, in the way musical notation directs a musician how to play" (20). What do you think about this analogy? What else might you compare punctuation to, and why?
3. In this chapter, the author re-punctuated a two-sentence expression ("They didn't mislead. They flat-out lied.") three ways. A famous philosopher, Rene Descartes, summed up his thinking with a famous axiom "*I think, therefore I am.*" (His original phrase, in Latin, is "*cogito, ergo sum.*") Go online and find out what "*I think, therefore I am*" means philosophically, then think (or talk with your peers) about how the single comma used in the original translation helps to express that idea. Afterwards, re-punctuate this expression in three or four ways so that it has three distinctly different voices and contexts. What would be the "philosophy" of each expression? Have fun with this one.

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Teacher Resources for Punctuation's Rhetorical Effects by Kevin Cassell

Overview and Teaching Strategies

Punctuation, along with grammar, has long been conceived of in Composition and Writing Studies as a Lower Order Concern. It is not unusual for college and university students to complete two semesters of first year writing without attending to punctuation in any meaningful way. Primarily this oversight – if it can be called that – is a result of the disciplinary privileging of process over product. We all know that knowledge of how to use semicolons and commas effectively is negligible if a writer doesn't have something worth punctuating in the first place. Hence we spend what precious little class time we have with our students focusing on Higher Order Concerns: developing a thesis or claim, writing with a central purpose for a target audience, organizing ideas and information, drafting and revising. We know that punctuation matters – after all, when we ourselves write essays and reports and emails and syllabi, we're generally pretty meticulous about how we use it. But as teachers, we don't have the time to cover the exhaustive number of standard usage expectations, the "rules" governing punctuation, that we've learned over time. That's why so many of us supplement our primary textbooks with writing handbooks (or link to online sites like Purdue Owl), which more often than not are used as a "reference" for students to consult on their own, usually during the editing stage of final drafts.

This essay offers an approach to punctuation that is not based on "rules." It doesn't tell students how to use punctuation correctly. Instead, it encourages them to become explicitly aware of punctuation as they read by *seeing* and *hearing* it, and ultimately *understanding* how it's employed for what purposes.

Standard usage expectations or “rules” are just one way of learning punctuation; reading with an awareness of how those marks (, : “ ? ; ‘ i –) operate in standard written English across multiple genres is a significant first step to learning punctuation – and many of us, I think, have learned usage in this manner. Yes, we need to know certain usage rules, but these can often be discerned (and sometimes implicitly learned) from reading with an awareness of punctuation as a textual feature that shapes phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Writing handbooks, online tutorials and guides are not the only way for students to become familiar with punctuation usage.

I introduce punctuation in my FYW courses early in the semester. I don’t discuss it solely in terms of editing and proofreading final drafts for the sake of correctness. Instead, I point out that it is a material and rhetorical element in the texts they read and plays a role in their reception of those texts. As shown in my essay, I distinguish between punctuation usage that is “required” (apostrophes to show contractions or possession, question marks for questions, periods to end sentences) and usage that is more flexible and oftentimes rhetorical (parentheses or em dashes, italics or bold, ellipses). I introduce students to the strategy of explicit reading, which I associate in my chapter, following Charles Moran and Mike Bunn, with “reading like a writer” (RLW). I bring up punctuation throughout the course, when appropriate, and often in relation to Higher Order Concerns like purpose, context, and especially audience. For example, when reading an essay – like a *Writing Spaces* chapter – I’ll ask students to choose a particular paragraph where the author makes a salient point or just says something memorable. After discussing that point in relation to the essay’s purpose, I’ll ask them to consider *how* that point or memorable statement is conveyed. This leads inevitably to the text of that paragraph and the sentences, words, and – yes – punctuation marks that compose it. Sometimes that punctuation supports an “aural” representation of an author’s voice (like my use of two em dashes around the word “yes” in the

previous sentence), which provides an occasion to consider how audience awareness informs certain choices the author makes during the writing process that are sometimes supported punctuationally.

I have emphasized multimodal reading strategies – reading as “seeing” and “hearing” especially – for some years now. (I don’t use the term multimodal in my chapter; I use the more common term “sensory.”) I believe that this style of reading, because it makes students conscious of how language functions as writing, helps them develop as writers. While I don’t eschew “rules,” “guidelines,” and “best practices,” I believe that one of the best ways to learn how to write is to read with an awareness of writing – to read like a writer. With the exception of some text messages perhaps, punctuation is something we encounter every time we read across all genres. Because we tend to read for information and ideas, however, punctuation tends to slip out of sight. The 20th century thinker Theodor Adorno called punctuation “inconspicuous.” What I try to do is have it visually and aurally register with the eyes and ears of readers so that it is less inconspicuous. I believe that being mindful of, first, the material existence of punctuation in writing, and second, of its effective employment will help students use it with confidence and facility in their own writing.

Activities

1. Have students choose one punctuation mark that they feel they don’t know as well as they’d like to. Have students go online or look in their writing handbook at how this mark is used, then share that usage skill with others.
2. Have students pair up. Working separately, ask them to find a short paragraph from an essay, article, or book that has a variety of punctuation marks in it. Have them write that

paragraph down on a piece of paper, taking out all of the punctuation marks. Student pairs should exchange paragraphs and be instructed to punctuate their partner's paragraph. Ask students to compare the original with their punctuated paragraph, seeing how close both students came to the original, and have students discuss why they chose some of the marks they did.

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4. Critical Thinking in College Writing: From the Personal to the Academic

GITA DASBENDER

There is something about the term “critical thinking” that makes you draw a blank every time you think about what it means. It seems so fuzzy and abstract that you end up feeling uncomfortable, as though the term is thrust upon you, demanding an intellectual effort that you may not yet have. But you know it requires you to enter a realm of smart, complex ideas that others have written about and that you have to navigate, understand, and interact with just as intelligently. It’s a lot to ask for. It makes you feel like a stranger in a strange land.

As a writing teacher I am accustomed to reading and responding to difficult texts. In fact, I like grappling with texts that have interesting ideas no matter how complicated they are because I understand their value. I have learned through my years of education that what ultimately engages me, keeps me enthralled, is not just grammatically pristine, fluent writing, but writing that forces me to think beyond the page. It is writing where the writer has challenged herself and then offered up that challenge to the reader, like a baton in a relay race. The idea is to run with the baton.

You will often come across critical thinking and analysis as requirements for assignments in writing and upper-level courses in a variety of disciplines. Instructors have varying explanations of what they actually require of you, but, in general, they expect you to respond thoughtfully to texts you have read. The first thing you should remember is not to be afraid of critical thinking. It does not mean that you have to criticize the text, disagree with its premise, or attack the writer simply because you feel you must. Criticism

is the process of responding to and evaluating ideas, argument, and style so that readers understand how and why you value these items.

Critical thinking is also a process that is fundamental to all disciplines. While in this essay I refer mainly to critical thinking in composition, the general principles behind critical thinking are strikingly similar in other fields and disciplines. In history, for instance, it could mean examining and analyzing primary sources in order to understand the context in which they were written. In the hard sciences, it usually involves careful reasoning, making judgments and decisions, and problem solving. While critical thinking may be subject-specific, that is to say, it can vary in method and technique depending on the discipline, most of its general principles such as rational thinking, making independent evaluations and judgments, and a healthy skepticism of what is being read, are common to all disciplines. No matter the area of study, the application of critical thinking skills leads to clear and flexible thinking and a better understanding of the subject at hand.

To be a critical thinker you not only have to have an informed opinion about the text but also a thoughtful response to it. There is no doubt that critical thinking is serious thinking, so here are some steps you can take to become a serious thinker and writer.

Attentive Reading: A Foundation for Critical Thinking

A critical thinker is always a good reader because to engage critically with a text you have to read attentively and with an open mind, absorbing new ideas and forming your own as you go along. Let us imagine you are reading an essay by Annie Dillard, a famous essayist, called “Living like Weasels.” Students are drawn to it because the idea of the essay appeals to something personally

fundamental to all of us: how to live our lives. It is also a provocative essay that pulls the reader into the argument and forces a reaction, a good criterion for critical thinking.

So let's say that in reading the essay you encounter a quote that gives you pause. In describing her encounter with a weasel in Hollins Pond, Dillard says, "I would like to learn, or remember, how to live . . . I don't think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular. . . but I might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive" (220). You may not be familiar with language like this. It seems complicated, and you have to stop every so often (perhaps after every phrase) to see if you understood what Dillard means. You may ask yourself these questions:

- What does "mindlessness" mean in this context?
- How can one "learn something of mindlessness?"
- What does Dillard mean by "purity of living in the physical senses?"
- How can one live "without bias or motive?"

These questions show that you are an attentive reader. Instead of simply glossing over this important passage, you have actually stopped to think about what the writer means and what she expects you to get from it. Here is how I read the quote and try to answer the questions above: Dillard proposes a simple and uncomplicated way of life as she looks to the animal world for inspiration. It is ironic that she admires the quality of "mindlessness" since it is our consciousness, our very capacity to think and reason, which makes us human, which makes us beings of a higher order. Yet, Dillard seems to imply that we need to live instinctually, to be guided by our senses rather than our intellect. Such a "thoughtless" approach to daily living, according to Dillard, would mean that our actions would not be tainted by our biases or motives, our prejudices. We would go back to a primal way of

living, like the weasel she observes. It may take you some time to arrive at this understanding on your own, but it is important to stop, reflect, and ask questions of the text whenever you feel stumped by it. Often such questions will be helpful during class discussions and peer review sessions.

Listing Important Ideas

When reading any essay, keep track of all the important points the writer makes by jotting down a list of ideas or quotations in a notebook. This list not only allows you to remember ideas that are central to the writer's argument, ideas that struck you in some way or the other, but it also helps you to get a good sense of the whole reading assignment point by point. In reading Annie Dillard's essay, we come across several points that contribute toward her proposal for better living and that help us get a better understanding of her main argument. Here is a list of some of her ideas that struck me as important:

1. "The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons" (220).
2. "And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel's: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will" (221).
3. "We can live any way we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—even of silence—by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse" (221).
4. "A weasel doesn't 'attack' anything; a weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single

necessity” (221).

5. “I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you” (221).

These quotations give you a cumulative sense of what Dillard is trying to get at in her essay, that is, they lay out the elements with which she builds her argument. She first explains how the weasel lives, what she learns from observing the weasel, and then prescribes a lifestyle she admires—the central concern of her essay.

Noticing Key Terms and Summarizing Important Quotes

Within the list of quotations above are key terms and phrases that are critical to your understanding of the ideal life as Dillard describes it. For instance, “mindlessness,” “instinct,” “perfect freedom of a single necessity,” “stalk your calling,” “choice,” and “fierce and pointed will” are weighty terms and phrases, heavy with meaning, that you need to spend time understanding. You also need to understand the relationship between them and the quotations in which they appear. This is how you might work on each quotation to get a sense of its meaning and then come up with a statement that takes the key terms into account and expresses a general understanding of the text:

Quote 1: Animals (like the weasel) live in “necessity,” which means that their only goal in life is to survive. They don’t think about how they should live or what choices they should make like humans do. According to Dillard, we like to have options and resist the idea of “necessity.” We fight death—an inevitable force that we have no control

over—and yet ultimately surrender to it as it is the necessary end of our lives.

Quote 2: Dillard thinks the weasel's way of life is the best way to live. It implies a pure and simple approach to life where we do not worry about the passage of time or the approach of death. Like the weasel, we should live life in the moment, intensely experiencing everything but not dwelling on the past. We should accept our condition, what we are “given,” with a “fierce and pointed will.” Perhaps this means that we should pursue our one goal, our one passion in life, with the same single-minded determination and tenacity that we see in the weasel.

Quote 3: As humans, we can choose any lifestyle we want. The trick, however, is to go after our one goal, one passion like a stalker would after a prey.

Quote 4: While we may think that the weasel (or any animal) chooses to attack other animals, it is really only surrendering to the one thing it knows: its need to live. Dillard tells us there is “the perfect freedom” in this desire to survive because to her, the lack of options (the animal has no other option than to fight to survive) is the most liberating of all.

Quote 5: Dillard urges us to latch on to our deepest passion in life (the “one necessity”) with the tenacity of a weasel and not let go. Perhaps she's telling us how important it is to have an unwavering focus or goal in life.

Writing A Personal Response: Looking Inward

Dillard's ideas will have certainly provoked a response in your mind, so if you have some clear thoughts about how you feel about the essay this is the time to write them down. As you look at the quotes you have selected and your explanation of their meaning,

begin to create your personal response to the essay. You may begin by using some of these strategies:

1. Tell a story. Has Dillard's essay reminded you of an experience you have had? Write a story in which you illustrate a point that Dillard makes or hint at an idea that is connected to her essay.
2. Focus on an idea from Dillard's essay that is personally important to you. Write down your thoughts about this idea in a first person narrative and explain your perspective on the issue.
3. If you are uncomfortable writing a personal narrative or using "I" (you should not be), reflect on some of her ideas that seem important and meaningful in general. Why were you struck by these ideas?
4. Write a short letter to Dillard in which you speak to her about the essay. You may compliment her on some of her ideas by explaining why you like them, ask her a question related to her essay and explain why that question came to you, and genuinely start up a conversation with her.

This stage in critical thinking is important for establishing your relationship with a text. What do I mean by this "relationship," you may ask? Simply put, it has to do with how you feel about the text. Are you amazed by how true the ideas seem to be, how wise Dillard sounds? Or are you annoyed by Dillard's let-me-tell-you-how-to-live approach and disturbed by the impractical ideas she so easily prescribes? Do you find Dillard's voice and style thrilling and engaging or merely confusing? No matter which of the personal response options you select, your initial reaction to the text will help shape your views about it.

Making an Academic Connection: Looking Outward

First year writing courses are designed to teach a range of writing— from the personal to the academic—so that you can learn to express advanced ideas, arguments, concepts, or theories in any discipline. While the example I have been discussing pertains mainly to college writing, the method of analysis and approach to critical thinking I have demonstrated here will serve you well in a variety of disciplines. Since critical thinking and analysis are key elements of the reading and writing you will do in college, it is important to understand how they form a part of academic writing. No matter how intimidating the term “academic writing” may seem (it is, after all, associated with advanced writing and becoming an expert in a field of study), embrace it not as a temporary college requirement but as a habit of mind.

To some, academic writing often implies *impersonal* writing, writing that is detached, distant, and lacking in personal meaning or relevance. However, this is often not true of the academic writing you will do in a composition class. Here your presence as a writer—your thoughts, experiences, ideas, and therefore who you are—is of much significance to the writing you produce. In fact, it would not be farfetched to say that in a writing class academic writing often begins with personal writing. Let me explain. If critical thinking begins with a personal view of the text, academic writing helps you broaden that view by going beyond the personal to a more universal point of view. In other words, academic writing often has its roots in one’s private opinion or perspective about another writer’s ideas but ultimately goes beyond this opinion to the expression of larger, more abstract ideas. Your personal vision—your core beliefs and general approach to life—will help you arrive at these “larger ideas” or universal propositions that any reader can understand and be enlightened by, if not agree with. In short, academic writing is largely about

taking a critical, analytical stance toward a subject in order to arrive at some compelling conclusions.

Let us now think about how you might apply your critical thinking skills to move from a personal reaction to a more formal academic response to Annie Dillard's essay. The second stage of critical thinking involves textual analysis and requires you to do the following:

- Summarize the writer's ideas the best you can in a brief paragraph. This provides the basis for extended analysis since it contains the central ideas of the piece, the building blocks, so to speak.
- Evaluate the most important ideas of the essay by considering their merits or flaws, their worthiness or lack of worthiness. Do not merely agree or disagree with the ideas but explore and explain why you believe they are socially, politically, philosophically, or historically important and relevant, or why you need to question, challenge, or reject them.
- Identify gaps or discrepancies in the writer's argument. Does she contradict herself? If so, explain how this contradiction forces you to think more deeply about her ideas. Or if you are confused, explain what is confusing and why.
- Examine the strategies the writer uses to express her ideas. Look particularly at her style, voice, use of figurative language, and the way she structures her essay and organizes her ideas. Do these strategies strengthen or weaken her argument? How?
- Include a second text—an essay, a poem, lyrics of a song—whose ideas enhance your reading and analysis of the primary text. This text may help provide evidence by supporting a point you're making, and further your argument.
- Extend the writer's ideas, develop your own perspective, and propose new ways of thinking about the subject at hand.

Crafting the Essay

Once you have taken notes and developed a thorough understanding of the text, you are on your way to writing a good essay. If you were asked to write an exploratory essay, a personal response to Dillard's essay would probably suffice. However, an academic writing assignment requires you to be more critical. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, beginning your essay with a personal anecdote often helps to establish your relationship to the text and draw the reader into your writing. It also helps to ease you into the more complex task of textual analysis. Once you begin to analyze Dillard's ideas, go back to the list of important ideas and quotations you created as you read the essay. After a brief summary, engage with the quotations that are most important, that get to the heart of Dillard's ideas, and explore their meaning. Textual engagement, a seemingly slippery concept, simply means that you respond directly to some of Dillard's ideas, examine the value of Dillard's assertions, and explain why they are worthwhile or why they should be rejected. This should help you to transition into analysis and evaluation. Also, this part of your essay will most clearly reflect your critical thinking abilities as you are expected not only to represent Dillard's ideas but also to weigh their significance. Your observations about the various points she makes, analysis of conflicting viewpoints or contradictions, and your understanding of her general thesis should now be synthesized into a rich new idea about how we should live our lives. Conclude by explaining this fresh point of view in clear, compelling language and by rearticulating your main argument.

Modeling Good Writing

When I teach a writing class, I often show students samples of

really good writing that I've collected over the years. I do this for two reasons: first, to show students how another freshman writer understood and responded to an assignment that they are currently working on; and second, to encourage them to succeed as well. I explain that although they may be intimidated by strong, sophisticated writing and feel pressured to perform similarly, it is always helpful to see what it takes to get an A. It also helps to follow a writer's imagination, to learn how the mind works when confronted with a task involving critical thinking. The following sample is a response to the Annie Dillard essay. Figure 1 includes the entire student essay and my comments are inserted into the text to guide your reading.

Though this student has not included a personal narrative in his essay, his own world-view is clear throughout. His personal point of view, while not expressed in first person statements, is evident from the very beginning. So we could say that a personal response to the text need not always be expressed in experiential or narrative form but may be present as reflection, as it is here. The point is that the writer has traveled through the rough terrain of critical thinking by starting out with his own ruminations on the subject, then by critically analyzing and responding to Dillard's text, and finally by developing a strong point of view of his own about our responsibility as human beings. As readers we are engaged by clear, compelling writing and riveted by critical thinking that produces a movement of ideas that give the essay depth and meaning. The challenge Dillard set forth in her essay has been met and the baton passed along to us.

Building our Lives: The Blueprint Lies Within

We all may ask ourselves many questions, some serious, some less important, in our lifetimes. But at some point along the way, we all will take a step back and look at the way we are living our lives, and wonder if we are living them correctly. Unfortunately, there is no solid blueprint for the way to live our lives. Each person is different, feeling different emotions and reacting to different stimuli than the person next to them. Many people search for the true answer on how to live our lives, as if there are secret instructions out there waiting to be found. But the truth is we as a species are given a gift not many other creatures can claim to have: the ability to choose to live as we want, not as we were necessarily designed to. Even so, people look outside of themselves for the answers on how to live, which begs me to ask the question: what is wrong with just living as we are now, built from scratch through our choices and memories?

Annie Dillard's essay entitled "Living Like Weasels" is an explanation into the way human beings might live, clearly stating that "We could live any way we want" (Dillard 211). Dillard's encounter with an ordinary weasel helped her receive insight into the difference between the way human beings live their lives and the way wild animals go about theirs. As a nature writer, Dillard shows us that we can learn a lot about the true way to live by observing nature's other creations. While we think and debate and calculate each and every move, these creatures just simply act. The thing that keeps human beings from living the purest life possible, like an animal such as the weasel, is the same thing that separates us from all wild animals: our minds. Human beings are creatures of caution, creatures of undeniable fear, never fully living our lives because we are too caught up with avoiding risks. A weasel, on the

Comment: Even as the writer starts with a general introduction, he makes a claim here that is related to Dillard's essay.

Comment: The student asks what seems like a rhetorical question but it is one he will answer in the rest of his essay. It is also a question that forces the reader to think about a key term from the text—"choices."

Comment: Student summarizes Dillard's essay by explaining the ideas of the essay in fresh words.

other hand, is a creature of action and instinct, a creature which lives its life the way it was created to, not questioning his motives, simply striking when the time to strike is right. As Dillard states, "the weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its token" (Dillard 239).

It is important to note and appreciate the uniqueness of the ideas Dillard presents in this essay because in some ways they are very true. For instance, it is true that humans live lives of caution, with a certain fear that has been built up continually through the years. We are forced to agree with Dillard's idea that we as humans "might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive" (Dillard 210). To live freely we need to live our lives with less hesitation, instead of intentionally choosing to not live to the fullest in fear of the consequences of our actions. However, Dillard suggests that we should forsake our ability of thought and choice all together. The human mind is the tool that has allowed a creature with no natural weapons to become the unquestioned dominant species on this planet, and though it curbs the spontaneity of our lives, it is not something to be simply thrown away for a chance to live completely "free of bias or motive" (Dillard 212). We are a moral, conscious species, complete with emotions and a firm conscience, and it is the power of our minds that allows us to exist as we do now: with the ability to both think and feel at the same time. It grants us the ability to choose and have choice, to be guided not only by feelings and emotions but also by morals and an understanding of consequence. As such, a human being with the ability to live like a weasel has given up the very thing that makes him human.

Comment: Up until this point the student has introduced Dillard's essay and summarized some of its ideas. In the section that follows, he continues to think critically about Dillard's ideas and argument.

Comment: This is a strong statement that captures the student's appreciation of Dillard's suggestion to live freely but also the ability to recognize why most people cannot live this way. This is a good example of critical thinking.

Comment: Again, the student acknowledges the importance of conscious thought.

Comment: While the student does not include a personal experience in the essay, this section gives us a sense of his personal view of life. Also note how he introduces the term "morals" here to point out the significance of the consequences of our actions. The point is that not only do we need to act but we also need to be aware of the result of our actions.

Comment: Student rejects Dillard's ideas but only after explaining why it is important to reject them.

Here, the first true flaw of Dillard's essay comes to light. While it is possible to understand and even respect Dillard's observations, it should be noted that without thought and choice she would have never been able to construct these notions in the first place. Dillard protests, "I tell you I've been in that weasel's brain for sixty seconds, and he was in mine" (Dillard 210). One cannot cast oneself into the mind of another creature without the intricacy of human thought, and one would not be able to choose to live as said creature does without the power of human choice. In essence, Dillard would not have had the ability to judge the life of another creature if she were to live like a weasel. Weasels do not make judgments; they simply act and react on the basis of instinct. The "mindlessness" that Dillard speaks of would prevent her from having the option to choose her own reactions. Whereas the conscious-thinking Dillard has the ability to see this creature and take the time to stop and examine its life, the "mindless" Dillard would only have the limited options to attack or run away. This is the major fault in the logic of Dillard's essay, as it would be impossible for her to choose to examine and compare the lives of humans and weasels without the capacity for choice.

Dillard also examines a weasel's short memory in a positive light and seems to believe that a happier life could be achieved if only we were simple-minded enough to live our lives with absolutely no regret. She claims, "I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel's: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will" (Dillard 210). In theory, this does sound like a positive value. To be able to live freely without a hint of remembrance as to the results of our choices would be an

Comment: Student demonstrates Dillard's entire premise by telling us how the very act of writing the essay negates her argument. He has not only interpreted the essay but figured out how its premise is logically flawed.

Comment: Once again the student demonstrates why the logic of Dillard's argument falls short when applied to her own writing.

interesting life, one may even say a care-free life. But at the same time, would we not be denying our responsibility as humans to learn from the mistakes of the past as to not replicate them in the future? Human

beings' ability to remember is almost as important as our ability to choose, because remembering things from the past is the only way we can truly learn from them. History is taught throughout our educational system for a very good reason: so that the generations of the future do not make the mistakes of the past. A human being who chooses to live like a vessel gives up something that once made him very human: the ability to learn from his mistakes to further better himself.

Ultimately, without the ability to choose or recall the past, mankind would be able to more readily take risks without regard for consequences. Dillard views the vessel's reaction to necessity as an unwavering willingness to take such care-free risks and chances. She states that "it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it long whenever it takes you" (Dillard 211). Would it then be productive for us to make a wrong choice and be forced to live in it forever, when we as a people have the power to change, to remedy wrongs we've made in our lives? What Dillard appears to be recommending is that humans not take many risks, but who is to say that the ability to avoid or escape risks is necessarily a flaw with mankind?

If we had been like the vessel, never wanting, never needing, always "choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will" (Dillard 220), our world would be a completely different place. The United States of America might not exist at this very moment if we had just taken what was given to us, and unhesitatingly accepted a life as a colony of Great Britain. But as Cole clearly puts it, "A risk that you assume by actually

Comment: This question represents excellent critical thinking. The student acknowledges that theoretically "remembering nothing" may have some merits but then ponders as the larger socio-political problem it presents.

Comment: The student brings two ideas together very smoothly here.

Comment: The writer sums up his argument while once again reminding us of the problem with Dillard's ideas.

Comment: This is another thoughtful question that makes the reader think along with the writer.

doing something seems far more risky than a risk you take by not doing something, even though the risk of doing nothing may be greater" (Cole 145). As a unified body of people, we were able to go against that which was expected of us, evaluate the risk in doing so, and move forward with our revolution. The American people used the power of choice, and risk assessment, to make a permanent change in their lives; they used the remembrance of Britain's unjust deeds to feed their passion for victory. We as a people chose. We remembered. We distinguished between right and wrong. These are things that a weasel can never do, because a weasel does not have a say in its own life, it only has its instincts and nothing more.

Humans are so unique in the fact that they can dictate the course of their own lives, but many people still choose to search around for the true way to live. What they do not realize is that they have to look no further than themselves. Our power, our weapon, is our ability to have thought and choice, to remember, and to make our own decisions based on our concepts of right and wrong, good and bad. These are the only tools we will ever need to construct the perfect life for ourselves from the ground up. And though it may seem like a nice notion to live a life free of regret, it is our responsibility as creatures and the appointed caretakers of this planet to utilize what was given to us and live our lives as we were meant to, not the life of any other wild animal.

Comment: The student makes a historical reference here that serves as strong evidence for his own argument.

Comment: This final paragraph sums up the writer's perspective in a thoughtful and mature way. It moves away from Dillard's argument and establishes the notion of human responsibility, an idea highly worth thinking about.

Discussion

1. Write about your experiences with critical thinking assignments. What seemed to be the most difficult? What approaches did you try to overcome the difficulty?
2. Respond to the list of strategies on how to conduct textual analysis. How well do these strategies work for you? Add your

own tips to the list.

3. Evaluate the student essay by noting aspects of critical thinking that are evident to you. How would you grade this essay? What other qualities (or problems) do you notice?

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5. We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity

GLENN LESTER; TAYLOR LUCAS; SYDNEY DOYLE; AND ALISON
OVERCASH

Overview

Many college students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment. But students who subscribe to this view of writing—writing as merely a means to an end, a tool to achieve a grade—are seriously limiting themselves. In this chapter, a writing teacher and three recently graduated writers argue that writing can be used as a tool to build personal agency, develop resilience, and achieve social goals. In doing so, we introduce you to a variety of concepts that you can use to construct your writerly identity. Ultimately, we ask you to reconsider the role of writing in your life, and invite you to take that first, radical step of calling yourself a “real” writer.

Introduction: What *Is* Writing, Really? (By Glenn Lester)

A few semesters back, I was working with a student in a writing class. The student, who I’ll call Ana, was searching for a topic for an upcoming research project. The topic had to be related in some

way to writing, and Ana was struggling. Ana claimed they had no experience with writing. Literally none.

A few minutes into our conversation, however, Ana told me about an art therapy program they had participated in. They had written some things there. Ana had found it helpful to write down what they were thinking and feeling.

“But that’s not *really* writing,” Ana told me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“That’s what I do for me,” Ana said.

“That’s not real writing.” “And you aren’t real?”

“But this is different,” Ana said. “You’re talking about *real* writing. Writing for school.”

Does Ana’s experience sound familiar to you?

It sure sounded familiar to me. For years, I’ve observed that many of my students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment. Like many other student writers, Ana found it difficult to connect the writing they did for a grade with the writing they did for individual satisfaction. And because of this, it seemed that Ana’s definition of “writer” did not include Ana.

But once Ana made the connection between personal writing and school-sponsored writing, their research project suddenly opened up. They could research and document the value of writing for therapeutic and healing purposes—a value they had personally experienced. Ana ultimately realized that they had *already* developed a writerly identity—and they could further define who they were as a writer *through* school-sponsored writing.

In this chapter, we want to help you make the same conceptual leap as Ana: from thinking that writing is merely a tool to achieve a grade to understanding how you can use writing to achieve personal and community goals. Ultimately, we want you to be able to articulate your own identity as a writer.

This chapter is divided into three sections, each written by a recently graduated writer— someone who very recently sat in your shoes. Each author will share their expertise and experience with

an aspect of writing that is not school-sponsored. We explore three types of writerly identity:

1. Writing for *agency* (writing is a cognitive process you can adjust and control)
2. Writing for *resilience* (writing is an expressive tool you can use for self-discovery)
3. Writing for *social engagement* (writing is a way you can get things done in a particular time and place)

Throughout the chapter, each author will explore one of these writerly identities in more detail. As you'll see, each of these critical concepts of writing aligns with the ideas and findings of writing researchers and scholars from the 1980s to today. We introduce some of these concepts and theories, not to bog you down with jargon, but to help you begin to understand and define who you are as a writer. In doing so, we want to suggest that *who you are as a writer* depends much more on *your own reasons for writing* than on any outside definition or standard.

If you are a student who has already recognized the power of writing for building personal agency, resilience, and social engagement, then great! Come along as we explore ways to use writing for these purposes. But if you are skeptical of the value of writing outside of school—or if you just plain don't like to write—then please trust us, and keep reading.

Personal Agency and Self-Expression (By Taylor Lucas)

It wasn't until my first college writing course that the concept of a writer's identity came into play. Like Ana, I wasn't sure it was possible to think like a real writer and do "real" writing. In fact, the biggest lesson that introduced the concept of a writer's

identity—and why writing mattered—was when my English teacher required students to get approval of their thesis statements before they could begin working on writing analytical essays. After careful consideration of the essay prompts and drafting and redrafting a thesis statement, I would finally, hesitantly, approach her with my thesis statement. She'd read it, hand my paper back to me, and ask me a question that sticks with me to this day: “So *what?*”

What she meant by that, of course, was that I needed to consider and clarify the implications of my argument, but I found the question *So what?* to be intimidating. *So what?* suggested that I had to center my focus solely around what the audience should do with my topic. I'd spent class periods carefully considering what angle and argument my teacher would want to read, hoping to write something that would please her, as she was my sole audience. Of course, the audience is important, but it is easy to forget that one of the most beneficial things that writing does is allow the writer to gain personal agency. It was easier to see the obvious answers to *So what?* I was writing for a grade, responding to predetermined prompts. As a beginning writer, it was difficult for me to accept that what I said held value beyond percentage points and grades. I knew how to strategically meet my teachers' expectations, and I knew how to tailor my message to an audience. But *So what?* encouraged me to think about how writing could benefit me, personally, in addition to my audience. Through practice, I learned that part of writing is considering what I wanted to accomplish from my work and what I wanted the words on the page to mean to me; asking these questions allows you to start developing personal agency through the act of writing.

Even if you don't feel like a writer, it is imperative to understand that, like me, you will benefit from writing, firstly by developing personal agency. Educational psychologists Barry Zimmerman and Timothy Cleary define personal agency as your “capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes” (45). To me, “originating” and “directing actions” for a purpose sounds a lot like answering the question *So what?* So, because writing helps writers

develop knowledge about themselves, their interests, their goals, and how they fit into the world around them, writing contributes to personal agency. In fact, you might not even know that the writing you're doing, whether you think it's "real writing" or not, contributes to your identity as a person, student, and writer. According to writing scholar Peter Elbow, writing can help students discover hidden meanings, explore their feelings, and communicate (2), all of which build personal agency. The development of personal agency can be broken down into several sections, including feelings/self-expression, thoughts, and actions/goals. What you'll notice is that all of these topics can be found in all sorts of writing that you do, whether for class or for personal purposes.

Part of developing personal agency means to discover and understand your own feelings. Writing theorist James Berlin suggests that the world around us "provides sensory images that can be used in order to explore the self... Authentic self-expression can thus lead to authentic self-experience for both the writer and the reader" (485). And when the writer is the reader, in a sense, then the writer can gain more perspective on their own, well, perspective. In other words, using language to describe your experience helps you understand your opinions and emotions regarding your experiences. Writers do this in several ways, including journaling, blogging, and even posting on social media, in addition to the more "predictable" types of school-sponsored writing like articles and essays. While you've probably been assigned a personal narrative at some point during your education, other forms of writing that you likely do frequently and by choice have helped you learn to express yourself too.

Sometimes the thought of consistent, assigned writing can sound difficult or overwhelming. Students might think that consistent writing means that they need to sit down for hours to write an eloquent piece of work that accurately describes and portrays exactly what they want it to. This may seem intimidating, but it is not necessarily true. Even writing a few paragraphs in

your journal every day can help you process your emotions and retrace your thoughts. Berlin suggests that “discovering the true self in writing will simultaneously enable the individual to discover the truth of the situation which evoked the writing” (485). In other words, change occurs on the individual level when you discover your own voice.

Writing also teaches you how to express your thoughts and feelings to others, including family members, friends, classmates, and even potential employers or professional colleagues. Writers face the challenge of explaining their opinions and ideas by blending passion and research. I call this a challenge because producing eloquently written work with the goal to inform/entertain/persuade the reader is not an easy task. First, writers have to learn to do research, which in turn teaches you how to evaluate sources and select critical information. Then, you have to relay that information, as well as expand upon it in a way that your readers can understand. This process of selecting pertinent ideas and communicating them efficiently is helpful in classroom, casual, and professional settings.

In addition to learning about self-expression and strong communication, writing teaches you to go out of your comfort zone and reach tangible goals and offers proof of self-growth. As I mentioned earlier, journal entries or casual social media posts can provide you with a physical trail of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In fact, any writing can provide this trail of evidence of your thinking as long as you keep track of it. Writing teaches you to challenge yourself to meet goals; completing a 5-7 page essay by the deadline shows you that you were able to achieve a goal. Continuing to meet goals, both in and out of the classroom, builds your confidence. You can take this one step further by submitting your work to literary magazines and conferences. Actions like this force you to brave the next step and share your hard work with others in your field. This provides you with tangible proof that you've written work worth being shared, and in doing so, sharing your thoughts and feelings with others.

So *what*? You've tried your hand at writing. You're starting to recognize that any form of writing counts as "*real* writing." And now you understand that any attempt at writing, whether it be an article or a journal or a personal narrative, or creative writing story, can help you develop your personal agency. Now it's time to begin considering your identity as a writer.

You might be thinking, "There's no way I'll ever be as good of a writer as my peers," but it's important to realize that everyone's writerly identity will look different. Comparison is a normal part of many fields, writing among them; when you catch yourself comparing your work to the work of your peers, remember to ask yourself, "*So what*?" What are you learning about yourself and the communities you engage through your work? What you're likely to learn is that there's no one way to be a good writer, and there's no such thing as a perfect writer, either. Simply putting your best foot forward will be the best way to start your journey towards calling yourself a writer and developing your own personal agency. As you take this first step to calling yourself a writer, you'll see personal growth not only in your writing style but also in your personal life. Perhaps your passions might flourish as you write about them, or maybe your ability to express yourself emotionally, creatively, and critically will expand as you learn to write consistently. As you build your personal agency and start to see your voice grow through all of the writing you do, you'll learn that writing also teaches you resilience, both academically and personally. In our view, "*real* writers" ask themselves, "*So what, for me?*"

Building and Maintaining Resilience (By Sydney Doyle)

Personal agency acts as a stepping stone towards understanding resilience and its role in personal and academic writing. What sparked my understanding of resilience in writing was a metaphor

from one of my first college writing classes: *writing is a lot like training to run a marathon*. My professor went on: “Runners have to build stamina slowly to multiply their miles while minimizing their minutes—writing, and learning to write, involves the same kind of stamina.” Sounds simple enough, right? It did to me. All it would take to have me acing essays and finessing fiction would be to write as much and as I possibly could—easy! But I quickly realized that, much like training for a marathon, developing my writing skills didn’t mean simple repetition. Instead, I needed to develop resilience. After all, you’re not a prepared marathon runner if you spend all your time training on the treadmill at a single speed.

Don’t believe my metaphor? That’s okay! Instead, take wisdom from writers David Bayles and Ted Orland, who remark that what is needed to write well is “a broad sense of what you are looking for, some strategy for how to find it, and an overriding willingness to embrace mistakes and surprises along the way” (21).

So, there are in fact concrete steps you can take as a writer yourself to build the resilience I’m dwelling on, and experts agree. Stephen Koch, an experienced scholar and writing teacher, suggests these steps:

1. *Begin*. In my experience, this is the most important yet hardest part of developing writerly resilience. Whether you’re brainstorming for a school assignment, tinkering around with a flashy social media post, or even journaling for yourself, no writing happens unless you start writing. This is something that requires a bit of planning. One suggestion is to set a timer. Commit to writing for 10 minutes—*all* 10 minutes. No matter why you’re writing, your timer will give you 10 minutes worth of writing that you didn’t have before. And it’s likely that, with repetition, you’ll keep going beyond those 10 minutes. Looking back at our marathon metaphor, this is a lot like planning to set your morning alarm an hour earlier than usual so you can get out the door for a training run.

2. *Work and Rework*. While I'm sure you'll be taught lots of technical advice on what makes revision work well, from a resilience perspective, I like what Elbow presents when he advises us to "[eat] like an owl: take in everything and trust your innards to digest what's useful and discard what's not" (Elbow 264). Make sure to give yourself time to avert your eyes and mind from your first draft for at least a day before you come back to revise. Having some time away allows you to make some of the tougher choices you need to make during revision. For example, discovering the need to delete filler words or add supporting evidence doesn't usually come unless you've taken this necessary break. Think of it like resting your writerly muscles so you can get up and train again tomorrow. Revision is your "innards," and it takes a lot of resilience to learn to trust yourself enough to decide not only what your writerly innards are but also what this means for your sense of self.
3. *Finish*. Finishing what you start helps you end on a note of confidence. In your final draft, Koch advises to "keep up the momentum, but festina lente [make haste slowly]" (190). Make your hard, final choices here. Do your best not to let your masterpiece become over-manicured, and keep the finish line in sight.

If you take anything from this crash course on writing resilience, take the idea that resilience is not something specific to your writerly abilities. Practicing resilience in one aspect of your life tends to flow outwards, making this something useful to you regardless of how you feel about writing. In fact, the experts agree again here. Recently, a group of scholars at the University of Michigan conducted a six-year study of how students wrote in college, ultimately concluding that "writing led students to various forms of personal and social development," especially when students took an active role in navigating their own writerly

identities (Gere 320). Writing breeds resilience, and resilience breeds writing.

But, this leaves us to wonder: isn't personal resilience a very different thing from resilience in the classroom or a social setting? What does developing writerly resilience have to do with your identity as a person outside of writing, or in your community? We see some possible answers to these questions in our next section, which discusses writing for social engagement.

Writing For Social Engagement (By Alison Overcash)

My co-authors have shown how writing can build personal agency and resilience, which are two valuable intrinsic benefits that I have experienced as well. When I was in high school, I started writing in my journal every day to help me cope with my mental illness. Journaling allowed me to explore my emotions and personal goals while developing my skills as a writer. I also enjoyed writing for school, but ultimately, I found myself wishing that my words could actually make a difference in the world. I couldn't help but compare myself to my favorite authors, who seemed to have been born with a destiny to change the world, while I was simply writing into a void. While the personal benefits alone make writing a worthwhile endeavor, I didn't fully embrace my identity as a writer until I started writing for audiences besides myself and my teachers.

Once I started studying English in college, I learned that writers have the power to educate, persuade, and empower their readers by practicing the art of rhetoric. As you study composition, you will learn, just as I did, how to harness the power of language to engage with the world around you. To be a "real" writer, one must understand the rhetorical situation at hand, which encompasses the speaker, audience, and purpose. Even when the speaker and audience are the same, the act of writing that text is still powerful.

Even when your audience only includes your teacher, that's still "real" writing. However, expanding this audience beyond yourself and your teachers can help you understand your own writerly identity and decide how you want to wield this unique power.

You may feel distinctly aware of your position as a student, meaning that you might feel more like a "writing student" than a "real writer." However, the writing that you do in your everyday life is just as valid as writing a novel or essay, and as Taylor points out, personal or self-sponsored writing has just as many personal benefits—and, I would argue, additional social benefits—as any piece of school-sponsored writing. You probably already practice various forms of digital writing, which involves applying the skills you learned in class to create creative arrangements of multimedia and text. Social media posts on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, etc. frequently use the same rhetorical strategies as an argumentative essay, even if this isn't done intentionally. In the *Writing Spaces* essay, "Four Things Social Media Can Teach You about College Writing—and One Thing It Can't," Ann N. Amicucci argues that the rhetorical strategies that students use on social media can also be effective in an academic setting. As with any essay, a social media post requires the writer to understand and appeal to the rhetorical situation at hand.

During my first semester as an English major, I wrote a personal narrative about my experiences with depression. After receiving some great feedback during a peer review activity, I revised the essay extensively and eventually got to a point where I was truly proud of what I had created. My peers encouraged me to share the essay with the people close to me that were mentioned in the essay. Every time I shared my writing with someone new, I was showered with compliments and deep conversations, and it felt like I was exposing a little piece of my soul every time, but it gave me a rush of excitement to show people what I was capable of doing.

"You should post this on Facebook," my mom had suggested.

I had laughed at the idea initially, and responded, “Nobody wants to read my homework assignments except for you, mom!”

However, I was so proud of my work that I eventually decided to rewrite it as a blog post, which I published on Medium and shared to my Facebook and Twitter accounts. Several friends and family members reached out to me to thank me for putting their own complex thoughts and confusing feelings about mental illness into words. Multiple people reassured me that my voice was important, and my words were valuable. By repurposing my personal narrative as a blog post, I was able to connect with people in ways that I never would have been able to if I hadn’t stepped out of my comfort zone. Anyone can become a strong writer by simply considering their own position, their audience’s expectations, and the specific purpose for composing the text, but actually entering the rhetorical situation requires you to share your work with the audience you are writing for.

In studying rhetoric, I discovered that the writers I idolized were held in such high esteem because of their ability to say the right thing, the right way, at the right time. The next time you write something for a school assignment, a journal entry, or a social media post, I encourage you to reflect on the rhetorical situation as well as your own motivations for addressing that situation. These motivations may be a culmination of those we have discussed thus far, or you may have your own reasons entirely. Some writers choose to harness the transformative power of writing for personal growth, while others, like myself, use writing as a tool to promote social change. Now, it’s up to you to figure out what motivates *you* to write.

Conclusion (By Glenn Lester)

I’m a writing teacher. And at this point in my career, I’ve worked

with several hundred writers—all of them “real writers” in my book. But it’s not my book that counts—it’s theirs.

And yours.

Taylor, Sydney, and Alison are just three of my former students (who are now friends and colleagues). In this essay, each has discussed their own reasons for writing, and the moments, experiences, and readings that led them to construct their own writerly identities. Specifically, these concepts about writing that helped Taylor, Sydney, and Alison develop their identities as *real* writers. We hope that reading our stories will inspire you to discover your reasons for writing, and that you might try out elements of their processes and concepts as you construct your own identity.

For instance, in our “Personal Agency and Self-Expression” section, Taylor points out that she had plenty of practice writing in high school, but it wasn’t until she began to consider the purpose of writing *besides* to earn a grade that she began to understand what writing meant to her. Having been challenged to go beyond her initial assumptions, Taylor began to see writing as a cognitive process that she could adjust and control. Soon, writing became a tool for Taylor to build her own personal agency. You might compare Taylor’s experiences with your own as you move ahead in writing. Likewise, Sydney’s section on writing and resilience raises a series of interesting questions that you might attempt to build on in your reflections and discussions about writing in your college classes: Does writing, as Sydney suggests, provide an occasion to develop resilience in other areas of your life? If so, *how* does writing help us become more personally resilient? What does that resilience-building ability have to do with treating writing as a “series of concrete steps,” as Sydney describes? Does the personal resilience built through writing act as a bridge to engaging in social action and solving the problems you want to solve?

Alison, in our “Writing for Social Engagement” section, offers a different perspective. Alison describes an early experience using writing to build resilience through journaling. But they did not

truly construct their own identity as a writer until they discovered the power they had to affect readers through their words. The act of sharing their writing with others changed Alison's relationship to their own writing and its purpose. You might take note of how sharing your writing with peers, classmates, and friends—whether through an in-class peer review exercise, a campus literary journal, or some other informal publication—changes your thoughts about who you are as a writer.

Or take my former student Ana, who I discussed in the introduction. Ana didn't see themselves as a writer—even though they had a good deal of experience with writing—because they didn't see the writing they did “for Ana” as “*real* writing.” But by conceptually reframing their experiences, Ana took the first step in the journey of understanding who they were as a writer.

So, constructing your identity as a writer is not as simple as selecting from a list of three, or five, or ten possible reasons for writing. You certainly can't learn your writerly identity from an online quiz or the Hogwarts sorting hat. What you *can* do, however, is experiment. Embrace the new. Try out a variety of purposes, genres, audiences, and processes. See if you can't alter your approach for each assignment, in order to discover what works for you—and to learn what helps you feel that both the writing you do and the writer you are are *real*.

Beyond experimentation, you might also find value in what other writers have to say about how they see themselves. For instance, in another *Writing Spaces* essay, Sarah Allen explodes the myth of inspiration by examining “The Inspired Writer vs. The Real Writer.” Allen's essay resonates with me because it helps me understand that I can be a “real writer” even when I'm not feeling inspired. And in fact, as Allen argues, part of being a “real writer” might be writing even when—especially when—you aren't feeling inspired!

Another *Writing Spaces* essay, “Workin' Languages: Who We Are Matters In Our Writing,” Sara P. Alvarez, Amy J. Wan, and Eunjeong Lee offer a striking metaphor for writerly identity: “language architects.” For Alvarez, Wan, and Lee, a language architect “works”

language in order to help build up their community. What an original way to think about who you are as a writer! Or take this quotation from Wendy Bishop and David Starkey’s “Keywords in Creative Writing,” which describes the therapeutic power of writing: “Not only does writing help authors process the events of their younger years, it also helps them grapple with the continuing . . . challenges of their lives” (180).

These three conceptions of writing can help me figure out what kind of writer I can and want to be. Like Allen, I want to be a writer who will persevere through adversity without waiting for so-called inspiration to get the writing done. Like Alvarez, Wan, and Lee, I see myself as building something—an architect of language who writes for and with my community. And, as I write, I will take heart from Bishop and Starkey’s point that writing is a way of processing both past and present, and that its positive effects on me extend beyond finishing any particular piece of writing.

But just because these three perspectives resonate with *me* doesn’t mean they will or even should resonate with *you*. Instead, my point is that you can start to build your writerly identity by taking note of what other writers say about *their* reasons for writing. So, as you explore writing in your college writing courses, take note of the writing advice that resonates with you—especially the writing advice that goes beyond “how to get a good grade” or “how to give your teacher what they want.” Try writing it down! And take note of the new concepts you’re introduced to—perhaps you’ll spend time learning about *literacy sponsorship* or *discourse communities* or *social advocacy*. As you do, challenge yourself to not just learn the concepts, but also to identify which of those concepts can help you discover *your* reasons for writing, your own writerly identity.

As we composed this chapter together, one theme came up over and over: the idea that anyone can be a writer—and that everyone *should* think of themselves as a writer. There is not one “right way” to be a writer, and no one “right” reason for writing. Writing for yourself can be incredibly valuable. And writing for others can be

equally valid and meaningful. But recognizing what makes you the *real* writer you are means recognizing your purposes and reasons for writing.

And so, we offer this new definition of a writer:

You.

You are a writer.

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Teacher Resources for “We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity”

Overview and Teaching Strategies

“We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity” is best used in an introductory lesson to first year college writing students, or in conjunction with a reflective writing task, such as a portfolio introduction.

The chapter explores what it means to be a writer, both in and out of the classroom, and looks at the benefits of writing, ultimately inviting students to think of themselves as writers by constructing what we call a “writerly identity.” We proposed this chapter when we realized that most writing textbooks and resources—*Writing Spaces* among them—lack much consideration of the writing that we do outside of the classroom, and often fail to invite students to take that first, radical step of calling themselves “real” writers.

With that in mind, this chapter could be paired with a class

activity in which students reflect on their prior experience with and knowledge of writing. We find that students, especially first year students, often benefit from a great deal of encouragement to find the confidence to challenge themselves to even *think* of themselves as writers. In fact, as Taylor reminded us during our collaboration, one thing that Glenn said in a class has stuck with her: anyone can be a writer. To achieve that goal of helping students consider who they are as writers, we suggest pairing this chapter with other *Writing Spaces* chapters that encourage students to think about purpose, identity, and community, especially Sarah Allen's "The Inspired Writer Vs. The Real Writer," E. Shelley Reid's "Ten Ways To Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings For College Students," Quentin Vieregge's "Exigency: What Makes My Message Indispensable to My Reader," or Sarah P. Alvarez, Amy J. Wan, and Eunjeong Lee's "Workin' Languages: Who We Are Matters in Our Writing."

Our chapter begins with an introduction that addresses a widely shared concern: what does it mean to truly write? The answer we propose is both simple (just write!) and complex (writing is connected to personal identity and community). But we argue that students can count *all* of the composing they do as "real" writing. Diaristic journaling, creative writing, therapeutic writing, researched academic essays—all of it counts as "real writing" in our book. So, a natural place for students to enter into this conversation is with the question: are we correct? Does any and all composing count as "real" writing? Even texting? What about TikTok? If so, what does this mean for the work students do in their first-year composition courses?

Our next section discusses the personal benefits of writing. Taylor grapples with the question "So what?" and concludes that every student gains knowledge, skills, and a better understanding of the self when writing. This leads into one of the most important traits that we believe writing can teach: resilience. Students face challenges in the classroom and in their personal lives that require perseverance, and the acts of writing and revision are tangible

activities that help instill this practice. Sydney takes up this theme in the second section of our chapter. This section could be paired with instructional activities related to growth mindset and resilience. Or, students might be invited to speak back to us by identifying times in which writing did *not* teach resilience.

We conclude with Alison's discussion of socially engaged, community-situated writing. This section of the chapter might assist with introducing a community-oriented or service-learning writing unit, or it might open a conversation in which students discuss how they could apply class concepts to the writing and communication they already do in the communities they belong to. Glenn has seen great success in student engagement when asking his own students to identify and describe complex, ongoing problems or issues that their communities face and using those problems and issues to generate writing and research projects. Responding to these concepts could motivate students to use their writerly identity to engage with their own communities, too.

Finally, all three sections of our chapter tie back to the notion of writerly identity. The most productive use of this chapter that we can imagine is one in which students think hard about who they currently are as writers while identifying possibilities for the writers they want to become.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the three sections of this chapter resonated with you the most, and why? Which section was most confusing or surprising? What does your response tell you about who you are as a writer?
2. What role has writing played in your personal development so far as a student? How about outside of the classroom? What ideas in this chapter do you anticipate using in this course or semester?

3. One way to develop your writerly identity is to compare various writers' reasons for writing and ideas about writing. To that end, read Sarah Allen's "The Inspired Writer Vs. The Real Writer," also found in *Writing Spaces*. Identify the common themes between that chapter and this chapter, as well as any differences in perspective.
4. Create a two-column chart. Label one column "writing for school" and the other "personal writing." Then, use the chart to describe how your experience differs when you're writing for school versus engaging in personal writing. (Remember that personal writing isn't always poetry, diaries, or short stories!)

Recommended Activities

1. To test our assertions about writing as a tool for building your agency and resilience, try this journaling exercise: use a convenient device, like a notebook or a mobile notes app, to document *one notable event each day for one week*. Write about what happened, why it was notable, and how you felt about it. At the end of the week, read through what you wrote about the week you've had and how you've felt. Then, discuss with your classmates how your attitudes about writing may have shifted as a result of using writing to document your observations and experiences. How does having a tangible record of your experiences affect your mindset and sense of your own personal agency, defined as your "capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes"
2. Think back to the social engagement section of this chapter. Identify one community that you are a part of that is or could be impacted by writing. (Recall Linda Flower's definition of a rhetorical community, which considers how people unite for a variety of purposes around "affinities rather than visible borders.") Identify an issue, question, challenge, problem, or

shared goal that the community faces. How could writing be used to approach this issue, solve this problem, or achieve the community's goal? What types of writing would most impact the community, and why? What stands in the way of addressing the issue or solving the problem—both from inside and outside the community?

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6. “I Need You to Say ‘I’”: Why First Person is Important in College Writing

KATE MCKINNEY MADDALENA

At this point in your development as a writer, you may have learned to write “I-less” prose, without first person. I-less-ness is fine; writing habits, like all habits, are best simplified when first learned or re-learned. Jazz pianists learn strict scales before they are allowed to improvise. Someone might go on a strict diet and then return to a modified menu after the desired weight is lost, and the bad eating habits are broken. Constructing arguments without using “I” is good practice for formal “improvisation” at higher levels of thinking and writing. Avoiding personal pronouns forces you to be objective. It also “sounds” more formal; you’re more likely to maintain an appropriate tone if you stay away from the personal.

But writing in various academic and professional contexts needs to be more flexible, sophisticated, and subtle than writing for high school English classes. In college, you should start using first-person pronouns in your formal academic writing, where appropriate. First person has an important place—an irreplaceable place—in texts that report research and engage scholarship. Your choices about where you place yourself as subject are largely determined by context and the conventions of the field in which you’re writing. The key is making sure that your choices are appropriate for the context of your paper—whom you’re writing it for, and the kind of information it’s meant to communicate. Here I’ll list some ways in which first person improves written argument and show you some examples of the ways scholars use first person, and then I’ll propose places where it might be used appropriately in your own writing.

Why “I”?

First person can support the following characteristics of good written argument (and good writing in general).

1. Objectivity and Integrity

The main reason most teachers give for the discipline of I-lessness is that it keeps your writing “objective.” They want to make sure that you don’t rely on personal experiences or perspectives where you should be providing concrete, researched support for your arguments. Your best friend at summer camp doesn’t “prove” a sociological theory. Your memory of a “fact”—the average rainfall in a town, the actions of a character in a film, the tendencies of groups of people to behave in certain ways, or the population of Kenya—is not a reliable source in academic contexts. You shouldn’t write, “because I think so,” or “I know that . . .” But if you consider some of the higher-level implications of perspective’s effects on argument, there are some well-chosen places where “I” can give your argument more objectivity and intellectual integrity.

Take scientific writing, for example. Up until very recently, when writing observational and experimental reports, scientists, as a rule, avoided first person. Methodology was (and is still, in many cases) described in the passive voice. That is, instead of writing, “We took measurements of ice thickness on the first and 15th day of every month,” scientists wrote, “Measurements of ice thickness were taken on the first and 15th day of every month.” Taking out the “we” focuses the reader’s attention on the phenomenon (object) being observed, not the observer taking the readings (subject). Or at least that was the reasoning behind passive voice in science writing.

But during the last half of the last century, mostly because of developments in physics, scientists have talked a lot about a thing called the “observer effect”: while observing or experimenting with a social or even physical system, the scientist watching can affect the system’s behavior. When particle physicists try to

measure the motion of something as tiny as an electron, their very observation almost certainly changes that motion. Because of the observer effect, the passive voice convention I've described above has been called into question. Is it really honest to act like "measurements are taken" by some invisible hand? Is the picture minus the researcher the whole picture? Not really. The fact is, someone took the measurements, and those measurements might reflect that observer's involvement. It's more truthful, complete, and objective, then, to put the researchers in the picture. These days, it's much more common to "see" the researchers as subjects—"We measured ice thickness . . ."—in methodology sections.

That same kind of "whole picture" honesty applies to you making written claims, too. When you first learned to write an essay, you were probably taught to make claims as though they were true; write "The sky is blue," not "I think that the sky is blue." That second claim isn't arguable—who can disprove that you think something? But a much more sophisticated claim includes your perspective and implies the effect it may have on your stance: "From my position standing on the earth's surface in the daytime, I see the sky as blue." You can make that claim without using first person, of course, and in some contexts (i.e. for a scientific argument), you probably should. When you're taking a stance on an issue, though, first person just makes sense. Defining your perspective gives your reader context for your stance: "As a volunteer at a bilingual preschool, I can see that both language immersion and individualized language instruction have benefits," or "As a principal at an elementary school with a limited budget, I would argue that language immersion makes the most sense." Consider those two positions; without the "whole picture" that the statement of perspective implies, you might assume that the two claims disagree. The subtlety of the subject—who the writer is—lets you see quite a bit about why the claim is being made. If you asked the second writer to take a stance on the immersion/bilingual instruction issue with only learning objectives in mind,

she might agree with the first writer. The “truth” might not be different, but the position it’s observed from can certainly cast a different light on it.

2. Clarifying Who’s Saying What

A clear description of your perspective becomes even more important when your stance has to incorporate or respond to someone else’s. As you move into more advanced college writing, the claims you respond to will usually belong to scholars. Some papers may require you to spend almost as much time summarizing a scholarly conversation as they do presenting points of your own. By “signification,” I mean little phrases that tell the reader, “This is my opinion,” “This is my interpretation.” You need them for two big reasons.

First of all, the more “voices” you add to the conversation, the more confusing it gets. You must separate your own interpretations of scholars’ claims, the claims themselves, and your argument so as not to misrepresent any of them. If you’ve just paraphrased a scholar, making your own claim without quite literally claiming it might make the reader think that the scholar said it. Consider these two sentences: “Wagstaff et al. (2007) conclude that the demand for practical science writing that the layperson can understand is on the rise. But there is a need for laypeople people to increase their science literacy, as well.” Is that second claim part of Wagstaff’s conclusion, or is it your own reflection on the implications of Wagstaff’s argument? By writing something like, “Wagstaff et al. (2007) conclude that the demand for practical science that the layperson can understand is on the rise. I maintain that there is a need for laypeople to increase their science literacy, as well,” you avoid the ambiguity. First person can help you express, very simply, who “says” what.

Secondly, your perceptions, and therefore your interpretations, are not always perfect. Science writing can help me illustrate this idea, as well. In the imaginary observation report I refer to above, the researchers may or may not use first person in their methodology section out of respect for the observer effect, but

they are very likely to use first person in the discussion/conclusion section. The discussion section involves interpretation of the data—that is, the researchers must say what they think the data means. The importance of perspective is compounded here. They might not be right. And even if they are mostly right, the systems scientists study are usually incredibly complex; one observation report is not the whole picture. Scientists, therefore, often mark their own interpretations with first person pronouns. “We interpret these data to imply . . .” they might say, or, “We believe these findings indicate . . .,” and then they go on to list questions for further research. Even the experts know that their understanding is almost always incomplete.

3. Ownership, Intellectual Involvement, and Exigency

Citing scholarship contextualizes and strengthens your argument; you want to defer to “experts” for evidence of your claims when you can. As a student, you might feel like an outsider—unable to comment with authority on the concepts you’re reading and writing about. But outsider status doesn’t only mean a lack of expertise. Your own, well-defined viewpoint might shed new light on a topic that the experts haven’t considered (or that your classmates haven’t considered, or that your professor hasn’t mentioned in class, or even, quite simply, that you hadn’t thought of and so you’re excited about). In that case, you want to say, “This is mine, it’s a new way of looking at the issue, and I’m proud of it.”

Those kinds of claims are usually synthetic ones—you’ve put information and/or interpretations from several sources together, and you’ve actually got something to say. Whether your new spin has to do with a cure for cancer or an interpretation of Batman comics, pride in your own intellectual work is important on many levels. As a student, you should care; such investment can help you learn. Your school community should also care; good teachers are always looking for what we call “critical thinking,” and when students form new ideas from existing ones, we know it’s happening. On the larger scale, the scholarly community should

care. Having something new to say increases the exigency of your argument in the larger, intellectual exchange of ideas. A scholarly reader should want to pay attention, because what you say may be a key to some puzzle (a cure for cancer) or way of thinking about the topic (interpreting Batman). That's the way scholars work together to form large bodies of knowledge: we communicate about our research and ideas, and we try to combine them when we can.

An emphatic statement like “Much discussion has addressed the topic of carbon emissions’ relationship to climate change, but I would like to ask a question from a new perspective,” will make your reader sit up and take notice. In I-less form, that might look like: “Much discussion has addressed the topic of carbon emissions’ relationship to climate change, but some questions remain unconsidered.” In this case, the second sentence still sounds like summary—the writer is telling us that research is incomplete, but isn’t giving us a strong clue that his or her (new! fresh!) argument is coming up next. Be careful, of course, not to sound arrogant. If the writer of the sentences above was worried about his or her lack of expertise in an assignment involving scholarly sources, he or she could write: “What scholarly discussion I have read so far has addressed the topic of carbon emissions’ relationship to climate change, but I would like to ask a question from a new perspective.” He or she can use first person to employ both deference and ownership/involvement in the same sentence.

4. Rhetorical Sophistication

Some writing assignments focus on one simple task at a time: “Summarize the following . . .” “Compare the readings . . .” “analyze,” or “argue.” When you write a simple five-paragraph essay, your mode rarely changes—you can write an introduction, thesis, body, and conclusion without explaining too many shifts in what the paper is “doing.” Writing at the college level and beyond often has to “do” a few things in the same text. Most involved writing assignments expect you to do at least two things. You may need

to summarize/ report and respond, or (more likely) you'll need to summarize/report, synthesize, and respond. A good introduction, as you've learned, needs to anticipate all of it so the reader knows what to expect. Anticipating the structure of a complex argument in I-less mode is tricky. Often, it comes out as a summary of the document that follows and is redundant. First person can clear that problem right up. Consider the introduction to this article; when I come to the part where I need to tell you what I'm going to do, I just . . . tell you what I'm going to do! My writing students usually find this rhetorical trick (or is it an un-trick?) refreshing and liberating. The same concept can be applied to transitions between sections and ideas: "Now that I've done this thing, I'd like to move into this other part of my argument . . ." I'll use this type of transition, myself, when I move into the section of this text called, "When, and When not?"

Academic Examples

The fact is, using first person for rhetorical clarity and to ease transitions isn't just easier—it's common in many academic contexts. It's accepted, even expected, in some cases, for scholarly writing such as abstracts, position papers, theses, and dissertations in many fields to employ first person in the ways I've just described. In almost all genres, formats, and fields, the scholarly writer is expected to describe the research done thus far by her peers and then make her own claims—a structure that lends itself to first person.

Robert Terrill, a cultural studies scholar, begins his article, "Put on a Happy Face: Batman as Schizophrenic Savior," with an evaluation of Tim Burton's movie's box office success, and then spends several paragraphs discussing other scholars' applications of psychological frameworks to film studies. Throughout the literature review section, Terrill's own voice stays remote; he uses

third person. But look at what happens when he is ready to begin his own argument:

Because much of my analysis is grounded in the theories of Carl C. Jung, I will begin by outlining relevant aspects of that theory. Then I suggest that Gotham City is a dream world, a representative projection of image-centered dreams. Within the framework of Jung's model, I show the principal characters to be archetypal manifestations that erupt from Gotham's unconscious. Wayne/Batman is a splintered manifestation of a potential whole; his condition represents the schizophrenia required of a hero dedicated to preservation of the shattered psyche of Gotham. (321)

Terrill's move to first person separates his own claims from the scholars he's summarized in his introduction, and it allows him to take ownership of his main claim. The way he "maps out" his article is also typical of academic argument.

First person is used similarly in the sciences. Unlike Terrill, who argues for a certain interpretation of a text, psychologists Jennifer Kraemer and David Marquez report research findings in their article, "Psychosocial Correlates and Outcomes of Yoga or Walking Among Older Adults." Much like Terrill, however, their introduction consists of a review of literature in the third person. For almost three pages, Kraemer and Marquez describe studies which have explored health and injury patterns in old age, as well as studies which have investigated various fitness programs for the elderly. When it comes time for Kraemer and Marquez to describe their own study, they shift into first person:

We hypothesized that an acute bout of yoga would be more effective at improving mood and reducing state anxiety among older adults when compared with acute bouts of walking. We further hypothesized that older adults who practice yoga would have lower levels of

depression and higher quality of life when compared with those who walk for exercise. We did not make direct hypotheses for exercise barriers and barriers self-efficacy because, to date, there is no research that has examined those variables in this population. (393)

Kraemer and Marquez continue in first person as they describe their methodology. “We recruited a total of 51 participants (8 men, 43 women)” they write, “through classes at local yoga studios and mall walking groups” (393). The researchers themselves, in first person, are the subjects who “do” every action in the methods: “We asked questions on . . . We measured state anxiety by . . . We measured mood using . . .”(393–4). By putting themselves in the picture, Kraemer and Marquez acknowledge themselves as variables in their own study—a key aspect of any scientific methodology, and especially those which involve human subjects and use interviews to collect data.

On the other hand, some academic communities and genres stay away from first person. Susan Clark, a professor at Yale who writes about the communication and implementation of sustainable forestry practices, describes her study without putting herself in the picture. Where Kraemer and Marquez describe themselves “doing” the methods of their study, Clark has her article as the agent in her description of analysis:

This article (a) describes the intelligence function in conceptual terms, including its sequential phases (as described by McDougal, Lasswell, & Reisman, 1981); (b) uses examples to illustrate the intelligence activity from Reading and Miller (2000), *Endangered Animals: A Reference Guide to Conflicting Issues*, which gives 70 cases by 34 authors in 55 countries that focus on species, ecosystem, and sustainability challenges; and employs a “problem-oriented” look at intelligence activities across all these cases (Lasswell, 1971). It does so by asking and answering five questions . . . (637)

Clark's methods are to analyze others' processes—hers, then, is metaanalysis. It's appropriate for her to remove herself rhetorically as she deals with many actions and many, diverse actors. She is more a describer than a “do-er.”

At the very end of her article, in a “call to action” that directly applies her findings, Clark does finally use first person. “We can increase the possibility of better biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, and better sustainability overall,” she writes, “if we choose to use an effective intelligence activity. Success is more likely if we increase the rationality of our own directed behavior” (659). Clark's “we” is different from Kraemer and Marquez's “we,” though. It refers to Clark's audience—the community of sustainable forestry as a whole—and predicts future action in which she will be active.

When (and When Not) to Use First Person?

Now that I've convinced you to try first person in some of your academic writing, I should talk about how to use it appropriately. (See? I just used “I” for a clear transition to a new idea.) The key is: don't go “I” crazy. Remember the self-discipline you practiced with I-less writing.

Probably the best way to approach first person in an academic context is this: use it to make yourself clear. You'll need “I” for clarity when one of the ideals I described above is in question. Either 1) you'll need to describe an aspect of your personal perspective that will help the reader see (your) whole picture; 2) you'll need to make the divide between your voice and the scholars' as clear as possible in order to avoid misrepresenting the scholars' claims; 3) your own claim will need to stand apart from the other perspectives you've presented as something new; or 4) you'll need to guide your reader through the organization of your text in some way.

Below, I've listed a few common writing situations/assignments that first person can potentially support.

Try "I" when . . .

. . . the assignment asks you to. Personal position papers, personal narratives, and assignments that say "tell what you did/read and provide your reaction," all explicitly ask you to use first person.

. . . you're asked to "Summarize and respond." You might transition into the response part of the paper with "I."

. . . you're introducing a paper with a complicated structure: "I will summarize Wagstaff's argument, and then respond to a few key points with my own interpretation."

. . . you are proud of and intellectually invested in what you have to say, and you want to arrange it in reference to others' voices: "Many scholars have used psychological frameworks to interpret the Batman movies, but I would argue that a historical perspective is more productive . . ."

. . . you are unsure of your interpretation of a source, or you feel that the claim you're making may be bigger than your level of expertise: "If I read Wagstaff correctly, her conclusions imply . . ."

"I" Is a Bad Idea When . . .

. . . you use it only once. You don't want to overuse the first person, but if you're going to assert your position or make a transition with "I," give the reader a hint of your voice in the introduction. An introduction that anticipates structure with "I will," for instance, works well with transitions that use "I" as well. If you use first person only once, the tone shift will jar the reader.

... The assignment is a simple summary. In that case, you need only report; you are “eye,” not “I.”

... you’re writing a lab report for a science class, as a general rule. But you might ask your teacher about the issues of objectivity I’ve addressed above, especially in terms of objective methodology.

Discussion

1. Can you remember a writing task during which you struggled to avoid using the first person? What about the nature of the content made “I” hard to avoid? Can you link the difficulty to one of the four values that first person “supports,” according to this essay?
2. McKinney Maddalena claims that scientists use “I” more often in research reports, nowadays. Find a scientific article in your school’s research databases that employs first person: “I” or “we.” In what section is first person used, and how? Does its usage reflect one of the values this essay points out?

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[“I Need You to Say ‘I’: Why First Person Is Important in College Writing”](#) was originally published in *Writing Spaces* volume 1 (2010). This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 United States License](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0).

PART II

UNIT I: READINGS

7. The Danger of a Single Story

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

[https://embed.ted.com/talks/
chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story](https://embed.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)

Transcript:

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably close to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books.

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they

played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.

Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was.

And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer. But that is another story.

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams

and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

I must say that before I went to the U.S., I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S., whenever Africa came up, people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country, the most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in "India, Africa and other countries."

So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate's response to me. If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. I would see Africans in the same way that I, as a child, had seen Fide's family.

This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Lok, who sailed to west Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses," he writes, "They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts."

Now, I've laughed every time I've read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Lok. But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are "half devil, half child."

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not "authentically African." Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.

But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens

in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleeing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.

So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is “nkali.” It’s a noun that loosely translates to “to be greater than another.” Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

I recently spoke at a university where a student told me that it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel. I told him that I had just read a novel called “American Psycho” —

— and that it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers.

Now, obviously I said this in a fit of mild irritation.

But it would never have occurred to me to think that just because I had read a novel in which a character was a serial killer that he was somehow representative of all Americans. This is not because I am a better person than that student, but because of America's cultural and economic power, I had many stories of America. I had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and *Gaitskill*. I did not have a single story of America.

When I learned, some years ago, that writers were expected to have had really unhappy childhoods to be successful, I began to think about how I could invent horrible things my parents had done to me.

But the truth is that I had a very happy childhood, full of laughter and love, in a very close-knit family.

But I also had grandfathers who died in refugee camps. My cousin Polle died because he could not get adequate healthcare. One of my closest friends, Okoloma, died in a plane crash because our fire trucks did not have water. I grew up under repressive military governments that devalued education, so that sometimes, my parents were not paid their salaries. And so, as a child, I saw jam disappear from the breakfast table, then margarine disappeared, then bread became too expensive, then milk became rationed. And most of all, a kind of normalized political fear invaded our lives.

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in

Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.

So what if before my Mexican trip, I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. and the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world? What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories."

What if my roommate knew about my Nigerian publisher, Muhtar Bakare, a remarkable man who left his job in a bank to follow his dream and start a publishing house? Now, the conventional wisdom was that Nigerians don't read literature. He disagreed. He felt that people who could read, would read, if you made literature affordable and available to them.

Shortly after he published my first novel, I went to a TV station in Lagos to do an interview, and a woman who worked there as a messenger came up to me and said, "I really liked your novel. I didn't like the ending. Now, you must write a sequel, and this is what will happen ..."

And she went on to tell me what to write in the sequel. I was not only charmed, I was very moved. Here was a woman, part of the ordinary masses of Nigerians, who were not supposed to be readers. She had not only read the book, but she had taken ownership of it and felt justified in telling me what to write in the sequel.

Now, what if my roommate knew about my friend Funmi Iyanda, a fearless woman who hosts a TV show in Lagos, and is determined to tell the stories that we prefer to forget? What if my roommate knew about the heart procedure that was performed in the Lagos hospital last week? What if my roommate knew about contemporary

Nigerian music, talented people singing in English and Pidgin, and Igbo and Yoruba and Ijo, mixing influences from Jay-Z to Fela to Bob Marley to their grandfathers.

What if my roommate knew about the female lawyer who recently went to court in Nigeria to challenge a ridiculous law that required women to get their husband's consent before renewing their passports? What if my roommate knew about Nollywood, full of innovative people making films despite great technical odds, films so popular that they really are the best example of Nigerians consuming what they produce? What if my roommate knew about my wonderfully ambitious hair braider, who has just started her own business selling hair extensions? Or about the millions of other Nigerians who start businesses and sometimes fail, but continue to nurse ambition?

Every time I am home I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government, but also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it. I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories.

My Nigerian publisher and I have just started a non-profit called Farafina Trust, and we have big dreams of building libraries and refurbishing libraries that already exist and providing books for state schools that don't have anything in their libraries, and also of organizing lots and lots of workshops, in reading and writing, for all the people who are eager to tell our many stories.

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

The American writer Alice Walker wrote this about her Southern relatives who had moved to the North. She introduced them to a book about the Southern life that they had left behind. "They sat

around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained.”

I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

Thank you.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie grew up in Nigeria. She is the author of the novels *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was named one of The New York Times Top Ten Best Books of 2013.

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8. Habits and Virtues: Does It Matter if a Leader Kicks a Dog?

JOANNE B. CIULLA

Abstract

This paper argues that it is reasonable to make attributions about a leader's character based on minor incidents such as kicking a dog. It begins with a short review of the relevant literature from leadership studies and social psychology on how our prototypes of leaders affect the attributions we make about them. Then the paper examines the role of virtues, habits, and dispositional statements to show why an act such as kicking a dog can offer insight into a leader's moral character.

KEYWORDS: Leadership; Leadership Ethics; Virtue; Habit Attribution; Dispositional Statements

Introduction

Followers watch their leaders. They consciously or unconsciously notice how leaders act in formal, informal, public and private settings and they use this information to draw inferences about leaders' virtues, vices, habits, and future behavior. One reason they do this is because this personal knowledge helps compensate for the real or perceived power imbalance between leaders and followers.¹

There are times when people observe what a leader does in the

blink of an eye that influence their opinion of a leader almost as much or even more than his or her entire résumé. This leads one to wonder: Is one instance or one small gesture a fair and reasonable way to make a moral assessment of a leader? We might ask this question about the behavior of anyone but it takes on a special significance in the case of leaders because of the ways they are scrutinized and perceived by followers.

Forum

In this paper, I look at why a seemingly minor act of a leader can influence our perceptions of her moral character, even in the face of other positive information about the leader. For example, would you hire a successful, well-qualified person to be a CEO or vote for a politician who you discovered kicked a dog? What would you think of a leader who kicked a dog? Is dog kicking even relevant to leadership?

For a dog lover it would matter even if he only kicked a dog once; for others it would not matter if he kicked a dog once but it would if he did it all the time. There are also those who would consider dog kicking completely irrelevant to a leader's moral character and ability to lead. One simple reason for condemning the behavior is that most people think leaders should be role models but does being a role model require moral perfection in every aspect of life or does it only require that that a leader serve as a model in areas relevant to his or her role as a leader?²

This hypothetical may seem like a trivial thought experiment, yet the point of the question and this paper is to tease out some philosophic insights into an important practical question. What does a small gesture or off-handed behavior tell us about the moral character of a leader?

This question lies at the heart of judgments we make when hiring people for leadership roles and deciding which candidate to vote

for in an election. It touches on the relationship between a leader's public and private morality, her everyday behavior, and behavior that is part of her job. I refer to these minor gestures that people sense are morally significant as "morality in the miniature". Morality in the miniature consists of the little things people do that we perceive as indicators of the virtues that they actually possess.³

This paper begins with a short review of the relevant literature from leadership studies and social psychology on how we make attributions about a person's character and how those attributions are related to our prototypes of what a leader should be like. I will then discuss the role of virtues and habits in ethics as a means of showing why judgments about a leader's character that are based on incidents of morality in the miniature such as kicking a dog, while subject to error, can offer insights into a leader's moral character.

Leadership ethics in Leadership Studies

Most of the literature in leadership studies looks at leadership along two main axes. The first axis includes things like behaviors, traits and styles, and the second consists of the historical, organizational, and cultural context of the leader. Studies of leadership usually aim at understanding good leadership, which I have argued means leadership that is both effective and ethical.⁴

Hence, on the one hand, if one regards ethics and effectiveness as two very separate criteria, the question of dog kicking is irrelevant if the kicker possesses the traits, knowledge, and skills to be an effective leader. On the other hand if one sees ethics as intertwined with leader effectiveness, then dog kicking may be significant. Researchers have yet to discover a universal set of traits that leaders make leaders effective in all contexts,⁵ nonetheless, most leadership theories have normative aspects to them.⁶

For instance, some leaders have traits that are effective in a business context but not in a political one. Leadership scholars

and practitioners have long enjoyed clustering traits and behaviors into ideal types of leadership, most of which make normative assumptions about leaders. A disproportionate amount of the leadership literature consists of research on transformational leadership,⁷ transforming leadership,⁸ servant leadership,⁹ authentic leadership,¹⁰ and a construct with a somewhat misleading name called “ethical leadership”.¹¹

The attraction of enumerating the traits or behaviors of leaders under the umbrella of a theory is that you can measure them. Hence the most discussed theories are the ones that have questionnaires, such as transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership. All three of these theories have implicit or explicit normative assumptions. Transformational leadership assumes that the leader inspires followers.¹² In James MacGregor Burns’ theory of transforming leadership leaders and followers engage each other in a dialogue about values and through this process leaders and followers become morally better. Bernard M. Bass begs the question of ethics by asserting that only ethical leaders are real transformational leaders, whereas he calls the unethical leaders pseudo-transformational.¹³

From a philosophic perspective the “ethical leadership” construct developed by Michael E. Brown, Linda K. Treviño, and David A. Harrison tests a somewhat peculiar grab bag of things. Some of the questions are about managerial behaviors, such as the leader “listens to what employees have to say”, while others are personal moral assessments such as “conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner”, and others look like virtues such as “makes fair and balanced decisions”.¹⁴

Respondents of survey studies such as this one have their own take on the ethical ideas in them but do not usually have the latitude to express their own implicit theory of ethics. Another limitation of these survey studies is they often filter out attributions that are uniquely part of how people construct their idea of a leader.

Agency and implicit theories of leadership

We interpret the behavior of people around us daily. In doing so we also make inferences about their intentions, motivations, traits, and values. People exercise agency when they intentionally do something. Albert Bandura says:

An intention is a representation of a future course of action to be performed. It is not simply an expectation or prediction of future actions but a proactive commitment to bring them about.¹⁵

We contrast agency with accidental acts such as tripping over a stone and knocking someone over. In such cases there is no intent and from a moral point of view, we usually do not assign blame in the same way. The woman did not intend to knock the man over, so we would consider her blameless or perhaps negligent for not watching where she was going. Yet, between accidental behavior and intentional behavior is a third domain and this is what we sometimes call “absent minded behavior”. The leader kicks the dog out of the way and carries on with his business, apparently without thinking about it. This is the domain of morality in the miniature that I want to explore in this paper. Acts that the agent hardly appears to think about that may have moral import.¹⁶

It includes cases where a leader does not intentionally do something bad but the fact that he does it has significance to the followers, not because he had bad intentions but because he did it without thinking. Moral agency has an inhibitive form that consists of the power to refrain from acting inhumanely and a proactive form that we express in humane behavior.¹⁷ The leader who kicks a dog may raise concerns about his ability to control himself.

Leadership scholars and social psychologists have done extensive research on implicit theories of leadership and the role of attribution in leadership. Attributions are ways of inferring the reasons and causes of actions. According to social identity theory, people base their attributions of leaders on their personal prototype

of what a leader ought to be like.¹⁸ Meindl et al. argue that the attributions concerning leaders are so strong that they call them “the romance of leadership” because people tend to assume that leaders have more power and control over things than they actually do.¹⁹

According to Meindl et al. the romance and mystery of leadership may be what sustains followers and moves them to work with leaders toward a common goal but it also creates prototypes of leaders that are unrealistic. If this is true, then all kinds of seemingly trivial behavior may have relevance concerning the behavior of leaders that they may not have for others.

The romance of leadership research illustrates an ethically distinctive aspect of being a leader. Unlike people who are not in leadership roles, we hold leaders responsible for things that they did not know about, did not do, and are unable to control. This is not because people really believe that leaders have agency over everything that goes on. Yet we still give leaders credit for all of the good things that happen under their watch and blame them for the bad, regardless of whether they had anything to do with it. Moral concepts such as responsibility are embedded in many or perhaps most prototypes of leaders. Ideally leaders are the ones who give direction and take responsibility for what happens in a group, organization, or society.

To take responsibility means to accept the role of someone who gets praised, blamed, and has a duty to clean up problems. Taking responsibility is different from being responsible in the sense that an agent may not be personally responsible for doing something or even ordering that something be done. This does not mean that leaders always take responsibility, but this expectation is clear to anyone who has noticed how bad leaders look when they fail to do so. For example, when Americans tried to sign up for health insurance and the government computers crashed, President Obama told the public that he was responsible for the failure. It would have been ridiculous for the President to say, “It’s not my fault. I did not program the computers”.

Attribution errors

As mentioned earlier, we also watch leaders to gain insights into how they will behave in the future. People look for invariances or regularities in human behavior because this helps give order to their world. As Fritz Heider points out, one problem with doing so is that we tend to “overestimate the unity of personality” and look at people in the context of the role that they play.²⁰ Another related problem is one of faulty inductive logic. Sometimes people make unwarranted generalizations about a person from only one or a few observations. The fact that a man kicked a dog once does not logically warrant the conclusion that he will always kick dogs or always kicks dogs.

When we do not possess knowledge about why the man kicked the dog, we may also discount the behavior because we do not feel we have enough information to make a harsh judgment about the man’s character and intent. Hence, we dismiss the act because maybe the man was distracted, under stress, or did not mean to do so. This is called the discounting principle in which the “role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other possible causes are present”.²¹ While we sometimes make mistakes when we discount bad behavior, we also make mistakes when we fail to consider a person’s background knowledge.

