

Chapter 2. Representational Knowledge: Exploring Threshold Ideas about Writing

Conceptions matter. With our thoughts, we make our own worlds, to paraphrase Buddha. As Chapter 1 demonstrated, our ideas about what makes writing “good” (or “not good”) are connected to our communities of practice. But the expansive connections between writing, communities, conceptions, and perceptions are sometimes reduced in practice to a set of *misconceptions* about writing, and these are ensconced in popular culture through movies, books, legislation and policy, and behaviors of parents, teachers and friends. For instance, one common misconception is that there is one thing that constitutes “good writing.” Another is “all good writing is clear and concise,” with “clear and concise” being self-evident and independent of context. (For an excellent collection of “misconceptions” and their correctives, see Ball & Loewe, 2017). If we become teachers, these misconceptions can affect how we think about students and their writing, what we assign, and how we try to intervene (or not). What we do, and thus what we teach students about writing, in turn influences how students think about themselves as writers.

Most instructors from outside the field of writing studies have little if any training in how to use writing in their classrooms. They often hold the belief that writing should be taught by “English teachers” and that students should come into their classes—in anthropology, chemistry, engineering, architecture—already knowing “how to write.” Though this also might feel like a common sense idea, it also is also a misconception. Chapter 1 introduced the idea that writing is a social activity whose value is determined and reinforced by audience(s); as people become experts they forget that their expertise has come from learning, is linked to their community of practice, and that what they know and do associated with that expertise (including writing) is not “natural.” Research and our own experiences demonstrate that writing differs across contexts, how people write differs across disciplines, and learning to write well is a task that never ends. If writing differs across contexts and we are always continuing to learn as writers, as the introduction noted, then teaching writing is everyone’s responsibility—but it is *not any one person’s* responsibility.

Sometimes, accepting this more accurate understanding of how writing works can feel intimidating for instructors who don’t study writing for a living. However, the task of including writing in disciplines and helping students learn to write (and learn *through* writing) is not as difficult as it might seem. You can tap into what you implicitly know how to do with writing in your field and add to that some of the research findings about writing and teaching in order to help students learn more and write more effectively in your classes, thus providing *access*. You also have the option of examining where beliefs about writing come from and considering whether and how you want to expand your ideas and prac-

tices, thus providing *opportunity*. You started this process in Chapter 1 through analysis of your own disciplinary knowledge—that is, through systematic reflection on your identity, expertise, and threshold concepts or learning bottlenecks in your discipline. You then started connecting this exploration to *representations* of field-based knowledge, connecting that knowledge to what you identify as “good student writing” and considering connections between these ideas and epistemological access and opportunity.

In this chapter and the next one, you will delve more deeply into how knowledge gets represented in writing. You will consider how to use these explorations to provide access to disciplinary and/or professional knowledge through writing.

This chapter asks you to use some threshold concepts about writing and test them against your own expertise, experiences, and knowledge, rather than simply accept them. Doing so will help you *teach writing*—that is, to more clearly identify your expectations of writing as they have been shaped by epistemologies of your field and make those explicit, then design activities for students to practice with those expectations. Both of these activities are a critical part of providing access, because you are creating ways for students to better understand and participate in your field.

Goals for this chapter include:

- gaining familiarity with threshold concepts of writing;
- undertaking systematic reflection on your experience of writing to test concepts against your own expertise, experience, and knowledge;
- using reflection to more clearly identify expectations of writing as they’ve been shaped by epistemologies of your discipline; and
- starting to make expectations associated with particular aspects of writing in your discipline more explicit.

The ideas you’ll explore in this chapter build on the threshold concept in Chapter 1, *writing is a social activity whose value is determined and reinforced by audience(s)*. This chapter adds to that another threshold concept: *Writing is something people do, and also something that can be studied*. By studying writing, writers can understand more about how writing works; how people can learn to write; and how instructors can teach writing more effectively. This is good news for instructors who are frustrated by their students’ writing but struggle to find ways to help students with the writing-related issues: There is research that can help! Through the activities in this chapter, you will explore how writing works in your own life, both personally and professionally, and then apply what you learn to your own teaching.

Threshold Concepts of Writing: Theory Informing Practice

Since writing is something people do that can be studied, this chapter introduces six research-based threshold concepts about writing. Then it asks you to study

your own writing practices and history through these concepts, reflect on how these ideas work in your own writing practices and history, and apply them to teaching about and with writing in your courses.

