CHAPTER 4.

FAIL MEMES AND WRITING AS PERFORMANCE: POPULAR PORTRAYALS OF WRITING IN INTERNET CULTURE

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When Kate Ronald (1990) wrote about dichotomies that threaten our sense of self, such as personal vs. public realms, she pointed out that these dichotomies force writers and writing instructors to view writing as objectively manageable. In the context of writing processes, writing instruction often over-manages the writing process with defined processes of prewriting, drafting, revising, and proofreading in the attempt to control the messy work of writing. Failure/success has also become a limiting dichotomy in academia, borrowing from the business world's work ethic, which implies that hard work means success and the only alternative to success is failure. Scott Sandage (2005) pointed out, in his history of failure in the US, that to be a failure or bankrupt in business morphed in the late 1800s to include any average, plodding, uninspired life. Saddest of all, in our American concept of failure, Sandage said, the lack of a "story" to tell about ourselves is also a sign of failure (p. 256). The business model that academia leans toward requires statistical proof that students succeed rather than that they learn, which is, in turn, internalized by our students to mean a successful paper is a one-draft essay and a grade. This attitude also carries over into how students handle writing processes: When a paper is complete, it is a success; a written text in draft form is a failure.

As a means of identifying and analyzing the true power of this fail/success dichotomy, looking at memes that my undergraduate writing students create about their writing processes is illuminating. This chapter studies "writing fail" memes, offers descriptive types of memes with which to analyze our students' theories of writing, and suggests ways that our writing students' work is influenced by the notion of failure as represented by these memes. This chapter also suggests ways to study memes with students to deepen their rhetorical understanding of composing-as-failure and strengthen their ability to transfer notions about writing to many rhetorical situations.

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INSTITUTIONALIZED FAILURE AND COLLEGE WRITING STUDENTS

As the Director of the Student Success Center on my branch campus (and former writing instructor), I have a complex relationship with the fail/success dichotomy when applied to undergraduate students. The Student Success Center operates as a resource for all students but also expects students who are on academic warning or who were conditionally admitted to participate in weekly meetings to share, reflect, and practice good study habits, theoretically intervening in their failed performance to turn them toward success. The dichotomy of fail/succeed is even embedded in the title; we're not the Academic Manage-Your-Expectations Center or even, my preference, the Academic Resilience Center. The institution's definition of failure by one-semester GPA or high school GPA (in the case of conditionally admitted students) is so fraught with its own failed sense of academic accomplishment that it's no wonder that about 25 percent of these students resist or refuse to participate. How can a student be failing and require "remediation" or "intervention" with no-credit work before they've attended a single college class? On the one hand, I hope all my students are successful (and I'm secretly happy with those who resist the stigma of failure by not participating). On the other hand, I don't want these students interpreting a lack of institutional success as a learning failure. In most versions of contemporary writing instruction, descriptions of writing processes specifically address drafting as a mess and a muddle, and we refrain from calling early drafts "failed" because of the connotations of failed exams and failed classes, which are absolutes in the fail/success dichotomy. And yet, for those students struggling with writing, any feedback on rough drafts is often the last straw after overcoming multitudes of obstacles to get that first draft submitted. Lengthy revisions and feedback intended to help students re-envision what they are composing is too frustrating for them to ever be seen as a successful process. For non-writers (students who prefer any activity over writing, even when quite skilled at writing), one-draft writing is the only "successful" writing, despite their experiences to the contrary in their engineering and computer classes. Students at my technical school are mostly STEM majors in lab-central and project-oriented classes, where the notion of failure is more readily defined as iterative steps toward success when learning Python to code a new video game, for instance, than in writing classes.

Embracing failure as a sign of growth is identified as a threshold concept for writers, without which students are less likely to move forward toward more rhetorically-aware writing (Brooke & Carr, 2015). However, the notion that the creation of failure is a result of constant high-stakes testing has been extensively described as a systemic problem that affects how students and instructors view

writing; testing seems to drown out any other voice on the topic of failed writing for our students. As Inoue (2014) pointed out, testing creates failure where none existed before, which leads to student performance (not writing) as failure or success. Even in our process-oriented classes with no exams, as such, every paper becomes just another place where students fail by not following their instructor's sense of a successful paper. West-Puckett and her coauthors (2023) point out that "In writing studies, when students fail, they have not demonstrated what has already been constructed by someone else as the ideal or appropriate text for a particular situation; normally, this someone else has both the power and the privilege not only to name that distinction but also to make it have meaning" (p. 47). I've been guilty of giving a lower grade to a rhetorically successful paper because it didn't follow the instructions.