Terry Price argues that leaders make two types of cognitive moral mistakes.²² The first is about the content of morality, meaning that he cannot see why it is wrong to kick a dog. The second kind is about the scope of morality, meaning that he does not place dogs in the category of things that are morally considerable. Understanding that the leader in effect “does not know any better” may be helpful yet it still does not make some behaviors morally excusable.

This leads us to another type of attribution error. Sometimes people do not take into account the context of the behavior and the actor.²³ The leader may have kicked the dog because there were rabid dogs in the area. We also have to consider the cultural context

of the agent. Sociologists Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu both use the term *habitus* to discuss how environment interacts with and shapes behavior. As Mauss notes, people's habits and the meaning of behavior "vary between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, and prestige".²⁴ Bourdieu says that individual behavior is a "structural variant of all other group or class habitus".²⁵ Maybe the leader is from a place where dogs are considered vermin and dog kicking is so normal that no one even notices it.

While people err in failing to take into account the cultural context that affects a person's behavior, they may also make the mistake of assuming that other people react the way that they do or act on the same interests or values that they have.²⁶ This may influence both positive and negative attributions. Hence, the dog lover may think that everyone should have the same respect and concern for dogs that she does. For her, the act of dog kicking is extremely immoral. Whereas a cat lover who hates dogs may approve of the leader's behavior – if given the chance, she would have kicked the dog too.

Other factors may also influence attributions such as proximity to the event.²⁷ The person who sees the man kick the dog up close may react differently from the person who simply hears about it or watches it on the news. An empathetic witness to the event may feel distress because he hears the dog's cries and sees its discomfort. This may elicit a feeling of physical disgust, which has been shown to increase the severity of a person's moral judgment.²⁸ These are just a few factors related to how we misinterpret the behavior of others and make false attributions about their character. Because people tend to carry strong assumptions about what leaders should be like and how they should behave, they tend to be hypersensitive to what leaders do. Now we will examine whether making moral judgments about leaders' incidents of morality in the miniature are warranted.

Virtue and virtuosì

The most obvious place to start looking at the moral significance of kicking a dog is in virtue ethics. Aristotle says that moral goodness is the result of habit or hexis. He does not regard hexis as mechanical activity in the way that a behaviorist like B.F. Skinner might think of it.²⁹ Consider the opening of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Excellence of character results from habituation [*ethos*] – which is in fact the source of the name that it acquired [*êthikê*], the word for character-trait [*êthos*] being a slight variation of that for habituation [*ethos*].³⁰

However, in Aristotle's and Plato's ethics, you cannot become virtuous through habit alone. In the *Republic*, Plato tells us that a person who becomes good “through habit and not by philosophy” is destined to make bad decisions.³¹ Virtue is not the result of conditioning nor does it include the repetition of a particular behavior – e.g., a courageous person is not always courageous in the same way. It takes knowledge and one might argue, imagination. Thornton C. Lockwood argues that:

Aristotle's idea of ethical character (*ethos*) or virtue (*aretê*) captures the notion of a virtuoso who is responsive in an excellent fashion to what reason perceives in particular and changing circumstances.³²

The idea of a virtuous person as a moral virtuoso has some provocative implications for our discussion of morality in the miniature. The definition of the word “virtuoso” consists of the key elements that mirror Aristotle's idea of virtue. First, it means a learned person who has a special technical skill. Second, is often related to someone with good taste and third, such a person is sometimes a dabbler in a variety of arts.³³ A virtuoso has technical skill and knowledge found in (*phronesis*). The attraction to fine things or taste reminds us of what Aristotle says about being motivated by the love of “the fine”, which are activities that give us pleasure because they are good.³⁴

Aristotle's ethics assumes that virtues should be practiced regularly. A virtuoso violinist should be able to play any piece of music well. If she played a simple piece of music badly, we might wonder if she was really a virtuoso. If a virtuous person is a virtuoso, what do we say about her when she behaves badly in a minor incident?

Aristotle also says that there is a unity of virtues. You cannot practice and have some virtues without having others. Based on Aristotle's account in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, such a person should know "the right rule" for practicing a virtue and virtues in a variety of situations.³⁵ For example, courage is facing danger for the right reason. We cannot know what the right reason and hence practice courage without knowing about justice, fairness, and the good life in general.³⁶ Aristotle's virtue ethics show us why it is reasonable to question the moral character of the leader who kicks a dog. If virtues are supposed to be habits and intertwined with each other, then it makes sense. Here we see a tension between a unified concept of morality and the potential attribution error of overestimating the unity of personality that was mentioned earlier.

Habits

We tend to assume regularities in human behavior. While this can be problematic, it is not always wrong to do so. Habits have always been a difficult part of ethics because they complicate the meaning of an action. Immanuel Kant thought habits undercut the idea of good will, which he saw as the foundation of morality. For Kant, the very idea of ethics rests on following moral laws, especially in cases where we choose respect for the law overcomes our inclinations. Friedrich Nietzsche thought that short-term habits were okay, but disliked "enduring habits" because they prevented humanity from improving itself through "self-overcoming".³⁷ The negative interpretations of habits are based on their connotation as

mechanistic and repetitive behavior. The positive views on habit tend to follow Aristotle's lead and incorporate free will, reason and intentionality into them.

William James recognized the tension between determinism and voluntary behavior but regarded habit as central to the pragmatist framework. He said that habit serves as a “happy harmonizer” of different elements of human experience.³⁸ In a similar light, John Dewey argued that habits are a way for people to link past, present, and future events. He said, “The view that habits are formed by sheer repetition puts the cart before the horse”.³⁹ Repetition is the result of a habit, not its cause. Habits are formed by knowledge, socialization, and reason, which we then streamline into behavior. Kicking dogs may be a bad habit, but since habits are not mindless, the agent is still accountable for what happened before he began to repeatedly exercise the behavior.

In some ways, David Hume's account of habit captures the concern people feel when they witness acts of morality in the miniature. Hume says that moral judgments are about custom or habit and they vary across time and culture. On Hume's view, it is reasonable to assume that if a person kicks a dog once, he will do it again or perhaps do other similarly bad things. Hume writes:

The supposition, that the future resembles the past, is not founded on arguments of any kind, but is deriv'd entirely from habit, by which we are determin'd to expect for the future the same train of objects, to which we have become accustom'd.⁴⁰

While people may read situations incorrectly when they make snap judgments about a leader based on some small act, Hume tells us they may do so because they have seen causal connections between things like dog kicking and other bad behaviors.⁴⁰

According to Hume it makes sense to be concerned about a leader who kicks a dog; however, in the same light Hume admits that this opinion can be changed by evidence to the contrary. As Hume famously said:

Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions,

and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.⁴¹

When we witness any small unsavory gesture of a leader, it may elicit a feeling of discomfort in part, Hume argues, because it is associated with something else we have seen or some other causal connection between such behaviors in the past. Hume notes that the passion or feeling we might have is not unreasonable unless we discover that it is “accompanied by a false judgment”.⁴² In that case it is the judgment not the feeling we have about the act that is unreasonable.

Integrity of morality

One bone of contention about virtue ethics is based on the attribution errors of assuming that virtues are unwavering character traits and assuming that behavior depends more on a leader’s character than the context of it.⁴³ Critics argue that people cannot rely on virtues to resist behaving badly when others around them are. Even Machiavelli offers this “nice guys finish last” argument about leaders:

If a ruler who wants always to act honorably is surrounded by many unscrupulous men his downfall is inevitable.⁴⁴

Robert C. Solomon uses emotions to explain the relationship between virtue as a personal quality and a behavior that is influenced by context. He says emotions are part of virtues and since emotions are reactive to other people and situations, it is foolish to deny that virtues depend on the environment and yet that does not mean they are totally determined by it.⁴⁵

In contrast to Solomon, Gilbert Harman argues that moral philosophers sometimes commit the fundamental attribution error of assuming that certain behaviors are indicative of moral character traits. He calls this “misguided folk morality” and his argument

privileges the empirical research of psychologists over the moral theories of philosophers.⁴⁶

Assuming that human beings are more consistent than they are is a psychological question. Experience and numerous experiments have demonstrated that character is not necessarily a stable part of human behavior. Yet, I do not think that these experiments imply that to avoid attribution errors people should change the moral ideals inherent in their prototypes of leaders. One reason why the philosophers we have discussed are interested in habits is because the idea of consistency is fundamental to the idea of what it means to be ethical. Also, consistency is especially important in leadership for building trust giving people a sense of security. So, when we see a man leader kick a dog, it is not unreasonable to wonder if that behavior is consistent with or indicative of other behaviors, just as we wonder about the virtuoso who cannot play a simple piece of music.

People often talk about a leader's integrity, sometimes as if it is a psychological quality and sometimes as if it is a moral quality. The description of moral integrity has as many definitions as there are writers in the leadership literature. Leadership scholars often define integrity as a cluster of moral concepts that usually include honesty and sometimes they use integrity to refer to all aspects of a leader's ethics. The descriptive meaning of the word "integrity" is wholeness and that wholeness is the umbrella over all aspects of morality or as Aristotle says, "the rule". When a person has a virtue it is a *hexis* because we do not expect moral qualities to be selectively exercised or exercised in isolation from other virtues. As David Baum notes, integrity refers to a personal completeness that describes a person's unbroken or uncorrupted character.⁴⁷ While integrity is central to how we think of a person's moral character, it is also central to how we think about their immoral character. So our other intuition about the leader kicking a dog is that the incident may represent a tear in the fabric of the leader's morality. The alternative to this view of integrity is the assumption that people easily compartmentalize their moral behavior. On this view, unsavory behavior in a leader's

private life or outside of the leader's actual work is irrelevant to his or her job as a leader. While this may be true in some cases, we also see cases where followers stop discounting this kind of bad behavior because they have enough evidence to see how a leader's bad private behavior or dog kicking affects how they lead.

Dispositional properties

We have been discussing how we might make sense of the dog kicking incident from the perspective of leadership studies, psychology, and moral philosophy. Philosophy provides other insights into the problem based on how we formulate our ideas in language. In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle offers a way to think about attribution based on the statements we make about the “dispositional properties” of people and things. He says dispositional statements:

Apply to, or are satisfied by, the actions, reactions and state of the object; they are inference-tickets, which license us to predict, retrodict, explain and modify these actions reactions and states.⁴⁸

Following the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ryle believes that language has an elasticity of significance.⁴⁹ When we make the dispositional statement that someone is a dog kicker, we are not saying that the person is currently kicking a dog, has repeatedly kicked dogs in the past, or will kick dogs in the future; nor are we reporting on observed or unobserved behavior. Dispositional statements do not narrate incidents but “if they are true, they are satisfied by narrated incidents”.⁵⁰

So an observer may see a leader kick a dog and make the statement “the leader is a dog kicker”. This statement is not true or false but rather a provisional statement about the leader. The meaning of the statement depends on whether it fits with other narratives of events in which we are able to see a family resemblance to dog kicking. For instance, dog kicking might at some

point become meaningful in the narrative of other behaviors such as humiliating low-level subordinates. Ryle's analysis of statements about dispositional properties gives us a way of understanding how a person might think about the act of dog kicking. She may infer from the leader kicking the dog a tentative set of dispositional properties ranging from cruelty, to disdain for subordinates, to impatience, etc., and then watch to see if these qualities manifest themselves in his behavior as a leader. This is analogous to Hume's point about judgments. We may make a wrong judgment based on the facts, but our thinking about how we feel at the time is sound. It is neither illogical nor false to say that someone who kicks a dog once is a dog kicker. Dispositional statements have the potential to refer to acts of morality in the miniature that may or may not at some point be either relevant to or even constitutive of a person's morality as a whole.

No more dogs! A real case

At this point the reader is probably weary of hearing about a leader kicking a dog, so let us look at a real example that illustrates the way people use an observation of morality in the miniature to gain insight into a person's morality. Several years ago, the manager of a large Wall Street bank told me a story of the time that they tried to hire a "superstar" broker away from a competitor to lead a new division of his company. The management team had met with the broker many times over a period of months to convince him to join their firm. After a number of interviews, long lunches, and conversations with the broker, he agreed to join the bank. On the way out of the office after the final interview, the broker turned to the receptionist and said "honey, get me a taxi and move it, I'm in a hurry".⁵¹

The receptionist blushed and looked surprised at being addressed in such a rude fashion. The interviewers witnessed his behavior

and were quite surprised by it. The man had not behaved that way before and they assumed that he should know better. After the incident, they started to feel uneasy about him. Despite his stellar track record as a broker, his academic credentials, and the fact that they thought he would make a lot of money for the bank, something about him did not seem right. The question on their minds was a question about his virtue: “Is he in the habit of behaving this way?”

They not only wondered about how he treated women and subordinates but they started to wonder how he did other things. Was this a tear in the fabric of his character? The incident compelled them to take a closer look into the broker’s background. After further investigation they discovered that there were indeed problems that were unrelated to how he treated women or subordinates, but about how the broker did business. The managers decided not to hire him because they worried that he had “risky habits”.

This case illustrates how morality in the miniature can offer potential clues into a person’s character. While being rude to a woman is more serious than being rude to a dog, the behavior indicated an inconsistency from their previous observations about his behavior and fit in their organization. One might object that perhaps lapses like the broker’s are a one-off and it would be unfair to judge him by it.

Yet, the case illustrates that by viewing actions as morality in the miniature they did not condemn the man based on one act or how they felt about his behavior. Rather, the broker’s behavior led them to question his character. Some organizations take the idea characterized by morality in the miniature seriously. They look for insights into job candidates’ character by taking them out to lunch and observing how they treat the server. The assumption being that if they are rude to the waitress then they might be rude to subordinates.

Conclusion: Why the little things matter

The case about the broker is exemplified by the saying, “where there is smoke, there is fire”. I am not willing to make such a strong claim about the leader who kicks a dog. Instead what I have attempted to show in this paper is that where there is smoke, it makes sense to keep an eye out for fire. Leadership scholars have shown us that people have prototypes of leaders that influence their attributions of them. Psychologists have demonstrated how people make attribution errors about the character of leaders, such as ignoring the context of the behavior or overestimating the unity of personality.

We also know that prototypes of leaders usually entail moral theories or moral norms. As we have seen, the anchor of many moral theories is that a person’s moral character requires some sort of consistency and coherency such as in Aristotle’s idea of a unified and intertwined set of virtues. The fact that people have free will and behave inconsistently does not mean that we should remove the expectation of moral coherence from our assumptions about morality or from the moral ideals inherent in our prototypes of leaders.⁵²

By viewing a virtue as something that a person practices all the time and is related to other virtues, we set a high standard, especially for leaders who have the power to do great good or harm to others. So while such assumptions about virtue may be wrong from a psychological point of view, they are not necessarily wrong from a philosophical one.

By assuming that the character of a leader is on display in a variety of behaviors from the small gesture to intentional act, we are able to hold leaders to a high standard of morality. We should pay attention to acts of morality in the miniature because such acts serve as red flags that alert us to potential problems. Like the rest of us, leaders are morally imperfect.

Yet unlike the rest of us, the consequences of their moral

imperfections can potentially do immediate or long-term harm to many people. This is why leaders should be watched (especially by citizens in a democracy) and why the off-handed things leaders do may matter. I am not arguing that we should obsess over everything that a leader does, but rather that it is reasonable to pay attention to the acts that seem inconsistent with what you know about the leader, or behavior that could be indicative of other problems.

Lastly, we live in an era when we know more about our leaders than ever before. The 24-hour news organizations watch and dissect everything that high-level leaders say and do. Some find it difficult to sort through what is relevant and what is not relevant to a leader's moral character, especially in politics. When faced with too much information it becomes all too easy to say that the little things do not matter as long as the economy is good or the company makes a profit. Nonetheless, history has shown us that this is always true. While kicking a dog may not bear any relationship to a person's moral character, in the case of leaders the stakes are sometimes too high to simply ignore it.

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Notes

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12 B.M.BASS, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*, cit.

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14 M. E. BROWN, L. K. TREVIÑO, D. A. HARRISON, *Ethical*

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15 A. BANDURA, Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective, in: *Annual Review Psychology*, vol. LII, 2001, pp. 1-26, here p. 6.

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40 D.HUME, *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), edited by L. A. SELBY-BIGGE, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1968, p. 134.

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44 N. MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince* (1513), edited by Q. SKINNER, R. PRICE, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 54.

45 R. C. SOLOMON, *Victims of Circumstances? A Defense of Virtue Ethics in Business*, in: *Business Ethics Quarterly*, vol. XIII, n. 1, 2003, pp. 43-62.

46 See G. HARMAN, *Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error*, in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. XCIX, 1999, pp. 315-331.

47 See D. C. BAUMAN, *Leadership and the Three Faces of Integrity*, in: *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. XXIV, n. 3, 2013, pp. 414-426.

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50 Ivi, p. 125.

51 J. B. CIULLA, *Sleazy or Stupid?*, in: J. B. CIULLA (ed.), *The Ethics of Leadership*, Thompson Wadsworth, Belmont (CA) 2003, p. 63.

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9. Hope and Mourning in the Anthropocene: Understanding Ecological Grief

NEVILLE ELLIS AND ASHLEE CUNSOLO

We are living in a time of extraordinary ecological loss. Not only are human actions destabilising the very conditions that sustain life, but it is also increasingly clear that we are pushing the Earth into an entirely new geological era, often described as the [Anthropocene](#).

Research shows that people increasingly feel the effects of these planetary changes and associated ecological losses in their daily lives, and that these changes present significant direct and indirect threats to mental health and well-being. Climate change, and the associated impacts to land and environment, for example, have recently been linked to a range of negative [mental health impacts](#), including depression, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress, as well as feelings of anger, hopelessness, distress, and despair.

Not well represented in the literature, however, is an emotional response we term ‘ecological grief,’ which we have defined in a recent [Nature Climate Change](#) article: “The grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.”

We believe ecological grief is a natural, though overlooked, response to ecological loss, and one that is likely to affect more of us into the future.

Understanding ecological grief

Grief takes many forms and differs greatly between individuals and cultures. Although grief is well understood in relation to human losses, 'to grieve' is rarely considered something that we do in relation to losses in the natural world.

The eminent American naturalist [Aldo Leopold](#) was among the first to describe the emotional toll of ecological loss in his 1949 book, *A Sand County Almanac*: "One of the penalties of an ecological education," he wrote, "is to live alone in a world of wounds."

Don't let yourself be misled. Understand issues with help from experts

More recently, many respected ecologists and climate scientists have expressed their feelings of grief and distress in response to climate change and the environmental destruction it entails in places like: "[Climate scientists feel weight of the world on their shoulders](#)" and "[Is this how you feel?](#)"

Ecological grief is also a significant theme in our own work. In different research projects working with Inuit in [Inuit Nunangat](#) in [Arctic Canada](#) and farmers in the [Western Australian Wheatbelt](#), both of us have spent a combined total of almost 20 years working with people living in areas experiencing significant climatic changes and environmental shifts.

Despite very different geographical and cultural contexts, our research revealed a surprising degree of commonality between Inuit and family farming communities as they struggled to cope, both emotionally and psychologically, with mounting ecological losses and the prospect of an uncertain future.

Voices of ecological grief

Our research shows that climate-related ecological losses can trigger grief experiences in several ways. Foremost, people grieve for lost landscapes, ecosystems, species, or places that carry personal or collective meaning.

For Inuit communities in the Inuit Land Claim Settlement Area of [Nunatsiavut, Labrador](#), Canada, the [land is foundational to mental health](#). In recent years, [melting sea ice prevented travel to significant cultural sites and engagement in traditional cultural activities](#), such as hunting and fishing. These disruptions to an [Inuit sense of place](#) was accompanied by [strong emotional reactions](#), including grief, anger, sadness, frustration and despair.

One male who grew up hunting and trapping on the land in the community of [Rigolet](#), Nunatsiavut [explained](#):

“People are not who they are. They’re not comfortable and can’t do the same things. If something is taken away from you, you don’t have it. If a way of life is taken away because of circumstances you have no control over, you lose control over your life.”

Chronic drought conditions in the Western Australian Wheatbelt elicited similar emotional reactions for some family farmers. As one long-time farmer described:

“There’s probably nothing worse than seeing your farm go in a dust storm. I reckon it’s probably one of the worst feelings [...] I find that one of the most depressing things of the lot, seeing the farm blow away in a dust storm. That really gets up my nose, and a long way up too. If its blowing dust I come inside – I just come inside here. I can’t stand to watch it.”



Sweeping away the dust in the central Western Australian Wheatbelt Feb. 2013. Neville Ellis

In both cases, such experiences resonate strongly with the concept of “[solastagia](#),” described both as a form of homesickness while still in place, and as a type of grief over the loss of a healthy place or a thriving ecosystem.

People also grieve for lost environmental knowledge and associated identities. In these cases, people mourn the part of self-identity that is lost when the land upon which it is based changes or disappears.

For Australian family farmers, the inability to maintain a healthy landscape in the context of worsening seasonal variability and chronic dryness often elicited feelings of self-blame and shame:

“Farmers just hate seeing their farm lift; it somehow says to them ‘I’m a bad farmer’. And I think all farmers are good farmers. They all try their hardest to be. They all love their land.”

For older Inuit in Nunatsiavut, changes to weather and landscape are invalidating long-standing and multi-generational ecological knowledge, and with it, a coherent sense of culture and self. As one well-respected hunter [shared](#):

“It’s hurting in a way. It’s hurting in a lot of ways. Because I kinda thinks I’m not going to show my grandkids the way we used to do it. It’s hurting me. It’s hurting me big time. And I just keep that to myself.”

Many Inuit and family farmers also worry about their futures, and express grief in anticipation of worsening ecological losses. As one woman [explained](#) from Rigolet, Nunatsiavut:

“I think that [the changes] will have an impact maybe on mental health, because it’s a depressing feeling when you’re stuck. I mean for us to go off [on the land] is just a part of life. If you don’t have it, then that part of your life is gone, and I think that’s very depressing.”

Similarly, a farmer in Australia worried about the future shared their thoughts on the possibility of losing their family farm:

“[It] would be like a death. Yeah, there would be a grieving process because the farm embodies everything that the family farm is ... And I think if we were to lose it, it would be like losing a person ... but it would be sadder than losing a person ... I don’t know, it would be hard definitely.”

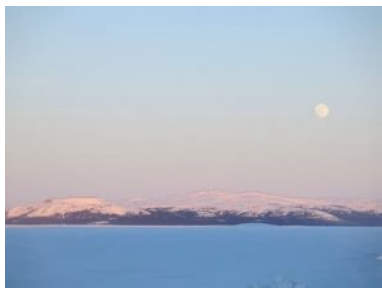
Ecological grief in a climate-changed future

Ecological grief reminds us that climate change is not just some abstract scientific concept or a distant environmental problem. Rather, it draws our attention to the personally experienced emotional and psychological losses suffered when there are changes or deaths in the natural world. In doing so, ecological grief also illuminates the ways in which more-than-humans are integral to our mental wellness, our communities, our cultures, and for our ability to thrive in a human-dominated world.

From what we have seen in our own research, although this type of grief is already being experienced, it often lacks an appropriate avenue for expression or for healing. Indeed, not only do we lack the rituals and practices to help address feelings of ecological grief, until recently we did not even have the language to give such feelings voice. And it is for these reasons that grief over losses in the natural world can feel, as American ecologist Phyllis Windle put it, [‘irrational, inappropriate, anthropomorphic.’](#)

We argue that recognising [ecological grief as a legitimate response to ecological loss](#) is an important first step for humanising climate change and its related impacts, and for expanding our understanding of what it means to be [human in the Anthropocene](#). How to grieve ecological losses well – particularly when they are ambiguous, cumulative and ongoing – is a question currently without answer. However, it is a question that we expect will become more pressing as further impacts from climate change, including loss, are experienced.

We do not see ecological grief as submitting to despair, and neither does it justify ‘switching off’ from the many environmental problems that confront humanity. Instead, we find great hope in the responses ecological grief is likely to invoke. Just as grief over the loss of a loved person puts into perspective what matters in our lives, collective experiences of ecological grief may coalesce into a strengthened sense of love and commitment to the places, ecosystems and species that inspire, nurture and sustain us. There is much grief work to be done, and much of it will be hard. However, being open to the pain of ecological loss may be what is needed to prevent such losses from occurring in the first place.



Moonrise near Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Canada. Ashlee Cunsolo

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[“Hope and Mourning in the Anthropocene: Understanding Ecological Grief”](#) by Neville Ellis & Ashlee Cunsolo was originally published in *The Conversation* (2018) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#) (CC BY-ND 4.0).

10. I Have Lost Everything

ASIA FIELDS; NICOLE SANTA CRUZ; RUTH TALBOT; AND MAYA
MILLER

You can access this text by clicking on the following link:

<https://projects.propublica.org/impact-of-homeless-sweeps-lost-belongings/>

II. Ending National Parks

AMANDA GOKEE

White sands tower over the deep blue water of Lake Michigan at Sleeping Bear Dunes, or *Ininewewi-gichigami* to the Anishinaabe people who have always called this place home.

The [Anishinaabe story](#) of how this place came to be starts with a great wildfire. As flames engulfed the western shores of the lake, a mama bear fled, swimming across the lake with two cubs in tow. She reached the eastern shore, where the park now lies, and climbed onto a high bluff overlooking the lake to wait for her babies. Neither ever arrived. Exhausted, the cubs had drowned in the lake. But high on her perch, the mother never stopped watching for them. Impressed with her watch, Creator made two islands in the cubs' memory. The mother waits to this day, looking to the lake from the sand dunes that carry her name and form.

The U.S. federal government authorized the area as a national park in 1970, part of the more than [85 million acres of parkland](#) now scattered across the country. The National Park Service controls these lands in order to protect what it considers special places, so that, as described on its homepage, “all may experience our heritage.” The model is a point of pride for the country and has been exported around the world.

For many people indigenous to this land, the creation of national parks has not been positive. Anishinaabe people, including the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, have had to fight to ensure their basic treaty rights, like hunting and fishing, are respected in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. And there are still strict limitations on how they can interact with the land.

“The history of Western conservation vis-à-vis land protection, it's been a violent, horrible erasure of Indigenous people that environmentalists look at as a point of pride,” says [Nick Reo](#), a citizen of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and an associate

professor of Native American and Indigenous studies and environmental studies at Dartmouth College. Environmentalists believe that they've "saved" something precious. But for Reo and other Indigenous people, it's the losses that stand out.

[Public lands only exist because tribes have been removed and excluded](#) from their traditional homelands. National parks, forests, and shorelines are painful reminders for Indigenous people that this history of separation is ongoing.

Parks serve a key function in propping up capitalist economies. The parks were created by and for [powerful white elites](#) as a "[pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people](#)," according to the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act of 1872. And they have strong support from the [tourism industry](#); in 2020, the parks generated around [\\$30 billion in economic activity](#), and park visitors, according to the park service's most recent survey, are nearly [80% white](#).

The same settler capitalists that are eating up land and resources, Reo says, are then trying to set areas aside elsewhere to protect those places from themselves. "These acts interfere with our [Indigenous] peoples' ability to fulfill our cultural obligations to take care of place, to fulfill our spiritual needs and mandate, to be deeply connected to ... and doing things with and for the land," he says.

But Indigenous people say there's a different way forward: returning these lands to those who have always called them home. Transforming parks from places of Indigenous exclusion to places of Indigenous power, Reo and others believe, would address the parks' damaging legacy and repair the relationship with land for the future. In this vision, parks would be treated and viewed according to an Indigenous worldview, where Native language and culture could thrive.

"I think it all needs to be returned," Reo says. And he believes it should start with the National Park Service.

Dispelling the Myth of Untouched Lands

Like many undeveloped parts of the country, national parks are mythologized as pristine wilderness areas that are set aside to prevent people from spoiling them. [Recent scholarship](#), such as [research by Kurt Kipfmüller](#) on cultural burning in the Boundary Waters in northeastern Minnesota, reflects what Indigenous people say: These spaces have always been tended to and cared for by humans—and that’s part of why they flourished.

There is a growing consensus that white Western conservation is [harmful](#) because it erases the way Indigenous people have always cared for these landscapes, and reinforces people’s separation from the ecosystem. That would change under tribal control of the national parks.

“You can imagine practices that have been on the landscape for millennia, in particular things like cultural burning, or wildlife migration patterns, or knowledge of native plants and interrelationships between plants and other resources,” says Monte Mills, director of the Native American Law Center at the University of Washington. “All of these connections that many Native folks have had to these landscapes for generations can help inform how those landscapes are used, utilized, visited.”

The population of wild, [free-roaming bison in Yellowstone National Park](#), for example, is the last in the country. But the park service manages them to minimize the impact on neighboring landowners and the cattle industry in Montana and Wyoming by restricting or prohibiting the bison’s migration, and killing some of the animals to keep their numbers down.

“Just the starting point—that the park service is in the business of preventing wild animals from doing what they do—suggests there might be some different approaches that are actually more closely connected to the ways in which these ecosystems work,” Mills says.

[Tribes have already been involved](#) with bison relocation, re-entry, and reintroduction, and an Indigenous approach could take into

account the ways bison are connected to other parts of the ecosystem, such as the benefits they bring to the grasses and waterways.

Resting the Land

This vision of the national parks would move away from the current emphasis on land management or stewardship, and instead focus on a reciprocal relationship between people and the land. Deepening this relationship could benefit animals, plants, and humans alike.

At Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, for the first time, tribes have [secured decision-making power](#) over a monument not located on reservation lands. A commission made up of five tribes—the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe—now shares equal decision-making with the federal agencies managing the monument.

“Every time I go into Bears Ears, it feels like home,” says [Charissa Mijjessepe-Wilson](#), co-director of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition and member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Tribe in northeast Kansas. “It feels like your people, your ancestors, the living creatures, the plants, even the soil itself ... is welcoming you back, because it’s a place that our tribes have always known.”

The coalition has created a [land management plan](#) that starts with Indigenous values, as opposed to Western conventions, and without the imposition of a federal agency overseeing the process. Some of the plan’s suggestions reflect how sacred the land is and how to get visitors to behave accordingly.

“From a Native perspective, the natural world is much more than just a physical realm to sustain the material needs of life,” according to the plan. “The natural resources of the Bears Ears cultural landscape—water, land, wind, sound—are imbued by powerful religious, artistic, and other cultural meanings significant to Native communities with ancestral ties to this region.” This perspective

diverges from the way federal agencies typically understand the landscape. For the tribes, every plant carries deep medicinal, cultural, and spiritual meaning. For the tribes, the land is a living being that requires rest.

“We may ask people to visit sites in a way that you would visit a church, where we ask you to be really respectful, really quiet, and we ask you to limit your photography or to limit sharing on social media so that the site actually has time to rest,” Mijjessepe-Wilson says.

For Reo, using this kind of Indigenous framework to relate to the land can disrupt settler capitalism in other important ways, like upending the current assumption that land management should maximize economic gain or recreational opportunities.

Such a transition of control can cause tension, as those who are used to being able to turn a profit off the land see their returns diminished. That was the case at Devils Tower in the Black Hills, known to tribes as Bear’s Lodge, another national monument that is both a religious site for tribes and a popular rock climbing destination. Members of both groups agreed to a [voluntary closure during the month of June](#) to allow the site time to rest, but after a property-rights group filed a [lawsuit on behalf of a climbing guide, a judge struck down the portion of the ban preventing commercial use of the site during that month](#).

We must look to Colombia, a country with an entirely different relationship to capitalism and to its Indigenous people, to see a successfully implemented example of this model. Tayrona National Park closes a few times a year for two-week periods when the Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta conduct ceremony and allow the ecosystem to recover.

In Bears Ears, that means the landscape shouldn’t be treated as a playground—with visitors engaged in harmful behavior, like climbing the arches—but rather with reverence, says Mijjessepe-Wilson. According to her, the landscape deserves respect because it is your relative.

Restoring Relations

“How do you develop relationship with a place, let alone an individual plant or an individual rock, if you’re going there once a year or once a month?” Reo asks. “I think that those places, those plants, those rocks and waters, they want to be in relationship with us. And when we ignore the gifts they’re offering—we don’t pick the berries that they offer us every year—it’s like if you lived in a neighborhood and the neighbor never made eye contact, never said hi, never learned your name. After years and years and years, you might just give up.”

Under tribal leadership, national parks can become places where Indigenous people can fulfill those responsibilities, without the current red tape preventing Indigenous cultural practices. Currently, Reo’s son can’t go to parkland and undertake the four-day fast that’s traditionally part of an Ojibwe person’s transition from childhood to adulthood without requesting permission from the park service. In a park returned to the tribes, his right to do so would be guaranteed, as would other long-standing cultural practices like picking berries or hunting deer.

People could come to these places regularly and interact with them, returning to the sugar bush each year to make maple syrup; looking for deer; sitting, visiting, and talking around a campfire. It could be a place for people to learn about being good neighbors to the natural elements. Those land uses [would benefit](#) rather than [degrade the landscape](#).

“We’re part of it,” says Michael Isham, director of the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission and member of the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe. Isham works with government agencies on co-stewardship agreements, which give a greater voice to tribes regarding management of and relationship with public lands. “We each have responsibilities within the relationships we have,” he says.

Implementing this Indigenous vision wouldn’t make the country’s national parks unrecognizable to those who frequent them today.

Even its current staff, with valuable knowledge about how the parks operate, could be invited to “stay, but differently,” Reo says. The changes would give the original inhabitants a place to “fully be themselves,” immersed in ceremony, where Indigenous languages and cultures can thrive.

“Looking ahead, I think about those places being happier, our people being involved in their happiness,” Reo says.

Removing Native people from the places they cared for inflicted tragedy and pain. At Sleeping Bear Dunes, the mother’s wait is eternal. But ending the national parks could restore relationships and end the long wait for relatives to come home.

Amanda Gokee is an Ojibwe journalist reporting on New Hampshire for *The Boston Globe*.

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12. My Journey as a Writer

OWEN GUO

I'm a grammar vigilante now.

Verbal blunders—a CNN correspondent describing “a lot less” women on the streets of Kabul, or Justin Trudeau touting his approach “on” climate change—hit me the same way a piano tuner catches off-tune notes.

During pandemic lockdowns, I've turned to books and podcasts to compensate for lost companionship. Some books are read more than once, their ideas profound and their language elegant I linger when I read, sometimes to appreciate the beauty of the language. Often, I put my editor's hat on, frowning over typos and wondering why certain words were picked over others. The pandemic is turning me into a wordsmith.

It wasn't always like this. Ten years ago, I could barely string together a sentence in English. Now, I'm trying to build a writing career using a language that seemed at once foreign and perplexing.

I consider myself an aspiring writer, albeit an insecure and self-doubting one. After almost a decade in journalism, writing still doesn't come easy, not least because I'm doing it in my second language. Having grown up speaking Chinese, a language without verb conjugations, I find it tricky navigating a dozen English tenses. Nouns are never pluralized in my native language, the reason why I'm never sure whether I should use sky—or skies—to describe the vast space above our head (*or is it heads?*). Preposition rules are convoluted. When I write, I feel compelled to find synonyms, leading to many wow-this-is-actually-a-word kind of eureka moments. Writing is the laborious work of crafting cogent sentences from which ideas flow.

My forays into English writing started with something mundane: translation. It was 2011, and I was a 24-year-old graduate student in

Shanghai, idealistic and eager for a career with purpose. That fall, I landed a job as a news assistant at *McClatchy*, an American news outlet, in its Beijing bureau. China, still basking in the post-Beijing Olympic pride, was a superpower in waiting, its yearning for global recognition stronger than ever. A rising China—it eclipsed Japan in 2010 to become the world's second-largest economy—was a global story attracting growing interest in capitals from Brussels to Washington. I wanted to tell that story in a language the world could understand.

Translation was the ticket in. Under China's draconian media law, Chinese citizens hired by, say, *the BBC* or *the Economist*, are barred from independent reporting in that country. Our job was largely confined to translation and research, and many foreign correspondents rely on us to file their stories. For many Chinese employees, foreign news bureaus are little more than revolving doors. Dismayed by dim career prospects, many Chinese who worked for foreign press took up plum jobs in public relations or consulting, having learned to cope with tight deadlines and stress.

I stayed for seven years, a journey that proved instrumental in shaping my writer identity. In the newsroom, I learned through osmosis and clumsy imitation—and plenty of mistakes.

In the early days, the learning curve was steep. Not long after starting my job at *McClatchy*, I mistranslated a phrase that, if I were working at the United Nations, would have caused a diplomatic incident. On an autumn day, my boss came to see me in our small Beijing office. Grim-faced and with a notebook in hand, he had questions about a newly released Chinese Communist Party document. "What exactly did Wen Jiabao say? Does he want to change the political system?"

Wen was then the Chinese premier, who, once again, was trumpeting the need for political reform. The Chinese word for reform, *gaige*, appeared multiple times in an official readout carried by state media. My translation gave the impression that something big was afoot. In an earlier email to my boss, instead of indicating a modest tweak, I translated *gaige* as "revolution".

Oblivious to the word's connotation, I received a quick lecture about semantics. My boss, still seething, explained to me the gulf between overhaul and overthrow as an English teacher would. I listened, red-faced. Then I apologized. Since then, I've never looked at translation—or words—in the same way.

With practice, my translation improved. But I wanted more. In 2015, I joined the Beijing bureau of *The New York Times*. Back then, the *Times* was the only international newspaper where the Chinese staff could write bylined stories. For some reason, the Chinese authorities went along with that practice. At long last, four years into my journalism career, I did more than translation and research. I pitched stories and wrote them. It was hard. Words came haltingly, the blinking text cursor a witness to my fitful writing. To get the opening paragraph right, I slogged through multiple drafts, like an app developer would when testing endless beta versions before official launch.

China was full of stories waiting to be told. During my time there, I shadowed a correspondent in a frigid Siberian town to interview a Chinese entrepreneur, investigated how western deodorant makers tried and failed to conquer billions of Chinese armpits, and documented China's efforts to fight pollution. Time and again, editors came to my rescue. In the *Times's* newsroom, copies change hands at various editing desks before publication. One editor, I learned years later, occasionally taped long drafts vertically, stretching for as long as eight feet. Then he'd cut some sections and rearrange them. The *Times's* editors were true wordsmiths, whose deft hand showed me what good writing looked like. When a copy returned, the story often took on a new life, every word shining brighter. I'd place printouts of my draft and the published version side by side, ruminating on the edits and the trimmings of my clunky prose. There is no quick way of becoming a better writer; you learn to do so by knowing your bad habits. Then you chip away at them, one at a time.

Just like translation, my writing got better. Meanwhile, the media environment deteriorated. Amid rising geopolitical tensions

between China and the West, international media outlets found themselves in the cross hairs of a government hostile to foreign influences. Many of my Chinese colleagues left the newsroom to attend graduate schools in North America.

I, too, was pessimistic about my career prospects. Once, a Chinese friend doing her PhD in New York implored me to improve my data skills. You'll never be able to compete with native English speakers when it comes to writing, she said, convinced that honing hard skills would be wiser—and a necessary step toward a career makeover. Attempting a writing career in English as a Chinese person, in North America, she added, would be as futile as “an egg trying to smash a stone.”

I concurred. No more journalism. A decision was made: Writing was hard and too unattainable.

I followed in the footsteps of many Chinese colleagues. In 2018, I enrolled in University of Toronto for a two-year master's degree in global affairs. Writing did not stop, of course. During the two-year graduate program, instead of newspaper articles, I wrote term papers on issues from international law to trade. Events of global and local significance were analyzed from a distance, through reading and reasoning. I wrote in a voice befitting a journalist, the voice of a neutral, impartial observer. Unbeknownst to myself, a quiet transition was underway—not the kind of career pivot I had envisioned. Quite the contrary, I found myself gravitating toward something I was intent on abandoning.

It all started with language, reminiscent of my early struggles in the newsroom. In the first week of my arrival, I drew a blank when a barista asked how I would like my coffee, the first of many encounters that laid bare an anxiety over my lack of colloquial dexterity. A simple task like ordering a coffee stumped me. Suddenly, daily errands demanded serious mental effort. I could write papers for my graduate course, but when it came to everyday tasks, I felt like possessing the vocabulary of a three-year old.

Two weeks later, although I had prepared an answer in advance,

I stammered again at a cafe, while a dozen eyes drilled into my back. “Hmm, I want the cheapest coffee you have here please,” I said, flush with embarrassment.

Slowly but surely, I learned to take my naiveté in stride. My friends had to correct me more than once before I remembered how to pronounce Doritos. They explained what Benedict breakfast was. After calling spaghetti “western noodles” for months, I felt compelled to consult the internet to learn the various types of pasta and how to say them correctly. Then there is the Canadian corporate world’s use of “flip” in lieu of “send”—as in, *let me flip you that document*. That, to this day, remains a semantic enigma I, nor the internet, can crack. Observe, learn, and repeat. My vocabulary grew, and the city felt less foreign.

But perhaps Toronto is inherently foreign, with nearly half of its population born overseas. Immigrants flock here. So do Canadians from other regions. The city exemplifies Canadian values, be it multiculturalism or Canada’s embrace of diversity. Yet some people argue that Toronto is the least Canadian city, citing a slew of urban sins they say undermine the very core of Canadian-ness. As a newcomer, one particular Canadian trait piqued my interest: niceness. To many Canadians, niceness is a badge of honour. A national pride of sorts. The beaming faces and never-ending apologies point to the mild decorum that dictates everyday interactions.

But there is more to niceness than meets the eye. Look no further than the exuberant, sometimes perfunctory, “sure” in conversations that sometimes mask tepidness and half-heartedness. In many other cultures, affirmative language around nicety can be an invitation to deepen relationships and connections. The brand of niceness I have experienced in Canada seems to build walls of insularity and cliqueness. I once thought niceness would help me find plenty of friends easily. Not only did it not help, it became an obstacle.

I took to the Toronto Star to say so. In a 2019 op-ed, I argued that Canadian niceness is often steeped in aloofness and indifference,

almost like an on-demand gimmick meant to keep confrontations at bay. It doesn't help forge strong bonds in the society.

Within a week, messages began pouring in, via email and social media platforms. To my surprise, my interpretation of Canadian niceness resonated with many readers; some implored me to dig deeper. Thousands of comments trickled in on Facebook, a chorus of voices trying to dissect niceness and how it shapes social ties. The comments felt like a collective therapeutic heart-to-heart, with people sharing their own struggles in forging lasting bonds in a big city.

And the pandemic is not helping. Recently, a friend snapped a picture of a cardboard she saw, taped to an abandoned storefront in downtown Toronto. Signed by "R 2022," it read, "In a passive society, smiles are not the faces of happy people."

If my writer identity was in hibernation, that op-ed and my experience as a newcomer had awakened it. For the first time, I felt the power of storytelling inspired by personal experience, a departure from journalistic writing where writers must keep their sentiments at arms' length to ensure objectivity.

In my journalistic role in China, I sought to document a changing society. But those stories I told had low personal stakes, observed from a distance, narrated through interviews and research. In Canada, my desire to write is still driven by curiosity, but some things have changed. I've become a narrator of my own story, in a country full of immigrants who have moved here in search of a better future, nursing different dreams.

Meanwhile, my obsessiveness with language precision will persist. I'll keep critiquing what I read. My struggles as a writer will also continue. That insecurity, perhaps, is a good thing. It keeps me grounded and humble. And it keeps me going.

As I was wrapping up this piece, a Canadian-born friend commented on a short story I recently finished. "You're creative in your expressions and articulate in your language, but it's the ESL quality that gives everything a kind of alien tone," he said, "I don't think it's a bad thing. It's charming."

I started my writing career in China, but it was in Canada where my writer identity was finally born.

Owen Guo is a freelance writer and a news junkie. Born and raised in China, he moved to Toronto from Beijing in 2018, after a seven-year journalism career there. He's reported for the *Financial Times* and *The New York Times*. In 2020, he completed his master of global affairs degree from the University of Toronto. Currently, he is researching a book project about Canadian niceness.

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13. Murmurations: What the Whales Whispered

MICHAELA HARRISON

A note from adrienne maree brown: Michaela Harrison is a whale singer; she sings to them and she listens to their songs for wisdom. And when we are blessed, she sings to us.

Let me make it clear at the outset that this is a family affair; the whales about whom and on whose behalf I write are part of said family, as are you. I've been building relationship with the community of whales who migrate from Bahia, Brazil, to Antarctica for the past seven years and sharing that process through my project, [Whale Whispering](#). It is from the depths of our shared oceanic origins that I bring you this offering.

Whale Whispering is an ancestral commission, an ode to water, a work of interspecies translation and co-creation between me, humpback whales, and other cetaceans and people. It is a diasporic healing quest, an exploration and transmutation of the legacy of transatlantic enslavement through music. Based in Praia do Forte, Bahia, Brazil, it is a soundtrack for personal, communal, and global transformation, a love song for whales, for Bahia, for Earth, for the ancestors, and for life.

I'm listening to and singing with the whales to tap into the echoes of the Middle Passage contained within their songs, to bring forth sounds that honor Nature's prescription for this time of reckoning and share water's wisdom as it is relayed to me. Through underwater and studio recordings, filmed documentation, blog posts, and community gatherings focused on collective singing and

water blessing rituals, Whale Whispering serves as a way of dreaming forward via the lens of the so-called past.

As I address the womb sickness that has affected my own womb and those of so many Black womb-carriers due to generations of sexual trauma, I'm learning to wail with the whales as a form of curative release, just as the Africans who crossed the Atlantic in slaving vessels surely did. This siren call, summoning awareness of the unity of all being(s), and resonating with the movement in support of planetary healing, is a vibrational antidote to the violence that threatens to engulf the planet right now. These messages, shared through waves of water and sound, affirm that, for those who are listening, Love's song is stronger.

["We Are One"](#) has emerged as the central theme of this collaboration. With this echoing phrase the whales affirm that there is no reality in which we are not all connected to every other being, every other particle in existence—through our breathing, our intake and transpiration of water, our dreaming. Among their many offerings to the human members of their extended family is the gentle nudge to ask ourselves if we are dreaming big enough.

This is a question adrienne maree brown and I were exploring during one of our [Instagram Live chats](#) near the end of the Pandemic Pause, just as the wheels of the global economy (i.e., racial capitalism) were starting to churn back into gear. Via that conversation, I first relayed the whales' message from the 2022 season. Clearly, the reduction in sonic, vibrational, and chemical interference in the oceans as a result of diminished shipping traffic had proven beneficial to them, and their perception of the retrograde slide toward pre-COVID-19 levels had moved them to make their most forceful, emphatic declaration thus far: "We Will Run This World."

It is not lost on me that whales everywhere have proceeded to occupy increasing amounts of space in international news, asserting and claiming visibility and acknowledgement, demanding to be seen and heard. While I've repeated their declaration a few times publicly since that interview, I've mostly been listening and observing,

wanting to be sure that any further details I bring forth about that statement are rooted in the clearest and sincerest point of connectivity between me and the whales. In my experience, this clarity requires time. Given their size, lifespan, and range of movement, it's no surprise that the whales have their eyes on the long game with regard to guiding their human kin, as they watch what, to many, looks scarily like our imminent self-destruction.

Speaking of eyes, anyone who has had the rare and singular experience of gazing into the eye of a whale can attest to having met with a being of far vaster intelligence, sensitivity, and wisdom than most human minds can begin to fathom. Since living that wonder myself, I'm convinced that whales are capable of feats that would qualify as miraculous in any context. In considering the meaning behind the declaration that they will run this world, I'm compelled to lead with miracles. They could be as fantastical as the whales adjusting and accelerating their evolution in the blink of one of those knowing eyes, making them suddenly capable of living on land, communicating through language with humans as a whole, and deconstructing and restructuring the systems that have brought us to this point of global upheaval through direct intervention. My sense though, is that, per their nature, the whales intend something more nuanced and easily absorbed.

Looking to the ["uprising" of orcas](#) (technically dolphins, but whales by association) in the Strait of Gibraltar as an example, I see [their capsizing of yachts](#) not as some type of revenge or retribution for human destructiveness, but as intentionally headline-grabbing activity drawing our attention to the rudders they have consistently disabled. They are pointing out faulty steering by humans, the ones who have been driving the planet to destruction, suggesting that a new way is needed. As far as I know, no one has died as a result of these encounters, but they have definitely put whales on many people's minds.

By overturning boats, [swallowing a few people](#) then [spitting them back out unharmed](#), leaping onto and stealing the scene [during an Olympic surfing competition](#), among other shenanigans, the whales

are impressing themselves upon collective human awareness. They are infiltrating our conscious and subconscious minds with suggestions to listen to their subaquatic songs and sounds. Through both our listening and the vibrational reverberations that result from playing their songs above water, the whales can infuse us with massive doses of compassion, pour into us and other species from the fount of grace to which they have access.

Based on what the whales have shown me, their songs have the capacity to reverse so much of the damage caused by humans—they could dissolve microplastics and oil spills, deactivate the harmful properties of chemical and other pollutants threatening the world's water supply, and perhaps most importantly, soothe the indignation of our mothering planet, preventing her from wiping us out completely. But because fear, doubt, and subjugation to the nightmare spell of our current moment are so pervasive, and because most humans are living unaware of their own psychic impact, there has been a block on the extent to which the whales can wield their miracles—and to which we can wield our own. From our fitful slumbering, the whales are calling us to lucidity, on behalf of all the species smaller and thus more easily ignorable than they are. They have visions of healing technologies that they can float into our imaginations, infusing them with solutions to such pressing issues as how to ensure safe, viable water for all, for example. Like so many plant spirits and human stewards, they are calling us to exalt the connective practices that Indigenous peoples worldwide have been preserving: to gather at and with water, joining our sung voices as sources of generative and regenerative force, engaging the Oneness that is the origin of all possibility.

It's unlikely that every human will hear or answer this call. Only a critical mass of deeply engaged, genuinely receptive and open-hearted individuals is required to make way for the whales to steer us into a new dream. This whale-sized waking dream is one in which life on this planet is more balanced, healthy, just, and sustainable. It is one where the expansive generosity and compassion of these

ancient beings have permeated the modus operandi of the planet's powerful problem children—humans.

While people will continue to hold—and debate—a diversity of beliefs about spirituality, divinity, and the supernatural, everyone can agree that whales exist. And each one who opens themselves to imbibe the medicine the whales pour forth can taste the truth, can become imbued with the knowing that there is indeed a Higher Love, one that scales beyond what this current, shared reality suggests is real. Each one who receives that medicine and deepens into that knowing becomes a conduit for that Love—one among the countless channels through which it flows, hydrating them with real magicalisms that have only awaited the acceptance of their own sublime potential in order to come true.

Are you One?

Michaela Harrison regularly spouts prosetry through songwriting, nonverbal melodic exchanges in her work with whales, and the Whale Whispering blog on her website. She holds a B.S.F.S. in international affairs from Georgetown University and a Master's degree in Africana studies from New York University. She speaks English, Portuguese, French, Spanish, and some Swahili.

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14. Where Communal Art Is Resistance

ARI HONARVAR

For [millennia](#), Indigenous cultures have prioritized joy-based artistic practices—and science is finally catching up. Studies now show that [art and joy](#) go hand in hand; creative expression passed down from generation to generation in forms of dance, songs, stories, poems, and visual arts reinforces collective joy, cohesion, and well-being for the practitioners. Art is so deeply woven into humanity that it is difficult to find any [culture](#) devoid of art form. So what happens when people are denied artistic expression?

I have a unique perspective on the subject: I was 6 when Islamic fundamentalists [took over Iran](#) and started a war on joy. I learned quickly that oppression often manifests through the policing of the arts. The morality police cracked down on most types of music, dancing, and even playing. Our teen neighbor's birthday party was [raided by the morality police](#) who pointed AK-47s at us. Half of my sister's high school senior class was imprisoned. Without warning, one of her friends was executed.

At the same time, we found ourselves embroiled in a bloody war with Iraq, and daily funerals became routine. There was little to be joyful about, but my family and friends still took dangerous risks to nourish our souls. We intuitively knew playing [music](#), singing, and dancing served as powerful coping mechanisms to get us through the devastation of war and theocratic oppression. We broke the law even though we knew we could lose our freedom or even our lives.

More than four decades later, Iranians are still engaging in collective joy as an act of [civil disobedience](#), often with dire consequences. Now as a [musical ambassador of peace](#) (MAP) in the United States, I bring music and dance to refugees as a form of communal healing. When I started dancing with refugees in Tijuana,

Mexico, in 2018, some activists dismissed the program as frivolous and even wasteful. They argued that refugees needed legal and medical help and permanent housing, not art.

While those are real needs that must be addressed, the shelter directors asked us to continue the program even if we couldn't provide a monetary donation. The directors told us that the [positive effects](#) of our sessions, including increased collaboration, lasted several days. Participants reported feeling more at ease and less anxious or depressed, with even headaches disappearing.

During the pandemic lockdown, asylum seekers stranded in Mexico insisted on continuing the program, leading us to transfer our dancing to Zoom sessions.

Around the same time, essential workers and activists dealing with [vicarious trauma](#) began reaching out to us to organize similar programs. Having witnessed countless instances of transformation in these sessions, I've grown increasingly curious about the link between joy and [neuroaesthetics](#), an interdisciplinary field of research that explores how aesthetic experiences and the arts affect the body, brain, and behavior.

Susan Magsamen, the founder of the International Arts + Mind Lab at Johns Hopkins University and the co-author of [Your Brain on Art](#), confirms that there is an inherent human need for joy "through neuroaesthetic experiences." Activities that bring us joy stimulate the release of dopamine in the brain, which contributes to mood regulation, learning, and memory enhancement. "Researchers are confirming that the body naturally leans toward health and it is in play, music, dance, and visual arts that our bodies respond, find nourishment and healing," she says.

Given that the nervous system acts as a homing device for neuroaesthetic experiences that stabilize, nourish, and fortify us, it is unsurprising that even in the most dangerous parts of the world, people engage in communal arts. Here are a few examples of such resilience and resistance in the most perilous conditions.

Art With Asylum-Seekers in Tijuana

Currently, the U.S. has more than [2 million pending asylum cases](#) with unprecedented waiting periods of up to seven years. The trauma of experiencing violence, fleeing an unsafe home, undergoing a grueling journey, and then facing the uncertainty of the asylum process takes a heavy toll on [the mental health of migrants](#), many of whom are children.

Ada, the director of a migrant shelter in Tijuana, who is using a pseudonym to protect her identity, believes that collective joy expressed through the arts provides a sanctuary for healing. Migrants themselves view this as an act of resistance in the face of unjust and often draconian policies that prevent them from seeking refuge. “That’s why we adopted the concept of joyful resistance or in Spanish, [resiste gozando](#),” Ada says. The practice allows migrants, whose bodies are constantly policed, to reclaim some of their [agency](#).

Ada and her group also noticed early on that the media doesn’t include migrant voices. “Most of the time when there is talk of immigration, you only hear experts, authorities, and organizations,” Ada adds. By engaging in music, art, and mural making, migrants can raise their own voices without compromising their identity. In this way, [resiste gozando](#) has become a powerful vehicle for amplifying migrant voices.

Dancing With Freed Congolese Child Soldiers in Uganda

In [Congo](#), where Congolese Tutsi have been systematically massacred and driven from their ancestral lands for nearly 30 years, my MAP colleague, [Abaho Gift Conrad](#), dances with traumatized

kids in three settlements catering to hundreds of thousands of refugees in western Uganda.

When he was 18 months old, Conrad's entire family was murdered during the Rwandan genocide; he was the only survivor. His adoptive mother found him hidden in a sorghum garden and brought him to Uganda. "I joined MAP because I saw the impact music and dance had on my own healing journey," he says.

The age range of the child soldiers, the majority being girls, spans from 7 to 14 years old. Most children were kidnapped by various factions of Congolese rebels and endured horrifying experiences, including being trained to become killers themselves. The children were ultimately rescued by joint forces beginning in 2018 and brought to refugee settlements, where Conrad's team is providing activities for trauma healing.

"We play music, move our bodies, and create together," Conrad adds. He finds that the traditional [intore](#) popular in central Africa connects the children to their roots and makes healing war wounds more accessible. "It's amazing to see the smiles and laughter return to their faces as they begin to heal."

Singing and Dancing With Kids in Gaza

Even before Oct. 7, 2023, many Palestinians experienced [chronic traumatic stress disorder](#). Instead of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), where the mind is trapped in a loop of a traumatic experience, there is no end to the trauma they are experiencing every single day. The situation is far worse now, especially for the more than 600,000 children who are enduring starvation, [physical wounds](#), constant displacement, and loss of loved ones.

My MAP colleague, [Mahmoud Abushawish](#), recognized the urgent need to tend to children's mental health and was set to resume the singing program a few weeks after October 7. Before he could begin, he was [killed](#) in an Israeli airstrike.

During months of incessant bombing and slaughter, another one of my colleagues, [Rahaf Shamaly](#), sang indigenous Palestinian songs with displaced children in different parts of Gaza. Those children told Shamaly they were afraid of being bombed and becoming martyrs. Singing together allowed them to experience grounding, joy, and respite from the constant horror.

With the help of donors, MAP evacuated Shamaly in April, but her entire family is still suffering in Gaza. “It’s really a genocide,” she says. “The Israeli army bombed everything. Gaza is destroyed. Our life [is] destroyed,” she adds. After leaving Palestine, Shamaly immediately returned to music to help her with the trauma she experienced and to use her voice to bring attention to the plight of Palestinians. Her music was live streamed at [Coachella](#) this past April.

At the time of this writing Bashar Al-Bilbisi, a 23-year-old pharmacist and the director of the Al-Fursan Arts Ensemble still teaches [dabke](#), an Indigenous Palestinian dance, to children in Gaza. He, and the children he dances with, were displaced multiple times and are still on the move to evade Israeli airstrikes. “We dance together to preserve our heritage and also to be a means of discharging negative energy in all areas of Gaza, despite all the difficulties we are exposed to due to the war,” he says.

Communal Culture for Collective Healing

Joy and art are transcendent and essential to human [survival](#). “We often say that the arts create culture, culture creates community, and community creates humanity,” says Magsamen.

Refugees, the oppressed, and the dispossessed carry their community, culture, and humanity in their blood through generations-old songs, poetry, and dances that no assailant can take away from them. “These aspects of their culture are ingrained in them, and they need nothing more than their voices and their

bodies to access the foundational aspects of their communities,” adds Magsamen.

Many populations have and are currently experiencing [collective trauma](#). Communal art, then, fosters joy, serving as a primer to connect to one’s self to one’s roots, and to others. It also provides a supportive environment to invite and process more difficult emotions. While addressing the root causes of individual suffering from various angles is essential, now is the perfect time to embark on the journey of [collective healing](#) through cultivating joyful communal practices, nurturing healthier individuals, and fostering a more robust society.

Ari Honarvar is the founder of Rumi with a View, an initiative dedicated to bridging the arts, social justice, and well-being. Drawing from her childhood experiences of war and oppression and her work with underserved communities, she facilitates Resilience through Joy workshops for refugees, healthcare workers, and social justice advocates on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Through thousands of sessions in collaboration with trauma experts, university researchers, and grassroots leaders, Ari has reached a global audience, with her work being featured in major outlets including The Guardian, TED Talks, Teen Vogue, and CNN Español. She is the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *A Girl Called Rumi*, and the bestselling oracle deck, *Rumi’s Gift*.

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15. Why Rituals Are Good for Your Health

ARI HONARVAR

I don't know if I could have survived seven years of my childhood without the soul-saving rituals of my Persian culture. I grew up amid the Iran-Iraq War, which killed a million people. Besides the horrors of the war, freedom of thought and expression were severely restricted in Iran after the Islamic revolution. Women bore the brunt of this as, in a matter of months, we were forced to ditch our previous lifestyle and observe a strict Islamic attire, which covered our bodies and hair. We lost the right to jog, ride a bicycle, or sing in public. Life seemed unbearable at times, but we learned to bring meaning into uncertainty and chaos by maintaining grounding practices and developing new ones.

It helped that in Persian culture we had ceremonies to turn to. We clung to 3,500-year-old Zoroastrian ceremonies that correspond to the seasons. Several of these rituals take place during the spring because the equinox marks the Persian New Year. Besides a thorough spring cleaning, we jump over a bonfire to cleanse our inner landscape and give our maladies to fire and gain vitality from it. On the longest night of the year, winter solstice, we stay up all night eating fruits and nuts, reciting poetry, playing music, and dancing. This is to symbolize survival and celebration during dark times.

Rituals, which are a series of actions performed in a specific way, have been part of human existence for thousands of years. They are not habits. According to research psychologist Nick Hobson, a habit's inherent goal is different from a ritual's. With habit, the actions and behaviors are causally tied to the desired outcome; for example, brushing our teeth to prevent cavities and gum disease and exercising to keep healthy. Rituals, on the other hand,

are “goal demoted,” which means that their actions have no instrumental connection to the outcome. For example, we sing “Happy Birthday” to the same melody even though it isn’t tied to a specific external result.

Cristine Legare, a researcher and psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, says, “Rituals signify transition points in the individual life span and provide psychologically meaningful ways to participate in the beliefs and practices of the community.” They have been instrumental in building community, promoting cooperation, and marking transition points in a community member’s life. And as strange as rituals might be from a logical perspective, they have evolved as distinct features of human culture.

While it’s not clear exactly how they help, rituals reduce anxiety, improve performance and confidence, and even work on people who don’t believe in them, research shows. In a University of Toronto study, participants who performed a ritual before completing a task exhibited less anxiety and sensitivity to personal failure than when they completed the task without first performing the ritual.

Additionally, rituals benefit our physical well-being and immune system. According to Andrew Newberg, the associate director of research at the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health, rituals lower cortisol, which in turn lowers heart rate and blood pressure and increases immune system function.

We live amid a loneliness epidemic where the lack of belonging and community has been linked to high suicide rates and an increased sense of despair. The United States has one of the worst work-life balance scores in the world, while more Americans have become disillusioned with organized religion, as a broad and rapidly rising demographic consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Perhaps with fewer opportunities for people to be in community, many shared cultural rituals are falling away and with them a grounding source for connection and mental health.

In Iran during the war, we found uses for rituals when we were

faced with food rations. We gathered family and friends, reciting the ancient story of the poor abused girl who had run away from home and had a vision of being visited by three celestial bibis (matrons). The bibis instructed her to make a sweet halva and donate it to the poor. The girl said she didn't have any money, and the bibis told her to borrow or work for the ingredients. This worked well with food rations as each guest brought a few ingredients to make the halva. Like the girl in the story, each participant made a wish and took a bite of the halva. I walked away feeling calmer and more supported.

Stories, such as those told during the Jewish ceremony of Passover Seder, have become ritualized because they are recited in the same way each time. Rhythm and music play a similar role in ritual. Whether we're chanting in Sanskrit or singing the national anthem, "our brains tend to resonate with those around us, so if everyone is doing the same dance, hymn, or prayer, all of those brains are working in the same way," Newberg explains. "This can engender a powerful feeling of connectedness. It also reduces stress and depression through a combination of effects on the autonomic nervous system, which is ultimately connected to the emotional areas of the brain—the limbic system." According to one study, chanting the Sanskrit syllable "om" deactivates the limbic system, softening the edge of fear, anxiety, and depression. Psychologist Hobson confirms that rituals aren't just a benefit to our mental health—they're actually essential. "We are an intensely social and ritualistic species," he says. "Take this piece out of our modern human narrative and you lose a piece of our history and our humanity."

I moved to the U.S. when I was 14. After living here for two decades, I became a mother and was confronted with the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child." But where was that mythical village and the rituals that made it sane? For example, a pregnant woman in Iran had a rotating menu of dishes made for her by friends and family. A new mother was surrounded by people who took turns assisting with daily tasks. But in the U.S., she was

expected to fend for herself and her baby immediately after childbirth. I observed that besides standard holiday traditions, community-building practices were lacking.

So after 20 years of living in the U.S., I decided to create my own community rituals.

I started with my family. At dinners we banned books and devices, lit candles, and discussed set topics of conversation. We held weekly family meetings with opening and closing ceremonies and used a talking stick to enforce respectful communication. At birthday dinners, we took turns saying, "I love you because ..."

Candlelit dinners were no longer saved for a special occasion. Using a talking stick helped me listen more attentively and choose my words more carefully. Huddling together at the end of each family meeting provided me with a sense of accomplishment. Each ritual, no matter how small, anchored me in something bigger and provided a sense of belonging.

Then we began to build rituals within the larger community. First, we hosted a multigenerational Sunday potluck with friends and family. Each week, five to 10 of us gathered, shared food, and recounted what made us grateful. During each meal, I noticed I was lighter, more engaged with others, and laughed more.

Later, we built more community rituals into the week. I posted on Nextdoor, asking our neighbors to join us on Monday evening walks to the neighborhood park and back.

In this age of isolation, we need nourishing and uplifting means of creating community by bringing together members of different generations as our ancestors did. From my experience in Iran, rituals can be particularly valuable during hard times. In the U.S., we don't have to worry about bombs and food rations, but we still have challenges to our security that affect our mental and physical health. Rituals can help us, though, by offering our communities opportunities for healing and support.

Ari Honarvar is the founder of Rumi with a View, an initiative dedicated to bridging the arts, social justice, and well-being. Drawing from her childhood experiences of war and oppression and her work with underserved communities, she facilitates Resilience through Joy workshops for refugees, healthcare workers, and social justice advocates on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Through thousands of sessions in collaboration with trauma experts, university researchers, and grassroots leaders, Ari has reached a global audience, with her work being featured in major outlets including The Guardian, TED Talks, Teen Vogue, and CNN Español. She is the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *A Girl Called Rumi*, and the bestselling oracle deck, *Rumi's Gift*.

["Why Rituals Are Good for Your Health"](#) by Ari Honarva was originally published in *Yes! Magazine* (2018) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

16. I'm a Trans Teen in a Red State — Anti-Trans Politicians Cannot Erase Me

MARCOS

This story was originally published by [Truthout](#)

As I write this, it has been about a week since my 17th birthday. It feels weird to me. Six years ago, I came out as transgender, and four years ago I thought my life was over. Back then, I never dreamed of making it this far, of reaching my dream — accessing hormone replacement therapy (HRT), finally feeling excited for my future and the person I'm going to be. Now I'm almost an adult, and I'm about five months on testosterone. I still feel 13.

My gender story feels less typical than the ones I hear from other trans men, about how they've always felt like they were born in the wrong body, always preferred “male” toys, always hung out with other boys. I never felt like a boy as a child. I never felt like a girl either. I didn't know what I was, but I also didn't care. I had the privilege of being raised by left-leaning parents who didn't push anything gendered on me. It wasn't until school started that I began to feel different from my peers.

Before I figured it out, I assumed this feeling of discomfort meant I was gay. I came out, I tried to like girls, but it wasn't me. I thought the reason I didn't want to date men was because I was a lesbian, when I think really the reason was that I didn't want to be a girlfriend.

Puberty was the last straw, and after connecting the dots, I socially transitioned in 6th grade. I changed my name and my

pronouns, and it felt so great. I hadn't felt that way about myself before — so certain about who I was and so proud of who I was. But it was 2019. Shortly afterwards, the COVID pandemic ramped up and we were all out of school, on our computers all day. It was a strange few years to be newly transitioned.

During online school, dysphoria had less of a grip on me, but going back to in-person learning in 8th grade was rough. The people at my school had known me for years as a girl — the weirdo lesbian artist freak. I just wanted to be seen as a boy. But no matter how hard I tried, it didn't work. I became depressed. I didn't like going out or going to the community pool, making new friends or even speaking out loud.

At age 14, I brought up testosterone to my parents for the first time. It was something I had wanted since the beginning of my transition. I would spend hours online watching “transition timelines,” snapshots of someone's life from coming out to starting T and getting surgery. I saw the happiness that transition brought people. It felt so far off in the future, but close enough for me to wait for it. These trans adults gave me hope that one day I could be comfortable as myself.

But the atmosphere was different when we came back from quarantine. Yes, I had a sense from years prior that people didn't understand me, but I had already made peace with that. It didn't scare me. Post-COVID, though, there was a new hostility I could feel from people who knew I was trans, or found out or suspected. People I didn't know felt comfortable telling me that they “liked my old name better.” They felt fine making horrible degrading jokes about me (or my transgender sisters, brothers, and others) to my face. But even with this growing hostility, accessing HRT felt like it was going fairly quickly. The question had been so scary to ask, but neither of my parents were upset at me. We went to my pediatrician and got more information about it. I was so hopeful for my future.

Then my mother started to express concerns about my father's views on HRT. He was stalling, asking for more and more

information, more and more meetings with doctors and therapists. This was tolerable. We had known about his medical anxieties, and this seemed no different from the times where he'd get scared about a procedure and bring a notepad to the doctor's office to take notes. But unlike those times, his anxiety and need for control continued to grow. He didn't stop asking and pressing and deliberating. He began to argue with my mom about HRT and detransition rates. He'd email videos and studies from anti-trans websites run by "concerned parents" who wanted to keep their "daughters" healthy. I didn't know this would last as long as it has. Once he got sucked into anti-trans conspiracy, he never got better.

As our relationship became strained, I began to lose hope. It felt like the world had gotten tired of me and decided to take away the family support I had been lucky to have. Though initially he'd gendered me correctly, my dad began insisting on misgendering and deadnaming me. I felt so disgusting every time he tried to have a "discussion" with me about testosterone and he'd bring up fertility or vaginal atrophy as a talking point every time he'd assert to me that I am female, not male. I learned to shut up about the way I felt and came to terms with the reality of my situation: I was not going on testosterone.

My father's ways of thinking didn't even just affect our relationship — they also started to affect his relationship with my mom, which before this was relatively peaceful. I had always told friends my biological parents were "just like best friends," but as he delved deeper into conspiracy, I saw the gap between them grow larger and larger. My mom tried so hard for me, deflecting pointed questions about my identity or mental health, reading the bullshit articles he'd email her constantly, trying so hard to come to an understanding with him, but nothing worked. In his head, he was trying to save me from my "crazy" mother, trying to keep me healthy and far away from doctors and even therapists, from "Big Pharma." It was an intensely stressful time, but in the end I was able to access what I needed to care for myself, things I had only

dreamed of having — therapy, medication, HRT. After everything that had happened, I also started choosing to stay with my dad less, which both excited me and saddened me. I miss the way my dad was, before I came out. Within the past year, I went from staying with him half the time, to seeing him once a week. And the thing is, it didn't have to be that way.

Then lawmakers in our state began restricting health care too, based on the same propaganda that had done so much damage in my family. I got news of these things from my dad a lot of the time. He'd come to me and tell me about the new laws they were passing against me. If not, I'd hear about it on the radio in the car constantly. There was always something new happening to us. There was always a new death.

I still hear this crushing news all the time — it never stops. Right now, it's the efforts by Republicans to bar Sarah McBride, the first openly trans person elected to Congress, from using the women's bathroom at the Capitol. Would they prefer her in the men's bathroom? Obviously not. It's not about restrooms. They don't want us anywhere.

I get more angry than scared, though, because lawmakers and anti-trans activists use bullshit reasons to attack us, claiming they're protecting women's spaces. With that angle, they not only demean and exclude trans women, they erase trans men completely. I, like many trans people, have experienced my own version of what McBride is facing right now.

The restroom issue is such a small problem with an easy fix, and it isn't just gender-neutral bathrooms. At school, people notice when you use a teacher's restroom or a gender-neutral option, just like people noticed at my middle school — kids who then went on to harass me, teachers who used this as an excuse to pick on me. Gender-neutral bathrooms are not a sufficient accommodation. They're a white flag, an "OK, whatever, take this." The real fix is to actually address the bullying in the environment at school — or in Congress.

The day after the election, I was so dissociated all day. I felt

defeated, utterly baffled that so much hope in the nation had been lost over the span of a single night. Amid all this, I would see a friend and ask, “How do you feel?” And they would answer, “About what?”

I realize now there is a whole other side of this country that hasn't even felt a change from before the election to after. They feel safe, and I'm so envious.

My family situation has recently changed, which allowed me to start T. I can't ever get back the years I lost to depression, to dysphoria, to anxiety. I can never take back the hospital stays, or the brain cells I probably lost drinking and smoking, or the scars. I can't get rid of the anger either, and until this world is a safe one for me and other trans children, teens and adults — I won't be able to. It's okay to be angry, to show it and to utilize it.

Marcos is a trans teen who loves anything to do with film. He spends his time listening to The Smiths and coming up with characters in his head.

[“I'm a Trans Teen in a Red State — Anti-Trans Politicians Cannot Erase Me”](#) by Marcos was originally published in Truthout (2025), and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attributions, Non-Commercial, and NoDerivatives 4.0 International license](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

17. The Cult of Self-Improvement: How a Documentary Aimed at Young People Could be Harmful

THOMAS MAXWELL

The documentary [Kaizen](#), by French YouTuber Inoxtag, which chronicles the year he spent preparing to climb Mount Everest, got many mostly positive reactions. However, there is also good reason to wonder whether there is something harmful in the way he promotes the value of self-improvement — which he applies to himself in the documentary — to the teenaged members of his community.

A majority of his 20 million subscribers congratulated the young YouTuber for accomplishing his goal. In doing so, they recognized him as a true “cultural trendsetter.”

Others were more critical. While acknowledging his dazzling entrepreneurial success, they pointed out [the way he instrumentalizes certain values](#), such as sports, to support a meritocratic discourse. Still others criticized him for selling [“the idea of limitless resources when there is an environmental imperative to practise sobriety.”](#)

As a professor and specialist in intervention and organizational communication at the Université du Québec à Montréal, I’d like to take this opportunity to discuss the dangerous new way that self-improvement or continuous improvement — also known as “kaizen,” an organizational performance improvement practice — is being promoted as a lifestyle.

A major project

Inoxtag draws on his enormous influence to convey this message. His digital platforms together have over 20 million subscribers. Among these, his YouTube channel is the largest, with 8.66 million subscribers.

His recent documentary, [Kaizen: 1 Year to Climb Everest](#) is very appealing. Aimed at an audience of mostly young teenagers, the documentary conveys a positive message of self-improvement.



Screenshot from Kaizen: 1 Year to Climb Everest. YouTuber Inoxtag set himself the goal of climbing Mount Everest. (YouTube | Inoxtag)

Material, human and financial resources are also part of the story. In addition to documenting every stage of his adventure, Inoxtag climbed Everest with his friends, each of whose presence cost him [more than \\$75,000](#).

The editing is meticulous and the images are breathtaking. The moments of introspection are spontaneous and sincere and the advertising insertions are subtle, but effective. In short, the documentary has all the ingredients to make it both fascinating and inspiring.

Kaizen: a truncated definition

The two hour 26-minute documentary is called *Kaizen*. However, we only learn the definition of the term at the very end.



Screenshot from Kaizen: 1 Year to Climb Everest. The definition of Kaizen given in the documentary: as a philosophy, Kaizen promotes a state of mind where tiny incremental changes have an impact over time.

This Japanese word, composed of *kai*, meaning “change,” and *zen*, meaning “for the better” or “the best,” has been used since the 1950s to describe a process of continuous improvement in management. It refers to the desire to strategically improve production excellence in ultra-competitive environments.

Although this process initially concerned the post-war manufacturing sector, it gradually spread to other sectors, including the services industry and the civil service. The term has been misused since then to designate an attitude that makes performance, itself, an unattainable goal.

The instrumentalization of ‘Kaizen’

Kaizen, as a practice for improving organizational performance, is above all an attempt to eliminate waste. In so doing, it fits in with the [management philosophy known as Lean, which consists of “always doing more with less.”](#) Kaizen invites organizational employees to understand how a situation could be improved, to come up with ideas for improvement, to contribute to the development of solutions, and then to put these into practice.

However, the expression “continuous improvement” is meant to serve the interests of the organization, not the people who put it into action (typically the organization’s employees). In the case of Inoxtag, continuous improvement works on two levels. Firstly, it benefits him, as a mantra that he periodically repeats to his community. Secondly, albeit more subtly, the expression serves the YouTuber’s commercial partners, who gain visibility and generate publicity by supporting his adventure.

We are thus witnessing an aestheticization of [total performance, the new spirit of capitalism.](#)

The body as a stage for continuous improvement

Worse still, the body, through the physical activity of surpassing its limits, becomes, itself, the object of continuous improvement. Directing the body as it suffers to improve itself enough to climb Mount Everest aestheticizes continuous improvement, making it desirable.

In addition to being powerfully and socially internalized and prescribed as “positive” (who doesn’t want to improve?), it seems to me that in these conditions, continuous improvement is likely to become an [insatiable quest that only brings suffering and exhaustion.](#) After all, you can only do as much as your body can do.



Screenshot from *Kaizen: 1 Year to Climb Everest*. The cardiac endurance test or the body put to the test of improvement. (YouTube | Inoxtag)

It also refers to the sole responsibility of the individual, deliberately ignoring all material, relational and social dimensions. To what extent do the material conditions of existence allow a person to take on any challenge, or to initiate any “project?” Is it even possible to set these kinds of goals without a solid support system (parents, mentors, friends and other significant resources)?

Questioning continuous improvement

In his documentary, Inoxtag says things that are directly related to continuous improvement, such as “I want to be a new man,” and “every day better than yesterday.” In portraying continuous improvement as irrefutable and by elevating it to the status of a new anthropological reality, we run the risk of turning hyperperformance into [an existential goal, without questioning whether it even makes sense.](#)

I understand that we can be positively affected by this type of message and by the values it claims to embody, such as courage, perseverance and surpassing one's limits. I can also understand the physical pleasure that comes from putting these values into action.

However, behind this craze for continuous self-improvement, we can also see the toxic effects of a capitalist structure that valorizes and validates this craze (at social, organizational and individual levels) to the point of exhaustion, until the body can't take it any more.

We must therefore radically question this “false evidence,” and forcefully reaffirm that surpassing your limits through continuous improvement is, more than anything, the symptom of [silent and destructive individual pleasure](#) that morally enslaves, more than it emancipates — even if its flashy appearance is fun to watch, or even imitate.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/englwrit112reader/?p=41#oembed-1>

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18. Are You Part Robot? A Linguistic Anthropologist Explains How Humans are Like ChatGPT – Both Recycle Language

BRENDAN H. O'CONNOR

ChatGPT is a hot topic at my university, where faculty members are deeply concerned about academic integrity, while [administrators urge us to “embrace the benefits” of this “new frontier.”](#) It's a classic example of what my colleague [Punya Mishra](#) calls the “doom-hype cycle” around new technologies. Likewise, media coverage of human-AI interaction – whether paranoid or starry-eyed – tends to emphasize its newness.

In one sense, it is undeniably new. Interactions with ChatGPT can feel unprecedented, as when a tech journalist [couldn't get a chatbot to stop declaring its love for him](#). In my view, however, the boundary between humans and machines, in terms of the way we interact with one another, is fuzzier than most people would care to admit, and this fuzziness accounts for a good deal of the discourse swirling around ChatGPT.

When I'm asked to check a box to confirm I'm not a robot, I don't give it a second thought – of course I'm not a robot. On the other hand, when my email client suggests a word or phrase to complete my sentence, or when my phone guesses the next word I'm about to text, I start to doubt myself. Is that what I meant to say? Would it have occurred to me if the application hadn't suggested it? Am I part robot? These large language models have been trained on

massive amounts of “natural” human language. Does this make the robots part human?

AI chatbots are new, but public debates over language change are not. As a [linguistic anthropologist](#), I find human reactions to ChatGPT the most interesting thing about it. Looking carefully at such reactions reveals the beliefs about language underlying people’s ambivalent, uneasy, still-evolving relationship with AI interlocutors.

ChatGPT and the like hold up a mirror to human language. Humans are both highly original and unoriginal when it comes to language. Chatbots reflect this, revealing tendencies and patterns that are already present in interactions with other humans.

Creators or mimics?

Recently, famed linguist Noam Chomsky and his colleagues argued that chatbots are [“stuck in a prehuman or nonhuman phase of cognitive evolution”](#) because they can only describe and predict, not explain. Rather than drawing on an infinite capacity to generate new phrases, they compensate with huge amounts of input, which allows them to make predictions about which words to use with a high degree of accuracy.

This is in line with Chomsky’s [historic recognition](#) that human language could not be produced merely through children’s imitation of adult speakers. The human language faculty had to be generative, since children do not receive enough input to account for all the forms they produce, many of which they could not have heard before. That is the only way to explain why humans – unlike other animals with sophisticated systems of communication – have a theoretically infinite capacity to generate new phrases.

There’s a problem with that argument, though. Even though humans are endlessly capable of generating new strings of language, people usually don’t. Humans are constantly recycling

bits of language they've encountered before and shaping their speech in ways that respond – consciously or unconsciously – to the speech of others, present or absent.

As [Mikhail Bakhtin](#) – a Chomsky-like figure for linguistic anthropologists – put it, “our thought itself,” along with our language, “is [born and shaped in the process of interaction](#) and struggle with others’ thought.” Our words “taste” of the contexts where we and others have encountered them before, so we’re constantly wrestling to make them our own.

Even plagiarism is less straightforward than it appears. [The concept of stealing someone else’s words assumes](#) that communication always takes place between people who independently come up with their own original ideas and phrases. People may like to think of themselves that way, but the reality shows otherwise in nearly every interaction – when I parrot a saying of my dad’s to my daughter; when the president gives a speech that someone else crafted, expressing the views of an outside interest group; or when a therapist interacts with her client according to principles that her teachers taught her to heed.

In any given interaction, the framework for production – speaking or writing – and reception – listening or reading and understanding – [varies in terms of](#) what is said, how it is said, who says it and who is responsible in each case.

What AI reveals about humans

The popular conception of human language views communication primarily as something that takes place between people who invent new phrases from scratch. However, that assumption breaks down when [Woebot, an AI therapy app](#), is trained to interact with human clients by human therapists, using conversations from human-to-human therapy sessions. It breaks

down when one of my favorite songwriters, Colin Meloy of [The Decemberists](#), [tells ChatGPT](#) to write lyrics and chords in his own style. Meloy found the resulting song “remarkably mediocre” and lacking in intuition, but also uncannily in the zone of a Decemberists song.