Threshold Concept 1: Writing Mediates Activity Through Recognizable and Recurring Forms

Sometimes, people think that good writers reach into a “toolbox” and easily find just the right way of putting words together to achieve a purpose. But this is a misconception that ignores the complicated ways people actually go about composing. The writing log you created in Activity 2.1 as you prepared for this chapter (see the end of Chapter 1 if you missed it) likely illustrates this point: people write to accomplish various purposes—work through their feelings, share their research findings, remember what to buy at the store, ask for money. Writing “mediates” (or facilitates) these purposes (Russell, 1995, 2015). Your trips to the grocery are facilitated by lists; your research is made possible through funding, and the effort to gain that funding is mediated by grant proposals. You intuitively know not to write a grocery list like a grant proposal (and vice versa). You also know that writing for these different purposes looks different—a grocery list doesn’t look like a thank you card, a thank you card looks different from an annual program assessment report. Different kinds of writing include different content and take different forms in order to achieve their purposes. This combination of content and form—different lengths, paragraph structures, sentences, fonts or modes of writing (e.g., on a computer versus by hand)—are *conventions* associated with these types (or genres) of writing. Conventions are formal or informal rules of writing, and they are reinforced as writing is used by people, for particular purposes, in contexts (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bazerman, 2015; Bazerman & Prior, 2003; Bazerman & Russell, 2003).

Conventions also have consequences. The more they are used and reinforced, the more they reflect the commitments and values of those who use and reinforce them. This leads to ideas about what conventions are “right” and “wrong” in any genre. These conventions, then, aren’t carved in stone; they are created and perpetuated by users. For the audiences who make and use them (e.g., write and read written text, record and listen to or watch podcasts or films), genres and conventions are recognizable to users. So, too, are the ways that the genres mediate activities and reflect cultures and values associated with what is “good” and “works well.” In other words: readers think a text is “good” (whether it’s an academic paper or a novel) because it taps into what they believe that kind of text should look like and do—whether they think it should engage them in difficult and potentially troublesome thinking, or it should distract them from their concerns. If you want to share your thoughts with your local community, for instance, you know the options for doing that include op-ed pieces, billboard signs, letters to the editor, speeches at a town hall—and each of these has particular conventions that you can employ to best accomplish your purposes.

Activity 2.2: Purposes and Forms of Writing

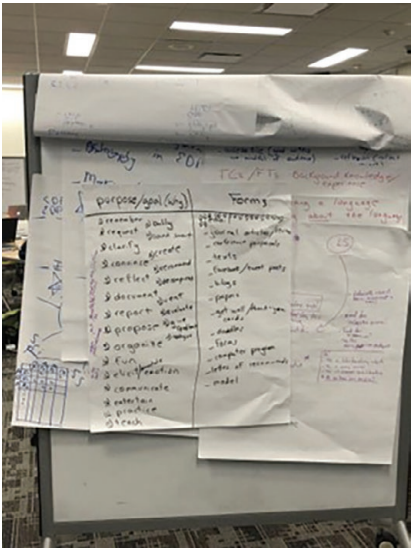
Begin by making a list of the *purposes or goals* of the various kinds of writing you do in your professional life (e.g., record lab experiments and their variations, remember things, argue, etc.) You can look at your writing log to jog your memory.

Next, consider the *forms* writing takes when you are working to accomplish these purposes. (e.g., lab notebook, notecards, review essay).

Start with purposes and then consider forms. Often a single purpose can be enacted through multiple forms.

Purpose	Form(s)
Remember	Lists, notes
Share findings	Articles, letters, emails

Figure 2.1 shows some examples created by faculty in a workshop at Miami University:



The image shows a flipchart with handwritten notes. The left side is titled 'Purpose/Goal (Why do you write?)' and lists various purposes like 'Remember', 'Share findings', 'To argue', etc. The right side is titled 'Form(s)' and lists corresponding forms like 'Lists, notes', 'Articles, letters, emails', 'summons', etc. The handwriting is in blue and black ink on a white background.

Purpose/Goal (Why do you write?)	Form(s)
To share thoughts	
To preserve ideas and perspectives over time	Transcripts, records of hearing, client and conversation notes
To share outward manifestation of you	
To document terms of an agreement	Contract, letter of intent, email
To communicate data to shareholders	Annual report/financial report, regulatory filing, news release, journals and law books, periodicals
To establish/maintain precedent/to resolve issues	Judicial opinions (written statements), law review articles
To codify laws	U.S. code, state codes, local ordinances, U.S. constitution, administrative regulations
To support legal conclusions	Memos (internal and/or external), court filing, case notes
To explain concepts, provide examples	Textbooks, lecture notes, Canvas assignments, PowerPoints
To resolve problems	Arbitration awards, client discussions
To argue	
To inform/notify	summons
To persuade	Motions, journal articles, informal memos to clients, pleadings
To negotiate	Contracts, revised contracts (comments, underlining), mediation presentations
To criticize	Journal articles, op-eds

Figure 2.1. Left: list created by Martha Castaned, Darrel Davis, and Xiang Shen (Teacher Education and Educational Psychology). Right: list created by Chelsea Green, Karen Meyers, and Paul Becker (Business Law).

