

2019

A Changing Understanding of Writing

Madeleine R. Hannah

Western Oregon University, mhannah16@wou.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/pure>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hannah, Madeleine R. "A Changing Understanding of Writing," PURE Insights: Vol. 8 , December 16, 2019.
<https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/pure/vol8/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in PURE Insights by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@wou.edu, kundas@mail.wou.edu, bakersc@mail.wou.edu.

A Changing Understanding of Writing

Abstract

As student writers gain more instruction and experience, their beliefs about writing and their own writing practices change. Based on prior research about writing development and the author's own experiences, a developmental scale was created that can be used to chart the typical course of a writer's growth and understanding of writing. It is not strictly linear, and stages might be skipped, condensed, or combined. Like the writing process itself, the scale is recursive; ideally, the writer would get into a cycle of repeating the final two stages, building on former knowledge and always seeking new understandings that can be applied to both learning and teaching writing.

Keywords

writing, developmental scale, student writers, writing pedagogy, composition, writing process, writing instruction

Cover Page Footnote

My profound thanks go to Dr. Cornelia Paraskevas, who has inspired and supported me through so much more than this paper. Many thanks as well to my colleagues at the WOU Writing Center, for their essential part in my own writing process.

A Changing Understanding of Writing

Madeleine R. Hannah, Western Oregon University
Faculty Sponsor: **Dr. Cornelia Paraskevas**

Keywords: writing, developmental scale, student writers, writing pedagogy, composition, writing process, writing instruction

Near the end of my time as an undergraduate student, I was stunned to find out that although I had always loved to write and excelled in my English classes, I knew no strategies for addressing writing. I was taking a class on style and genre at the time, and I realized that even the most basic, common-sense understanding of the writing process had so far eluded me. How could this be? It seemed impossible that I had made it so far without acquiring any practical strategies for generating ideas, any appreciation for the importance of format and genre, any understanding of how writing can be taught. And yet, there I was, about to graduate college without being able to articulate how or why I wrote the way I did.

It became clear that I was not the only one who had been left in the dark. Everyone in my class, it seemed, was having the same revelations. Outside of class, the situation was much the same. Friends I talked to, including English writing majors and future teachers, confessed feeling similarly confused and unprepared for the demands of the writing tasks before them. Basic strategies for drafting and revising were world-shaking epiphanies to them. The more people I talked to, the more I realized I was not alone.

As a future educator, I was naturally drawn to the pedagogical implications of all this. It became apparent that many of my own teachers had unknowingly failed me because they themselves had never been given access to the knowledge and strategies I was learning. After all, you can't teach what you don't know. I was thrilled to be learning ways to improve my own writing habits, but I was even more interested in finding out how writing can and should be taught. As I contemplated my own development, I considered how I would go about leading others through the same steps of growth.

My hope is that by exploring my own journey as an emerging writer, I can offer some insight for student writers into their own developmental process. Further, I hope that teachers of writing can use my experience to better understand the experiences of their students. Ideally, teachers and students alike will come away from this paper with a better understanding of the writing process, as well as practical applications that they can use to engage in, and instruct, writing.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT WRITING?

The idea of a process is well established in the field of composition. As far back as the early seventies, Murray (1972) argued that writing should be taught as a process rather than a product. Murray described three general stages of the writing process: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Flower and Hayes (1981) expanded on this idea, stating that the process of writing itself contains a hierarchy of embedded cognitive processes and asserting that writers generate goals for themselves to guide these processes.

Many researchers have emphasized that the writing process is recursive, meaning that a writer will likely revisit previous stages as they progress through the process (Elbow, 1981; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Murray, 1972, Bishop, 2004). According to Elbow (1992) and Gallagher (2011), it is also generative; rather than writing to show what they know, a writer can use writing to discover and create meaning. Elbow (1981) also asserts that writing is a collaborative effort, and that writers should seek feedback from others rather than relying solely on themselves.