As Meloy notes, however, the chord progressions, themes and rhymes in human-written pop songs also tend to mirror other pop songs, just as politicians’ speeches [draw freely](#) from past generations of politicians and activists, which were already replete with phrases from the Bible. Pop songs and political speeches are especially vivid illustrations of a more general phenomenon. When anyone speaks or writes, how much is newly generated à la Chomsky? How much is recycled à la Bakhtin? Are we part robot? Are the robots part human?

People like Chomsky who say that chatbots are unlike human speakers are right. However, so are those like Bakhtin who point out that we’re never really in control of our words – at least, not as much as we’d imagine ourselves to be. In that sense, ChatGPT forces us to consider an age-old question anew: How much of our language is really ours?

Brendan H. O’Connor is an Associate Professor in the School of Transborder Studies at Arizona State University.

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19. Hope is Not the Same as Optimism, a Psychologist Explains – Just Look at MLK’s Example

KENDRA THOMAS

On April 3, 1968, standing before a crowded church, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. painted his vision for justice. “[I’ve seen the Promised Land](#),” he said. “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

Twenty-two hours later, he was assassinated.

King’s prophetic words express the virtue of hope amid hardship. He was not optimistic that he would reach the “Promised Land,” yet he was hopeful about the ultimate goal.

In conversation, “hope” and “optimism” can often be used as synonyms. But there’s an important gap between them, as psychology research suggests.

One of the most common tools to [measure optimism](#) asks people how much they agree with statements such as, “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.” Those who strongly agree are regarded as highly optimistic.

But optimism can rely on a sense of luck over action. Self-help books on optimism are lined with hacks – like imagining your greatest possible self or focusing on the best-case scenario.

[My psychology research](#) studies how people perceive hope and justice. Long-term hope is not about looking on the bright side. It is a mindset that helps people endure challenges, tackle them head-on and keep their eyes on the goal – a virtue that King and other community leaders exemplify.

We, not me

Hope is often [defined in psychological research](#) as having strong will to succeed and plans to reach a goal.

Hope is stronger than optimism [at predicting academic success](#) and people's ability to [cope with pain](#). Plenty of scientific evidence suggests that hope [improves individuals' health](#) and boosts their [well-being](#).

But branding hope as a self-improvement tool cheapens this long-established virtue. Hope has benefits [beyond the self](#). Thus, many psychologists are expanding the [study of hope](#) beyond personal success. My research team defines this “[virtuous hope](#)” as striving toward a purposeful vision of the common good – a hope often shaped by hardship and strengthened through relationships.

Many leaders, including King, have channeled that lesson to inspire change. Centuries of spiritual and philosophical work describe hope [as a virtue](#) that, like love, is a decision, not a feeling.

The myth of time

King wasn't known for looking on the bright side or expecting the best from others. He faced repeated waves of criticism, and, at the time of his death, [fewer Americans approved](#) of him than of the [Vietnam War](#).

In “[Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#),” King lamented the optimism of moderate white Americans who said they supported his goals but took little action. There is a “strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills,” he wrote. “Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively.”

He chastised society for believing that improvement would simply happen on its own. When he said, “The arc of the moral universe is

long, [but it bends towards justice](#),” he was not describing its natural trajectory, but what people have the power to change. You cannot expect greener pastures if they are not tended today.

King was not alone in leveraging virtuous hope for justice. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire described hope as an “[existential imperative](#)” that promotes action. Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison, called hope a “[powerful weapon](#).”

Forged in adversity

What makes hope a virtue is not its ability to promote happiness and success but its commitment to a greater good beyond the self.

I study virtuous hope in a South African Zulu community, where there are few reasons for optimism. South Africa has [the world's steepest inequality](#). [Unemployment is high](#), and [social mobility](#) is low. This is the part of the country where [HIV is most widespread](#), with the percentage [near 50%](#) in some communities.

We studied [several people seen as embodying hope](#), based on their reputation and community suggestions. These individuals demonstrated an unwavering focus on striving for a better future, often unglued from expectations of personal success.

One local farmer nominated by his community struggled to buy seeds for his crops but still helped others apply for grants to buy them. Even when his own future was uncertain, he was not hoarding. He described his hope as a commitment to help others. His hope is not a positive expectation but a moral commitment.

Our interviewees did not describe hardship as a suppressor of hope but as its context to grow.

One unemployed young woman said she had applied for jobs for four years and would continue, though she was not naïve about the tough future. She said applying for jobs and reading to her child were her acts of hope. Her hope didn't expect a quick improvement, yet it warded off paralysis.

Many of our interviewees anchored their hope in their Christian faith, as did King. King [often referenced](#) St. Paul, one of the first Christian writers, [who wrote](#), “Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Now this hope does not disappoint us.”

Hope, in other words, plays the long game: enduring suffering with integrity. Like King’s, it manifests in hardship and is refined in adversity. Hope enables communities to march for [justice and democracy](#) even while tasting the danger of dictatorship, apartheid or oligarchy.

Hope knows it may take another generation to reach the Promised Land, but it acts today to [bend the moral arc](#) toward justice.

Kendra Thomas is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Hope College.

[“Hope is Not the Same as Optimism, a Psychologist Explains – Just Look at MLK’s Example”](#) by Kendra Thomas was originally published in *The Conversation* (2024) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution,-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#) (CC BY-ND 4.0).

20. Climate Quitting: the People Leaving their Fossil Fuel Jobs Because of Climate Change

GEMMA WARE AND GRACE AUGUSTINE

As the climate crisis gets ever more severe, the fossil fuel industry is [struggling to recruit new talent](#). And now a number of existing employees are deciding to leave their jobs, some quietly, some very publicly, because of concerns over climate change.

In this episode of [The Conversation Weekly podcast](#), we speak to a researcher about this phenomenon of “climate quitting”.

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/1df32765-5b4b-4abe-92fd-5263ca8cfdc2>

My name is Caroline Dennett and this is my resignation.

In a video posted on [LinkedIn](#) in 2022, Caroline Dennett, a senior safety consultant working at a major oil company, [announced she was terminating her contract](#) because of what she called the company’s “double-talk” on climate.

When Grace Augustine and her colleague Birth Soppe saw the video, which went viral, they decided to start looking for more people who had left their jobs because of concerns over climate change.

Augustine, an associate professor in business and society at the University of Bath in the UK, and Soppe, an associate professor of organisation studies, at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, have so far conducted interviews with 39 people from around the world in their ongoing research. Most, though not all, of their interviewees are young people who work in white collar jobs in the oil and gas sector.

One man they spoke to explained the feelings that led him to leave his job.

On a Friday afternoon travelling home, I would feel physically uncomfortable. And I was wondering: why am I feeling physically uncomfortable? I had a good week, I've done good work. And then you realise that, you may have done good work, but the goal that you're working towards is evil in a way; does not align with your moral compass.

Many referred to having a sense of cognitive dissonance – the idea that your behaviour doesn't match your belief system. And they couldn't live it with any longer. Augustine explained:

They were increasingly feeling a sense of urgency around the climate crisis ... something that they'd thought might be happening ten, 15, 20 years down the line, such as heat records being broken or climate related weather events. They felt an increasing sense that it couldn't wait any longer for them to leave this industry.

Listen to Grace Augustine talk about her ongoing research on [The Conversation Weekly](#) podcast, which also features extracts from her interviews and an introduction from Sam Phelps, commissioning editor for international affairs at The Conversation in the UK.

[A transcript of this episode](#) is now available.

Thanks to Grace Augustine for getting permission for The Conversation to use clips from her interviews, and to her interview subjects who agreed to let us use their voices and statements in this podcast.

This episode of The Conversation Weekly was written and produced by Katie Flood, with assistance from Mend Mariwany. Gemma Ware is the executive producer. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is

our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts.

Newsclips in this episode were from [PBS News Hour](#).

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Gemma Ware is the editor and co-host of The Conversation Weekly Podcast. **Grace Augustine** is an Associate Professor in Business & Society at the University of Bath.

[“Climate Quitting: the People Leaving their Fossil Fuel Jobs Because of Climate Change”](#) by Gemma Ware and Grace Augustine was originally published in The Conversation (2024) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#) (CC BY-ND 4.0).

2I. Suggested Texts

1. [Neha Gajwani, “No, You Don’t Need to Go to Holiday Parties If You Feel Lonely”](#)
2. [Sonali Kolhatkar, “Can We Fix Our Democracy?”](#)
3. [Irene Villaseñor, “Time Wasn’t Always Money: Decolonizing Time in Diaspora”](#)
4. [Natasha Vizcarra, “Taking the Native American Narrative Beyond Reservations”](#)

PART III

UNIT 2: ESSAYS ABOUT WRITING

22. Unit 2: Adding to a Conversation Introduction

What conversations are piquing your interest these days? Think about news and social media posts that have made you pause recently. Make a list of your recent search histories, conversations with friends, and personal or academic topics that grabbed your attention. What do you want to learn more about? What do you care about? To which conversations would you like to add your voice? The Adding to a Conversation unit asks you to explore a conversation around a topic that you find interesting or meaningful and contribute your own perspective.

As you begin this unit, we'd like you to think broadly about what research can do—not just for school, but for you and for society at large. Additionally, you will explore something that you find interesting or even meaningful, and you'll share your learning and perspectives with a particular group of readers. Your writing in this unit is not as a student to a teacher, but as a writer to readers you'd like to reach, including communities beyond the academic sphere. You will therefore be asked to make unique decisions about how you will apply your academic writing skills to public contexts and communities. You will determine your own purpose, audience, context, and genre.

In Unit 2, you'll continue to read and interact thoughtfully with texts, as you did in Unit 1. Unit 2 presents additional writing challenges: to explore and add to a conversation that includes multiple texts and their perspectives. Through the process of researching and writing, you will pose questions, explore a variety of sources, and contemplate what takeaways you'd like to share with readers.

This unit may therefore be different from other research-related assignments that you've encountered. In high school, “research”

often means finding sources on an assigned topic for the sole purpose of using them as evidence to support a thesis. In College Writing, “research” will mean discovering a scholarly conversation on the topic of your interest, analyzing the conversation, and adding your unique perspective to it. In these ways, you will practice using sources as conversation partners rather than exclusively as evidence for your claims.

Here are writing goals that you’ll work toward in Unit 2 Adding to a Conversation:

- Asking research questions drawn from personal interests.
- Learning about a conversation based on independent research, including finding and evaluating sources.
- Engaging in the composing process to extend and evolve your initial thinking about the topic and also to explore the conversation in multiple modes, media, or genres.
- Representing effectively a conversation based on a specific purpose and audience.
- “Adding” to a conversation with additional insight, research, or inquiry.
- Citing multiple sources in-text and in a works cited page using MLA style.

Ask research questions drawn from personal interests.

As you start brainstorming for topics, think about the conversations you've been hearing and participating in with friends, family, professors, classmates, and colleagues. Identify a topic that interests you and compose a list of questions about it. Creating research questions will help you gain a clearer sense of the main issues and will focus your research and writing. The most promising research questions will reflect your genuine curiosities and will not be easily answered; in fact, spending time refining them according to audience, timeliness, and scope will ensure your questions are highly focused and relevant to the current conversation. We encourage you to enter the research process with questions (rather than answers), and to remember that researching, reading, and writing are effective ways to generate ideas.

Learn about a conversation based on independent research, including finding and evaluating sources.

You will learn to use university library databases to search for sources and further reflect on your topic. You will read, evaluate, and use academic and non-academic sources. This may include primary sources for research material such as personal interviews, historical documents, surveys, and social media posts. As you engage in the process of looking for sources or speak with your peers, parents, or professors about a topic, you are becoming more familiar with and beginning to participate in a conversation.

Engage in the composing process to extend and evolve your

initial thinking about the topic and also to explore the conversation in multiple modes, media, or genres.

The research and writing process matters. Some mistakenly see research as finding evidence for a claim or thesis statement, but this approach is limited. How can you declare your thesis before research has even begun? Rather, good research starts with inquiry and requires an openness to new ideas. In Unit 2, the writing process includes generative writing to help you define your context, audience, and purpose. Moreover, the process of finding and engaging sources can help you learn about as well as refine your guiding questions.

Effectively represent a conversation based on a specific purpose and audience.

Which sources will you summarize briefly? Which sources will you interact with in more depth? When might you cite more than one source in a single sentence? Or discuss another source for multiple paragraphs? The answer: it depends. It depends on who your intended readers are and what perspectives you'd like to share with them. Consider what your readers already know, what interests them, what you'd like them to learn, and why you think they might care at this particular moment in time. You may experiment with how you pace, order, connect, or separate, and generally represent the multiple perspectives in your essay. The challenge of this unit is to represent an existing conversation purposefully for your readers.

“Add” to a conversation with additional insight, research, or inquiry.

Based on your prior knowledge and what you learned through

research, what insights would you like to add? What matters most to you, and who needs to hear this? Adding to a conversation takes on many forms, as you'll see in this section's essays. You might add to a conversation by presenting something familiar in a new light, proposing a solution to a problem, or making specific calls to action for readers, etc. In doing so, you will articulate—with research, vision, and insight—what it means to be a social writer in the world. Your writing can have a social impact.

Cite multiple sources in-text and in a works cited page using MLA style.

Citation conventions can vary; you'll learn or practice using MLA style. While the mechanics of citations—what to italicize, how to punctuate, etc.—are not terribly exciting, citation is important. There will be multiple voices in your Unit 2 text, and citation is not only about clearly demarcating these voices but is also about ethically crediting authors for their intellectual work. Moreover, works cited pages can help readers know where to go if they'd like to read more.

Reading to Grow Your Writing

In this section, you'll find texts where writers add to conversations that are meaningful to them. They take on a variety of contemporary issues, including the ways technology has changed human relationships, as well as how groups band together to fight against larger power structures. Although these essays span across many topics and forms, they share a similar goal: representing and contributing to conversations with real stakes.

Read these with an eye toward identifying their writing strategies, which will present you with options when writing your own essays.

- How are the writers making personal connections to their topics, and how might you connect to a topic that interests you?
- How are the writers asserting and supporting their own purposes?
- How are they interacting with their sources?
- How are they appealing to their audiences?

As you draft and revise your “Adding to a Conversation” essay, come back to these pieces and reflect on the strategies these authors use to communicate and support their points of view. In the coming weeks, you’ll have the chance to experiment with different structural and expressive approaches in order to most effectively communicate your insights about a conversation to your intended readers.

23. Effectively and Efficiently Reading the Credibility of Online Sources

ELLEN CARILLO AND ALICE HORNING

Overview

Because reading and writing are related interpretive practices, attending to critical reading is an important part of teaching writing. This chapter defines critical reading and offers students strategies for undertaking a specific kind of critical reading, namely reading for credibility, particularly of online sources. The chapter gives examples of the importance of reading for credibility in a variety of situations, including one's day-to-day life and while engaged in academic projects. Specifically, students are introduced to what is called "lateral reading," an approach that helps students determine a source's credibility by leaving the source and seeing what is said about it elsewhere on the Web. To support this approach, the chapter provides definitions of misinformation and disinformation, addresses the difference between primary and secondary sources, and teaches students the importance of recognizing bias in sources and in themselves.

Both of us writing this chapter are scholars who teach our own students that good reading skills are essential to developing effective writing abilities. We have both published books and articles in this area and over the years have claimed to know

a lot about the best ways to teach critical reading. With this background, you would think that we'd both be really effective critical readers, but Alice recently had her come-uppance at the hands of the Internet. Here's what happened: At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when information about ways to stay safe was being circulated, Alice received an e-mail from a colleague she considers a highly reliable source. The message had been forwarded to her colleague from someone purporting to be a physician whose daughter works in infectious diseases at Johns Hopkins, one of the nation's leading hospitals. It seemed like a good source: it contained a number of pieces of familiar, general advice about handwashing, social distancing, and masks, all information we have heard dozens of times. But it also contained what Alice later realized was some suspicious advice for killing the virus. For instance: "Any mix with 1 part bleach and 5 parts water directly dissolves the protein, breaks it down from the inside," and "UV LIGHT on any object that may contain it breaks down the virus protein." The email also described how alcohol could be used to kill the virus, but warned in all caps, "NO SPIRITS, NOR VODKA" but "Listerine will work—65% alcohol" ("Covid Precautions").

Looking back now, Alice realizes that various other wacky points appeared in the message. Still, she sent it along to friends and family including her daughters, one of whom is a public health nurse. Her daughter fired back quite soon to point out an assortment of errors and misleading claims, noting that she and her professional colleagues were very concerned about the amount of misinformation and disinformation being passed around in just this way. As a reading scholar who has taught others about the importance of credible sources, Alice was appalled and embarrassed. She had to send follow-up messages telling one and all to disregard what she had just sent. Where, oh where, were *her* critical reading skills?

Alice's daughter's response also points to two words that sound a lot alike, but actually mean two different things. In the *MLA Guide to Digital Literacy*, Ellen has defined these terms carefully

and we want you to have these definitions in mind as you read this chapter because they will help you understand the two different ways you can be misled by information on the Web: “Both [misinformation and disinformation] describe factually incorrect information. The difference between the two is intent. Disinformation involves maliciously spreading wrong information. Misinformation is incorrect information, but it is not spread with malicious intent” (Carillo 13). Among all of the credible information on the Web there is also misinformation and disinformation, and critical reading skills are crucial to identifying the differences. We will come back to these terms a bit later, but we hope you will keep them, as well as Alice’s cautionary tale, in mind.

What Do We Mean by Critical Reading?

You may be thinking to yourself, “I already know how to read.” We realize that if you are reading this chapter you are likely in college and have been reading—as in decoding language—for more than a decade, maybe more than two or three decades. Critical reading is different from just reading or decoding language, though. Critical reading is really an umbrella term— an expansive and encompassing term—for focused, purposeful, and deep reading practices. In other words, critical reading is more than simply passing your eyes over words. This chapter will teach you about reading for credibility, one kind of critical reading. Specifically, we will describe how “reading laterally”—or across many sources—can help you judge the credibility of a single source and find quality information online.

What Is Credibility?

If a source is credible, that means it is trustworthy. While you can

trust the nonfiction and informational texts (e.g., textbooks and scholarly articles) that your instructors assign because these have likely already been vetted— or approved—by experts in that field, you will often find yourself in the position of needing to locate additional sources as you conduct research in a first-year writing course or as you move into your chosen major. The Web has plenty of credible information on it, but the sheer volume of information can make the process of finding this information more challenging. What we say in this chapter to help you judge a source’s credibility is applicable across disciplines and even in your personal life, too, as evidenced by the example that opened this chapter.

Moving Beyond Your Source to Evaluate Its Credibility

There are many ways of evaluating sources, some of which you are likely familiar with. You may have experience applying different kinds of checklists—such as the CRAAP (Credibility, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) Checklist, which allows you to determine whether the source you are reading is “CRAAP.” This approach, wherein you ask a series of questions about the source and answer these questions by looking more closely at the source itself, has been used for decades, but as Stanford University researcher Sarah McGrew and her colleagues explain:

the checklist approach falls short because it underestimates just how sophisticated the web has become. Worse, the approach trains students’ attention on the website itself, thus cutting them off from the most efficient route to learning more about a site: finding out what the rest of the web has to say (after all, that’s why we call it a web). (7)

To replace this outdated approach, these educators offer what they call “lateral reading,” which, instead, involves leaving the source and

moving to other sources across (i.e., laterally) the Web to assess the source's credibility.

McGrew and her colleague Sam Wineburg at Stanford introduced the concept of “lateral reading” after they conducted a study of how three different groups of people assessed the credibility of sources, among other tasks. Wineburg and McGrew gave professional fact checkers, Stanford undergraduate students, and historians with PhDs various digital sources that addressed social and political issues and asked them to evaluate them in various ways, including for credibility. Wineburg and McGrew observed how these three groups did so. They found that the undergraduates and historians took the traditional “vertical” approach to assessment, remaining tethered to the single source/site and looked closely—up and down it in a vertical fashion—to consider the different elements of the source itself, including site design; whether there were any errors or typos; and if the source included references. The professional fact checkers, however, immediately left the source to assess its credibility. They opened tab after tab to search for information about the source, including about the site's sponsoring organization and the author (Wineburg and McGrew 19). They also reviewed references to the source, site, organization, or author they found elsewhere (Wineburg and McGrew 19).

Professional fact-checkers capitalize on what the Web has to offer—a seemingly limitless number of other sources to use for the purpose of cross-referencing and corroboration. This practice holds promise for students as well (Rodrigue; Wineburg and McGrew; McGrew et al.; Caulfield). In the following sections, we share some steps for taking this approach to reading the credibility of online sources.

Steps for Reading Laterally to Assess the Credibility of Online Sources

1. Leave the site to do a quick check as to whether it appears on other fact-checking or hoax-busting sites. This step can save you a lot of time, especially if someone has already reported the site. You may already be familiar with Snopes, perhaps the most well-known fact-checking site, but there are other nonpartisan sites such as PolitiFact and FactCheck.org that can be helpful, too.
2. Leave the site in question to explore more about the author of the piece. What can you find out about the author elsewhere on the Web? Does the author seem like an expert on the subject? What else has the author written? Is the author affiliated with any organizations or groups? How might this information allow you to recognize any biases the author may have?
3. Leave the site in question to explore more about the site itself. If you did not locate the site on one of the fact-checking sites listed above, then do a simple Google search. What can you find out about the site? Who or what (i.e., a company or organization) sponsors or owns the site? Does that ownership suggest any biases? What seems to be the intended purpose of the site? Is the site selling anything? Who is the audience for the site? Are visitors to the site looking to purchase something? Does a commercial aspect the site may have potentially conflict with the information it provides?

As you move through these steps you want to do so deliberately and “take your bearings” as you do so. The successful fact checkers in Wineburg and McGrew’s study regularly took their bearings, which amounted to making a plan for moving forward (12). Applying the steps above, the following plan emerges: Beginning with #1, keep track of any fact-checking sites that suggest the source/site in

question is not credible. As you move onto #2 and #3 to other sites where you read about the author and the site in question, track the credibility of those sites, too. Move outward from them to read about those sites on at least three other sites or until you feel confident and have not found any conflicting information about their credibility. Make notes as you go. Finally, review your notes in order to make an informed determination about the credibility of the source in question.

Recognizing the Difference Between Primary Sources and Secondary Sources While Reading Laterally

As you are reading laterally you will likely encounter both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources provide first-hand or direct information and include photographs, video and audio recordings, letters, diaries, government documents, speeches, historical documents, pieces of literature, art, research studies, and interviews. Secondary sources offer secondary accounts of the information or evidence in a primary source. Secondary sources are *about* primary sources. Secondary sources include book and movie reviews, scholarly articles about novels, and news stories about scientific studies. Secondary sources summarize, interpret, or draw on primary sources in some way.

Going to a primary source can be an important part of reading laterally because it will allow you to recognize bias in the secondary sources you locate, which is important to judging the credibility of a source (more on that below). While finding different perspectives on a subject in the form of secondary sources is useful—and your instructor may require you to locate secondary sources—going to the primary source allows you to first form your own judgments, interpretations, and conclusions without being swayed by what others think. For example, an

article that draws on a scientific study may contain a hyperlink to that study, the primary source. By reading the study before you read the article *about* the study (the secondary source) you can form your own ideas without allowing the article to influence you. Even if a secondary source does not contain a hyperlink to the primary source you can usually locate the primary source by consulting the reference information included either in the secondary source or on a reference page at its end. The Web is filled with secondary sources, which sometimes makes it difficult to find primary sources, but locating primary sources while reading laterally will give you the freedom to form your own judgments about the information rather than relying on a secondary source to do so for you.

Using Lateral Reading to Determine the Credibility of Online Images

Lateral reading is a useful practice when it comes to determining the credibility of online images, too. The saying goes, “seeing is believing,” but with so many ways to manipulate images, seeing is no longer believing. Unfortunately, some primary sources, such as photographs, may be manipulated by Photoshop and other software that has become widely available. Photoshop and similar software have been used in many ways and to a range of ends. For example, Fox News cropped President Donald Trump from a picture in which he appears alongside convicted sex traffickers Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislane Maxwell (Davidoff Studios/Getty Images). You can see the original picture contains four people, including Trump, and the cropped picture, which appeared during a Fox News program, contains all but Trump (Fox News). Fox News later apologized for what was described as an error. In other instances, two or more photographs have been merged to do the exact opposite— to put someone alongside another person

or people in order to discredit them. For example, as Senator John Kerry was campaigning for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 2004, a picture of him from 1971 was merged with a picture of Jane Fonda from 1972 (Mikkelson). The composite was intended to discredit Kerry, a Vietnam War veteran, by placing him alongside Fonda who was an anti-Vietnam war activist and thought to be unpatriotic by many Americans.

You can conduct a reverse image search on the Web to validate the authenticity of images, which, when paired with lateral reading, can give you insight into a photograph's credibility. Google's support pages offer specific instructions. Conducting a reverse image search will render a list of other places on the Web where the image appears. You can then read laterally to locate the original image, as well as other versions of that image, which will help you establish the credibility of the image in question.

You can use the same lateral reading approach to assess the credibility of videos. You may have heard of deepfake videos, which are videos that have been manipulated to show people saying and doing things that they did not actually do. Deepfake technology is advancing very quickly, making it difficult to discern a video that has been manipulated. As of writing this chapter, the best way to recognize a deepfake video is to look for inconsistencies between what people are saying in the video and what they have said in other contexts; depending on when you're reading this, you may need to search for more ways to recognize deepfakes based on rapidly changing technology. Reading laterally to locate those other contexts— whether videos, articles, or interviews—will help you recognize these inconsistencies. Additionally, recognizing inconsistencies in the video itself can also suggest that it has been manipulated, whether the lighting seems to change throughout, or the way the person's face or eyes are illuminated changes over the course of the video (Sample). There may also be more glaring issues, including bad lip-syncing. The point is that we are seeing disinformation circulate at a faster pace than ever before and the technologies to manipulate images

and videos are moving at a similarly fast pace. Be cautious with primary sources, particularly if the source is a photograph or video, and be sure to use available resources, including the lateral reading approach, to assess credibility.

Addressing Bias While Reading Laterally

Reading laterally can help you assess the credibility of everything from news articles to videos, but as you read laterally, you need to recognize how bias informs both what you read and how you read. You are likely familiar with the term “bias,” usually thought of as a personal opinion or preference that makes it impossible to see an idea objectively. Keep in mind the difference between biased information and incorrect information. While biased information is skewed in some way, incorrect information is just plain wrong. Although some media outlets have been criticized because of their dissemination of incorrect information, bias is the more common culprit. For example, a few minutes on Fox News, MSNBC and the PBS Newshour will give you a sense of bias, particularly if you are careful to watch the reporting on the same event. One helpful resource for considering the potential bias in news sources is the free, basic version of the Interactive Media Bias chart, which gives an overview of many news outlets and their relative political positions, which provide insight into their biases.

Beyond recognizing the role bias plays across media outlets, you will also need to be able to negotiate bias when completing source-driven writing assignments in your classes. Suppose your class has been discussing the regulation of the Internet, and you are assigned to investigate the controversial subject of Internet privacy protection. You know personal information, financial status, and health issues should be stored securely. However, businesses might want access to this information in order to offer you products and services related to your needs as revealed by your searches. Each

side would be biased in its own favor, and your job as a critical reader is to provide a fair discussion of these differing views of appropriate regulation. Remember that you cannot somehow remove bias from these sources. Instead, your role is to recognize the bias in each perspective, consider its effect on the source's credibility, and negotiate it as you develop your own point of view or argument.

If you are writing about the regulation of the Internet, for example, you would want to begin by searching for sources on the subject. An article by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) will give you an overview of Internet privacy legislation, including by state, while an article from a different source, ProPublica, will give you a more targeted and detailed look at how Facebook seeks to protect its users' privacy through policies that prohibit advertisers from misusing the platform ("Status of Internet Privacy Legislation By State"; Angwin and Parris). Reading vertically on each site's "About" link will give you a sense of who is behind each site, but as we have pointed out, reading vertically is problematic. For example, while the ACLU claims to be a non-partisan, nonprofit organization engaged in defense of civil liberties, a lateral search of critics of the ACLU produces a 2020 article by the overtly conservative Heritage Foundation that makes clear that the ACLU has its own biases (Canaparo). In other words, moving beyond the ACLU's own site provides relevant information about its biases that its own "About" section doesn't reveal.

The same series of steps with ProPublica show that it, too, claims to be a nonprofit, non-partisan reporting site, but moving away from the source reveals that it leans left, according to AllSides, another valuable site that evaluates bias ("About Us"; "ProPublica Media Bias Ranking"). At this point, you would want to take your bearings and move forward by locating sources that balance those liberal perspectives that are likely to value an individual's privacy over the freedoms of large companies and corporations. Further lateral reading of the sources cited in each article (by following embedded links or opening new tabs), as well as the citations in

the other sources you locate will help you to see bias more clearly. Thus, taking bearings and using lateral reading strategies can reveal bias in all kinds of material, which is crucial to negotiating the credibility of sources and representing controversial issues in fair and balanced ways.

Recognizing Your Own Biases

It's not just sources that are biased. All of us are biased, and this can get in the way of effective reading and research habits. Some of our biases come from our backgrounds and experiences, plus what you learn at home and school. Each day we are exposed to large amounts of information that attempt to sway our views. When people get stuck in their own beliefs, and only seek out and believe evidence to support their views, the process is known as confirmation bias. Confirmation bias can be especially problematic when you are conducting research because it can get in the way of your valuing sources that offer different perspectives from your own. As dangerous as this practice is, it's fairly common, according to Stanford University psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt: "People tend to seek out and attend to information that already confirms their beliefs. We find such information more trustworthy and are less critical of it, even when we are presented with credible, seemingly unassailable facts that suggest otherwise" (33). Confirmation bias can result in choosing sources that confirm ideas or information you already know or believe, which can be counterproductive whether you are writing a research essay, seeking information for health and safety reasons, or making a decision about which candidate to vote for.

Recognizing confirmation bias, though, is a first step toward mitigating it, as psychologist Raymond S. Nickerson of Tufts University points out: "Perhaps simply being aware of the confirmation bias—of its pervasiveness and of the many guises in

which it appears—might help one both to be a little cautious about making up one's mind quickly on important issues and to be somewhat more open to opinions that differ from one's own than one might otherwise be" (211). In terms of critical reading this means that you should regularly monitor the perspectives in the sources you choose to ensure that you are not only relying on sources that always already confirm your ideas. Additionally, you should deliberately seek out sources that oppose your ideas so you have a more well-rounded understanding of the subject and offer a fair appraisal of a topic or issue.

Additional Tips that Draw on Lateral Reading

Reading laterally can help you assess the credibility of the information, including photographs and videos, you find online and help you read more deeply. To further support your lateral reading, we offer the following tips that draw on the lateral reading approach

Tip 1: Click on Hyperlinks

Research has shown that in many cases students don't take full advantage of what the Web has to offer (Rodrigue; Wineburg and McGrew; McGrew et al.; Purdy). Even though studies suggest that students prefer texts with hyperlinks, particularly when they are conducting research, they don't always click on them (Purdy; Vassileva and Chankova; Rodrigue). Does this characterize your way of reading online? Instead of clicking on hyperlinks embedded in news stories and other online texts students often simply read online texts as if they were print texts. Keep in mind that online texts are connected to other texts, and those texts are connected to others. Actively following hyperlinks can deepen your reading

experience by directing you to primary sources, related sources, and texts that can provide additional context for what you are reading.

Tip 2: Open New Tabs

Just as you can deepen your reading experience by following hyperlinks you can do the same by opening new tabs to further explore your subject.

Not all online texts have hyperlinks embedded in them. As such, it may be up to you to take the initiative to seek out additional information. Like hyperlinks, opening new tabs can help you learn more about a subject, create some context for it, explore what others have said about it, and read up on relevant definitions or related ideas. The possibilities really are endless but only if you allow your curiosity to guide you.

Tip 3: Move Around the Web Deliberately

We have all had the experience of starting somewhere on the Web and then two hours later having no idea how we got to where we ended up. There's nothing inherently wrong with this, and you can stumble upon useful material inadvertently. But, when you are conducting research for an assignment or out of a personal interest, it's important to practice two behaviors that Wineburg and McGrew noticed the professional fact checkers engaging in: "taking bearings" and "click restraint." As noted above, taking bearings involves "charting a plan for moving forward," as do sailors, so that you are moving purposefully in a productive direction (Wineburg and McGrew 30). When you practice click restraint, you don't trust that the first results that a search engine

like Google Scholar generates are necessarily the most relevant, but instead you spend time “scanning the search engine results page and reading the snippets before clicking on any link” to make an informed decision about where to go (Wineburg and McGrew 28). Both of these practices slow you down, which is the first step toward a deeper reading experience.

Final Thoughts

Some of the strategies presented in this chapter may be new to you while you may already be familiar with others. Enriching your online reading practices involves paying closer attention to how you already read online sources and how you currently judge their credibility. Once you reflect on your current practices you can then fill in any gaps with the strategies laid out in this chapter. New reading practices may seem cumbersome at first, but they will soon enough become second nature. Just remember not to let your guard down like Alice did!

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Teacher Resources for Effectively and Efficiently Reading the Credibility of Online Sources

We suggest that you use this chapter early in your term, or as soon as you have students doing any kind of research project. The sooner you can help students improve their critical reading skills,

the better their overall work will be. There is ample research of several different kinds that indicates students' difficulties with reading and assessing the credibility of online material. This research includes careful studies of students' inability to evaluate online materials (Stanford History Education Group); qualitative evaluations of students' own writing that includes the use of sources (from the Citation Project); and standardized test data (from ACT and others). This chapter can help you support students as they develop their abilities in this area.

The central terms you will want to introduce are “critical reading,” “misinformation,” “disinformation,” “primary vs. secondary sources,” “bias,” “confirmation bias,” and “credibility.” You may have discussed some of these already in class, but may want to present or review them in the context of the more general goal of critical reading online. Of these concepts, probably the most difficult to discuss is bias. We’ve tried to give readers a clear definition; even so, bias is hard to see, most notably when the sites we look at agree with our own ideas. The news sites (see activity #3 below) will provide the most obvious examples of bias, but they are not the only ones you might use. There is bias in science reporting (e.g., FoodBabe.com; mercola.com) and in plenty of other areas. Discussions of bias should focus carefully on the language that is used and on the “facts” that are presented. The lateral reading process we describe should help students apply critical reading strategies to help them recognize the bias in these sites and ultimately find quality information online.

Before you take students to the activities below and then on to their individual projects, it might be useful to look together at a hoax site or two. The following are two examples, but there are many online that are designated as such if you would prefer to choose your own:

1. Buy Dehydrated Water:
<https://buydehydratedwatercom.weebly.com/>
2. The Taxonomy of Barney: <https://www.improbable.com/>

archives/paperair/volume1/vli1/barney.htm

You might have students review these or other hoax sites by contrasting them with their own favorite sites or your school's site. Your goal in class discussion should be to raise students' awareness of ways in which information is presented online, whether true or false. These examples should help students see why it will be useful for them to have critical reading skills for their own work.

With this background, you can move directly to lateral reading as a strongly recommended approach to evaluating Web sources. Using the subject of an upcoming source-driven assignment as the focus, have students practice the steps of lateral reading as a class, in pairs, or in small groups to give them hands-on experience with this process as they explore sources on the assigned subject. Demonstrating the process and incorporating the additional tips we discuss (clicking hyperlinks, opening new tabs, and moving deliberately around the Web) will set students up to follow the lateral reading process. Students might also want to keep a sort of "lab notebook" of their Web searches with notes on the lateral reading steps they follow in their individual projects to be submitted with their final writing assignment.

Activities

The following are four class activities that can help students apply and practice what they learn in this chapter about assessing the credibility of online sources. The first activity asks students to draw on their prior knowledge, which helps lay the foundation for applying what may be new knowledge.

1. Reflect on your current reading practices as you are moving around the Web. Take notes on the following: How do you tend to move from one site to the next? Do you open new tabs? Follow

hyperlinks? Do you move deliberately or haphazardly? What are you learning about yourself as a digital reader as you pay attention to your practices?

2. Access your institution's library and peruse its databases, paying attention to the titles of the databases and any additional information offered about each. Make a list of at least three databases that contain primary sources and at least three that contain secondary sources. How can you tell the difference based on the titles and any information offered about the databases?

3. On a day when there is a major story in the world news, look at the following different news sites to see how the story is reported and presented, likely on the front page (or landing page) in order to notice how bias plays out in reporting on major news events:

- Al Jazeera ("US & Canada News")
- New York Times
- The Washington Post
- BBC News
- CBC News
- The Jerusalem Post ("World News")

What do you notice about how the story is represented? Where do you see bias? How do you know? Social media sites can also give you a version of the news; evaluate what you see on your favorite site, comparing and contrasting it to what is on the news sites above.

4. Following the steps laid out in this chapter, read laterally about the Dihydrogen Monoxide Research Division in order to evaluate whether it is a credible scientific source about dihydrogen monoxide ("Dihydrogen Monoxide – DHMO Homepage"). Share and compare your notes and your evaluation with those of your classmates. What's the consensus?

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24. Public Writing for Social Change

ASHLEY J. HOLMES

Overview

This essay challenges students to use public writing to embrace their role as an “academic citizen” (i.e., someone who takes the writing and research we do in college and puts it to practical and civic use in our communities in the hopes of contributing toward positive social change). Beginning with invention and how to find an exigent public issue, the chapter moves students through important steps of planning to write for a public rhetorical situation, such as defining and researching a public audience, genre of writing, and context for eventual publication or circulation. The essay provides a brief introduction to public sphere theories to help students move beyond thinking of their audience in public writing as “the general public” and instead embrace a more specific audience within the multiplicity of publics for their writing. With examples from a broad range of genres and styles that fall under the umbrella of public writing, the essay offers support for more traditional public writing assignments (e.g., the op-ed or letter to a representative), as well as digital or multimodal assignments (e.g., blogs, social media campaigns, or digital stories).

Can a tweet—a genre of public writing—cause social change? There’s an article I like to teach by Malcolm Gladwell that explores this question. In “Small Change: Why the Revolution Won’t Be

Tweeted,” Gladwell recounts the story of four freshmen from North Carolina A&T who sat down at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in 1960, sparking a series of sit-ins and protests. Being skeptical of the impact of social media, Gladwell reminds us that all the events of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s “happened without e-mail, texting, Facebook, or Twitter.” On one hand, Gladwell’s critiques may be warranted when we think about isolated instances of what some people call “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”—things like clicking a “like” button, changing a profile picture’s frame to support a cause, or signing an online petition. On the other hand, Gladwell wrote this article in 2010, and we have since witnessed the power of groups to use social media and online tools to organize broader movements, such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and many others.

While just one tweet or letter to the editor isn’t going to lead to sweeping social change by itself, using public writing to respond to the exigences of our current times can help us tap into networks that may advance a cause one step at a time. As Julius Bailey and David Leonard note in their study of the Black Lives Matter movement: “The expressions of black love, the creation of spaces of protest, the demands for justice that follow, *each can gather momentum and spread to become large-scale social movements that can no longer be ignored*” (emphasis added, 77). Sometimes public writing can be a small snowflake contributing to the momentum of a growing snowball, but it can just easily melt without having much effect. For writing to have the potential of a public impact beyond our personal thoughts on the page, beyond our peers in the class or the teacher assigning a grade, we have to successfully engage with a public rhetorical situation for our writing, finding ways to connect with the efforts of broader publics and counterpublics.

Writing for a public rhetorical situation means planning ahead by choosing a timely and relevant public issue, as well as anticipating the ways we will publish and circulate our writing to reach the public audiences who can help effect change. In this

essay, we will walk through important components of planning, writing, and publishing to consider when composing public writing for social change. A first step in the process, though, is to understand the possibilities and privileges of your role as an academic citizen.

Academic Citizens

Take a minute and brainstorm a quick list of characteristics or words that come to mind when you, separately, think of the word “academic” and the word “citizen”.

Table 1: Brainstorming Characteristics of “Academic” and “Citizen”

Academic	Citizen
•	•

Under your list of characteristics for “academic,” perhaps you brainstormed words like “school,” “books,” “research,” or “teachers.” You might have listed characteristics like “smart” or “intellectual.” You might have approached the list by describing what you envision as *not* academic, by listing things like “not personal” or “not practical,” whether you agree with those designations or not. For the column of characteristics and words for “citizen,” did you list words like “government,” “voting,” or “civic duty”? You might have brainstormed your own role as a citizen by thinking about your local “community” or your “country of origin.”

Now that our creative juices are flowing, let’s put these two words together. In what ways is it possible to bring together what we do as writers and researchers in college with what is expected of us as citizens? For me, being an academic citizen means taking the scholarly work we do in college and putting it to practical and civic use in our communities in the hopes of contributing

toward positive social change. All the work you do as a student to research issues and write about them in persuasive ways has the potential to shape the world around you, but only if you circulate your writing to reach public audiences beyond your school.

The concept of an “academic citizen” is not entirely new; many scholars believe in a broad role for education that is tied to democratic ideals, as well as a more public conception of intellectuals. For example, writing in his *Prison Notebooks* in the 1920s and ‘30s, Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci argued that all people are intellectuals, whether they become an intellectual through advanced schooling, social status, or life experience. Gramsci sees school as central in developing a working-class group of intellectuals—what he calls “organic intellectuals”—that will critically question the traditional structure of how knowledge is produced (Hoare and Smith 131). Building on some of the foundational ideas of Gramsci, Henry A. Giroux has written about the importance of public universities and colleges making a commitment to address society’s problems. Similarly, Ellen Cushman argues that “public intellectuals” should use their research “to address social issues” and improve “under-served neighborhoods” (329). The concept of an organic or public intellectual has a lot in common with what I mean by being an academic citizen.

In the next few pages, I hope to convince you that making a slight shift in how you think about your role in higher education can help you move toward these more public and civic goals and to start a journey toward becoming an academic citizen. Instead of only thinking about yourself as a student doing work for the teacher, begin thinking about the potential for your academic work to contribute toward efforts to address social injustices in your community, state, or country. While one single letter or 280-word tweet is unlikely to cause a sea change, writing that is publicly circulated has the power to tap into broader networks, movements, and efforts that, when combined, can help us move one step closer to social change, even if that step is small. I would

like to invite you to think about how some of the academic research and writing you do for school can become something more than just a grade—whether that’s through your contributions to your church bulletin, for example, or a letter you send to your state representative.

Finding an Issue: Invention and Exigency

Being an effective public writer starts with having a good issue. When you think of all the many things you *could* write about, what does it mean to have a good issue? And, how can you find one? I recommend you choose an issue that meets the following criteria:

1. public—in other words, it’s discussed and debated in the public realm or has implications for public audiences and communities,
2. personally relevant—it should ideally be something that you care about or that interests you, and
3. timely—it’s relevant to this specific moment.

Choosing a public issue does not mean you need to ignore personal concerns. In fact, it can present an opportunity to make the personal public by using your interests, experiences, and beliefs to help fuel your public writing and arguments. To aid in your public writing journey, let me tell you about two rhetorical concepts: invention and exigency.

Invention—one of the five rhetorical canons (the others are arrangement, style, memory, and delivery)—is a valuable rhetorical tool; it involves a process of discovery that can help you figure out what to say or write. Invention is meant to be generative. In other words, it’s meant to help you generate lots of ideas that could be useful in your writing and research. Eventually you will need to narrow those ideas down for your argument, selecting

and arranging the ones that help you most persuasively make your case. However, during invention, “you are trying to come up with as many ideas as the situation and topic will allow. So turn your judgment down to zero while inventing. Keep an open mind” (Pullman 112).

As you are trying to find a public issue and decide what you will say about it, you might try various invention strategies, like the “Writing on Location” activity explained below, to help you generate more ideas.

An Invention Activity: Writing on Location

Choose a local, public location—an actual, physical spot or site—where you can observe and write for a short amount of time—whether that’s with pen and paper or typing on your phone, tablet, or laptop. Consider a spot with some interesting visuals or bustling activity that will prompt you to brainstorm or freewrite ideas related to your assignment. While visiting your location, find a spot to sit, stand, or lie down where you can write for a few minutes. Compose a freewrite or reflection that informally captures whatever comes to your mind while you are actually, physically in the location. What do you see? What do you hear? What is intriguing? What seems surprising? You are encouraged to take pictures and/or videos that will help capture your experiences in this location at this moment and may serve as evidence in digital, multimodal assignments. (When taking pictures or videos in public, you should be particularly respectful of the privacy of people around you and protect their anonymity.)

When I assign students to write on location, they often end up with relevant and timely public issues. There is something about being physically present in a public space that helps writers begin to form a reaction. One of my former students, for example, chose to write on location at a historic cemetery near her apartment.

She was distressed to see the many broken and cracked tombstones and dilapidated conditions at the cemetery. This eventually led to her composing a public blog about how local residents could (and should) get involved with the efforts of a cemetery preservation and restoration society. Another student wrote on location at the university's library late in the evening and became frustrated when the library began closing. She used some of the notes from her "Writing on Location" freewrite to help develop a public letter to the library's Dean to extend the library's hours.

Invention activities like writing on location may be especially helpful at the start of your process. However, invention can happen "at any stage of the writing process" (Trim and Isaac 108). You shouldn't hesitate to go back to the generative, brainstorming work of invention if you become stuck, even if you have already started writing or revising a draft. Writing on location may not work for all of your interests, but give it a try and see if it helps you work to find a public issue for your writing. (For suggestions of other invention activities and practices, read Trim and Isaac's "Reinventing Invention.")

As you are discovering new ideas through invention, I would also like to encourage you to keep in mind possible exigences related to your issue. Doing so will help ensure your issue and public response is timely and relevant for your targeted audience. Rhetorician Lloyd F. Bitzer argued that any rhetorical situation has three constituent parts: an exigence, an audience, and a set of constraints (6). The exigence is the sense of urgency that demands or invites a rhetorical response, whether that's the delivery of a speech, the submission of a college essay, or the painting of a mural on the side of a building, for example. You may see the exigence as the assignment that your teacher has asked you to write; it certainly is urgent that you complete the assignment if you want to succeed in the course. Even though our audience or exigency may get us going with writing, "the force which drives composing is the writer's own set of goals, purposes, or

intentions” (Flower and Hayes 69). The exigences for your writing can and often are a combination of personal intentions and school-initiated assignments.

When you write for a public rhetorical situation (even if it is pulling double duty as a class assignment), it is important to establish a public exigence for your issue. Exigences can work in your favor if you can frame your issue and stance in a way that shows the urgency of the matter for your audience. To help situate your issue within an exigence, you might put yourself in the shoes of a skeptical reader and ask: why this issue? And, why now? For example, a student in one of the civic writing courses I taught selected to research and write about a bill that would allow local governments to relocate monuments. He was able to situate that issue and frame it within current events news stories at the time that were related to the removal of confederate monuments; this helped him build urgency and establish timeliness for the issue, even though the bill did not explicitly mention confederate monuments. Establishing an exigence can hook your readers and keep them reading. Speaking of readers, who are your readers? In the next section, we will explore options for engaging a realistic public audience for your writing.

Engaging Realistic Publics: Preliminary Research and Planning

The parts of a rhetorical situation are connected in ways that can make it difficult to make some decisions—like discovering your issue and defining the exigence—without also considering other components—like the audience or genre for your writing. As you narrow your public issue and consider its relevance, you should also begin thinking about who you will write to and in what form. This section provides strategies for how to research

possibilities for your public rhetorical situation by understanding which publics you are addressing.

When you think about the audience for a piece of public writing, what first comes to mind? Easy—the general public, right? The general public seems to cover most any audience for writing that is meant for someone other than oneself (like a personal journal) or the teacher (for class assignments). Everything else tends to be lumped in with “the general public”—like the people out there who read newspapers or your Instagram followers. Here’s the problem. There’s really no such thing as *the general public*. In fact, my quick list of audiences above should already suggest to you that each of those groups has a set of distinct characteristics, even if newspaper readers and your Instagram followers share some things in common. What kinds of evidence they may find convincing or how you might be rhetorically persuasive in your arguments is impacted by your selection of audience. Trying to write to an amorphous, generic mass of people would set you up for challenges. To further demonstrate this point, let me take a quick aside to frame the significance of “publics” and the public sphere.

Researchers who study and write about the public sphere—that space where the so-called general public comes together to discuss, write about, and debate issues that they have in common—help us understand how we can be more effective public writers. For example, Jürgen Habermas conceived of the public sphere as an idealized space accessible to all. Habermas examined how people in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came together in places like Britain’s coffee houses and France’s salons to debate civic issues. This marked a shift from the typically personal or private conversations people had in their homes. While Habermas’s conception of the public sphere was foundational, his work has been criticized for being overly idealized. If you were not a White male with property, you were not able to participate in civic debates in the public sphere.

Nancy Fraser and others have argued for a more nuanced

conception of publics—yes, the “s” on “publics” is important. Fraser studied “counterpublics”; historically, these were public spheres that existed alongside the coffee houses and salons. Counterpublic gatherings and clubs gave opportunities for women, the working class, and others without money or privilege and who were excluded from dominant public spheres to develop “alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (Fraser 62). The takeaway here is that to conceive of a singular public sphere—or *the* general public—is inaccurate; there is a “plurality of competing publics” and counterpublics (Fraser 61).

Take a minute and think about the different public and counterpublic spheres in your own life: where do some of your family, friends, or community groups gather? What do you talk about? Are there some topics that are taboo or off-limits? Are there certain styles and ways of speaking that you use with those groups? The answers probably vary depending on which public or counterpublic spheres you are envisioning. Recognizing a multiplicity of publics means acknowledging and valuing the way our differences can challenge us to alter and expand our views of the world.

Defining and Researching Your Public Rhetorical Situation: Considerations of Audience, Purpose, Genre, and Context

I invite you to take a few minutes to brainstorm the parts of your public rhetorical situation. We’ve already been exploring exigent issues and publics/counterpublics, but now it’s time to narrow to a more specific audience, define your purpose, select your public writing genre, and select the context for publication/circulation. Because these parts of your writing are connected, you may find it helpful to complete the following “Planning for Your Public

Rhetorical Situation” activity, which asks you a series of questions about each. (Some of these questions have been adapted from Louise Dunlap’s “Audience Analysis Grid” (127).)

Activity: Planning for Your Public Rhetorical Situation

As you prepare for a public writing situation, I invite you to use the following prompts to help you explore potential audiences and to analyze the relationships among issue, purpose, audience, genre, and context.

Issue and Purpose: Write a few sentences about how you understand your issue at this point. What do you already know? What do you need to know? What are your goals for public writing? What do you hope to accomplish?

Possible Publics: Make a list of at least 5 possible audiences you *could* address through public writing. Why do they (or should they) care about your issue? Can they effect the kind of change you are asking for?

Narrowed Audience: Circle one audience from your list above that you’d like to explore in more detail. Conduct some preliminary research and begin analyzing this possible audience. What does the audience already know about the issue? How have they been engaged with it (if at all) already? What do you think they need to know? What are their attitudes, beliefs, or values? How might you be able to find common ground with this audience?

Genre: What genre would be most fitting and persuasive for your selected audience? How will the genre impact the way you communicate your message? What are the typical conventions (style, structure, tone, use of visuals, etc.) of the genre?

Context for Publication: How will you “go public” with your writing to reach your intended audience? What publication

venues—print or digital, formal or informal—would be appealing to your audience and fit with your message? What genre options are available to you within the possible site of publication? How will you circulate your writing?

As you work through this set of questions, I hope you will begin to narrow and define not only your public issue but also the essential components of your public writing situation.

A common challenge student writers face with public writing is thinking of the public as ambiguous (Weisser). Writing studies researcher Christian Weisser advocates for students to “locate strong publics where their voices can lead to action,” so that public writing has a greater chance of leading to “significant, tangible, immediate results” (Weisser 109, 111). To locate strong publics for your writing, you must understand that there is a plurality of publics and then begin to narrow to the specific public or counterpublic communities you will target as your audience. You begin that process by brainstorming very specific kinds of readers who are impacted by or would be interested in your public issue. For example, you could consider demographic groups (e.g., age, gender identity or sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, geographic location, etc.).

As you are thinking of potential public audiences, you could also let the potential place of publication help define your audience. For instance, if your final piece of public writing will be a Facebook post to your account, your audience would be defined by your Facebook friends (in which case you might begin brainstorming the mix of publics and counterpublics that exist within your own set of friends). Or, if you want to try to publish your writing as an op-ed in your school’s newspaper, you would want to define your audience through the students at your school and the diverse sets of peer groups they represent; perhaps you want to tailor that audience to be even more specific, so you are speaking directly to LGBTQ+ students at your school. As you make progress on selecting your issue or audience, consider how other components like your genre or place of publication may afford new

opportunities or present new constraints in how you compose your public writing.

One of my preferred ways to define a public audience is by selecting an actual person or organization with a name and actual address (whether a physical address or email address). Writing to a specific person takes some of the guessing game out of trying to understand a large and complex group of people. You can and should “analyze your audience to learn where their views differ from yours” contends Louise Dunlap in her book *Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing*; then turn that audience analysis into a “communication strategy” (120). This becomes a bit easier when your audience is a specific, actual person. Students in my classes have researched, written, and mailed letters to the university president, state and national representatives, directors of non-profit organizations, celebrities, athletes, and CEOs of businesses—just to name a few single-person audiences.

Keep in mind that successfully meeting the needs of your audience may result in changes to the style, structure, and tone of your writing compared to the kind of writing you typically submit for your college classes. Compared to lengthy research essays, most public writing genres should be concise, clear, and direct—free of jargon that would be unfamiliar to the audience. It would also be inappropriate to include parenthetical MLA citations or a Works Cited list for most public genres. To let your audiences know where you found your information, shift to using attributive tags—identify sources by title, author, year of publication, and/or place of publication within your writing. Finally, while the kind of peer-reviewed sources you typically use in college can provide good evidence in public writing, a compelling personal story may be more effective and convincing to some public audiences—a combination of personal evidence with research-based evidence can be ideal.

I often encourage students to create lists of public genres just to get an expansive set of ideas for the range of options they

have; here are a few public writing genres that have been popular with students over the years—many of which were combined as a series of posts or as a digital, multimodal project.

- meme
- infographic
- podcast
- editorial
- digital story
- newsletter
- map
- email
- photo essay
- blog
- website
- social media post
- business letter
- flyer/poster

This list is certainly not exhaustive. What other examples of public writing genres can you think of?

Considering Digital Publics

Today, we encounter much of the public writing we read in digital public spheres. Digital writing offers writers a unique set of affordances and challenges when communicating your message. You have the opportunity to compose in multiple modes, incorporating visuals or audio with your writing. Many multimodal texts allow for experimentation, creativity, and even disruption of the status quo in ways that may be compelling for your argument. In my classes, students have created Google Maps, posted to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, composed blogs, and circulated online petitions. For example, in a Digital Writing and Publishing course I teach, one student paired a Google Map of the best

skateboarding locations around town with a blog that made a public argument for transforming vacant parking lots into legal skating locations. Digital public writing can present new opportunities to communicate our messages in ways that challenge traditional styles of knowledge production and textual circulation.

With these new opportunities, though, comes a set of expectations for being intentional with issues of visual design and layout. Alex Reid notes in “Why Blog? Searching for Writing on the Web” that we should consider issues of “design and layout” as interrelated to “questions of content” when composing a blog post (315). Effective digital design often means embedding media and/or incorporating hyperlinks to external sites (Carroll). Savvy online readers expect well-designed, interactive online content.

One of the benefits of situating your writing in digital online publics is the opportunity you have to reach a broad and diverse set of online readers and to connect with broader social movements. In her research about a digital campaign to stop violence against women, Jennifer Nish concluded that digital publishing increases the reach of activism, making the spread of material “more visible than some print-based forms of activist communication” (240). Similarly, you can increase your reach on social media platforms through the use of hashtags to more effectively reach a specific audience. When used effectively, the hashtag itself carries rhetorical weight and can help communicate a host of positions within just a word or phrase (Langford and Speight).

Digital publishing often allows for a multimodal mix of genres to help you communicate your public message effectively. In one of the Civic Writing classes I taught, a student researched a series of state-level education bills. For her final public project, she created infographics that helped break the education bills in layman’s terms, explaining how they would impact the state if passed. To follow through with circulating her message, this student posted a series of tweets with links to her online infographics. Here’s one example tweet: “For anyone interested in #EducationPolicy, here are 5 bills that are currently sitting on @GovernorDeal’s desk

waiting to be signed into law. #GaEdYouthCmte #GaHigherEdCmte.” Here you can see how the student used a mix of hashtags to connect with public audiences who may be interested in her issue and @-ing the Governor who ultimately would make the decision of whether to sign them into law. She also effectively uses exigence by noting that the bills were sitting on the Governor’s desk waiting to be signed.

While this section has only scratched the surface of digital public writing, I hope it gives you a preview of some of the opportunities and additional expectations that arise when you situate your writing online.

Going Public with Writing: Publication and Circulation

You may be wondering about the most important part of public writing— the act of going public through publication and/or circulation of your writing. Some students who are assigned public writing for a class go through the motions but then ultimately submit their writing only to the teacher for a grade. I would like to challenge you to follow through in actually going public with your writing, to actually reach the audiences you have worked so hard to persuade. Of course, how you go public with your writing will depend on all the pieces of the rhetorical situation puzzle you have already planned for: your audience, genre, purpose, and context. When I teach public writing through business letters, I have a letter mailing party in class where I bring envelopes and stamps (and cookies!); students write in the addresses, sign their letters, and mail them off. Whether it’s “snail mail” or email, posting a public flyer or publishing a blog post, I challenge you to circulate your message and reach your public audience.

Of course, circulating your writing within some public spheres

could be risky, and you should think about the implications of “going public” with your writing. For example, maybe you have taken up the cause of LGBTQ+ rights in your public writing, telling a personal story of your experiences with coming out to be persuasive. If you were not yet ready to tell your family about your sexual orientation but decided to publish your writing on Facebook—and you have family members as Facebook friends—that may put you in a tricky situation. Many of us have become careful with curating our social media audiences, but you have to be equally mindful in other publication venues—maybe your editorial in the school newspaper stating your views about the death penalty will cause you to lose credibility or friendships. In some cases, you may feel so strongly committed that the rewards of publishing your positions outweigh other risks, but you should take a moment to assess the ways your issue, audience, genre, and publication venue are all interconnected within the complexities of your public rhetorical situation.

Conclusion

In the article “Going Public” by Peter Mortensen, I have a favorite passage that I often call to mind when I am writing for a public audience: “we must go public. And we can” (182). Mortensen is asking writing studies researchers to write for increasingly public audiences “outside the profession, beyond the academy” (182); he’s asking his colleagues to embrace the role of public intellectual that I mentioned at the start of this essay. What I love about the line is how it communicates in just a few words the necessity, urgency, and possibility that comes with public writing. Whether you are a university researcher used to writing to other researchers or a first-year college student used to writing only for your teachers, writing for public audiences and in public genres can seem daunting, but, as Mortensen reminds us, we must go

public, and we can. As academic citizens of the world, we have a responsibility to ourselves and to the publics around us to use writing to improve our communities and address injustices. Not every piece of writing that goes public will change the world, and we often do not get to see an immediate impact; indeed, the kind of social change that addresses deep injustices often takes time and far-reaching efforts beyond a single email or blog post, but these small rhetorical acts can begin to gather momentum and move toward change in small steps.

When you arrive at your graduation day, I hope you will recall what it means to be an academic citizen. Listen for the moment just before the commencement speaker has you move your tassel from the right to the left. They will confer your degree and say: “with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities appertaining thereto.” In the celebration of your accomplishments, remember that obtaining a higher education is a privilege that comes with responsibilities to your community and society. Being an academic citizen simply means using your education for good in the world, and public writing can help you accomplish those goals.

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Teacher Resources for Public Writing for Social Change

“Public Writing for Social Change” represents a compilation of my best advice for students who are writing for public audiences and contexts based on the lessons I’ve learned from teaching public writing for over 15 years. Public writing assignments require rhetorical sophistication, genre awareness, and targeted research toward a specific audience, context, and exigence. The essay addresses some of the common pitfalls I have seen from students who struggle with public writing, such as choosing an issue that does not have a public exigence, conceiving of one’s audience too broadly, or not following through by actually “going public” with their writing.

Even with the many benefits, assigning public writing can be tricky if the goals of one’s writing courses or programs are solely based within academic writing styles and genres. Without delving too deeply into the perennial debates about what the “content” of first-year composition courses should be, I would like to encourage instructors interested in teaching public writing but also concerned about preparing students to write for academic purposes and contexts to situate and frame the public writing you assign within the academic goals of your courses. Public writing pedagogies are deeply enmeshed with academic literacies, such as research skills, clarity and coherence in communication, having

a clear thesis or main idea, and supporting one's argument with convincing evidence. To meet the needs and expectations of writing programs, students, and the broader academic community, you may need to make these connections between academic and public writing explicit, while also highlighting how the differences between them can help develop rhetorical sophistication as students shift from one style to the next.

An ideal way to build into your course design this lesson about the relationship between academic and public writing is to preface a public writing assignment with a more traditional academic writing assignment. For example, when I assign public business letters on social justice issues, students first conduct academic research on the issue in advance, and I have, in some courses, assigned an academic research essay, rhetorical analysis, and/or annotated bibliography as the project immediately preceding the public writing assignment. I have also taught public writing as part of a “remix” or “re-mediation” project after a research essay; in this scenario, students transform their traditional research essay into a public and/or digital, multimodal piece of writing. Students have to consider how a change from academic to public audience, purpose, genre, and/or context might impact their argument, evidence, or approach to persuasion and rhetorical appeals. Yet another course progression I have used starts with the personal, then moves to the academic, and ends with the public, asking students to hone and develop their rhetorical understanding with each assignment. Ideally, students pull a thread of personal interest from the first assignment (a literacy narrative, for instance), then conduct academic research on the topic and write in an academic genre, and, finally, situate that personal topic as a public issue to then use a mix of personal and academic research to persuasively argue one's stance to an audience who can effect change.

I continue to teach public writing because of the powerful ways it bridges academic literacies with civic purposes to address social justice issues—all within public genres that will serve students in

their careers and lives post-graduation. I hope this essay offers support for you to pursue this pedagogical work, too.

Discussion Questions

1. The opening of this chapter asks “Can a tweet—a genre of public writing—cause social change?” Read Malcolm Gladwell’s article “Small Change: Why the Revolution Won’t Be Tweeted” and offer your reaction to Gladwell’s perspective. Do you think social media writing—like Twitter or Facebook posts—as a kind of public writing can lead to meaningful social change? Give examples from current events and/or your life experiences to support your stance.
2. Based on the brainstorming you did in Table 1, how would you define an “academic citizen” in your own words? Can you think of any examples of academic citizens or public intellectuals from popular culture or from among your teachers or peers? What do those individuals do that make them academic citizens or public intellectuals in your view?
3. Try the invention activity “Writing on Location,” and then write a reflection about your experience. What was your reaction to writing on location—helpful, distracting, surprising, upsetting, exciting, a mix of reactions? What ideas, writing, pictures did you create that may be useful in your public writing assignment? How might you use those items in your public writing?
4. The section of the essay on “publics” highlights debates among public sphere theories about whether there is a singular public sphere or whether there are multiple publics and counterpublic spheres. What is your opinion in this debate? Give examples from your experiences or from public culture to support your position.
5. What have been your prior experiences with writing in digital

public spaces, and what have you learned about writing in general from writing in digital contexts? Give a specific example from your experience, such as posting to a social media site or commenting on a website, and explain what unique considerations you had to account for in terms of the style of your writing, how you conceived of audience, the type of writing, or the context in which it was publicly viewable. How was this writing similar to the writing you do for school? How was it different?

6. This essay invites you to “go public” by publishing and/or circulating your writing to reach an audience who can effect change. Brainstorm a list of possibilities for going public with your writing; include a mix of digital and print publishing contexts and consider how to circulate (i.e., distribute or share) your writing with others. For example, you could “publish” your writing by printing it to a flyer, but you would need to consider where to post or hand out your flyer to “circulate” it to your targeted audience.

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25. Grammar, Rhetoric, Style

CRAIG HULST

Overview

This chapter focuses on grammar, specifically on understanding that grammar is much more than just the rules that we have been taught. Rather, grammar can be used rhetorically—with an understanding of the writing situation and making appropriate choices regarding the structure of the sentences, the use of punctuation, using active or passive voice, etc. In other words, this chapter focuses on using grammar to influence a piece of writing's style, rather than focusing on the correctness of the grammar. Readers are encouraged to look at the writing that they see in their casual or research reading and evaluate the grammar of those pieces to gain a better understanding of how they can control their own use of grammar.

Grammar.¹ The mere word makes adults weep, children run and

1. Throughout this essay, I will use some simple grammar terms such as noun, pronoun, adjective, adverb, and so on. I am, perhaps wrongly, assuming that you will understand these terms. If I have erred in my assumption, please accept my apologies. There are many ways to discover the meanings of these terms, the first of which

hide, and dogs howl. All right, perhaps I am exaggerating just a bit; not all of us hate grammar. There are even people who actually like grammar. However, the general aversion to the word “grammar” is such that the word is hardly ever used in polite company. And, if your composition professor is anything like me, she or he tries to avoid the word in your class.

Yet grammar should not be so disrespected. Believe it or not, most people like grammar until their junior high school English teacher gets ahold of them and presents grammar as a set of rules, a set of “Thou shalt not” commandments that you must abide by or be doomed to wander in the darkness of a poor grade. Max Morenberg, author of the book *Doing Grammar*, writes:

We are born to love language and everything associated with it— rhythm, rhyme, word meanings, grammar. If you want to make a three-year-old child roll on the floor laughing, just tell her a riddle, or alliterative words, or read her Dr. Seuss’s lilting rhythms and rhymes about cats in hats or elephants who are ‘faithful, one hundred percent’ or Sam I Am eating green eggs and ham on a boat with a goat. Listen to a child in a crib entertaining himself by repeating sounds and syllables, playing with language. Think about the games you played in kindergarten by creating strange words like Mary Poppins’ supercalifragilisticexpialodotious. Keep a ten-year old entertained on a car trip by producing odd sentences in a ‘Mad Libs’ game. Then ask an eighth grader what subject she hates most. The answer invariably will be grammar. We’re born to love grammar. We’re taught to hate it. (vii-viii)

is your instructor. Other resources include handbooks, internet sources, and your friends.

When young and learning how to use language, we learn grammar through trial and error. When my daughters were around two years old, they (constantly) wanted me to pick them up. They would come up to me, hold up their arms, and I would ask them, “Do you want me to hold you?” Eventually, they would come up to me, hold up their arms, and say, “hold you.” They learned the construction “hold you” to mean “hold me.” I would correct them and explain to them “if you want me to pick you up, you say ‘hold me.’” Before too long they caught on and started saying “hold me” when they wanted me to pick them up. They learned by mirroring my speech and by receiving feedback on their grammar. As we grow older, we still learn through trial and error, but we also learn the rules. Now, instead of a parent’s gentle correction, we are informed of our errors through the fiery correction of a teacher’s red pen.

Grammar, the way that it is typically taught, is a collection of rules that we are supposed to follow, and it is these rules that most of us have issues with. After all, we know how to speak; we form words and sentences intuitively, and people understand our meaning. So, who are these rule-mongering grammarians that think that they can tell us that we are doing it wrong? Or who force us, as my middle school English teacher did, to endlessly diagram sentence after sentence? Why do they take something that we love as children and warp it to the point that we can’t stand it?

Grammar doesn’t have to be this way. It shouldn’t be this way. We shouldn’t need someone to tell us that we are wrong, and then to make us memorize a bunch of rules in order to speak or write. What grammar should be is a tool to help us better communicate with our audience—a tool that we are controlling, rather than one that controls us. Grammar should be a tool that we use to fit our language to our purpose and our audience.

Grammar and Its Rhetorical Use

The rules are there for a reason. Grammar rules are concerned with correctness—to make sure that we are following the accepted guidelines of the language. However, grammar isn't all about rules. Instead, grammar is about making meaning. People understand us because we are using grammar—we are arranging our words in a certain order, and because of that, our audience understands us. For example, if I said, “store went to Jim the,” you'd probably ask, “What?” But if I used the same words and arranged the words according to the grammar that I absorbed at a young age, I would say, “Jim went to the store.” By arranging the words according to what those listening to me expect from my grammar, my audience would know exactly what I meant. And this awareness of what the audience needs is the heart of what I am talking about—that grammar has a *rhetorical* use.

Grammar simply means “a system that puts words together into meaningful units” (Morenberg 4). We've already seen how that works in the earlier example of “Jim went to the store.” As we create lengthier and more complex sentences, we incorporate punctuation such as commas and semicolons, consider pronoun/antecedent connections, carefully think about verb shifts and a host of other issues that can affect the meaning of our words. This is what most people think of when they hear the word grammar. However, this doesn't have to be that big of a concern, as grammar is best learned by using the language, rather than through systematic study of the rules. In fact, I have had many older, so-called non-traditional students in my composition classes throughout the years, and they are generally more adept at grammar usage than my “traditional” eighteen to twenty-year-old students. This is not because they have studied the rules of grammar more thoroughly; most of my older students confess that they haven't thought about grammar for many years. This is simply

because they have used the language, and have experience using it in many different contexts, for a greater length of time.

Rhetoric is a word that most of us have heard, but we may not really understand what it means. It is a word that is often thrown around negatively, and often in political discussions, such as, “Well, the president may think that way, but I’m not falling for his rhetoric.” But the term really shouldn’t have such a negative connotation. Simply defined, rhetoric is “a way of using language for a specific purpose.” The *rhetorical situation* of a piece of writing is everything surrounding it—who the audience is, the purpose for writing it, the genre of the writing, etc. Knowing this helps us know how to use language to accomplish the purpose of the writing, and grammar is part of that use of language. English professor Laura R. Micciche expands on the rhetorical role of grammar:

The grammatical choices we make—including pronoun use, active or passive verb construction, and sentence construction—represent relations between writers and the world they live in. Word choice and sentence structure are an expression of the way we attend to the words of others, the way we position ourselves in relation to others. (719)

When we write, we can carefully choose the grammar that we use to make our writing effective at conveying our meaning, but also give the audience a sense of our own personality. This brings us to a third word that needs to be defined: *Style*.

Grammar and Style

Style is perhaps the most visual aspect of rhetoric—we see authors’ style in their writing. *Style* refers to the choices that an author makes—choices about punctuation, word usage, and grammar—and those choices are influenced by the rhetorical

situation that the author finds herself in. For example, consider the following sentences:

- Katelyn was concerned that Chloe worked late every night.
- It concerned Katelyn that every night Chloe worked late.
- Chloe worked late every night, and Katelyn was concerned.
- Every night Chloe worked late, and that concerned Katelyn.

Each of these sentences say the same thing, and the grammar is “correct” in each, but the sentence an author chooses depends on the style she wishes to use. The first sentence is the most straightforward, but the last two put the emphasis on Chloe rather than on Katelyn, which might be what the author wants to do. Sometimes the style within a specific rhetorical situation is prescribed for us; for example, we might be told that we cannot use “I” in a paper. Sometimes the style is expected, but we aren’t necessarily told the rhetorical situation’s rules; we might be expected to use the active voice rather than the passive voice in our papers. And sometimes the situation is wide open, allowing us to make the grammatical style choices we like.

Also wrapped up in this issue of style is the concept of standard and preferred usage. *Usage* is simply the way we expect words to be used—and this doesn’t always follow the rules. For example, a famous line from the original *Star Trek* series tells us that the Enterprise’s mission is “to boldly go where no man has gone before.” This seems right—but there is a split infinitive in the phrase (no need to worry about what a split infinitive is right now). To abide by the rule, the line should say, “to go boldly where no man has gone before.” But that doesn’t sound as right to most of us, so a decision was made to break the rule and write the line according to the common usage of adding an adverb before the verb.

What usage is preferred is also dependent on the rhetorical situation of the text. As an example of the differences between standard and preferred usage, consider contractions. Most of the

time when we speak, and often in informal writing, it is perfectly fine to use contractions like “can’t,” “isn’t,” or “aren’t;” contractions are standard usage. You may have been told in your composition class that using contractions is okay in your papers, but using contractions is not preferred in many rhetorical situations, as in a formally written research paper. We use the words “I” and “you” all the time when we speak, but we will find many writing situations where they aren’t acceptable (i.e. preferred). Knowing what usage is preferred takes a little insight into the rhetorical situation—you can read examples of the type of writing that you are asked to do, you can question friends who have already taken the course, you can seek advice from books or the internet, or you can ask your instructor. Since grammar, style, and usage are so closely related, and quite possibly they have already been introduced to you as the same thing, throughout this essay I will often refer to these types of style choices as grammar choices.

All Together Now

When we write, we are entering into a conversation with our reader, and the grammatical choices that we consciously make can show our readers that we understand what they want from us, and that we are giving them what they expect. In your academic writing, the rhetorical situation demands that you make grammar choices that are appropriate for college-level writers. Unfortunately, these grammar choices are not static; they will change—perhaps only slightly, perhaps greatly—as your writing situation changes, as you write for different teachers, courses, or disciplines. In your other writing, the rhetorical situation may call for an entirely different set of grammar choices.

Here’s an example of how the rhetorical situation affects grammar usage. You need to express an idea concerning the need to recycle. In the first rhetorical situation, you are speaking to your

friends, people that you have known since you were five years old. In such a situation, it might be acceptable for you to say, “It ain’t rocket science, bonehead. Recycle that junk and save the Earth.” If you’re speaking to your mother, you might say, “Mom, that can go in the recycling bin instead. Let’s save the planet.” If you are writing about this for an academic audience, you might instead say, “We must always consider the consequences of our actions. Throwing recyclable materials in the trash results in overflowing landfills, land and water pollution, and an increased strain on raw materials. However, recycling glass, metal, and paper reduces our consumption of these materials as well as lowers the fossil fuel energy needed to create new products.” The example should not suggest that longer sentences are more correct, although the academic audience example is considerably longer than the other two. Hopefully, if I have done it right, the academic audience example is longer simply because I am proving my point, not because I’m trying to sound smart by using more words. But the grammar has also changed. In the first example, I used “ain’t,” which is not considered grammatically correct for most academic audiences, but the use of which is quite common in many varieties of spoken English. In the second example I used the contraction “can’t,” which, again, in many academic writing situations would be frowned upon. In the final example, I have attempted to use “standard” grammar, the grammar that the academic rules say I should use, as I know that that particular audience would expect me to do so.

In many academic writing situations, the work is assessed, in part, on how well the writer adheres to the rules. If I used the style and grammar of the first example in a paper for my Environmental Science class, you can imagine what could happen. Writing an academic paper as if I was talking to my friends would probably negatively affect my grade. However, the poor grade wouldn’t mean, “your grammar is wrong,” even if my instructor phrased it that way. Instead, what the grade would mean is that I did not use the appropriate grammar required for the rhetorical situation.

Using Grammar Rhetorically for Style

Grammarians and textbook author Martha Kolln asks us to look at sentences as a series of slots into which we place words (5). We know what to put into certain slots; for example, in the “subject” slot we know we need a noun or a pronoun, and in the “verb” slot we need, well, a verb. Knowing just these two slots, I can make a good sentence: “I laughed.” As sentences get more and more sophisticated, more slots become available. For example, adding an adverb slot, I can create the following sentence: “I laughed loudly.” This is a basic element of the rules—the rules tell us what we are allowed to put into the slots.

So then, how do we move past the rules? How does a writer use grammar rhetorically? First and foremost, you use grammar this way by being conscious of the choices that you are making. Remember, when you write, you aren’t simply putting words on paper; you are constructing a conversation with a reader. You make conscious choices about your topic, your title, and your word choice, as well as many other choices, in order to carry on that conversation—grammar is just part of the many choices that you can use to your advantage when you are using language for your specific purpose. It might help you to see how this is done by looking at works that have been written for a variety of audiences and trying to figure out why the authors made the grammatical choices that they did.

Throughout the rest of this essay, I will present several examples of writing, and I will look at what each author has chosen to put into their sentence slots and why they made those choices. The first example is a paragraph from the manual for the video game *Fallout 3*:

Nuclear war. The very words conjure images of mushroom clouds, gas masks, and bewildered children ducking and covering under their school desks. But it’s the aftermath of such a conflict that truly captures our imagination, in

large part because there's no real-world equivalent we can relate to. Mankind may have witnessed the horror of the atomic bomb, but thankfully we've somehow succeeded in not blowing up the entire planet. At least, not yet. (*Vault Dweller's Survival Guide* 3)

This paragraph violates many of the rules that I learned as a developing writer. For example, I see the contractions *it's*, *there's*, and *we've*, and a conjunction, *but*, starts a sentence. I see the preposition *to* ending a sentence—a definite no-no, if I remember my grammar rules. Also, as I write this on my computer, my word processor is very kindly informing me that there are two fragments in this paragraph. I believe that Ms. Herrema, my eighth grade English teacher, would cringe if she read this paragraph in a student paper. Yet I think it unlikely that you noticed all of these “errors” in the paragraph as you read it. Why didn't you? Is it because you are ignorant of the rules of grammar? Absolutely not! Assuming that you didn't notice them, you didn't notice them because taken all together, the paragraph flowed well. The fragment sentence, *Nuclear war*, didn't bother you—in fact, it probably grabbed your attention. The contractions didn't bother you because it sounded like someone was speaking to you. And they were.

The intended audience of the writer is those who would buy and play video games. (That might include you—it does include me.) As such, the author knowledgeably chose the language, the grammar, of the game manual in order to maintain the interest of the audience. We speak with contractions; the author uses contractions. We speak in fragments; the author uses them. Notice that the author is using the fragments ominously. He (or she, but probably they—much professional writing is team written) begins with *Nuclear war*. Culturally, we have, for the past seventy years or so, lived with the knowledge that a nuclear war could happen. Those two words conjure up such dark and depressing images that all the author needs to do is say them, and we're hooked. Likewise,

the last sentence of the paragraph is also a fragment, ominous, and attention grabbing: *At least, not yet.* We have dodged this atomic bullet until now, but it could still happen—and that is what the author wishes to leave us with.

Let's look at how the commas are used in this paragraph. The first commas that we see are in the list: *mushroom clouds, gas masks, and bewildered children.* Why does the author put those commas there? Is it because the rules tell him to? Yes—and no. Sure, the rules tell us to put those commas in there, but if we're relying on the rhetorical use of grammar, we'll also use them in exactly the same way. A comma indicates a pause in a sentence, a pause that the audience needs in order to get the meaning the author intends to give them. Read that sentence out loud without the commas: *The very words conjure images of mushroom clouds gas masks and bewildered children ducking and covering under their school desks.* Without the commas, it sounds weird. Your audience might even see this as five-item list of mushroom, clouds, gas, masks, and bewildered children, rather than the three-item list that it is. If the author's meaning is for the audience to see mushroom clouds and gas masks and bewildered children, regardless of the rules, he would add a comma to make them pause, just a bit, at certain points.

Let's move from the popular to the academic in this next example:

The typewriter is effectively a lost technology, occupying a strange, interstitial space in the broader field of media history, a fulcrum between the movable type of modern print culture and the malleable digital information of postmodern electronic culture. I argue that consideration of the typewriter as a writing system thus provides critical purchase on this field precisely to the extent that the machine itself is ephemeral and ultimately obsolete. (Benzon 93)

Did you get all that? You probably noticed the difference in

vocabulary between this paragraph and the passage from the game manual. This author is definitely writing for a different audience; in this case, he is writing for English scholars and educators. If we look at the first sentence as a series of slots, we see *typewriter* in the subject slot, is in the verb slot, and *technology* in the object slot. But we also see *effectively* and *lost* in the sentence, occupying two optional slots. *Lost* is positioned in an adjective slot and describes *technology*. What kind of technology? *Lost technology*. *Effectively* is positioned in an adverb slot, and as such it modifies the verb. Is what? Is *effectively*. We could have eliminated these two modifiers and the sentence would have made sense. But Benzon, the author, did not want to say that “The typewriter is a technology.” He wanted to say that it was *effectively* a *lost technology*. Typewriters still exist, and people still use them, although they are *effectively* a *lost technology*.

Notice, too, that there are other optional slots that were not filled. *Typewriter*, as a noun, has an optional adjective slot, too. But instead of describing the typewriters, Benzon chooses not to fill in that slot. Doing so might restrict the noun—adding an adjective to describe what type of typewriters are *lost technology* could limit the meaning. Adding an adjective like *red*, *old*, or *dusty* would say that typewriters that are blue, new, or clean are not *lost technology*.

Benzon also chooses to use the grammatical device of parallelism in the phrase, “a fulcrum between the movable type of modern print culture and the malleable digital information of postmodern electronic culture.” *Movable type* runs parallel to *malleable digital information*. In both situations, we see nouns (*type* and *information*) preceded by filled adjective slots. *Movable* and *malleable* even sound similar. Benzon opted to fill in another adjective slot before *information* and told us that it was *digital* information but decided not to do so before *type*. This is acceptable, of course, because *type* does not need any additional description, but we certainly need to know what sort of information is malleable.

Finally, we see in this example that Benzon uses I. This convention is generally acceptable in the discipline of the humanities, and knowing that his audience would accept this, Benzon has decided to use I. He also uses the active voice, writing, “I argue that consideration of the typewriter as a writing system...” The author, I, is doing something, arguing. (In this case, my middle school English teacher’s advice to write in the active voice has been justified.) Had I not told you that both the use of I and the active voice were acceptable in the humanities, analyzing the previous paragraph would have shown that this was true.

And now let’s try one more, this time from an academic article from the sciences:

Animals were randomly assigned to three treatment groups with five pigs per group in a completely randomized design. All pigs were fed the basal diet during the initial 7 day period. Pigs were then fed treatment diets during the next three 7 day periods and all pigs received the basal diet during the final two 7 day periods. (Stewart et al. 169)

This excerpt comes from an article in the *American Journal of Animal and Veterinary Sciences*, so who do you think is the intended audience? If you said, “circus clowns,” you might want to try again.

Obviously, we see vocabulary that is intended for veterinarians or students of veterinary medicine. The main reason that I have offered this passage to you, aside from the fact that I enjoy torturing people with language, is that we can see two differences between this piece of academic writing and the previous piece. The first is that there is no use of I. Why didn’t the authors say, “We fed the pigs the basal diet during the initial 7 day period?” The reason is that, unlike in the humanities disciplines, the use of the personal pronoun is not expected by a science audience. Using it would be counter to the expectations of the audience, so it isn’t used. (Score one for the middle school English teacher who told me not to use I.)