Before continuing with this chapter, consider the lists you’ve just made. What are some things you notice about *purposes, forms, and contexts*? For instance: perhaps that there are multiple ways to achieve purposes, and even the forms you list can look quite different depending on context.

Activity 2.2 asks you to put the concept that “writing mediates activity through recognizable and recurring forms” into practice by studying writing in your professional/academic life.

It’s likely that the recognizable forms or genres you’ve just listed are extremely varied, that each purpose for which you write can be enacted through a variety of genres, and that the forms or genres themselves share discernible features and conventions but often vary in small or large ways. This practice of closely studying writing to show how forms you use often—forms that are, to you, “recognizable and recurring” because they are associated with your daily life and disciplinary practice and expertise—helps make clear what you know. Your understanding of these connections bring *implicit* or *tacit* knowledge associated with your experience (and likely your expertise) to light. The problem with implicit knowledge, though, is that people often don’t recognize what they know. For instructors, this might mean that what you know about and do with writing in your personal and professional lives doesn’t necessarily translate into what you assign to your students. Unfortunately, in school, writing is often taught as “psuedotransactional”—something that *pretends* to get things done (Petraglia, 1995).

Because the pressing reasons for using writing (in the case of students: asking parents for money, applying for internships, for example) are removed in psuedotransactional writing, the system of schooling tends to make up reasons for writing—to show knowledge on an exam, or in an “essay” or a “research paper” (forms that are created by teachers, in school, and are typically defined as whatever the teacher says that they are). They are “mutt genres” (Wardle, 2009). They’re created only for school and they include rules that students often (rightly) see as idiosyncratic and unpredictable—a paper must have ten sources, or the thesis must come at the end of the first paragraph. Students often dutifully obey these, but without understanding why, apart from compliance with the rules of the assignment they are fulfilling. For instance, the writing portion of a standardized test like the SAT may state that it is an opportunity for students to demonstrate writing skills that they will use in college or beyond, but students are generally motivated to perform on the exam because their scores are tied to college admission. When the purposes are more remote—for instance, in written portions of state-mandated exams where they are asked to convince “someone” about an argument on a topic they know little about—students may be even less motivated to write them.

Alternatively, when writers (including students) see the need as pressing—an op-ed for a passionate cause, a research-based project that could lead to action on something that matters to them—they are much more motivated to write. Similarly, instructors who publish about their research have pressing reasons to do so. The conventions of the writing you produce for your research (no matter the form—writing, graphics, numbers, notes) are outlined for you—you know you have to use certain kinds of evidence, organize according to certain conventions, use certain citation styles. Research overwhelmingly shows that faculty *want* students to write for meaningful reasons (Eodice et al., 2017). It’s useful, then, to

identify why *you* want students to write and think about the connections between those motivations and how you support students' writing. Then you can talk with students about what they're doing, and how the genres and conventions they are learning mediate particular activities within your course (and community of practice). Some of the meaningful purposes you might consider, for instance, are to brainstorm, to engage with thinking, to identify intersections between concepts, to interpret facts, to connect concepts and lived experience, to apply concepts to real-world situations, to persuade others of something, to propose solutions. This makes the idea that "writing mediates activity through recognizable and recurring forms" visible for students, helping them achieve the purposes of writing that matter to you, your discipline, and your community of practice.

Helping students write for meaningful purposes will require bringing to conscious awareness what you already implicitly understand—that form follows function and writing gets things done—and asking yourself: what do I want students to learn and do? What forms/genres help accomplish those purposes? What are the conventions of those genres? How do I help students accomplish those purposes through these forms, and see this work as meaningful? Going back to the threshold concepts you identified in the preceding chapter can be helpful in this exercise. In the faculty examples found in the appendix for this chapter, you will see some ways that instructors have invited students to engage in meaningful purposes for writing.³ Heeyoung Tai, a teaching professor in chemistry and biochemistry, invited her senior chemistry capstone students to write science fiction essays exploring ethical implications of scientific decisions (see <https://tinyurl.com/4chacpxc>). Bruce D'Arcus, associate professor of geography, asked students to contribute to a class website mapping the geography of COVID (see <https://tinyurl.com/yckt89f8>). You can also explore results from The Meaningful Writing Project at <https://meaningfulwritingproject.net/> regarding what writing assignments students from different universities found to be meaningful.