Halliday (1985) described a functional approach to language which places an emphasis on construction of meaning rather than a set of prescriptive rules (as cited in Bloor & Bloor, 2013). This is echoed by Derewianka (1999), who stated that a functional language model can

be used alongside instruction in the writing process. Rather than thinking in terms of grammatical correctness, writers should consider the rhetorical situation their writing addresses, focusing on the appropriateness of their piece in terms of audience, genre, and purpose (Elbow, 1981; Flower & Hayes, 1980). According to Hoey (2010), writers can arrange their texts with consideration to the needs of their readers; skilled writers omit irrelevant information and answer their audience's questions without compromising their own message. Myhill (2009) found that mature writers make careful grammatical and syntactical choices to influence the style and effect of their work. Despite this evidence, Connors (1985) found that teachers of writing disproportionately focus on mechanical correctness, and students rarely receive feedback on more substantial stylistic and process-related concerns.

Writing theorists have problematized the notion that the act of writing can be generalized to a single process, and some have critiqued the over-prevalence of process theory in composition studies (Kent, 1999). On the surface, post-process theory seems to suggest that writing cannot be taught, and theorists like Kent have been criticized for their vague or nonexistent considerations of pedagogy (Breuch, 2002). However, Breuch suggests that post-process theory invites teachers to think critically and reflectively on their practice. Rather than a rejection of foundationalist practices, post-process theory is a rejection of oversimplifications; it suggests that the act of writing is a set of individualized and recursive processes instead of one rigid, universal process.

A WRITERLY DEVELOPMENT SCALE

As teachers understand more about writing, they themselves are transformed. Shaughnessy (1976) describes a developmental scale for writing teachers similar to the scales on which students are often measured. According to Shaughnessy, educators must go through stages of unlearning biases and opening themselves up to new ideas. Similarly, my understanding of writing and the way I approach it has changed drastically over time. Based on my own experiences, as well as what research says about student writers, I created a developmental scale that can be generally applied to most writers' change over time. Although this scale is largely illustrated with examples from my own life, my experiences are not

unique. The majority of student writers go through something similar over the course of their schooling.

Instead of dictating what students should be doing, this scale describes observable patterns that typically emerge among student writers. It does not always have to occur in the order below, and some stages may be skipped, condensed, or combined. The scale, like the writing process itself, is recursive; ideally the writer would get into a cycle of repeating the final two stages, building on former knowledge and always seeking out new understandings that can be applied to both learning and teaching writing.

MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

The first stage in the writer's developmental scale is called Myths and Misconceptions, so named because writers in this phase have little evidence-based understanding of the writing process, and instead rely on unfounded—and often untrue—assumptions about composition. Due to patchy, erroneous prescriptivist instruction, they believe that grammar is a set of rules and that there is a “right way” and a “wrong way” to write (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). Their “revision process,” if they have one at all, consists of catching formal errors (Murray, 1972). They have no knowledge of the way in which people learn to write, and most likely think that the world is divided up between those who can write and those who cannot. They may believe that they fall into the latter category because they are unable to spit out a spotless first draft on command, or they may believe they are in the former category purely because they've had the advantage of growing up in a culture that understands Standard Academic English and are able to get good grades on writing assignments without really trying (Schleppegrell, 2004). Students in the Myths and Misconceptions phase think of writing as a solitary activity, likely imagining writers as tortured geniuses spitting out classic novels in fits of inspiration (Flower & Hayes, 1980). They probably do not enjoy writing or even think of themselves as writers, because their perception of what writing is and what the writing process looks like has been so skewed.

My Myths and Misconceptions period lasted a long time. Though I had plenty of writing assignments in elementary and middle school, I had very little instruction in writing.

My seventh-grade teacher introduced the concept of a “rough draft” to me for the first time, but even then I did not have a real writing process. I had to turn in my draft and wait for her to put cryptic symbols and phrases like “¶” and “comma splice” all over it in red pen. Then, confused though I was by her commentary, I dutifully fixed every typo and tried to follow her directions. After I made these superficial changes, I was ready to turn in my “final draft,” which was almost a carbon copy of the “rough draft.” Nowhere in this process did I receive feedback from my peers, or indeed even consider the prospect of readership beyond my teacher. Writing was a solo activity, and I liked it that way. I would hardly have wanted anyone to read my finished piece, much less a work in progress.