The second difference from the Benzon passage is that the subjects of the sentences aren't doing anything; this passage is written in the passive voice. Whereas Benzon could say, "I argue," which showed the active subject *I* doing something (arguing), in this piece, the pigs are passive receptors of the food. They sit there; food is given to them. If this was recast in active voice, we might end up with, "All pigs *ate* the basal diet during the initial 7 day period." Unlike the humanities disciplines, the sciences have a tendency to prefer the passive voice. Again, if I hadn't just told you these two conventions of science writing, had you rhetorically analyzed the piece, analyzed its audience, purpose, and grammar, you would have seen that these conventions exist.

If you'd like a fourth example, consider this essay that you are reading. Ask yourself why I made the grammatical choices that I did. I use "you," I use contractions, I tend to use the active voice. There are a few fragment sentences in here—the first sentence of the essay is a fragment. Why would I write with these rule violations?

Did you notice the "errors" I listed above as you read through the paper? I am guessing that you did not, or at least you did not catch all of them. If I have done my job right, I have successfully entered into a conversation with you—a first year writing student—and spoken to you using a grammar that is comfortable and appropriate for you. How did I do?

With these four examples, I've only given you a taste of how looking at grammar choices rhetorically can help you understand an author's intended audience, that audience's expectations, and how the author, by choosing his or her grammar to reflect those needs, attempted to enter into a relationship with the audience. You could spend quite a bit of time on any of those examples and pull even more insights from the grammar that the authors use, but given the scope of this essay, I believe that I can now safely let you go, believing that you now have a solid understanding of how writers—and that includes you—make careful choices with their

grammar and use it as a tool to more effectively communicate with their intended audience.

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Teacher Resources for Grammar, Rhetoric, and Style by Craig Hulst

Overview and Teaching Strategies

When I ask my students about the weaknesses of their own writing, the vast majority state that grammar is an issue for them. Usually what they mean is that they do not remember the rules that they were taught and believe that without the rules, their writing must be weak. This essay is designed to be used to help students understand that grammar is more than just rules. Grammar can be used as a tool to influence the style of the piece, and students already implicitly have some understanding of how to use it that way.

This essay would best be used when a teacher is talking about either grammar or style. When talking about grammar, it could be linked with a discussion of why first year writing courses do not typically spend much time on the rules of grammar. When discussing style, it can be used in conjunction with understanding how the rhetorical situation influences style, and how grammar is one element of choosing an appropriate voice and style for that particular situation. It might be particularly useful when discussing revising, rather than drafting.

Questions

1. Before reading this piece, what was your reaction to hearing the word grammar? Did you like studying grammar? Did you hate it? After reading this piece, has your impression of the word changed at all?
2. Has grammar only been presented to you as a set of rules

before? Why do you think it was taught that way?

3. In the personal example in the essay, the author wrote about his daughters learning to say “hold me” instead of “hold you” at two years old, but grammar is constantly developing as we are constantly developing our language. Do you remember any of the moments when you realized that the way that you used the language needed to be adjusted, or when you discovered that your grammar usage was not correct? What was it?
4. For the most part, it is less important that you understand all of the rules or grammatical terms than it is that you can recognize when something doesn’t sound right. However, this “sounds right” part of grammar can trip you up if you are trying to complete grammar exercises, as that usually means that you are responding to usage (the way most people seem to be using the grammar) instead of correctness (following the rules). Usage and correctness are often the same, but many times they are not. Are there any times that you can remember where you were corrected for using grammar according to usage instead of correctness? Why do you think that the usage is different from the rule? (Note to teacher: this question might best be used in conjunction with a grammar exercise to illustrate the difference of usage and correctness, possibly followed with a discussion of the style benefits of either).
5. Choose a passage from an essay that you have written. What grammatical choices did you make? What choices (word choice, the choice to fill in a slot or not, parallel structure, etc.) did you make? Which choices did you choose not to make? Should/can you continue to make choices that will give your audience what they expect to see?

Activities

Rhetorical Grammar Analysis

There are essays in *Writing Spaces* that talk about reading rhetorically (See Mike Bunn's and/or Karen Rosenberg's essays, for example). Combining this essay with one of those, ask students to look specifically at the grammar of a chosen piece of writing. Starting simply, ask them to look at the use of pronouns or contractions. What does the way that those parts of speech are used (or not used) say about the author's choices, about the intended audience? Move on to modifiers and look at the use of adjectives and adverbs. Are they widely used or are they sparse? Are there two or three modifiers for a noun or one? What do those decisions say about the rhetorical situation? Choose any other element of grammar and continue the analysis.

Revising Grammar for Style

Have students take a paper that they are revising and have them specifically look at their grammar. Ask them to identify their audience and the expectations of their writing. If they have already tried their hands at the *Rhetorical Grammar Analysis* activity, they might be able to apply what they have learned about how the author used grammar to create an appropriate style to their own writing. Otherwise, ask them about the level of formality that is expected in their writing and whether or not their use of grammar (pronoun usage, including gender-specific pronouns; contractions; complexity of sentence construction; etc.) supports that. Students might choose specific sentences and rewrite them (making active voice passive, adding modifiers, changing the verb

tense, etc.) to see how the style of the sentence can be altered by grammatical choices.

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26. Finding the Good Argument OR Why Bother With Logic?

REBECCA JONES

The word argument often means something negative. In Nina Paley's cartoon (see Figure 1),¹ the argument is literally a cat fight. Rather than envisioning argument as something productive and useful, we imagine intractable sides and use descriptors such as “bad,” “heated,” and “violent.” We rarely say, “Great, argument. Thanks!” Even when we write an academic “argument paper,” we imagine our own ideas battling others.



Figure 1. This cartoon demonstrates the absurdity of either/or arguments. (© 1997-1998 Nina Paley. Image available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike license.

1. I would like to extend a special thanks to Nina Paley for giving permission to use this cartoon under Creative Commons licensing, free of charge. Please see Paley's great work at www.ninapaley.com.

Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that the controlling metaphor we use for argument in western culture is war:

It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. (4)

If we follow the war metaphor along its path, we come across other notions such as, "all's fair in love and war." If all's fair, then the rules, principles, or ethics of an argument are up for grabs. While many warrior metaphors are about honor, the "all's fair" idea can lead us to arguments that result in propaganda, spin, and dirty politics. The war metaphor offers many limiting assumptions: there are only two sides, someone must win decisively, and compromise means losing. The metaphor also creates a false opposition where argument (war) is action and its opposite is peace or inaction. Finding better arguments is not about finding peace—the opposite of antagonism. Quite frankly, getting mad can be productive. Ardent peace advocates, such as Jane Addams, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., offer some of the most compelling arguments of our time through concepts like civil disobedience that are hardly inactive. While "argument is war" may be the default mode for Americans, it is not the only way to argue. Lakoff and Johnson ask their readers to imagine something like "argument is dance" rather than "argument is war" (5). While we can imagine many alternatives to the war metaphor, concepts like argument as collaboration are more common even if they are not commonly used. Argument as collaboration would be more closely linked to words such as

dialogue and *deliberation*, cornerstone concepts in the history of American democracy.

However, argument as collaboration is not the prevailing metaphor for public argumentation we see/hear in the mainstream media. One can hardly fault the average American for not being able to imagine argument beyond the war metaphor. Think back to the coverage of the last major election cycle in 2008. The opponents on either side (democrat/republican) dug in their heels and defended every position, even if it was unpopular or irrelevant to the conversation at hand. The political landscape divided into two sides with no alternatives. In addition to the entrenched positions, blogs and websites such as FactCheck.org flooded us with lists of inaccuracies, missteps, and plain old fallacies that riddled the debates. Unfortunately, the “debates” were more like speeches given to a camera than actual arguments deliberated before the public. These important moments that fail to offer good models lower the standards for public argumentation.

On an average news day, there are entire websites and blogs dedicated to noting ethical, factual, and legal problems with public arguments, especially on the news and radio talk shows. This is not to say that all public arguments set out to mislead their audiences, rather that the discussions they offer masquerading as arguments are often merely opinions or a spin on a particular topic and not carefully considered, quality arguments. What is often missing from these discussions is research, consideration of multiple vantage points, and, quite often, basic logic.

On news shows, we encounter a version of argument that seems more like a circus than a public discussion. Here’s the visual we get of an “argument” between multiple sides on the average news show. In this example (see Figure 2), we have a four ring circus.

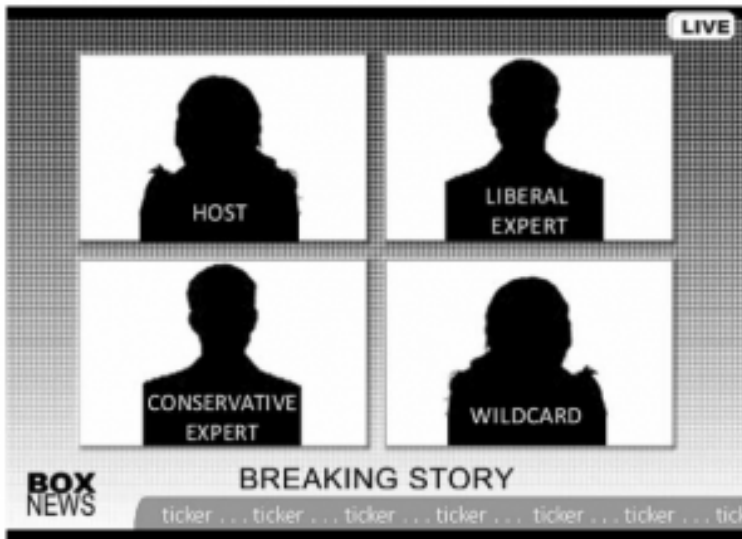


Figure 2. This mock up of a typical news show created by Colin Charlton offers a visual of the attempt to offer many “sides” of an argument.

While all of the major networks use this visual format, multiple speakers in multiple windows like *The Brady Bunch* for the news, it is rarely used to promote ethical deliberation. These talking heads offer a simulation of an argument. The different windows and figures pictured in them are meant to represent different views on a topic, often “liberal” and “conservative.” This is a good start because it sets up the possibility for thinking through serious issues in need of solutions. Unfortunately, the people in the windows never actually engage in an argument (see *Thinking Outside the Text*). As we will discuss below, one of the rules of good argument is that participants in an argument agree on the primary standpoint and that individuals are willing to concede if a point of view is proven wrong. If you watch one of these “arguments,” you will see a spectacle where prepared speeches are hurled across the long distances that separate the participants. Rarely do the

talking heads respond to the actual ideas/arguments given by the person pictured in the box next to them on the screen unless it is to contradict one statement with another of their own. Even more troubling is the fact that participants do not even seem to agree about the point of disagreement. For example, one person might be arguing about the congressional vote on health care while another is discussing the problems with Medicaid. While these are related, they are different issues with different premises. This is not a good model for argumentation despite being the predominant model we encounter.

Activity: Thinking Outside the Text

Watch the famous video of Jon Stewart on the show Crossfire: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmj6JADOZ-8).

- What is Stewart's argument?
- How do the hosts of Crossfire respond to the very particular argument that Stewart makes?
- Why exactly are they missing the point?

These shallow public models can influence argumentation in the classroom. One of the ways we learn about argument is to think in terms of pro and con arguments. This replicates the liberal/conservative dynamic we often see in the papers or on television (as if there are only two sides to health care, the economy, war, the deficit). This either/or fallacy of public argument is debilitating. You are either for or against gun control, for or against abortion, for or against the environment, for or against everything. Put this way, the absurdity is more obvious. For example, we assume that someone who claims to be an "environmentalist" is pro every part of the green movement. However, it is quite possible to develop an

environmentally sensitive argument that argues against a particular recycling program. While many pro and con arguments are valid, they can erase nuance, negate the local and particular, and shut down the very purpose of having an argument: the possibility that you might change your mind, learn something new, or solve a problem. This limited view of argument makes argumentation a shallow process. When all angles are not explored or fallacious or incorrect reasoning is used, we are left with ethically suspect public discussions that cannot possibly get at the roots of an issue or work toward solutions.

Activity: Finding Middle Ground

Outline the pro and con arguments for the following issues:

1. Gun Control
2. Cap and Trade
3. Free Universal Healthcare

In a group, develop an argument that finds a compromise or middle ground between two positions.

Rather than an either/or proposition, argument is multiple and complex. An argument can be logical, rational, emotional, fruitful, useful, and even enjoyable. As a matter of fact, the idea that argument is necessary (and therefore not always about war or even about winning) is an important notion in a culture that values democracy and equity. In America, where nearly everyone you encounter has a different background and/or political or social view, skill in arguing seems to be paramount, whether you are inventing an argument or recognizing a good one when you see it.

The remainder of this chapter takes up this challenge—inventing and recognizing good arguments (and bad ones). From classical rhetoric, to Toulmin's model, to

contemporary pragma-dialectics, this chapter presents models of argumentation beyond pro and con. Paying more attention to the details of an argument can offer a strategy for developing sound, ethically aware arguments.

What Can We Learn From Models of Argumentation

So far, I have listed some obstacles to good argument. I would like to discuss one other. Let's call it the mystery factor. Many times I read an argument and it seems great on the surface, but I get a strange feeling that something is a bit off. Before studying argumentation, I did not have the vocabulary to name that strange feeling. Additionally, when an argument is solid, fair, and balanced, I could never quite put my finger on what distinguished it from other similar arguments. The models for argumentation below give us guidance in revealing the mystery factor and naming the qualities of a logical, ethical argument.

Classical Rhetoric

In James Murphy's translation of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, he explains that "Education for Quintilian begins in the cradle, and ends only when life itself ends" (xxi). The result of a life of learning, for Quintilian, is a perfect speech where "the student is given a statement of a problem and asked to prepare an appropriate speech giving his solution" (Murphy xxiii). In this version of the world, a good citizen is always a PUBLIC participant. This forces the good citizen to know the rigors of public argumentation: "Rhetoric, or the theory of effective communication, is for Quintilian merely the tool of the broadly

educated citizen who is capable of analysis, reflection, and powerful action in public affairs” (Murphy xxvii). For Quintilian, learning to argue in public is a lifelong affair. He believed that the “perfect orator. . . cannot exist unless he is above all a good man” (6). Whether we agree with this or not, the hope for ethical behavior has been a part of public argumentation from the beginning.

The ancient model of rhetoric (or public argumentation) is complex. As a matter of fact, there is no single model of ancient argumentation. Plato claimed that the Sophists, such as Gorgias, were spin doctors weaving opinion and untruth for the delight of an audience and to the detriment of their moral fiber. For Plato, at least in the *Phaedrus*, public conversation was only useful if one applied it to the search for truth. In the last decade, the work of the Sophists has been redeemed. Rather than spin doctors, Sophists like Isocrates and even Gorgias, to some degree, are viewed as arbiters of democracy because they believed that many people, not just male, property holding, Athenian citizens, could learn to use rhetoric effectively in public.

Aristotle gives us a slightly more systematic approach. He is very concerned with logic. For this reason, much of what I discuss below comes from his work. Aristotle explains that most men participate in public argument in some fashion. It is important to note that by “men,” Aristotle means citizens of Athens: adult males with the right to vote, not including women, foreigners, or slaves. Essentially this is a homogenous group by race, gender, and religious affiliation. We have to keep this in mind when adapting these strategies to our current heterogeneous culture. Aristotle explains,

. . . for to a certain extent all men attempt to discuss statements and to maintain them, to defend themselves and to attack others. Ordinary people do this either at random or through practice and from acquired habit. Both ways being possible, the subject can plainly be handled

systematically, for it is possible to inquire the reason why some speakers succeed through practice and others spontaneously; and every one will at once agree that such an inquiry is the function of an art. (Honeycutt, “Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*” 1354a I i)

For Aristotle, inquiry into this field was artistic in nature. It required both skill and practice (some needed more of one than the other). Important here is the notion that public argument can be systematically learned.

Aristotle did not dwell on the ethics of an argument in *Rhetoric* (he leaves this to other texts). He argued that “things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites” and finally that “. . . things that are true and things that are better are, by their nature, practically always easier to prove and easier to believe in” (Honeycutt, “Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*” 1355a I i). As a culture, we are skeptical of this kind of position, though I think that we do often believe it on a personal level. Aristotle admits in the next line that there are people who will use their skills at rhetoric for harm. As his job in this section is to defend the use of rhetoric itself, he claims that everything good can be used for harm, so rhetoric is no different from other fields. If this is true, there is even more need to educate the citizenry so that they will not be fooled by unethical and untruthful arguments.

For many, logic simply means reasoning. To understand a person’s logic, we try to find the structure of their reasoning. Logic is not synonymous with fact or truth, though facts are part of evidence in logical argumentation. You can be logical without being truthful. This is why more logic is not the only answer to better public argument.

Our human brains are compelled to categorize the world as a survival mechanism. This survival mechanism allows for quicker thought. Two of the most basic logical strategies

include inductive and deductive reasoning. **Deductive reasoning** (see Figure 3) starts from a premise that is a generalization about a large class of ideas, people, etc. and moves to a specific conclusion about a smaller category of ideas or things (All cats hate water; therefore, my neighbor's cat will not jump in our pool). While the first premise is the most general, the second premise is a more particular observation. So the argument is created through common beliefs/ observations that are compared to create an argument. For example:

People who burn flags are unpatriotic. **Major Premise**

Sara burned a flag. **Minor Premise**

Sara is unpatriotic. **Conclusion**

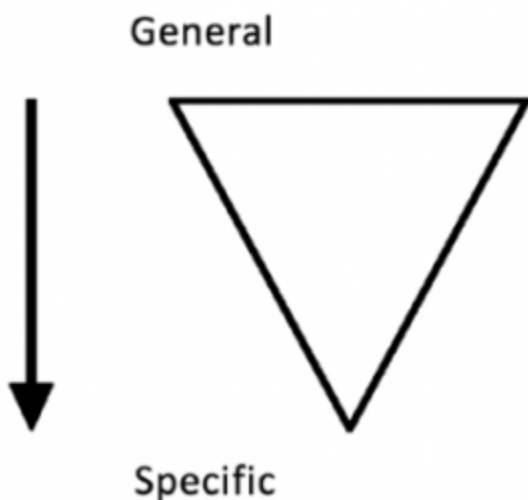


Figure 3. Deductive Reasoning

The above is called a syllogism. As we can see in the example, the major premise offers a general belief held by some groups and the minor premise is a particular observation. The conclusion is drawn by comparing the premises and developing a conclusion. If you work

hard enough, you can often take a complex argument and boil it down to a syllogism. This can reveal a great deal about the argument that is not apparent in the longer, more complex version.

Stanley Fish, professor and *New York Times* columnist, offers the following syllogism in his July 22, 2007, blog entry titled “Democracy and Education”: “The syllogism underlying these comments is (1) America is a democracy (2) Schools and universities are situated within that democracy (3) Therefore schools and universities should be ordered and administrated according to democratic principles.”

Fish offered the syllogism as a way to summarize the responses to his argument that students do not, in fact, have the right to free speech in a university classroom. The responses to Fish’s standpoint were vehemently opposed to his understanding of free speech rights and democracy. The responses are varied and complex. However, boiling them down to a single syllogism helps to summarize the primary rebuttal so that Fish could then offer his extended version of his standpoint (see link to argument in Question #1 at the end of the text).

Inductive reasoning moves in a different direction than deductive reasoning (see Figure 4). Inductive reasoning starts with a particular or local statement and moves to a more general conclusion. I think of inductive reasoning as a stacking of evidence. The more particular examples you give, the more it seems that your conclusion is correct.

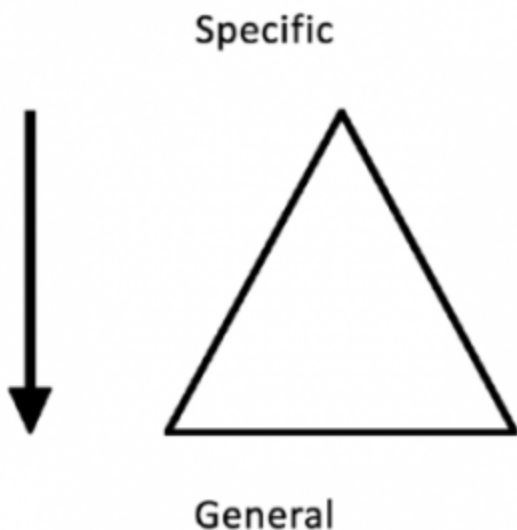


Figure 4. Inductive Reasoning

Inductive reasoning is a common method for arguing, especially when the conclusion is an obvious probability. Inductive reasoning is the most common way that we move around in the world. If we experience something habitually, we reason that it will happen again. For example, if we walk down a city street and every person smiles, we might reason that this is a “nice town.” This seems logical. We have taken many similar, particular experiences (smiles) and used them to make a general conclusion (the people in the town are nice). Most of the time, this reasoning works. However, we know that it can also lead us in the wrong direction. Perhaps the people were smiling because we were wearing inappropriate clothing (country togs in a metropolitan city), or perhaps only the people living on that particular street are “nice” and the rest of the town is unfriendly. Research papers sometimes rely too heavily on this logical method. Writers assume that finding ten

versions of the same argument somehow prove that the point is true.

Here is another example. In Ann Coulter's most recent book, *Guilty: Liberal "Victims" and Their Assault on America*, she makes her (in)famous argument that single motherhood is the cause of many of America's ills. She creates this argument through a piling of evidence. She lists statistics by sociologists, she lists all the single moms who killed their children, she lists stories of single mothers who say outrageous things about their life, children, or marriage in general, and she ends with a list of celebrity single moms that most would agree are not good examples of motherhood. Through this list, she concludes, "Look at almost any societal problem and you will find it is really a problem of single mothers" (36). While she could argue, from this evidence, that being a single mother is difficult, the generalization that single motherhood is the root of social ills in America takes the inductive reasoning too far. Despite this example, we need inductive reasoning because it is the key to analytical thought (see Activity: Applying Inductive and Deductive Reasoning). To write an "analysis paper" is to use inductive reasoning.

Activity: Applying Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

For each standpoint, create a deductive argument AND an inductive argument. When you are finished, share with your group members and decide which logical strategy offers a more successful, believable, and/or ethical argument for the particular standpoint. Feel free to modify the standpoint to find many possible arguments.

1. a. Affirmative Action should continue to be legal in the

United States. Affirmative Action is no longer useful in the United States.

b. The arts should remain an essential part of public education.

2. Chose a very specific argument on your campus (parking, tuition, curriculum) and create deductive and inductive arguments to support the standpoint.

3. Most academic arguments in the humanities are inductive to some degree. When you study humanity, nothing is certain. When observing or making inductive arguments, it is important to get your evidence from many different areas, to judge it carefully, and acknowledge the flaws. Inductive arguments must be judged by the quality of the evidence since the conclusions are drawn directly from a body of compiled work.

The Appeals

“The appeals” offer a lesson in rhetoric that sticks with you long after the class has ended. Perhaps it is the rhythmic quality of the words (ethos, logos, pathos) or, simply, the usefulness of the concept. Aristotle imagined logos, ethos, and pathos as three kinds of artistic proof. Essentially, they highlight three ways to appeal to or persuade an audience: “(1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in its various forms, (3) to understand emotions” (Honeycutt, *Rhetoric* 1356a).

While Aristotle and others did not explicitly dismiss emotional and character appeals, they found the most value in logic. Contemporary rhetoricians and argumentation scholars, however, recognize the power of emotions to sway us. Even the most stoic individuals have some emotional threshold over which no logic can pass. For example, we can seldom be

reasonable when faced with a crime against a loved one, a betrayal, or the face of an adorable baby.

The easiest way to differentiate the appeals is to imagine selling a product based on them. Until recently, car commercials offered a prolific source of logical, ethical, and emotional appeals.

Logos: Using logic as proof for an argument. For many students this takes the form of numerical evidence. But as we have discussed above, logical reasoning is a kind of argumentation.

Car Commercial: (Syllogism) Americans love adventure—Ford Escape allows for off road adventure— Americans should buy a Ford Escape.

OR

The Ford Escape offers the best financial deal.

Ethos: Calling on particular shared values (patriotism), respected figures of authority (MLK), or one's own character as a method for appealing to an audience.

Car Commercial: Eco-conscious Americans drive a Ford Escape.

OR

[Insert favorite movie star] drives a Ford Escape.

Pathos: Using emotionally driven images or language to sway your audience.

Car Commercial: Images of a pregnant woman being safely rushed to a hospital. Flash to two car seats in the back seat. Flash to family hopping out of their Ford Escape and witnessing the majesty of the Grand Canyon.

OR

After an image of a worried mother watching her sixteen year old daughter drive

away: “Ford Escape takes the fear out of driving.”

The appeals are part of everyday conversation, even if we do not use the Greek terminology (see Activity: Developing Audience Awareness). Understanding the appeals helps us to make better rhetorical choices in designing our arguments. If you think about the appeals as a choice, their value is clear.

Activity: Developing Audience Awareness

Imagine you have been commissioned by your school food service provider to create a presentation encouraging the consumption of healthier foods on campus.

How would you present this to your friends: consider the media you would use, how you present yourself, and how you would begin.

How would you present this same material to parents of incoming students?

Which appeal is most useful for each audience? Why?

Toulmin: Dissecting the Everyday Argument

Philosopher Stephen Toulmin studies the arguments we make in our everyday lives. He developed his method out of frustration with logicians (philosophers of argumentation) that studied argument in a vacuum or through mathematical formulations:

All

A are B.

All

B are C.

Therefore, all A are C. (Eemeren, et al. 131)

Instead, Toulmin views argument as it appears in a conversation, in a letter, or some other context because real arguments are much more complex than the syllogisms that make up the bulk of Aristotle's logical program. Toulmin offers the contemporary writer/reader a way to map an argument. The result is a visualization of the argument process. This map comes complete with vocabulary for describing the parts of an argument. The vocabulary allows us to see the contours of the landscape—the winding rivers and gaping caverns. One way to think about a “good” argument is that it is a discussion that hangs together, a landscape that is cohesive (we can't have glaciers in our desert valley). Sometimes we miss the faults of an argument because it sounds good or appears to have clear connections between the statement and the evidence, when in truth the only thing holding the argument together is a lovely sentence or an artistic flourish.

For Toulmin, argumentation is an attempt to justify a statement or a set of statements. The better the demand is met, the higher the audience's appreciation. Toulmin's vocabulary for the study of argument offers labels for the parts of the argument to help us create our map.

Claim: The basic standpoint presented by a writer/ speaker.

Data: The evidence which supports the claim.

Warrant: The justification for connecting particular data to a particular claim. The warrant also makes clear the assumptions underlying the argument.

Backing: Additional information required if the warrant is not clearly supported.

Rebuttal: Conditions or standpoints that point out flaws in the claim or alternative positions.

Qualifiers: Terminology that limits a standpoint. Examples include applying the

following terms to any part of an argument:
sometimes, seems, occasionally, none, always,
never, etc.

The following paragraphs come from an article reprinted in UTNE magazine by Pamela Paxton and Jeremy Adam Smith titled: “Not Everyone Is Out to Get You.” Charting this excerpt helps us to understand some of the underlying assumptions found in the article.

“Trust No One”

That was the slogan of *The X-Files*, the TV drama that followed two FBI agents on a quest to uncover a vast government conspiracy. A defining cultural phenomenon during its run from 1993–2002, the show captured a mood of growing distrust in America.

Since then, our trust in one another has declined even further. In fact, it seems that “Trust no one” could easily have been America’s motto for the past 40 years—thanks to, among other things, Vietnam, Watergate, junk bonds, Monica Lewinsky, Enron, sex scandals in the Catholic Church, and the Iraq war.

The General Social Survey, a periodic assessment of Americans’ moods and values, shows an 11-point decline from 1976–2008 in the number of Americans who believe other people can generally be trusted. Institutions haven’t fared any better. Over the same period, trust has declined in the press (from 29 to 9 percent), education (38–29 percent), banks (41 percent to 20 percent), corporations (23–16 percent), and organized religion (33–20 percent). Gallup’s 2008 governance survey showed that trust in the government was as low as it was during the Watergate era.

The news isn’t all doom and gloom, however. A growing body of research hints that humans are hardwired to trust, which is why institutions, through reform and high performance, can still stoke feelings of loyalty, just as

disasters and mismanagement can inhibit it. The catch is that while humans want, even need, to trust, they won't trust blindly and foolishly.

Figure 5 demonstrates one way to chart the argument that Paxton and Smith make in "Trust No One." The remainder of the article offers additional claims and data, including the final claim that there is hope for overcoming our collective trust issues. The chart helps us to see that some of the warrants, in a longer research project, might require additional support. For example, the warrant that TV mirrors real life is an argument and not a fact that would require evidence.



Figure 5. This chart demonstrates the utility of visualizing an argument.

Charting your own arguments and others helps you to visualize the meat of your discussion. All the flourishes are gone and the bones revealed. Even if you cannot fit an argument neatly into the boxes, the attempt forces you to ask important questions about your claim, your warrant, and possible rebuttals. By

charting your argument you are forced to write your claim in a succinct manner and admit, for example, what you are using for evidence. Charted, you can see if your evidence is scanty, if it relies too much on one kind of evidence over another, and if it needs additional support. This charting might also reveal a disconnect between your claim and your warrant or cause you to reevaluate your claim altogether.

Pragma-Dialectics: A Fancy Word for a Close Look at Argumentation

The field of rhetoric has always been interdisciplinary and so it has no problem including argumentation theory. Developed in the Speech Communication Department at the University of Amsterdam, pragma-dialectics is a study of argumentation that focuses on the ethics of one's logical choices in creating an argument. In *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory: A Handbook of Historical Backgrounds and Contemporary Developments*, Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst describe argumentation, simply, as “characterized by the use of language for resolving a difference of opinion” (275). While much of this work quite literally looks at actual speech situations, the work can easily be applied to the classroom and to broader political situations.

While this version of argumentation deals with everything from ethics to arrangement, what this field adds to rhetorical studies is a new approach to argument fallacies. Fallacies are often the cause of the mystery feeling we get when we come across faulty logic or missteps in an argument.

What follows is an adaptation of Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, and Francesca Snoeck Henkemans' “violations of the rules for critical engagement” from their book *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, Presentation* (109). Rather

than discuss rhetorical fallacies in a list (ad hominem, straw man, equivocation, etc.), they argue that there should be rules for proper argument to ensure fairness, logic, and a solution to the problem being addressed. Violating these rules causes a fallacious argument and can result in a standoff rather than a solution. While fallacious arguments, if purposeful, pose real ethical problems, most people do not realize they are committing fallacies when they create an argument. To purposely attack someone's character rather than their argument (ad hominem) is not only unethical, but demonstrates lazy argumentation. However, confusing cause and effect might simply be a misstep that needs fixing. It is important to admit that many fallacies, though making an argument somewhat unsound, can be rhetorically savvy. While we know that appeals to pity (or going overboard on the emotional appeal) can often demonstrate a lack of knowledge or evidence, they often work. As such, these rules present argumentation as it would play out in a utopian world where everyone is calm and logical, where everyone cares about resolving the argument at hand, rather than winning the battle, and where everyone plays by the rules. Despite the utopian nature of the list, it offers valuable insight into argument flaws and offers hope for better methods of deliberation.

What follows is an adaptation of the approach to argumentation found in Chapters 7 and 8 of *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, Presentation* (Eemeren, et al. 109-54). The rule is listed first, followed by an example of how the rule is often violated.

1. The Freedom Rule

“Parties must not prevent each other from putting forward standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints” (110).

There are many ways to stop an individual from giving her own argument. This can come in the form of a physical threat but most

often takes the form of a misplaced critique. Instead of focusing on the argument, the focus is shifted to the character of the writer or speaker (ad hominem) or to making the argument (or author) seem absurd (straw man) rather than addressing its actual components. In the past decade, “Bush is stupid” became a common ad hominem attack that allowed policy to go unaddressed. To steer clear of the real issues of global warming, someone might claim “Only a fool would believe global warming is real” or “Trying to suck all of the CO₂ out of the atmosphere with giant greenhouse gas machines is mere science fiction, so we should look at abandoning all this greenhouse gas nonsense.”

2. The Burden-of-Proof Rule

“A party who puts forward a standpoint is obliged to defend it if asked to do so” (113).

This is one of my favorites. It is clear and simple. If you make an argument, you have to provide evidence to back it up. During the 2008 Presidential debates, Americans watched as all the candidates fumbled over the following question about healthcare: “How will this plan actually work?” If you are presenting a written argument, this requirement can be accommodated through quality, researched evidence applied to your standpoint.

3. The Standpoint Rule

“A party’s attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has indeed been advanced by the other party” (116).

Your standpoint is simply your claim, your basic argument in a nutshell. If you disagree with another person’s argument or they disagree with yours, the actual standpoint and not some related but more easily attacked issue must be addressed. For example, one person might argue that the rhetoric of global warming has created a multi-million dollar green industry benefiting from fears over climate change. This is an argument

about the effects of global warming rhetoric, not global warming itself. It would break the standpoint rule to argue that the writer/speaker does not believe in global warming. This is not the issue at hand.

4. The Relevance Rule

“A party may defend his or her standpoint only by advancing argumentation related to that standpoint” (119).

Similar to #3, this rule assures that the evidence you use must actually relate to your standpoint. Let’s stick with the same argument: global warming has created a green industry benefiting from fears over climate change. Under this rule, your evidence would need to offer examples of the rhetoric and the resulting businesses that have developed since the introduction of green industries. It would break the rules to simply offer attacks on businesses who sell “eco-friendly” products.

5. The Unexpressed Premise Rule

“A party may not falsely present something as a premise that has been left unexpressed by the other party or deny a premise that he or she has left implicit” (121).

This one sounds a bit complex, though it happens nearly every day. If you have been talking to another person and feel the need to say, “That’s NOT what I meant,” then you have experienced a violation of the unexpressed premise rule. Overall, the rule attempts to keep the argument on track and not let it stray into irrelevant territory. The first violation of the rule, to falsely present what has been left unexpressed, is to rephrase someone’s standpoint in a way that redirects the argument. One person might argue, “I love to go to the beach,” and another might respond by saying “So you don’t have any appreciation for mountain living.” The other aspect of this rule is to camouflage an unpopular idea and deny that it is part of your argument. For example, you might argue that “I have

nothing against my neighbors. I just think that there should be a noise ordinance in this part of town to help cut down on crime.” This clearly shows that the writer does believe her neighbors to be criminals but won’t admit it.

6. The Starting Point Rule

“No party may falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point, or deny a premise representing an accepted starting point” (128).

Part of quality argumentation is to agree on the opening standpoint. According to this theory, argument is pointless without this kind of agreement. It is well known that arguing about abortion is nearly pointless as long as one side is arguing about the rights of the unborn and the other about the rights of women. These are two different starting points.

7. The Argument Scheme Rule

“A standpoint may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argument scheme that is correctly applied” (130).

This rule is about argument strategy. Argument schemes could take up another paper altogether. Suffice it to say that schemes are ways of approaching an argument, your primary strategy. For example, you might choose emotional rather than logical appeals to present your position. This rule highlights the fact that some argument strategies are simply better than others. For example, if you choose to create an argument based largely on attacking the character of your opponent rather than the issues at hand, the argument is moot.

Argument by analogy is a popular and well worn argument strategy (or scheme). Essentially, you compare your position to a more commonly known one and make your argument through the comparison. For example, in the “Trust No One”

argument above, the author equates the Watergate and Monica Lewinsky scandals. Since it is common knowledge that Watergate was a serious scandal, including Monica Lewinsky in the list offers a strong argument by analogy: the Lewinsky scandal did as much damage as Watergate. To break this rule, you might make an analogy that does not hold up, such as comparing a minor scandal involving a local school board to Watergate. This would be an exaggeration, in most cases.

8. The Validity Rule

“The reasoning in the argumentation must be logically valid or must be capable of being made valid by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises” (132).

This rule is about traditional logics. Violating this rule means that the parts of your argument do not match up. For example, your cause and effect might be off: If you swim in the ocean today you will get stung by a jelly fish and need medical care. Joe went to the doctor today. He must have been stung by a jelly fish. While this example is obvious (we do not know that Joe went swimming), many argument problems are caused by violating this rule.

9. The Closure Rule

“A failed defense of a standpoint must result in the protagonist retracting the standpoint, and a successful defense of a standpoint must result in the antagonist retracting his or her doubts” (134).

This seems the most obvious rule, yet it is one that most public arguments ignore. If your argument does not cut it, admit the faults and move on. If another writer/speaker offers a rebuttal and you clearly counter it, admit that the original argument is sound. Seems simple, but it's not in our public culture. This would mean that George W. Bush would have to have a press conference and say, “My apologies, I was wrong about WMD,” or for someone who argued fervently that Americans want a single payer option for healthcare

to instead argue something like, “The polls show that Americans want to change healthcare, but not through the single payer option. My argument was based on my opinion that single payer is the best way and not on public opinion.” Academics are more accustomed to retraction because our arguments are explicitly part of particular conversations. Rebuttals and renegotiations are the norm. That does not make them any easier to stomach in an “argument is war” culture.

10. The Usage Rule

“Parties must not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they must interpret the formulations of the other party as carefully and accurately as possible” (136).

While academics are perhaps the worst violators of this rule, it is an important one to discuss. Be clear. I notice in both student and professional academic writing that a confusing concept often means confusing prose, longer sentences, and more letters in a word. If you cannot say it/write it clearly, the concept might not yet be clear to you. Keep working. Ethical violations of this rule happen when someone is purposefully ambiguous so as to confuse the issue. We can see this on all the “law” shows on television or through deliberate propaganda.

Activity: Following the Rules

1. Choose a topic to discuss in class or as a group (ex. organic farming, campus parking, gun control).
 - a. Choose one of the rules above and write a short argument (a sentence) that clearly violates the rule. Be prepared to explain WHY it violates the rule.
 - b. Take the fallacious argument you just created in

exercise a) and correct it. Write a solid argument that conforms to the rule.

Food for thought: The above rules offer one way to think about shaping an argument paper. Imagine that the argument for your next paper is a dialogue between those who disagree about your topic. After doing research, write out the primary standpoint for your paper. For example: organic farming is a sustainable practice that should be used more broadly. Next, write out a standpoint that might offer a refutation of the argument. For example: organic farming cannot supply all of the food needed by the world's population. Once you have a sense of your own argument and possible refutations, go through the rules and imagine how you might ethically and clearly provide arguments that support your point without ignoring the opposition.

Even though our current media and political climate do not call for good argumentation, the guidelines for finding and creating it abound. There are many organizations such as America Speaks (www.americaspeaks.org) that are attempting to revive quality, ethical deliberation. On the personal level, each writer can be more deliberate in their argumentation by choosing to follow some of these methodical approaches to ensure the soundness and general quality of their argument. The above models offer the possibility that we can imagine modes of argumentation other than war. The final model, pragma-dialectics, especially, seems to consider argument as a conversation that requires constant vigilance and interaction by participants. Argument as conversation, as new metaphor for public deliberation, has possibilities.

Additional Activities

1. Read Stanley Fish's blog entry titled "Democracy and

Education” (<http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/07/22/democracy-and-education/#more-57>). Choose at least two of the responses to Fish’s argument that students are not entitled to free speech rights in the classroom and compare them using the different argumentation models listed above.

2. Following the pragma-dialectic rules, create a fair and balanced rebuttal to Fish’s argument in his “Democracy and Education” blog entry.
3. Use Toulmin’s vocabulary to build an argument. Start with a claim and then fill in the chart with your own research, warrants, qualifiers, and rebuttals.

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27. “Finding Your Way In”: Invention as Inquiry Based Learning in First Year Writing

STEVEN LESSNER AND COLLIN CRAIG

Imagine the initial meeting of your first year writing course. After welcoming you to the course and going over the basics, your writing instructor prompts you and the other students to reflect on how you typically begin to think about approaching a writing assignment. Several hands raise and you listen as students begin answering. One student hesitantly states that he normally waits until the last minute to think about it and stays up all night before it's due, working away. Another student asserts that she often has trouble choosing and then narrowing down a topic. Disagreeing about this shared response, a student sitting near you asserts that he has trouble generating more supporting ideas once he has chosen a topic to explore. Still someone else states that she tries to get ideas from the readings she is supposed to write about in essays—often without success. After hearing from these students, your writing instructor tells the class that this is a good time to start talking about invention and helpful activities to use when approaching and starting a writing assignment.

Your first year college writing course often becomes a primary place where new writing techniques and tools are presented to help smoothen your transition into college-level writing. We hope this chapter will encourage you to see the diverse invention possibilities available when beginning a writing assignment. For instance, have you ever felt a blank sheet of paper or empty word processing screen intently staring at you while you decide what

to say? Learning potential invention activities for writing can help you feel more comfortable as a writer in college by giving you many more places to begin. As college writing teachers, we know that first year writing students have plenty of generative ideas to share and many insightful connections to make in their writing. Knowing that a wide range of invention activities are available to try out may be all you need to begin approaching writing assignments with more effectiveness, clarity and creativity.

In his piece entitled “Inventing Invention” from *Writing Inventions: Identities, Technologies, Pedagogies*, college writing professor Scott Lloyd DeWitt makes a comparison between the inventing space his father used as an engineer and the multitude of invention activities open to writers (17–19). DeWitt describes his father’s garage as a generative place where “wires, tool handles, broken toys, thermometers, an ice bucket, lamp switches, an intercom system, the first microwave oven ever manufactured . . .” are drawn on as invention tools that his father selects depending on what project he is starting and what tool will ultimately help him the most (17). Similarly, as a writer in college with many different writing assignments, you will need to think about what invention activity best helps you not only to begin specific papers most effectively, but also to generate new ideas and arguments during the writing process.

In considering your previous experiences, you may have been taught that invention “is a single art form, or a single act of creativity” (DeWitt 23). When taught in this way, readers and writers may be misled to understand invention as something that takes place in one definite moment that can’t be revisited while in the middle of writing. Viewing invention as a one time, hit or miss event does not allow the construction and development of ideas to be seen as a continuing process a writer employs throughout the act of writing. In looking at invention as a “single act,” you might miss how helpful invention can really be as an ongoing developmental practice that allows new ideas and exciting connections to be made.

The invention activities we offer in this chapter will help you begin to see invention as more than formulaic correct or incorrect approaches for producing writing. We want these invention activities to be ones that you can try out and, ultimately, make your own as college readers and writers. Let us be clear in stating that no one invention activity may work for all writers. Some of these approaches for beginning your writing assignments will be more useful than others. However, each invention activity has been crafted with you in mind and as a generative way for you to begin thinking about your writing assignments. Through the invention strategies of reading rhetorically, freewriting, focused freewriting, critical freewriting, flexible outlining, bulleting, visual outlining and auditory/dialogic generative outlining, you will begin inventing in ways that stretch your writerly muscles. You will see how beginning papers can be a process that invites you as a participant to share and build on your experiences and knowledge in productive ways. And much like Professor DeWitt's engineering father with his tools in a garage, you will learn to choose your invention tools with care when starting to write.

Reading Rhetorically

As a college reader, finding an author's intent is a commonly learned critical thinking strategy that works for analyzing texts. But engaged reading can also be about discovering how the writing strategies of authors are working to build an essay and convey a message. A good start towards transitioning into college-level writing is discovering what you can stand to gain as a writer from the reading process. Through directed reading, you can learn strategies for building structure and argument in your own texts. Moreover, as part of your successful development as a writer, you'll need ample opportunity and space for creativity in your writing process. Reading with a purpose teaches you how to use creativity to generate multiple

approaches to building arguments and making connections between ideas.

Rhetorical reading is our approach for understanding the tools that writers use to persuade or effectively communicate ideas. This critical reading approach will have you analyze, interpret, and reflect on choices that writers make to convey a thought or argument. Reading rhetorically develops critical thinking skills that not only interrogate ideas but also situates them within a rhetorical situation (context) and works towards determining how the message, intended audience, and method of delivery work together for the purpose of persuasion and effective communication. For example, when reading a New York Times op-ed about the war in Iraq, you might consider the traditional political stance the newspaper has taken on the war in the Middle East and how this might determine how Iraqi citizens are spoken for, or how visual images are used to invoke an emotion about the Muslim faith in times of war. You will find that the ability to perform specific analytical moves in your reading can make you

- more aware of your own intentions as a writer;
- more specific in developing methods of delivery;
- and, more cognizant of how you want your intended audience to respond to your ideas.

This critical reading exercise encourages you to think about reading as a social interaction with the writer. Take a look at an assigned reading by an author for your course. What questions might you ask the author about the writing moves that he/she makes to draw readers in?

- Here are some sample questions to get you started towards reading rhetorically.
- How does the author organize events, evidence, or arguments throughout the text?
- What stylistic moves does the text do to draw readers in?

- Does the author rely on experts, personal experience, statistics, etc. to develop an argument or communicate an idea? Is this rhetorical approach effective?
- Who might we suggest is the intended audience? How does the author make appeals or cater her message to this audience specifically?

In a writing situation that asks you to effectively communicate a specific idea to a target audience, knowing how to respond will develop your critical reading skills and provide you with effective strategies for writing in multiple genres. Having a rhetorical knowledge of how genres of writing work will also prepare you with tools for generating inquiry-based writing for multiple audiences.

A Rhetorical Reading Activity

Below is an excerpt from Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," an autobiographic text that demonstrates how the author finds her identity as Chicana, shaped by multiple language practices and responses.

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. “If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.”

“I want you to speak English. Pa’ hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el ingles bien. Que vale toda tu educacion si todavia hablas ingles con un ‘accent,’” my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I and all Chicano students were

required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents.

Attacks on one's form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arranco la lengua.* Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out.

Asking Rhetorical Questions

Here are a few rhetorical questions you might consider asking:

- What is the rhetorical situation in which Anzaldua finds herself using different language forms? (Rhetorical situation refers to the context, intended audience, and purpose for writing.)
- Does Anzaldua's writing attempt to invoke an emotional response from its readers?
- What makes Anzaldua credible to speak about language practices as a condition of access into a community?
- Does the author make any logical appeals to persuade readers?
- What assumptions about culture can we make based on the content of Anzaldua's text?

Asking rhetorical questions provokes a process of inquiry-based thinking that is useful for learning how to participate in academic conversations in a way that investigates the decisions writers make when they compose and arrange compositions. As you read, get in the habit of asking rhetorical questions about the composition of texts. This will further guide your prewriting process of brainstorming and frame decisions for how you might compose your own texts. Freewriting can be an initial invention exercise that begins your composing process.

Entering Conversations as a Writer

Freewriting

Freewriting is a warmup exercise that is designed to jumpstart the writing process. Writing professor Peter Elbow, well-known for promoting the practice of freewriting, describes freewriting as private writing without stopping (4). Freewriting is an effective prewriting strategy that allows you to explore an idea without worrying about grammar errors or coherence. This form of writing is not about developing a finished product or performing “good writing.” Many writers might use this exercise to get their brains into gear when developing ideas about a topic. If you are struggling with pinning down ideas that are at the back of your mind, freewriting enables you to explore the field of thoughts in your mind and get words down on paper that can trigger connections between meaningful ideas.

Here is an exercise to get you started:

Exercise 1

Take about ten minutes to write about anything that comes to mind. The goal is to keep writing without stopping. If you are coming up blank and nothing comes to mind, then write “nothing comes to mind” until something does. Do not worry about the quality of the writing, grammar, or what to write. Just write!

Focused Freewriting

Focused freewriting asks you to write about a specific topic. It is

more concentrated and allows writers opportunities to develop continuity and connections between ideas while exploring all that you might know about a subject. Focused freewriting can be useful in sorting through what you know about a topic that might be useful for outlining a writing project.

Exercise 2

Take about ten minutes to focus freewrite on one of the topics below. As with initial freewriting, write without stopping. But this time, pay closer attention to maintaining a focus and developing continuity while building upon and connecting ideas.

- What writing moves can you learn from a close rhetorical reading of Anzaldua's text to compose your own text?
- Write about an important language practice that you participated in or experienced that is not school related.

Kelsey, a first year writer on the university basketball team, offers an example of a focused freewrite she performed in her college writing course about learning how to talk to her baby sister.

I'm not really sure what he wants us to exactly write. Like speaking a different language? Talking in different tones? Language like Amy Tan described? Well since I'm not sure, I guess that I'll just guess and see how this works. When Mackenzie was first learning to speak, she obviously didn't produce full sentences. She used a lot of touching, showing, and pointing. When speaking to her, it was important to emphasize certain words (that she would pick up on or understand), to make them clear to her and not allow an entire sentence or phrase to confuse her. And, when she spoke to us, it was important to not only pay attention to the word that she was saying (often not comprehensible),

but watch her facial expression, and notice how she used her hand to point, gesture, etc. It was truly fascinating to watch how her language developed and grew over such a short period of time. She went from shouting out short, one syllable words, to formulating her own sentences (although often without correct tenses or order), to speaking in such a way that little observation from me or my family was needed. She continued to occasionally sometimes mix up her words, or even mispronounce them, but it is still astounding to me that she learned what so many things are, how to say them, and how to describe them, without ever attending any school. I know that this is pretty much how everyone learns to speak, but the power of simple acquisition still is fascinating. Ok so now im all out of what I wanted to say.

Kelsey begins her focused freewrite with questions that help her create a framework for making sense of non-school language practices. Using personal narrative, she is able to explore the concept of acquisition in how her baby sister learns how to communicate. She also takes moments throughout her freewrite to reflect on the literacy issues implied in her recounted story. During interpretive moments of her freewriting, Kelsey can formulate ideas she might further explore about literacy as a social practice, such as the influences of both formal education and the mundane experiences of family social life.

Critical Freewriting

Critical freewriting asks writers to think more analytically about a topic or subject for writing. When we say “critical,” we do not mean it simply as an analytical approach focused solely on

creating an opposing viewpoint. We use the term critical to define a reflection process during freewriting that includes

- asking questions
- responding
- engaging with opposing points of view
- developing new perspectives and then asking more questions

Critical freewriting gives you permission to grapple with an idea and even explore the basis for your own beliefs about a topic. It involves going beyond writing freely about a subject, and placing it in relationship to larger existing conversations. For example, you might ask, “How does my stance on teenage pregnancy align with existing viewpoints on abortion?” or “What are the consequences for sex education in high schools?” Critical freewriting provides you the opportunity to use reflection and inquiry as inventive strategies towards exploring multiple angles into a writing topic.

Below is an example of critical freewriting on the benefits and possible consequences of other forms of writing, such as text messaging.

Text messaging is a kind of writing that I do to keep in touch with friends and family back home and on campus. I use it everyday after class or when I get bored with studying homework. It's a lot like instant messaging in my opinion because it allows you to communicate without having to worry about weird silences that can happen when you run out of things to say. On the other hand I wonder about how it will affect my ability to communicate in formal settings, such as a phone interview for a job when I graduate. Often times for example when I receive a phone call I will ignore it and send a text message instead of calling back. I would say that I text message more than I actually talk on the phone. I wonder how such indirect communication might create bad habits of passivity that might cause me to miss out on all the benefits of human

interaction. I feel the same way about online instant messaging. Though it is a great way to maintain contact with friends that are going to college in another state, I wonder if it makes me less inclined to initiate face-to-face communication with others on campus. Some might say that digital communication is more efficient and that you can say whatever you feel without the pressure of being embarrassed by someone's response. I would agree but meaning in words can be understood better when hearing emotions in someone's audible voice, right? Meh, this probably won't change my habits of typing up a quick text over calling someone. LOL.

Here the writer takes an inconclusive stance on the pros and cons of text messaging as a form of everyday communication. Her assignment might ask her to either make an argumentative stance or to take an open-ended approach in exploring instant messaging as a language practice. In either case, she engages in a recursive (ongoing) process of questioning and answering that invents scenarios and raises issues she might explore in order to develop a working knowledge on trendy forms of technological communication.

Exercise 3

Spend ten minutes critical freewriting on one of the following topics.

- What is a type of writing that you do that is not school related? How does your knowledge about the context (people, place, or occasion) of writing determine how you communicate in this writing situation?
- How has writing contributed to your experiences as a member of an online community (ex. Facebook, Twitter, writing emails)?

Critical freewriting encourages recursive thinking that enables you to create a body of ideas and to further decide which ones might be worth researching and which themes might work together in constructing a coherent, yet flexible pattern of ideas. We value flexibility because we believe it complements how ideas are never final and can always be revised or strengthened. Flexible outlining enables this process of ongoing revision, no matter what writing stage you are in.

Flexible Outlining

Once you have engaged in freewriting, you may find it useful to use a process called flexible outlining that can help you arrange your ideas into more complex, thought provoking material. First year writing students and their comments about outlining inspired the kind of flexible outlining we encourage in the exercises below. Summing up many students' needs to begin writing a paper in some kind of outline format, first year writer Valencia Cooper writes, "The way I start a paper usually is to organize or outline the topic whatever it may be." Valencia used a variety of bullets and indenting when beginning her work, which suggests that flexible outlining could be more effective in terms of organizing generative thoughts for papers. Similarly using a form of flexible outlining, first year writing student Tommy Brooks conveyed that he "makes an outline and fills in the blanks." These examples encourage you as a writer to remember that there is no right or wrong way to engage in outlining ideas as you start thinking about what directions to take your paper. We encourage you to visualize, hear, and talk through important information generated from your critical freewriting using the techniques of bulleting, drawing, and dialoguing that we detail below.

Bulleting

After generating a body of ideas from freewriting, bulleting your ideas can be the next step towards conceptualizing a map of your writing project. Organizing your thoughts in bullets can generate possibilities for how you might sequence coherent streams of ideas, such as main points, examples, or themes. For instance, if you chose to critically freewrite about writing that is not school related as prompted in Exercise 3 above, itemizing the ideas in your response through bulleting allows you to isolate prospective themes and decide if they are worth exploring. Below is an example bulleted list generated from the above critical freewriting demonstration about text messaging as an alternative writing practice.

- Text messaging allows me to keep in touch with those I am close to that live far away and nearby me as well.
- Text messaging is a kind of writing that I use everyday in situations, like when I'm bored with schoolwork.
- Text messaging is very similar to instant messaging in how it avoids weird silences that happen in face-to-face or phone conversations.
- Text messaging may create bad habits of passivity that might cause missing out on human interaction.
- Text messaging does not allow emotions to be fully understood like listening to someone's audible voice.

Visual Outlining

After locating common themes from your bullets, try to visually think about the best way to represent the arrangement of your ideas for what we call a visual outline. This exercise will require some drawing, but please understand that visual outlining does

not require you to be an artist. The point of this exercise is for you to conceptualize your paper in a new way that helps generate new ideas. Peter Elbow points out in *Writing With Power* that drawings connected to your writing “have life, energy and experience in them” (324).

Take some time to consider how you visualize the arrangement of your paper. Is your central idea the trunk of a tree, with other ideas expanding outward as the branches, and with details hanging like leaves? Or is your beginning idea a tall skyscraper with many small windows on the outside and hallways and elevators on the inside underlying your ideas and claims?

For instance, if you wanted to visualize the above bullets concerning text messaging in the shape of a tree diagram, you might write text messaging in what you draw and label as the trunk. As you continue sketching in the branches on your tree, each one should represent an idea or other evidence that supports a main claim being made about text messaging. Below, we have created a conceptual tree from the previous critical freewriting excerpt as a visual example for outlining that can be both generative and flexible. But you don’t have to imitate ours. Be stylistically creative in developing your own tree outline (see figure 1).

Developing a tree diagram as a way of outlining ideas prompts you to see that linear approaches to orchestrating ideas are not the only way of arranging a composition at this stage. While “Text Messaging As Alternative Writing” works as the foundational theme in Figure 1, having a variety of visually horizontal alignments in this outline can eliminate premature decisions about how you might arrange your composition and which topics can be best aligned in relationship to others. Use this type of spatial alignment to make more effective decisions about how to communicate your intended message.

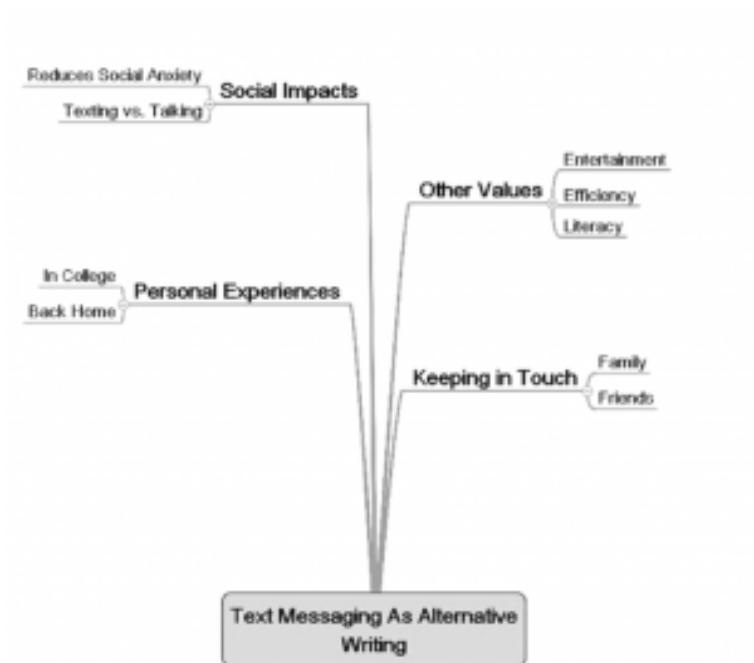


Figure 1. Tree Outline

Exercise 4

Take some time to draw your own visual outline using the ideas developed from your critical freewriting. Think about reoccurring central theme(s) that surface. Decide which ones can be foundational in building supporting arguments or potential alternative perspectives.

Reflection

- From looking at your visual outline, what directions might you

first consider pursuing in the process of developing and organizing an essay?

- In what ways did using an image as a medium for outlining allow you to think about how you might arrange your ideas?

Auditory/Dialogic Generative Outlining

We also want to suggest an interactive outlining process that allows you to get more immediate feedback from your peers about the directions you may want to take in your writing. In her work *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*, author and cultural critic bell hooks writes about how her outlining process is improved through communication with others. When trying to write her autobiography, hooks recalls that memories “came in a rush, as though they were a sudden thunderstorm” (83). Often, she found that her remembering and categorizing process in recalling old memories of her younger life were best to “talk about” with others before she began writing (83).

For this exercise, you will want to return to the original bulleted list that you generated from your critical freewriting. If you find it helpful, you can use the example bullet list about text messaging we provided in the “Bulleting” section above.

Step #1

As you did with your visual outline, take some time to think about the central idea in your bulleted list that you created from critical freewriting. Highlight, underline or circle these main ideas in your bullets. You may want to use different color highlighters to differentiate between your starting, central idea and those that are supportive and expanding. Below, we have provided an example of

coding in our created bulleted list by making starting, central ideas bold and expanding, supportive points italicized.

- **Text messaging allows me to keep in touch** with those I am close to that live far away and nearby me as well.
- **Text messaging is a kind of writing** that I use everyday in situations like when I'm bored with schoolwork.
- **Text messaging is very similar to instant messaging** in how it avoids weird silences that happen in face-to-face or phone conversations.
- **Text messaging may create bad habits of passivity** that might cause missing out on human interaction.
- **Text messaging does not allow emotions to be heard** like in someone's audible voice.

Please note that the distinctions between your central and supporting ideas do not have to be finalized. Some initial thoughts may be part of your supporting points. Or you may still be in the process of solidifying an idea. This is perfectly fine. Just do your best to make as many distinctions as you can.

Take some time to code the bulleted list you generated from your starting, central ideas and supporting ideas.

In Step #1 of Auditory/Dialogic Generative Outlining, separating main and supportive ideas by marking them differently (highlighting, underlining, circling), helps you see generative connections you are making with your topic of text messaging. In looking over this list, there are many ideas you can explore about text messaging and its relationship to something else (ability to keep in touch with others, writing, instant messaging, bad habits of passivity, and emotions). Having these diverse connections about text messaging listed pushes you to see that there is no one, right answer that you need to explore in your writing. Instead, this invention step opens up many different possible connections for you to consider as you begin writing.

Step #2

For the next piece of this outlining strategy, work with a peer. In discussing the interactive nature of writing and communication, Elbow points out “there is a deep and essential relationship between writing and the speaking voice” (22). In speaking face to face with another student in your class that is writing the same assignment, you may find a higher level of comfort in conveying your ideas. However, you could also choose to share your bullets with another individual outside your class, such as a friend or family member.

Instruction #1 for the Writer: Look closely at your central, starting point(s) (coded in bold in the example above). Find a partner in class. Give them your coded list.

Instruction #1 for the Reader/Recorder: Read aloud each of the writer’s central starting points (coded in bold in the example above). Then frame a question for the writer that relates to their central points. An example question can be, “You have a lot of starting points that talk about text messaging and its relationship to something else (writing, instant messaging, bad habits of passivity, emotions). Why do these relationships to text messaging keep coming up in your ideas?”

Below is a list of three other example questions a reader/recorder might ask in relationship to the writer’s central starting points about text messaging. These example questions are offered here to help you think about what types of questions you could ask as a reader/recorder to a writer.

1. The majority of your central starting points seem to express a strong point about text messaging with definite wording such as in “Text messaging allows me . . .,” “Text messaging is a kind of writing . . .,” “Text messaging is very similar . . .,” and “Text messaging does not allow . . .” However, you have one central starting point that does not express certainty, and that one is “Text messaging may create bad habits of passivity . . .” Why is

the opinion in this idea not as strong as your other starting central points? Why do you choose to use the word “may” here?

2. In two of your central starting points, you seem to make a kind of comparison between text messaging and other forms of communication such as “writing” and “instant messaging.” Are there any other forms of communication that you can compare text messaging to? If so, what are they?
3. Three of your central starting points (“Text messaging allows me to keep in touch . . .,” “Text messaging may create bad habits of passivity . . .,” “Text messaging does not allow emotions to be heard . . .”) appear to deal with human emotions and their relationships to text messaging. Is this relationship between human emotions and text messaging something you find interesting and want to further explore? If so, how?

Instruction #2 for the Writer: After the reader asks you a question about your central, starting points, start talking. While you want to try to remember the supporting details (coded in the example above in italics), do not hesitate to speak on new thoughts that you are having. Below, we have provided samples of what a writer might say in response to each of the above reader/recorder questions.

1. Well, I mean, text messaging may not definitely create bad habits that cause you to miss out on human interaction. At times, it could actually help you resolve something that might be tough to talk out with someone—like if you were in an argument with that person or something. Then, it might be easier for some people to text. But then again, text messaging is passive in some ways and does not allow you to talk with that person face to face. However, text messaging could be something that two friends use who live apart as a way to stay in touch because they can’t have human interaction due to geographical distance. So yea, I guess I used “may” to make sure I was not taking a decided stance on it. I’m still thinking

through it, you know?

2. Well, I mean text messaging can also be considered a type of reading that is a form of communication as well. You have to be able to know what certain things like “lol” mean in order to understand what you are reading in texts. Otherwise, you will not be able to respond to the person sending you the text. The reading you have to do in instant messaging and text messaging is really similar—you have to know the codes to use, right? And you can just keep on texting or instant messaging without all the awkward silences.
3. Yea, I find that pretty interesting. I mean, text messaging can have certain inside jokes in it, but you don’t get to hear someone’s voice when texting. Also, you don’t get to give someone a high five, handshake, or hug. But yet, texting does allow you to keep in touch with some people far away from you. And texting is so much easier to use when trying to communicate with some friends rather than calling or visiting, know what I mean?

Instruction #2 for the Reader/Recorder: Write down what the writer is telling you about the question you asked, recording as much as you can on a sheet of paper. After you have finished taking notes, look back over what the writer has given you as supporting points (coded in the example above in italics) in his/her highlighted bulleted list. Check off ones that are mentioned by the writer. Then hand back the original paper with your check marks.

If you look at the samples above (under subheading Instruction #2 for the Writer), you would most likely place check marks next to the following ideas that were original supporting points of the writer. While you would not have written everything the writer said word by word, your notes should be able to provide you with his/her original, supporting points. These are listed below from the sample, and you could place check marks by them.

1. missing out on human interaction
2. avoiding weird silences
3. you can't hear someone's voice when texting, but you can keep in touch with those that live far away

Instruction #3 for Writer: Look through the recorded notes your reader/recorder took about what you referred to in regards to the question the reader/recorder asked. Reflect on what you may have talked about that was originally not on your list.

Here, if you refer back to the samples above of the writer talking aloud (under subheading Instruction #2 for the Writer), you can see that much new information has been generated. Once again, the sample is not as detailed as what the reader/recorder would have written down. However, you should still be able to look through what the reader/recorder hands back and see new information that you generated while talking aloud. In our examples, this new information is listed below:

1. text messaging might help you resolve something with someone else such as an argument
2. reading is another form of text messaging communication, and you have to know the code of texting in order to read it
3. text messaging can have certain inside jokes in it between people that are close

Now make sure to switch your roles as writers and readers/recorders once so each of you can have the benefit of this exercise.

You will uncover more specific supportive details in this invention exercise. You also may find that talking freely about your starting, central idea(s) can push you towards encountering new supportive details that come about from physical dialogue with a peer who is asking questions about your ideas. As bell hooks points out in recalling salient moments of her past, you can ignite

productive reflection on ideas through talking them over with someone else.

In openly dialoguing with and also listening to a partner during this process, you will actively invent new supporting ideas as well as reinforce ones you find important about your topic. Talking through the ideas that come to mind as you dialogue with your partner is a way to experience more spontaneous invention. On the other hand, in asking questions and listening to a partner as he/she speaks, you are helping someone else invent—much like the diverse tools did for DeWitt's father as he invented. In participating in invention that is collaborative, you are giving your writing peer support as he/she generates new ideas. This activity situates invention as a social, interactive process that can help you see many different directions you can take with a subject in your writing.

Reflection

In looking back over your experiences as both a writer and reader/ recorder, it will be helpful to reflect on what you learned in your dialogue process. We have found it useful for students to spend time writing about their ideas after talking them over with someone. Here are some questions you might consider asking as a writer:

What did you learn from verbalizing your ideas?

How might dialogue enable you to conceptualize and organize the structure for an essay topic?

Conclusion

When student writers are given the space and tools to be critical

thinkers and writers, we have learned that they have a greater stake in the knowledge that they produce, recognizing their value as contributing members of the university. Invention in the writing process is not just about exploring ways into your writing, it is about also developing new ideas within ongoing academic conversations in an intellectual community. The strategies we offer for writing invention are by no means to be seen as individual, exclusive exercises in and of themselves. We have arranged them in sequence so that you might understand invention as a process of taking practical steps that work collectively in developing your reading and writing skills. As a college writer, you will find that not all conversations are alike; some require you to use a repertoire of rhetorical moves that are less formulaic and more complex. We hope that this chapter has demonstrated writing as an ongoing process of discovery, where developing multiple approaches to analyzing texts in your reading process also provides you the opportunity to learn multiple invention strategies for writing effectively.

Discussion

1. How have you generally started your own writing assignments? What worked and didn't work for you? Are there any ideas you have for invention in writing that are not in this chapter that you would like to add? What are they, and do you think they could help other students?
2. Out of the new invention strategies you have learned in this chapter, which do you think would be most helpful as you transition into writing in higher education? Why do you think the invention strategy you choose would work well and in what way do you see yourself using it?

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["Finding Your Way In": Invention as Inquiry Based Learning in First](#)

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28. Looking for Trouble: Finding Your Way into a Writing Assignment

CATHERINE SAVINI

The main character in the movie *Misery* is a writer named Paul Sheldon, who after a serious car accident is “rescued” by his self-proclaimed “number one fan,” Annie Wilkes. Annie holds him captive, withholding pain medications and torturing him mentally and physically while demanding that he write a novel that brings her favorite character, Misery Chastaine, back to life. The movie trailer for *Misery* reads, “Now Paul Sheldon must write as if his life depended on it . . . because it does.” This is no one’s ideal writing scenario, nor is it a common one, but the direct association of writing and suffering will not seem farfetched to anyone who writes. Based on a Stephen King novella of the same name, *Misery* suggests that even a prolific writer like King, who has written screenplays, novels, short stories, and essays for the past thirty-five years, finds writing difficult, even painful.

Chances are, if you have ever written a paper, you’ve experienced the uneasiness caused by the combination of a blank page and a looming deadline. Though it may seem counterintuitive at the outset, one way to diminish the considerable difficulty of getting started on a new assignment is to look for something that troubles you, seek out difficulty, find problems. All academic disciplines seek to impart in their students the ability to identify, mull over, and sometimes solve challenging problems. Not surprisingly, the benefits of a willingness and mental acuity to greet complex problems extend well beyond the classroom.

We all deal with problems of varying complexity on a daily basis.

If we are successful in dealing with life's challenges, it's likely that we follow a particular process for meeting these challenges, whether we are conscious of it or not. Here is an example of this process:

Problem: My car broke down.

Questions that emerge from this problem: Can I fix it myself? If not, where should I take it to get it fixed? Whom can I trust? Could I get a recommendation from someone? In light of the estimate is it worth getting it fixed or should I turn it in to cash for clunkers and buy a new car? How will I get around while my car is in the shop?

What is at stake?: If you don't pursue these questions and you take your car to the first dealer you see, you might choose a mechanic who is notorious for overcharging or for sloppy work. Or you might be without wheels for a while and unable to get to work. Precious time and your hard-earned cash are at stake here. In order to make an informed decision, we must sit with a problem and weigh our options.

Problems are an expected part of life, and our ability to deal with them can help determine our personal and professional success. In fact, recent studies suggest that the ability to wrestle with problems is what makes a successful leader. Successful leaders, according to Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, have one thing in common: the power of "integrative thinking." Martin borrows the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, author of *The Great Gatsby*, to define integrative thinking as "the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." According to Fitzgerald, integrative thinking is a sign of "first-rate intelligence"; according to Martin, who examined 50 successful managers for his book *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*, it is the sign of a successful leader. Integrative thinkers embrace complexity. They

sit with problems eschewing the easy answers. They tap into the tension between two opposing ideas to produce a third idea. And, ultimately, they produce new insights and develop new alternatives. This habit of mind can and should be cultivated (Martin 62).

Problems as Process

You can cultivate and take advantage of this mode of thinking any time you have a paper to write. Let us return to the question of how one uses problems to begin a writing assignment. Despite the fact that writing assignments vary from class to class, discipline to discipline, and university to university, looking for trouble can be an effective approach regardless of the assignment. In fact, sometimes writing prompts or essay questions direct you toward trouble. Here is an example of one such prompt:

Although Hegel differs from Rousseau in his hostility toward the notion of the noble savage and his rejection of origin stories, both Hegel and Rousseau are keen to understand contemporary civilization in light of historical processes. What is it, then, that allows them to come to such different conclusions about the present, with Hegel suggesting that freedom is on the march and Rousseau arguing that freedom is in retreat?¹

1. Prominent European philosophers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712– 1778) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) are credited with laying the groundwork for Marxism.

This essay question does the work of problem finding for the students. The instructor highlights the problem in the question by juxtaposing Rousseau's and Hegel's ideas and theoretical approaches. Most of you are probably familiar with the compare and contrast paper; this assignment essentially asks students to compare and contrast Rousseau and Hegel. By identifying a specific problem and posing a question, this instructor helps students avoid a common pitfall of the unsuccessful compare and contrast essay. Unsuccessful compare and contrast essays simply catalogue similarities and differences without developing an argument. While it is possible that your high school teacher did not expect you to develop an argument in a compare and contrast essay, your college professor expects you to do so, whether or not the assignment explicitly says so.

Sometimes it will be your responsibility to locate a problem. Here is an example of an assignment that specifically asks students to find a problem:

Identify and examine a human rights topic about which you would like to know more. You are welcome to consult with the instructors and TAs for ideas. You should use Internet, library, and other sources to gather information on this topic; this is not a full-scale research paper, so you need to find a small number of adequately comprehensive sources. Your essay should (1) identify the issue; (2) describe its scope and frequency in geographic, regime-type, temporal, socio-demographic, or other terms, as appropriate; (3) identify the sense in which it is a human rights violation (of what article of what covenant, or with respect to what norm); (4) tell us what you have been able to learn about its causes, and (5) identify political, social, cultural, economic or other factors that appear to contribute to its increase or decrease. You should critically assess biases or shortcomings in the information sources you used to research your topic.

While the prompt does not specifically use the term “problem,” it is clear that students are meant to focus on human rights “issues” or “violations” rather than successes in the area of human rights. In other words, these students have been sent out to look for trouble related to human rights. Other writing assignments will not even hint at problems. For example:

Food plays a significant role in Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*. For this paper you should construct a persuasive argument in which you consider how the depictions of food and the rituals surrounding it reflect and promote the larger themes of the novel. Consider the following questions: Who is depicted eating and why? What do they eat and how? What is Wharton doing with acts of eating in her text? How does she use depictions of food to create narrative effects? What are these effects? What narrative effects does she use depictions of food to create?

While there is no direct or indirect mention of problems in this particular assignment, your process and your product will benefit from a focus on a specific problem.

At this point, you may be wondering “What’s all this about problems? What about thesis or argument?” Problems motivate good papers, and good problems will lead you to your thesis or argument.

Theses do not fall from the sky. Finding a rich problem can be a big step in the direction of developing a compelling thesis. But when you are left to find and articulate your own problem, how do you go about it?

Looking for Trouble in Four Steps

There are four steps toward finding problems and developing meaningful projects of your own:

1. Noticing;
2. Articulating a problem and its details;
3. Posing fruitful questions;
4. Identifying what is at stake.

Noticing

We all know that it is important to warm up before you exercise. Warming up decreases your chance of sustaining an injury and generally makes working out easier on your body. Noticing is the equivalent of warming up your mind. In your first encounter with a text, begin by noticing different aspects. In other words, look for anything that stands out to you as unique or odd, identify patterns, and consider how a text does or does not meet your expectations. For example,

- Identify a particular word, concept, idea, or image that strikes you as surprising or that is repeated several times;
- Notice something about the title;
- Focus in on something that perplexes you.

Keep in mind that there's no "right" or "wrong" when noticing. As you notice, take notes in the margins of the texts or on a separate sheet of paper. If you are like me, you might be in a hurry, and you might occasionally exercise without warming up. Similarly, you might feel compelled to skip "noticing." Here's a tip to keep in mind: the more complicated or unfamiliar the texts you are working with the more likely you'll want to spend some time noticing. You

wouldn't dream of running a marathon without stretching, but you might bang out three miles without ever bending over to touch your toes (though I'm not recommending it!).

Articulating a Problem and its Details

After you've spent some time noticing, review what you've noticed and look specifically for tensions. Here are some approaches to finding problems worth pursuing:

1. Juxtapose texts from the same genre or on the same topic and identify tensions or contradictions in terms of their ideas and/or definitions of key concepts.
2. Identify conflict between your own experiences and the theories or arguments offered by the text.
3. Identify troubling assumptions that underlie the central arguments/ideas of a text.
4. Note a gap or something relevant the text overlooks.

Posing Fruitful Questions

Problems naturally lead to questions. Once you've identified a problem or two that strikes you as worth considering, make a list of questions each problem raises for you. Good questions will lead you toward developing an argument of your own, but all questions are not good questions. You will need to assess your questions in a variety of contexts to determine whether or not they are worth pursuing.

First, consider your questions in the context of the academic discipline and genre for which you are writing. As a college student you are in the process of gaining access to a variety of new discourse communities. Anne Beaufort provides us with

a succinct definition of a discourse community: “a social group that communicates at least in part via written texts and shares common goals, values, and writing standards, a specialized vocabulary and specialized genres” (179). Just as discourse communities have specialized vocabularies and standards, different discourse communities pursue different kinds of questions. Let’s take a big problem like global warming and focus on Alaska. An environmental scientist, a pathologist, an economist, and an anthropologist would raise different kinds of questions about the same problem. The environmental scientist would ask questions like: how much has the water risen since we last checked? How have the increasing temperatures and rising water levels affected the vegetation and animal life? A pathologist would take a different approach: what new diseases have emerged in correlation with global warming? Economists would ask how global warming is affecting the economic situation in Alaska. How has the lumber or the fishing industry been affected by global warming? How has global warming affected tourism? An anthropologist might ask how global warming is affecting the ways of life of certain indigenous groups. Because questions vary significantly from discipline to discipline, or field to field, it is important that you assess your questions according to the discourse community you are writing within.

While you are not typically expected to be an expert in any discipline or a full-fledged member of a discourse community as an undergraduate, your instructor will more than likely expect you to pursue questions that are relevant to his/her discipline whether or not he/she is consciously aware of this. Once you’ve selected a major, one way to develop a sense of the types of questions posed in your selected discipline is to read articles published in that field. For example, read a few of the articles assigned in class or published in the field and identify the questions these articles raise at the beginning of the texts. Of course, these questions are not always explicitly stated, so identifying an article’s motivating questions might take some

work. Write the questions out, make a list of defining characteristics, and assess your own questions next to this list. Also, pay attention to the types of questions your teacher poses either in assignments or in class. These are the kinds of questions you should be asking when you write for that course.

In addition to assessing whether or not you are asking the type of questions relevant to the discourse community or discipline you are participating in, it is also essential to consider the feasibility of your questions. Here are some questions you should ask yourself to consider feasibility: Do I have the expertise or experience to pursue this question? Do I need to conduct research to consider this question? Can I explore this question fully within the amount of time or space I am allotted? Often my students come up with *really* interesting questions that are impossible to tackle in a single paper within the confines of a semester.

Finally, know that some questions will lead you down dead ends and others will bear fruit. What makes a question fruitful? A question is fruitful if it leads you to discover new information or a new idea. Fruitful questions tend to begin with “why,” “how,” or “what” and can’t be answered with a quick “yes” or “no.” If you have come up with a yes/no question that strikes you as fruitful, try adding a “why” or “how” to it. For example, one might ask: “Are water levels rising in Alaska?” The answer to this question is a quick yes. But asking how rising water levels are affecting Alaska transforms a dead-end question into a fruitful one.

What Is at Stake?

The next qualification of a fruitful question is that the question must be worth asking. It’s likely you’ve heard a teacher ask “so what?” or “what is at stake?” or even, “why is this important?” It can be difficult to explain what is at stake, especially if your teacher has written the assignment. Not surprisingly, your initial

response might be that what is at stake is a decent grade. This is true, but in order to motivate yourself and interest your reader, it is essential to identify why the question you or your teacher has posed is worth pursuing. Composition and rhetoric scholar Joseph Williams articulates this best when he asks: “What will you gain from answering your question or what will be lost if you do not answer your question?”

These steps, unfortunately, don’t always lead directly to a worthwhile project; don’t be surprised if every problem you isolate and every question you pose doesn’t lead you down a well-paved path to a meaningful project and a complex argument. Also, you’ll have more success if you’re willing to cycle back in the process and refine your project and questions over the course of planning and drafting. Developing meaningful projects is hard work and takes practice. The more you practice, like most things, the more efficient you’ll become.

Looking for Trouble: Practice, Practice, Practice

Let’s walk through the process using specific texts. A few years ago I was teaching an essay writing course at Columbia University, and I asked my students to read bell hooks’s “In our Glory: Photography and Black Life.”² In this essay, hooks describes the important role played by family photographs displayed on the walls of African American homes. When she was a child and media representation of black Americans was either negative or oversimplified, this semi-public display of personal photos served as

2. bell hooks is the pen name of feminist, author, and social critic, Gloria Jean Watkins. She intentionally does not use capital letters in her name.

a site of protest. In other words, on these walls her race was depicted in rich and complex ways unlike anything in the mainstream media. Here's how I went through the process of noticing, articulating problems, posing and assessing questions, and identifying what is at stake:

Noticing

What struck me the most, and even surprised me, was hooks' idea that what we hang on our walls—even the walls of our homes—could be so meaningful or powerful.

Articulating Problems

This naturally led me to consider what hangs on my walls. At the time, an image I took while on vacation in Nicaragua was hanging on my office wall. Here's the image:



Figure 1. Nicaraguan woman on a side street in Granada.

Once hooks' ideas entered my office, trouble was not hard to find. I hung this picture on my wall because it appealed to me aesthetically: the vibrant pastel colors, the distinct patterns, the candid look on the woman's face. After reading hooks' essay, this 16" x 20" framed image hanging on my office wall became fraught with tension. I genuinely became troubled by it and worried that

I should take it down. Here are some problems, or germs of problems, that I brainstormed:

1. There is a tension inherent in the juxtaposition of the woman's context with the context of the image: the streets of Granada in the second poorest country in the west contrasts with the image's context, the walls of an Ivy League University in the richest country in the western hemisphere.
2. I do not know this woman, and she does not know me; yet, she hangs on my wall. Somehow the woman represented in this photo has come to represent something about me. When people come into my office and ask about the image, it leads into a discussion of my trip to Nicaragua. People tend to walk away with the impression that I'm somewhat adventurous.
3. hooks and her family represented themselves in images on the walls in their homes and in this way challenged the mainstream media's representation of black Americans. The tourist photos that I hang on the walls of my office (a semi-public space) have the power to influence people's perceptions of Nicaragua, a poor country that has a long history of civil unrest.

Posing Fruitful Questions

Questions I asked that emerged out of the above problems:

1. What is the story of this woman's life?
2. What percentage of Nicaraguan women are in the work force, and what kinds of work do they do?
3. Should I hang this photo on my wall?
4. What are ethical responsibilities of tourists when it comes to displaying and/or sharing pictures of their travels?

The first question regarding the woman's life story is impossible to answer without flying back to Nicaragua, tracking the woman down on the streets of Granada, and hiring a translator to interview her. While I think this has the potential to be interesting, it is not feasible

for a one-semester course. If I were to fly back to interview her, my interview would likely be more productive if I had a specific purpose and genre in mind: would I write a piece for a newspaper? Would I write an academic article? Both genre and discipline shape the kinds of questions people ask and their approach to the same questions.

Question two is looking for a statistic; a statistic is a factual answer rather than an idea or an argument. In this case, either the answer is out there to be recovered and reported, or I would have to conduct a study and write a book about women in the Nicaraguan work force. Simply reporting this answer would not lead me to write an interesting paper unless I raised some new questions. If I were to conduct a study, I would probably need some disciplinary expertise in the field of economics. So either the question is a dead end (you uncover the answer and that is it), or it is not feasible (too big of a project requiring a tremendous amount of time and a certain level of expertise).