Recent research on transfer in knowledge-making shows the difficulty students have in transferring or integrating writing skills into new sites and purposes for writing. Students tend to see writing assignments as discrete tasks that can be finished and then forgotten (Adler-Kassner et al., 2017, p. 19). These studies point directly to the failure of standard writing instruction practices such as writing workshops and peer reviews to help students apply writing skills from one similar setting to another (Smith et al., 2017; Brent, 2012). Our writing process teaching simply does not transfer past single assignments; as Thoune (2020) noted, students are required to "fail" a draft, in their eyes, to get feedback (p. 55).

On a wider scale, the 16-week, final exam, Carnegie credit hour paradigm of higher education, based on a completely different funding model than what my students have available to them, sets up so many students for failure that "retention" becomes the institutional version of "success." Programmatic changes that are designed to mitigate these barriers, such as delayed grading, labor-based or contract grading, portfolio assessment, and others, are hallmarks of critical pedagogy but not universally found in first-year college composition classes. My university constantly harps on early grading, requires 6-week progress reports rather than midterms, with the intention of getting feedback to students about their lack of progress, but in turn creating anxiety and early withdrawals. Hjortshoj (2001) pointed out that institutions assume writing skills are a freshman-level issue, solved once and for all with an introductory-level course, which does not allow for extensive drafting and messy, confusing learning processes. The students who can't manage this one-and-done kind of learning by Week 6 are encouraged to withdraw rather than change the environment, which creates this institutionalized failure to learn. In this testing-focused, failure-first environment, students' memes about their writing expose their intertwined notions of writing and failure.

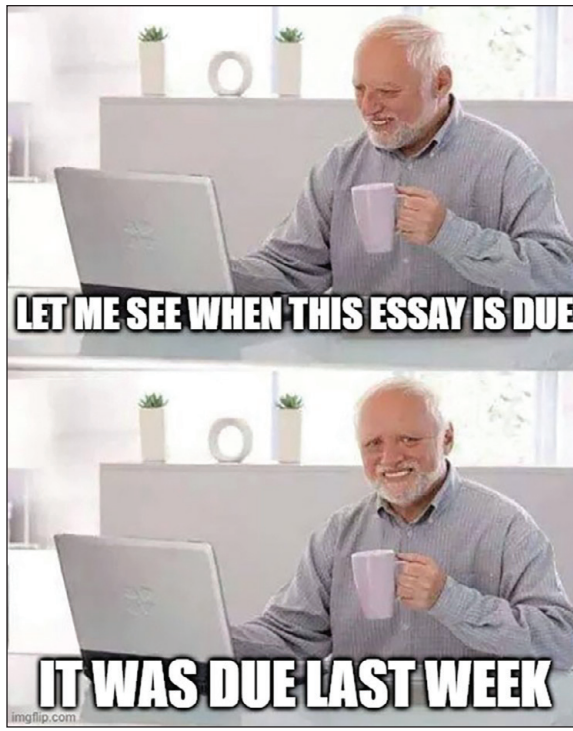

Figure 4.1. Student meme from English 200; "Hide the Pain Harold" template.

ARGUMENT 1: MEMES ARE ARTIFACTS OF CREATIVE FAILURE, THROUGH CONSTANT REMIXES, BUT ALSO INDICATIONS OF THE STATUS OF FAILURE IN POPULAR CULTURE

Scholars have been arguing over the definition of meme since Dawkin's 1976 book, using the term to mean complex, spreadable, memorable cultural ideas. For our purposes, memes are simple visuals, often with text, that undergo constant remixing as they are repurposed for different messages spreading over social media. Generally, at least one element of the original meaning remains with the remix in order to participate in the string of revisions, but often, that original meaning is utterly transformed by the time a meme goes "viral" and reaches a substantial audience.