Activity 2.3: Identifying and Supporting Students' Purposes for Writing

1. Brainstorm for three minutes: Why do you want students to write? What do you hope they accomplish? (Consider your own list from Activity 2.2 regarding your reasons for writing.)
 2. What do they need to know, understand, or be able to do to accomplish these purposes?
 3. How frequently and carefully do you provide opportunities for students to write for these purposes, and how much do you emphasize the purpose for writing rather than the form?
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3. In addition to linking directly to resources on the web, we provide archived versions of the materials in the appendix on this book's web page at <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/practice/expertise>.

Threshold Concept 2: Writing is a Means of Learning and Creating New Knowledge

Writing is often seen as simply transcription of pre-existing thought: someone has an idea and they “put it down” or “write it up.” However, this misconception misses the reality that “writing” isn’t one thing—it’s a series of acts that are imbued with different types of meaning, from using the act of composing to sort through difficult ideas, to putting ideas down “on paper” (or computer, or phone) for purposes from the poetic to the practical. It’s rare that what anyone actually writes is exactly what was already in their mind. The act of writing is in and of itself an act of invention, of brainstorming, of learning, of working things out and exploring what we know and don’t know (Bazerman & Prior, 2003).

For example, as you compose a grocery list, you remember items you didn’t pick up last week, but you also remember that the grocery store recently moved its produce from one side of the store to the other and you start thinking about why that might be the case and what it means for sales. As you write the results section for a new article, you realize that you completely missed something about the data you had been analyzing, or that there are implications that you had not thought about before. You also use writing to process ideas—what you thought was straightforward actually requires more explanation. In other words, in the act of writing, you learn. As you learn and then continue writing, you create new knowledge. Writing out your results helps you understand them better, and then you publish an article that in turn moves forward a particular conversation in your field.

Activity 2.4 illustrates some of the many ways people use writing as a means of learning: making notes in margins, freewriting, sketching out big ideas and then rewriting them. All of these acts show that writing is much more than simply transcribing what you already know.

Activity 2.4: Tracking Thinking Through Writing

For this activity, you’ll need to find something you’ve written for “academic” purposes (however you define that) relatively recently.

1. Identify a recent “academic” writing project in which you have engaged.
 2. Write down everything that you can remember doing as you engaged in that piece of writing--from taking notes in the margins to emailing friends to making outlines and writing notes on a white board. Be sure to track your thinking and drafting from inception to final form.
 3. Now step back and consider what you learned during this drafting process and how various kinds of informal writing helped you develop your thinking.
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This threshold concept reminds us that the act of writing and learning is often quite messy. As writers think of new ideas, question old ones, run down rabbit holes, and try to sort out their thoughts, the written product itself is often messy, full of grammatical errors, and sometimes difficult for anyone but the writers (and sometimes even for the writer!) to read. That is a normal and even necessary part of the writing process.

School settings, on the other hand, can often ignore the fact that writing is messy. Outside of composition classes where students are asked to bring “drafts” of their work or to “journal” or “freewrite,” writing is often simply assigned, collected, and assessed as a final product. When this happens, students miss the opportunity to see what they can learn and explore through the act of writing. It’s possible for teachers to show students the ways that writing helps them (as teachers and instructors) learn, and to ask students to try out different methods for using writing to learn the course materials, explore their ideas, figure out what they know and don’t know. This can happen through low-stakes, writing to learn activities (discussed further in Chapter 5) or by helping walk them through a higher-stakes, longer, or more formal project in ways that allow for time and opportunity to learn from the writing in messy ways before delivering a polished product for outside readers.

Assigning writing in this way again requires you as an instructor to reflect on what you implicitly know and do as an expert. If you assign students a research project, you can ask yourself how *you* engage with and learn as you conduct research projects. It’s rare, for instance, that an expert would receive an assignment to write about an undefined “topic” using “ten sources” that is due in “six weeks.” Rather, researchers consider pressing or troubling questions and often write about them in informal ways as they discuss them with colleagues over months or even years. Experts take notes as they read (and most likely not in the ways students were taught to take notes—if they were ever taught to take notes). They collect data and analyze it. They synthesize what they think they know in various messy drafts. Experts put ideas and findings together in all sorts of ways—sketching them out visually, putting post it notes across walls, writing outlines, writing pieces that don’t yet make sense. All of this constitutes using writing as a means of learning, and none of it is typically visible to students or taught to them. Helping students engage with writing as an exciting and messy means of learning and creating new knowledge can lead you to rethink what writing you assign and how you talk to students about writing. How can our students know how to engage in long-term planning, note-taking, and messy drafting if they’ve never seen examples of this kind of process?