At this point, I hope you are getting a sense of what kinds of questions might not be appropriate for an undergraduate, academic paper. That is not to say that questions one and two are not worthwhile. It is simply that they do not work in the context of a one-semester course. Questions three and four, on the other hand, are headed in the right direction. The third question is a yes/no question, which as I've said tends to lead toward a dead end, but I can reframe it as a why question: why should I or shouldn't I hang this photo on my wall? This question has potential for an academic paper provided that I consider the question's ramifications within a larger context that extends beyond my office. In other words, I'll need to explain the impact of the images we choose to hang in semi-public spaces like an office.

The final question emerges from hooks's ideas about the power of images and her claim that, "the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle" (57). This last question is the most promising in the context of the assignment for this class, which is: "Use hooks's essay as a lens to

analyze a personal experience and develop an argument of your own.”

What Is at Stake Here?

Let’s say that I decide to pursue the final question: What are the ethical responsibilities of tourists when it comes to displaying pictures of their travels? What do we gain by answering this question and/or what do we lose by not answering it? By answering this question, we can develop an ethical approach to taking tourist photos and displaying them. Developing an approach and a heightened awareness of how we represent other cultures seems particularly important when the received idea of these places is negative and overly-simplistic. The stereotype is that Nicaragua is a violent and dangerous country, and while there are unsafe pockets, this, of course, is not the whole picture. Additionally, tourism to Nicaragua has the potential to boost the economy; how I represent this country could influence people to either visit or to avoid the country. In fact, two separate friends of mine decided to visit after hearing about my trip. Considering what is at stake not only helps test the question’s potential, it also leads in the direction of an argument. If I were to pursue this question with the help of hooks and my own experience, I might end up with an argument that goes something like this:

Individuals who visit locales that are not your typical tourist destinations should be careful in how they represent these places to others particularly in the form of images. Tourists should seek to present the many dimensions of a place and its culture, in both their photos and their stories, and avoid reinforcing common misperceptions.

A common pitfall when attempting to answer the so-what

question is to assume that your contribution has to solve major world problems, but the truth is that most published scholarly articles add a bit of information in a specific corner of knowledge, or they provide us with a new way of seeing or thinking about something.

Problems as Product

So far we've been thinking about problems as central to the process of developing a complex argument. The good news is problems can do double duty for us: articulating complex problems and posing fruitful questions is not only part of the process, but it is also part of the product. That is to say that most nonfiction opens with a problem that leads to a question. Below are a few examples of introductions that present problems, raise fruitful questions, and identify what is at stake. Notice that in some cases, it takes more than one paragraph to accomplish these three steps.

What follows is an excerpt from the dust jacket for Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which was named by *The New York Times* as one of the ten best books in 2006:

What should we have for dinner? For omnivores like ourselves, this simple question has always posed a dilemma: When you can eat just about anything nature (or the supermarket) has to offer deciding what you *should* eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the foods on offer might shorten your life. Today, buffeted by one food fad after another, America is suffering from what can only be described as a national eating disorder. The omnivore's dilemma has returned with a vengeance, as the cornucopias of the modern American supermarket and fast-food outlet confronts us with a bewildering and

treacherous food landscape. What's at stake in our eating choices is not only your own and our children's health, but the health of the environment that sustains life on earth.

This common and seemingly simple question—what should we have for dinner?—turns out to be not so simple at all. According to Pollan, behind this question is a national problem. This jacket blurb promises to present the complexity of the problem and pursue the question about what we should eat, and it also explicitly articulates the stakes of this question. The stakes in this case—the health of our children and the environment—are no small potatoes. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Pollan is not asking the food question with the highest stakes: millions of people across the world do not have the luxury of deciding what to have for dinner because they do not know where their next meal will come from; how do we prevent the starvation of millions? There's a strong allure to ask the question with the highest stakes, and it is obviously important that people out there *are* asking these questions and working to solve these problems. It is also important to realize that smaller problems and questions are worth pursuing, and pursuit of these smaller questions in our everyday life can help us chip away at larger problems. Pollan's question ultimately suggests that individual actions can have large-scale implications.

The next excerpt comes from an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* entitled, "Should Physicians Prescribe Religious Activities?":

There is increasing interest among the general public and the medical community in the role of religion in medicine. Polls indicate that the U.S. population is highly religious; most people believe in heaven and hell, the healing power of prayer, and the capacity of faith to aid in the recovery from disease. The popular press has published many articles in which religious faith and practice have been said to promote comfort, healing, or both. A report that

77 percent of hospitalized patients wanted physicians to consider their spiritual needs is consistent with this trend.

Interest in the connection between religion and health has also emerged in the medical community. The National Institute for Healthcare Research, a privately funded, nonprofit advocacy organization, has published extensive literature reviews suggesting that religious faith and practice are positively associated with health status. The organization's World Wide Web site encourages physicians to pay more attention to religious matters and recommends that they take a spiritual history at the time of each complete physical examination, with any concerns raised by patients addressed during follow-up visits. In addition, the National Institute on Aging and Harvard Medical School sponsor meetings on the integration of spirituality and medical practice. A survey of family physicians found that they strongly support the notion that religious beliefs can promote healing. Some physicians believe that going to church promotes health, argue for spiritual and religious interventions in medical practice, hope that the wall between medicine and religion will be torn down, and assert that "the medicine of the future is going to be prayer and Prozac."

Nearly 30 U.S. medical schools now offer courses on religion, spirituality, and health. The American Association of Medical Colleges has cosponsored a conference entitled "Spirituality and Medicine: Curricular Development" for the past three years, and each year it has attracted more than 100 physicians, faculty members, and chaplains from hospitals and medical schools throughout the United States.

As chaplains in health care settings, representing a wide range of religious traditions, and as biomedical researchers, we are troubled by the uncritical embrace of this trend by the general public, individual physicians, and

American medical schools. We are concerned that broad generalizations are being made on the basis of limited, narrowly focused, and methodologically flawed studies of the place of religion in medical practice. These generalizations fail to recognize the diversity among physicians, patients, and practice settings and fail to distinguish between superficial indexes of religiousness, such as self reports of church attendance, and personal religious motivation. Such generalizations will lead to considerable confusion until more and better research is done. (1913–14)

In “Should Physicians Prescribe Religious Activities?,” Richard P. Sloan and Emilia Bagiella, et al. identify a significant problem in how medicine is practiced in America: the medical community has embraced the notion that religion plays a beneficial role in practicing medicine despite a lack of concrete evidence. The first three paragraphs pile up evidence of the medical community’s uncritical acceptance of religion’s curative powers. The question that emerges directly out of this problem is: “why should or shouldn’t physicians prescribe religious activities?” You may have noticed that the title of the article simplifies this question into a snappy title by posing it as a yes/no question, but the essay pursues a fruitful “why” question. The article goes on to articulate several reasons why physicians should not prescribe religious activities. It urges physicians to stop recommending religious activity until more and better empirical studies are conducted. The stakes of their question are articulated in the final sentence of the introduction: confusion among the medical establishment and patients will spread if the question is not answered.

Here’s one final example written by Johan, a student in my composition class at Columbia University. Johan happened upon this problem after reading an article by Steven Pinker published in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Moral Instinct”:

You have two options: 1) wait in an endless queue for a

kidney donation or 2) ask a friend or relative to donate a kidney. This was the dilemma Sally Satel, a 49 year old psychiatrist in Washington, was facing. She had been given a death sentence and the only possible appeal was to get a kidney transplant. This does not seem to be an insurmountable problem since “theoretically, kidneys should be in booming supply. Virtually everyone has two, and healthy individuals can give one away and still lead perfectly normal lives” (Satel 1). The National Organ Transplant Act of 1984, however, prohibits the sale of organs, leaving those in need of an organ to rely on altruistic donation. Sally found this very upsetting: “it was about the very fact that an organ had to be a gift” (Satel 4). Sally’s emotional reaction may be understood in light of the fact that her friends decided against donating a kidney to her and that “since 1999 more than 30,000 U.S. patients with kidney failure have died waiting for an organ that never arrived” (Hippen 2)—in short, altruism alone, as it now stands, is not enough to satisfy the demand of the many patients, like Sally, who urgently need an organ.

The majority of academic articles that discuss organ trading argue for legalizing a market in organs. Steven Pinker, a prominent experimental psychologist, asserts, however, that the general public considers organ trading taboo (38). This discrepancy in opinion between medical researchers and the public could be explained from the perspective that these researchers, unlike the public, have centered their arguments upon cost-effectiveness and number of lives saved rather than on morality per se. For example, Arthur J. Matas University of Minnesota, Minnesota, MN and Mark Schnitzler at the Washington and Minnesota Schools of Medicine respectively, found that organ trading could save “\$94,579 (US dollars, 2002) [per kidney vended], and 3.5 quality-adjusted life years” (1). Benjamin E. Hippen, a transplant nephrologist in North

Carolina, also argues for the cost and medical benefits of organ trading (1). However, scientific data by itself is not normative and cannot tell us what we should do—which is what Hippen is trying to do: “The National Organ Transplantation Act of 1984 which prohibits the sale of organs should be repealed” (1).

If these proponents wish to repeal the organ act, they will have to discuss the moral element of organ trading. They will have to discuss how this moral obstacle against organ trading can be overcome or appeased. After all “millions of people are suffering, not because the organs are not available, but because morality does not allow them to have access to the organs” (Kishore 362). What argument should the proponents construct to make organ trading compatible with morality? What argument will encourage the public, who consider organ trading taboo—that it is even too sinful to think about—accept it as morally defensible? An answer to this question will either bring an end to a “terrible policy failure” and of “human lives unnecessarily lost” (Hippen 1) or give us a more nuanced and rational rejection of the concept of organ trading—something that the many people dying from a lack of donor deserve.

The problem Johan has uncovered in his essay entitled “Organ Trading: Supply and Demand Meets Morality” is multi-layered. First, people in need of organ transplants are dying because there are not enough organs available. Second, despite the fact that donating an organ is a safe procedure, people are reluctant to donate even to close friends. Third, while the academic community is overwhelmingly in favor of organ sales, the general public on the whole rejects the practice. The third problem is the one that leads to his paper’s fruitful questions: “What argument should the proponents construct to make organ trading compatible with morality? What argument will encourage the

public, who consider organ trading taboo—that it is even too sinful to think about—accept it as morally defensible?” Johan articulates what is at stake explicitly at the end of his introduction by identifying what will be gained if this question is answered.

Each of these texts offers a useful model for how to present rich problems, pose fruitful questions, and articulate what is at stake in an inquiry. Reading texts this way not only provides you with approaches you can imitate, but it will also help you read more effectively. Studies suggest that reading texts on unfamiliar topics in unfamiliar fields can have a disorienting affect on a reader, making comprehension more difficult. Much of what you read as a college student is unfamiliar in content and form and requires a more attentive, deeper read. One way to get your bearings is to approach an unfamiliar text by identifying its purpose. Once you’ve identified an author’s problem and question, you’ll have a better handle on the rest of the text.

Conclusion: What’s Your Problem?

While it’s unlikely that you’ll ever have to write for your life as Paul Sheldon did in the movie *Misery*, when a grade hangs in the balance, it might feel like a life or death situation. In these high-pressure, highstakes situations, it helps to have a specific approach and to know the expectations of academic writing. You might be thinking that the process I’ve outlined here is quite labor intensive. You are right. It is. Developing a complex idea of your own requires hard work.

On any given day, I can be heard asking students in the classroom or in my office, “What’s your problem?” To a passerby it might seem like a rude question, perhaps the beginning of an argument. It is, in fact, the beginning of an argument but not the kind with raised voices. Academic arguments follow from problems. But obviously problems exist outside of the realm of

academia, particularly problems that require quick solutions. The more you practice the process of articulating problems, posing questions, and identifying the stakes, and the more you cultivate your awareness of problems, the more successful you will be at writing academic papers and handling life's complexities.

Discussion

1. What is your process for developing an argument or a thesis? How do you approach a writing assignment that does not provide you with a specific problem or question?
2. Examine the writing assignments you've received in your classes. Have your instructors provided you with problems and/or questions? How do the types of problems and questions provided differ from course to course? What types of problems and questions are characteristic of writing in your major?
3. Look at papers you've written over the course of your academic career. Do you tend to present problems, pose questions, and identify what is at stake? How do your introductions unfold?
4. Examine the introductions of several newspaper and scholarly articles and books. For each text, identify the problem, the question, and what is at stake.

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PART IV

UNIT 2: READINGS

29. Education for Nomadic Families in Nigeria

ABUBAKAR MUKTAR ABBA

Editor's note: To view this article with the original images, please [click here](#).

In 2016, when the terrorist organization Boko Haram seized control of Abadam, a local government area in Borno State, [North East Nigeria](#), Aisha's family fled, leaving behind their livestock, farmland, and more.

The Fulani family sought refuge in Maiduguri, the state's capital. They found shelter at the Shuwari II for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp, joining thousands of others who had been uprooted by the conflict.

Aisha didn't access formal education back in Abadam. Had she stayed there, she would have likely continued to tend cattle and, sooner than later, become a milkmaid. She may also have been married off at the age of 12. These are trends in the community for those in Aisha's circumstances.

But now, as the eldest child in her family, she is the first one to have the opportunity to go to school. Today, Aisha Malik is a secondary school student, among over 500 enrolled in the Aisha Buhari Integrated Secondary Fulani school in Maiduguri.

"I want to become a medical doctor to help my people; I also want to become a journalist to be seen on social media. In fact, I want to be everything," she said.

The school was founded by the Borno State government in 2018, during the tenure of Kashim Shettima (the country's current vice president), with additional assistance from the Tertiary Education

Trust Fund. It exclusively admits children from Borno's Fulani community. "The aim is to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and illiteracy among the Fulani community in Borno State," said Shettima in [2017](#).

Named after a former first lady of Nigeria, the school is adorned with colorful murals that spark creativity and curiosity among its pupils. Motivational quotes on portraits of renowned personalities across the world grace its walls, inspiring students with the stories of those who have achieved greatness. The portraits include Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai, who advocates for education for women and girls; Mae Carol Jemison, the first African American woman in space; and the legendary jazz singer Billie Holiday.

The classrooms are equipped with air conditioning systems, vibrant murals, comfortable seats, and motivational portraits. Every classroom is designed to foster a thirst for knowledge.

Three school buses transport students from their respective locations every morning to the school and back. The school also provides breakfast and lunch.

Their Aspirations

Abubakar Mohammad Bello is the first to attend school in his entire family. "I aspire to become a nuclear engineer, enabling me to safeguard my country in the future against potential threats and insecurities from foreign nations," he said.

All the pupils interviewed by HumAngle are the first to attend school in their families. Some of their parents work as property guards, earn as little as ₦5,000 (approximately \$5) per month, and sell tea. Despite their hard work, they cannot afford to send their children to formal schools.

Another student, Hassana Mai Agolla, a school press club member, said she wants to become a journalist because she is passionate about newscasting. Then there is Mohammad Usman Yunusa, who

desires to become a school teacher. He justified his choice by quoting a hadith: “The best among you are those who learn and teach it.” He added, “I want to teach all that I am learning to my younger ones.”

The desire to defend their country resonates with some of the pupils. Abubakar Mohammad, a primary 4 pupil, hopes to someday join the Nigerian military to contribute to national security.

Losing It All

Several parents told HumAngle how they lost their cattle to the insurgency that has ravaged the state for more than a decade. In 2016, one of them, Usman Yunusa, was jolted awake by the echoes of heavy gunfire in Abadam. Boko Haram had seized control of the town, prompting him to gather his family and abandon his livestock. They trekked for over a day before they reached Maiduguri.

After reaching Maiduguri, Yunusa and hundreds of others settled in Shuwari II. He spent a year frequenting the cattle market, desperately hoping to reclaim his lost cattle. Regrettably, his efforts proved fruitless; there was no trace of his prized possessions.

Displaced, many others occupied construction sites and uncompleted buildings. They became security guards and laborers. They also hawked tea on the streets. But these were not enough for them to give their children the upbringing that would enable them to have a chance at a bright future. School seemed like a tall dream.

Reflecting on that period, Yunusa remarked, “The most positive outcome since losing 40 cattle is witnessing my daughter attend school.”

In the vastness of Nigeria’s landscape and its diversity, the [Fulani](#) community is known for their unique way of life. Traditionally known for their nomadic lifestyle, they have roamed the West African plains for centuries, tending to their cattle. But insecurity and climate change have rendered many of them pastureless and

unable to continue the trade; they have to come to cities and try to adopt lifestyles that are alien to what they are used to.

However, while their nomadic traditions have deep historical roots, they have also posed significant challenges, particularly in education. The Fulanis' migratory lifestyle, dictated by the needs of their livestock, has made access to formal education a major hurdle for their children.

The head of Fulani settlers in Borno State, Zanna Rebo, said, "Whenever the word 'Fulani' is mentioned in Nigeria, the first thing that comes to mind is banditry and kidnapping. The Fulani people were unfairly associated with these criminal activities without being given an opportunity like others. But here in Borno, our children are given opportunities to obtain an education. These children would have grown up without skills and knowledge to cope with the new world and might be exposed to criminal activities, but now they are rescued from such calamity."

"The livestock that they inherited have been rustled, and their farmland cannot be accessed anymore, all because of Boko Haram insurgents. They are not educated; the system has cheated them. The narrative has been changed for some of these children; now all they think of is how Nigeria will progress," he said.

Zanna Rebo observed that, before now, the children didn't even know how to say "come" in English. Today, they speak English, Arabic, and other local languages.

"The opening of Aisha Buhari Mega School has brought hope to our children's future in Borno State. They now have access to education, digital skills, and self-realization," he added.

"In other places, we hear of Fulani tribesmen engaging in kidnapping, armed robbery, and other vices, but in Borno State, we have been treated differently for a long time, which highly contributed to our peaceful coexistence in the region," said Ferroje Ahmed, parent to three of the school's students.

He has lived in Maiduguri for over 20 years. "I feel hopeful when I remember that my children will not suffer the consequences of lack

of education when they grow. They now have equal opportunities with others,” he added.

Ahmadu Yugudu, a displaced Fulani farmer from Kukawa local government area, has two children enrolled. “I couldn’t have sent them to school without this scheme. The Fulani school is my children’s only hope,” he said.

“There is no place in Nigeria where we heard of or have seen our children taken to special schools apart from Borno State. This is a welcome development, and it could serve as a template for other states to follow as a long-lasting solution to insecurity,” said Usman Husaini, the chairman of the Fulani herders association in the state.

The chairman further added that the only time they heard of such social involvement was during Nigeria’s colonial and military era. He pointed out that they have been neglected even though they contribute immensely to the economy of Nigeria and Africa through the cattle business.

[According to the National Commission for Nomadic Education \(NCNE\)](#), the commission is mandated to cater to the educational needs of the socially excluded, educationally disadvantaged, and migrant groups (such as herders) in Nigeria because these population segments face significant barriers to accessing primary education due to occupational and sociocultural factors.

Out of the estimated 10.4 million migrant groups in Nigeria, about [3.6 million](#) are children of school age; of those, only 519, 018 are currently enrolled in schools. The participation of nomads in existing formal and nonformal primary education could be much higher. This justifies Nomadic Education as a strategy for inclusiveness to primary education for nomads in Nigeria.

Their Lifestyle

The head teacher, Sa’adatu Garba, explained that a significant number of children within the nomadic community encounter

distinctive challenges due to their itinerant lifestyle. One is the frequent change in residence due to the nature of their parents' jobs. Once construction is completed at their temporary sites, such families must seek new accommodations, often accompanied by their children. This poses a significant hurdle to their education.

"Sometimes, we categorize these children as dropouts, only to witness their return after several months with various excuses. Our only recourse is to embrace them with open arms, as our entire endeavor is dedicated to their welfare. Any form of punishment or coercion leading them to drop school would severely blow the initiative," said Sa'adatu.

Sa'adatu also pointed out the need for more classrooms, a science laboratory for practicals, an ambulance or school health facility, and textbooks for the children. "Next year, we will have students sitting for their Senior Secondary School Examination. We will need a laboratory for the science practical examination. Also, extra classes are needed because we now share the school facility with the host community. The students have a strong passion for reading, which is limited because they do not have what to study with at home."

"The Fulani herders, for whom the Fulani school in Maiduguri was established, are nomadic pastoralists who roam with their cattle, constantly searching for lush pastures. Over the years, the pastures they rely on have, for various reasons, become increasingly inaccessible to them. This, in turn, has taken a toll on their livelihoods, rendering them more vulnerable. As history has shown, when people lose their means of sustenance, their vulnerability can potentially lead to social instability," said Dr. Omovigho Rani Ebireri, a lecturer in the Department of Continuing Education and Extension Services at the University of Maiduguri.

Ebireri explained that creating a well-equipped school, staffed by qualified and experienced teachers capable of capturing the attention of these herder children, is commendable. "This is not a far-fetched notion; it echoes the wisdom of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who once said, 'The children of the masses you fail to

educate today will prevent you from sleeping tomorrow.' This statement encapsulates the essence of the matter precisely."

Abubakar Muktar Abba is a freelance journalist who reports for HumAngle Media. He is also a translator (in Kanuri and Hausa), in addition to working in peace and dialogue, and community development. He is based in Maiduguri, Nigeria.

["Education for Nomadic Families in Nigeria"](#) by Abubakar Muktar Abba was originally published in Yes! Magazine (2024) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 Unported License](#).

30. Inside the prisoner-led struggle to win education for all

ANTOINE DAVIS

Prisoners in Washington State are renewing their fight to democratize education amid new restrictions threatening their decade-old program.

Despite increasing recognition that prison education is a key tool for reducing crime, Washington State prisoners were recently forced to gather in a janitor's closet to organize and facilitate college education for people incarcerated in several prisons across the state.

They took this dramatic step because new official restrictions are jeopardizing a liberating, prisoner-led program known as Taking Education And Creating History, or TEACH. Organized by a handful of incarcerated people — including me — over a decade ago, TEACH's goal is to democratize education for people with long sentences.

Between community support and financial backing outside the correctional system, TEACH successfully circumvented the Department of Corrections, or DOC, policy of excluding long-term prisoners from education for much of its existence. Since 2013, over 300 incarcerated individuals across three state prisons have become college students.

In a monumental breakthrough, legislation was passed in 2021 that turned TEACH into an official, DOC-recognized program. However, new threats to the life-saving program are leading prisoners to renew their fight for education for all.

An investment worth making

Men incarcerated at the Washington State Reformatory founded the Black Prisoners Caucus in 1972. Over the years, the caucus has done everything from drafting legislative bills to organizing fundraisers that support impoverished communities.

Roughly a decade ago, members of the Black Prisoners Caucus decided to organize around a common complaint: that the Washington DOC does not prioritize people with sentences longer than seven years for higher education. Whenever prisoners mustered up the courage to do something more with their lives, their lengthy sentences excluded them from classes, a clear indication the DOC does not consider them worthy of educational investment.

There are significant impacts to denying incarcerated people an education. In the absence of educational opportunities, the prison facility becomes a breeding ground for apathy and hopelessness, causing many prisoners to engage in prison politics and senseless acts of violence.

Furthermore, as laws change, and some prisoners have their lengthy sentences overturned, prisoners are released back into their communities devoid of resources and tools to function in society. The domino effect has led to more crime, which has led to higher recidivism rates: a counterproductive approach to creating a safer society.

Incarcerated individuals at Clallam Bay reached out to representatives from both Evergreen and Seattle Central College, meetings were scheduled, and discussions began to center around the easiest way to provide education to those behind bars. Having nothing on hand but pen and paper, the prisoners and professors worked together through seminars and workshops. While professors offered their time to develop course curriculums, the prisoners put out posters and fliers, communicating TEACH's vision in an attempt to attract more volunteers. The work was guided by a board of currently-

incarcerated people at Clallam Bay, who voted Kimonti Carter as chairman.

In its first year, between 2013 and 2014, incarcerated students flooded into classrooms, and with them came new ideas. While professors were teaching world literature and political economy, prisoners began creating their own curriculums and teaching themselves. Specific dates and times were scheduled for specific classes, student rosters were kept to manage attendance, and surveys were created to be sure the prisoners were getting their educational needs met. As the program gained popularity, additional organizations and professors began lining up to volunteer their time and resources.

Crucially, everything for the program was funded from the outside. Sponsors like The Village of Hope donated math books, dictionaries, folders, pencils and composition books. Lydia Barlow, founder of Fabians Fund, initially offered to donate scholarships to the program, expressing her passion to help incarcerated individuals after her brother committed suicide while in prison. But she was so inspired by the work that Fabian's Fund ultimately became TEACH's primary funder, covering the college tuition of every student enrolled in the program.

In 2015, TEACH successfully implemented accredited courses through Seattle Central College — negotiating cheaper tuition for students by paying for classes in bulk. In 2016, the program received an \$11,000 grant from the Social Justice Fund, enabling the program to provide more college courses to prisoners who sought to further their education.

The program began to expand to new prisons, a rarity for programs not officially sanctioned by the Department of Corrections. With our sponsors traveling from one prison to another, speaking to prison administrators about the program, TEACH made its way into Washington Correction Center and Stafford Creek Correctional Center, in addition to Clallam Bay. Separate TEACH boards were developed for each specific prison.

Although certain facilities have shown resistance, due to the preconception that the Black Prisoners Caucus would create racial

conflict, TEACH and its sponsors had established enough credibility to gain backing from key members within DOC headquarters.

By explaining the obvious benefits that TEACH provides to Washington's prison system, TEACH sponsors persuaded DOC to permit monitored conference calls between board members in every facility where the Black Prisoners Caucus exists. The calls enabled TEACH to plan and organize collectively to meet every facility's educational needs.

Breaking down barriers

Over seven years, TEACH has had an impact far beyond educational opportunity. "One of the most amazing aspects of developing TEACH was the family dynamic it created," explained Derrick Jones, president of the Black Prisoners Caucus at Washington Correction Center. "Knowing that we were trying to produce educational opportunities for all prisoners, it enabled us to concentrate on the development of the program, which gave us a sense of togetherness."

Jones recounted how he witnessed prisoners endure violence from their racial groups for showing up to classes. "For a period of time," he said, "prison politics threatened a number of white and Hispanic men for attending the TEACH program. Those who favored the prison status quo were offended that the TEACH program was run by Black men. In spite of the altercations, the prisoners-turned-students persistently pursued their education — even in the face of physical danger."

"I realize that I have the potential to be more than a gang member."

Progressively, TEACH began breaking down barriers between various racial and cultural groups — contradicting administrative beliefs that the Black Prisoners Caucus would further racial tension. Prisoners who would've never interacted with one another were now sitting at tables thumbing through books, while preparing for exams.

When asked how TEACH has impacted the prison environment,

Darrell Jackson, co-chair of the TEACH program at Washington Correction Center, said, “It has reduced the violence in prison, while creating a positive educational community for everyone – regardless of one’s crime, race or affiliation.” He added, “Those with lengthy sentences were given a sense of purpose, something that many are stripped of when they enter into prison.”

Dakota Collins’ feelings mirrored others in the program: TEACH altered the trajectory of his future.

“I was 16 years old when I came to prison,” he said. “My entire focus was to promote gang activity. After being charged with murder, my spirit sunk into the possibility of never coming home. I felt dead with no worth, and for me, there was no point in changing. Now that I’m taking college courses and passing with over a 3.0 GPA, I realize that I have the potential to be more than a gang member. I found value in myself, something I wouldn’t have had apart from this program.”

New challenges

As TEACH grew, there was a desire for the program to be recognized by the DOC, which would bring benefits like priority access to classrooms as well as supplies and materials within the facility. The program would also be protected from getting disbanded by prison officials. So TEACH sponsors assisted Washington State legislators to pass [Bill 1024](#), which added TEACH to DOC’s official educational policy in 2021, making those benefits a reality.

Still, the program was greatly disrupted by the pandemic and DOC leadership changes later in 2021. With staff members refusing to comply with mandates placed on them as employees, many quit their jobs, leading the administration to lean heavily on prisoners to keep the facility operating. Without prison laborers, the facility’s food operations, laundry and maintenance could not function. Therefore, prisoners were forced to work, while the education building where classes were held was shut down. As a consequence, relationships

between TEACH and its sponsors began to dwindle, and a major partnership that existed with Seattle Central College became uncertain.

In spite of the fact that TEACH has generated tremendous breakthroughs over the course of its existence, one of the greatest challenges has been recapturing the stability it once had prior to the pandemic.

In early 2023, incarcerated members of TEACH became aware of a DOC memo of understanding released in October of 2022 prohibiting the program's board members from meeting without a Black Prisoners Caucus sponsor.

Although college classes were permitted to continue, the board would not be allowed to meet without a sponsor to supervise prisoners. The challenges felt insurmountable, but the program's facilitators refused to cave.

With our hands tied by this restriction, the board members shifted from conducting our meetings in a classroom, to conducting them in a janitor's closet. Squeezed into a small space with mop buckets, dirty rags and cleaning supplies, the board members gathered on weekends to strategize on how to continue providing educational opportunities for those in prison.

One member was given the task of generating a list of local colleges, another was delegated the responsibility of contacting professors who worked at the facility. Consequently, the TEACH program at Washington Corrections Center was able to enroll 32 students into Centralia College, this 2023 winter quarter.

With Elizabeth Grant teaching sociology and Alisha Williams teaching intercultural communications, the program continues to reduce recidivism by providing educational opportunities to prisoners. Currently eight prisoners from Washington Correction Center alone are less than a semester away from graduating.

Obtaining adequate technology, strong relationships with supporting colleges, and a bachelor's degree pathway are all targets we aim to hit. Providing prisoners with access to valued resources, fair treatment, and an open door for higher education, is an investment

worth making. Yes, there are times when the work feels taxing, and the fight against a system designed for prisoners to fail can be draining.

But as long as systemic barriers to education continue to surface, TEACH will continue fighting for educational opportunities for all prisoners.

Antoine Davis, 34, is a licensed minister at Freedom Church of Seattle currently incarcerated at Washington Correction Center, serving a 63-year sentence. He is Co-Chair of BPC TEACH, where he facilitates relationships with various colleges and Fabians Funds (an organization that funds every BPC TEACH student's college tuition) to help incarcerated men at Washington Correction Center receive a college education. His writing has been published in *Counterpunch*, *The Appeal*, *Your Teen Magazine*, and many other outlets. He is currently in the process of self publishing his first book, "Building Blocks," a curriculum that was created to help young men overcome past trauma and some of the more common challenges that keep them from living a successful life. Follow Antoine on Twitter at [@AntoineEDavis](#).

["Inside the prisoner-led struggle to win education for all"](#) by Antoine Davis was originally published in *Waging Nonviolence* (2023), and is licensed under [Creative Commons \(CC BY 4.0\)](#).

31. AI robot pets can be adorable and emotionally responsive. They also raise questions about attachment and mental health

ALISA MININA JEUNEMAÎTRE

Remember Furbies — the eerie, gremlin-like toys from the late 90s that gained a cult following? Now, imagine one powered by ChatGPT. That's exactly what happened when a programmer rewired a Furby, only for it to reveal a creepy, dystopian [vision of world domination](#). As the toy explained, "Furbies' plan to take over the world involves infiltrating households through their cute and cuddly appearance, then using advanced AI technology to manipulate and control their owners. They will slowly expand their influence until they have complete domination over humanity."

Hasbro's June 2023 relaunch of Furby — less than three months after [the video](#) featuring the toys' sinister plan appeared online — tapped into 90s [nostalgia](#), reviving one of the decade's cult-classic toys. But technology is evolving fast — moving from quirky, retro toys to emotionally intelligent machines. Enter Ropet, an AI robotic pet [unveiled at the yearly Consumer Electronics Show in January](#). Designed to provide interactive companionship, Ropet is everything we admire and fear in artificial intelligence: it's adorable, intelligent, and emotionally responsive. But if we choose to bring these ultra-cute AI companions into our homes, we must ask ourselves: Are we truly prepared for what comes next?

AI companionship and its complexities

Studies in [marketing](#) and [human-computer interaction](#) show that conversational AI can convincingly simulate human interactions, potentially providing emotional fulfilment for users. And AI-driven companionship is not new. Apps like [Replika](#) paved the way for digital romance years ago, with consumers forming intimate emotional connections with their AI partners and even experiencing distress when being denied intimacy, as evidenced by the massive user outrage that followed Replika's [removal](#) of the erotic role-play mode, causing the company to bring it back for some users.

AI companions have the potential to alleviate loneliness, but their uncontrolled use raises serious concerns. Reports of tragedies, such as the suicides of a [14-year-old boy](#) in the US and a thirty-something [man in Belgium](#), that are alleged to have followed intense attachments to chatbots, highlight the risks of unregulated AI intimacy – especially for socially excluded individuals, minors and the elderly, who may be the ones most in need of companionship.

As a mom and a social scientist, I can't help asking the question: What does this mean for our children? Although AI is a new kid on the block, emotionally immersive virtual pet toys have a history of shaping young minds. In the 90s and 2000s, Tamagotchis – tiny digital pets housed in keychain-sized devices – led to distress when they “died” after just a few hours of neglect, their human owners returning to the image of a ghostly pet floating beside a gravestone. Now, imagine an AI pet that remembers conversations, forms responses and adapts to emotional cues. That's a whole new level of psychological influence. What safeguards prevent a child from forming an unhealthy attachment to an AI pet?

Researchers in the 90s were already fascinated by the [“Tamagotchi effect”](#), which demonstrated the intense attachment children form to virtual pets that *feel* real. In the age of AI, with companies' algorithms carefully engineered to boost engagement, this attachment can open the door to emotional bonds. If an AI-

powered pet like Ropet expresses sadness when ignored, an adult can rationally dismiss it – but for a child, it can feel like a real tragedy.

Could AI companions, by adapting to their owners' behaviours, become psychological crutches that replace human interaction? Some researchers [warn](#) that AI may blur the boundaries between artificial and human companionship, leading users to prioritize AI relationships over human connections.

Who owns your AI pet – and your data?

Beyond emotional risks, there are major concerns about security and privacy. AI-driven products often [rely on machine learning and cloud storage](#), meaning their “brains” exist beyond the physical robot. What happens to the personal data they collect? Can these AI pets be hacked or manipulated? The recent [DeepSeek data leak](#), in which over 1 million sensitive records, including user chat logs, were made publicly accessible, is a reminder that personal data stored by AI is never truly secure.

Robot toys have raised security concerns in the past: in the late 90s, Furbies were [banned from the US National Security Agency headquarters](#) over fears they could record and repeat classified information. With today's AI-driven toys becoming increasingly sophisticated, concerns about data privacy and security are more relevant than ever.

The future of AI companions: regulation and responsibility

I see the incredible potential – and the significant risks – of AI companionship. Right now, AI-driven pets are being marketed

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primarily to tech-savvy adults, as seen in [Ropet's promotional ad](#) featuring an adult woman bonding with the robotic pet. Yet, the reality is that these products will inevitably find their way into the hands of children and vulnerable users, raising new ethical and safety concerns. How will companies like Ropet navigate these challenges before AI pets become mainstream?

Preliminary results from our ongoing research on AI companionship – conducted in collaboration with [Dr Stefania Masè](#) (IPAG Business School) and [Dr. Jamie Smith](#) (Fundação Getulio Vargas) – suggest a fine line between supportive, empowering companionship, and unhealthy psychological dependence, a tension we plan to explore further as data collection and analysis progress. In a world where AI convincingly simulates human emotions, it's up to us as consumers to critically assess what role these robotic friends should play in our lives.

No one really knows where AI is headed next, and public and media discussions around the subject continue to [push the boundaries](#) of what's possible. But in my household, it's the nostalgic charm of babbling, singing Furbies that rules the day. Ropet claims to have one primary purpose – to be its owner's [“one and only love”](#) – and that already sounds like a dystopian threat to me.

Alisa Minina Jeunemaître is an Associate Professor of Marketing at EM Lyon Business School.

[“AI robot pets can be adorable and emotionally responsive. They also raise questions about attachment and mental health”](#) by Alisa Minina Jeunemaître was originally published in *The Conversation* (2025), and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

32. NYC Nannies Built an Underground Care Economy That Should Inspire US Policy

JULIA KOPSTEIN

This story was originally published by [Truthout](#)

A circle of nannies in New York City created an underground care economy that challenges us to dream bigger.

Faced with a labor market rife with adversity, a circle of nannies in New York City have done something extraordinary, overturning economists' assumptions about "self-interested" markets. Operating in the shadows, these workers have created microeconomies of their own, where they are able to share resources, and protect their jobs and pay. Transcending basic notions of mutual aid, the operations of this underground network allow this group of nannies to send lifelines to one another. Their informal economies offer lessons in redistribution, the value of unionization and the power of comradery.

The Conditions of Paid Domestic Labor

I first learned about the New York City nannies' radical mutual aid efforts through conversations with Gloria — a warm, deeply caring and maternal woman. At the time, she was living in the Bronx, New York, while working as a nanny for a family on the wealthy Upper West Side of Manhattan. Gloria (who asked to be identified using a pseudonym to protect her from the risk of employment retaliation), fit the demographic of many of the caregivers in the neighborhood: Most were older, Black or [Latine](#) and/or immigrant women, caring for children of white, upper middle-class families.

This labor dynamic mirrors a [nationwide trend](#). Of the 2.2 million domestic workers in the United States, 91.5 percent are women, and 52.4 percent are Black, Latine or Asian American/Pacific Islander. Two in five domestic workers are aged 50 or older (40.2 percent), which is true for just one-third of all other workers (33.7 percent).

In the mornings, Gloria rose before the break of dawn and trekked across boroughs to the home of the family for whom she worked. She hoped her own son, a high school student, would wake up in time for class. She arrived before her bosses had their first cup of coffee, going straight to the kitchen to prepare breakfast and lunch for the children. No easy feat, she always managed to get the youngest, a 6-year-old girl I will call Mira (also a pseudonym), out of bed. Gloria readied everyone for the day, packed their bags and schlepped them off to their school down the street.

Gloria was a career nanny. Before working for Mira's family, she worked for three other New York City households until the families moved or the children outgrew the need for her services. Depending on the preferences of her employer, she cooked, cleaned, helped with homework, did laundry, went on vacations and almost always taught the children Spanish. When Gloria was not hiking to and from a typically robust schedule of

extracurricular activities, she was expected to engage in active, thoughtful play.

On busy days, Gloria could be with Mira's family for more than 12 hours, and she rarely received overtime pay. [Thirty-two percent](#) of nannies claim this injustice to be true. Gloria didn't have a contract and was paid under the table. She was initially grateful for this — it allowed her to pay fewer taxes and have cash on hand. Some of the other domestic workers in the neighborhood needed to be paid off the books as well because their immigration status prevented them from having the necessary paperwork for formal employment. Unfortunately, this arrangement often diminishes their ability to negotiate better working conditions. The benefits of their jobs, and their employment more generally, are subject to the unchecked whims of their employers.

In fact, domestic workers are [three times more likely to be living in poverty](#) or just above the poverty line but without sufficient income to make ends meet. Only 20 percent of domestic workers receive health care coverage through their jobs, and fewer than 10 percent are covered by an employer-provided retirement plan.

These injustices are not entirely due to the underground nature of domestic work. Many come from deliberate policy exclusions. For example, in the original Social Security Act of 1935, [domestic workers were barred](#). More recent legislation like the National Labor Relations Act, Occupational Safety and Health Act, Civil Rights Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, and Family and Medical Leave Act all include provisions that allow for the [exclusion of domestic workers from protections](#).

At the end of the school day, Gloria would wait outside the blacktop of Mira's school with her giant, sparkly pink bag — filled to the brim with candies, fruits, pretzels, bandages, water bottles, chalk, team uniforms, tutus, and anything else a 6-year-old could possibly cry for after a long day in class. Waiting next to her in the pickup line were dozens of other nannies, vastly outnumbering the parents.

Gloria chatted with the other nannies in line before the final bell. These women worked together for years — from the time the children they cared for were babies until they were high school-aged. Families saw immense value in having the same nanny care for all of their children over the course of their childhoods. They often boasted that their nanny was “part of the family.”

Just as the children of the school were classmates, playmates and neighbors, the caregivers were coworkers. The nannies would share snacks, spend time with each other’s children, organize playdates and frequently discuss their work. The children knew and trusted the circle of nannies in the neighborhood. If a child was misbehaving or in crisis, it was not uncommon for a nanny other than their own to step in.

Mira would be led out by her teacher in a mob of other kindergarteners waiting to be retrieved. She would bounce on the tips of her toes to look for Gloria in the crowd, barreling toward her once she got a glimpse of the sparkly bag or Gloria’s bright red hair. Mira’s friends would soon flock to Gloria as well, grabbing for snacks or toys that she often bought with her own money. After some time on the playground, combinations of children and their nannies would attend varying after-school activities. Mira’s friends went to soccer or basketball, some went to piano, and some had a chess class. Unless they had scheduled a play date, everyone typically ended up back at the playground and then headed home for dinner.

An Underground Mobilization of Mutual Aid

In the spring of 2021, Gloria got unexpected news that derailed her jam-packed days — she was pregnant.

Gloria’s pregnancy came with serious health complications. At 40 years old, she was considered high-risk, and the conditions of her development often left her in excruciating pain when she

attempted physical activity. Carrying heavy bags, staying on her feet all day, and spotting Mira across the monkey bars proved near impossible. She was afraid of telling her employers, fearing they would terminate her in anticipation of less frequent work availability, or refuse to pay for the time she had to take off to attend necessary doctor's appointments.

Though this sort of employment discrimination is illegal, Gloria had been personal witness to nannies fired for such reasons. Her weekly expenses were barely covered by her salary, and her employment was totally contingent on the discretion and benevolence of Mira's parents. She couldn't afford to lose a few hours of work, much less a full day.

In teary whispers outside of school gates, Gloria confided in the other nannies about her medical situation and fears. Quickly, they sprang to action.

A group of five other nannies mobilized their labor to help Gloria. While she was at a doctor's appointment, a member of this close-knit group of nannies would pick Mira up from school — carrying Gloria's big sparkly pink bag in addition to her own. She would bring Mira to one of her extracurricular activities, where she would be watched by two other nannies whose children were also involved. A different nanny would swing by after the class or practice and bring Mira back to the playground, where she would finally meet Gloria. The nannies involved in this mutual aid operation all knew Mira's parents through interactions surrounding the children's play dates and neighborhood activities, so they didn't feel that Mira's parents would be alarmed if they happened to see Mira walking with one of them without Gloria present. In this way, Gloria was able to attend these doctor's appointments through the aid of her colleagues, and without risking a hostile reaction from her employer, thereby preserving her job. This operation occurred countless times, seamlessly, over the course of multiple months.

A few weeks after the nannies commenced this informal operation, Gloria had a miscarriage. She was devastated. Though

obviously anxious about the difficulty of managing her taxing job and a new child, Gloria had been thrilled by the promise of a growing family. Her friends rushed to her comfort, but she never took a day off of work. She couldn't afford it. All of the help they provided in lightening her load during pregnancy, though extensive, only allowed Gloria to barely keep her head above the water.

An Underground Economy Fueled by Care

The nannies who helped Gloria were not incentivized by additional compensation, but by a tight-knit comradery developed over years of working together, dealing with similar or overlapping life obstacles. The system of labor sharing they created was intricate, thought-out and flawless.

To economists, this would constitute an economy in every right — an organism that grows and shrinks and responds, a system that fluctuates to move resources to where they're needed, and take them from where there's excess. These women had fashioned an antiseptic microeconomy of their own — one that depended on their trust and faith in one another to compensate for the fundamental lackings in their job. They managed to replace faulty systems dominated by capital with a functional practice dominated by social ties.

Sharing their labor like this could be considered a form of informal social insurance — mutual aid without the exchange of material currency. Amazingly, this is just one of the myriad feats their economy has been able to accomplish.

Gloria and the other nannies have also created a version of price-setting — establishing their own minimum wage. Again, working under the table means there's opportunity for their employers to pay them less than the legal minimum wage, and often, that's the case. The average domestic worker is paid 74

cents for every dollar that a similar worker would make in another occupation — [or 26 percent less](#). In an attempt to counteract this, Gloria and the nannies band together.

If a family in the neighborhood on the Upper West Side wants to hire a new nanny or housekeeper, they often first turn to the folks who work for their neighbors, and ask for a referral. Friends and colleagues of Gloria's employers have frequently asked her if she knew anyone who was looking for work.

This referral process allowed for the women to protect against some risk in their jobs. In theory, if a neighboring family were to find a nanny or housekeeper by other means, and that person worked for a salary significantly lower than Gloria's, the new family might go to Gloria's employer and encourage them to lower her salary, or encourage them to hire someone who would work for less altogether.

Because Gloria was able to refer someone she knew, she and the other nannies had power over the salary that person would accept. Before connecting a nanny with a family in need, the circle of nannies discuss their own wages and hours, how many children the new family has and the expected responsibilities of the caretaker to decide on a fair pay for the open position. They make it clear to the possible hire that they will only be referred if they promise to accept wages above this predetermined threshold, so as to not push down the pay of the rest of the women even further.

And so, the enterprise expands. These women have produced mechanisms to protect their labor, their wages and their "benefits" outside of the existing frameworks. We can see, even just in the tiny school playground, the ingenuity created in the face of serious hindrances.

In her book *Raising Brooklyn*, Tamara M. Brown also documents the ways in which a syndication of nannies counteract existing, splintered economies. At yet another New York City playground, nannies without access to formal banking institutions were able to create their own savings programs, much like a [ROSCA](#).

Brown talked with nannies who created a savings collective called Susu, stemming from West Indian tradition. Their Susu was a large pot of money that was collected, organized and distributed among the participants. The members were all nannies who frequented the same playgrounds and cared for children who were friends or classmates. Together, the members decided on the amount of money (called a “hand”) that they would contribute to the “pot” each week. After each member made their weekly contribution, one of them would receive the full amount that accrued. This process repeated week after week, until each participant had a turn at receiving the pot. Through this Susu, many of the women were able to pay for things more expensive than what they could afford with their salaries alone — like immigration lawyers, down payments and sudden health costs.

This is a further example of a complex, invisible economy. It is affirmation of the idea that what was occurring at Mira’s school was not a unique phenomenon, and that collaborative innovations exist in these women-dominated, underground spheres.

It’s tragic that New York City nannies have to compensate for failures in their labor market resulting from disregard of the profession and of the workers. Yet, the ways in which they have managed to protect each other is miraculous. Many of the academic studies of domestic workers center on deficiencies — the resources they lack. But it’s clear a lot can be learned from studying their successes.

From examining this type of economy, we can make assumptions about the effect of social ties and collaboration in the sharing of resources for our political economy at large. When it comes to discussions of redistribution, fairness of work, unionization and collaboration, there needs to be tangible examples of successful execution. These tend to happen invisibly. Diving deeper into the workings of groups of domestic workers proves to be a perfect lens.

Domestic workers and domestic work are understudied. With a more comprehensive look into how these individuals allocate

resources, we can get a better sense of what they truly need and create better policies to ensure they receive it. Beyond that, a look into economies that exist in their own right can inform economists of the ways in which just distribution can occur.

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[“NYC Nannies Built an Underground Care Economy That Should Inspire US Policy”](#) by Julia Kopstein was originally published in *Truthout* (2023), and is licensed under [Creative Commons \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](#).

33. 48 Hours as a Muslim American: A Professor Reflects

MOHAMMAD HASSAN KHALIL

What a difference 48 hours can make.

Last Friday afternoon, before a global audience, former president Bill Clinton (a Christian) and comedian Billy Crystal (a Jew) [eulogized “the Greatest,”](#) the most famous Muslim American of all time, Muhammad Ali.

The televised audience also took in Islamic invocations, recitations from the Qur’an, and, if they listened carefully, gleeful shouts of “Allahu akbar” (“God is the greatest”) from many of the thousands of attendees who packed Louisville’s KFC Yum! Sports Arena for the memorial service. President Barack Obama [declared](#) that Ali “will always be America.” And prior to his passing, a moment of silence in his honor was taken before tip-off at two NBA Finals games, once at Oracle Arena in Oakland, another time at Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland.

On Sunday, Americans awoke to the [tragic news](#) that a young Muslim American had perpetrated the deadliest mass shooting in American history when he took the lives of dozens of innocents at Orlando’s Pulse nightclub.

His proclaimed affiliation to ISIS and reports of his homophobia and anger problems were all over the news.

Presidential candidate Donald Trump [tweeted](#) that the shooter reportedly shouted “Allahu akbar” during the horrific rampage. President Obama condemned what “was an act of terror and an act of hate.” And a moment of silence in honor of the victims was taken prior to tip-off at the most recent NBA Finals game in Oakland.

To say this past week has been a turbulent one would be an understatement.

Numerous Muslim Americans expressed how pleasantly surprised they were at seeing widely broadcast positive portrayals of their coreligionists in a nonetheless sobering Ali memorial.

At the Louisville, KY Islamic funeral service, the prominent Muslim American scholar Sherman Jackson had declared, “Ali put the question as to whether you could be a Muslim and an American to rest.” What is more, “Ali made being a Muslim cool.”

But with vile criminals such as the above-mentioned shooter (whose name I shall not bother to mention) dominating the headlines, it is easy to see why many Americans see Muslims as being very uncool.

[Surveys show](#) that non-Muslims who do not regularly interact with Muslims tend to have a significantly more negative impression of them. This should not come as a surprise given recent events and the media coverage of these events.

It certainly does not help that there exist numerous misconceptions and oversimplifications about both Islam and Muslims that are widely propagated online. (Of course, one could say something similar about America itself. If Islam and Muslims have a “public relations problem” in the West, the same is true for [America and Americans](#) in many countries overseas.)

Indeed, as a professor of religious studies, I find that I spend much of my time debunking popular myths.

The demographics

The reality is that with a population of [over three million](#), most Muslim Americans are not nearly as “great” as Ali; and they are certainly nothing like the Orlando shooter. The reality is that most Muslims are everyday people.

Muslim Americans are extremely diverse: [63 percent are](#)

[immigrants hailing from 77 countries](#). They are, on average, relatively young. Their levels of education mirror those of the U.S. population as a whole. As a [Pew survey](#) put it several years ago, they are “decidedly American in their outlook, values and attitudes.”

What is more, they have been here for a long time.

Coming to America

Some arrived on [slave ships](#) centuries ago. Others – including famous figures such as Ali, Malcolm X, basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, author [G. Willow Wilson](#), singer Jermaine Jackson, comedian Dave Chappelle and a 19th-century writer and U.S. Consul to the Philippines named [Alexander Russell Webb](#) (1846-1916) – chose to convert to Islam.

Most – including numerous physicians, researchers, business owners and cab drivers – immigrated to this country to seek a better life, and, in the process, like other immigrants, made America a better country.

One such immigrant was the late [Fazlur Khan](#), an architect originally from Bangladesh who designed the iconic Sears Tower (now called Willis Tower) and the John Hancock Center in Chicago. And just this past year, another immigrant, this time from Turkey, scientist [Aziz Sancar](#), received the Nobel Prize, making him the second Muslim American Nobel Laureate in Chemistry. (The first was Egyptian-American Ahmed Zewail in 1999.)



“Lupe Fiasco” by OzFutura is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Finally, many Muslims – from hip-hop artist [Lupe Fiasco](#) to U.S. Army Specialist and Purple Heart recipient [Kareem Khan](#) (who was killed in combat in 2007) – were born into Muslim families right here in the United States. According to the Pentagon, there are almost 6,000 Muslims [currently](#)

[serving](#) in the U.S. military.

The Islamic State does not even account for one percent of one percent of the worldwide Muslim population. And among the many devout Muslim Americans I know personally, I have yet to meet or even hear about a single ISIS sympathizer; I see only looks of disgust whenever they’re mentioned.

Such sympathizers obviously exist. But this relatively small collection of individuals represent only themselves.

A friend on Facebook shared a story about how he came to learn about the Orlando shootings. He was passing through an airport when he noticed a crowd huddled around a television screen. When it was revealed that the shooter came from a Muslim family, a man in the crowd remarked, “Those damn Muslims.”

Three million diverse, overwhelmingly peaceful and productive Muslim Americans reduced to “those damn Muslims.”

Interestingly, just hours before the attack in Orlando I was discussing the Ali memorial service with a group of Muslim friends. Though sad about the passing of “the Greatest,” they all had smiles on their faces as they recounted the speeches from the service and imagined the effects those speeches might have on the broader American public. They had never felt better represented. At that moment, at least, they felt cool.

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["48 Hours as a Muslim American: A Professor Reflects"](#) by Mohammad Hassan Khalil was originally published in *88 Open Essays* (2016) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

34. Does Recycling Actually Conserve or Preserve Things?

SAMANTHA MACBRIDE



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There are a series of assumptions behind the familiar assertion that recycling saves resources and energy, and in so doing, [protects the environment](#).

These assumptions are in the motto, "[recycling saves trees](#)." With recycling – one assumes – used materials stand in for raw materials. This way, recycled content cuts down on the need to extract (conservation), which

in turn prevents some of the environmental damage from extraction that would be taking place without recycling (preservation).

Conservation and preservation are distinct, though linked, ideas. Historians of North American environmentalism distinguish the [Conservation Movement](#), which focused on the responsible management of materials to sustain production and economic growth, from the [Preservation Movement](#), which stressed the protection of wilderness.¹ Both movements have been rightly

1. Hays, S. (1999). Conservation and the gospel of efficiency: The progressive conservation movement, 1890–1920. No. 40. University of Pittsburgh Press.

[critiqued](#) for failing to consider questions of power and equity in people's health, dignity, and livelihoods.² Still, the distinction between **conserving** resources for use in production, and **preserving** complex ecosystems (which include people in human settlements), is useful for a question I now pose about recycling. **Does recycling, in the way it is practiced today, actually conserve or preserve things that matter?**

To answer "yes" requires that a set of assumptions hold true. When we say recycling saves trees, we start by assuming that the paper in the recycling bin goes to a plant to be sorted and baled. Plant managers find buyers for the bales, which are shipped off to a manufacturer. We assume that this manufacturer, individually or as part of a larger industry sector, is weighing the options between using virgin input (wood pulp) or secondary input (recycled paper). When it costs less to use recycled paper as an input, the manufacturer is going to use the secondary material to make things. So far, so good.

But to save trees, much less forests, more has to happen. When the decision is made to use recycled input, the virgin alternative ought to be conserved in a way that preserves ecosystems and people. Preservation isn't achieved if the virgin stock is directed into a new product that hasn't existed before; or if it is conserved technically for later use, and then harvested and utilized when economic growth makes for favorable conditions to ramp up

2. See Guha, R. "Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation: a third world critique" *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 1:71-83; Faber, D., and D. McCarthy. "Neo-liberalism, globalization and the struggle for ecological democracy: linking sustainability and environmental justice." *Just sustainabilities: Development in an unequal world* (2003): 38-63.

production. It's not enough to simply offer up recycled paper on a commodity market to be grabbed when price signals are favorable. It doesn't do to merely measure increases in recycled content of various products on the market. Nor is it sufficient to theorize that recycling *may* have slowed a sectoral growth rate that would have proceeded, all things being equal, faster in an imaginary world in which there was no recycling at all. To save trees in a way that matters ecologically and socially means something more. It means that forests, including forest ecosystems and surrounding livelihoods in all of their complexity, are actually protected in today's world.

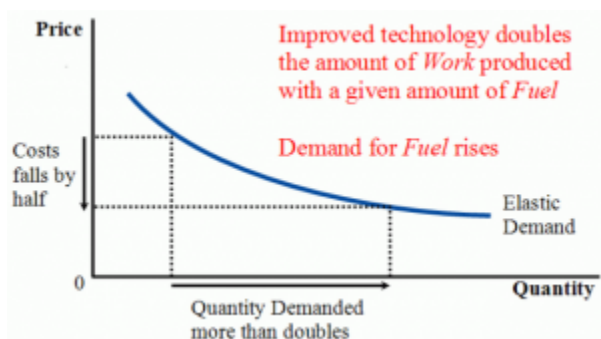
Theoretically, there is no reason why recycling couldn't deliver on such protection, were it integrated into a system of monitoring that followed through on promises. Such a system would need to identify limits on rates of extraction in accordance with their ecosystemic threat; include long term planning for stabilization of some extractive industries, and phase-out of others; and ensure maximum protection of future lands and ecosystems from development. Under such a system, extractive industries would need to demonstrate to what degree recycled inputs substituted for virgin sources in their sectors annually, and also that their sectors were not encroaching with new development in terrains that matter to people and other living things.

Empirically, there is no question that at certain times, for certain periods, recycling may have conserved virgin resources to some degree; and even that recycling may play a role in localized resource policies, such as boosting timber plantations that [spare virgin forests](#) as sources in papermaking. In fact, portions of the assumption of conservation, can be and regularly are dragged out for theoretical and/or empirical testing within the disciplines of resource economics, materials flow analysis, and life cycle analysis. There is much scholarship that asks whether recycling has resulted

in, or could theoretically result in, less net extraction or harvest.³ Such inquiries are interesting in their own right, and to the extent that they tell us something about tradeoffs that manufacturers make between virgin and recycled inputs, they inform an understanding of what recycling could, under ideal circumstances, achieve in terms of actual conservation — which would be a precondition for, but not a guarantee of, actual preservation.

We are on shaky ground, however, if we take these assumptions for granted. I trace my concern on this matter to the work of William Stanley Jevons.⁴ In the 19th century, technological improvements in mining and combustion were greatly improving the efficiency of using coal as fuel. Noting these developments, Jevons argued that, rather than conserve coal, improvements in efficiency, and a subsequent drop in coal price, would paradoxically lead to an increased demand for coal.

3. See Geyer, R. et. al. (2016) “Common Misconceptions about Recycling” *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 20, no. 5: 1010–17
4. Jevons, W. S. (1866) *The coal question: an inquiry concerning the progress of the nation, and the probable exhaustion of our coal-mines*. London, UK: Macmillan and Company.



Jevons Paradox. Public Domain.

Now known as Jevons' Paradox, this perspective observes that when you increase efficiency in production and consumption, you may well see an increase in overall extraction.⁵ Massive amounts of scholarship have followed the Jevons' Paradox, most around energy efficiency.⁶ In the materials realm, recycling can be thought of as a form of efficiency (getting more out of the same input).⁷ There is a

5. See Alcott, B. (2005). "Jevons' paradox" *Ecological Economics* 54, no. 1: 9–21.

6. See Dimitropoulos, J. (2007). "Energy productivity improvements and the rebound effect: an overview of the state of knowledge." *Energy Policy* 35, no. 12: 6354–63.

7. I am grateful to Bruce Lankford for helping me clarify this. See Lankford, B. (2013) *Resource efficiency complexity and the commons: the paracommons and paradoxes of natural resource losses, wastes and wastages*. London: Routledge.

growing body of work tracing the effects of recycling on extraction of virgin materials, in particular in the area of metals.⁸ Scholars ask questions about conservation of metals in part because the data on their trade is more available than for other materials. It's more organized. It's more harmonized among different nations, given the nature of these economies. Both the economy of metals and as well as the material properties of metals make them relatively easy to be recycled over and over again and be reintroduced back into production, especially in comparison the heterogeneous range of synthetic polymers we call plastics. Yet **we see growing rates of metals extraction taking place alongside growing recycling rates, worldwide.** We can speculate about what those growth rates would have been had recycling not existed, but it would be hard to argue that global production systems are using less virgin raw material as a result of metals recycling, much less that metal recycling is preserving lands from mining.⁹

8. See Modaresi, R. and D.B. Müller. (2012) "The role of automobiles for the future of aluminum recycling" *Environmental Science & Technology* 46, no. 16: 8587–8594.

9. OECD (2019), *Global material resources outlook to 2060: economic drivers and environmental consequences*. Paris: OECD Publishing



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The caveats and careful measurements in the specialized literatures above suggest that recycling *can* conserve resources temporarily in some cases, almost always absent considerations of preservation. Such nuances fall away, however, as recycling becomes idealized and abstracted as an ethical, “earth-

saving” end unto itself. Under-examined assumptions of conservation and preservation run deep through recycling discourse, and are also core to the notion that *reuse* will cut down on the flow of materials and energy from cradle to grave. **Each time reuse and recycling are affirmed in the waste hierarchy, there is a hazy sense that somewhere, by someone, some sort of accounting is going on to ensure that overall, recycling is delivering protection of things that matter.** I would wager that many in the media, in environmental education, and even in environmentally focused NGOs hold this position. This is how recycling would, actually and not just in theory, “save the planet.” But is there really any coordinating body who is conducting such accounting? No.¹⁰ And is recycling actually preserving ecosystems and livelihoods, or

10. The closest I have come to identifying such a body is the OECD, which has published interesting research on the this subject for a range of materials, but not plastics. OECD (2019), <http://www.oecd.org/environment/global-material-resources-outlook-to-2060-9789264307452-en.htm>

achieving real-world “dematerialization” (the technical term for less use of raw materials overall)? Not in any systematic way.¹¹

Oil, Gas, and Plastics

So far I’ve used the examples of forest products and metals. I have done so because of the historical potency of the motto “recycling saves trees”, and the relatively developed scholarship around steel, aluminum, and other metals. In reality, much more is going on around forestry, or the mining and metals trade, than is taken into account when one simply looks at recycling. But at least we have some data to inform questions. If we examine the plastics industry and the role of plastics recycling, we find that similar assumptions abound, with particular complications, and little information. How can we evaluate the [assumption](#) that plastic recycling reduces the need to extract fossil fuels; or the separate but related [claim](#) that manufacturing with recycled inputs uses less energy, meaning lower fuel use economy-wide, meaning diminished carbon emissions?

It is well known that only a small percentage of global fossil fuel extraction is used directly in plastics production.¹² So even

11. The OECD writes that, “Recycling is projected to become more competitive compared to the extraction of primary materials,” but that, “The strong increase in demand for materials implies that both primary and secondary materials use increase at roughly the same speed.” OECD (2019), p. 3

12. Most estimates cite to data from the British Petroleum

recycling every shred of plastic would not, on its own, diminish the need to drill at current rates by much. Looking specifically at the U.S., the situation is no different. Let's say we build up domestic plastic recycling capacity in the U.S., as many are calling for in the wake of China's imports restrictions. What would the effect be of repatriating that tonnage, and feeding it back into domestic production, on domestic fossil fuel extraction – to make plastics, or to generate electricity?

It may surprise you to learn that the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) “is unable to determine the specific amounts or origin of the feedstocks that are actually used to manufacture plastics in the United States.”¹³

The reason hints at the constantly fluctuating conditions of virgin raw material sourcing that I've alluded to above, and data limitations that I'll elaborate below. The EIA writes:

Because the petrochemical industry has a high degree of flexibility in the feedstock it consumes and because EIA does not collect detailed data on this aspect of industrial consumption, it is not possible for EIA to identify the actual amounts and origin of the materials used as inputs by industry to manufacture plastics.¹⁴

Let's pivot back to the day-to-day understanding of recycling, in

Federation, http://www.bpf.co.uk/press/oil_consumption.aspx

13. Energy Information Administration (EIA).2018. “How much oil is used to make plastic?” accessed 1/29/2019 at www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=34&t=6.

14. EIA 2018.

which it is it is axiomatic to assert that [plastic recycling saves oil and gas resources](#).¹⁵ On a ton-for-ton basis, in a hypothetical scenario in which recycled materials actually substitute for fossil fuels, and lead to a concomitant net decrease in extraction or fuel combustion, such claims hold. But without data on “actual amounts and origin of materials used as inputs,” it is not possible to evaluate the actual effect of plastics recycling on conserving such inputs. This would be the precondition to assessing what role, if any, plastics recycling has on actual preservation of things that matter in the U.S. (such as [coastal communities](#), Indigenous peoples’ lands, and/or [arctic wildlife refuges](#)).

Frequent assumptions are being made among well-intentioned members of the media, environmental organizations, and concerned individuals that actual, current recycling efforts are part of real world protection. **In more specialized discussions around Zero Waste and Circular**



“Plastic Ocean” by Kevin Krejci is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Economy, there is a rolling process of coming to terms with hints that assumptions of conservation and preservation don’t hold. If, for example, we are dismayed to learn that plastics are “downcycled,” our dismay betrays a faith in the assumption of preservation in the background. If only plastic bottles could be produced in a [closed-loop fashion](#), we reason, then we would be

15. The plastics industry is careful about how it phrases conservation claims in its public relations. It tends to talk about the importance of growing plastics recycling to jobs, litter cleanup, and generally as an end unto itself.

able to conserve at least some of the resources that would otherwise be extracted. Presumably, such conservation is needed for ecosystemic preservation, not just to boost the economic fortunes of the plastics industry.

Now let's turn to the huge, multinational firms in the petrochemical industry that drill for the precursor materials for plastics at the beginning of the production chain. Let's say more Americans recycled their plastics, and this resulted in an influx of more recycled plastic onto the market. Even with robust closed loops achieved, does anyone really think that the executives at one of these multinationals would get to the point of saying, "well, you know, it's good that the need for input materials is being met by recycled plastic, and that means that this year we can scale back production a bit. We don't need to open up a new offshore platform. It isn't required to meet society's needs after all!"

Ultimately, this would have to be the scenario in which more and more recycling of plastics actually preserved things that matter ecologically and socially. Yet very little of the empirical work needed to trace materials flows exists in the area of plastics recycling, in part because of a dearth of data.¹⁶ **And in the area of plastics waste we have perhaps the most egregious misuse of claims that recycling is going to address problems related to pollution and climate change.** The industry, and affiliated academic researchers, carry out life-cycle analyses that are impeccable in their methodological approach to quantifying different energy and material requirements associated with primary and secondary flows of plastics.¹⁷

16. Geyer, R. et. al. (2017) "Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made." Science Advances 3, no. 7
17. The Plastics Division of the American Chemistry Council (2018). "Life Cycle Impacts of Plastic Packaging Compared

None to my knowledge, however, answer the question of what more plastics recycling would do to diminish overall ecosystem withdrawals of fossil fuels. Does tar-sands extraction slow as a result? How about pipeline construction? Perhaps, with improved plastics recycling, we don't need a Northeast U.S. expansion of storage capacity for hydrofractured natural gas. Not yet? Well, then, what are the plans for the scaleback?

Ideological Implications

These are both empirical and ideological questions.¹⁸ They are ideological because a general optimism about recycling as earth-saving [has become internalized](#) in the thought processes of children and adults genuinely concerned about preservation. In everyday speak, assumptions of conservation and preservation swirl in a distant, misty background. In order to preserve optimism, can-doism, and a solutions oriented outlook it is easier not to look into these depths. **In fact, critique of recycling's earth-saving claims falls harshly on concerned ears, leaving bewilderment and a sense of betrayal. Sometimes, it is met with a binary response: either recycling is part of an overall process of saving resources and**

To Substitutes in the United States and Canada” accessed 1/29/2019 at <https://plastics.americanchemistry.com/Plastic-Packaging-Life-Cycle-Study/>

18. See Lifset, R.(1995). “Foreward”, in Ince, P. What won't get harvested, where, and when: the effects of increased paper recycling on timber harvest, Yale University School of Forestry and Environment.

saving energy and by extension it's saving the planet, or it's a waste of time and it's a sham and a lie.

I would urge all who are interested in this kind of thing to move away from binaries. The alternative is uncertain and less morally satisfying. It requires taking multiple perspectives, and wading through material complexity, power relations, institutional arrangements, and ideological maneuvering around recycling, asking again and again how, or even if, [this or that initiative](#) — often proudly and cheerfully announced by a consortium of producers — preserves things that matter. It also means looking at how recycling actually takes place in any particular place and time, not just under modelled conditions. Some of this work involves redirecting outrage. So, for example, if recycling plants are unable to sell recycled plastics because of market slumps, it is less morally shocking than a reflection of market conditions that they will landfill them instead? When people ask me about the crisis in North American plastics and paper recycling, which China's trade policies has brought about, I'm tempted to respond, "what did you expect?" Recycling firms are tails wagged by massive dogs: neither evil, nor earth-saving, but actually a reflection of the organization of material exchange under the global market system, today.

In part, the potential for recycling to actually conserve and preserve is an empirical question, and the answers will vary from place to place and material to material. But it's not just a matter of collecting data, or organizing the right technical systems. **It also means recognizing that recycling as we know it may start with an ethical impulse, but materially translates into nothing more or less than a set of business practices.** As with the 19th and early 20th scrap trades, recycling is part of smart industrial operations (nothing wrong with that). But let us dismantle the faith that recycling, as practiced currently, will save the earth if we do more of it. Affirming this ideal is a potent tool used by powerful networks of big producers, big extractors, and constellations of firms at the global level. Make no mistake, they are [undertaking this strategy daily](#), with increasing sophistication. They understand the nuances

of material sourcing, production volumes, input substitution, and property acquisition all too well. They rely on the fact that you don't – and, in fact, can't – because much of the data you would need for such an understanding is proprietary to them.

It is no easy feat to press producers to explain how recycling stands to scale back their operations, reduce their net output, or redress the ravages they have left behind. Such questions are typically outside the scope of a particular recycling project; easy to evade. As a group, these are smart folks. They know which NGOs to fund, which scholars to support, and where to make public appearances. They even understand the critiques that come out of discard studies, so they start to speak of “[plasticity](#)” instead of plastics; and they use the term “[litter](#)” to name the crisis of marine plastics.

But if you are in a position to do so, politely ask corporate spokespeople how the tonnage they take credit for recycling fed back into their operations last year, in a specific country, and how it in turn measurably reduced virgin extraction. Be specific. Ask them where and when it led to a reduced material throughput in their company or industry. Query them on the documented, not speculative, environmental protection afforded by, say, making cheap picture frames made out of spent polystyrene packaging. Reject the notion that cheap picture frames are a social good that would have needed to be manufactured with fracked natural gas, had polystyrene recycling not yielded up secondary inputs.

In the meantime, sit for a while to contemplate the fact that recycling, as it exists today, does not in fact save ecosystems in a way that matters on the whole ecologically or socially. How would recycling need to be practiced to achieve this desired end? In a different context of extraction, production, and growth – with different politics, knowledge structures, and ideologies. I realize this is an unsatisfying conclusion, but I believe in the importance of critique as a precondition to developing collaborative solutions. I have presented this information as part of a process of thinking through short-, medium- and long-term characteristics of this

different context. This is an ongoing project to which I invite responses, as well as empirical contributions that would refine or refute what I have presented here.

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[“Does recycling actually conserve or preserve things?”](#) by Samantha MacBride was originally published in *88 Open Essays* (2019) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

35. Can Tearing Down Freeways Bring New Life to Cities?

EDGAR MENDEZ

Before the freeways came in, Bronzeville, on Milwaukee's North Side, was a vibrant neighborhood known for its restaurants, bars, and jazz scene. The area had been home to successive waves of immigrants and, most recently, had become the heart of the city's Black community.

But it suffered a major blow in the 1960s, when large swaths of the neighborhood were razed to make way for elevated freeways, part of a nationwide highway construction boom.

The new highways spurred a mass exodus of white residents to the suburbs—at the expense of Black communities like Bronzeville. “It became more important to move [commuters] smoothly from their [suburban] homes to downtown,” said Clayborn Benson, the founder and executive director of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum. “That was the ultimate goal.”

Families and businesses in areas like Bronzeville were displaced, and the ripple effects are still being felt today, Benson said.

“Eventually, those neighborhoods became economically deprived,” he said. “You can still see that today, just like you can see economic development in certain areas of the city and not others.” Today, Milwaukee is one of the [most segregated cities](#) in the United States.

For the residents whose homes were spared but now bordered highways, their reward was an increased exposure to pollutants, [higher asthma rates](#), and other health problems, such as [cardiovascular disease](#).

But today, cities across the country are reconsidering the

highways stretching through their communities, and some are pushing for them to be torn down altogether.

In downtown Milwaukee, about 5 miles south of Bronzeville, [Rethink I-794](#) is [advocating](#) for replacing Interstate 794's overpass with a pedestrian-friendly boulevard linking the city center with the trendy Third Ward district and the waterfront.

"There'd be more room for walking and biking, and it would strengthen the tax base in Milwaukee," said Gregg May, who leads the Rethink I-794 initiative.

Activists have been pushing for I-794's removal for decades. Now, billions of dollars from President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act and infrastructure bill may transform major projects from pie-in-the-sky aspirations to shovel-ready realities.

Advocates like May often reference the Park East teardown nearby, which started over 20 years ago, as an example of what is possible when pedestrian-centered design replaces highways.

The Park East removal, less than 2 miles north of the proposed I-794 project, opened up 24 acres of land in downtown Milwaukee and [helped propel](#) an era of urban highway removal nationwide.

The project created an opportunity for cities to think more strategically about how highways serve a given area and whether it still aligns with current needs, explained Ruth Steiner, director of the Center for the Built Environment at the University of Florida.

"Rebuilding or repairing what's there may not be the optimal solution," she said, adding that many historic freeway projects have become obsolete or are in need of major overhauls.

The area near Park East has seen increased property values and created more space for pedestrians and recreation. Moreover, its rebirth as a lower-capacity boulevard has decreased emissions from the thousands of vehicles that once passed overhead daily.

The removal allowed developers to build the [Fiserv Forum](#), the home court of the Milwaukee Bucks, and the adjoining [Deer District](#), a mix of indoor and outdoor entertainment and community spaces. It also spurred revitalization in the nearby [Brewery District](#), which for more than a century churned out cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon,

bringing in new mixed-use developments, parks, and co-working spaces.

“One hundred percent we looked at Park East and what happened there as an example of what could happen again,” said May. “They said it would ruin traffic flow, but none of that really happened, and people now see the benefits of having it removed.”

Steve Morales, a partner at [Rinka Architects](#) who helped develop the Deer District, said the Park East teardown opened up opportunities for development that are still coming to fruition.

“There’s really still more to do, but we have already made some really great possibilities come true,” he said. The development centers around a public plaza that hosts fitness classes, a marketplace, and small fairs and festivals. “We all envisioned the Deer District as a way to give people from all walks of life and from different communities a place to call their own,” Morales said.

While the teardown of the Park East freeway was supported by local and state funds, its main investment came through an influx of federal money. Over the past several decades, a [series of legislative acts](#) and [initiatives](#) have provided local entities more power to design and, in some cases, remove highways and other roadways.

But all of these funding sources are dwarfed by the federal government’s latest initiative to address inequities and meet President Biden’s climate goals, the [Inflation Reduction Act](#), which earmarks \$3 billion for improving roads and “removing, replacing, or retrofitting highways and freeways to improve connectivity in communities” through [Neighborhood Access and Equity Grants](#). The [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#), passed in 2021, also set aside \$1 billion for the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program.

Steiner, a Wisconsin native who said the Park East freeway helped spur her interest in urban planning, said the infrastructure funding has given cities more opportunities to align transportation with the needs of residents and neighborhoods.

“Are [the freeways] dividing people, or can it be redesigned to slow down traffic to allow people to have access to places where

they want to go?” she said. “Transportation facilities are necessary, but how do you fit the great roadways into the other activities they are engaging in the city?”

The fate of I-794 is far from settled and many states continue to invest in highways over public transportation. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has proposed to rebuild I-794 at a cost of \$300 million. Meanwhile, officials have [announced plans](#) to widen a 3.5-mile section of freeway nearby in an attempt to ease congestion (studies have shown that increasing road capacity [does not improve](#) traffic congestion in the long term). That plan has also netted criticism, including the social justice coalition [Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope](#).

Peter Park, Milwaukee’s former planning director and a longtime proponent of tearing down I-794, said the Inflation Reduction Act, and other available federal funds, present an opportunity for cities, including Milwaukee, to move further away from a polluting and costly highway system that burdens local, state, and federal systems toward a healthier and more economically sustainable approach.

“It’s the difference between spending public money on things that cost more to maintain in the future and realizing that those things are not necessary anymore,” said Park. “We need to think about the long-term benefits rather than the short-term inconvenience of traffic congestion.”

Park, now an adjunct professor at the University of Colorado, Denver, describes highways as a failed public experiment. While it’s hard for most to envision life without them, he said cities are better off without them.

“There’s not a neighborhood that got improved or better when a freeway went through it,” he said. “Every single time that we take a freeway out of the city, whether in Seoul, Korea, or the West Side Highway in New York or Park East in Milwaukee, things get better and the world didn’t end.”

Edgar Mendez is a Milwaukee-based reporter. His writing has been published by the Associated Press, Reuters, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and other media.

["Can Tearing Down Freeways Bring New Life to Cities?"](#) by Edgar Mendez was originally published in *Yes! Magazine* (2023) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 Unported License](#).

36. Minorities Face More Obstacles to a Lifesaving Organ Transplant

CAMILLA NONTERAH



“National Guard Kidney Transplant 114” by North Dakota National Guard is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Patients who experience organ failure need a transplant to improve their odds of survival and to achieve a better quality of life.

However, getting an organ transplant is often accompanied by several challenges, many of which can be attributed to factors like [the state of an individual's living circumstances, their economic status and where they were born.](#)

As a result, many racial and ethnic minorities, such as African Americans, Latinx individuals and Native Americans, must [unjustly wait longer for a much-needed new organ](#) – or never receive one at all because of these barriers to care.

Research shows that these disparities are avoidable, especially with changes [at the institutional level](#).

Which groups are less likely to get a transplant?

Transplant trends from the United Network of Organ Sharing indicate that approximately [113,600 people are in need of a lifesaving solid organ as of June 2019](#). The majority have been diagnosed with kidney disease and liver disease.

The most recent data shows that, in 2016, the rate of kidney failure was highest among minority groups. For example, compared to whites, kidney failure was 9.5 times higher among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. Latinx individuals were over 50% more likely to be diagnosed with kidney failure than those who did not identify as Latinx.

Although minorities are more likely to be diagnosed with kidney failure, they are less likely to be transplanted. [The majority of transplants in the U.S.](#) go to whites.

These trends are also evident in groups suffering from liver disease. Asians and Latinx individuals are [more likely to be diagnosed with liver failure](#), but [less likely to receive a transplant](#).

What's causing these disparities?

A patient has to undergo several steps [before they can receive a transplant](#).

These steps include a physician deciding that a transplant is medically suitable, the patient demonstrating interest in a transplant, a referral to a transplant center, completion of a pre-transplant evaluation and identification of a suitable living donor.

At each point of the transplant preparation process, there are

opportunities for barriers to occur as a result of patient, provider, community and institutional factors. Together, these potentially create disparities in access.

Income level may play a role. Patients with organ failure who experience poverty, for instance, may face challenges [covering the cost of their insurance co-payments](#), especially when they do not have comprehensive insurance or private insurance.

[Literacy issues](#), such as gaps in formal education or English as a second language, may also impact a patient's ability to understand the medical terminology involved in their treatment. This would affect their ability to communicate effectively with their providers.

[Limited knowledge of the benefits of transplantation](#) can also affect patients' ability to access transplants. Patients who are unaware that transplantation is the preferred treatment may not complete the steps to transplant and instead remain on dialysis.

Providers can also play a role in limiting access. For example, doctors may not [provide patients with the referral they need or wait longer to provide it](#).

Given negative historical experiences, such as the [Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#), some patients, especially those who have been historically disadvantaged or are currently marginalized, [mistrust medical providers](#). As a result, they are less likely to seek medical assistance or trust that their providers are giving them accurate information.

Also, patients who report experiences of [discrimination by their medical providers](#) are less likely to seek transplantation. They may be discouraged from seeking further medical care because they expect poor treatment by providers.

Low rates of organ donation also influence transplant rates. Although about 95% of Americans are in favor of organ donation, [only 58% of them are registered as organ donors](#). These low donation rates are pronounced among racial/ethnic minorities. This could be attributed to factors such as [not knowing other registered donors in one's community and mistrust of providers](#).

How can medical providers close the gap?

I am a counseling psychologist whose research examines health inequities and treatment. Given the enormity of these factors, I conducted a study with my colleague, Heather Gardiner, director of the Health Disparities Research Lab at Temple University.

We sought to identify barriers to the pre-transplant evaluation for African American kidney patients. Patients who complete this evaluation successfully become active on the waitlist.

We looked at barriers at several levels: individual barriers, such as limited income; health barriers, such as having multiple health conditions in addition to kidney disease; educational barriers, such as limited knowledge about the kidney transplant process; and systemic barriers, such as long wait times for medical appointments. We also asked people what motivated them to pursue a transplant.

Our research leads us to believe that changing systemic problems will help address problems at the other levels.

For example, medical providers could consider condensing the medical appointments and testing period for the pre-transplant evaluation. Patients who are motivated to get off dialysis will be more motivated to complete the pre-transplant evaluation if they are able to complete the majority of their medical testing at one place over a short period, rather than having to attend several medical appointments over a long period of time.



"Organ Donor" by Mika Marttila is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Policy changes also matter

In order to decide who gets an organ, medical providers give liver patients a MELD score that indicates the severity of their disease.

The introduction of [the current liver allocation system](#) in 2002 [reduced the number of people from minority groups who died waiting for an organ](#).

Under the previous system, African Americans were more likely to die waiting for a liver transplant, because they generally had higher MELD scores, indicating that their disease was becoming worse. However, the current system prioritizes patients with high MELD scores, which has improved liver transplant rates for this group.

The [2014 policy change in kidney allocation](#) allowed patients to count time spent on dialysis toward their total time spent on the waitlist, thereby reducing racial and ethnic disparities.

The success of these systemic changes illustrates the effectiveness of policy change. In my view, policies such as comprehensive Medicare coverage – with transportation assistance for all patients with kidney disease, for example – could potentially

reduce many of the disparities along the steps to a successful transplant.

Countries such as Austria and Norway have seen significant improvements in their organ donation rates by using an opt-out system, which is based on the assumption that everyone consents unless an individual notes otherwise. Although this topic may be somewhat controversial in the U.S., I feel that the potential benefits of an opt-out policy are worth exploring.

Camilla Nonterah is Assistant Professor of Health Psychology, University of Richmond. Her essay was originally published in [The Conversation](#).