The term meme also covers a wide variety of mimetic and viral material spread over the internet. But for my purposes here, I will focus on what Shifman (2013) calls "stock character macros" (p. 112): still photos of animals or humans

with particular associations toward community values and behaviors, such as "advice dog," "success kid," and "Hide the Pain Harold" (see Figure 4.1). This genre of meme is favored by students in my writing classes when they choose meme templates; plus, as Shifman points out, they are part and parcel of expressing success and failure as a way of showing how one belongs to a group (p. 113). For instance, the image macro meme "Confession Bear" shows a bear with a rather human-like sad expression and text that confesses a usually taboo activity, such as "I actually like Nickelback." Another one that connects to the theme of failure is "success kid," which shows a small child with a fierce expression and a fist. The meme started out with the message "I hate sandcastles" but morphed as it was remixed to be an image of unexpected success with text such as "Late to work—boss was even later."

One of the first popular meme collections was "Fail Blog," which chronicles "fail" memes. Although it is now part of the Cheezburger website, the glee with which internet readers liked and reposted photos, descriptions, and visuals of embarrassing falls, silly slips, and faux pas show how much we love *schadenfreude* and how much we seek to show how we belong to a world of ineptitude, which is also a testament to the pervasive but depressing vision of success that we are surrounded by. There are "epic fails," a section on "autocowrecks," a place for "Fail Nation," and a "School of Fail" specifically for school-related assignment failures with many variations on "the dog ate my homework" excuses. We apparently need to prove to the world that most of us are not shining examples of American work ethic and athletic grace. As Paul Cook (this volume) points out, memes participate in the "Internet Ugly" aesthetic where failure is a stock joke and complaint about modern life.

Thus, what makes stock character macro memes expressive and interesting also makes them limiting and superficial: Simple, visual, part of stereotypical experiences (so that wide audiences understand them). The fact that memes are funny and self-deprecating, therefore prone to be about failure, makes them good for bringing up the challenges and myths about writing and research, but ultimately show the lasting power and draw of those stereotypes about writers and writing. These memes don't "hold" positive messages well; the predominant activity of memes is to poke fun at someone. Many memes that my students choose are those with exaggerated, over-the-top emotions, easy prey for meme-makers to mock. For instance, one student used the "American Chopper Argument" meme with several stills taken from the scene where the father and son shout at each other as the father fires the son and they throw furniture, with both characters completely out of control, but likely a staged scene for the show; one of my students turned this meme into the argument between her need to pass the writing course and her desire to binge Netflix

all night, an argument also staged for class participation since she was clearly doing well in the course.

A scan of the memes about writing on Fail Blog shows that most contributors believe writing is hard work and the special skills needed as writers are for padding a report and waiting for the miracle of an original idea. For instance, one fail meme shows Captain America ripping up a log with his bare hands, with the inscription indicating that the writer turns the word "don't" (aka the log) into "do not" (aka the ripped log now in two pieces) to add more words to the essay. This is a funny exaggeration as if non-contracted words will add any significant number of words to an essay, and yet this is not an exaggeration at all for struggling writers who can't, that is, can not, think of anything more to write. Lots of other memes are of cats procrastinating as they sit on a pad of paper or on a computer keyboard. A recent listicle of memes about writing by Hayes (2021) in Buzzfeed shows that the popular vision of even professional writers emphasizes procrastination, holes and gaps in stories, late-night revelations, and basic descriptive writing skills as material for jokes based on failed writing skills. The work of memes in most contexts is to find empathetic audiences that can "get" the joke and to show that one is part of the writing community that sees writing as a distraction and a chore. Many memes targeting the work of creative writing show "not-writing" as a failure as well, indicating a stereotype of writing as "putting words on a page" and leaving out every other stage or activity involved in writing: researching, reading, reciting, interviewing, re-envisioning, sketching, and so on (see Figure 4.2 as an example). Many of these fail memes are, therefore, not directly about failure but about the *management* of failure, about how we deal with failure (and impending failure) by making jokes and pointing out ironies in education. They help us manage the utter meaninglessness of some failures, as the opposite of making every failure into a "learning opportunity."

Shifman (2013), along with others, argues that memes are important objects of study because they are "cultural information . . . which scale into shared social phenomena" (p. 18). Writing fail memes share this contact in scale with the failure/success dichotomy and its close relative, the lose/win dichotomy. Because of this integration with social values, Jenkins (2014) suggests that rhetorical study of memes requires a modal approach rather than a textual or visual approach to account for the rapid delivery and constant remix of memes. His modal study of fail/win memes argues that they are expressions of anxiety in a digital world where humans are expected to succeed or fail the same way that computers do. The reductionist view of writing exhibited in most memes, when combined with the stereotypical view of failure in culture, creates a popular version of writing as failure in almost every aspect and experience. Internet memes about productive, meaningful writing that makes a difference in the world are nearly non-existent.