Threshold Concept 3: “Good Writing” is Dependent on the Situation, Audiences, and Uses for Which it is Composed

When instructors who study writing and the teaching of writing have “that” conversation (Activity 1.2) with new acquaintances, typical responses include: “Don’t you find students’ writing is worse than it used to be?” or “I better be careful that I

don't make any mistakes if I email you!" The responses reflect a number of misconceptions: that teachers of writing focus only on "grammar"; that there is one thing that constitutes "good writing" and that people either can produce it or can't; that everyone should have learned how to "write well" at some time in the past and that if they can't, it's because their former teachers didn't do a very good job teaching them; or that as students they didn't try hard to learn to "write well." These responses also suggest that people have been taught to believe that avoiding errors is the most important part of writing.

The more accurate conception of writing, however, is much more complicated. As you've probably seen thus far in this chapter, all writers are always writing something particular for a specific context and audience; none of us do—or can—"write in general" (Wardle, 2017). You write something specific for a particular purpose.

Activity 2.5: What Makes Your Writing "Good"?

Use the writing log you compiled to explore what makes writing good in your daily life. Pick three different kinds of writing from the log you kept. For each one, ask:

- Who was the audience?
- What was the purpose?
- What are appropriate forms/conventions for that type of writing?
- What makes this kind of writing "good" or "effective"?

Figure 2.2 shows is an example created by business law faculty members Chelsea Green, Karen Meyers, and Paul Becker during a workshop at Miami University.

Genre 1: Text message to friend	<p><i>Audience?</i> Friend</p> <p><i>Purpose?</i> Sharing something of interest: an upcoming art show Appropriate conventions? Varies with person communicating, but: informal, maybe no salutation, more about the substance/content of message, maybe an emoji, sent quickly</p> <p><i>What makes it good/effective?</i> Using casual conversation dialect/tone; conveying warmth, humor, friendly tone, build relationship, providing info they need, catching autocorrect</p>
Genre 2: Judicial opinion	<p><i>Audience(s)?</i> General public (sometimes, broader), parties to a case, attorneys, judges, law students, political activists, NGO, private companies, government organizations, media, commentators</p> <p><i>Purpose?</i> To resolve an issue, to explain a holding (the judge's holding in a case, "I find for the defendants etc. and here's why"), to set policy/precedent, to change and modify behavior, to facilitate planning</p> <p><i>Appropriate conventions?</i> Formal: citations in body of paper (in blue book, the way lawyers cite things; to footnotes or bibliography); majority, dissenting opinions, and concurring opinions; sometimes one judge who writes it and others the court; everyone taking a position on the opinion; its own law language with law jargon and terminology used in particular context and framework that judges/attorneys understand but that general public doesn't; highly edited; "old-fashioned" prose; starts with who is delivering the opinion; includes some history and context;</p> <p><i>What makes it good/effective?</i> Veracity of the arguments—should be analytical, not as "good" if heavy political opinions; conclusion should be at the end after evidence and analysis at the beginning, go through it objective, systematically, analytically; UNBIASED, based on precedent; flows, direction, theme, organized point to point, logic going one to another</p>

Figure 2.2. Genre analysis.

As you've likely seen through this analysis, you make careful (even if unconscious) decisions about audience, purpose, and conventions all the time; these decisions, in turn, affect why and how the writing is "good" or "effective." The writing is "good" if it achieves your purposes and meets the needs and expectations of readers. For example, grocery lists are "good" if you get home in a reasonable amount of time with the groceries you need. Your text to your partner is "good" if they don't worry about you when you are late. There is no one monolithic "writing" and thus no one monolithic "good writing." Whether writing is "good" or not depends on the purpose(s) and the audience(s) for the writing. What is necessary is that the reader can understand without undue effort. Spelling or sentence construction in some instances doesn't matter until spelling choices or syntax are so unusual that they cause miscommunication. In the same way, the research report to your colleagues is "good" if it communicates findings and interests to your readers and convinces them of your viewpoint—or at least encourages them to ask questions and dialogue about the idea. Editors sometimes take care of the grammar and spelling edits, and what makes the report "good" is not that it is grammatically perfect or correct but that it is compelling and interesting to your colleagues. (One study, in fact, showed that readers adapted their expectations and critical focus based on their perception of who the writer was, looking for different things when they thought it was completed by a student, a colleague, and so on [Williams, 1981].)

The threshold concept that "good writing" is dependent on purpose, audience, and context may lead you to add more detail to the characteristics of "good student writing" that you described in Activity 1.5. On the website for Miami University's Howe Center for Writing Excellence, you can find a number of examples of guides written by faculty to explain what is expected of writing in their fields. Art historians Annie Dell'Aria, Jordan Fenton, and Pepper Stetler explain, for example:

what is considered effective or good writing in our field varies by genre and purpose, but overall we expect to see:

- a direct address of the subject or work of art.
- an interpretive analysis of a work of art backed by research from credible sources.
- engagement with significant interpretive and theoretical frameworks.