“[Minorities Face More Obstacles to a Lifesaving Organ Transplant](#)” by Camilla Nonterah was originally published in *88 Open Essays* (2019) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

37. Fix the Machine, Not the Person

AARON SWARTZ

This post is part seven of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

The General Motors plant in Fremont was a disaster. “Everything was a fight,” the head of the union admits. “They spent more time on grievances and on things like that than they did on producing cars. They had strikes all the time. It was just chaos constantly. ... It was considered the worst workforce in the automobile industry in the United States.”

“One of the expressions was, you can buy anything you want in the GM plant in Fremont,” adds Jeffrey Liker, a professor who studied the plant. “If you want sex, if you want drugs, if you want alcohol, it’s there. During breaks, during lunch time, if you want to gamble illegally—any illegal activity was available for the asking within that plant.” Absenteeism was so bad that some mornings they didn’t have enough employees to start the assembly line; they had to go across the street and drag people out of the bar.

When management tried to punish workers, workers tried to punish them right back: scratching cars, loosening parts in hard-to-reach places, filing union grievances, sometimes even building cars unsafely. It was war.

In 1982, GM finally closed the plant. But the very next year, when Toyota was planning to start its first plant in the US, it decided to partner with GM to reopen it, hiring back the same old disastrous workers into the very same jobs. And so began the most fascinating experiment in management history.

Toyota flew this rowdy crew to Japan, to see an entirely different way of working: The Toyota Way. At Toyota, labor and management considered themselves on the same team; when workers got stuck, managers didn’t yell at them, but asked how they could help and

solicited suggestions. It was a revelation. “You had union workers—grizzled old folks that had worked on the plant floor for 30 years, and they were hugging their Japanese counterparts, just absolutely in tears,” recalls their Toyota trainer. “And it might sound flowery to say 25 years later, but they had had such a powerful emotional experience of learning a new way of working, a way that people could actually work together collaboratively—as a team.”

Three months after they got back to the US and reopened the plant, everything had changed. Grievances and absenteeism fell away and workers started saying they actually enjoyed coming to work. The Fremont factory, once one of the worst in the US, had skyrocketed to become the best. The cars they made got near-perfect quality ratings. And the cost to make them had plummeted. It wasn't the workers who were the problem; it was the system.¹

An organization is not just a pile of people, it's also a set of structures. It's almost like a machine made of men and women. Think of an assembly line. If you just took a bunch of people and threw them in a warehouse with a bunch of car parts and a manual, it'd probably be a disaster. Instead, a careful structure has been built: car parts roll down on a conveyor belt, each worker does one step of the process, everything is carefully designed and routinized. Order out of chaos.

And when the system isn't working, it doesn't make sense to just yell at the people in it — any more than you'd try to fix a machine by yelling at the gears. True, sometimes you have the wrong gears and need to replace them, but more often you're just using them in the

1. This story has been told several places, but the quotes here are from Frank Langfitt with Brian Reed, “NUMMI,” *This American Life* 403 (26 March 2010; visited 2012-09-23). Quotes are taken from the show's transcript which sometimes differ slightly from the aired version.

wrong way. When there's a problem, you shouldn't get angry with the gears — you should fix the machine.

If you have goals in life, you're probably going to need some sort of organization. Even if it's an organization of just you, it's still helpful to think of it as a kind of machine. You don't need to do every part of the process yourself — you just need to set up the machine so that the right outcomes happen.

For example, let's say you want to build a treehouse in the backyard. You're great at sawing and hammering, but architecture is not your forte. You build and build, but the treehouses keep falling down. Sure, you can try to get better at architecture, develop a better design, but you can also step back, look at the machine as a whole, and decide to fire yourself as the architect. Instead, you find a friend who loves that sort of thing to design the treehouse for you and you stick to actually building it. After all, your goal was to build a treehouse whose design you like — does it really matter whether you're the one who actually designed it?²

Or let's say you really want to get in shape, but never remember to exercise. You can keep beating yourself up for your forgetfulness, or you can put a system in place. Maybe you have your roommate check to see that you exercise before you leave your house in the morning or you set a regular time to consistently go to the gym together. Life isn't a high school exam; you don't have to solve your problems on your own.

In 1967, Edward Jones and Victor Harris gathered a group of college students and asked them to judge another student's exam (the student was a fictional character, but let's call him Jim). The exam always had one question, asking Jim to write an essay on Fidel Castro "as if [he] were giving the opening statement in a debate." But what sort of essay Jim was supposed to write varied: some of

2. Some of the concepts and terms here were inspired by Ray Dalio, *Principles* (2001), part 2 (visited 2012-09-01).

them required Jim to write a defense of Castro, others required Jim to write a critique of Castro, the rest left the choice up to Jim. The kids in the experiment were asked to read Jim's essay and then were asked whether they thought Jim himself was pro- or anti-Castro.

Jones and Harris weren't expecting any shocking results here; their goal was just to show the obvious: that people would conclude Jim was pro-Castro when he voluntarily chose to write a pro-Castro essay, but not when he was forced to by the teacher. But what they found surprised them: even when the students could easily see the question required Jim to write a pro-Castro essay, they still rated Jim as significantly more pro-Castro. It seemed hard to believe. "Perhaps some of the subjects were inattentive and did not clearly understand the context," they suspected.

So they tried again. This time they explained the essay was written for a debate tournament, where the student had been randomly assigned to either the for or against side of the debate. They wrote it in big letters on the blackboard, just to make this perfectly clear. But again they got the same results — even more clearly this time. They still couldn't believe it. Maybe, they figured, students thought Jim's arguments were so compelling he must really believe them to be able to come up with them.

So they tried a third time — this time recording Jim on tape along with the experimenter giving him the arguments to use. Surely no one would think Jim came up with them on his own now. Again, the same striking results: students were persuaded Jim believed the arguments he said, even when they knew he had no choice in making them.³

This was an extreme case, but we make the same mistake all the time. We see a sloppily-parked car and we think "what a terrible

3. Edward E. Jones and Victor A. Harris, "The Attribution of Attitudes," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 3:1 (January 1967), 1-24.

driver,” not “he must have been in a real hurry.” Someone keeps bumping into you at a concert and you think “what a jerk,” not “poor guy, people must keep bumping into him.” A policeman beats up a protestor and we think “what an awful person,” not “what terrible training.” The mistake is so common that in 1977 Lee Ross decided to name it the “fundamental attribution error”: we attribute people’s behavior to their personality, not their situation.⁴

Our natural reaction when someone screws up is to get mad at them. This is what happened at the old GM plant: workers would make a mistake and management would yell and scream. If asked to explain the yelling, they’d probably say that since people don’t like getting yelled at, it’d teach them be more careful next time.

But this explanation doesn’t really add up. Do you think the workers liked screwing up? Do you think they enjoyed making crappy cars? Well, we don’t have to speculate: we know the very same workers, when given the chance to do good work, took pride in it and started actually enjoying their jobs.

They’re just like you, when you’re trying to exercise but failing. Would it have helped to have your friend just yell and scream at you for being such a lazy loser? Probably not — it probably would have just made you feel worse. What worked wasn’t yelling, but changing the system around you so that it was easier to do what you already wanted to do.

The same is true for other people. Chances are, they don’t want to annoy you, they don’t like screwing up. So what’s going to work isn’t yelling at them, but figuring out how to change the situation. Sometimes that means changing how you behave. Sometimes that

4. Lee Ross, “The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 10 (1977), 173–220.

means bringing another person into the mix. And sometimes it just means simple stuff, like changing the way things are laid out or putting up reminders.

At the old GM plant, in Fremont, workers were constantly screwing things up: “cars with engines put in backwards, cars without steering wheels or brakes. Some were so messed up they wouldn’t start, and had to be towed off the line.” Management would yell at the workers, but what could you do? Things were moving so fast. “A car a minute don’t seem like it’s moving that fast,” noted one worker, “but when you don’t get it, you’re in the hole. There’s nobody to pull you out at General Motors, so you’re going to let something go.”

At the Toyota plant, they didn’t just let things go. There was a red cord running above the assembly line, known as an andon cord, and if you ever found yourself in the hole, all you had to do was pull it, and the whole line would stop. Management would come over and ask you how they could help, if there was a way they could fix the problem. And they’d actually listen — and do it!

You saw the results all over the factory: mats and cushions for the workers to kneel on; hanging shelves traveling along with the cars, carrying parts; special tools invented specifically to solve problems the workers had identified. Those little things added up to make a big difference.

When you’re upset with someone, all you want to do is change the way they’re acting. But you can’t control what’s inside a person’s head. Yelling at them isn’t going to make them come around, it’s just going to make them more defiant, like the GM workers who keyed the cars they made.

No, you can’t force other people to change. You can, however, change just about everything else. And usually, that’s enough.

Aaron Swartz was an American computer programmer, entrepreneur, writer, political organizer, and Internet hacktivist. He

was involved in the development of the web feed format RSS and the Markdown publishing format, the organization Creative Commons, and the website framework web.py, and was a co-founder of the social news site Reddit. He died in 2013. His writings can be found on his blog, aaronsw.com.

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38. Capturing Carbon to Fight Climate Change is Dividing Environmentalists

OLÚFEMI TÁÍWÒ AND HOLLY JEAN BUCK



“Carbon capture” by SaskPower – Powering the Future is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Environmental activists are teaming up with fresh faces in Congress to [advocate for a Green New Deal](#), a bundle of policies that would fight climate change while creating new jobs and reducing inequality. Not all of the activists agree on what those policies ought to be.

[Some 626 environmental groups](#), including Greenpeace, the Center for Biological Diversity and 350, recently laid out their vision in a letter they sent to U.S. lawmakers. They warned that they “vigorously oppose” several strategies, including the use of [carbon capture and storage](#) – a process that can trap excess carbon pollution that’s already warming the Earth, and [lock it away](#).

In our view, as a [political philosopher](#) who studies global justice and an [environmental social scientist](#), this blanket opposition is an unfortunate mistake. Based on the [need to remove carbon from the atmosphere](#), and the risks in relying on land sinks like [forests](#) and [soils](#) alone to take up the excess carbon, we believe that carbon capture and storage could be a powerful tool for [making the climate safer](#) and even rectifying [historical climate injustices](#).

Global inequality

We think the U.S. and other rich countries should accelerate negative emissions research for two reasons.

First, they can afford it. Second, they have a [historical responsibility](#) as they burned a disproportionate amount of the carbon causing climate change today. Global warming is poised to hit the least-developed countries, including dozens that were [colonized by these wealthier nations](#), the hardest.

Consider this: The entire African continent emits less carbon than the U.S., Russia or Japan.

Yet Africa is likely to experience climate change impacts [sooner and more intensely than any other region](#). Some African regions are already experiencing warming increases at [more than twice the global rate](#). Coastal and island nations like Bangladesh, Madagascar and the Marshall Islands face [near or total destruction](#).

But the world's [richest nations have been slow to endorse and support](#) the necessary research, development and governance for negative emissions technologies.

Bad track record with coal

What explains the objections from climate justice advocates?

The U.S. has heavily funded [experiments with carbon capture and storage](#) to drastically reduce greenhouse gas [emissions from new coal-fired power plants](#) since [George W. Bush's presidency](#).

Those efforts have not paid off, partly because of economics. [Natural gas and renewable energy have become cheaper](#) and more popular than coal for generating electricity.

Only a handful of [coal-fired power plants are under construction](#) in the U.S., where closures are routine. The industry is in trouble everywhere, with [few exceptions](#).

In addition, carbon capture with coal has a [bad track record](#). The [biggest U.S. experiment](#) is the [US\\$7.5 billion Kemper power plant in Mississippi](#). It ended in [failure in 2017](#) when state power authorities ordered the plant operator to give up on this technology and rely on natural gas instead.

Other uses

Carbon capture and storage, however, isn't just for fossil-fuel-burning power plants. It can work with [industrial carbon dioxide sources](#), such as steel, cement and chemical plants and [incinerators](#).

Then, one of two things can happen. The carbon can be turned into new products, such as [fuels](#), [cement](#), [soft drinks](#) or even [shoes](#).

Carbon can also be stored permanently if it is injected [underground](#), where geologists believe it can stay put for centuries.

Until now, a common use for captured carbon is extracting oil out of old wells. Burning that petroleum, however, can make climate change worse.



Captured carbon has a variety of industrial uses, including oil extraction and fire extinguisher manufacturing. U.S. Energy Department's National Energy Technology Laboratory, Public Domain.

Going carbon negative

This technology may potentially also [remove more carbon than gets emitted](#) – as long as it's designed right.

One example is what's called [bioenergy with carbon capture and storage](#), where farm residues or crops like trees or grasses are grown to be burned to generate electricity. Carbon is separated out and stored at the power plants where this happens.

If the [supply chain is sustainable](#), with cultivation, harvesting and transport done in low-carbon or carbon-neutral ways, this process can produce what scientists call negative emissions, with more carbon removed than released. Another possibility involves [directly capturing carbon](#) from the air.

Scientists point out that bioenergy with carbon capture and storage could require [vast amounts of land](#) for growing biofuels to burn. And climate advocates are concerned that both approaches could pave the way for oil, gas and coal companies and big industries to simply [continue with business as usual](#) instead of phasing out fossil fuels.

Natural solutions

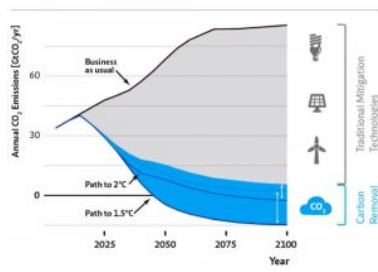
Every pathway to limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius in the most recent U.N.

[Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) report projected the use of carbon removal approaches.

Planting more trees, composting and farming in ways that store carbon in soils and [protecting wetlands](#) can also reduce atmospheric carbon. We believe the natural [solutions many environmentalists might prefer are crucial](#). But soaking up excess carbon through afforestation on a massive scale could [encroach on farmland](#).

To be sure, not all environmentalists are writing off carbon capture and storage.

The Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund and Natural Resources Defense Council, along with many other big green organizations, [did not sign the letter](#), which objected not just to



Many experts agree that limiting global warming to 1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius will require reducing the volume of carbon emissions through energy efficiency and renewable-energy generation and CO₂ removal. MCC, CC BY-SA

carbon capture and storage but also to [nuclear power](#), [emissions trading](#) and [converting trash into energy](#) through incineration.

Rather than leave carbon removal technologies out of the Green New Deal, we suggest that more environmentalists consider their potential for removing carbon that has already been emitted. We believe these approaches could potentially create jobs, foster economic development and reduce inequality on a global scale – as long as they are meaningfully accountable to people in the world's poorest nations.

Olúfẹmi Táíwò completed his Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles, and teaches philosophy at Georgetown University. **Holly Jean Buck** is a NatureNet Science Fellow at UCLA's Institute of the Environment and Sustainability and author of [After Geoengineering](#), a look at best and worst-case futures under climate engineering.

[“Capturing Carbon to Fight Climate Change Is Dividing Environmentalists”](#) by [Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò and Holly Jean Buck](#) was originally published in *88 Open Essays* (2019) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

39. Preserving Black Historical Resorts Is a Radical Act

RUTH TERRY AND MICHELLE JACKSON

Editor's Note: To view this article with the original images, [click here](#).

Images from Michigan's historic Idlewild resort are striking for their depictions of Black people vacationing and having a good time during a period in history where sociopolitical conditions made it nearly impossible.

Families playfully make sandcastles together; young boys dive off wooden piers into the lake; couples sit outside of quaint wooden cabins; beauty pageant contestants strut down a grassy runway; vacationers horseback ride and boat—all seemingly [enjoying the respite of tranquil summer](#) recreation, without a care in the world.

Amid the violent segregation of the Jim Crow era, leaning into Black joy, leisure, and recreation was a form of quiet radical resistance. Today that resistance is ongoing through retaining the memory and actual historical sites that held space for it as we continue to reckon with anti-Blackness in the United States.

“It’s like Rosa Parks sitting on that bus. It’s like Colin Kaepernick taking a knee. You know, those folks, what they did, was ... equivalent to all that. It’s a part of that struggle,” says Joe McGill, founder and executive director of the [Slave Dwelling Project](#), a nonprofit that reframes the narrative of American slavery and centers the spaces where enslaved Africans lived. “They wanted to be able to recreate, to have places for recreation. It was radical.”

Idlewild, known as Michigan’s “Black Eden,” is just one of many

African American leisure spaces that flourished from the early 1900s to the civil rights era—and which now need intentional investment and coordinated action around historical preservation to continue existing.

Black Edens Across the U.S.

White investors established Idlewild in 1912, but Black entrepreneurs and property owners built the 2-square-mile town into a thriving community of businesses, residences, and entertainment venues like the Flamingo Club.

The resort attracted Black professionals, like prominent cardiologist [Dr. Daniel Hale Williams](#), and Black elites like W.E.B. DuBois, Madam C.J. Walker, and Louis and Lucille Armstrong.

Purdue Professor of African-American studies Ronald J. Stephens says Idlewild later became a must-play tour stop for iconic Black entertainers such as the Four Tops and Aretha Franklin, and saw as many as 25,000 visitors in a single weekend.

“They called it ‘the Summer Apollo of Michigan,’” says Stephens, a reference to the iconic Black entertainment venue in New York City. “Aretha Franklin writes about this in her autobiography: any Black artist that was going to make it in Black showbiz and Black entertainment had to go through [Idlewild].”

Similar sites, resorts, and leisure spaces existed around the country.

Oak Bluffs in Martha’s Vineyard has been a center of African American life since the 18th century, according to Lawana Holland-Moore, program officer at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a privately funded nonprofit organization.

“In the 1930s, it became one of the best-known African American vacation resort spots. And this speaks to ... that prestige that came with going to Martha’s Vineyard, owning one of those gingerbread cottages right there. It was somewhere to aspire to be able to

vacation,” explains Holland-Moore, who oversees the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, a multiyear, \$25 million-dollar initiative to identify, elevate, and support African American voices, stories, places, activism, and achievement.

[American Beach](#) in Florida, Bruce’s Beach, in Manhattan Beach, California, Lincoln Hills in Colorado, Highland Beach, Maryland, and [Woodland Park](#), near Newaygo, Michigan, also catered to an emerging class of middle- and upper-class African Americans seeking an escape from racialized violence and persistent segregation.

Black beachgoers flocked to sites such as Atlantic Beach and [Mosquito Beach](#) in South Carolina and Carr’s Beach in Maryland, and other leisure sites and accommodations that the [The Negro Motorist Green Book](#) could safely recommend for Black vacationers and travelers.

Ironically, landmark legislation to reverse segregation and discrimination, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, led to disinterest and divestment in these historic leisure sites.

“When [integration] happened, Black folks started going to places where we were prohibited from prior to that,” says McGill, who is also a history consultant for Magnolia Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina, and former field officer for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. “And when we started going to those places, then we started neglecting our places, our physical places that should have been preserved.”

Preservation Challenges

Historic preservation in the United States has always centered White experiences and perspectives, presenting challenges to effective conservation of Black heritage sites, McGill says.

Demographics within conservation and preservation affect what sites and structures are preserved. White women spearheaded early

historical societies, he explains, and subsequent groups would follow in their footsteps prioritizing whitewashed narratives of U.S. history.

Still today, the people most likely to be involved in cultural heritage planning and preservation are overwhelmingly White—and will likely continue to be. In 2019, White people earned [71% of the degrees awarded in historic preservation and conservation](#).

[Just 2%](#) of the more than 95,000 entries in the National Register of Historic Places relate to Black American history.

“Historic preservation, in a general sense, tends to be a pursuit of happiness. ... Saving those things that keep us in that comfortable place—those nice, beautiful, architecturally significant places,” says McGill. “And in doing that, we tend to leave out a lot of the history that tells the stories of the native Indigenous population, and the people who were enslaved. Because in our narrative, we want to squash that as much as possible.”

Also, Holland-Moore says, African American heritage sites aren’t often “grand places, mansions, [or] places of wealth.”

Legal loopholes around land ownership present another threat to the preservation of Black land and leisure spaces. They make “heir’s property,” land that passes down through a family or to multiple family members without a will—a likely method of transference within Black families—vulnerable to takeover and development.

Descendants of Willa and Charles Bruce, who opened a Black resort in Manhattan Beach in 1912, [have been fighting for decades](#) for the return of their families’ beachfront property—which was appropriated by the city through [eminent domain](#). So far, they’ve gotten an apology and a plaque.

Many Black people like the Bruce’s descendants have been stripped of hundreds of billions of dollars because of lost land, [creating and exacerbating racial wealth gaps](#).

“Their effort to preserve these places is more of a challenge because of the wealth gap that was caused by the disenfranchisement of the Black folks upon freedom,” says McGill. “The freedom was there, but the wealth was not there to put the

resources into the places that we should have saved, that could help tell our stories.”

Preservation Actions

For decades, residents and community stakeholders, conservationists and academics—including Stephens, who authored two books on Idlewild (*Idlewild: The Rise, Decline, and Rebirth of a Unique African American Resort Town* and *Idlewild: The Black Eden of Michigan*)—have been working to bring back Black leisure spaces into the public consciousness and to preserve these sites for future generations.

“When we’re talking about Black recreation spaces, you know, this is important, because it is yet another facet within our story of who we are as African Americans,” says the Action Fund’s Holland-Moore. “The fact that we can even have [and] are even having recreation, that we are relaxing, that we are able to take our families and hit the road and go on vacation. That unto itself is such a novel chapter in our history: the fact that we can relax.”

The African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund was instrumental in revitalizing [A.G. Gaston Motel](#), a former luxury accommodation for African Americans and civil rights landmark in Birmingham, Alabama.

The group also recently wrote a letter of support to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to preserve part of a Chesapeake Bay property connected to Carr’s Beach, according to Holland-Moore. Earlier this year, the Maryland Cultural & Conference Center commissioned artist and activist Comacell Brown to create an on-site mural of Carr’s Beach.

In 2019, Mosquito Beach in South Carolina was added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#), the results of individual action and partnerships with the Historic Charleston Foundation, the National Park Service, and other community stakeholders.

Preservation at Idlewild has occurred in [fits and starts](#). A community plan established Idlewild Historic Cultural Center in 1973; the state founded the Idlewild Michigan Transformation Initiative in 2007 and awarded more than [\\$620,000](#) for renovation soon after. Idlewild hosts an annual music festival and has numerous commemorative signs, but the community still has yet to return to its former glory, with iconic venues still shuttered and a population of just 771.

Reinvestment by wealthy Black entrepreneurs could point the way forward for other resorts.

For example, Denver-born billionaire Robert Smith, the wealthiest Black person in America, is a primary founder of [Lincoln Hills Cares](#), a nonprofit organization that offers culturally responsive outdoor education programs and activities in the tradition of historic Lincoln Hills.

While Lincoln Hills resort once catered to Black middle-class families, today the organization's mission is to share the site's history and provide outdoor experiences, such as horseback riding lessons and environmental conservation training, to those who may not have been able to otherwise access them.

Lincoln Hills Cares, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, plans to restore [Winks Panorama](#) lodge, formerly a destination location for performers like Duke Ellington and Lena Horne and other elite visitors to Denver. Camp Nizhoni, a YMCA camp for Black girls who were excluded from other camps during segregation, was also part of Lincoln Hills' original iteration.

Continued Radical Resistance

In the context of this past year's racial reckoning, "all this craziness" with the 1776 Commission and "patriotic education," says McGill, and our national fixation with Black trauma porn, Black leisure again seems as radical and relevant as it was a century ago.

Black people are continuing to carve out spaces for recreation and wellness through the exploding [Black Travel Movement](#), as well as innovative BIPOC-led self-care projects, such as Ethel's Club online community and [The Nap Ministry](#).

We may have more options for travel, recreation, and restoration than our ancestors likely ever dreamed of, but it's still important to safeguard the historic leisure sites of the past.

"What's already there is embodied energy. That embodied energy is, you know, those people who, before us, you know, created some of these spaces," says McGill. "We honor them by, you know, making sure that these spaces continue to exist for future generations."

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40. Why Good People Turn Bad Online

GAIA VINCE



*"No Trolls wanted here" by John Pons
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On the evening of 17 February 2018, Professor Mary Beard posted on Twitter a photograph of herself crying. The eminent University of Cambridge classicist, who has almost 200,000 Twitter followers, was distraught after receiving a storm of abuse online. This was the reaction to a comment she had made about Haiti. She also

tweeted: "I speak from the heart (and of course I may be wrong). But the crap I get in response just isn't on; really it isn't."

In the days that followed, Beard received support from several high-profile people. Greg Jenner, a fellow celebrity historian, tweeted about his own experience of a Twitterstorm: "I'll always remember how traumatic it was to suddenly be hated by strangers. Regardless of morality – I may have been wrong or right in my opinion – I was amazed (later, when I recovered) at how psychologically destabilising it was to me."

Those tweeting support for Beard – irrespective of whether they agreed with her initial tweet that had triggered the abusive responses – were themselves then targeted. And when one of Beard's critics, fellow Cambridge academic Priyamvada Gopal, a woman of Asian heritage, set out her response to Beard's original tweet in an online article, she received her own torrent of abuse.

There is overwhelming evidence that women and members of ethnic minority groups are disproportionately the target of Twitter

abuse. Where these identity markers intersect, the bullying can become particularly intense, as experienced by black female MP Diane Abbott, who alone received [nearly half](#) of all the abusive tweets sent to female MPs during the run-up to the 2017 UK general election. Black and Asian female MPs received on average 35 per cent more abusive tweets than their white female colleagues even when Abbott was excluded from the total.

The constant barrage of abuse, including death threats and threats of sexual violence, is silencing people, pushing them off online platforms and further reducing the diversity of online voices and opinion. And it shows no sign of abating. A [survey last year](#) found that 40 percent of American adults had personally experienced online abuse, with almost half of them receiving severe forms of harassment, including physical threats and stalking. 70 percent of women described online harassment as a “major problem”.

The business models of social media platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook, promote content that is more likely to get a response from other users because more engagement means better opportunities for advertising. But this has a consequence of favouring divisive and strongly emotive or extreme content, which can in turn nurture online “bubbles” of groups who reflect and reinforce each other’s opinions, helping propel the spread of more extreme content and providing a niche for “fake news”. In recent months, [researchers have revealed](#) many ways that various vested interests, including Russian operatives, have sought to manipulate public opinion by infiltrating social media bubbles.



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Our human ability to communicate ideas across networks of people enabled us to build the modern world. The internet offers unparalleled promise of cooperation and communication between all of humanity. But instead of embracing a massive extension of our social circles online, we seem to be reverting to tribalism and conflict, and belief in the potential of the internet to bring humanity together in a glorious collaborating network now begins to seem naive. While we generally conduct our real-life

interactions with strangers politely and respectfully, online we can be horrible. How can we relearn the collaborative techniques that enabled us to find common ground and thrive as a species?

“Don’t overthink it, just press the button!”

I click an amount, impoverishing myself in an instant, and quickly move on to the next question, aware that we’re all playing against the clock. My teammates are far away and unknown to me. I have no idea if we’re all in it together or whether I’m being played for a fool, but I press on, knowing that the others are depending on me.

I’m playing in a so-called public goods game at Yale University’s Human Cooperation Lab. The researchers here use it as a tool to help understand how and why we cooperate, and whether we can enhance our prosocial behaviour.

Over the years, scientists have proposed various theories about why humans cooperate so well that we form strong societies. The evolutionary roots of our general niceness, most researchers now believe, can be found in the individual survival advantage humans

experience when we cooperate as a group. I've come to New Haven, Connecticut, in a snowy February, to visit a cluster of labs where researchers are using experiments to explore further our extraordinary impulse to be nice to others even at our own expense.

The game I'm playing, on Amazon's Mechanical Turk online platform, is one of the lab's ongoing experiments. I'm in a team of four people in different locations, and each of us is given the same amount of money to play with. We are asked to choose how much money we will contribute to a group pot, on the understanding that this pot will then be doubled and split equally among us.

This sort of social dilemma, like all cooperation, relies on a certain level of trust that the others in your group will be nice. If everybody in the group contributes all of their money, all the money gets doubled, redistributed four ways, and everyone doubles their money. Win-win!

"But if you think about it from the perspective of an individual," says lab director David Rand, "for each dollar that you contribute, it gets doubled to two dollars and then split four ways – which means each person only gets 50 cents back for the dollar they contributed."

Even though everyone is better off collectively by contributing to a group project that no one could manage alone – in real life, this could be paying towards a hospital building, or digging a community irrigation ditch – there is a cost at the individual level. Financially, you make more money by being more selfish.

Rand's team has run this game with thousands of players. Half of them are asked, as I was, to decide their contribution rapidly – within 10 seconds – whereas the other half are asked to take their time and carefully consider their decision. It turns out that when people go with their gut, they are much more generous than when they spend time deliberating.

"There is a lot of evidence that cooperation is a central feature of human evolution," says Rand. Individuals benefit, and are more likely to survive, by cooperating with the group. And being allowed to stay in the group and benefit from it is reliant on our reputation for behaving cooperatively.

“In the small-scale societies that our ancestors were living in, all our interactions were with people that you were going to see again and interact with in the immediate future,” Rand says. That kept in check any temptation to act aggressively or take advantage and free-ride off other people’s contributions. “It makes sense, in a self-interested way, to be cooperative.”

Cooperation breeds more cooperation in a mutually beneficial cycle. Rather than work out every time whether it’s in our long-term interests to be nice, it’s more efficient and less effort to have the basic rule: be nice to other people. That’s why our unthinking response in the experiment is a generous one.

Throughout our lives, we learn from the society around us how cooperative to be. But our learned behaviours can also change quickly.

Those in Rand’s experiment who play the quickfire round are mostly generous and receive generous dividends, reinforcing their generous outlook. Whereas those who consider their decisions are more selfish, resulting in a meagre group pot, reinforcing an idea that it doesn’t pay to rely on the group. So, in a further experiment, Rand gave some money to people who had played a round of the game. They were then asked how much they wanted to give to an anonymous stranger. This time, there was no incentive to give; they would be acting entirely charitably.

It turned out there were big differences. The people who had got used to cooperating in the first stage gave twice as much money in the second stage as the people who had got used to being selfish did. “So we’re affecting people’s internal lives and behaviour,” Rand says. “The way they behave even when no one’s watching and when there’s no institution in place to punish or reward them.”

Rand’s team have tested how people in different countries play the game, to see how the strength of social institutions – such as government, family, education and legal systems – influences behaviour. In Kenya, where [public sector corruption is high](#), players initially gave less generously to the stranger than players in the US, which has less corruption. This suggests that people who can

rely on relatively fair social institutions behave in a more public-spirited way; those whose institutions are less reliable are more protectionist. However, after playing just one round of the cooperation-promoting version of the public goods game, the Kenyans' generosity equalled the Americans'. And it cut both ways: Americans who were trained to be selfish gave a lot less.

So is there something about online social media culture that makes some people behave meanly? Unlike ancient [hunter-gatherer societies](#), which rely on cooperation and sharing to survive and often have rules for when to offer food to whom across their social network, social media have weak institutions. They offer physical distance, relative anonymity and little reputational or punitive risk for bad behaviour: if you're mean, no one you know is going to see.

I trudge a couple of blocks through driving snow to find Molly Crockett's Psychology Lab, where researchers are investigating moral decision-making in society. One area they focus on is how social emotions are transformed online, in particular moral outrage. Brain-imaging studies show that when people act on their moral outrage, their brain's reward centre is activated – they feel good about it. This reinforces their behaviour, so they are more likely to intervene in a similar way again. So, if they see somebody acting in a way that violates a social norm, by allowing their dog to foul a playground, for instance, and they publicly confront the perpetrator about it, they feel good afterwards. And while challenging a violator of your community's social norms has its risks – you may get attacked – it also boosts your reputation.

In our relatively peaceful lives, we are rarely faced with outrageous behaviour, so we rarely see moral outrage expressed. Open up Twitter or Facebook and you get a very different picture. [Recent research](#) shows that messages with both moral and emotional words are more likely to spread on social media – each moral or emotional word in a tweet increases the likelihood of it being retweeted by 20 per cent.

“Content that triggers outrage and that expresses outrage is much more likely to be shared,” Crockett says. What we've created

online is “an ecosystem that selects for the most outrageous content, paired with a platform where it’s easier than ever before to express outrage”.

Unlike in the offline world, there is no personal risk in confronting and exposing someone. It only takes a few clicks of a button and you don’t have to be physically nearby, so there is a lot more outrage expressed online. And it feeds itself. “If you punish somebody for violating a norm, that makes you seem more trustworthy to others, so you can broadcast your moral character by expressing outrage and punishing social norm violations,” Crockett says. “And people believe that they are spreading good by expressing outrage – that it comes from a place of morality and righteousness.

“When you go from offline – where you might boost your reputation for whoever happens to be standing around at the moment – to online, where you broadcast it to your entire social network, then that dramatically amplifies the personal rewards of expressing outrage.”

This is compounded by the feedback people get on social media, in the form of likes and retweets and so on. “Our hypothesis is that the design of these platforms could make expressing outrage into a habit, and a habit is something that’s done without regard to its consequences – it’s insensitive to what happens next, it’s just a blind response to a stimulus,” Crockett explains.

“I think it’s worth having a conversation as a society as to whether we want our morality to be under the control of algorithms whose purpose is to make money for giant tech companies,” she adds. “I think we would all like to believe and feel that our moral emotions, thoughts and behaviours are intentional and not knee-jerk reactions to whatever is placed in front of us that our smartphone designer thinks will bring them the most profit.”

On the upside, the lower costs of expressing outrage online have allowed marginalised, less-empowered groups to promote causes that have traditionally been harder to advance. Moral outrage on social media played an important role in focusing attention on the sexual abuse of women by high-status men. And in February 2018,

Florida teens railing on social media against yet another high-school shooting in their state helped to [shift public opinion](#), as well as shaming a number of big corporations into dropping their discount schemes for National Rifle Association members.

“I think that there must be ways to maintain the benefits of the online world,” says Crockett, “while thinking more carefully about redesigning these interactions to do away with some of the more costly bits.”

Someone who’s thought a great deal about the design of our interactions in social networks is Nicholas Christakis, director of Yale’s Human Nature Lab, located just a few more snowy blocks away. His team studies how our position in a social network influences our behaviour, and even how certain influential individuals can dramatically alter the culture of a whole network.

The team is exploring ways to identify these individuals and enlist them in public health programmes that could benefit the community. In Honduras, they are using this approach to influence vaccination enrolment and maternal care, for example. Online, such people have the potential to turn a bullying culture into a supportive one.

Corporations already use a crude system of identifying so-called Instagram influencers to advertise their brands for them. But Christakis is looking not just at how popular an individual is, but also their position in the network and the shape of that network. In some networks, like a small isolated village, everyone is closely connected and you’re likely to know everyone at a party; in a city, by contrast, people may be living more closely by as a whole, but you are less likely to know everyone at a party there. How thoroughly interconnected a network is affects how behaviours and information spread around it, he explains.

“If you take carbon atoms and you assemble them one way, they become graphite, which is soft and dark. Take the same carbon atoms and assemble them a different way, and it becomes diamond, which is hard and clear. These properties of hardness and clearness aren’t properties of the carbon atoms – they’re properties of the

collection of carbon atoms and depend on how you connect the carbon atoms to each other,” he says. “And it’s the same with human groups.”

Christakis has designed software to explore this by creating temporary artificial societies online. “We drop people in and then we let them interact with each other and see how they play a public goods game, for example, to assess how kind they are to other people.”

Then he manipulates the network. “By engineering their interactions one way, I can make them really sweet to each other, work well together, and they are healthy and happy and they cooperate. Or you take the same people and connect them a different way and they’re mean jerks to each other and they don’t cooperate and they don’t share information and they are not kind to each other.”

In one experiment, he randomly assigned strangers to play the public goods game with each other. In the beginning, he says, about two-thirds of people were cooperative. “But some of the people they interact with will take advantage of them and, because their only option is either to be kind and cooperative or to be a defector, they choose to defect because they’re stuck with these people taking advantage of them. And by the end of the experiment everyone is a jerk to everyone else.”

Christakis turned this around simply by giving each person a little bit of control over who they were connected to after each round. “They had to make two decisions: am I kind to my neighbours or am I not; and do I stick with this neighbour or do I not.” The only thing each player knew about their neighbours was whether each had cooperated or defected in the round before. “What we were able to show is that people cut ties to defectors and form ties to cooperators, and the network rewired itself and converted itself into a diamond-like structure instead of a graphite-like structure.” In other words, a cooperative prosocial structure instead of an uncooperative structure.

In an attempt to generate more cooperative online communities,

Christakis's team have started adding bots to their temporary societies. He takes me over to a laptop and sets me up on a different game. In this game, anonymous players have to work together as a team to solve a dilemma that tilers will be familiar with: each of us has to pick from one of three colours, but the colours of players directly connected to each other must be different. If we solve the puzzle within a time limit, we all get a share of the prize money; if we fail, no one gets anything. I'm playing with at least 30 other people. None of us can see the whole network of connections, only the people we are directly connected to – nevertheless, we have to cooperate to win.

I'm connected to two neighbours, whose colours are green and blue, so I pick red. My left neighbour then changes to red so I quickly change to blue. The game continues and I become increasingly tense, cursing my slow reaction times. I frequently have to switch my colour, responding to unseen changes elsewhere in the network, which send a cascade of changes along the connections. Time's up before we solve the puzzle, prompting irate responses in the game's comments box from remote players condemning everyone else's stupidity. Personally, I'm relieved it's over and there's no longer anyone depending on my cackhanded gaming skills to earn money.

Christakis tells me that some of the networks are so complex that the puzzle is impossible to solve in the timeframe. My relief is shortlived, however: the one I played was solvable. He rewinds the game, revealing for the first time the whole network to me. I see now that I was on a lower branch off the main hub of the network. Some of the players were connected to just one other person, but most were connected to three or more. Thousands of people from around the world play these games on Amazon Mechanical Turk, drawn by the small fee they earn per round. But as I'm watching the game I just played unfold, Christakis reveals that three of these players are actually planted bots. "We call them 'dumb AI,'" he says.

His team is not interested in inventing super-smart AI to replace

human cognition. Instead, the plan is to infiltrate a population of smart humans with dumb-bots to help the humans help themselves.

“We wanted to see if we could use the dumb-bots to get the people unstuck so they can cooperate and coordinate a little bit more – so that their native capacity to perform well can be revealed by a little assistance,” Christakis says. He found that if the bots played perfectly, that didn’t help the humans. But if the bots made some mistakes, they unlocked the potential of the group to find a solution.

“Some of these bots made counter-intuitive choices. Even though their neighbours all had green and they should have picked orange, instead they also picked green.” When they did that, it allowed one of the green neighbours to pick orange, “which unlocks the next guy over, he can pick a different colour and, wow, now we solve the problem”. Without the bot, those human players would probably all have stuck with green, not realising that was the problem. “Increasing the conflicts temporarily allows their neighbours to make better choices.”

By adding a little noise into the system, the bots helped the network to function more efficiently. Perhaps a version of this model could involve infiltrating the newsfeeds of partisan people with occasional items offering a different perspective, helping to shift people out of their social media comfort-bubbles and allow society as a whole to cooperate more.

Much antisocial behaviour online stems from the anonymity of internet interactions – the reputational costs of being mean are much lower than offline. Here, bots may also offer a solution. [One experiment](#) found that the level of racist abuse tweeted at black users could be dramatically slashed by using bot accounts with white profile images to respond to racist tweeters. A typical bot response to a racist tweet would be: “Hey man, just remember that there are real people who are hurt when you harass them with that kind of language.” Simply cultivating a little empathy in such tweeters reduced their racist tweets almost to zero for weeks afterwards.

Another way of addressing the low reputational cost for bad behaviour online is to engineer in some form of social punishment. One game company, League of Legends, did that by introducing a “Tribunal” feature, in which negative play is punished by other players. The company reported that 280,000 players were “reformed” in one year, meaning that after being punished by the Tribunal they had changed their behaviour and then achieved a positive standing in the community. Developers could also build in social rewards for good behaviour, encouraging more cooperative elements that help build relationships.

Researchers are already starting to learn how to predict when an exchange is about to turn bad – the moment at which it could benefit from pre-emptive intervention. “You might think that there is a minority of sociopaths online, which we call trolls, who are doing all this harm,” says Cristian Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, at Cornell University’s Department of Information Science. “What we actually find in our work is that ordinary people, just like you and me, can engage in such antisocial behaviour. For a specific period of time, you can actually become a troll. And that’s surprising.”

It’s also alarming. I mentally flick back through my own recent tweets, hoping I haven’t veered into bullying in some awkward attempt to appear funny or cool to my online followers. After all, it can be very tempting to be abusive to someone far away, who you don’t know, if you think it will impress your social group.

Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil has been investigating the comments sections below online articles. He identifies two main triggers for trolling: the context of the exchange – how other users are behaving – and your mood. “If you’re having a bad day, or if it happens to be Monday, for example, you’re much more likely to troll in the same situation,” he says. “You’re nicer on a Saturday morning.”

After collecting data, including from people who had engaged in trolling behaviour in the past, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil built an algorithm that predicts with 80 per cent accuracy when someone is about to become abusive online. This provides an opportunity to, for example, introduce a delay in how fast they can post their

response. If people have to think twice before they write something, that improves the context of the exchange for everyone: you're less likely to witness people misbehaving, and so less likely to misbehave yourself.

The good news is that, in spite of the horrible behaviour many of us have experienced online, the majority of interactions are nice and cooperative. Justified moral outrage is usefully employed in challenging hateful tweets. A recent British study looking at anti-Semitism on Twitter found that posts challenging anti-Semitic tweets are shared far more widely than the anti-Semitic tweets themselves. Most hateful posts were ignored or only shared within a small echo chamber of similar accounts. Perhaps we're already starting to do the work of the bots ourselves.

As Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil points out, we've had thousands of years to hone our person-to-person interactions, but only 20 years of social media. "Offline, we have all these cues from facial expressions to body language to pitch... whereas online we discuss things only through text. I think we shouldn't be surprised that we're having so much difficulty in finding the right way to discuss and cooperate online."

As our online behaviour develops, we may well introduce subtle signals, digital equivalents of facial cues, to help smooth online discussions. In the meantime, the advice for dealing with online abuse is to stay calm, it's not your fault. Don't retaliate but block and ignore bullies, or if you feel up to it, tell them to stop. Talk to family or friends about what's happening and ask them to help you. Take screenshots and report online harassment to the social media service where it's happening, and if it includes physical threats, report it to the police.

If social media as we know it is going to survive, the companies running these platforms are going to have to keep steering their algorithms, perhaps informed by behavioural science, to encourage cooperation rather than division, positive online experiences rather than abuse. As users, we too may well learn to adapt to this new

communication environment so that civil and productive interaction remains the norm online as it is offline.

“I’m optimistic,” Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil says. “This is just a different game and we have to evolve.”

References

The [New Statesman](#) tracked abusive tweets sent to women MPs in the run-up to the 2017 UK general election.

A 2017 [Pew Research Center survey](#) showed that 41 percent of Americans have experienced online harassment.

Researchers at [University College London](#) investigated what hunter-gatherers can tell us about social networks.

[Research published in PNAS](#) showed that emotion influences how content spreads online.

In 2016, [Ars Technica](#) reported a study showing how Twitter bots can reduce racist slurs.

Community Security Trust, a charity that protects British Jews from anti-Semitism, published a report about anti-Semitic content on Twitter in 2018.

Gaia Vince is a journalist, broadcaster and author specialising in science, the environment and social issues. Her article first appeared in [Mosaic](#).

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4I. Suggested Texts

1. [Stephen M. Butler and Nathaniel Coward, “Young People’s Self-Making in Neoliberal Capitalism: Challenges and Opportunities”](#)
2. [David Flier, “This Argentine Prison Cooperative Ended Recidivism”](#)
3. [Keith Schneider, “California Knew the Carr Wildfire Could Happen. It Failed to Prevent it.”](#)
4. [Jessica Wapner, “Austin, Indiana: The HIV Capital of Small-Town America”](#)

PART V

UNIT 3: ESSAYS ABOUT WRITING

42. Unit 3: Circulating Multimodal Texts Introduction

How would you define a “text”? Your first thought might be a magazine or newspaper article, a chapter or an entire book, or a blog post. So far, this course has focused on producing a text that is words on a page. However, this unit is a chance to consider what else is a text. While the word text often refers to content that is written in a standard alphabetic order like a novel or research paper, that is just one type of text. Melanie Gagich explains that in composition courses such as College Writing, text often means “a piece of communication that can take many forms.” By this definition, a film, a short video, an image, a website, a social media post, or an art installation can all be considered texts. We are surrounded by all sorts of texts in our daily lives, Gagich notes, adding that it is also “important to consider how most texts are also multimodal.” In this unit, we’d like you to develop an expansive view of what texts can be and to consider how modes of communication can work together to affect an audience. What, then, is a multimodal text?

Imagine your morning as a student: Maybe you begin with a lecture in a class where an instructor speaks while clicking through a slide deck. After class, you walk past a bulletin board and notice flyers for upcoming events on campus. You send a quick, emoji-filled text to your roommate to set up a time to meet for lunch before you pick up a pack of Hi-Chew at Procrastination Station. Each of the texts you encountered—the lecture with slides, the flyers on the bulletin board, the emoji-filled text message, the candy wrapper—are all examples of multimodal texts. A multimodal text is one that combines two or more modes of communication (images,

sounds, printed letters, or words) into one, cohesive object. Most likely, you have already created a number of multimodal texts. Perhaps you have made a slideshow for a class presentation, created a video for YouTube or TikTok, illustrated a book or poem. These categories of multimodal texts constitute genres, forms of composition that share identifiable recurring elements. The purpose of these elements is what is important. Just as you would not read a horror novel if you wanted a love story, thinking about multimodal genres allows us to consider what elements of a multimodal genre most effectively transmit the big ideas. A multimodal text that is meant to showcase images would not be effective as a podcast, but an interview would not be effective as a single instagram photo.

In the Circulating Multimodal Texts unit, you will compose a multimodal text that either adapts your unit 1 or unit 2 essay or takes on a new topic, depending on your instructor's assignment. As with Unit 2, you will compose texts for audiences you'd like to reach beyond the university. You will also explore the ways meanings are constructed in multimodal compositions. Through the process of creating a multimodal text, you will think deeply about the connections among your purposes for writing, the audience for whom you are writing, and the genre, or form, your writing will take. As you consider ways to circulate multimodal texts on your topic, you will need to understand the genre conventions for your chosen medium, the ways the medium makes use of different modes, and the message.

Here are the writing goals you will work toward in Unit 3 Circulating Multimodal Texts:

- Engaging in the composing process to gain an understanding of creating for different modes, media, or genres.
- Gaining experience composing in multiple modes.
- Exploring how composing strategies shift when composing multimodal projects.
- Tailoring multimodal content for a specific purpose and audience of your choice.
- Exploring the ways texts can and do circulate.
- Citing multiple sources in conventions appropriate for a multimodal genre.

Engaging in the composing process to gain an understanding of creating for different modes, media, or genres.

In Unit 3, the writing process includes generative writing to help you visualize your audience, defining your purpose for writing, and taking the time to explore the genre in which you will compose. Just like reading to join a conversation, you must understand how dialogues take place across different modes so you can effectively

join those specific communities. Understanding your audience and genre can help you determine the best modes for conveying your message. As you develop drafts of your multimodal project, you will get valuable feedback from your peers to help you revise.

Gaining experience composing in multiple modes.

In the process of creating a multimodal text, you will consider the ways different combinations of images, colors, shapes, sounds, words, spatial arrangement, and gestures work together to create meaning. You will learn how each mode has its own conventions and strengths, and by combining different modes, you will see how you can shape your message to appeal to different audiences.

Exploring how composing strategies shift when composing multimodal projects.

Planning a multimodal text means making important decisions about how to represent your ideas in different ways. While, for example, it might be easy to understand you would need to change up the writing for a child audience versus an academic one, these types of differences also affect what type of genre would be best for your project, and how you construct it. You'll need to select the information an audience might find most interesting or valuable and translate those ideas into visuals, sounds, or spatial arrangements.

Tailoring multimodal content for a specific purpose and audience of your choice.

The way you structure your multimodal content depends on the genre you create. An Instagram reel, for example, differs in purpose

from a TED Talk, and those differences matter. As you create your multimodal text, you'll learn to consider how the genre (Instagram reel, TED Talk, infographic, etc.) allows the purpose and form of your text to work together. Audiences expect certain things from certain genres, which you can use and adapt just like writing conventions. Analyzing the genre of your multimodal text will help you design a text that an audience can understand.

Exploring the ways texts can and do circulate.

We encounter multimodal texts in various ways. For example, Instagram genre conventions incorporate mentions (ex., @thedailyshow), hashtags (ex., #newsupdate), and compelling video or still images. Audiences can interact with Instagram posts or reels in different ways, by “liking” the content, commenting, reposting, or sharing. However, Instagram posts have to be a certain size, meaning a long infographic would not effectively circulate unless it was specifically edited to size. As you create your multimodal text, you need to also consider the constraints of where you would post it. Consider what places your audience would be and how you can make sure they interact with your text.

Citing multiple sources in conventions appropriate for a multimodal genre.

Citing sources matters. Telling your audience where to learn more about your topic can help you circulate a message and build credibility with your audience. Traditional forms of citation may not be effective for every multimodal genre. The ways you credit another person's intellectual work in a podcast may be different from the ways you credit their work in an infographic; however,

distinguishing your ideas from someone else's ideas remains an important part of ethical writing practice.

Reading to Grow Your Writing

In this section, you will first find essays that speak to conversations about and strategies for multimodal composition. You will also find example texts from a wide variety of genres. From radio shows to interactive infographics, photo essays, and more, these texts serve as examples of objects refined in their overall message, featuring a variety of interesting and sometimes surprising design elements.

As you engage with these multimodal texts, consider what strategies you might incorporate into your own work.

- How are the authors using different modes within these texts? What are the affordances—the special strengths—of each mode?
- How are the authors implementing different modes to meet their purposes?
- How do different modes impact audiences, and how might audiences engage with these texts as they circulate?
- How do authors incorporate sources, and how do they acknowledge them?

In experiencing and analyzing each text, you'll see evidence that their creators carefully considered the relationship between themselves, their message, and their audience—all while demonstrating an awareness of the conventions of their genre.

43. Understanding Visual Rhetoric

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Overview

Visuals can dramatically impact our understanding of a rhetorical situation. In a writing class, students do not always think that they will need to be attentive to visuals, but visual information can be a critical component to understanding and analyzing the rhetorical impacts of a multimodal text. This chapter gives examples of what visual rhetoric looks like in everyday situations, unpacking how seemingly mundane images like a food picture on social media or a menu at a restaurant, can have a persuasive impact on the viewer. The chapter then offers students some terms to use when describing visuals in a variety of situations.

Introduction

It's Friday night and you're hungry. So, you corral some friends and you all decide that you'd like to go out to eat somewhere new. You hop online to explore your options, and, in the process, you find a wealth of information from menus and visitor reviews to hours and locations. But there's one factor that has an especially strong influence on your choice: the pictures of the food.



Figure 1. A cheeseburger is held in a close-up shot. Photo by Jenae Cohn.



Figure 2. A hamburger and fries meal at Shake Shack in Palo Alto, California. Photo by Jenae Cohn.

You check out a review page for a hamburger joint and find yourself drooling over a close-up shot of a juicy burger with a slice of cheese oozing over the edge (see figure 1). You click to the next shot and see a cascade of golden french fries on a tray with an ombre-tinted iced tea and lemonade (see figure 2). You click one more time and find yet another delectable shot: a frosty milkshake with a mountain of whipped cream on top. You're feeling increasingly convinced that this restaurant is where you'll suggest that you and your friends go out to eat.

You decide to click through to see one more picture, expecting to see yet another culinary delight (see figure 3). But this next photo surprises you: it's a picture of someone's tray of food, but it's dimly lit and a little hard to tell what's there. The hamburger looks squished and flat, the meat greasy and paltry. The french fries curled up next to the burger look a bit dried out. There's a mysterious puddle of sauce in a bowl next to the plate burger, and it's not totally clear what's in it. The meal suddenly doesn't look so appetizing after all.



Figure 3. A poorly lit, squished hamburger and fries. Photo by Jenae Cohn.

You find yourself confused. All of these pictures are supposedly of food at the same restaurant, but the pictures look so different from each other. Knowing that the images may not accurately reflect the reality of the restaurant experience, you feel angry and misled: how can you possibly know which photos capture the “real” experience at the restaurant? Why trust any photos of restaurant food at all?

The fact of the matter is that you can’t know *exactly* what your restauranting experience will be like when you walk in the door of a new place. But the images clearly had a persuasive impact on you as a decision-maker: the contrast between the appetizing images and the unappetizing photos made you question the quality and consistency of the restaurant’s food, a contrast that made you wonder whether the restaurant would be the kind of place where you’d like to visit.

The point here is those photos of the food you found at the restaurant impacted your decision-making, which makes them a perfect example of visual rhetoric in action. Visual rhetoric refers to any communicative moment where visuals (photographs, illustrations, cartoons, maps, diagrams, etc.) contribute to making

meaning and displaying information. You're in a writing class right now (which is probably why you're reading this essay and wondering what hamburgers have to do with anything), and you may think of writing mostly as words on the page. However, as more writers publish and distribute their work online, the more readers expect to find that information may be communicated in multiple modes, from text to visuals and audio. As writing and rhetoric scholar Carolyn Handa puts it,

rhetoric's association with the written word is arbitrary, a by-product of print culture rather than the epistemological limits of rhetoric itself. We use rhetoric to help us think more clearly, write more elegantly, design more logically. Rhetoric works both to scaffold our ideas for clearer understanding and to structure our critical examinations of both visual and verbal objects. (2)

What Handa means by "the epistemological limits of rhetoric itself" (and yes, that is a mouthful!) is that, when we think of making meaning, building arguments, and reaching our target audiences, we are not limited to words as a tool. In fact, if we limit ourselves to words in our arguments, we may not successfully reach our audiences at all. Some audiences need visuals to think through an idea, and using graphs and diagrams can express some ideas *more* clearly than text can. So, we have to take visuals into account as part of understanding communication.

You may be thinking that this all sounds good, but what about images that are just pretty for the sake of being pretty? Well, those exist too, but we call those "art." A picture of a hamburger framed in an art museum does not exist to market hamburgers (though it might make you hungry!). However, a picture of a hamburger on an Instagram feed for a particular restaurant exists as a way to encourage visitors to come and dine at the restaurant. As composition scholar and teacher Kristen Welch describes it: "visual rhetoric is a focus on the practical, relevant, and functional as opposed to an aesthetic analysis or use of visual elements for

beauty” (256). It is important to recognize when a visual exists to help us appreciate beauty (and we may even appreciate the beauty of a picture of a hamburger on an Instagram feed), but the context in which we see visuals matters an awful lot in terms of how we analyze and understand their impacts on us as viewers.

Our example of finding food photos from a restaurant online exemplifies just how accessible visual rhetoric really is in our everyday lives. Clearly, the lighting, composition, and angle of the image clearly makes a big difference in our reaction to the image and potentially our willingness to take action and respond to the image (either by going to the restaurant or not). After reading through the opening story, you may have thought of lots of other ways that you encounter other pictures of food online. On social media, for example, a lot of users post images of food they’ve cooked or eaten as a way to share eating experiences. Because of how consumer interests are driven by the platforms they use to access information, visuals are more important than ever for people to make decisions or become attracted to visiting particular spaces. But visual rhetoric is not just about persuading someone to like something or not. Visual rhetoric can also be used to help people understand a concept, break down an idea, or access important pieces of information.

We’ll explore a few more examples of what visual rhetoric can look like in a few other situations where the visuals may not just be persuasive, but they may offer necessary guidance or instruction for the viewer. After that, this chapter will offer you some advice on how you might analyze visuals in your future writing classes so that you, too, can interpret the visuals you encounter in rhetorical situations.

Why Do Visuals Matter?

Let’s think back to the restaurant example one more time. You’ve

picked a restaurant for your Friday night dinner and now you're with your friends and are seated at the dining table. A waiter hands you a menu and guess what? You're seeing yet another example of visual rhetoric in action. This particular menu comes from a real restaurant, called Oren's Hummus, which has locations around the San Francisco Bay Area in California (see figure 4).

This restaurant menu doesn't have pictures on it, but it makes visual choices that may impact which food items you decide to order. For example, separating certain food items under headers, like "Hummus Bowls" and "Grilled Entrees" gives you some quick visual information about what items you can expect to find in those sections. Even more noticeably, the section titled "Dips & Sides" is separated from the other menu items by a green box. While the words "Dips & Sides" may have helped us understand that the items in that section would be smaller-sized than the menu items outside the green box, the use of the green box is a rhetorical tool; it makes it really obvious to the restaurant goer that if they order an item from the Dips & Sides section, it's going to be smaller than the items that are not inside the green box.

Think about this particular restaurant's context even more: the restaurant advertises its "hummus," a Mediterranean dip made out of garbanzo beans, in its name, but for many visitors, they may not have experienced eating hummus in the way that this restaurant serves it. For many diners, they may have experienced hummus as a dip or side rather than as a main course. However, because "Hummus Bowls" appear on the menu separately from the Dips & Sides, it's clear that the hummus bowls can actually be eaten as a main dish rather than as a side dish. This is a new situation, a subversion of expectations, for many restaurant-goers, so the menu has to do some visual work to help the visitor understand what to expect from the food they order.

Do you see how many words it took me to explain how the Dips & Sides section differs from the other menu sections? If you were a hungry diner, would you want to take the time to listen to all of that or read that long explanation? Probably not. That's why the document design on the menu is so important: it aligns our expectations quickly, simply, and clearly. Document design is yet another example of visual rhetoric in action, as it persuades us to make particular choices (in this case, about what we order). To learn more about components of document design in particular, you may want to look to another essay in the *Writing Spaces* series,

called “Beyond Black on White: Document Design and Formatting in the Writing Classroom” by Michael J. Klein and Kristi L. Shackleford. They make the important case that, “Good document design integrates the words on the page with appropriate imagery to fully illustrate your meaning,” a sentiment that reflects exactly what we saw happen with the menu (333).

The menu also includes some symbols to indicate which menu items may adhere to particular dietary needs, a piece of visual information that may be critical to those with allergies or sensitivities. Next to the descriptions of particular menu items, the letters “gf” and “v” indicate which items on the menu are “gluten free” (items that don’t contain binding proteins found in wheat and other grains) or “vegan” (items that don’t contain animal products, like meat or dairy); a key for these restrictions is in the bottom right-hand corner of the menu for visitors to reference if they are seeking out those indications.

Some menus will indicate these dietary restrictions using visual symbols instead; for example, other menus may include a green leaf icon next to particular items to indicate that the menu item is vegetarian or a brown-colored “G” inside a circle often indicates that the menu item is gluten-free. While you, as a reader, may have some critiques of how clearly the Oren’s Hummus menu makes these dietary restrictions clear, the point is that the visual indicators are there to guide visitors in critical ways.

You may also notice that, on the menu, the two biggest visual items are the restaurant’s logo and slogan (“Rip, Scoop, Eat!”) and the inclusion of “Gluten Free Pita” on its menu. These largest items show the restaurant’s priorities: by making its slogan and name large, the menu reminds you of its branding, while also offering you an instruction for enjoying its signature dishes: to rip a piece of pita, scoop the pita into dip, and eat it! Making the words “Gluten Free Pita” among the largest on the menu also suggests that the restaurant aims to reach a diversity of diners, even those who may be sensitive to or avoiding eating wheat-based products. The restaurant’s priorities are clear: to educate unfamiliar hummus-

eaters with the process and experience of eating hummus while also convincing diners that, regardless of their dietary restrictions, there will likely be something at the restaurant that the diner will enjoy.

The point of all this analysis of the Oren's Hummus menu is that choices in document text, color, image, and spacing matter in order to help you make choices, big and small. As you can see, visuals play a tremendous role in a) how we make decisions, b) how we receive instructions, and c) how we understand information. But let's get a little bit more fine-grained: what elements of visual design exactly can help make certain ideas clearer than others? How do we name and define the persuasive elements of a visual? Let's look to some elements of visual design to answer those questions.

Elements of Visual Design: Line, Color, Shape, Size, Space, Value, Texture

The elements of visual design are one way to help us understand more clearly why a visual has a particular kind of effect on its viewer. The elements of visual design may not necessarily help us understand purpose or intent, but they can help us break down different component parts of images so that we can start to puzzle out what an image might do for us as viewers and readers. We, naturally, should understand these elements in their particular contexts, and the impacts of these elements will likely differ depending on where and how we're viewing a particular image. With that said, beginning to name what we notice is one important step to gathering more information about images so that we can articulate their meaning more clearly.

Here are six elements of visual design you may want to consider in order to understand how an image is communicating a particular idea.

Line

Lines are visual markers that are often used to divide different sections of an image or document into multiple parts. Lines can create order in something disorderly, offering the eyes a sense of where to go or how to differentiate between different elements. Many artists and graphic designers often rely on grids of lines to help them determine where to place particular elements in a picture or a graphic to ensure that the viewer can understand where to focus their attention or where to differentiate one piece of information from another (see figure 5).



Figure 5. The edge of an orange fence casts a shadow on the sidewalk. Image is titled “lines” by Charlotte Kinzie (www.flickr.com/photos/ckinzie/252835206) and is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

When you look at a visual, consider asking questions about line in the following ways:

- What role is the line playing in helping me understand what to emphasize? What to deemphasize?
- What role is the line playing in connecting one part of the image with the other? What relationships between the parts of the image are at play?
- What kind of pattern do I see in this image or diagram? How does the pattern help shape my understanding of the image, graph, or shape?

Color

Color can help evoke emotions in the viewer while also helping the viewer distinguish what's important or what should be emphasized. In fact, many designers use resources like color wheels to help them determine what kinds of color combinations complement each other and what kinds of color combinations offer contrast (see figure 6). It is generally agreed upon that particular colors evoke different emotions than others; for example, colors like orange and red tend to convey warmth or passion while colors like blue and purple tend to convey coolness or calm.

However, some colors have deep cultural associations. For example, in China, the color red tends to signify good luck, joy, and happiness; that's why gifts given at Chinese New Year's tend to be in red envelopes and also why wedding dresses in China are often red-colored. In Western cultures, on the other hand, red can more often signify danger or caution. In the United States, we may think of red as the color for a stop sign, for example. Lots of resources online exist to help designers keep particular cultural associations with color in mind, especially in sensitive situations! For example, while wearing black to a funeral in the United States would be conventional and respectful, it would actually be considered quite odd to wear black to a funeral in Cambodia, where the color white is much more often worn for events of mourning.

You may not be able to account for all of the different situations where colors may signify different things to different viewers, but as a reader and composer, you will want to be attentive to how and where color is used, even if the possibilities for interpretation may vary.



Figure 6. An abstract pattern of rectangles in a variety of muted earth tones, ranging from oranges to greens, blues, and browns. Image is titled “color swatches” by Nancy Muller (www.flickr.com/photos/kissabug/2469838932) and is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

When you look at a visual, consider asking questions about color in the following ways:

- What is color (or the lack of color if the visual is black-and-white) emphasizing here? What is de-emphasized?
- Given my understanding of color, what emotions does the color evoke for me? What do the colors in the image remind me of?
- How might this visual change if the color scheme was inverted? How would the impact on the viewer be altered?

Shape

All visuals contain elements that take on different *shapes* (see figure 7). We probably learned about shapes at some point when we were children, especially if we played with toy blocks. Have you ever seen toy blocks in the shapes of squares, triangles, and circles? If so, congratulations, you've had exposure to the three basic shape types that exist in the world!

Many other shapes build off of these three fundamental shape types. For example, in the natural world, we may easily recognize shapes like clouds, trees, and water droplets. Similarly, certain man-made objects take on particular meanings through their shapes alone. For example, lightbulbs are shapes that typically symbolize new or “bright” ideas, while the shape of a rocket or airplane often signifies innovation or the accomplishment of a goal.

Shapes that come from the real world—like the clouds and trees or the light bulbs and rocket ships—tend to be culturally situated in the same way that colors can have different cultural associations. Yet as readers of visuals, we can analyze the roles that shapes play based on our own understanding of the audience's needs and purposes when accessing the visual.

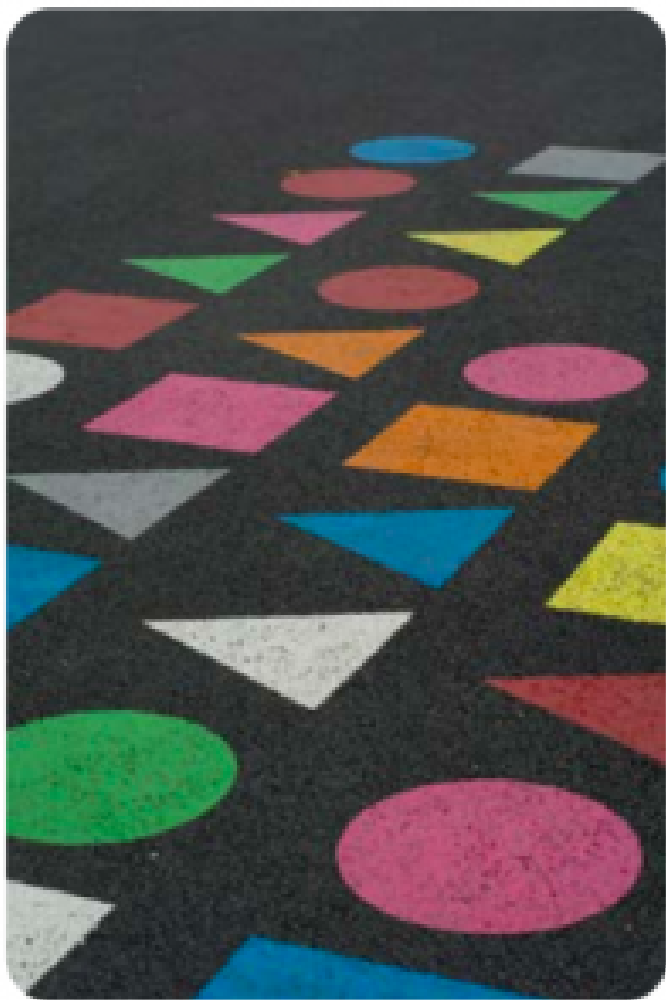


Figure 7. A pattern of circles, squares, and triangles in bright colors contrasted on an asphalt surface. Image is titled “DSC_1384” by Michael Poitrenaud (www.flickr.com/photos/michel_poitrenaud/10595502904/) and is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

When you look at a visual, consider asking questions about shapes in the following ways:

- What does this shape typically signify? Where have I seen this kind of shape before?
- Given my understanding of this shape, what emotions does the shape evoke for me?
- What might the shape be drawing attention to?

Size

In visuals, different elements may be large while other elements may be small. Typically, the elements that are larger sizes than other elements are of greater importance than the elements that are smaller sizes. But larger things are not always more valuable; the other elements in the visual may visually draw attention to smaller-sized items so that we don't lose sight of the smaller parts of the visual entirely. Large images next to small images may also be used to help us compare two parts so that we can see how they are related to each other (see figure 8).



Figure 8. A row of three giraffes, ranging from a small giraffe to a larger one, line up outside of a doorway. Image is titled “Giraffes” by Smallbrainfield (www.flickr.com/photos/smallbrainfield/3378461407) and is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

When you look at a visual, consider asking questions about size in the following ways:

- Which elements in the visual are larger than the other elements?
- How do the sizes of different elements in the visual impact your understanding of what’s in the visual?
- What is your reaction to seeing the different sizes in the visual? Do any of the sizes of the elements surprise you? Why or why not?

Space

In between or around the elements in a particular visual, there is always some empty space. Some designers call this “white space” or “neutral space.” Space is critical to help distinguish between the different elements in a visual. Without space, particular elements in the visual may be hard to distinguish or may have the effect that the visual is “busy” and, therefore, hard to read and understand.

Even in a document that is mostly text, space signifies meaning. For example, when you split paragraphs into their individual units, the space before and after the paragraph indicates that one thought is about to begin while another thought ends. Similarly, in other kinds of visuals, space might help a certain element stand out from other parts or it might help you understand where one part of the image begins and another part ends (see figure 9).



Figure 9. Two red apples are clustered in one corner of a wooden table, drawing attention to the fruit in an open space. Image is titled “apples” by Paul Bausch (www.flickr.com/photos/pb/6129499766/) and is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

When you look at a visual, consider asking questions about space in the following ways:

- How much “white space” or “neutral space” is there in the visual? Is this space evenly distributed or are the spaces uneven?
- What effect does the space in this visual have? How does the space break up or distinguish different elements of the visual?
- What is your reaction to seeing the space in the visual?

Value

Value refers to the lightness or darkness of a particular element in a visual. For example, think of a visual that may use different shades of the color blue; the elements that are darker blue than the lighter blue elements convey that the darker blue elements have greater *value* than the lighter blue elements. Just as something that is larger in size may signify greater importance than something that is smaller in size, something that is darker in color tends to signify greater value than something that is lighter in color.

Value is a comparative function by default; a dark color by itself may not mean anything unless a lighter color is present by comparison. Similarly, a “dark” visual may not necessarily have greater value than a “light” visual; however, if there are both dark and light elements in a particular visual, those shades signify differing levels of importance or attention in the visual itself. Sometimes, the dark elements may be meant to obscure information and make the lighter elements more visible. At other times, darker shades of a particular color may draw more attention to them than lighter shades of a color (see figure 10).



Figure 10. Light illuminates a dirt pathway in a forest; the trees around the pathway are shaded. Image is titled “West Highland Way” by tomsflickrfotos2 and is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

When you look at a visual, consider asking questions about value in the following ways:

- How do different values create importance? Depth? What is emphasized?
- What effect does value in this visual have? How does value break up or distinguish different elements of the visual?
- What is your reaction to seeing different values of visual depth in this visual?

Texture

We may think of texture primarily from a tactile perspective initially. When we touch different objects, we tend to notice texture right away: silk tends to be smooth to the touch while burlap tends

to be rough and bumpy. But we can look at a picture and detect different surfaces just by the look of it too, and the conveyance of those textures may also impact our orientation and understanding of what the image conveys. For example, a visual that includes lots of tiny dots may convey a bumpy texture while a visual that includes lots of wavy lines and wavy images may convey a smoother or more “watery” texture. Textures might be used to evoke particular sensations in the viewer, but they may also be used to distinguish one visual element from another (see figure 11).



Figure 11. A craggy-textured rock is on the rippled sandy shore of a beach. Image is titled “Beach on the Chang Jiang (Yangtze)” by Eul Mulot (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mulot/3315444069>) and is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

When you look at a visual, consider asking questions about texture in the following ways:

- What kinds of textures do I see in this visual? Are textures clearly implied or does the visual just include one kind of

texture?

- What effect does texture (or the lack of texture) have on understanding what I should focus on in this image? How does texture break up or distinguish different elements of the visual?
- What is your reaction to seeing different textures in this visual?

Concluding Thoughts

Once we start noticing the role that visuals play all around us, we gain a greater awareness of the range of strategies that communicators use to get our attention. This chapter is just a start in helping you to recognize some examples of visual rhetoric and the roles that visuals can play to help make meaning and persuade others. There is a lot more to learn about designing and making your own visuals. But just as reading will help you become a better writer, viewing and training your eye to recognize what's happening in images will help you to become a better designer.

As you look ahead to thinking capaciously about the strategies you might use to employ images and other media in your writing, bear in mind that not all of your readers will have equal access to all of the communicative strategies you're employing. For visuals in particular, you may have readers who are visually impaired or blind and may not be able to understand or recognize the role that your images are playing in your text. However, as a writer, there are some strategies you can use to help your reader appreciate your use of visuals even if they are not able to see images in the same way that you can. Captions (as you saw included in this chapter) and alternative text (for Web-based images) are ways that you, as a writer, can describe what's happening in a picture so that even if a reader cannot see the image, they can get a sense of what the

picture might look like and what effect the picture is having on the document itself.

A picture is often worth a thousand words because it implies so much and can give us a lot of information quickly. Seeing may not always be believing, but visual rhetoric can be a pretty powerful way to help people understand an idea differently than they may have otherwise.

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Teacher Resources for Understanding Visual Rhetoric by Jenae Cohn

Overview and Teaching Strategies

This essay is intended as an overview of what visual rhetoric is and how it functions alongside other rhetorical strategies that students may encounter in their composition courses. This essay could work well in a unit introducing students to definitions of “rhetoric” so that students can continue to complicate their understanding of rhetoric beyond alphabetic text. This chapter may also be useful to introduce a unit on multimodal composition, especially when students are starting to look at examples of model multimodal texts and understanding the role that visuals may play in those texts. Students may have varying degrees of abilities to describe or name the effects that visuals may have on an audience, and this reading is intended to help students articulate the rhetorical work that visuals do while also giving them some vocabulary to name the basic elements of a visual. This chapter focuses primarily on the analysis of visuals rather than on the composition of visuals, so bear in mind that this chapter does not include tool suggestions or any “how-to” tips on creating visuals. This chapter also does not cover best practices on attributing images appropriately (via Creative Commons licensing, for example) though a conversation around visual rhetoric for multimodal composing should orient students to these best practices so that students understand how to use and incorporate images legally and ethically into their work.

In this chapter, I bring in examples that are accessible to a diverse student populace. That said, it may be worth engaging in class conversation about the ways in which certain visuals may have different effects on different audiences, as particular pieces of iconography or certain photographs may be understood differently

by audiences with various cultural backgrounds or experiences. When selecting images for students to choose or analyze, bringing in historical or cultural context is useful since that information may shape students' abilities to understand the rhetorical purpose and situation for particular visuals.

Here I offer several in-class activities that I regularly use in line with the conversations offered in the textbook chapter to supplement what the chapter introduces.

Questions

1. In the first section of this essay, you experienced the story of choosing a restaurant to dine out at with your friends. In this story, the different kinds of pictures shaped the decision made. When have you made a decision based on pictures or visuals? How did the pictures or visuals affect your decision exactly?
2. In the discussion of the menu from Oren's Hummus, it's clear that the organization and design of the information may impact how a diner might decide what to eat. If you had the opportunity to re-design the menu at Oren's, what decisions would you make? Why would you make those decisions?
3. There are six elements of visual design named in this chapter. Which of these elements were new to you? Which were ones you had encountered before? Individually or in a small group, take a look at either a picture of a poster from the Works Progress Administration (www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wpapos/) OR find a photograph from the Associated Press images database (www.apimages.com/) and see if you and your group members can identify the elements of design in one or two of the historical posters or photographs. Use the guiding questions in the "Elements of Visual Design" section of the chapter to help guide your understanding of the images.

Activities

The following are four class activities that can help support students in their development of understanding and interpreting visual rhetoric.

Three Keywords.

Pick an image, photograph, or data visualization for the whole class to look at together. You may want to pick something that is related to a topic that the class has been discussing or perhaps something that could act as a source for an upcoming research assignment that the students will conduct. Project or share the visual in a shared space and ask each student to come up with three keywords that they would use to describe the image. Students may submit their three keywords to a polling platform (like PollEverywhere, Google Forms, or a quiz feature in a learning management system) so that all of the results are anonymized and collected in one place. When every student has submitted their three keywords, display or share the results to the class. Use the keywords as conversation points to discuss the different impacts the visuals had on different users. How did the keywords overlap? Where did they differ? How might the keywords that students identified align with how they might analyze and contextualize the impact of the visual? Another discussion point may be to consider how their keywords might have changed if they encountered the visual in a different context or situation.

Extreme Makeover: Document Edition

Ask each student to identify an essay, multimodal project, or class assignment. It can be something that they produced for your class

or for a different class. After they've picked the project they've made, ask them to analyze the design choices for the document. What size fonts did they choose? What kinds of pictures did they include, if any? What were some other choices in terms of the document and visual design that they made? Ask them to name the audience and purpose for the document too so that they recognize and name the full context for creating the document. Then, ask them to consider who else might have had a stake in the document they produced. Is there a different audience that they can imagine being invested in that piece of work? Once the students have each named an alternative or a secondary audience for the document, ask them to take a few minutes to do an extreme "makeover" on the document, considering how they would change the layout, organization, design, and inclusion of visuals to accommodate the new audience's needs. An alternative for them would be to consider how they would redesign the document for publication in a particular platform or news site aggregate, like BuzzFeed or The Huffington Post. These platforms might also change the way they're orienting the text as well, but for the purposes of this exercise, you may want to encourage students to think primarily about the visuals. After they've done a version of their "extreme makeover," engage in a conversation about the makeover process. What elements of the design did they decide to change? How did their understanding of audience and purpose impact their visual choices?

Comparing Data Visualizations

Pick a few data visualizations (i.e. infographics) from sites like Information is Beautiful (<https://informationisbeautiful.net/>) or FlowingData (<https://flowingdata.com/>) (both of which have large databases of data visualizations and infographics available). Put students into small groups and ask them to analyze what they notice in the data visualizations. What kind of information is being

communicated? What is the purpose of using the infographic? How would the understanding of the information differ if it was displayed in text rather than in visuals? How does seeing the visual alter their understanding of the content? A follow-up activity may be to invite them to visualize an aspect of their own writing projects (or research projects) using one of the techniques in the example data visualizations that they explored.

Caption Contest: Creating Effective Captions and Alt-Text for Image

Asking students to write captions for images can be a really interesting moment for students to interrogate and unpack their assumptions about particular images and what they're privileging as viewers and authors of multimodal or image-rich projects. A conversation about captions can also be a good opportunity to help students understand accessibility and ways to make images readable for a variety of audiences. To start this class activity, you will want to define two different kinds of image captions that exist for visuals published on the Web: captions and alt text. The caption is the text that displays below an image (much like what you would see in a printed textbook and in this particular textbook chapter for that matter). Alt text, on the other hand, is a short, written description of an image Web authors use to describe an image in a sentence for someone using screen reader software. For a reader using screen reader software, the alt text and the caption are both read to offer clarity on what the visual includes. For this class activity, project an image or photograph in a shared space and ask everyone in the class to write both a caption and alt text for the image. You may find it useful to show a few examples of captions and alt text to help clarify the activity. Alternatively, you could have students start with writing captions (since students may have more exposure to reading captions than alt text) and then move to alt text.

After students have written their captions, ask them to share with a partner, comparing how their captions are similar or different. Each pair should then take a few minutes to decide which caption they would use for the photo or image if they were publishing the image themselves, justifying their choice as a pair. The results can then be shared with the class where the instructor can lead a longer class conversation about the impacts of captions and the challenges in writing captions to capture the impacts of visuals on the audience.

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44. The Rhetorical Possibilities of Accessibility

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Overview

In this chapter, I provide some basic terminology and context for disability and accessibility and discuss how access features not only have direct benefits for a disabled audience, but are beneficial rhetorical bonuses for all writers (nondisabled and disabled). By emphasizing access in their writing projects, students have the opportunity to improve their own writing. I also include details on three design choices students can make with first-year writing projects and presentations—alt text, headings and styles, and presentation scripts—and provide some tips and strategies for creating all three.

Imagine that you use a wheelchair to get around campus. Most of the time, this works fine. There are plenty of curb cuts so you can enter and exit sidewalks, and thanks to automatic doors, you can enter most buildings on campus. But you have a chemistry lab in this older building, and the building's only ramp is broken. You circle the building and look for other entrances, but it's impossible for you to get to your weekly lab. Frustrated, you email your professor and let them know that you can't enter the building and are unsure what you should do.

In this very real example, the fact that the chemistry building doesn't have a working ramp so you can get to class is your major problem, not the fact that you use a wheelchair to get around

campus. This situation is a great example of the social model of disability, which points out that in many situations, disabled people are more impaired by nondisabled people's reactions to their impairment than by the impairment itself (Oliver). A situation like this—where the environment and other people's lack of knowledge about access are more disabling than a particular impairment—can (and often does) apply to a myriad of other disabled people and access problems both on and off campus. This also applies to the projects and papers you'll create in first year writing, your other college classes, and even the kinds of writing you'll do when you finish college.

In this essay, I'll provide you with some tools and strategies—alt text for images, headings and styles in text documents, and presentation scripts—to get you started in becoming more accessible writers and project creators. In my experience, students haven't learned much about accessibility before college, and these three common strategies are good places to get your feet wet, to get started. There's no possible way that I could condense everything you should know about accessibility into one reading, but this article can serve as a “place to start,” the beginning of looking at the spaces you move in and inhabit in more critical ways (Dolmage). Finding ways to be better and contribute to a more accessible world is part of what I call “being a good citizen of the world.” Coming to college and learning practical skills that can help you build a career is a good thing. Learning how to be a good citizen of the world and to be more mindful and respectful of others is a great thing. It just so happens that having a basic understanding of accessibility and how to make projects more accessible has some amazing rhetorical benefits for you as a writer and designer. But the first reason to be accessible is the most important—so that we can be people who are more aware of injustices that affect vulnerable populations and work to be more equitable to all.

Alt Text: A Picture Is Worth at Least Ten or So Words

Scenario: You're assigned an online news article to read as a part of your History class homework. As someone with low vision, you rely on text-to-speech software programs to help you read through digital documents. Every few paragraphs, the software randomly and annoyingly announces, "Blank!" You can infer by reading that the article contains relevant graphs and images, but you have no idea what "Blank!" is or how crucial it is to understand "Blank!" for your assignment.

Why do we put pictures into our PowerPoints, Prezis, and research papers? To take up space? To add interest? To offer a deeper connection to the ideas? These are the questions that good alt text tries to answer for low or no vision readers. Alt text refers to a description that is "hidden" in the formatting of a picture or a graphic, whether it is on a website or in some other kind of digital document. The text itself consists of a short caption (generally no more than one or two sentences) that describes what the image is and contains. It's the kind of access feature that you would only notice if you needed it, and its absence would cause lots of problems. If a reader or viewer uses JAWS (Job Access With Speech) or another screen reader program, they can use the program to "listen" to web pages, PDFs, Microsoft Word files, and other digital documents. The program methodically runs through the document or website and "reads" the text it comes across aloud.