The five-paragraph essay was the only way I knew to structure my writing, but I never encountered an assignment I could not apply it to. I grew up in an English-speaking home with parents who spent time teaching me, had an above-average understanding of the demands of academia, and was naturally predisposed to enjoy reading and writing. I was not, in the eyes of my teachers, “remedial,” and so I received no extra guidance or feedback, sailing through my English classes with decent enough grades that I raised no complaints and asked no questions.

I was taught grammar— and therefore writing, because at that time I was told that writing and grammar were inseparable— in a way that overemphasized and overassessed mechanical correctness, as described by Connors (1985). Though the instruction was vague and (as I now know) outright incorrect at times, it was very clear about the fact that there was only one “right” way to do things, and deviating from standard, prescriptivist expectations was a huge mistake. My teachers focused on the visible and easily-targeted grammar errors rather than delve into more complex writing instruction (Connors, 1985). And so, even though no one offered any real criticism of my writing, I lived in eternal fear that I was always moments away from messing up, or that I already had. It seemed to me that I had fooled everyone into thinking I could write well through the sheer dumb luck of not accidentally doing something wrong. I did not feel that I knew how to write at all, because I had no grasp of the rules I was told not to break. Since I had absolute faith in my teacher’s knowledge and authority, however, I failed to see that perhaps the problem was not with my inability to understand rules, but with the rules themselves.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

That came later, when I began to move into the next stage of the writer’s development scale: Cognitive Dissonance. In this phase, the writer begins to suspect that something is wrong with the way they have been taught writing, but has no knowledge about language to back up their hunch. They can sense that there is a problem, but cannot articulate what the problem is. They are frustrated because they lack the resources to find a better way, and so continue on as they always have, only now with a creeping dissatisfaction at the back of their mind.

In high school, some of my English teachers had good ideas about writing instruction. They introduced me to the idea of a writing process— the importance of planning and gathering information and the need for more substantial revision (Murray, 1972). For the first time, I was given the opportunity to see writing as collaborative, as suggested by Elbow (1981). One of my teachers had the class break into peer feedback groups for every major assignment, sometimes multiple rounds of review for multiple drafts. We were encouraged to move beyond catching typos and give meaningful feedback on more global issues. Additionally, some of my teachers criticized the preoccupation with standardized testing that led to an obsession with the dreaded five-paragraph essay, which is often restrictive when taught without an understanding of its purpose (Nunnally, 1991). At the same time, though, my classmates and I were gearing up to take state tests, AP exams, and IB tests. It was necessary to learn an efficient format for exams, so we had some variation of the five-paragraph essay drilled into us day in and day out, from all sides.

This kind of contradiction was everywhere. I was told I needed a revision process, but not given any revision strategies. I was told that peer feedback was necessary, but not given enough instruction to be able to craft helpful comments. I felt that I had cobbled together a very bad writing process, but had no idea how to improve upon it. It was upsetting, because I felt that I disagreed with how I had been taught and how states and schools teach writing, but I had no idea why I felt that way. I could not provide any evidence; it was just a feeling, but an irksome one that would not leave me alone.

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING

That feeling propelled me into the next stage, Building Understanding, in which the writer's perspective on writing shifts as they find alternatives to the way they have been taught. They begin to unlearn the harmful and incorrect things they have been told about language and writing. They start to view the "rules" they grew up with as a set of tools, and see how they can be applied in different situations to improve the complexity and appropriateness of their writing (Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Myhill, 2009). They understand that grammar and editing are not writing, and that different texts use different formats and language (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). They gain knowledge of the writing process and the way people learn to write.