See <https://tinyurl.com/mrycm862>.

Philosophers Gaile Pohlhause, Elaine Miller, and Keith Fennen explain:

Our field tends to value precise thinking that considers potential objections and counter positions. Our relationship to

empirical facts is complicated, as almost all philosophers agree that there are no facts without an interpretive framework, and many philosophers are deeply interested in how these frameworks operate.

We tend to write argumentative essays and books. We rarely write reports or surveys.

We find writers to be credible when they situate themselves within a scholarly debate and when they use conceptual analysis, present a logically valid argument, and charitably consider opposing positions. Effective writing in our field tends to walk you through a sequence of thoughts about a question or problem, and may consider multiple sides, even those that the author disagrees with. Ultimately the goal is to draw you in and transform your thinking.

See <https://tinyurl.com/2s4yyrjj>.

Threshold Concept 4: Writing (and the Teaching of Writing) is Informed by Prior Experiences

Threshold concept 3 demonstrates that definitions of good writing vary. The next threshold concept pushes that idea further. If there is no monolithic “good writing”; if writing varies across genres, purposes, and disciplines; if writing enacts the values of the contexts in which it is used to mediate activity, then students come to classrooms enacting ideas about writing that may differ greatly from their instructors’ ideas—because they have of course *had* experiences that are different from those instructors. (The realization that “We are not our students and our students are not us” is one frequently expressed by faculty who have engaged with the activities in this book; see Adler-Kassner & Majewski, 2015).

Prior knowledge and experience with writing can be challenging for learners and teachers in ways you might easily recognize. For example, students are taught to write in a literature class and this prior knowledge can present challenges when they need to write in a biology class. Or high schools students might have been taught to take notes in a particular way that is not effective in your course. Sometimes varied prior knowledge and experience is even more challenging, and can result in judgments about a person’s home dialect that feel inequitable or biased. For example, research in writing studies, English education and linguistics have documented the challenges of valuing Standardized American English (SAE) over other dialects, especially African American English. This has led to efforts to teach “code switching” and subsequence concerns about this practice and its message to language users (Baker-Bell, 2020;

Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974 and 2020; Linguistic Society of America, 2019; Smitherman, 1977). The use of specific language varieties is a complex issue, and you can learn more about it by delving into the sources cited in this chapter. The purpose of exploring this threshold concept is to help you recognize that all of our beliefs and decisions about language and correctness are informed by our prior experiences, cultures, identities, and values. Reflecting on your ideas of what a really good learner/writer looks like can help you make your assumptions visible. You can then build these into assignments and class activities to strengthen and reinforce the characteristics of “good writing” you think important.

Examples in the appendix for this chapter illustrate how other faculty have answered these questions (see <https://tinyurl.com/5y9z3ck6>). Stefanie Tcharos, a music faculty member, writes that a successful learner in her “Exploring Voices” course was “incredibly open . . . to the unusual and unconventional subject and approach” and was “very willing to regularly participate and be engaged,” as well as “very good at adapting the concepts and ideas to their own worlds.” In more mundane ways, the successful learners in her course were “very organized” and “good about keeping up with their work.” Rachael King, a faculty member in English, writes that in her course, good writers “show growth in understanding how to make an argument based on literary evidence. . . . This means making an argument that is about literature (rather than about the world, society, psychology) and that grounds that argument in specific, textual analysis.”

Naming these characteristics may help you identify knowledge and skills that you can build into your assignments in order to help students be successful writers in your class and/or field. Instructors tend to expect that students can already write in the ways you want them to write because these ways of writing are familiar *for instructors*—that is, instructors bring their own prior experiences to these ways of writing. Additionally, because instructors are part of the communities of practice that value these ways of writing, the writing that you are concerned with is closely related to your expertise and the values associated with writing that are determined and reinforced as writing circulates among disciplines and fields. Instructors might think of these ways of writing as monolithic forms of “good writing”—especially when they have relatively limited exposure to writing in other disciplines. (When instructors do have that exposure, though, they sometimes find the writing of other fields to seem “jargony,” because the language used is different from what they typically expect.) Sometimes, instructors also forget how difficult it may have been to work through the threshold concepts of your fields that are now common sense or implicit knowledge. Yet all of these assumptions mean it’s easy to forget to a) find out what students’ previous experience is with writing, research, and central ideas in your fields, and b) to provide some explanation or examples to help clarify your expectations.