ARGUMENT 2: WRITER-GENERATED MEMES ARE WAYS TO FOCUS ON THE PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN WRITING

What happens when you ask college writing students to make memes about their writing processes? I started using memetic and viral materials in college writing classes when Padlet added a feature that allowed users to quickly and easily post a GIF on a virtual wall. I asked the students to do a "temperature check" at various times during the semester to share simply "how things are going" in their lives without the need to make comments or explanations. The GIFs they chose generated enough discussion that I moved to asking students to create memes about their writing processes (not about failure), first as an experiment and later as a regular activity to create an alternate mode of self-expression, allow students to make visuals instead of writing, and start discussions about writing processes. I gave them the option of any family-friendly, appropriate meme, using any program they wanted, but I walked them through the Meme Generator on the imgflip.com site as a simple, quick way to choose a well-known meme from templates. The Meme Generator allows them to add text in certain places but not manipulate the image template. Their memes were created during class and had minuscule points assigned, mainly a participation activity.

- Most students created a procrastination fail: a failure to focus. The memes were self-mocking—they know better but don't do better. The two points of greatest struggle for college writers, according to their memes, are getting started and getting the final draft submitted.
- Some students created a meme to describe the difficulty of balancing homework with their other preferred activities: a failure to juggle. Inherent in their memes is the idea that if they could keep all the parts of their lives in motion, they could succeed.
- Some students created a meme that describes a writing or research struggle: a failure to complete, generally located in the performance of the assignment: the number of words required, the number of sources required, the deadlines, etc.
- No students reinterpreted the template in a remix of images or concepts about writing (as with the Chuck Norris version of "Bicycle Fail" shown in Figure 4.3).

In Figure 4.2, the skeleton meme shows the most common type, illustrating the empty body/mind connection when searching for a topic or a way to phrase an idea. The second one is also common, showing the procrastinating of most writers who know they need to start writing but get pulled away by distractions

and alternative activities. The third one illustrates a fairly complex idea and is much rarer among the memes that my students create. The astronaut meme is illustrating a trope in action movies where the protagonist has a revelation that he was lied to from the beginning of the story, and the villain reveals his treachery. The student turned this into a revelation about how his good intention to revise a draft was really only a pipe dream, and his first draft was, to be honest with himself, always going to be his final draft.

In Figure 4.3, a webcomic illustrating a metaphoric version of self-sabotage by Corentin Penloup was appropriated by other meme-makers. The first image is the original webcomic by Corentin Penloup. The second meme shows the use of the comic with added text, which reinterprets the original. The third one shows a more typical self-mocking, everyday version expressing the way our good intentions get sidetracked by others' agendas. The fourth one is Penloup's favorite, which shows a re-imagining of the original where Chuck Norris, the ultimate strongman good guy, simply keeps biking despite the stick and overcoming what for him is a small obstacle.

Figure 4.2. Three examples of student-created memes about writing processes.

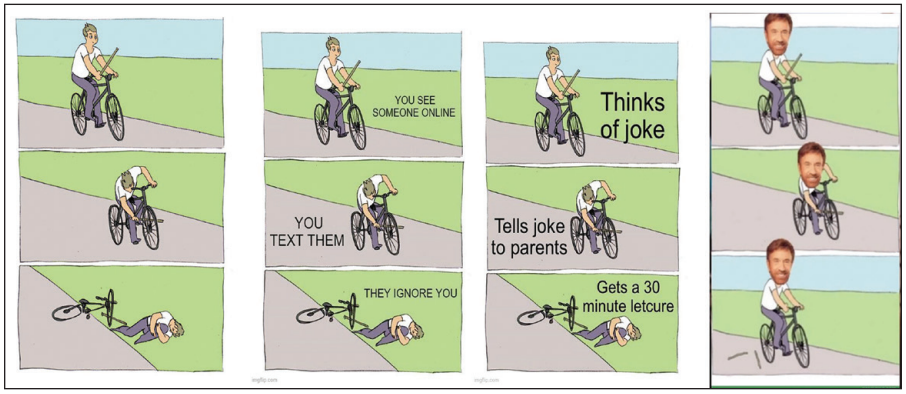

Figure 4.3. Bike Fail meme [Know Your Meme website].