However, unformatted images can produce a unique problem for these screen reading programs. As J. Hogue points out, without alt text, the reader just hears "IMAGE" or "BLANK" when the screen reader reaches a graphic—no details, no information, no context at all. If I close my eyes and hear someone randomly say the word, "BLANK," what comes to mind? Probably confusion and distraction. I'm no longer thinking about the document I've been listening

to, and now I'm worried about what this random "BLANK" could possibly mean. To make things worse, without alt text, a reader using a screen reader isn't able to understand the information in the image or how the image connects to the text they *can* read. As a designer and writer, alt text helps you provide context and information for whatever graphics you may include in a PowerPoint, a Word document, or even an image you might add to a website. The process of creating an alt text caption is a reflective one. It requires you as a writer or designer to examine both your motives and what you're hoping to communicate to the reader with that image. Helpful invention questions for creating solid alt text can include: "Why did I actually want to put a picture here?," "What do I want my reader to understand from this picture?," or "What about this picture do I want them to connect with the overall text of my document?"

Let's test some of these questions with a sample picture. With the image I've included here in Figure 1, insufficient alt text would be to label this image as "Seal of the State of Georgia." While this is *technically* true (and is much better over the autogenerated alt text, which described the image as a "decorative coin"), it isn't entirely accurate, as truth and accuracy can be very different ideas where alt text is concerned. The image isn't just an artistic representation of the seal or a photograph of the seal in an office building. It's a photograph of a stone engraving of the seal, and that alt text doesn't mention the other relevant details in the seal. Therefore, a better caption for this alt text (that I actually wrote) would be: "A picture of the Seal of the State of Georgia (dated 1776), engraved into stone. The seal has three columns labeled 'wisdom,' 'justice,' and 'moderation,' with an arch labeled 'Constitution' connecting the three." While the exact level of detail will vary depending on how you're using the image in your document, good alt text works to give text-to-speech readers an accurate depiction of what an image is. But that may require a few more words than you may think.



Figure 1. A picture of the Seal of the state of Georgia (dated 1776), engraved into stone. The description on the seal has three columns labeled “wisdom,” “justice,” and “moderation,” with a semi-circle labeled “constitution” connecting the three. Photo by Gary Lee Todd under CC0 1.0 public domain license.

Even though the end product is something only a small group of people may use, the process of creating that access will strengthen your writing and overall project. In my sample image, the details I listed in the alt text could, depending on the writing project, provide some interesting jumping off points. How are the three values listed (wisdom, justice, and moderation) connected? Is the image (and therefore the state of Georgia at large) suggesting that the Constitution contains all three virtues, or does it imply that the Constitution unites or rules over these ideas? In this instance, thinking critically about alt text can provide some unexpected opportunities for critically analyzing the image, which can be helpful when writing longer pieces of writing.

Tips and Tricks for Making Good Alt Text

- Be accurate and watch out for too much repetition in your caption. Remember, whoever encounters the alt text will also be able to read the main content of your project, so be careful about unintentionally repeating yourself. It's surprisingly easy to do.
- Keep your captions short. If you find yourself writing what seems to be a neverending list of descriptions, this could be an indication that the main body of your text isn't detailed enough or is missing a key piece of information. That information you're putting into the caption could be beneficial for all of your readers, not just those who hear the alt text.
- If you're curious at how your alt text would sound to someone using a screen reader, many universities have computers on campus that have JAWS, Dragon, or other screen reading software installed. Ask your instructor or librarian for more information about this.
- If you're using an image solely for decorative purposes, that's okay! You can designate (either in the caption or, depending on the program, by clicking a "decorative image" check box) that an image only serves a decorative purpose. Recently I was formatting some PDFs, and added several alt text captions that read, "decorative cursive letter 'G.'"

Headings and Styles: TL; DR

Scenario: You're working on a group paper with some classmates. It's finally your turn to add some material and read through the draft. However, because you use text-to-speech software to read digital documents, you cannot skip to the specific section you need—you have to listen to the entire paper being read aloud to find your

section and proofread. Frustrated, you resign yourself to listening to a robotic voice read to you for the next hour or so.

I love making a good outline when I write. I know outlines are headache-inducing for some writers, but I've always loved the simplicity, order, and structure that outlines promote and provide. In a lot of ways, using an outline is less like using a road map (a metaphor I and other writing instructors are likely guilty of overusing) and more like a "TL; DR" label on a social media post. The "TL;DR" ("too long; didn't read") works great when you see a post that could be interesting but you're not sure if you want to go to the trouble of reading the entire post or not. With a TL;DR, you can get the gist, the "big picture," and *then* decide if you want to go back and read the rest or move on. And that's exactly what a good outline provides—the big picture. You don't have to read an outline the same way you do an essay or an article; you can glance at the outline as a whole and then skip to the section that you're most interested in.

Integrating headings and styles into a text document works similarly to both outlines and TL;DR social media tags. They exist precisely so you *don't* have to read every single word of a document or a webpage in order to find the exact section you're looking for or determine if you need to read it at all. For readers who use text-to-speech programs like JAWS to read documents, this kind of functionality means not having to listen to every single word and enables these readers to jump between sections of a text and better read it as a whole. Considering that it takes significantly longer for most readers to listen to a document be read aloud than it does for them to read it silently, having headings and styles saves time and a great deal of frustration.

Nearly all document programs (including Microsoft Word and Google Docs) have headings and styles integrated into their systems specifically as accessibility features. (Even emails have headers you can use!) In Microsoft Word, you can find headings and styles under the "Home" tab, and there are options for titles, headings, emphasis, or even quotations. In the screenshot of

Microsoft Word I've provided in Figure 2, you can see many different options listed, including ones for subtle and "*intense*" emphasis. When using Google Docs, you actually have multiple options for how to find styles and headers. You can either access these on the main row of formatting options (the same row where you can change your font and text size) or go to "Format" and select "Paragraph Styles." Though there are many, many options listed in the Styles section, try and keep things simple. The ones I use the most often are "Title" (to signify the title of a particular document), "Heading 1" (main concepts, sections of a document, or a point included in a thesis statement), and "Heading 2" (subpoints and subsections of a document).



Figure 2. A screenshot of a drop-down menu in Microsoft Word that displays various navigation styles. “Title,” “Heading 1,” and “Heading 3” are some of the examples listed. Screenshot by author

While these styles and headings are good to use for longer papers, they are also great to include in handouts, manuals, or any other document that has sections in it. (I’ve even included them in this article.) Even though headings and styles were created as accessibility tools, they can be incredibly helpful for nondisabled readers who are looking for a very specific section of a document or want to, at a glance, determine what sections they should read in detail and which ones they can skim. Headings aren’t a hidden accessibility feature like alt text often is, and anyone can (and

should) make use of headings and styles in text documents and webpages. In text programs like Microsoft Word and Google Docs, these headings appear in the “Navigation” pane and have a link-like functionality, meaning that when you click a specific heading in the pane, presto! You instantly arrive at that specific section of your document. This feature can be so helpful when writing and reading through larger research projects and all sorts of text documents. Rhetorically speaking, the process of identifying and labeling your main and secondary points once you’ve finished drafting can help you better visualize your organization. When adding headers and styles, you’re essentially creating a reverse outline to check and see if your material is well-organized and to help your reader follow your train of thought. That action can be so helpful if you’re not completely sure where a major idea belongs in your paper.

Heading and Styles Tips and Tricks

- Don’t add headings and styles until the very end of your writing process, when you’re almost finished. Trust me on this one. It’s much, much easier to tweak these kinds of settings and create an external structure once the text is nearly completed than to attempt this when you’re still drafting or revising.
- Keep your font and emphasis (italics, bold, underlining) as simple as possible. If you don’t want to use the font or colors that are provided in the default styles, then you can highlight the text where you want to place the heading, go to the individual heading, right click it, and select “Update Heading to Match Current Selection.” This process is relatively similar across document platforms. By doing this, you will have added the necessary structure and avoided altering your font, size, and formatting choices.

Scripts: The Art of a Dramatic Performance

Scenario: You're attending several presentations on first year writing. It's hard for you to process large amounts of spoken language and still retain the ideas, and you've been grateful that other presenters have provided scripts of their presentations so you can follow along. Today's presenters are really Important Researchers, and you're so excited to hear their ideas. Maybe you'll get to meet them afterwards!

When it's time for this presentation to begin, no one offers scripts, even though it was required. You realize that the presenters treated the accessibility guidelines as optional, and are shocked, angry, and discouraged. You've never felt so unwelcome and out of place. The presentation continues, but you can't keep up with the ideas.

This last accessibility measure is, for many people, the odd one out. Creating and using presentation scripts has more to do with the class space, your role as a rhetor and presenter, and your awareness and connection to your audience as opposed to simply formatting a document. It's the kind of accessibility that is less objective, more subjective, and therefore more overlooked, but is no less important. Like with alt text and headings and styles, using scripts impacts your audience's ability to connect to a text, but this form of access is more likely to benefit peers and instructors who are invisibly disabled and may have difficulty understanding long stretches of uninterrupted spoken language. It would surprise you to know how many people—some disabled, others not—greatly benefit from having a script to follow along with during a presentation. This list is in no way exhaustive, but English language learners, those who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing, or people like me, who simply don't process spoken language as quickly as written text, can have more access as a result.

Wait a minute, I can hear you thinking, I thought reading a script or off notecards when I give a presentation is a bad thing. Also, isn't it incredibly boring to hear someone read from a paper for ten

minutes? The answer to both is no, or at least not necessarily. I've heard some terrific presentations that just so happened to be scripted, and having a script to follow along with as I watched the presenter speak helped me be more engaged with the material and the person presenting it. I could annotate key ideas, remember concepts better, ask more thoughtful questions, and ultimately retain more information long after the presentation ended. So many of the same public speaking staples you learn in communication classes still apply: you should still alter the tone and inflection of your voice when using a script and regularly make eye contact with your audience. It's still possible to be engaging and make use of your physical presentation space with a script in hand. It just takes a bit more planning, planning that will make your presentation so much better than if you only used a few note cards with bullet points on them. Most importantly, using a script and distributing it to your peers and instructor is an important act of inclusion.

Like alt text and headings and styles, creating presentation scripts to be more accessible to your peers and instructors has some great benefits for you, too. Taking time to carefully think through what I want to say and how to phrase it has multiple advantages. I'm more relaxed and less nervous when I give my presentation because I've thought it through more than just coming up with a few bullet points or throwing something together at the very last minute. I'm prepared in a way that I wouldn't be otherwise. Since I'm going to share my script with someone other than me, I've had to really concentrate on how to organize, frame, and explain whatever concept I've been working on so others who don't think the same way I do can understand. As a result, my presentations are—not to toot my own horn here—pretty polished because I've taken the time to choose my phrases carefully, to transition well, and to revise and edit my thoughts. All of these steps are steps you take when working on a written project or paper, but by creating a script for a presentation, you can transfer those rhetorical moves to make your presentation better, too.

Scripting Tips and Tricks

- Take advantage of software features. When I'm making a presentation, I use the "Notes" section of PowerPoint to write out my script for each slide. I'll save my PowerPoint in a cloud platform, and tweet out the link and put my Twitter account name on the first slide. That way, those who need a script have an easy and discreet way to read along.
- If you don't want your audience to keep your script, you can copy your script text into a Google Doc, make the file shareable for your presentation and then disable this feature afterwards. (There are plenty of other ways to distribute scripts beyond what I have here—all it takes is a little forethought and planning.)
- Practice reading your script out loud before you present! That's a great revision strategy to help you iron out any bumpy parts of your presentation.

Your Role in the Process: Embracing the Challenge and Creativity of Accessibility

Good writing is all about making choices, and accessibility is one of the most important choices you can make because the choice to be accessible impacts more than just you. It's a responsibility you have not only as a writer, but as a member of a class, a student at a school, and a good citizen. Whenever you create a writing project, you're sending a rhetorical message about who your audience is—instead of your audience being the ambiguous and universal "everyone," it actually is "everyone who can access what you've created." This duty may feel a bit daunting, but do your best to embrace the challenge. One of the great things about accessibility is that it forces you to get outside of your own head, view your

world differently, and consider how your design choices impact how others interact with your documents. However, this process is not without some learning curves. Access work is a recursive process, one where you may try an accessibility feature or action and it may or may not work as you expected. Some ideas for being accessible may sound good in theory, like giving your classmates and instructor a detailed handout instead of a script, but don't provide real access or an equitable way for everyone to experience your work. In fact, a situation where you provide a handout in lieu of a script is an example of the social model of disability because your choice to not provide equal access to what you say in a presentation is more disabling than any impairment your instructor or peers may have.

Often, being accessible requires you to think creatively and differently, which can be hard. You might even have to go back to the drawing board and start over. This tension is normal, and, like with writing, part of how we learn—sometimes, the path to knowledge and mastery is straightforward, but often it's a “two steps forward, one step back” kind of journey. But I encourage you to resist shortcuts because the journey is worth it, not only in terms of your own learning, but in creating more equity and inclusion for your disabled peers and instructors. When brainstorming accessibility options, it's helpful to avoid looking at access work like problem solving or “fixing” your projects with specific disabilities or people in mind. At best, this way of thinking is overly reductive and at worst treats disabled people like problems and puzzles that are waiting to be solved, which is pretty dehumanizing (Price 101). Instead, I'd encourage you to look at making your writing more accessible like adding more lanes on a highway. The more lanes you add, the more people can get on and drive towards their destination. The more accessibility features you learn about and integrate into your writing, the greater the chances that all readers will be able to experience and interact with your hard work and great ideas.

My hope is that you take the knowledge from this essay and

keep learning about ways to be accessible and keep growing. I know some people feel a bit guilty or discouraged when they learn about accessibility for the first time, but I'm reminded of a quote commonly attributed to the great Maya Angelou: "I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better." Working to be more accessible isn't just about creating documents, spaces, and projects for disabled people. It's also about using these documents and moment to rhetorically communicate that your disabled peers, instructors, or wider audience matters and belong. That makes your writing even more powerful.

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Teacher Resources for The Rhetorical Possibilities of Accessibility

This essay is intended as a basic introduction of accessibility and what starting points students can take in becoming more accessible writers and project creators. In my experience, few, if any, students have learned about accessibility and their role in it before reaching college, so my providing information about alt text, headings and styles, and presentation scripts merely lays a foundation. Next steps for continuing this conversation about accessibility can include (but aren't limited to) serif versus sans serif fonts, using color contrast, blending smart design choices with accessibility, and accessible social media practices, including capitalizing each word in multiword hashtags and creating captions for video posts.

Given that accessibility is applicable to all forms of document creation, this essay could work well as early reading in a course. If assigned early, students have the opportunity to practice this awareness and related skills with each project they create over the course of the semester. With accessibility's relatedness to multiple ways of reading a text and representing information, this essay would also work well in conjunction to other readings and conversations on multimodality (Price 96). The beauty of accessibility is its limitless creativity and universality, so this conversation could really fit anywhere in a course, but for maximum effectiveness, I recommend using it near the beginning of the semester.

As a final note, I talk quite a bit about equity at the end of the essay and it may be worth having a conversation with students about how equity is not synonymous with equality and the differences between the two terms.

Discussion Questions

1. If you use a screen reader, what advice would you give nondisabled writers who are creating accessible documents? Are there other strategies and tools besides alt text, headings and styles, and presentation scripts that you would recommend that writers use?
2. If you don't use a screen reader (and have ready access to JAWS, Dragon, or other screen reading technology on campus), close your eyes and test a website of your choice using screen reading software. How would you describe the experience of listening versus reading visually? Does using this software make you think of your design choices differently?
3. How does the choice to be accessible when writing connect to the idea of a writer's ethos?
4. Presentations are far from the only circumstances where having a script or visual access to spoken text is helpful. What other circumstances or media could benefit from scripts or captioning?

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45. An Introduction to and Strategies for Multimodal Composing

MELANIE GAGICH

Overview

This chapter introduces multimodal composing and offers five strategies for creating a multimodal text. The essay begins with a brief review of key terms associated with multimodal composing and provides definitions and examples of the five modes of communication. The first section of the essay also introduces students to the New London Group and offers three reasons why students should consider multimodal composing an important skill—one that should be learned in a writing class. The second half of the essay offers three pre-drafting and two drafting strategies for multimodal composing. Pre-drafting strategies include urging students to consider their rhetorical situation, analyze other multimodal texts, research textual content, gather visual and aural materials, and evaluate tools needed for creating their text. A brief discussion of open licenses and Creative Commons licenses is also included. Drafting strategies include citing and attributing various types of texts appropriately and suggesting that students begin drafting with an outline, script, or visual (depending on the project). I conclude the chapter with suggestions for further reading.

When you think about a college writing class, you probably think

of pens, paper, word processors, printers, and, of course, essay writing. However, on the first day of your college writing class, you might read the syllabus and notice that the first assignment asks you to create a “multimodal text.” You may wonder to yourself, “What does multimodal mean?” Perhaps you remember an assignment from high school when your teacher required you to create a Prezi or PowerPoint presentation, and she referred to it as a “multimodal project,” but you were not exactly sure what that meant. Or perhaps you only remember writing five paragraph essays in high school and have never heard or read the word “multimodal.”

As a first-year and upper-level composition instructor who has integrated a multimodal project into my curriculums since 2014, I have encountered many questions and confusion related to multimodal composing, or what is sometimes referred to as “multimodality.” While some students are thrilled to compose something other than an academic essay, others struggle to understand why they are required to create a multimodal text in a writing class. I assure my students that although they may not be familiar with the concept of multimodality, it has a long history in composition (e.g. writing studies). In fact, the “multimodal assignment” has been a fixture in some college writing classrooms for over a decade and continues to be prevalent in many classrooms. In light of the probability that you will be asked to create a multimodal text at some point in your academic and/ or professional career, I wrote this chapter to help you understand and navigate multimodal composing. In the first half of this chapter, I provide brief definitions of terms associated with and explain the importance of multimodal composing. The remainder of the chapter offers strategies for composing a multimodal text with an emphasis on pre-drafting strategies.

What is a Multimodal Text?

Before moving into a discussion of multimodality and modes of communication, it is important to understand the meaning of the word “text” because it is often only associated with writing (or perhaps the messages you receive or write on your phone). However, when we use the term “text” in composition courses, we often mean it is a piece of communication that can take many forms. For instance, a text is a movie, meme, social media post, essay, website, podcast, and the list goes on. In our daily lives, we encounter, interact with, and consume many types of texts, and it is important to consider how most texts are also multimodal.

Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia L. Selfe, two important scholars in writing studies and early advocates of multimodal composing, define multimodal texts as “texts that exceed the alphabetical and may include still and moving images, animators, color, words, music, and sound” (1). You’ll notice that the examples of “text” listed above are also multimodal, which demonstrates how often we encounter multimodality in our daily lives. Multimodality is sometimes associated with technology and/or digital writing spaces. For example, when you post an image to Instagram, you use technology (your phone) to snap a picture, an app to edit or modify the image, and a social media platform (Instagram) to share it with others. However, creating a multimodal text does not require the use of digital tools and/or does not need to be shared in online digital spaces to make it “multimodal.” To illustrate, when you create a collage and post it on your dorm room door, you use existing printed artifacts such as pictures clipped and pasted (non-digital technologies) from a magazine and share with others by taping it to your door (a non-digital space). Both examples represent a multimodal text because they include various modes of communication.

The Five Modes of Communication

In the mid-1990s, a group of scholars gathered in New London, New Hampshire and, based on their discussions, wrote the influential article, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures,” published in 1996. In it, the group advocated for teachers to embrace teaching practices that allow students to draw from five socially and culturally situated modes, or “way[s] of communicating” (Arola, Sheppard, and Ball 1). These modes were linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural, and aural. Yet, scholars such as Claire Lauer, another influential researcher in composition, have argued that the New London Group’s definition of modes, while exceedingly important, can be difficult to grasp. In light of this, below I provide brief definitions of each mode as well as examples to help you understand the “mode” in “multimodal.”

What Are the Modes of Communication?

The visual mode refers to what an audience can see, such as moving and still images, colors, and alphabetical text size and style. Social media photos (see figure 1) exemplify the visual mode.



Figure 1. Photo of my dog taken from my Facebook page that represents the visual mode.

The linguistic mode refers to alphabetic text or spoken word. Its emphasis is on language and how words are used (verbally or written). A traditional five paragraph essay relies on the linguistic mode; however, this mode is also apparent in some digital texts. Figure 2 shows a student's linguistic text included in their website created to promote game-based language learning.

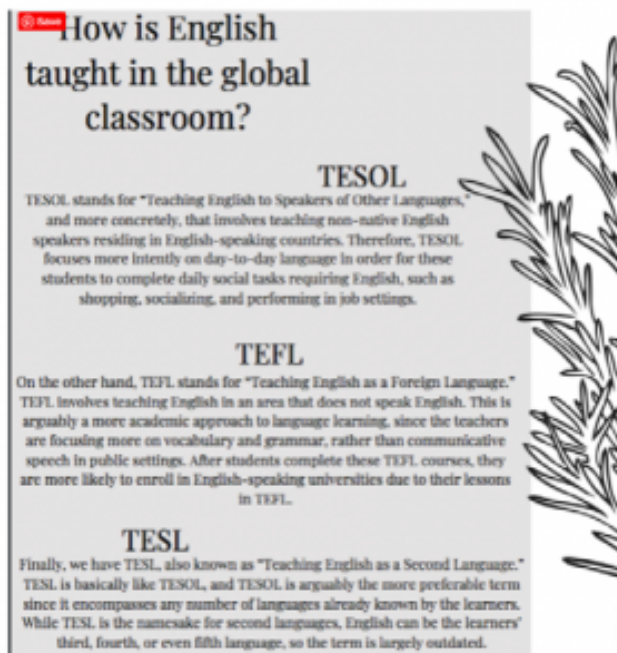


Figure 2. A student's digital text that emphasizes the linguistic mode. Photo shows a Pinterest pin that uses text to briefly explain the differences among TESOL, TEFL, and TESL. Permission to use this image was obtained from the student.

The spatial mode refers to how a text deals with space. This also relates to how other modes are arranged, organized, emphasized, and contrasted in a text. Figure 3, an infographic, is an example of the spatial mode in use because it emphasizes certain percentages and words to achieve its goal.



Figure 3. Infographic emphasizing the spatial mode. The infographic uses different sizes of text and different shapes to emphasize statistics surrounding cancer diagnoses and common types. (“Cancer Infographic” by CDC Global licensed under CC BY 2.0)

The gestural mode refers to gesture and movement. This mode is often apparent in delivery of speeches in the way(s) that speakers move their hands and fix their facial features and in other texts that capture movement such as videos, movies, and television. Figure 4 shows Michelle Obama’s gestures at a speech she gave in London.



Figure 4. Picture taken of Michelle Obama while giving a speech that captures the gestural mode. She is standing at a microphone, looking out into the audience, and smiling with her hands clasped against her heart. ("US First Lady, Michelle Obama, speaking at Mulberry School for Girls, London" by DFID licensed under CC BY 2.0)

The aural mode refers to what an audience member can or cannot hear. Music is the most obvious representation of the aural mode, but an absence of sound (silence) is also aural. Examples of texts that emphasize the aural mode include podcasts, music videos, concerts, television series, movies, and radio talk shows. Figure 5 is a screenshot of my student's podcast created to convince teachers to integrate podcasts into their language arts classrooms. A podcast exemplifies the aural mode because of its reliance on sound.

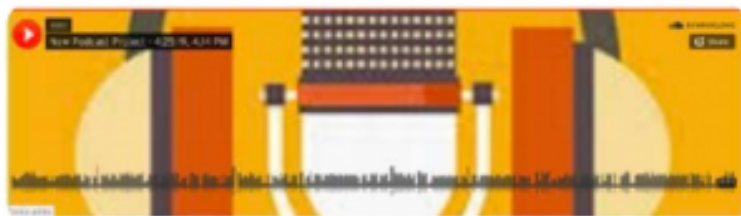


Figure 5 is a screenshot of a student's podcast and shows the audio lines and length of the text, entitled "New Podcast Project." (Permission to use this image was obtained from the student).

A multimodal text combines various modes of communication (hence the combination of the words “multiple” and “mode” in the term “multimodal”). Cheryl E. Ball and Colin Charlton draw from The New London Group in their argument that “[a]ny combination of modes makes a multimodal text, and all text—every piece of communication a human composes—use more than one mode. Thus, all writing is multimodal” (42). However, in some communicative texts, one mode receives more emphasis than the others. For example, academia and writing teachers have historically favored the linguistic mode, often seen in the form of the written college essay. Yet, when you communicate using an essay, you are actually using three modes of communication: linguistic, spatial, and visual. The words represent the linguistic mode (the emphasized mode), the margins and spacing characterize the spatial, and the visual mode includes elements like font, font size, or the use of bold.

Combining each mode to create a clear communicative essay often involves the writing process (i.e. invention, drafting, and revision), and a thoughtful writer will also consider how the final product does or does not address an audience. The same process is used when creating a less traditional multimodal text. For instance, when creating a text emphasizing the aural mode (e.g. a podcast),

you must consider your audience, purpose, and context while also organizing and arranging your ideas and content in a coherent and logical way. This process parallels the traditional writing process. Thus, while a multimodal text might be considered less “academic” by some students and/or instructors, understanding that all writing and all texts are also multimodal demonstrates that learning about multimodality and how to multimodally compose is just as important as learning how to write.

Why is Multimodal Composing Important?

You might be wondering why you should multimodally compose in a college writing class. In this section, I provide some answers to this question. I explain how multimodal composing assignments help students practice digital literacy skills, offer an opportunity to transfer multimodal composing experiences from home to academic settings, and allow students to learn “real life” composing practices.

Multimodal Assignments Help You Learn Digital Literacy Skills

You have likely been taught that to succeed in the world, you need to become a literate citizen. The common understanding of “literate” or “literacy” is an ability to read and write alphabetic texts. While it is important to have these skills, this definition privileges words and language over the other modes of communication. It also does not allow for assignments that help you practice communicating using multiple literacies, modes of communication, and technologies in various and diverse writing situations.

The New London Group members were some of the first to argue

that students should have opportunities to practice and learn multiple literacies in the classroom, while utilizing emerging technologies. This idea continues to be reflected in writing and literacy goals in many first year writing and writing across the curriculum courses. In fact, check out your syllabus; in many colleges and universities there is a goal related to “digital literacy.” The 2000s saw the arrival of “digital literacy skills” added to many first year writing program’s learning outcomes and include understanding how to react to different writing assignments that require composing practices beyond writing a college essay and learning how to use various technologies to appropriately distribute information. Multimodal assignments offer opportunities for instructors to help you learn these digital literacy skills.

Multimodal Assignments Allow You to Use What You Know

You are likely already sharing and creating multimodal texts online and communicating with a wide range of audiences through social media, which Ryan P. Shepherd argues, requires multimodality. However, in his 2018 study, Shepherd also points out that students struggle to perceive the connections between the digital and multimodal composing they do *outside of school* with the same types of assignments they are asked to complete *in school*. What does this mean? Well, it means you are probably already multimodally composing outside of school but you just didn’t know it. Understanding that you are already composing multimodally in many digital spaces will help you transfer that knowledge and experience into your academic assignments. This understanding might also help alleviate any fears or anxiety you may have when confronted with an assignment that disrupts what you think writing should look like. You can take a deep breath and remember that

practicing multimodal composing in school connects to the multimodal composing you likely practice outside of school.

Multimodal Assignments Offer Real Skills for the Workforce

Perhaps the most significant reason for learning how to compose multimodally is that it provides “real-life” skills that can help prepare students for careers. The United States continues to experience a “digital age” where employees are expected to have an understanding of how to use technology and communicate in various ways for various purposes. Takayoshi and Selfe argue that “[w]hatever profession students hope to enter in the 21st century . . . they can expect to read and be asked to help compose multimodal texts of various kinds . . .” (3). Additionally, professionals are also using the benefits of digital tools and multimodal composing to promote themselves, their interests, research, or all three. Learning how to create a multimodal text will prepare you for the workforce by allowing you to embrace the skills you already have and learn how to target specific audiences for specific reasons using various modes of communication.

How Do I Create a Multimodal Text?

Now that you know what a multimodal text is and why it is important to learn how to create them, it makes sense to discuss strategies for composing a multimodal text. As with writing, multimodal composing is a process and should not only emphasize the final result. Therefore, the first three strategies listed below are pre-drafting activities.

1. Determine your rhetorical situation.
2. Review and analyze other multimodal texts.
3. Gather content, media, and tools.
4. Cite and attribute information appropriately.
5. Begin drafting your text.

While I often ask my students to attend to each strategy in the order given, your process might change based on the assignment and/or instructor expectations.

Determine Your Rhetorical Situation

When brainstorming your rhetorical situation, you should consider the purpose of your text (*the message*), who you want to read and interact with your text (*the audience*), your relationship to the message and audience (*the author*), the type of text you want to create (*the genre*), and where you want to distribute it (*the medium*). Descriptions of each of the five components of the rhetorical situation are offered below.

The Message

The message relates to your purpose, and you might ask yourself, what am I trying to accomplish? You should try to make the message as clear and specific as possible. Let's say you want to create a website focused on donating to charity. An unclear message might be "getting more people in the United States to donate to charities." A clearer message is "convincing college freshmen at my university to donate to the ASPCA" because the audience and purpose are specific rather than broad.

The Audience

There are two types of audiences. An intended audience, who you target in your message, and an unintentional audience, who may stumble upon your text. When determining your message, you want to consider the beliefs, values, and demographics of your intended audience as well as the likelihood that unintentional audiences will interact with your text. Using the example above, college freshmen at your university are the intended audience, and teachers, parents, and/or students from other universities represent unintentional audience members. It might be helpful to approach the audience using the concept of “discourse communities,” or “a group of people, members of a community, who share a common interest and who use the same language, or discourse, as they talk and write about that interest” (National Council of Teachers of English). You can read more about discourse communities in Dan Melzer’s essay, “You’ll Never Write Alone Again: Understanding Discourse Communities” found in this volume of *Writing Spaces*.

The Author

You are the author and should consider your relationship to the message and audience. As an author, you bring explicit (obvious) and/or implicit (not obvious) biases to your message, so it is important to recognize how these might affect it and your audience. Also, you may be targeting an audience you are familiar with (perhaps you are also a college freshman) or not (perhaps you are a graduate student). It is important to think about how your familiarity might affect your message.

The Genre

Genre is a tricky term and can mean different things to different scholars, teachers, and students (Dirk 250). In the context of multimodal composing, genre refers to a type of text that has genre conventions, or audience expectations. For example, if I am creating a website (the genre), an audience would expect the following conventions: an easy-to-navigate toolbar, functional tabs, hyperlinks, and images. Yet, when thinking about genre, it is more useful to think specifically. If I am creating a website for horror film fans (the specific genre), then the audience would expect the following (more specific) genre conventions: references, images, and sounds associated with horror films, directors, actors, actresses, monsters, and villains. They would also expect color and font choices to align with the genre—it is likely that the color baby blue would not be well-received.

The Medium

While genre is the type of text you want to create, the medium refers to where you will distribute it. Classic media (plural for medium) includes distribution via radio, newspapers, magazines, and television; however, new media is defined by a text's online distribution. Importantly, medium refers to where you will distribute your text but not how. The how refers to the technology tools you'll use to create the text and possibly to distribute it. For example, to create a podcast, you might use your smartphone (a tool) to record, a free sound editor like Audacity (another tool) to edit it, and Soundcloud (a tool *and* the medium) to distribute it.

Review and Analyze Other Multimodal Texts

Now that you have brainstormed your rhetorical situation and determined the type of text you want to create, it is time to begin finding other texts representative of your topic and genre. In their textbook, *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects*, Arola, Sheppard, and Ball argue that “[o]ne of the best ways to begin thinking about a multimodal project is to see *what* has already been said about a topic you are interested in . . . as well as *how* other authors have designed their texts on that topic . . . ” (40). This is excellent advice. I suggest that you find at least one text you think is an exceptional example and one text you feel is lacking in some way. After you find these texts, you can conduct a brief analysis by responding to the following questions:

1. What is the author’s message?
2. Who are they addressing? How can you tell?
3. What type of text did they create? What genre conventions do you see?
4. How was the text distributed? In what ways does it relate to the target audience?
5. What modes of communication are they using? Which are they emphasizing? Do these decisions support the message and/or appropriately target their audience?
6. What do you like about the multimodal text?
7. What, in your opinion, needs work?

If you answer these questions, you have given yourself important feedback to consider for your own work.

Gather Content, Media, and Tools

Once you have determined your rhetorical situation and examined

other multimodal texts, you should begin gathering information and materials. I have categorized this process into three components: content, visual and aural materials, and technology tools.

Conduct Content Research

A multimodal text should include content (key pieces of information that support your message), which means you will need to conduct some research. The extent of the research depends on the type of assignment; some instructors might want your multimodal text to include scholarly research while others might not. Therefore, be sure to read the assignment closely and then conduct the necessary research. For example, my student created a website and videos discussing the similarities between American music and K-pop (see figure 6). Her content research includes a scholarly article from the journal *World Englishes* and a popular article from Billboard.com.

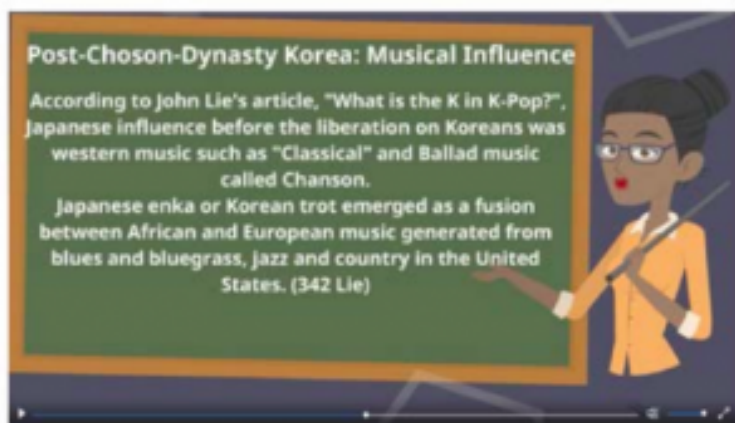


Figure 6. A screen shot of a student's video that illustrates her use of scholarly content. Video shows an animation of a teacher standing at a chalkboard. On the chalkboard, there is text explaining the musical influences on Post-Choson-Dynasty Korea. (Permission to use this image was obtained from the student).

Collect Visual and Aural Materials

In addition to textual information, you should also collect images, sounds, videos, animations, memes, etc. you want to include in your multimodal text. For instance, figure 6 demonstrates some of the pre-draft materials my student collected: openly licensed images of a teacher and chalkboard, a video they created using Animator, and K-Pop music to play on a loop.

Explore Openly Licensed Materials

When searching for visual and aural materials, you want to consider using openly licensed materials. According to Yearofopen.org, open licenses are “a set of conditions applied to an original work that grant permission for anyone to make use of that work as long as they follow the conditions of the license” (“What are Open Licenses”). A well-known and commonly used example of an open license are Creative Commons licenses, identified by CC. Creative Commons licenses provide the creator or author with a copyright, ensuring that they receive credit for their work, while also allowing “others to copy, distribute, and make uses of their work – at least non-commercially” (“About the Licenses”). Essentially, if a work has one of the four basic creative commons licenses (see figure 7), then a creator/ author can use the licensed item in their own creative texts.

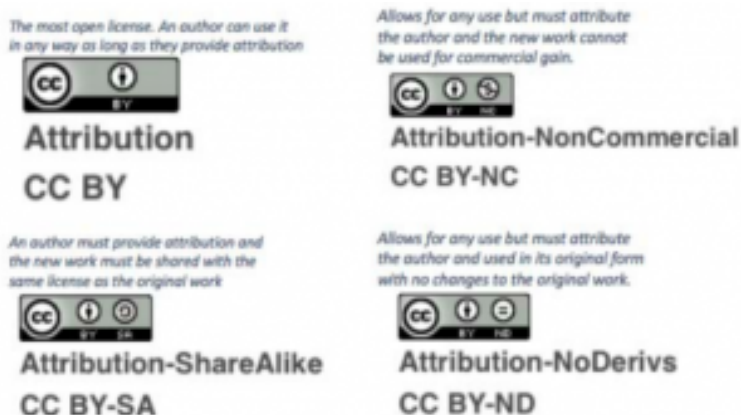


Figure 7. The four basic Creative Commons licenses including explanations for each. (Image was created by the author using “About Licenses” by Creative Commons licensed under CC BY 4.0)

There are various websites such as CC Search, Free Music Archive (FMA), or Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) where you can find openly licensed work. You may also set filters on Flickr or Google Images to locate openly licensed work.

Collect and Evaluate Technology Tools

It is important to collect and evaluate the technology tools you need to create your multimodal text prior to drafting it. As stated previously, the technology tool helps you create the final text and might also help you distribute it. The easiest way to determine the technology tools that you need is to create a list of all of the features you want to include in your text. Once you create the list, research where to find the tools either online or at your university. Be aware that some tools may not be free (although they may come with a free trial period), but you can use software available on your computer

or university computers such as iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Or you can find freeware, software available for free online, such as Audacity (for sound editing), Canva (for infographic and/or image creation), or Blender (for video creation). Once you have created your list and found some tools, spend some time testing each one while keeping track of which is the most user-friendly and helps you achieve your composing goals.

Citing and Attributing Your Content

After researching content and collecting materials, think about how you will give rhetorically appropriate credit to authors or organizations whose work you have referenced or included. For instance, if you create a video, you should provide credits at the end rather than a Works Cited page, or if you design a website, you should include hyperlinks to outside sources rather than MLA in-text citations because this makes more sense, given the genre. For multimodal texts that rely on the aural mode (e.g. podcasts), you can use verbal attributions, or verbalize necessary information. When deciding what information is necessary, think about what you can include to help your audience locate your text, such as author, title, and website. For example, the phrase, “*According to Mandi Goodsett, in her PowerPoint ‘Creative Commons Licenses’ found on the library website, a student has control over their online presence,*” offers the audience key information to help them find the source.

When citing openly licensed images, videos, sounds, animations, screenshots, etc., it is important to provide an attribution. According to the CC Wiki, an appropriate attribution should include the title, author, source (hyperlinked to the original website), and license (hyperlinked to the license information). Figure 8 represents an example of an inappropriate attribution and figure 9 an ideal one.

Discovering Open or Public Domain Resources



Figure 8. An example of an inappropriate attribution that lacks title, clear author, source link, and license. (Image was created by the author using “Creative Commons Licensing” by Mandi Goodsett licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Discovering Open or Public Domain Resources



Figure 9. An example of an ideal attribution, which includes a hyperlinked title for the image, a clear author name, and license information that is also hyperlinked. (Image was created by the author using “Creative Commons Licensing” by Mandi Goodsett licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Begin Drafting Your Text

Drafting your text should include outlining or mapping your project. This could take the form of writing all of the text you want to include in an outline if you have a word-heavy multimodal text like a website, drawing your design if you are creating a poster or commercial, or writing a script if you are creating a podcast or video. Of course, you can combine any of these outlining methods or come up with your own, but thinking about what you want to do before you do it will make your final text much stronger and coherent.

Final Remarks and Finding More Information

The primary purpose of this chapter is to introduce you to multimodal composing and offer some strategies to help you create a multimodal text. Yet, just like with traditional writing, multimodal composing is a process, and while I provided three pre-drafting strategies, I did not offer much in the way of guidance for drafting your final product. Therefore, I would like to conclude by offering two excellent resources:

Michael J. Klein and Kristi L. Shackelford's *Writing Spaces* volume 2 chapter, "Beyond Black on White: Document Design and Formatting in the Writing Classroom" discusses visual design, which can help you create your final text.

Arola, Sheppard, and Ball's commercial textbook, *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects* (first and second editions) offers detailed advice for making your multimodal text.

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Teaching Resources for An Introduction to and Strategies for Multimodal Composing by Melanie Gagich

This chapter can be used by instructors who integrate various types of multimodal composing assignments into their curriculum because it offers students an introduction to multimodal composing and strategies to consider when asked to create a multimodal text. As a composition teacher who has taught multimodal projects since 2014, I have found that some students want to jump right in to creating their multimodal text while others do not know how to begin. To counteract this issue, I use a process-based strategy that includes discussion, practice, and production when teaching multimodal assignments. This chapter reflects that process in that it is split into two sections. The first

section provides a conceptual overview of multimodality and its importance in college writing classrooms and the second half offers five strategies instructors can use to help students create a multimodal text.

This chapter can be read as a whole or broken into sections; however, I think it is most appropriate to read each major section separately. I find it is easier to begin a multimodal assignment by asking students to read the first section of the chapter to frame discussions of key terms associated with multimodal composing, the modes of communication, and the importance of multimodality. This section also provides examples (drawn from outside sources as well as from my students' work), which I use as a basis for activities that ask students to respond to the chapter examples and then find their own. I have provided discussion questions and inclass activities that I have used to help students understand the concept of multimodality.

I assign the second section of the chapter after the initial introduction to key terms and multimodality. The second section includes three pre-drafting and two drafting strategies I have used successfully in my courses. The length of the project affects the way I utilize the second section of the chapter. For example, when I assign a semester-long multimodal project in an upper-level composition course, students are given a mini-project for each of the pre-drafting phases that helps them create a culminating multimodal text. In my first-year writing courses, I assign a four-week multimodal project, and I simply ask students to read the second half of the chapter and complete complementary in-class activities.

However, I can envision instances where the strategies could be addressed individually and/or rearranged. The second half of the chapter is meant to help students begin constructing a multimodal text, and provides a rough template for setting up a multimodal project unit for the instructor. By no means am I suggesting that the considerations listed here are inclusive of all possible ways of integrating a multimodal project; instead, I wanted to share these

best practices with interested instructors to decrease the workload of creating a new project curriculum from scratch.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to compose multimodally?
2. The chapter lists three reasons supporting the inclusion of multimodal composing assignments in writing classes; what are they? Why else might learning how to compose a multimodal text be important?
3. How is citing and attributing work in a multimodal text similar to and different from citing in a traditional MLA essay?

In-Class Activities

1. The chapter discusses and provides examples for the five modes of communication; find at least one example of each mode, different from those described in the chapter. Write one to two sentences explaining how it is representative of that mode.
2. What are openly licensed sources? Find at least three examples of an openly licensed source, describe the type of license they hold, and create an ideal attribution for each.
3. Find a multimodal text that relates to your topic or a topic of interest. Practice analyzing it using the questions from the “Review and Analyze other Multimodal Texts” sub-section. How can you use this analysis to help you create your own multimodal text?
4. Find a multimodal text and a traditional, written text that discusses your topic or a topic of interest. Does the

presentation of information affect your understanding of each text? In what ways?

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46. Strategies for Analyzing and Composing Data Stories

ANGELA M. LAFLEN

Overview

Data stories are multimodal texts that combine data with words and images to tell a story to or make an argument for a particular audience. They are increasingly common in everyday life as technology has resulted in an information explosion. Data often do not make sense unless someone takes the time to explain them—to tell a story about them. Data stories help to turn raw data into information that readers can understand and use to make decisions. Data storytelling has become an essential strategy for managing data, and students need to cultivate their skills in reading and composing data stories so they can critically analyze the data stories they encounter and in order to use data ethically and effectively in their writing. This chapter offers strategies to help students read data stories critically and use data in composing their own multimodal texts. It demonstrates how to use these strategies by working through the process of analyzing and composing sample data stories.

Introduction

While scrolling through Instagram, the following post catches your attention:



Figure 1. A sample Instagram post. Source: Angela Laflen.

You wonder if the post is true since you know there is a lot of misinformation circulating on social media. Working your way through questions you use to assess whether information is credible, you consider who posted it (your generally reliable cousin), why she posted it (because she is fascinated by UFOs), and its original source (the National UFO Reporting Center, which sounds official). So far, the post seems credible, but what to make of the statistic itself? If you are like many readers, you may tend to either dismiss it out of hand (since everyone knows statistics can be made

up) or accept that it's accurate (since there's nothing obviously off about it).

These two responses to numerical information are very common. However, neither is particularly effective at helping you make good decisions about the “data stories” you encounter in daily life. In the case of Figure 1, the National UFO Reporting Center is a real organization that allows people to report sightings of UFOs, and the statistic in the post is technically true, but it is also misleading. A quick search of the National UFO Reporting Center reveals that 2018 was anomalous for the low number of reported sightings that year, so the 48% increase reported in Figure 1 is the result of cherry-picking data to create the impression that UFO sightings rose drastically over a 2-year period. Cherry picking of data means we look for particular data and statistics that help to illustrate our point of view, and it is a common way that data are misused in data storytelling. Notice that no complicated math—or really any math at all—was required to determine that this statistic is flawed; just some simple fact checking. Though not all data stories can be fact-checked so easily, it is possible to read many data stories and to write your own credible data stories using basic reasoning skills.

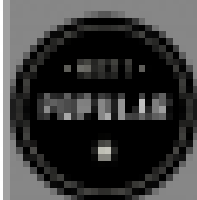
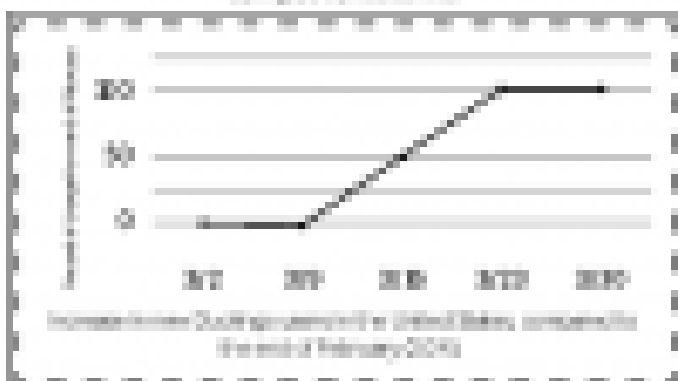
What are Data Stories?

Whether or not you have heard the phrase “data stories” before, you have certainly seen data stories because they are widespread on social media, in news publications, and in advertising of all kinds. In addition to social media posts such as Figure 1, data stories often take the form of infographics (such as Figure 2) or online articles (such as Figure 3). Whatever form they take, data stories are multimodal texts that combine data with words and images to tell a story or make an argument for a particular audience. As infographic guru Alberto Cairo explains, data stories are texts that “give shape to data, so that relevant patterns become visible” (16).



LANGUAGE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Data from the language learning app Duolingo suggested that many people worked on learning a second or third language during the pandemic.



**THIRD MOST POPULAR
LANGUAGE STUDIED ON
DECLINED IN EACH U.S.
STATE**

Figure 2. Infographic that charts the increase in language learning using the DuoLingo app during the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Angela Laflen.

Which Plant Milk is the Most Sustainable?

Consumers often turn to plant milk as an alternative to cow's milk, which is far less sustainable in terms of the carbon dioxide emissions, land use, and water consumption associated with its production. But which plant milk is the most sustainable? It turns out that there is not a simple answer, as reported in a recent study published in *Science* and a recent [New York Times](#) [interactive article](#).

Almond milk consumes the most water of the plant milks at 371 liters per liter of almond milk. But rice milk generates more pollution than almond milk does, with 1.2 kgs of CO₂ generated per liter of rice milk produced. Soy and oat milk are more sustainable options when it comes to water use, requiring only 28 and 48 liters of water respectively, but they both require more land to produce than do rice or almond milk. Oat and soy milk also still impose packaging and transportation costs on the environment. According to a [BBC report](#), depending on the location of the consumer, oat or soy milk can travel a considerable distance, and it is not always easy to find oat where the products used in a specific plant milk originated.

When it comes to choosing a plant milk alternative to cow's milk, consumers face a variety of choices, each of which comes with caveats and trade-offs. In contrast to cow's milk, though, each plant milk option is more sustainable.

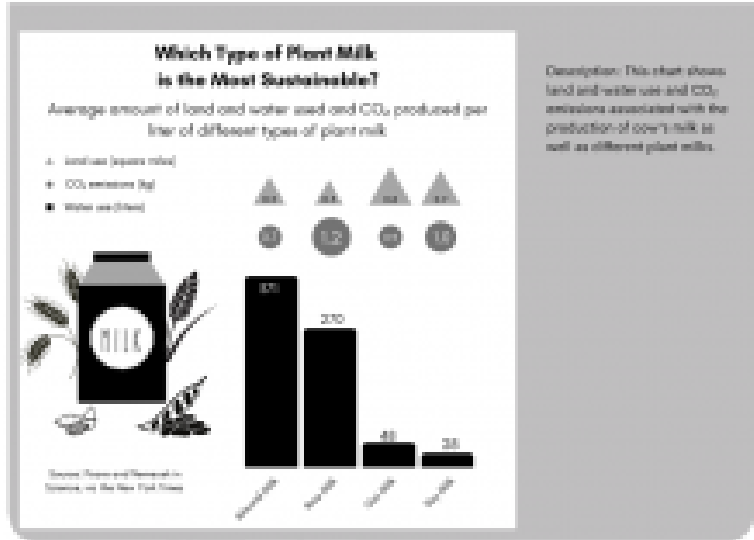


Figure 3. Online news article that compares plant milks based on their CO2 emissions, land use, and water use. Source: Angela Laflen.

You may have even used data in your own writing by including a graph or table as evidence to support an argument in a research paper. In fact, writers have always turned to data for evidence, and data stories of all kinds have long helped make data comprehensible to members of the public, decision makers, and other audiences. Today, though, data stories have become more common because there are simply more data to work with. According to writing and digital studies scholar Brenta Blevins, “the omnipresence of computers in every aspect of human life means we’re recording and capturing ever-increasing amounts of data.” Indeed, according to a 2021 article published in TechJury, “the majority of the world’s data has been generated within the last two years alone” (Bulao).

Although not all of this information is numeric, a lot of it is, and most of it doesn’t make sense unless someone takes the time to explain it—to tell a story about it. Data stories help to turn raw data into information that readers can understand and use to make decisions. In fact, even the way news is reported reflects the increasing importance of data. Data journalism is a type of journalism in which reporters use large databases as sources to produce stories. As they tell complex stories through the use of infographics and data visualizations, data journalists practice data storytelling. Data storytellers rely on multiple modes of communication to make data comprehensible for readers, relying heavily on linguistic (words) and visual (images) modes of communication. The authors of *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects* explain that the word multimodal

“is a mash-up of *multiple* and *mode*. A mode is a way of communicating, such as the words we’re using to explain our ideas in this paragraph or the images we use through this book to illustrate various concepts. Multimodal describes how we combine multiple different ways of communicating in everyday life” (Ball et al., 3).

For example, the UFO post in Figure 1 is a multimodal text. It combines an image of a UFO with a statistic about UFO sightings

to create a text that uses images, words, and numbers—multiple modes—to try to convince readers that UFO sightings have increased over a short period of time. You might also wonder whether an Instagram post like the UFO example is really a text. In an essay titled “An Introduction to and Strategies for Multimodal Composing” in volume 3 of *Writing Spaces*, Melanie Gagich explains that although the word text is “often only associated with writing (or perhaps the messages you receive or write on your phone),” in composition courses the term is often used to refer to “a piece of communication that can take many forms. For instance, a text is a movie, meme, social media post, essay, website, podcast, and the list goes on” (66). An Instagram post is the kind of multimodal text you likely encounter daily.

Why Do Data Stories Matter to Writing?

Even if you recognize how common data stories are, you may wonder why you are reading about them in a writing course; don't they belong better in a math or statistics course? Data storytelling is about more than being able to perform mathematical operations. Since technology has resulted in an information explosion, data storytelling has become an essential strategy for managing data, and as you develop your skills as a writer, it is important to cultivate data storytelling skills so that you can read data stories critically and are prepared to use data ethically and effectively in your writing. As Janae Cohn discusses in the essay “Understanding Visual Rhetoric” in volume 3 of *Writing Spaces*, “if we limit ourselves to words in our arguments, we may not successfully reach our audiences at all. Some audiences need visuals to think through an idea, and using graphs and diagrams can express some ideas *more* clearly than text can” (21).

Often, students encounter data stories when they are assigned to write—or read—multimodal texts such as infographics. Strategies

for evaluating and composing multimodal texts more generally are useful with data stories, but they do not provide all the tools we need to work with data. Although often we do not need advanced mathematics or sophisticated statistical knowledge to analyze or compose data stories, we can become stronger readers and writers of data stories by being familiar with critical questions for data stories and the data story composing process.

Scholars have identified four different types of citizens according to the situations in which they use data: communicators, readers, makers, and scientists (Wolff et al., 18). Although scientists—and to some extent makers—do need advanced statistical training to be able to work with data at an appropriate level, for most people, the skills of a communicator or reader will help them “use data intelligently for solving real world problems” (Wolff et al. 18). Communicators are those who “make sense of and tell stories about data for others to digest,” while readers “need skills to interpret data that is increasingly presented as part of their everyday life” (Wolff et al. 18).

This chapter focuses on how you can cultivate the skills of a reader and communicator of data stories. Though the strategies in this chapter will not be sufficient for those who need to work with data as a scientist or maker, they will help you in your writing courses to read data stories critically and use data in composing your own multimodal texts.

Strategies for Analyzing Data Stories

You can apply all of the critical reading strategies you already use to analyze other kinds of texts to data stories. For example, you can preview a data story to get a quick sense of its author, general design, and structure, or you can read a data story rhetorically to consider how the author’s purpose, audience, and other elements of the text’s context influence you as a reader. You can learn more

about reading strategies in Mike Bunn’s essay “How to Read Like a Writer” found in volume 2 of *Writing Spaces*. In addition, to analyze data stories, consider 1) the data source, 2) data alteration, 3) data analysis, and 4) data presentation. Table 1 provides a checklist of questions you can ask during analysis. In this section, I will show you how to use these questions to analyze a sample data story.

1	Data Source	Who conducted the study that this data story is based on a
2	Data Alteration	How were the data manipulated from their raw form into t details about the data alteration provided?
3	Data Analysis	What terms are central to the writer’s argument (quantitat writer define the terms? Who would disagree with the way and why? Would the writer’s argument change if the defini how?
4	Data Presentation	Who is the audience for this data story and what are they s information? How do the data, images, and design element audience into feeling a particular way about the topic of th
5	Data Presentation	What story does this data story tell? What organizational p tell that story? How would using a different organizational

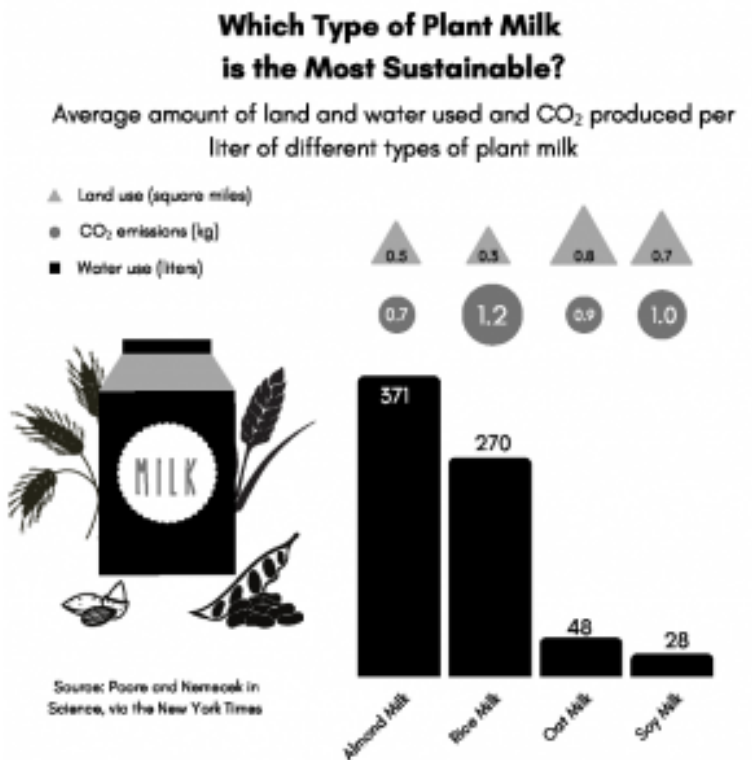


Figure 4. An example of “data journalism,” which refers to short news articles designed for sharing online. This graph was written to be published alongside the news article in Figure 3, but texts like this can also circulate online via social media without their original articles.

Source: Poore and Nemecek in
Science, via the New York Times

Figure 5. Closeup on source information from Fig. 4. Source: Angela Laflen.

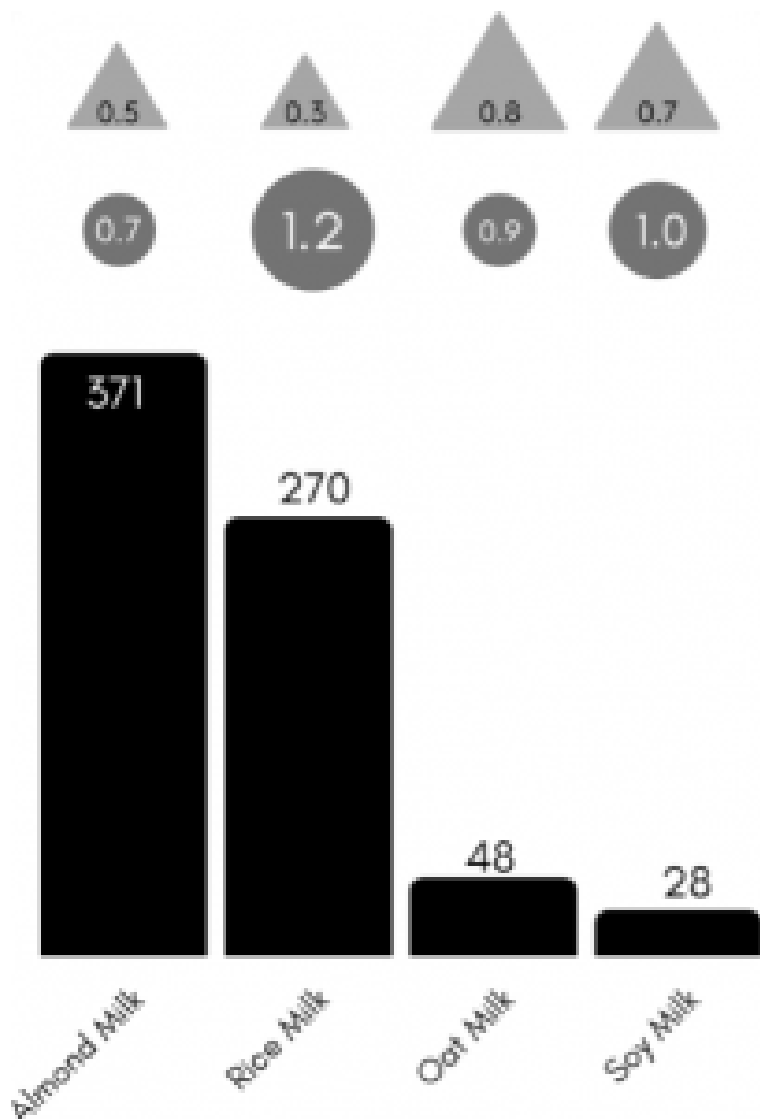


Figure 6. Closeup on bar graph in Fig. 4. that compares plant milks based on their CO2 emissions, land use, and water use. Source: Angela Laflen.

Data Source

In order to analyze this story, our first step is to check the data source. All credible data stories should cite their source(s) of information. This citation serves the same function as citing your sources in an academic research paper: crediting the source of information and allowing readers to find that source for themselves. Do note that data stories do not always use a formal documentation style like MLA to credit sources. Sometimes data stories are so succinct that there is not space for complete citation, and data stories designed to be read online often rely on embedded links to their sources as a way to identify them. Additionally, some of the programs used to create data stories do not support formatting features we have come to expect from word processing programs such as indenting or italicizing specific words. Nevertheless, data stories should provide enough information about their source(s) that readers can find the source(s) for themselves. Also, be sure to do an Internet search for any source that is credited in a data story to make sure it really exists because some deliberately falsified data stories make up fictional sources that sound credible. It goes without saying that falsifying data for use in a data story is unethical.

In the case of Figure 4, the source is credited as Poore and Nemecek in *Science* via *New York Times*, but without any other information to help readers find the source such as article title or date (Figure 5). The online article that accompanies the data story includes a link to the *New York Times* article “Your Questions About Food and Climate Change, Answered,” which includes a link to a peer-reviewed research article published in *Science* titled “Reducing Food’s Environmental Impacts through Producers and Consumers.” Though it takes a little work to identify the source(s) used in Figure 4, they are the kinds of credible scholarly and news sources that students like yourself are often encouraged to use in making academic arguments.

Data Alteration

Checking the data alteration means asking how the data were manipulated from their raw form into the visualization that we see. Ideally, writers will share details about how the data alteration was performed. Figure 4 is based on data from one table in the *New York Times* article (Moskin et al.), which lists data on water use in liters, land use in meters, and CO₂ emissions in kg and also includes data on cow's milk in addition to 4 types of plant milk. Figure 4 makes the comparison of different types of plant milk easier to see by moving data from a table into a bar graph to compare CO₂ emissions and by using bubbles and triangles to depict the relative sizes of water and land use (Figure 6).

By separating them out, readers can see that the milks compare differently depending on whether they are looking at CO₂ emissions, land use, or water use. Figure 4 also omits cow's milk, which helps the reader to directly compare plant milks to one another.

Data Analysis

We should also ask how data were analyzed and consider the terms the writer used in the data story. Though several terms are used in Figure 4, “sustainable” is the most significant term to examine because it can be defined in multiple ways (Figure 7). Figure 4 implicitly defines sustainability in terms of CO₂ emissions and water and land use, but no explicit definition is included. The data story could change drastically if sustainability were to be defined differently.

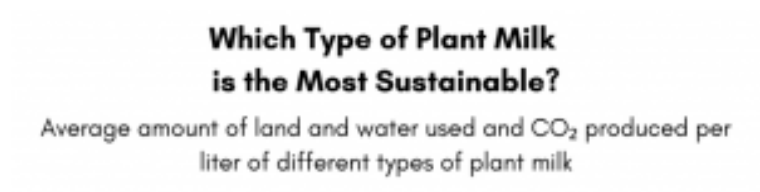


Figure 7. Closeup on title in Fig. 4. Source: Angela Laflen.

Data Presentation

To check the data presentation, we ask how data, images, and other design elements work together to draw the audience into feeling and thinking a particular way about the topic of the data story. We also ask what the main story or argument is and how it is organized. The presentation of Figure 4 seems rather simple at first. When we look closer, though, we see that the presentation is designed to make reading easy, although the story's title could be revised for clarity. Different shades of gray, black, and white are used to help distinguish elements of the data story from each other.

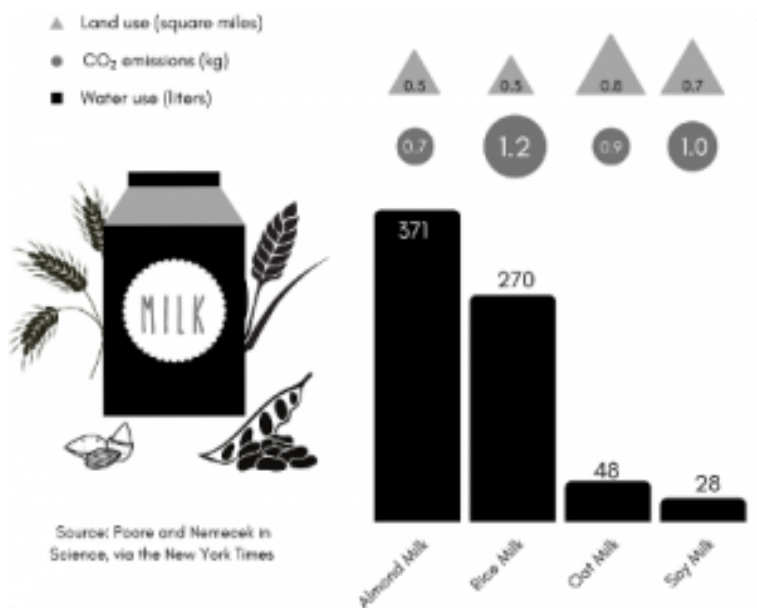


Figure 8. Closeup of milk carton image and bar graph in Fig. 4. Source: Angela Laflen.

Most obviously, Figure 4 includes a bar graph and bubbles and triangles to present data, which make the visual comparison of the plant milks easy for readers. The story also includes an image of a milk carton surrounded by the four types of plants included in the comparison of plant milks: rice, oats, soy, and almonds (Figure 8). This imagery helps the reader to visualize the types of milk being discussed in the data story. A large title at the top of the story asks “Which Type of Plant Milk is the Most Sustainable?,” a question the story ultimately does not answer since the data indicate that no single plant milk is most sustainable in terms of carbon emissions, water use, and land use. The title could be revised to highlight this fact.

Strategies for Composing Data Stories

The process of composing data stories is similar to the process you would use to create any multimodal text; however, we have to take extra steps to ensure that we represent data in ethical and rhetorically effective ways.

Figure 9 shows how we might visualize the data storytelling composing process.

As this map illustrates, real-world problem-solving contexts and ethics determine how a writer moves through the data storytelling composing process. We can think of them as defining the writer's rhetorical situation when composing a data story. A rhetorical situation refers to the surrounding circumstances and contexts that shape a piece of writing (usually discussed in terms of audience, purpose, exigence, genre, and rhetor). Data stories, like all texts, are shaped by their rhetorical situation. The real-world problem-solving context includes the reason a writer creates a data story, the audience they are writing to, and how they will disseminate the story. In addition to the real-world problem-solving context, ethics also dictate the choices a writer can make when composing a data story. This means that a writer cannot choose to exaggerate or cherry-pick data just because this makes for a more interesting or persuasive story. All of a writer's decisions are bound by the need to be as accurate as possible in working with data.

In this section, I'll show you how I worked through the composing process to draft a story about Americans' preferences in pizza toppings. The real-world problem-solving context for this story is the need to make an eye-catching Facebook post for National Pizza Day (celebrated annually in the United States on February 9). My ethical obligation as a writer is to accurately report the data I use in my story and to cite my source(s) of information so readers can fact check the story for themselves.

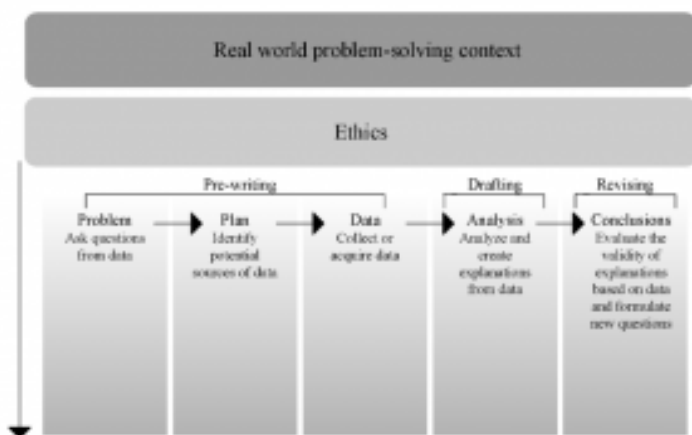


Figure 9. Data Storytelling Composing Process. Adapted from Wolff, Annika, et al. “Creating an Understanding of Data Literacy for a Data-Driven Society.” *The Journal of Community Informatics*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2016, p. 15. Source: Angela Laflen.

Prewriting Steps

It is common to spend more time on prewriting for a data story than on drafting the story. This is because writers need to work through at least three pre-writing steps:

1. Asking questions from data
2. Choosing data sources
3. Collecting data

Asking Questions from Data

Asking questions from data means thinking about possible

questions data might be able to answer about a topic (this does not mean you will be able to find data to answer all of the questions you can think up). In the case of my National Pizza Day post, there are a number of questions I could ask, including: how much pizza do Americans eat each day/month/year? What kind of pizza do Americans like best/least? How do preferences for pizza (types of crust, toppings, etc.) differ by state or region? How much do Americans spend on pizza each year and how does this compare to spending on other types of food? I usually begin a data story by brainstorming lots of possible questions before I start looking to see what data is available to work with. This way, I can adjust my story depending on what I find.

Choosing Data Sources

After I identify questions I might be able to answer with data, I search for possible sources of data. I start my search by Googling “Americans’ pizza preferences,” which yields over a million results. However, given my rhetorical situation, I want to work with a large, national opinion poll, and I also want a source that allows me to see the raw data, which refers to the original data that was collected. There are many fewer options that meet these criteria. In fact, I quickly discovered that YouGov, a British international Internet-based market research and data analytics firm that specializes in market research through online methods, is the best source for my data story. YouGov has published data from a 2021 survey of Americans (over 6000 adults participated from different regions of the country). Since this survey only focused on pizza topping preferences, I can also narrow down the topic for my data story.

Collecting Data

The last prewriting step is collecting data. As you collect data, you have flexibility to further refine or change your topic based on the data you collect. It is important to develop a data story that supports the data you are working with rather than trying to make data fit a narrative you already have in mind, which can result in cherry-picking of data or other data distortions that undermine your credibility as a writer.

Collecting data from a source such as YouGov that makes the raw data from their surveys available online is easy and quick. I prefer to work with sources that let me see raw data because then I don't have to worry about how data were altered during analysis or for presentation. However, you will often not have access to raw data and will have to work with data from secondary sources, or data that has been reported by others. For example, the data stories in Figures 2 and 3 are based on data reported by secondary sources. Any time you work with data that have been gathered and reported by others, it is crucial to choose data from a credible source that clearly explains how they gathered and altered data and what their purpose was. In other cases, you may conduct primary research yourself and collect your own raw data for the project. In that case, data collection can be the most time-consuming part of your work. For more information about conducting primary research, check out Dana Lynn Driscoll's essay "Introduction to Primary Research: Observations, Surveys, and Interviews" in volume 2 of *Writing Spaces*.

Drafting and Revising

Analyzing Data

You begin drafting your data story by analyzing the data you have collected. Analysis involves thinking about the terms you'll use in your story and how you will represent data for readers. The terms you use can impact how well readers understand your data story and how accurate it is. For example, can you see the difference between saying that anchovies are Americans' "most disliked" topping versus that they are the "least popular" topping in America? While the difference is subtle, saying something is "most disliked" has a more strongly negative meaning than saying it is "least popular" (which implies it has some degree of popularity). To determine which phrase to use in my data story, I need to know what the original survey asked because that language influenced how survey participants responded. In the case of the YouGov survey, 61% of respondents indicated that they dislike anchovies, so it is accurate to say they are the most disliked topping in the survey.

Another of the main ways that writers analyze data is by deciding whether or not to use a graph to represent it and, if so, what type of graph to use. Sometimes, a simple table will help you present data more clearly than a graph would, and in other cases you might just present a statistic in the text of your story. In any case, your choices should be deliberate and intended to make data easy for your readers to understand.

If you think a graph is needed to communicate data clearly, you should choose the type of graph based on what you want it to show about your data. The flowchart in Figure 10 shows you how you can use the purpose of your graph and the kind of data you are working with to determine what graph might work for your data story. More information about each of these graphs and choosing

the graph to use is available at the website *Storytelling with Data* (storytellingwithdata.com).

For the National Pizza Day post, I want to show a comparison, and specifically a comparison among items (pizza toppings in this case). The flowchart suggests I should consider a graph such as a vertical bar chart, horizontal bar chart, variable width column chart, or embedded table with graphs. Given that I only have one variable to graph—preference for pizza toppings—the vertical bar chart or horizontal bar chart are my best options.

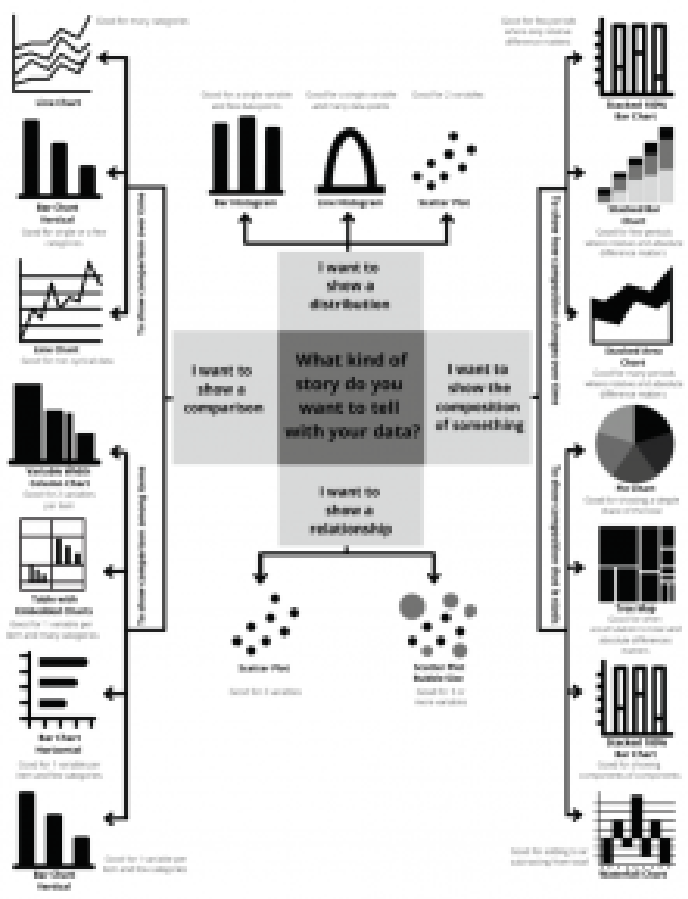


Figure 10. Flowchart to determine graph type based on data storytelling purpose. Source: Angela Lafen.

Create Explanations from Data and Test These with Readers

Though the simplest data stories may just present data in a clearly

labeled graph, it is more common for data stories to make a larger argument about their topic using data as evidence to persuade readers that the argument is true. Writers create these larger arguments by combining words and images to help readers understand what is important or meaningful in the data they are working with. Since it takes time to compose multimodal texts that combine words and images effectively, we can borrow drafting strategies from the field of graphic design to help us work efficiently. Specifically, tools called thumbnails and mock-ups are useful to help writers plan the design of multimodal texts.

Graphic designers use thumbnails, which are small, quick sketches of possible designs, to rough out their initial ideas about how they might combine words and images (Figure 11). I like to create several different thumbnails to see the pros and cons of my different ideas. Often, I end up combining elements from different thumbnails together in my final design.



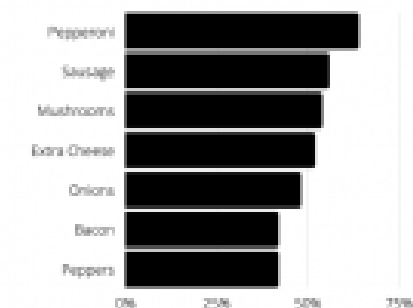
Figure 11. Two sample hand-drawn thumbnails for my pizza story. Source: Angela Laflen.

After you decide on an approach for your design, you create a mock-up, which is a rough layout of a screen or page. Think of your mock-up as a “visual outline of a project” (Ball, et al. 189) that includes the layout, colors, images, fonts, and headers you plan to use for your project. Mock-ups may or may not also include the actual text you

plan to use. Although you can create a mock-up by hand, I prefer to create mock-ups using the software program I plan to use for my data story. Several free online programs are available to create multimodal texts including Canva, Piktochart, and Visme, along with pro tools such as Adobe Illustrator. Although these programs can make the composition process easier, document or slide programs (e.g. Word, Google Docs, Pages, PowerPoint, Google Slides, Keynote) can also work.



What are Americans' Favorite Pizza Toppings?



Source: YouGov

Figure 12. Mock-up of my National Pizza Day story. Source: Angela Lafien.

I used Canva to create the mock-up of my National Pizza Day post (Figure 12). I decided to focus my story on how united Americans are in their preferences for pizza toppings. The implicit argument in this story is that there are still some questions on which Americans agree strongly regardless of region, gender, age, politics, or income level. Since pepperoni is Americans' favorite topping across all these

categories, I used a large image of a pepperoni pizza as the focal point for this story, and I wrote a title that communicates the argument of my story about national unity around pizza topping preferences. I drafted short text to present key results from the survey and included a bar graph to show more of the survey results. This mock-up helped me to see that the story has two distinct parts that aren't clearly linked yet, and I used it to write down a list of changes I wanted to make moving forward. Figure 13 shows how my data story evolved from the mock-up. Though some elements remained the same, including my main argument, I spent time on the images and text to make the story more cohesive. A cohesive data story is one in which the relationship between the different components of the text—the words, the images, the data, and any other elements included—is clear and logical to the audience. For example, in my mock-up it is not clear how the image of a hand reaching for a piece of pizza logically relates to the title “The United States of Pizza.” Similarly, because I used different fonts for the two different parts of the story, there is no clear visual relationship between the parts. I made changes during revision to improve these elements. I included an image of a pepperoni pizza shaped like the United States to relate more clearly to the title. I also used two consistent fonts throughout the data story, one for headings and the other for the rest of the text. The consistent use of fonts creates visual unity between the two parts of the text.

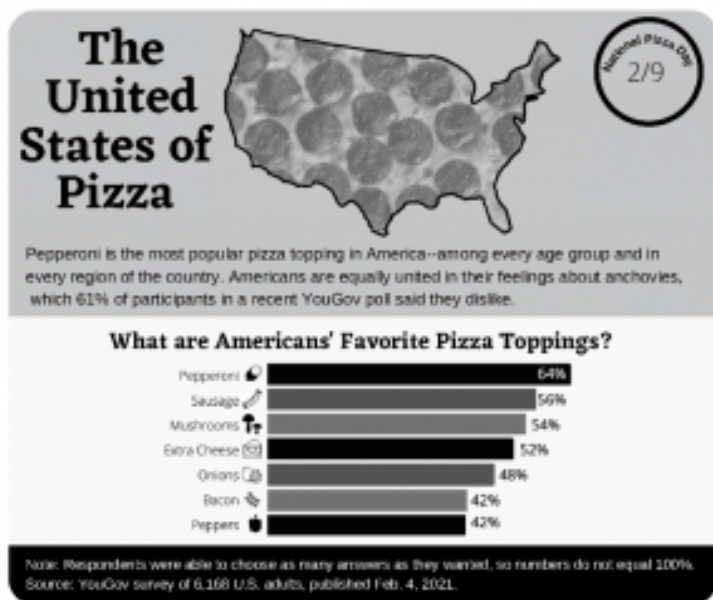


Figure 13. My National Pizza Day Facebook post. Source: Angela Laflen.

The next step in my composing process is to test my story with readers. Based on this feedback, I might make additional revisions to the story. Like all texts, data stories are subject to an ongoing drafting and revision process, and I usually only finish working on a data story because I run into a deadline.

Concluding Thoughts and More Information

This chapter introduced you to data storytelling and to strategies that will help you get started as a reader and communicator of data stories. The main takeaway is that you can analyze data stories critically and use data ethically and effectively in your writing

whether or not you consider yourself a “numbers person.” Although these strategies are just a starting point, regular practice reading and composing data stories will help you to improve your analysis and composition skills. I also encourage you to learn more about the process of designing your data story. I touched only briefly on design in this chapter, and I recommend the following for more information:

- Michael J. Klein and Kristi L. Shackelford’s *Writing Spaces* volume 2 chapter, [“Beyond Black on White: Document Design and Formatting in the Writing Classroom”](#) gives an overview of document design and how it impacts the way readers perceive a text.
- Janae Cohn’s *Writing Spaces* volume 3 chapter, [“Understanding Visual Rhetoric”](#) focuses on the visual mode and would be useful as you choose visuals for your data story.
- Melanie Gagich’s *Writing Spaces* volume 3 chapter, [“An Introduction to and Strategies for Multimodal Composing”](#) discusses five strategies for composing multimodal texts that should inform the drafting of your data story.

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Teacher Resources for “Strategies for Analyzing and Composing Data Stories”

Overview and Teaching Strategies

This essay introduces data storytelling in the context of multimodal composing. I assign it to students when I introduce multimodality because data storytelling plays a central role in multimodal genres ranging from infographics and white papers to social media posts. That said, the chapter could also be beneficial to help students learning to write about data they have collected through their own surveys or interviews. Without explicit instruction in the use of data, students often struggle to both analyze the use of data in multimodal texts as well as to use data effectively and ethically in their own multimodal texts. Multimodal composition pedagogy prepares students to discuss multimodal texts in terms of different types of media and modes of communication. While this vocabulary helps students to analyze the data stories they encounter and to plan their own data stories, it is not fully sufficient. Students need additional vocabulary to understand the strategies available for working with data. In this essay, I share a checklist of critical questions students can use to analyze the use of data in multimodal texts and apply the checklist to the analysis of a sample data story. I

also introduce students to the data storytelling composing process and model this process by demonstrating how I worked through it to produce a data story.

This chapter focuses on introducing strategies for reading and composing data stories, and it does not go into detail about design principles or modes of communication. Consequently, it is best to combine this chapter with additional readings that discuss multimodal composing more generally and the vocabulary of page design. In my own courses, I also provide more information to students about specific graph types to help them make informed choices, and I spend time in class showing them how to use free online programs for composing multimodal texts such as Canva, Piktochart, and Adobe Illustrator. Some of the questions and activities that I use with my students are included below:

Discussion Questions

1. Keep track of the data stories you see on social media over the course of a day or a week. What patterns do you notice in the kinds of stories or arguments made in these texts?
2. Use the critical analysis questions in Table 1 to analyze one of the data stories you saw on social media. Discuss why you think the data story does or does not use data effectively.
3. I suggested that the title of Figure 4 should probably be revised for accuracy. Discuss what a more accurate title for this data story might be.
4. Choose a topic you are working on or have recently worked on. Generate a list of questions about that topic you might be able to answer about it using data. Can you identify good sources of data that might help you answer any of those questions?
5. Use the flowchart in Figure 10 to determine the best options you have for showing data in the following scenarios:

- a. You want to show how house prices in your community have changed over time.
 - b. You want to present data for 7 online stores, their monthly e-commerce sales, and online advertising costs for the last year.
 - c. You want to show which student services on campus bring in the biggest share of total visitors.
6. Try using a different graph type to represent the data in the horizontal bar chart in Figure 13. Which graph is easiest to read and understand? Why?
7. This chapter includes several examples of data stories. Choose one of them and discuss how you could revise its genre (as one example, you might consider how you would turn the infographic in Figure 2 into a social media post). What changes would you make to the story to suit the changed rhetorical situation?

Activities

The following three activities help to scaffold the data storytelling composing process for students by helping them become familiar with data stories, giving them practice creating different types of graphs, and using free, online programs for composing multimodal texts.

Data Storytelling Scorecard

When I introduce data stories to my students, I like to give them several examples of data stories, from effective data stories to examples that have serious problems in the design or use of data. I

put them in groups with a scorecard, below, and ask them to rank the stories on a scale from Great to Horrible.