Activity 2.6: Characteristics of a Really Good Learner/Writer

In as much specific detail as possible, describe what a “successful learner” looks like in a course you teach. If you can’t focus on a learner you know personally, you can create a learner—the idea is to ground your response in a specific person. Ideally this person is real; if that’s not possible, a composite real person is fine. After you describe a successful learner, consider the following questions:

1. How do you know this learner is/was successful? What did this learner think like, know, know how to do in their writing, etc.? (Please go beyond the grade that the learner earned.)
2. What attributes associated with the class might have or did the learner display—in class, in discussions with TAs or with you, or elsewhere?
3. What activities associated with the class might have or did the learner undertake—again, in class, in sections, with you, etc.?

Please include as much specific detail about what successful learning looks and sounds like in your description.

Threshold Concept 5: Learning to Write Effectively Requires Practice, Time, and Revision

Instructors often expect that students should already know how to write what they assign. This misconception, though, belies the reality that everyone is always learning—and everyone is also always learning *about writing*. In every new context, in every new genre, for every new audience and purpose, you must figure out something new. Whenever you take up a new topic or research question, the writing may be painful and prolonged even though you may have written “articles” many times before—each new task can be difficult and even painful. Every writer has to engage in the same writing task multiple times before it gets easier; every writer needs feedback and help from others; often writers fail and need time to fail and try again. No one is immune to the difficulties of writing.

Activity 2.7: Your Writing History

Freewrite and reflect for a few minutes on these questions:

As a graduate student and then new faculty member, what kinds of writing did you have to do? What instruction did you receive? What was difficult for you? When you first tried to publish, what was the experience like? What writing project are you working on now? How difficult or easy is it? What help do you need?

In order to best help students with their writing processes and challenges, it can be productive to really think about and analyze how your own writing processes work. Given what you reflected on in Activity 2.7, are there areas where you can extrapolate from your own struggles in order to help your students? For example, if you were not given any instruction in high-stakes writing tasks and struggled for months or even years to learn, how could you help your own students have a different and more positive and more supported experience?

Activity 2.8 asks you to reflect on how you engage in writing you feel you do well and less well, thinking through how your process works and who helps with it.

Activity 2.8: Your Writing Processes

For this activity, reflect on something you've written professionally that you are used to writing and feel you do fairly well:

1. What sorts of planning, feedback, and revision do you need to write this type of text effectively? How many drafts? How long is the planning period?
2. What sorts of readers help you revise and generate ideas?
3. Who is your "ideal" reader for a rough draft? What are the characteristics of an effective reader of your work?
4. When in the drafting/invention process do you get feedback and talk things over with others?

After you respond to these questions, answer them a second time while focusing on a less familiar type of writing or for a more challenging context (a journal where you haven't published before or a new kind of report or proposal or even a syllabus for a new class). How are your responses different?

Activities 2. 7 and 2.8 are intended to help you bring to conscious awareness some of the challenges of writing. Instructors' familiarity with school settings might make it easy to forget just how difficult writing can be, how much time it can take, how much help and revision writers tend to need. To resist this, it is helpful to reflect on what writing is like for you—and what writing was like for you before you got good at a particular genre or way of writing.

Activity 2.9 asks you to focus even more narrowly on a time when things didn't go as planned with writing. Reflecting on these moments can be important for thinking about what kind of support works best for you— and thus what might also support your students.

When you seek to build support and scaffolding for your students, it is especially important to remember when your efforts to write haven't gone as you planned—maybe even times when your efforts resulted in what you saw as failure. Remembering your own struggles as a writer can help you gain empathy for students (a subject taken up in Chapter 4). Everyone has been a learner, and everyone is still learning. Learners often fail before they succeed. Remembering these writing experiences is important in building scaffolded writing opportunities for your students.

Activity 2.9: A Time You Did Not Succeed When Writing

Think of a time you “failed” when attempting to write about something new or for a new field or in a new form or for a new audience. Then, write about the following questions:

1. How long did it take before you were able to write in expected ways?
 2. What happened? How did you finally succeed (if you did)? What helped you?
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Threshold Concept 6: Writing Enacts and Creates Disciplinary Identities and Values

In writing faculty development workshops, faculty often ask why students can’t write in the ways that the instructor expects them to. The irony is that instructors in varied fields all expect something different—without explicitly recognizing this reality. The common assumption is that there is one kind of “academic writing” from which all other writing stems, and that all instructors agree on what that might be. This is not the case, however (Russell 1995).

Although genres can have similarities across related disciplines (e.g., biology and psychopharmacology) (Carter, 2007), there are many more ways in which genres and conventions vary, both subtly and dramatically. This goes back to the idea that writing enacts and (re)creates the values and identities of fields. As writers learn to compose in the ways colleagues write, they begin to embody the voices, values, and identities of the communities where the writing circulates (and is validated). And, over time, those ways of composing become invisible to them; they start to feel like “conventions in general”—thus the conventions and the values they embody start to become invisible the longer a writer uses them. For example, as someone writing in STEM disciplines uses passive voice and avoids first person in professional articles and reports, they are embodying the belief that scientific knowledge is objective; this may not be a conscious act, however, just what is expected of them by the people with whom their writing is in dialogue. As someone writing in history weighs varying accounts of historical events, they enact the value and threshold concept that history consists of multiple and competing narratives and there is no single, objective, capital-T Truth. If someone in education cites dozens of other scholars before stating their own argument, they illustrate the value of giving “due regard” to colleagues (Hyland, 2013, p. 13).