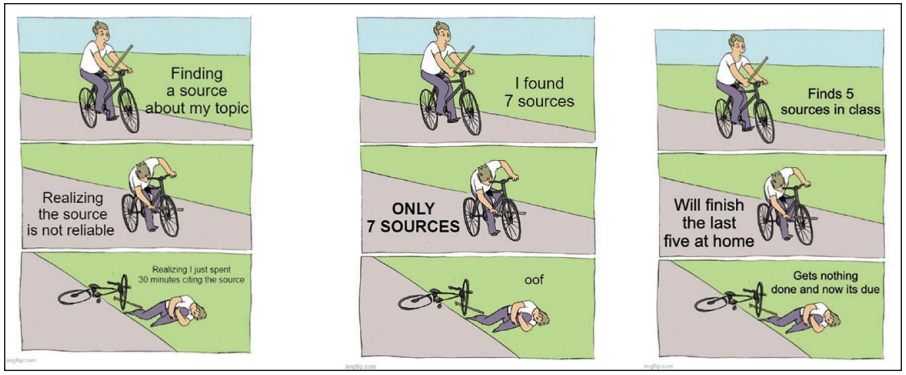

Figure 4.4. Student-created memes using the "Bike Fail" template.

In Figure 4.4, student-created memes took on the same visual. The first one follows the original web comic closely, showing the self-destructive writing habit of citing the source before reading it. The second one shows a slight reinterpretation of the visual as just a failed bicycle ride as a metaphor for a failure of the assignment despite finding the first seven sources. The third one shows the same sense of writing as performance failure, equating the finding of a number of sources as the measure of writing success.

Memes are a particularly expressive way our students can convey what failure means, both in writing and in wider fields of life. Most of my students are thoroughly familiar with these memes through constant exposure to online content platforms. Many "writing fail" memes are humorous and relatable, expressing a shared experience with the difficulty of writing. Any meme with a panicked or confused expression is useful for students to express their problems with procrastination and distractions. Other memes quickly cycle through a variety of attitudes, such as rueful disdain toward writing, scathing satire of "schooled" essays, and competition among epic procrastinators. The notion of writing failure embodied in these memes is closely connected to broader memes about writing, which often portray writing and writers as unable to express themselves in language and highly distractible. Despite their ephemeral qualities, writing fail memes reveal the popular internet culture's attitude toward writing, including unmanageable emotional responses to writing complexity and a very narrow view of writing. Creating memes in class, then, is important for the "social bonding effect" of sharing common feelings (Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018, p. 190) and for joining the club of students who dislike performing writing with deadlines.

Students' memes point out the failure of pedagogy: that nothing I said about writing processes or messy drafts transferred or seemed applicable in the real world that the students' memes pointed to. "Writing fail" memes clearly

contribute to social bonding over the common anxiety-producing problems of emotional management during difficult stages of writing. Peeling back another layer of failure in the students' memes, we can see how students used the memes to embody themselves in their resistance to the version of writing their instructor gave them. They found bodies not their own (astronauts with guns, skeletons, bicyclists) to say they know they are self-sabotaging their papers (thus their liking for the Baton Roue meme); they know writing is NOT exploratory, provisional, or interesting, but just another hoop to jump.

CONCLUSION: STUDENT MEMES ARE EVIDENCE THAT WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY

Are memes worth studying, worth classroom time, or just another attempt to use pop culture in cringe-worthy ways? Can they be transgressive as well as socially bonding? By asking students to create memes and participate in a part of culture heavily weighted toward a fail/succeed dichotomy, I am, in effect, asking a leading question, leading them to fall back on popular notions of writing processes and, thus, writing failure. These memes also perpetuate myths about writing blocks and writing processes, portraying writing as a performance rather than an inventive, meaning-making process. This version of writing is exactly what causes the kinds of failed writing described by Mike Rose (1980) in his case studies of students who operated with rigid rules and absolute control of writing processes. The one-shot approach behind some of the "writing fail" memes (a writer has one chance to succeed and, if not, the work is a fail) reinforces students' tendency to take any small criticism of their drafts as an utter failure of the draft.