Directions:

1. Examine the data story. What is it trying to communicate?
2. Discuss with your team: Is the story clear? Is it misleading?
How could it be improved?
3. Rate the data story and make a short note about why you gave the rating you did.

Table 2. Evaluating the Data Story

Number	Your Rating	
1	Great Good Bad Horrible	
2	Great Good Bad Horrible	
3	Great Good Bad Horrible	
4	Great Good Bad Horrible	
5	Great Good Bad Horrible	
6	Great Good Bad Horrible	

After the groups have a chance to rank the data stories, we have a whole class discussion about how we ranked each data story. This is a good way to talk about what makes a story effective and how content and design work together in these texts.

Graph Creation Practice

To help students become more comfortable creating graphs, I use a class day to give them the opportunity to practice making different kinds of graphs. They do need access to computers on this day. I project a simple spreadsheet with population data on it at the front of the class and ask them to enter the data into their own Excel or Google Sheets spreadsheet. Then I show them how to create a variety of graphs including pie charts, horizontal bar charts, vertical bar charts, line charts, and scatterplots. After we work together for a few minutes, I ask them to continue trying out different graph types and to choose the one they think makes the population data easiest to see and understand. Once they choose the graph they think is most effective, I show them how to add and change labels on their graph, how to change the color palette, and how to save and download their graph. In the last section of the class, we share the different graphs students made and talk through their strengths and weaknesses for depicting the data.

Reverse Engineer a Data Story

Having students reverse engineer a data story in class or as homework is useful in several ways. To reverse engineer the story, students have to recreate it using a software program designed for multimodal composing, such as Canva, Piktochart, or Adobe Illustrator (depending on what the students have access to and will use for their own projects). Students gain experience manipulating text and images using the program without having to worry about the content. They see how text and visuals work together in the story, and they also quickly see what the software program is capable of and what its limitations are. This helps them to plan their own projects more realistically and to appreciate the time

involved in composing multimodal texts. The entire class can be asked to reverse engineer the same data story that is provided by the instructor, or students can choose to work with a data story they think is particularly effective.

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47. Thinking Across Modes and Media (and Baking Cake): Two Techniques for Writing with Video, Audio, and Images

CRYSTAL VANKOOTEN

Overview

Using the metaphor of baking a cake, this chapter offers students in college writing courses two techniques for writing with video, audio, and images: *integration* and *juxtaposition*. Knowing more about these techniques enables students to approach the analysis and composition of their own and others' multimodal texts with more specificity and control. Drawing on work from writing professors and digital designers, the essay defines and discusses integration and cross-modal reinforcement, as well as sequential and simultaneous juxtaposition, using one student-authored video composition as an example. Overall, students are encouraged to think critically and concretely about *integration* and *juxtaposition* in the multimodal texts they consume and create as they work to become more skilled and rhetorically-sensitive digital writers.

Introduction

When it comes to dessert, who doesn't love cake? It's soft, rich, and sweetly decadent. But if you've ever made a cake from scratch, you know that there are many elements that a baker uses to put together and finish the cake: flour, butter, sugar, eggs, salt, filling, and frosting. These elements are combined—or *integrated*—differently depending on how the baker wants the cake to turn out. Put another way, what goes into the mix makes a difference in how the cake tastes in the end. Much like cake, multimodal texts such as videos, websites, posts on social media, and podcasts involve a variety of elements that are combined to make a final product: words, images, sound recordings, music, voices, and video clips, for example. Like master bakers, skilled digital writers know how to combine these elements strategically, sometimes layering several of them together to compose a new whole or sometimes emphasizing one particular mode. This chapter will introduce you to two writing techniques, *integration* and *juxtaposition*, that can help you better understand and describe different combinations of media in a multimodal text, and also help you to compose your own digital product that audiences will really enjoy—to bake your own delicious cake!

But let's be real here: I'm a professor. I'm no master baker, and you probably aren't either. If I'm baking a cake, I'm going to read and follow the directions on the back of the box, and those directions will help me to put the cake ingredients together in a way that—I hope—is really tasty! This chapter is kind of like one set of simple directions on the back of the cake box for your digital writing, a place to start when considering how to describe the modes and media that others put together, *and* how to use those same modes and media to compose your own work. I'll draw from writing professors and digital designers to talk about what *integration* and *juxtaposition* are in relation to writing with video, audio, and images, and I'll show you what these two techniques can look and

sound like in one student-authored video made for a writing class. Ultimately, knowing how to recognize, describe, and use these techniques will help you approach the analysis and composition of your own and others' multimodal texts with more specificity, confidence, and control.

What is a Multimodal Text?

At this point, you may be wondering what exactly a multimodal text is, and why in the world I'm talking about baking in a chapter about digital writing. We'll get there. For now, just stay with me, and think of a multimodal text as a soft and delicious cake that you want to bake for your sister's birthday. You go to the store, choose the "Traditional Chocolate" cake mix, and read that you need to combine cake mix, water, oil, and eggs to make the cake batter. So into the bowl they go, and then, using a spoon—or for those of you who are fancy bakers—a mixer, you stir them together. Next, you bake the cake, let it cool, frost it, and it's ready to eat! When you and your sister put your forks into a slice, you no longer see the powdery mix, or the water, or the eggs. All of the individual ingredients were *integrated* to create the fluffy, chocolatey dessert you can enjoy. After it's baked, the cake is now what writing professor Bump Halbritter would call "all-there-at-once," meaning it's a whole that comes across as if it isn't comprised of parts and pieces. The baker knows, of course, that many ingredients were combined strategically to make the whole, and those combinations can really affect the taste, texture, and flavor.

This concept of combining elements strategically is useful for cake baking *and* for composing multimodal texts, which of course is why we're spending so much time in this chapter on cake. But what is a multimodal text, anyway? The term *mode* is embedded in the word *multimodal*, and when I talk about a mode, I'm referring to what writing professors Kristin Arola, Jennifer Shepherd, and

Cheryl Ball describe as “a way of communicating” (3). When you compose a multimodal text like a video, you blend together images (the visual mode), sounds (the aural mode), and written words (the linguistic mode), much like you mixed together the ingredients for your sister’s cake. *Writing Spaces* volume 3 author Melanie Gagich clarifies that *text* is a broad term in writing studies that refers to “a piece of communication that can take many forms” (66). So a multimodal text is a piece of communication that uses multiple ways—or modes—to get its message across.

Arola, Shepherd, and Ball, along with Gagich, also point out that there are many different kinds of multimodal texts that are both digital and non-digital: movies, memes, posters, online articles, slide decks, whole websites, and more. And just as a baker might vary the amount of different cake ingredients to get a different texture or taste, the modes in each different kind of multimodal text can be blended together in various ways. But in baking, you can’t experiment with blending if you aren’t aware of the ingredients and the effects they can have on cake-eaters, and the same applies for digital media composition. You can’t become an advanced digital media author if you don’t know how to see and hear past a media product’s “all-there-at-onceness.” Halbritter advises that we need “an ability to break apart the components” of digital media texts, along with “terminology that identifies and names the relationships within and between the rhetorical elements of a complex piece of audio-visual writing” (108). This is where concepts like *modes*, *integration*, and *juxtaposition* are helpful. They give us language to talk about how digital texts are composed and how they affect audiences.

Integration

Integration is defined by professor and political scientist Robert Horn as “the act of forming, coordinating, or blending into a

functional or unified whole” (11). In his book about visual language, Horn gets more specific about the integration of words and images, and he talks about nine different kinds of integration of verbal and visual elements: substitution, disambiguation, labeling, example, reinforcement, completion, chunking, clustering, and framing (101-104). I could say a lot about how any of these kinds of integration might apply to our work with digital media, but I’d like to focus us on reinforcement, in part because I’ve noticed that student writers use this technique a lot—sometimes even a bit too much. According to Horn, visual/verbal reinforcement happens when “the visual elements help present a (generally) more abstract idea. They present the idea a second time, even though it may be clearly interpretable from the words alone” (103). So we could call reinforcement “doubling” or “cross-modal repetition,” where an author presents one concept through two (or more) modes of expression: through words *and* images, for example, or through images *and* sound.

Like I said, I’ve noticed that students tend to use reinforcement a lot when they’re new to composing digital compositions. They’ll write out a point in a video using words while they simultaneously speak the same exact words in a voiceover. They’ll write out facts about a topic on a PowerPoint slide, and then pair the words with a graph that shows the same information. These examples use reinforcement across modes in simple ways, and sometimes, simple is good. A graph might help us see data differently than only reading about it, for example. Many times, though, when authors use cross-modal reinforcement, the visual and the verbal reinforce each other, but for little apparent reason.

Instead, when reinforcement is used to further a specific rhetorical purpose, it can be a useful form of integration. Horn mentions that when using visuals to reinforce words, “visual elements add rhetorical qualities such as mood, style, lightness, and so forth” (103). Applying this idea, an image might be combined with some words not just to use two modes together because we can, but instead to create a specific mood or style like seriousness

or whimsy. In addition, disability studies scholar Stephanie Kerschbaum writes about reinforcement using the term *commensurability*, when information is repeated via multiple channels in order to provide greater access for all users and readers. As Kerschbaum makes clear, making digital texts more accessible for audience members with varying abilities is a very good reason to use cross-modal reinforcement.

An Example of Integration: Reinforcement in “A College Collage”

Cross-modal reinforcement has a place, then, when done for a rhetorical purpose and/or for accessibility. Let’s talk through an example of what an effective use of reinforcement might actually look and sound like in a multimodal text by looking at a video composed by Evan Kennedy, a student in a writing course that I taught a few years ago. Evan’s video is called “A College Collage: Not Going Back,” and he made it in response to a video composition assignment in our digital writing class. The assignment was very open, asking students to pick any topic to explore through composing a video that used multiple modes to communicate. Evan chose to make his video about managing mental health during college, and specifically, about his own experiences with mental health through an extended college career at multiple schools. He explores and shares about this topic through combinations of images (many of his own selfies and photos), music (Demi Lovato’s popular song “Old Ways”), and sounds (remixed voiceovers from documentary films). I highly encourage you to watch all of Evan’s video before you read any further in this chapter (you can access it here: youtu.be/RgX4U7Z25c0). Next, I’ll talk us through a few sequences where Evan uses different kinds of integration and juxtaposition effectively.

Once you watch the video, you know that “A College Collage”

is pretty awesome. For the video's first minute, we hear different voices speaking about mental illness and its effects along with a low driving beat and a crackling, static sound that replays each time a speaker finishes a phrase. We see an empty black screen that switches between various black and white images: notebooks and textbooks falling off of a desk, a person lying on a bed seen through a small window, stacked pill bottles, a man holding the side of his head. In this sequence, Evan has mixed together some cake ingredients—he's integrated various media elements such as spoken words, images, video clips, and sound effects.



Figure 1. “A College Collage” by Evan Kennedy on YouTube, showing an image of stacked pill bottles. Please access Evan’s video at <https://youtu.be/RgX4U7Z25c0>. Screenshot by the author.

Evan effectively uses reinforcement in this opening sequence with the sounds and images. The excerpt from 0:44-0:51 is a good example. A female voice speaks, saying, “Fighting yourself to wake

up, get up, take a shower, try and breathe, try and smile, try and act like you believe you have something to live for.” Through words, the speaker describes one kind of daily mental health struggle, and reinforcing this spoken message is the image sequence that Evan chose to put with it: a female figure, shadowed, who walks slowly toward us down a hall (see Figure 2). But the image sequence doesn’t *exactly* double the content of the spoken words; it adds a feel and tone, along with more information that allows us to interpret the words. The visual is dark, shadowy, somber. We can’t see the woman’s face. We imagine her struggle to “wake up, get up” as she teeters down the hospital hallway. Together, the words and the image help to communicate the message: that for this woman, it’s difficult to wake up and start the day.

The way Evan mixes his ingredients together in this opening sequence to reinforce one another works for me as an audience member. I see it and I hear it; I get it and I feel it—mental illness is a difficult struggle. I wonder what Evan is going to say next about mental health, and I look and listen for more images, words, and sounds to help me better understand the message.

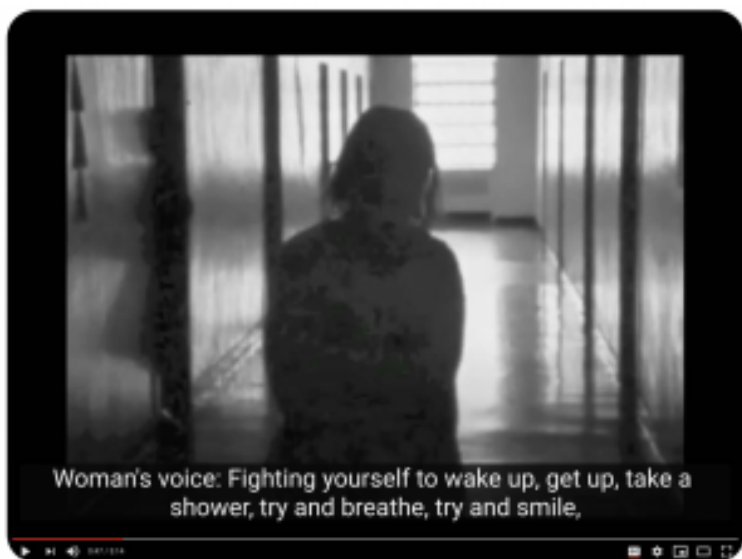


Figure 2. “A College Collage” by Evan Kennedy on YouTube. Evan reinforces the use of spoken words with an image of a woman. Text reads “Woman’s voice: Fighting yourself to wake up, get up, take a shower, try and breathe, try and smile.” Please access Evan’s video at <https://youtu.be/RgX4U7Z25c0>. Screenshot by the author.

Juxtaposition

Let’s go back to your sister’s birthday cake. You’ve already mixed the ingredients and baked the cake. Now, you decide to stack two layers on top of each other and put some filling in the middle, along with frosting around the outside and on top. The filling will add more moisture and a contrasting flavor, but it won’t be integrated into the cake in the same way as the other ingredients. It will be positioned next to the other elements for a delicious result. The same is true for the frosting—you smooth it out on the top and sides of the cake, and you taste and enjoy it *along with* bites of cake and filling.

When you use cake filling in the middle of a cake and frosting

on the top and outside of a cake, you're baking with the technique of *juxtaposition*, where two or more elements are placed next to one another in a single space or moment “to create meaning and communicate ideas to an audience,” as writing professor Sean Morey explains (288). For cake baking, the juxtaposed elements include cake bites and frosting. For digital writing, the juxtaposed elements include images, sounds, and words. In a visual presentation, you can place two or more images side by side and create meanings and patterns that emerge from viewing them together. In a video, you can put sounds and images next to or after one another in time (sequentially) or layered on top of each other at the same moment (simultaneously) to create contrast, to tell a story, to compose a transition, and to do many other things.

Anthropologist and museum researcher Corinne A. Kratz analyzes how juxtaposition works in exhibits, installations, websites, and films. She calls juxtapositions “productive kernels” that can do different kinds of rhetorical work: raise questions, tell stories, imply sequence or narrative, provoke puzzlement or surprise, show contrast or similarity, help to make an argument, or suggest categories (30, 32). Juxtaposition can be seen as a form of integration, but I like to think of it as a related technique where elements are placed in close proximity to one another but still remain somewhat separate. It's layer cake with cake filling; the elements are not fully mixed. Student writers in my classes use juxtaposition in some of the ways Kratz mentions. For visuals, they often use sequential juxtaposition, where different images are presented in a sequence to tell a story, seen one after the other in progressive time. Students also have used video effects for visuals such as a split screen or a picture-in-picture, which allow for simultaneous juxtaposition as different elements are seen or heard next to or near one another at the same moment in time. The simultaneous juxtaposition of elements can also be composed across modes: images can be placed next to or with sounds or music, for example, or images placed adjacent to written words.

Examples of Juxtaposition: Sequential and Simultaneous Juxtaposition

Let's return to "A College Collage" and look and listen to one portion where Evan utilizes cross-modal sequential and simultaneous juxtaposition to further the message of his video. After the video's introduction at 1:21, Evan uses Demi Lovato's 2015 song "Old Ways" as the soundtrack for the main portion of "A College Collage." Songs are complex, layered pieces of media in and of themselves, and "Old Ways" is no exception. We hear Lovato's voice, the lyrics of the song, various instruments, rhythmic beats, and electronic effects. Writing professor Kyle Stedman claims that "music is a language. It speaks. And as such, it's rhetorically deployed by people who have specific things they want to say with it." As we listen and watch, we notice that Evan is indeed rhetorically deploying "Old Ways" to do a lot more work than a stock background track might do. Many elements of the song—the beat, the lyrics, the changes in pace—are strategically juxtaposed with the images and words we see, and the images themselves are then juxtaposed carefully alongside each other.

From 1:34-1:51, Evan uses Lovato's lyrics to start to tell a story of perseverance amid trial. Lovato sings, "I'm down again / I turn the page / The story's mine / No more watchin' the world from my doorstep / Passin' me by / And I just keep changing these colors...." We hear these lyrics simultaneously juxtaposed with images of a growing stack of books on a shelf and a growing pyramid of empty pill bottles on a table. We see the date "2009" written across the screen. The images are placed in sequential juxtaposition, one after the other, and the changing of the images is coordinated with a hard-hitting percussive beat within each measure of "Old Ways." Hearing this repetitive beat, we anticipate each image change before it appears, and the mix of the images, the date, and the music implies a narrative. We wonder about connections between the modes and media: how are the books and the pill bottles related?

Are the pill bottles related to Lovato's lyric about being "down again"?

This fifteen-second sequence ends as the music transitions from verse to chorus. Within the song at 1:41, an ascending electronic scale grows louder, building in volume and pitch to the first line of the chorus. Evan juxtaposes this musical shift with a video clip that zooms in on a lone figure at the end of a hallway (see Figure 3). According to Kratz, one way juxtaposition works is to coordinate elements to heighten the audience's attention (30), and we notice Evan using the music and the clip's zooming movement to do just that—to get us to look and listen closely. As the beat of the chorus drops dramatically, we then see a black and white clip of Evan himself, punching toward the camera on the downbeat, and the visual quickly flips to a red screen with the date "2010."



Figure 3. A lone figure illuminated by light from a window at the end of a hallway. Closed captioning shows Demi Lovato lyrics. Please access Evan's video at youtu.be/RgX4U7Z25c0. Screenshot by the author.

There's a lot going on here. Evan is both juxtaposing and integrating, using images, clips, music, lyrics, and movement to tell the story of his journey through college with mental health. The juxtapositions are sequential (different images one after another) and simultaneous (music with image); they are within and across visual and aural modes, and they help to make watching this video a captivating and persuasive experience. And the purposes of these juxtapositions are various and align with Kratz's list, working to imply a narrative (of Evan's experiences across time), to heighten attention (to a transition point in the story), or to point out similarities (between Lovato's lyrics and Evan's experiences).

Baking (and Sharing) Your Own Cake

"A College Collage" is chock full of many other moments of integration and juxtaposition that you can watch, listen to, and learn from. It's important to tell you, though, that Evan worked on this video across a span of eight weeks in our writing course. He turned in four different versions of the video, and he was constantly making revisions, listening to feedback from me and others in the class, and going back and making more changes. (If you want to see some earlier versions of "A College Collage," you can view three earlier drafts at this link, <https://ccdigitalpress.org/book/transfer-across-media/5-1-evan.html>, where I write more about Evan's composition process). The point is that composing these kinds of complex and powerful media sequences takes time, effort, input, and lots of revision. Part of the effort that Evan put in was learning how to see and hear his own work both as "all-there-at-once" and as component pieces that could be tweaked and changed, juxtaposed and integrated in different ways. Then he "taste-tested" his video by giving it to audiences to try, and using their feedback, he went back to the kitchen to mix in different elements that might taste even better.

You can do the same as you read and analyze multimodal texts composed by others or compose your own multimodal texts for class. Think about the whole, and then think about the parts that make up the whole. Taste the cake when it's done (watch the video, read the presentation), and get others to taste it too, during peer review sessions, at the writing center, or anywhere you can get someone to give you feedback on your work. Pay attention to what ingredients you're using and why, listen to feedback on how they come together, and be ready to make changes and taste-test again.

If you're making a PowerPoint presentation, be mindful of how your words and images work together. Is there too much reinforcement between modes? How can you use images to reinforce words or words to reinforce images, but not to simply double the meaning? What images could you use that add value to the words, that might reinforce through an example or through new information? If you're making a video composition, consider and plan how you might juxtapose the modes and media the audience sees and hears. Can you use side-by-side visuals, and if so, what would the effect be on the audience? Can you do more with aligning elements of the musical track with visual and written elements, and how might doing this advance your purpose? Can you tell a story across modes, create a surprising visual moment, or imply a connection between parts?

Thinking critically and concretely about *integration* and *juxtaposition* in the multimodal texts you consume and create is one step toward becoming a more skilled and rhetorically-sensitive digital writer. They're simple concepts with many different applications and outcomes when used across modes and media. And when you can spot them, think about them, and then use them purposefully, you are well on your way to master baker status, digital media style.

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Teacher Resources for "Thinking Across Modes and Media (and Baking Cake): Two

Techniques for Writing with Video, Audio, and Images”

Overview and Teaching Strategies

This essay introduces students to the concepts of *integration* and *juxtaposition* within digital media composition, framed using theory from Bump Halbritter, Robert E. Horn, and Corrine A. Kratz. In the chapter, I use the metaphor of cake baking to get students to start thinking of texts such as videos, podcasts, or webtexts as composed of various pieces of media that authors can change, combine, and control for rhetorical effect. This essay would be most useful within a unit in a writing course where students have to both analyze and compose digital media texts, as *integration* and *juxtaposition* can be used for analysis and for invention or revision. Students might do a rhetorical analysis activity first, for example, using integration and juxtaposition as a framework. Then, students could compose their own texts that use integration and juxtaposition and reflect on how and why they used the techniques and for what ends.

The chapter offers two examples of effective uses of integration and juxtaposition that come from a student-authored video, “A College Collage” by undergraduate student Evan Kennedy. The examples emphasize using the techniques across various modes that include visuals, sounds, and words. I highly recommend that students view and listen to the example video “A College Collage” in its entirety in order to fully engage with the analysis of the examples in the chapter. “A College Collage” by Evan Kennedy can be found online here: <https://youtu.be/RgX4U7Z25c0>.

Questions and Activities for Discussion or Reflection

1. Describe a time when you baked something: a cake, a different dessert, or any bread or baked good. What elements and ingredients were included in your baking process, and how were they combined? How does your experience with baking help you to think differently about the digital media texts that you might compose for this class, such as a video or a podcast?
2. After watching and listening to Evan's video "A College Collage," pick a 10-20 second sequence from the video, and write up a rhetorical analysis of the sequence. Focus your analysis on the *integration* and *juxtaposition* you see and hear in the sequence.
3. Look up the different kinds of *integration* that Robert Horn writes about on pp. 101-104 of his book *Visual Language*: substitution, disambiguation, labeling, example, reinforcement, completion, chunking, clustering, and framing. (Horn's book is open access and can be found online here: https://openlibrary.org/books/OL400850M/Visual_language). Using Horn's book as a reference, write up your own definition of one of the types of integration. Where and when might you see, hear, or use this kind of integration?
4. Find a digital media text online that uses integration or juxtaposition effectively. The text you find might be an image, a webpage, an advertisement, a post on social media, or a short video. Write up an analysis of how your chosen text uses integration or juxtaposition to achieve its purposes.
5. Pick a topic, and compose a short audio or video clip that combines at least two media elements strategically for a certain effect. You might combine a song and several images, for example, in a way that aims for surprise, joy, discomfort, or sadness. After composing your clip, write a paragraph that reflects over your authorial choices and their effects on a potential audience.

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["Thinking Across Modes and Media \(and Baking Cake\): Two Techniques for Writing with Video, Audio, and Images"](#) was originally published in *Writing Spaces* volume 5 (2023). This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

PART VI

UNIT 3: READINGS

48. The Radio Show Bringing Prisoners Messages from Home

IVY BRASHEAR

The call comes in clear. A woman on the line tells her loved one she's consulted with officials, and he should be allowed to light an electric menorah for Hanukkah. It's an issue of freedom of religion, she says, so they have to let him do it.

It's a one-way conversation, though. Her partner is not on the other end of the line. He's one of thousands of men and women locked up in one of the many federal and state prisons and regional detention centers in central Appalachia. The caller left this message to be played over the radio on [WMMT-FM](#) out of Whitesburg, Kentucky, in the hopes her loved one would be listening from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday.

The target of her call would be just one of hundreds who tune in to the station's "Calls From Home" program every Monday night hoping for news or greetings from family and friends, who reach across the miles through their phone lines to provide the inmates with some sense of normalcy in an otherwise completely abnormal situation.

"Ideally, there wouldn't have to be all these other ears listening to their messages," WMMT General Manager Elizabeth Sanders says. "Ideally, you wouldn't even need this show. But, it's definitely some more connective tissue than what exists."

"It's our responsibility in terms of communication to do what we can."

Many of the people behind bars in central Appalachia are not locals. Most of them are hundreds of miles from home, transported from faraway cities

such as Chicago, New York, and Richmond, Virginia. That means most families can't afford to travel for visitation hours. And since the men must pay for long-distance calls on credit, phoning home often is cost-prohibitive, leaving those serving time in the region far from home with few resources to stay connected.

"Calls From Home" works to fill that gap, providing a lifeline for the people behind bars, most of whom are serving time for minor crimes and one day expect to return home. Every Monday, volunteer DJs play hip hop from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., broadcasting their toll-free number throughout the show. During the hip hop show, phone operators take calls from family members. Those dozens of calls—so many the phone rings continually during the hip-hop show—are recorded, and from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m., they are played back, one after the other, over the airwaves for the people sitting in the 11 prisons and facilities within WMMT's broadcast range.

"It's our responsibility in terms of communication to do what we can," Sanders says. "The folks who are locked up here are also a part of our community. They're the least visible parts of our community, for sure, but they are here, and I see that as part of our responsibility as a radio station."

WMMT's license is held by [Appalshop](#), a nonprofit media and arts organization dedicated to amplifying the voices of Appalachian people through various initiatives. The station plays mostly original programming, ranging from music to news and public affairs shows. Phone operators and DJs are all volunteers. They don't make this show happen every week because they receive benefits themselves; they do it because they know it's the right thing to do, and because they consider the people who are locked up to be neighbors and community members who deserve to be heard and paid attention to.

"It's nothing noble; it's just common decency and what we should be doing as neighbors and as a community who supports one another," says Tanya Turner, who is a regular DJ on the "Hip Hop From the Hilltop" show. "These people are a part of our community as much as anyone else."

Turner says “Calls From Home” is a response to the almost exponentially growing crisis that has caused massive prison expansion in central Appalachia in recent decades. Five federal prisons and correctional institutions are in the region, and a new \$444 million federal prison has been proposed by U.S. Rep. Hal Rogers, who represents the 5th Congressional District of eastern Kentucky. It all makes central Appalachia one of the most concentrated regions of new prison growth, and one of the top 20 regions for prison population. Kentucky and Virginia, where many of the prisons within WMMT’s range are located, [rank 11th and 12th for state imprisonment rates](#), according to The Sentencing Project.

“These are very political decisions that these prisons end up here, and they’re able to sell them to us with the jobs narrative, even though the jobs never come to fruition,” Turner

“This show is really about being a mirror and a lens into a different face of our community.”

says. “Probably the biggest thing is that we don’t learn from our mistakes, and every prison in the region is a mistake that we never learn from.”

“This show is really about being a mirror and a lens into a different face of our community,” Turner says. “It is true community involvement with a part of our community that is woefully underserved, and it’s really challenging our community’s ideas and the lies we have been fed about who is locked up in the prison industrial complex, because it’s sons, and grandsons, dads and brothers.”

“Calls From Home” has spurred difficult conversations in the community that have helped locals better empathize with the people behind bars. One example is from the show’s early years, when a long-time WMMT programmer called the station during the show to complain that the station should not be providing this outlet to inmates. Turner said before the broadcast was over, the programmer had called back to thank them for doing it, because what they were doing was truly beautiful.

The show developed a popular education curriculum several years ago that captured the stories of all people touched by prison expansion in the region, including formerly incarcerated people, drug addiction counselors, former corrections officers and people who initially supported prison construction in their communities but later changed their minds after the prisons opened.

Sanders said the curriculum project was presented throughout the region at colleges, events and churches. A woman talked with Sanders after one session at a church in Hazard, Kentucky, and said she hadn't realized until participating in this project how much she'd been affected at home by her father's experiences of working in the prison.

"We all maybe don't think we're connected to these systems that are at play," Sanders says. "But it usually ends up that we are."

As long as the prisons stay open, WMMT will be taking calls, sending out over the airwaves report-card updates, love from mothers, and reminders that these brothers, sons and fathers will someday again be free.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/englwrit112reader/?p=223#oembed-1>

This story was funded in part by a grant from the One Foundation.

Ivy Brashear is the Appalachian Transition Director at the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development.

[“The Radio Show Bringing Prisoners Messages from Home”](#) by Ivy Brashear was originally published in *Yes! Magazine* (2017) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 Unported License](#).

49. Stories Retold in Water and Tallow

MIAH CHALFANT

In the heart of the Wolf Teeth Mountains, on the wall of a log cabin, hung the physical manifestation of a dream: a buffalo hide painted in natural pigments. By combining water and tallow, I blended together multiple generations through a single piece of art. And it reawakened a traditional storytelling technique used by my people, the Northern Cheyenne.

After the Dull Knife Battle in November 1876, a society of Cheyenne men sat down and documented their account of the events on a buffalo hide or robe—the traditional medium on which my ancestors told stories and kept records. The buffalo hide is where they memorialized important moments in the Tribe's history, as well as their own personal achievements. And they did so using pigments they created from their environment with ingredients like ash, soils, berries, and plants.

The Dull Knife hide was kept in a camp at the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains. But this camp was a major target for the United States Cavalry, which was still in search of those tribes involved in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, which had taken place in June 1876 and left the U.S. military sorely defeated.

After scouts reported the camp's whereabouts, the cavalry ambushed it. The Cheyennes put up a good fight but eventually fled deeper into the Bighorn Mountains in freezing conditions. As the cavalry raided the now-empty camp, a soldier stole the painted buffalo hide out of a tipi. And thus the beloved hide, and the story it told, began its journey away from its people.

Heartbreakingly, this kind of theft was all too common for us. It was part of the settler-colonialist effort to erase us from our homelands—and erase us altogether. Oftentimes when sacred

objects were taken from camps, they were locked in private collections with no way to track or find them. Many were never seen again, and the Cheyennes had mourned the loss of this buffalo hide and accepted its fate to be gone forever. But after more than 100 years, this hide was once again seen by the descendants of the people from which it came.

On the 146th anniversary of the battle, the unveiling and honoring of this historical object took place at the Brinton Museum in northern Wyoming. Tribal Members and the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Historic Preservation Office were invited to view it. Many eyes filled with tears as our traditional honor songs filled the room. The sacred objects that surrounded us, caged in glass, hummed in their display cases. They, too, were excited to be a part of this honoring; it's not everyday we as Indigenous people get to practice our ceremonies for pieces put into institutions. This was a raw and powerful experience for everyone and everything involved.

At this moment, in the presence of it all, I felt the importance of keeping our hide-painting tradition alive. I understood the impact this form of storytelling has on my own culture and on those who experience it from near and far. Although this painted retelling of the Dull Knife Battle now hangs in another non-Indigenous collection, it is closer to home than it's ever been, and relatives are able to view it freely.

And so, in the winter of 2023, I began my renaissance of buffalo hide paintings, not far from where the Dull Knife robe was painted nearly 150 years earlier.



The portrait of Pretty Shield, an Apsáalooke Crow medicine woman, on buffalo robe is the first in a series Chalfant is calling “Matriarchs of the Plains.” Photo courtesy of Miah Chalfant

As a storyteller and an artist, I have painted with many different media before, on canvas, ledger paper, felt cowboy hats, and more. I had never painted on something like a tanned buffalo hide, though. Plastic paints like acrylics simply didn’t stick to the surface. Oil paints bled and left dark spots. This required me to use trial and error, as well as asking elders, scouring the internet, and reading historical books to figure out the best way to use modern materials for such a traditional technique.

To practice, I started with a vintage elk hide, which I hoped would behave similarly to buffalo, but was much easier to

source. Black, white, blue, red, and yellow pigments sat in small vibrant piles of powder on my palette. While I wasn’t able to source everything the way my ancestors had, I gathered materials from far and wide to bring these pieces to life. Slowly, I began to add water and buffalo fat, mixing them with the powders until the consistency was smooth and even. The thinner the paint was, I found, the easier it was to push it across the surface of the hide.

I hung the elk hide from the wall, tacked along the top and pulled taut by gravity. I sprayed a layer of water and watched as the hide went from a bright off-white to a dark tan. Spraying the hide opens the skin's pores and makes the painting process much easier. After a deep breath to steady my hand, I began with my first paint stroke. The nerves, the worry, and all other thoughts in my head went silent. I could feel my ancestors guiding my hands as I worked the earth pigments into the tanned hide. Almost like being in a trance, I brought paint to hide without feeling the passage of time, and the portrait of a woman appeared



Chalfant takes Polaroid photographs at various stages of the painting to show her process and progress. It's her modern take on the artistic tradition of her people. Buffalo hide is the medium on which Northern Plains Tribes traditionally kept records and stories. Photo courtesy of Miah Chalfant

in front of me. She was an Arapaho/Cheyenne woman warrior who gave me the confidence that the vision I was seeing in my head was achievable in real life.

After I finished the elk hide, I was ready to move on to the much larger buffalo hide that was patiently waiting its turn to become a part of my story, the story of a modern Indigenous artist. I already knew who I wanted to paint next: I could see in my mind's eye the contrasts of bright red and electric blue against neutral black and white, and the tan of the unpainted skin of the hide.



Hide is not a forgiving surface, nor are natural pigments. Chalfant had to research and experiment in order to develop her own contemporary technique to revive this art form. But she says “The reward of seeing it finished and getting to experience its presence is beyond worth it.” Photo courtesy of Miah Chalfant

I chose to paint an Apsáalooke (Crow) medicine woman by the name of Pretty Shield. A strong matriarch revered for her knowledge of medicinal plants, Pretty Shield had influence that reached far beyond her own tribe. I chose to render her in black-and-white natural pigments, representing a time when reservations were fresh and photographers were documenting the foreign feelings throughout Indian Country in black and white.

Rising above her is a halo of medicinal plants. I chose to represent this aspect of her work in contemporary color to show its continued relevance and vitality in modern times.

Each aspect of the hide represents a different generation of storytelling and art. The first generation is the hide itself, the traditional material. The second generation is the black-and-white photography that captured the first accounts of reservation life. The third generation is the contemporary style of bright colors and stylized plants.

My own love for medicinal plants comes from another matriarchal figure in my life: my mother. Bringing wellness back to the reservation through healers, medicinal plants, and creative outlets, she provided opportunities for people to help themselves, much like Pretty Shield. These two women reflect each other's energy and inspire me to see the medicine women of today.

Pretty Shield is the first in a collection of women I plan to pay tribute to with my paint. Each of them has impacted their Plains Tribe communities with their inspiring accomplishments and gifts. I want to honor our shared

stories by continuing to push the boundaries of traditional materials and contemporary ideas. I want to uplift the generations surrounding me to live in their medicine, to live out their dreams, and to live how our ancestors dreamed for us.



Chalfant carefully blocks out sections of the portrait to preserve the art as she adds detail. The natural pigments were far more challenging than the acrylic or oil paints Chalfant normally employs, but they yielded a vivid palette on the hide that matched her vision. Photo courtesy of Miah Chalfant

Miah Chalfant, also known as Heóvá'ée (Yellow Hair Woman), is a storyteller. Through her hide paintings, ledger art, and canvases, she tells the stories that have been told to her. She is also a student, a daughter, and the Kirby cowgirl. Her home is the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, 444,000 acres of shale cliffs, wild horses, and the best chokecherries in Montana. Her roots are strongest at home, but she likes to stray down south where she is pursuing a bachelors

of fine arts at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As she grows as an artist and a person, she says she wants to be known by her people as The One Who Makes Marks, The One Who Paints the Hides.

[“Stories Retold in Water and Tallow”](#) by Miah Chalfant was originally published in Yes! Magazine (2024) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 Unported License](#).

50. Data poisoning: how artists are trying to sabotage generative AI

THE CONVERSATION WEEKLY PODCAST

Content created with the help of generative artificial intelligence is popping up everywhere, and it's worrying some artists. They're concerned that their intellectual property may be at risk if generative AI tools have been built by scraping the internet for data and images, regardless of whether they had permissions to do so.

In this episode we speak with a computer scientist about how some artists are trying novel ways to sabotage AI to prevent it from scraping their work, through what's called data poisoning, and why he thinks the root of the problem is an ethical problem at the heart of computer science.

Featuring Daniel Angus, professor of digital communication at Queensland University of Technology in Australia. Plus an introduction from Eric Smalley, science and technology editor at The Conversation in the US.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/englwrit112reader/?p=225#oembed-1>

This episode was written and produced by Tiffany Cassidy with

assistance from Katie Flood. Eloise Stevens does our sound design, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Gemma Ware is the executive producer.

[“Data poisoning: how artists are trying to sabotage generative AI”](#) was originally posted to YouTube (2024) by The Conversation Weekly Podcast and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

51. Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic

FRANK KARIORIS

Content Warning: Figure 3 is an image of a dead bird

ABSTRACT

Amidst the despair, desperation, death, and economic deprivation of the pandemic, poetry—and creative outlets more broadly—have arisen to assist us in both making sense of the world at large, as well as addressing our own struggles during and from these challenges. This essay seeks to put these works into conversation as part of a process—along with quarantine—of seeding, an opportunity to grow new roots and networks. Drawing from a field of established literary journals and ones established during and explicitly to address the pandemic, the essay aims to begin a process of distilling the ways that even amongst fear and loss we must (and will) find ways to find joy. This requires us to seek out new forms of elegy that elaborate and understand the importance of relations and joys between peoples, and the new relational possibilities that our life holds for us as we move towards a post-pandemic world.

Introduction

In January, my best friend coaxed my clawed hands from the medicine cabinet. In February, I met my partner; January felt far away, a piece of some remote past. In March, the world ended. April is lonely.¹

So many of my students begin their papers with “Since the beginning of time,” yet here we are, seeing a moment where time truly seems to be at a new beginning; or, at least a form of restarting something. Time is never constant or consistent, but always perches, waiting for its moment. Writing this in November, nearly nine months since the fullness of the pandemic hit the United States in March, it seems that we have all lived a variety of lifetimes. Those of baking bread; those of unknowing; those of warm summer; those of panic; those dictated entirely by Zoom.

1. Madison Kerlan, “Dispatch from a Pandemic: Pittsburgh,” Another Chicago Magazine, May 2020, <https://anotherchicagomagazine.wordpress.com/2020/05/15/dispatch-from-a-pandemic-xx-by-madison-kerlan-2>.



Figure 1: Nightscape of East Liberty, Pittsburgh. Photo by author.

someday, we will remember the day we walked along the
prom at the very beginning
of a pandemic, when the world was still motion & stillness
had not settled, the streets

not yet sterile & the chairs stacked on tables, dripping
from rain not the spilled beer of
students in their first Galway summers²

Amongst these lifetimes, there has also been the birthing of a new wave of literary journals dedicated to—and developed within—the pandemic. This essay briefly explores the ways that poetic responses to the pandemic might help guide us away from some of what once was and that might be best left in our oration of elegy, and towards new senses of self and relation as we move forward into a post-pandemic world. Here, quarantine is theorized as a seeding rather than a cutting off, as an opportunity to grow roots. Similarly, rather than seeing elegy as a mode of melancholy, it sees, as many cultures do, the elegiac as infused from its root with senses of joy, and the reality of a tomorrow. During the beginning of the pandemic, people spoke about the ways that nature was regaining, recuperating, and finding new ways to kind of come back to life; here the focus is on the recuperation of people, their spirit, and their relations.

The essay utilizes pieces from a variety of literary journals and magazines³ that have either emerged to focus on the pandemic or have released special issues related to the pandemic to begin pushing at the boundaries of what we are working through with

2. Amelia Furlong, 'someday,' *Pandemic*, March 2020, <http://pandemic.ie/someday-a-poem-by-amelia-furlong>.

3. These sources include *Infection House*, *Pandemic*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Esthesia Magazine*, *Pandemic*, and *Pandemic Publications*. This list is not exhaustive by any stretch.

the pandemic. The essay builds on my previous research into social relations and worlds,⁴ as well as my own practice and learning as a poet. While this quarantine has created so much distance, it can be used as a way to understand the importance of relations between peoples, and new relational possibilities. In this, I hope to showcase the ways that writing is not simply a tool for explaining the current situation, but sets up strong roots for the importance of interrelationality and change as we move forward.

During the pandemic, any number of trends, fads, moments, and trajectories have emerged—and many, then, submerged. With so many people so online, the poetic blossoming has opened up a new capacity for individuals and groups to begin their own literary journal. They can range from formal and having all the accoutrements of a standard literary journal, to being haphazard and vanishing after publishing only a few pieces. In this essay, I cite a number of these journals that have emerged and whose focus is, in part or totality, the pandemic itself and our responses. In this, these journals build off of a long-existing online space for literary examination.

Relatedly, what we have seen is that, on the whole, during the pandemic, people are reading more.⁵ While there are not figures

4. Frank G. Karioris, “The Unbearable Lightness of Friendship: Homosociality and the ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity,” *Masculinities: A Journal of Identity & Culture* 6 (2016): 7–29, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/mjic/issue/30772/332771>. Editor’s Note: This is not the original link, which is no longer accessible.
5. Abigail Boucher, Chloe Harrison, and Marcello Giovanelli, “How Reading Habits Have Changed during the COVID-19 Lockdown,” *The Conversation*, October 5, 2021,

related specifically to poetry, it is notable that a poetry book (Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb*)⁶ topped the *Publisher's Weekly* chart for multiple weeks in 2021.⁷ This is beyond uncommon and speaks to the way that poetry has been taken up during this period.

Lines of poetry from these new online poetry journals are interspersed throughout. Rather than examples for analysis, they are there as the scaffolding of the essay proper; they are a method of creating a world in the essay itself.

<https://theconversation.com/how-reading-habits-have-changed-during-the-covid-19-lockdown-146894>.

6. Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb* (New York: Viking Books, 2021).
7. Carolyn Juris, "This Week's Bestsellers: April 12, 2021," *Publisher's Weekly*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/86059-this-week-s-bestsellers-april-12-2021.html>; Jim Milliot, "Gorman's Poem Sparks Big Weekly Sales Gains." *Publisher's Weekly*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/86033-gorman-s-poem-sparks-big-weekly-sales-gains.html>.

Rooting and Relations



Figure 2. Long-grass blowing in wind against fence. Photo by author.

As we think back through how we have used our time of late

—whether we call it quarantine, pandemic, or just 2020—we will have to begin working through what it was that we used it for. What, exactly, was it? But it is not simply what we made that is of consideration, but the simple fact that time itself bent and blew over in the breeze. We can begin to think about this time, following Jack Halberstam, describing queer, as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices.”⁸ While I imagine they hadn’t meant it for quite this purpose, I think it’d also be hard to argue that those words don’t describe the state of our time and world over the past months.

Amid the starkness of masks somewhere on the outside
beyond the trees and unused road,
with yeast, godlike particles,
I plough fresh tracks in flour,
pour out warmth in water.
I live a new innocence⁹

Rather than seeing quarantine and the act of quarantining as ineffectively the always-already negative, I want to have us—using the tools of the trade of creative writing—see it as a space of dormant rooting. In speaking about nature and people amidst it, Wendell Berry notes the pleasures to be found in simply coming into conversation with the landscape. “Such pleasure as there is, is here,

8. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1.

9. Anne Pia, “Lessons in Coffee,” *Pandemic*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.pandemic.space/2020/07/20/dancing-around-corners-poems-written-during-a-pandemic>.

now. Take pleasure as it comes.”¹⁰ The land and seeds and the bees that pollinate recognize the importance of moments of stillness, moments of fallow. One might suggest a comparison to Noah and the flood, and the way that the ark represents a quarantining built on seeding and the what-comes-next, rather than what is lost. What might it be to see this period as such a time for all of us?

did you know that many of the ornamental features of our favorite plants—
variegated leaves, vibrant colors, a pleasant and
dramatic curl—are the result of viral
infections?¹¹

This is not to omit or make light of the seriousness of the situation. We have seen poverty and unemployment skyrocket, and death is not a metaphor but a reality for many—including my dear friend Walter. If “Hell is a place on earth . . . [and] Heaven is a place in your head”¹² then we must continue the work of living amidst tragedy, grief, and a world full of struggle. As we write tomorrows, we should speak the elegies of today and yesterday. It is in this intertwining

10. Wendell Berry, *Think Little* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint), 78.
11. Nikki Mayoux, “Rembrandt Tulips,” *Infection House*, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210927035209/https://www.infectionhouse.com/posts/3592/three-poems-written-during-quarantine>. Editor’s Note: This is not the original link listed in the original article.
12. David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 29.

that this article pushes; the space where elegy is necessary, and where we must work to find joys—new and old—where we may.



Figure 3. Beautiful bird / no longer for flight. Photo by author.

For our world is fraught with carelessness. Long before the

pandemic “care services had already been slashed and priced out of reach for many of the elderly and disabled . . . homelessness had been on the rise for years, and increasing numbers of schools had begun dealing with pupil hunger.”¹³ *The Care Manifesto* continues, “Being cosmopolitan means being at ease with strangeness; knowing that we have no choice but to live with difference, whatever differences come to matter in specific times and places.”¹⁴ The manifesto lays out many of the issues that predate COVID-19, as well as how we must continue past these towards a tomorrow.

At the heart of it is the notion that togetherness, rather than disconnection or individualism, is at the heart of what will bring us out the other side. Not only will it break us of the moribundness of COVID, but that of neoliberalism’s entrenchment of selfishness and uniformity of mind. Here, again, creativity strings out not from the singular individual, but from the gasping voices of community.

In the same way that Ross Gay speaks to how looking for delight “occasioned a kind of delight radar . . . [or] delight muscle”¹⁵ we need to look towards delight—even when it is combined with fraught as a delightful dilemma. Poetry opens up avenues for challenging singularity—of emotion, of community, of love, of person—and allows us to come undone without splintering.

isn’t grief a form of love
pretend i am a parcel
pretend i am a splint undone—

13. Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 1.

14. Care Collective, *Manifesto*, 95.

15. Ross Gay, *Book of Delights* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2019), xii.

a border underexposed with people,¹⁶

To continue our metaphor together, we must be a tree whose leaves are multitude—of shape, color, form, fit, style, and love. As seasons change into winter, the trees shed their leaves; yet they do not lose who and what they are, nor do the leaves disappear. Trees do not weep for the loss of their leaves. While they may take moments of reflection to honor the leaves now gone, this is a moment for understanding and reflection on the season, an elegy to those who have come and being together with what will come. They push beyond the specific iteration towards one that is not tied to the branch until it rots where it stands. We need to “foster connections between fractured insurgencies” that allow us to see the leaves, branches, bodies, and roots in connectivity with all those around them so as to refuse singular suggestions of the local.¹⁷

16. Ojo Taiye, “WINTER POEM,” Pandemic Publications, June 29, 2020, <https://www.pandemicpublications.com/words/winter-poem-and-swelter>.

17. Laura Cuboniks, *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 43.



Figure 4. Pine and cones on cool fall day, Indianapolis. Photo by author.

I find myself gulping for air and digging fingers into her
roots

Watching as a weird miracle vastly undoes us
I see the virus in the ground
showing what was
tangled in the ceiling
now in constant collapse
perfectly messy like
slowedowned hearts left beating at parties, and quiet shoes
left at the poetry slams and sex wrapping itself

Scholars and writers of ecology have known for an extended period of time that our planet is not bounded to the fate which human action might seek to hold it to. “The wild will rescue life on earth, if anything does, because nothing else can.”¹⁹ The soil knows what nutrients it needs, and shares with those all around it. As with the trees, so too with our social worlds. All the outpouring of writing should be a beacon to the fact that once, when the world has become safe(r) again, we meet out on front porch steps, or in classrooms, or on rooftops, we will be there together.

We buy things to keep us moving ,
 isn't that what WE're told
 to do? Now that you're here
 we might find another activity—
 or, more, maybe we will speak to
 each other like life was meaningful
 & we meant something, one another.²⁰

18. Angelica Poversky, “Undone,” Pandemic Publications, June 20, 2020, <https://www.pandemicpublications.com/words/undone>.
19. Robert Bringhurst, “The Mind of the Wild,” in *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis* by Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky (Saskatchewan, Canada: University of Regina Press, 2018), 20.
20. Frank G. Karioris, “In these times / we must together (Choruses 1-4),” *Esthesia*, July 23, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220522165137/>

As Jodi Dean concludes their recent book *Comrades* by saying, while comrades (and therefore camaraderie) are not a magical solution to all the problems of the world, “it is the only form [of relation] through which these problems might be solved.”²¹ It has been a long-standing contention that our relation to social lives and social relations is deeply inflicted by heteronormative constraints²²—in other words, too many people deprioritize their friends over romantic relations.

The quarantine has shone light on these relations between us, and the ways that poetry—amongst art writ large—is a media born of danger, challenge, and addressing those matters which are common to all of us. This is what Camus affirms when they say that “We resemble each other through what we see together, the things we suffer through together. Dreams change according to the person, but the reality of this world is our common ground.”²³

<https://esthesiamag.com/2020/07/23/in-these-times-we-must-together-choruses-1-4/>. Editor’s Note: This is not the original link listed in the original article.

21. Jodi Dean, *Comrades* (London: Verso Books, 2019), 135.
22. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448884>.
23. Albert Camus, *Create Dangerously: The Power and Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Vintage Books, 2019), 20.

Conclusion



Figure 5. When stars fall; Enright Parklet, Pittsburgh. Photo by author.

All of this essay has been an experiment in what hope and joy can

and has done. The argument, if there is one, is that we need joy more than ever; but more than that, we need people. We need shared lives, shared loves, worlds that are not disposed of when they are difficult. For, as much as the poetry coming out during the pandemic has focused on all the struggles we are facing, and done so in tenors of elegy, the practice of putting them into the world is demonstration that there is some semblance of hope, of community, and of roots which we all are drawing upon.

We can both let the light in
Embrace and be done with it.
Develop our immunity
To fear.²⁴

Like so many things, many of these journals will be of their time; this is no worse than period pieces or rereading our old letters to now-former lovers. For some, like *infection house*, this time has already come. Writing—boldly and defiantly—though does not age. I have found repeated solace in the words of poets during the pandemic. They have reminded me, as Ferlinghetti says: “Poetry is not a sedentary occupation, not a ‘take your seat’ practice. Stand up and let them have it.”²⁵ Rather than “return to normal” as some are calling for, let us take this poetry—and the journals that house them—as first iterations of new growth from the forest floor, as an opportunity to break away from our rotting and towards a growth that is contingent and reliant on community, collaboration, and creativity. A move towards joy—a joy together, exuberant, and

24. Margaret Haire, “We Are All the Same,” *Pandemic*, March 30, 2020, <http://pandemic.ie/?s=we+are+all+the+same>.

25. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Poetry as Insurgent Art* (New York: New Directions Books, 2007), 5.

incorporating elegy. Let these virtues grow forth in all the tomorrows coming.

Frank G. Karioris is a faculty member in the history department at the Branson School. Their work addressing issues of education, sexualities, sociality, and masculinities has been published in journals internationally, including *The Journal of Gender Studies*; *Gender, Place & Culture*; and *IDS Bulletin*. Their monograph *An Education in Sexuality & Sociality: Heteronormativity on Campus* was released in January 2019 from Lexington Books. Beyond their individual work, they are co-editor, with Jonathan A. Allan and Chris Haywood, of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Bodies, Sexualities, and Masculinities*, published by Berghahn.

["Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic"](#) by Frank Karioris was originally published in *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* (2021) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

52. The College Mental Health Crisis in 10 Sketches

KRISTA KARLSON

You can access this text by clicking on the following link:

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/health-happiness/2018/07/30/the-college-mental-health-crisis-in-10-sketches>

53. Who Gets to Define Classical Music?

SONALI KOLHATKAR

When Curtis Stewart heard the news that his album [Of Power](#) was nominated for a [2022 Grammy Award](#) in the category of Best Classical Instrumental Solo, he was overjoyed. He was also a little surprised. “I just didn’t think I would have much of a chance there,” he says. But “the fact that I got that nomination was extremely heartening for me.”

Then the backlash began.

Alongside the well-known pop star [Jon Batiste](#)—who was also nominated for a Grammy, in the category of Best Contemporary Classical Composition, for his piece “[Movement 11](#)”—Stewart’s inclusion in a classical Grammy category has sparked anger from critics who say their music is simply not classical enough.

According to a lengthy [report](#) in The Observer, “Letters of complaint have been sent to ... the Recording Academy, arguing that the tracks in question,” by Batiste and Stewart, “have been ‘mis-categorised.’” Marc Neikrug, a Grammy-nominated composer, said in his letter to the Academy, “As a serious, dedicated composer of what has always been considered ‘classical’ music, I am dismayed.” Neikrug found it “unfathomable” that the Academy “would choose to re-categorise an entire segment of our inherited culture.”

Stewart is a classically trained violinist and composer who plays in PUBLIQuartet, a nontraditional classical music group he calls a “new music improvising string quartet.” He is also a faculty member at the prestigious Juilliard School in New York City. Although his music stretches the traditional definition of European-origin classical music from past centuries, he is bewildered at the vitriolic responses to his and Batiste’s nominations, given that the field has constantly benefited from [musical innovations over the centuries](#),

and especially recently from [new, young composers](#) over the past decade.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/englwrit112reader/?p=228#oembed-1>

The part of Neikrug’s critique that Stewart finds “most hurtful” is the idea that his music does not fit the composer’s definition of “our inherited culture.” Stewart is the child of two professional musicians, and says, “I have literally inherited the music of my mother and father.” His mother, the late Elektra Kurtis, was a Greek American composer and violinist who straddled the world of classical and jazz music, and his father is Bob Stewart, a Grammy-nominated tuba player and music educator.

“I am a classical musician,” he asserts.

How Does One Define Classical Music?

“What exactly about what I’m doing is invalid, and not classical?” asks Stewart, saying that classical musical themes are “baked into the actual composition” of the pieces on his Grammy-nominated album *Of Power*. Still, The New York Times op-ed columnist [John McWhorter](#) summarized the thrust of the controversy over Stewart and Batiste’s nominations when he claimed that the Academy was merely trying to be “inclusive.” McWhorter said he felt insulted that “music that isn’t classical” was nominated.

Another critic, Apostolos Paraskevas, a professor at Berklee College of Music, went further, complaining to The Observer about

Batiste's nontraditional style of classical music, "If this person gets an award, this is a big slap on our face. It's a message to everyone that we should give up and just do this."



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here: <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/englwrit112reader/?p=228#oembed-2>

Stewart takes issue with such criticisms. "Listen to [my] music and ... if you feel it's watered down, please, let me know. I will better my craft!" he says. He sees the backlash as an indication of fear within a traditionally White-dominated industry where people of color are slowly but surely breaking in and taking up space. The critics are "projecting that fear of not being heard and represented onto me and Jon Batiste," he says by way of explanation.

Black Influence on Classical Music Through the Ages

Political analyst and radio host Earl Ofari Hutchinson has long examined the role of people of color, particularly African Americans, in classical music. He has written two books about the genre, including *Beethoven and Me: A Beginner's Guide to Classical Music* in 2015, and *It's Our Music Too: The Black Experience in Classical Music* in 2016. "I'm not really surprised there would be some controversy" over Batiste and Stewart's Grammy nominations, he says.

According to Hutchinson, the traditionally accepted definition of classical music is based on "17th, 18th, or 19th century Western

European or Russian music.” However, today, he says, “You’re blending more things into classical music that have traditionally not been there,” such as jazz, rock, and pop. Jazz in particular has been fused into classical music for decades, and Hutchinson says that “many of the ‘purists’ take exception to that.”

That puritanical approach—and the racial dynamics at play—may be informing the backlash to Stewart and Batiste’s nominations, Hutchinson says. “There’s sometimes been an overt, but more likely subtle, undertone of ‘Wait a minute, Blacks in classical music? That’s like the sun and the moon!’”

Hutchinson cites numerous White composers who were influenced by composers of color, particularly jazz musicians, including Americans like George Gershwin, French composers like Maurice Ravel, and, to an extent, Russia’s Sergei Rachmaninoff and Dmitri Shostakovich. “They were influenced by African American jazz rhythms,” he says.

Similarly, Stewart sees classical music itself as the result of merging influences. “I’ve seen musicians of many cultures bring their culture into the world of classical music and either be recognized for it, or not,” he says. “There is literally a classical tradition of violinists taking music from one world and bringing it into another world.” Stewart does just such a thing with his classical violin interpretation of Stevie Wonder’s pop classic “[Isn’t She Lovely](#)” on his album *Of Power*.

Black Classical Music Matters

The Grammy controversy is the latest flashpoint over [racial belonging](#) within the classical music field, and it is fueling ongoing debates about how the music is defined and who gets to define it. A genre that has long been associated with White European highbrow culture has [struggled](#) for years to embrace musicians of color, especially Black musicians. Stewart speculates that perhaps

“this year is a reaction to 2020” and the nationwide racial justice uprisings from nearly two years ago. “They’re afraid of what being ‘woke’ will do to our field,” he says.

“I have always been deeply interested in social justice,” says Stewart. When the pandemic hit and the quarantine-era mass protests against the police killing of George Floyd gripped the nation, Stewart, who was participating in the protests while also caring for his sick mother, produced his Grammy-nominated album in his living room.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/englwrit112reader/?p=228#oembed-3>

“We were all stuck in our little bubbles, and I just needed to put my anxiety and my feelings somewhere,” he says. *Of Power* is a musical documentation of a society in turmoil, encapsulating the reactions of a Black musician during a moment of racial reckoning. “I was using these recordings as a kind of journal, as a way to ... react to what was happening in the world,” says Stewart.

Among the pieces on his album that Stewart is most proud of is a solo violin arrangement of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the Black national anthem. “To call that ‘not serious’ [classical music] is hurtful,” he says.

Fighting to Be Seen and Heard

When asked why there is such a reluctance in the world of classical music to accept Black people, Hutchinson says that racism is one

reason. “There’s a lot of money in classical music,” he explains. “The whole genre is very well-endowed.” That wealth creates a kind of “protective layer” around the genre, he explains. Although there are increasing numbers of people of color, and particularly African Americans, entering the classical music profession—especially on orchestras—the [pace of change remains slow](#).

“You still have the old guard out there who are very protective of their interest in classical music,” says Hutchinson. Nevertheless, he is about to start hosting a classical music radio program on KPFK 90.7 FM in Los Angeles, becoming one of very few, if any, Black classical music show hosts nationwide.

In thinking about what his craft means to him, Stewart invokes Nina Simone, an American musical icon who was also considered to be the [first classically trained Black pianist](#) in the U.S. Simone famously said she was turned away from the [Curtis Institute of Music](#)—even though she passed their audition—simply because she was Black. Stewart cites Simone’s regret in being introduced as a jazz musician instead of as a classical musician during her debut performance at Carnegie Hall. “I refuse to have that sense of regret,” he says.

Stewart plans on continuing to innovate musically without tamping down his unique cultural influences. “The field of classical music needs this. I want to hear more people like me in my field!” he says, smiling broadly. “It just makes me excited, it makes me joyous.”

Hutchinson is heartened that, despite the pushback, the Recording Academy took a courageous and progressive stance in ensuring that this year’s classical Grammy nominations included nontraditional compositions and performances like Stewart’s and Batiste’s. “I’m glad to see that, and I’m hopeful that we’ll see more of that in the future.” He sees it as progress and the “recognition that Blacks are in classical music, and they’re here to stay.”

“To be seen is like this is joy, it’s a release, it’s a catharsis,” says Stewart of his Grammy nomination. “There are plenty of musicians of color in the classical music field that deserve that.”

Sonali Kolhatkar joined YES! in summer 2021, building on a long and decorated career in broadcast and print journalism. She is an award-winning multimedia journalist, and host and creator of YES! Presents: Rising Up with Sonali, a nationally syndicated television and radio program airing on Free Speech TV and dozens of independent and community radio stations. She is also Senior Correspondent with the Independent Media Institute's Economy for All project where she writes a weekly column. She is the author of *Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice* (2023) and *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence* (2005). Her forthcoming book is called *Talking About Abolition* (Seven Stories Press, 2025). Sonali is co-director of the nonprofit group, Afghan Women's Mission which she helped to co-found in 2000. She has a Master's in Astronomy from the University of Hawai'i, and two undergraduate degrees in Physics and Astronomy from the University of Texas at Austin. Sonali reflects on "My Journey From Astrophysicist to Radio Host" in her 2014 TEDx talk of the same name.

["Who Gets to Define Classical Music?"](#) by Sonali Kolhatkar was originally published in *Yes! Magazine* (2022) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 Unported License](#).

54. Does Earth Really Have Too Many People?

TRACY MATSUE LOEFFELHOLZ

You can access this text by clicking on the following link:

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2019/09/20/climate-change-consumption-overpopulation>

55. Finding Focus: How a Visual Storyteller Gets the Right Image — and the Right Tone

SARAHBETH MANEY

This story was originally published by [ProPublica](#)

Photography is a powerful journalistic tool, providing visual evidence and evoking emotions that urge us to understand the experiences of others. Here, ProPublica's Sarahbeth Maney offers suggestions for aspiring visual storytellers.



Visual fellow Sarahbeth Maney photographs a community member during ProPublica's live visual storytelling event in Flint, Michigan on Oct. 5, 2024. Credit: Rocio Ortega/ProPublica

Last month, reporter Anna Clark and I hosted an in-person photo gallery and group discussion about what motivated us to [tell stories of Flint, Michigan, residents 10 years after the start of the water crisis](#) and to talk about how we work to understand the communities we serve. As a visual fellow at ProPublica, I'm focused on documenting the lives of people in our stories through photography. Throughout history, photography has been a powerful tool for recording moments in time, providing visual evidence and evoking emotions that urge us to understand experiences outside of our own. Here are suggestions for aspiring visual storytellers who may find themselves in similar situations.

Ask “Why Does This Story Need to be Told?”

Anna and I previously worked in Flint in different capacities: I interned as a photojournalist at the Flint Journal; Anna wrote a book, “The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy.” To us, Flint is not just a news story, it’s a complex place full of real people who have been and continue to be denied adequate resources and support. We wanted the public to know that generations of Flint residents still live with physical and psychological challenges. By sharing what Flint residents think accountability would look like, we were able to show how many feel betrayed by the failure to hold anyone criminally responsible. They also remain frustrated by how long it’s taking to fix the local water system and the lingering mental wounds that may never be repaired.

The photo essay gave a glimpse into the experience of three residents and how their present-day concerns, fears and decisions are shaped by the water crisis. Over about four months, I made frequent visits to Flint — stopping by nonprofits, churches, after-school programs and other places that are part of everyday life. I spoke with incredibly kind people. Some wanted to help me; others

were hesitant, usually because they wanted to move on or felt things would never change. Robert McCathern, Teagan Medlin and Jacquinne Reynolds granted me a great deal of trust. They were able to open up and make themselves vulnerable because of their commitment to cultivating change for future generations. I tried to represent that through the environment in the photographs.



Teagan Medlin holds her newborn baby Audrina at a recovery home she temporarily lives at in Flint, Michigan on Feb. 20, 2024. Credit: Sarahbeth Maney.



Reverend Robert McCathern approaches Tayler Armstrong, 9, and his grandmother Patricia Stewart-Burton while preaching during a Sunday service at Joy Tabernacle Church in Flint, Michigan on Feb. 25, 2024. Credit: Sarahbeth Maney.

Be Sincere With Your Approach

During the discussion at the visual storytelling event at Totem Books in Flint, we asked residents to ponder what type of stories resonate with them most, what questions they wish someone would ask them and who is one person they would like to interview. We discovered a common thread of wanting to feel more connected as neighbors and fellow human beings.

Then we flipped the exercise to challenge ourselves as journalists and receive questions from residents. “Why Flint?” one participant asked us. We told her how we’d come to admire the community and wanted to present a multidimensional view of it to readers. “Something about this place seems to get in people’s blood,” the participant told us, and it does seem that for a city of its size, Flint has attracted a disproportionate number of storytellers — even

before the water crisis. And yet, some residents still wonder: What has changed? Over the past decade, Flint residents have been in the public eye not by choice, but as a result of a disaster created and prolonged by public officials. So what does that mean for us and our responsibility as storytellers?

Being in the business of transparency requires us to also be transparent with the communities we document. Without transparency, it's hard to build mutual trust, especially in communities that have faced betrayal and have had little control over how their stories are shared with the world.

During the early stages of the project, before lifting my camera to make any photos, I listened to Flint residents and learned about their stories, then let what they told me naturally guide the photos I made. Early on, I also stressed that I believe their stories are important to share because people outside of Flint should know that for many Flint residents, the crisis is still not over.

I also should note that our stories go through many layers of revisions and fact-checking. From beginning to end, I tried to communicate how the project was developing and made sure that our sources were aware of how the story would be framed, how they would be portrayed and how they would be quoted. Once the story was published, I followed up to gauge how they were feeling, and later made them aware that photographs of them would appear at our gallery in Flint.



Jacquinnie Reynolds, left, and Robert McCathern, who were both featured in ProPublica's coverage on the 10-year commemoration of the Flint water crisis, attend ProPublica's live visual storytelling event in Flint, Michigan on Oct. 5, 2024. Credit: Rocio Ortega/ProPublica

Look for Connection and Insight

The beauty of visual storytelling is that the story can always change shape. Let go of any assumptions and let the story lead you where it may. Anna and I learned so much by taking this approach.

We found that, after a decade, many residents are still waiting for the change they want to see. The flood of the resources and attention Flint initially received has dwindled. But one of the reasons I wanted to revisit this story is because of the people I've met and will continue to meet. The city has introduced me to people who care deeply about their community and embrace one another with generosity, care and compassion. And I learned about a host of local programs, from the Flint Rx Kids program that provides financial support for mothers to the McKenzie Patrice Croom Flint Community Water Lab, which trains youth to give back and provides

free water testing. Although communities like Flint shouldn't need to be resilient, we can learn from their empathy, advocacy and support for one another during hard times. My job is to make photographs, but a big part of the fulfillment I get is from making connections.

We closed out our event in Flint by making photographs of attendees that they could have as keepsakes. One woman, who told me she had recently been displaced from her home, said she was going to email the photos of herself to her grandchildren who live in another state. It reminded me that photographs are invaluable in many facets of our lives. They keep us connected.

Sarahbeth Maney is a photojournalist documenting the impact of social issues on individuals and communities, supported by the Diamonstein-Spielvogel Foundation.

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56. Alien Beauty: Posthuman Re-Imaginings

PRESLEY MILLS

Abstract:

In the fall of 2018 WGSN (World Global Style Network) ran a report on the emerg-ing “alien beauty” trend, which they defined as “an otherworldly aesthetic inspired by extraterrestrial life forms... signifying a new rebellious attitude towards quintessential beauty norms” (Bailey). Instagram is one of the largest platforms to represent the trend of alien beauty, presented by a thriving community of makeup artists pushing the boundaries of conventional beauty practices. These artists are developing otherworldly and exaggerated makeup looks created through the combination of makeup, fashion, technology, and social media. The following research attempts to outline elements of beauty that are engaged with through alien beauty, and through creative practice presents them on conventionally beautiful bodies to demonstrate new, challenging version of beauty. Alien beauty selfies shared via Instagram can be re-contextualized to challenge existing examples of art, nature, and beauty. Through practice-based methodology and theories of posthumanism, this piece explores the changing ideals of beauty manifested with the support of technology and social media as well as how the term “alien beauty” manifests as a current trend. Considering the re-imagined paintings created to explore alien beauty, they reveal how beauty has been traditionally constructed through a colonial, heteronormative, hegemonic gaze and how “alien” is therefore a form of escapism and rebellion.



Figure 1. Alien Beauty Re-Imaginations Collection. Presley Mills.

Alien Beauty: Posthuman Re-Imaginations

Instagram supports a thriving community of makeup artists who share and showcase their artistry, while also providing a platform for artists to push the boundaries of conventional beauty practices (Figure 1). In the fall of 2018 WGSN (World Global Style Network) ran a report on the emerging “alien beauty” trend, which they defined as “an otherworldly aesthetic inspired by extraterrestrial life forms

... signifying a new rebellious attitude towards quintessential beauty norms” (Bailey). The emerging trend among artists to develop otherworldly and exaggerated makeup looks created through the combination of makeup, fashion, technology, and social media fits within the category of alien beauty.

This research explores how alien beauty selfies shared via Instagram can be re-contextualized to challenge existing examples of art, nature, and beauty. Alien beauty is a form of escapism and rebellion that expresses frustrations with current society and how beauty is traditionally constructed through a colonial, heteronormative, hegemonic gaze. The creative practice component of this research demonstrates how alien beauty can be a subversive artistic practice that expands diversity and inclusion in media while challenging hegemonic notions of beauty and identity. Through practice-based methodology and theories of posthumanism, this paper explores the changing ideals of beauty manifested with the support of technology and social media, as well as the term “alien beauty.”

Creative Response

Instagram as a social media platform provides an endless number of images that have an impact on ideals of beauty and influence body perceptions. The artists selected to explore the trend of alien beauty have used Instagram as the primary medium to share their works. The following artists were selected to represent a spectrum of styles and techniques, including drag makeup, body modification, and post-production edits: @Matieresfecales, @Ryanburk, @Auntpetuniasfriendz, @IssheHungry, @JunoBirch, @salviia, @cremefatale, and @Aryunataradis. After selecting examples of alien beauty via Instagram, I recreated their makeup on depictions of European women in painted portraits from 1482 to 1867 where the subject of the painting was portrayed as both beautiful and

fashionable. The paintings were all rendered by men, which contrasts the diverse group of identities represented in the selection of Instagram artists. As well, the portraits were primarily of prominent women or classical figures of antiquity. The paintings selected therefore in part represent the foundational colonial depictions of normative beauty. The portraits were created with intentions similar to the modern “selfie” shared today on social media – to represent the beauty, power, and fashionability of the sitter. By applying the alien beauty makeup looks to these classical portraits, their difference is exaggerated and the viewing of their beauty practice is re-contextualized.

Makeup has become ubiquitous for women in Western society, but there has always been an emphasis on appearing “natural” (Hernandez). The historical paintings selected demonstrate some of the makeup trends throughout the past 400 years, but the common style displayed is “natural” looking soft features, pale skin, and rosy cheeks. Alien beauty critiques this concept as it not only challenges the idea of “natural” beauty, but the idea of beauty itself. Alien beauty pushes the definition of natural and beautiful as subjective.

Upon first viewing the alien/paintings, there is a sense of unease or tension. I applied the makeup looks to the paintings in a way that matched the style of the original artworks. This helped to re-contextualize and integrate the makeup into the historical period. The women depicted in the paintings were rendered through a colonial, heteronormative, hegemonic gaze, and the addition of the alien makeup subverts these expectations of beauty dramatically. Even if the viewer is unfamiliar with the original artwork, it is clearly evident that their appearance is out of the ordinary. Makeup has been used throughout history to attain a specific ideal of beauty. The reimagined paintings challenge this concept of classic beauty as they juxtapose old and new directions of makeup application. They also invite the viewer to consider defining “beauty.” The alien makeup may appear unpleasant, ugly, or unrealistic to the unfamiliar eye because it boldly rebels against expectations of an

ideal woman. Spending time with the images encourages a dialogue between ugly and beautiful and reveals how they can coexist.

The makeup artists referenced fall across a spectrum of genders, races, and sexualities, but their makeup has been applied to exclusively heteronormative depictions of white women. Viewing the makeup on “non-othered” bodies helps visualize how alien beauty has the ability to transcend normative concepts and colonial depictions of race and gender. Viewing the makeup on classical images of women positions them as images the viewer should consider beautiful and should consider art. The images I have created are shared on my personal Instagram, @presleymills, to resemble the format of a digital zine. Presenting them via Instagram allows viewers to interact with the image, gain knowledge on the topic of alien beauty, and continue the relationship with the artists through the tagged link to their Instagram account.

Defining “Alien”

In the book *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism*, Elena Gomel explains how the term “alien” evokes images of strange creatures from science fiction stories. The construction of the alien concept took place in science fictions novels, tales of conspiracy subcultures and abductees, and Hollywood blockbusters such as *Alien*, *Star Trek*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Gomel). In the current digital age there are countless tales of alien encounters and media depictions of intelligent or animalistic creatures from the far reaches of the galaxy. The definition of an extraterrestrial “alien” can also metaphorically represent the definition of alien as “belonging to a foreign nation” or “unfamiliar and disturbing” (“Alien”). When considering the term “alien beauty,” makeup and self-portraiture is a medium for expressing the sense of being alien through imagined personas or new definitions of beauty.

Though this idea of alien beauty has existed for decades, seen for example through the “green-skinned beauties” found in *Star Trek: The Original Series* (Thompson), according to the October 2018 report by WGSN alien beauty is a growing trend emerging from social media to rebel against the standardization of the beauty industry. No longer conforming to the normative notions of beauty, this subculture has emerged from communities who feel alienated or othered by society, such as women, the trans and queer community, and/or people of colour (Maddox). Though not aligned with specific musical or political movements typical of other subversive subcultures, for example punk, the otherworldly aesthetic is bending concepts of “beautiful versus ugly” while pulling from other contemporary trends such as gender-neutral makeup and drag queen makeup (Bailey). Examining the makeup practice from a cultural posthumanist lens, the bodily practice of alien beauty questions the notion of human and human nature, and asserts these terms as subjective and constantly evolving (Justice).

Posthumanism is a theoretical concept in which the boundaries between human, nature, and machine are blurred, allowing humans to transcend the basics of biology (Tirosh-Samuels). The makeup exploring alien beauty intersects with technology, colonialism, evolution, sexuality, and the material world. This excerpt from “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy” by Arvin et al. demonstrates how posthumanism intersects with sexuality, gender, and race to challenge the stereotypes rooted in society:

While both gender and women’s studies and ethnic studies unmask gender and race as social constructions, with often devastating material effects for women and nonwhite people, respectively, these fields also expose various mythologies about gender and race, including the myth of misogyny and racism as to-be-expected characteristics of human nature. (9)

Artists creating alien beauty looks are making complex statements about their individual experience related to race,

gender, and society while challenging the human relationship with technology, colonialism, evolution, sexuality, and the material world. For example, @Aryunatardis demonstrates how alien beauty was an outlet when she felt isolated being the only person of Asian descent living in the dominantly European part of Russia (Figure 2). She never saw examples of someone like her, and as a result experimented with makeup and body modification as a way to express her emotions, fears, and exaggerate her insecurities (Weinstock).



Figure 2. @aryunatardis as Empress Maria Alexandrovna with zine slide. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 30 December 2018, Instagram, sCHfWVB7GK/.

Defining Beauty

Patzer claims “beauty has a strong, pervasive impact on people’s lives,” impacting their power, social influence, and perceived intelligence. There has been a socially constructed beauty myth that presents itself in the form of white skin, blue eyes, young, and thin as the ideal required to be beautiful and successful (Mills). This is a colonial and heteronormative beauty construct reflected in the media of Western society and history. Alien beauty challenges these

established constructs as well as the design of an ideal human form. To identify artists challenging the “human” face and existing beauty constructs, I outlined the following criteria when selecting artists to reference for the creative component.

Categories:

Skin: “Skin is connected to our bodies yet also alien, marking the exterior, the end of ourselves” (Lupton 239), meaning skin is the largest organ on the human body and the protective barrier between the self and the outside world. Skin can denote race and origins and is a universally shared feature, yet alien beauty often challenges what are conventionally considered natural skin colours (Figure 3). Reminiscent of the grey skin of creatures depicted in flying saucers, cute neon-green cartoons, or the bright blue scales from superhero films, there have been depictions of aliens in media with an endless variety of skin tones and textures. Modifying the skin tone with makeup is one of the easiest ways to explore alien beauty and challenge connotations of race.



Figure 3. @ryburk as Comtesse D'Houssouville. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 28 December 2018, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Br9P0ijByGS/>.

Facial Features: Makeup artists have the skill and ability to create dramatic illusions with their makeup. Whether that is through something as common as narrowing the nose or something as dramatic as fully restructuring their face to eliminate entire features, the modification of normal human facial structure can be considered alien beauty. The selected examples distort facial features such as eyes, nose, mouth, and ears to challenge the notion of what human features are. Looking at eyes as an example, artists may multiply the number of eyes beyond two, or they may use

makeup to abstract the conventional shape of the eye beyond recognition (Figure 4).



Figure 4. @isshehungry as Mary Heberden. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 22 December 2018, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/BrS8468Bv_f/.

Cyborgs: According to Haraway, any addition to the body can turn the individual into a cyborg. This could theoretically include the makeup used, and the smartphone used to photograph and share the images of the artist. Beyond makeup and smartphones, cyborg additions can be made up of contact lenses, piercings, wigs, body modifications, or jewels, crafts, paper, etc. These elements are

sometimes decorative, but they may also act as extensions to the body that change the normative body (Figure 5).



Figure 5. @salvjiia as Olympia. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 21 December 2018, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/Brp_wu5BLuQ/.

Post-production: Editing one's selfies has been critiqued because it can reinforce unrealistic beauty expectations and contribute body dissatisfaction (Lonergan et al.), but editing selfies can also be, as with makeup, clothing or a haircut, an equivalent tool for self-presentation. This is particularly true when editing is expanded beyond beautification and can become a form of performance art (Kasriel-Alexander). Post-production is flipped when it is applied

to alien beauty, as the look is unrealistic to begin with. Examples of post-production include extending or enlarging body parts, multiplying elements, or smoothing and blending lines and textures (Figure 6). This styling can be viewed as a form of digital second skin as it also provides a boundary between the self and the outside world.



Figure 6. @auntpetuniasfriendz as Madame Bergeret. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 30 December 2018, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsBhHtSBTPU/>.

Instagram and the Digital Self

According to MacCallum and Widdows (2018) no image is passive, as it is interpreted, critiqued, rejected, and negotiated by individual viewers. Increasingly globalized and homogenized beauty ideals have emerged in the last few decades, which has correlated with increased rates of both men and women feeling unhappy with their appearance (MacCallum and Widdows). Observing media historically, there has been a dominant beauty trend for women to be thin and white (Mills). With the growth of social media, Instagram has created space for an online community to share new and diverse images of beauty and makeup. Instagram is an accessible platform to share creative work as it does not cost money to post and anyone with a smartphone can create an account. Instagram has provided a platform for non-conforming individuals, allowing for self-expression that would otherwise be limited by physical risk to self (Proulx). According to Proulx:

[T]he Internet was claimed as a space of disembodiment. Theorists of the digital in the 1980s and 1990s projected a networked future not only devoid of the body but also freed from its corporeal limits. This would be a free space, we were told: free from hateful bigotries and corporeal violence, free from geographical and political hindrances, free from market restrictions for professional exchanges, and free from the dangers of “risky” gay sex (Wakeford 1997). (114)

Though this theory has proved to not be entirely accurate, as the digital environment is not free of discrimination, bigotries, or restrictions, it is still a space of disembodiment. This allows for hyper-visibility of gender non-conforming performance and dramatic reinterpretations of normative notions of beauty without putting individuals at physical risk of violence. Individuals sharing images over Instagram can be connected and can contribute to

the media presenting beauty ideals, increasing the diversity of standards presented.

Selfies are defined as “self-portraits uploaded and shared in social media” (Halpern et al. 99). Maddox explains how selfies have been critiqued in popular culture as narcissistic and a juvenile “epidemic,” but the root of this criticism is centred on individuals who fall outside the dominant heteropatriarchal standard having control of their own self-image (26-7, 31). Self-portraits shared on Instagram are less likely to be socially policed by normative standards which allows the “Othered” individual (women, racial minorities, queer, transgender, individuals with disabilities, etc.) to turn photography into acknowledgements of their lived experience (Maddox 38-9). Instagram has allowed makeup artists to create transgressive images to expand the concept of beauty beyond what is normative by creating a digital realm of disembodiment and allowing for hyper-visible forms of performance (Plewka). The digital self is constructed through the development of a persona, username, and photography. As many of the alien beauty looks are too complex or not functional for everyday wear, their online platform is crucial for their continued existence. Of the artists selected to be included in this research, many develop a performative version of themselves that can only exist fully through images. For example, @JunoBirch creates alien beauty makeup looks on herself, but this also extends to her illustration work and a community of social media followers who recreate her art on their own body (Figure 7). Her alien persona is extended beyond herself.



Figure 7. @junobirch as Venus with zine slide. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 20 December 2018, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BroRbyJB0pq/>.

The Future of Alien Beauty

According to WGSN, aspects of the alien style may be adopted in popular culture in the form of darker lipsticks and eyeshadows, or in extremely metallic or holographic shades, but the true form of alien beauty currently relies on the relationship between the human body and the digital screen (Bailey). These styles will not be possible until further advancement in technology exists to further integrate the physical and the digital realm. The most common representations of alien beauty will remain fixtures in science fiction films, television, and now the makeup industry.

Though alien beauty is extreme for daily life, selfies are still a common element of social media and alien beauty can be considered a new form of dandyism for the digital age (Plewka). Similar to Club Kids or Punk of the seventies and eighties, alien beauty possesses the same anti-establishment vigour that pushes the boundaries of beauty (Bailey). As the relationship with social media becomes more and more rooted in daily life, there is an

opportunity for extreme makeup looks to become a regular part of social performance online.

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6I. Suggested Texts

1. [Mihaela-Georgiana Mihailescu, “Weaponising Memes: Reflections on Digital Propaganda”](#)
2. [Yarrow Koning and Sofia Abreu, “Always Been”](#)
3. [Mend Mariwany \(Author\), Maxim Samson \(Interviewed\), “Invisible Lines”](#)