You may chafe at the request to reflect on the conventions of writing (and values) that your field asks you to use. After all, these values and conventions were created by others and expected of you, and may not reflect your personal beliefs or values. They may have solidified as expectations decades ago and may not align well with current field members’ research or with the available technologies. At

times, we may determine that the values and conventions of a particular discipline are so different from our own that we do not wish to remain in the field. At other times, we might help change the conventions and values. As values and activities of fields change, so too does the writing—sometimes the changes happen quickly, other times they happen slowly. As written values and conventions change, so, in turn, does the field. Reflecting on this connection between values and ways of writing is yet another way to observe how *opportunity* has contributed to the field—that is, how making room for other values, ideas, and commitments has led the field’s boundaries to change (or, in some instances, has not led to change—and instead resulted in people leaving the field).

The conscious experience of learning to write like other members of your field may quickly fade from memory as you become more successful in that field. By the time you become an expert, designing classes for students to learn about the field, you know “good” writing from your field when we see it. But you may not have the language to talk about what writers must do in order to create that good writing, or why these particular conventions are considered good. Part of helping students understand your written disciplinary conventions and values involves bringing them to your own conscious awareness and naming them for others.

Activity 2.10: Learning and Using Your Field’s Written Conventions

1. Without referencing a text, write down all of the “rules” you keep in mind when you are composing a research-based piece of writing (article, paper, or book) for colleagues in the discipline. (For instance: always start with a narrative, never use first person, shorter is better, never cite year but always cite person).
 2. Pick a few of these that tripped you up when you began writing in your discipline/profession.
 3. How did you learn to enact these values and conventions? Who helped you? What got in your way?
-

Bringing these conventions and expectations to conscious awareness and sharing them with students can go a long way toward making writing in your field accessible and learnable for your students. It’s also worth remembering that there’s an important power dynamic at work in this relationship, too. Consider, for instance, what it would be like to write a short note to a former teacher or advisor of yours telling them what kind of support you would like to have received in order to better introduce you to the idiosyncrasies of writing in your field when you were a student yourself. Does this idea seem acceptable? Outrageous? Something that would be welcomed, or would never be done? Answering these questions helps make clear some of the ways that members of your field show how knowledge is made—and as a reminder, making those knowledge-creating practices visible to students is a key part of facilitating access.

Activity 2.1 I: Building a Supportive Writing Process for Your Students

Identify an assignment you give your students that you also regularly write (a “research paper” or “lab report” or “grant proposal” for example).

1. What steps, supports, opportunities for peer interaction, and feedback do *you* need in order to write this kind of text?
 2. How might you revise the assignment to better support your students in their efforts to write this same text? What do they need to know in order to begin? What invisible steps and abilities and supports need to be made visible? How much time will students need to engage in the process as you do?
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Conclusion

This chapter has introduced some misconceptions about writing and worked to counter them with research-based threshold concepts about writing that inform the ways in which writing is used and taught in fields:

- writing mediates activities through recognizable and recurring forms
- writing is a means of learning and creating new knowledge
- definitions of “good writing” depend on the situation, audiences, and uses for which writing is composed
- writing is informed by prior experience
- learning to write effectively requires practice, time, and revision
- writing enacts and creates disciplinary identities and values

These ideas can become a very powerful foundation for creating access and opportunity for your students. When you recognize that writing is something that is created and which circulates within communities of practice for particular purposes and that those creations and purposes both perpetuate the communities and beliefs about what is “important” in them, you can then more easily explain to students why writing looks the way(s) that it does. Suddenly, ideas that once might have seemed arbitrary and strangely idiosyncratic make more sense. At the same time, the ideas that you’ve started to explore here also serve as a reminder that all writers come to your courses with varied ideas about what’s expected, and these ideas are formed by their prior experiences in school and outside. This reality can help you remember to build in practice, time, and revision (with feedback)—because we are all always learning to write. The next chapter will invite you to dive more deeply into how disciplinary knowledge is represented in writing as a way to open *access to your courses*.

Preparing for Chapter 3

For most of the activities in the next chapter, it will be helpful to find a partner from a field dissimilar from yours. You also will want to find a research article

from your field that you will share with that partner for some of the activities in Chapter 3.