And as Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) point out, prior knowledge profoundly affects students' ability to theorize, generalize, and apply ideas about writing across writing tasks. Thus, our students' out-of-class exposure to meme-thinking about writing and failure has to be taken into account if we want them to grow as writers by seeing failure as iterative growth in meaning-making. Helping students find and analyze the sources of their writing approaches, such as these fail/win memes, makes them stronger writers and rhetors. While making memes in first-year writing classes began as a lighthearted way to bring joy into a prosaic class, a deeper look shows the ability of meme-making to be an "assessment killjoy," as West-Puckett and her coauthors (2023) call the ability to move writing sideways, allowing writers to "take up more space" than the assessment, by not being the assessment (p. 84). Meme-making gives students a chance to speak out, to be unhappy, to show themselves as bodies in the world,

and that they are not just the uploaded files that will be graded. Meme-making with our students can be, as West-Pucket, Caswell, and Banks (2023) suggest, a "sideways" assessment that "points us toward the shadowy, messy, complicated, contradictory, fluid, and foundering practices of writing and the teaching of writing" (p. 106).

Memes can be used to resist the cultural standards surrounding failure. For example, the "What People Think I Do/What I Really Do" meme elicits the gaps among audiences and interpretations based on stereotypes and popular images of a particular profession or activity. Figure 4.5 is an example, created by J. W. Eberle (2012), of how this meme works with the role of writer. Our mothers will forever think we are cute, our friends assume we live some kind of hippie Utopian fantasy of working in a meadow, society assumes we are alcoholics, and the last two images show the contrast between how we wish our writing progressed with how it more often fails to progress.

In a writing class, using this meme along with a collection of images of writers and writing, accompanied by a student-led search of stock images for writers and writing, could help students start to articulate the conflict between how they are asked to write in class with how they manage the failure of writing, through more visually-loaded meme-making. Another classroom use of meme-making is creating "anti-memes," which spin the mocking, ironic use of memes into the ultra-obvious aspects of life. The skeleton (in Figure 4.2) would be relabeled the technically accurate "Anatomically Inaccurate Skeleton Chilling on a Park Bench," and the images in the "Writers" meme (Figure 4.5) would be filled with actual selfies of the students as they write.

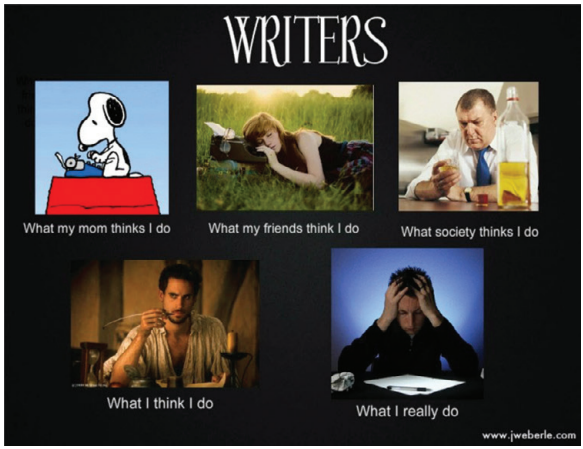

Figure 4.5. What People Think I Do/What I Really Do "Writers" meme. Reprinted with the permission of the author.

Teaching writing as an iterative, messy process may not be enough. We also need to show students the way through the fail/success dichotomy by acknowledging the social media world they live in and around and discussing the limitations of choosing "fail" as the predominant reaction to writing. Simply replacing the dichotomy of fail/success with another dichotomy of recursive/linear ignores the material world our students live in. We need to be explicit in our talk about room for failure in writing processes and the difference between getting work done and intellectual failure. Yancey (2024) calls for us to engage students in articulating their own theories of writing and to continue developing those theories through intentional reflection and practice (p. 232). But ultimately, we have to make room for less fossilized versions of composing and failing. Kate Ronald (1990) argued that rather than swinging from one extreme to another with such dichotomies or cementing a position on one side or the other, we as rhetoric/composition scholars and practitioners need to act in the tension between the two and rather than seeing writing as either a subjective or objective writing practice, that we seek "connected" knowledge. This third position holds the other two in tension rather than against each other. Studying memes in writing instruction is one of those bridges to connected learning, or as Allison Carr (2013) describes her journey through failure to write, to an "enlarged" place for connecting mind and body. Not only do we as writing instructors need to present an iterative, recursive, robustly meaning-making activity, but we need to actively present the stereotypical version of writing as a physical and psychologically difficult (and sometimes boring) job as something to be considered.

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