In this third stage, I re-evaluated my beliefs about what writing is and how it should be approached. No longer do I buy into the myth of the "Eureka moment," which holds that a writer's ideas come from bursts of inspiration with no discernable source (Flower & Hayes, 1980). I have come to see writing as a way of discovering and creating meaning— rather than knowing what I plan to say before I start, I can use writing to help me find my point along the way (Elbow, 1981; Gallagher, 2011). Writing is not a linear process, but rather, recursive, able to be revised (Murray, 1972). It is collaborative, not solitary (Elbow, 1981). It can be messy. In short, writing is not sitting alone for a few hours, plunking out some words, proofreading, and calling it good. It is a vibrant, many-tiered process that involves much more than just one person trying to transcribe their thoughts on paper.

APPLYING NEW IDEAS

Armed with a new way of thinking about writing, I moved into the final stage: Applying New Ideas. Here, the writer starts to put the things they have learned to use in their own writing, and they develop their own writing process. They know techniques for prewriting and revision that they draw from for each writing project, rather than trying to write everything in one draft (Murray, 1972; Bishop, 2004). They also view other people's writing through a new lens; rather than criticizing non-standard usage, they look at the reasons the author may have deliberately or unknowingly written that way (Gallagher, 2014; Myhill, 2009). They analyze the craftsmanship of experienced writers, always looking for new tools to add to their writer's toolbox.

In this stage, I was finally able to create my own writing process. I explored strategies for getting started that are much healthier than trying to write a final draft in one go. I experimented with sets of prompts meant to help me explore a topic from various perspectives, such as Elbow's (1981) Loop Writing and Perl's Guidelines for Composing (Sargent & Paraskevas, 2005). My favorite strategy by far is plain and simple freewriting, wherein the writer writes without stopping, even if all they say is "I don't know" over and over (Elbow, 1992). The first time I tried writing without stopping or worrying about conventions for a set amount of time, I only planned to write for five or ten minutes, but I liked it so much that I just kept going. Since then, I have done at least one freewrite for every writing assignment I have had to do for school, as well as several for projects outside of class. The benefits of freewriting were made especially clear when I tried "unfreewriting," in which the writer must adhere to arbitrary rules as they write, such as "put an asterisk by every preposition" and "capitalize every R, S, V, and B wherever they appear" (Sargent & Paraskevas, 2005, p.107). I only got five lines of unfreewriting compared to a page and a half of freewriting in the same amount of time. That activity made me realize how much I have been restricting myself by trying to get everything right in my first draft. Once I was able to let go of the need to always write "perfectly," I was able to be much more productive and create a more useful first draft with lots of content I can pull from and rearrange.

Rearranging, in fact, is the major component in my other favorite activity for drafting: making a collage (Bishop, 2004). In this activity, I literally cut up my draft into chunks and physically rearranged them. Just like with freewriting, I had to get over my conception that a draft should be untouchable— I had to force myself to put scissors to paper the first time, but once I did I found it incredibly satisfying. Making a physical collage was even better than doing the same thing on a computer, because I was able to make piles and shift things around, see how my paper fit together in a real space. I was most surprised by how much ended up in my discard pile (half of my total material, or nearly so). I had been so focused on figuring out how to generate content in the first place that I failed to consider what to do with all the excess and how to whittle down what to say to focus only on what is most relevant and effective in the particular assignment.

Previously, removing words or chunks only came at the very end of my writing process, as part of my “revision,” though that term is used loosely here. I never had a good understanding of the division between revision and editing until I was well into college, and the few strategies for revision I had somehow picked up along the way were what inexperienced writers do, according to Sommers (1980). I was overly concerned with lexical repetition, and my idea was to tweak my sentences until they “sounded right.” Now when I revise, I am able to focus on finding the form of my argument (Sommers, 1980). It is significant for me to be able to revise well now, since for so long revision was one of my main problem areas in writing— I knew I had no good strategies, but I could not figure out how to acquire them.

The realization that audience, purpose, and genre should always be at the center of any writing project was completely revolutionary for me (Elbow, 1981; Flower & Hayes, 1980). Those three things should inform every single step of the writing process and every aspect of the design, but for some reason I never gave them much thought. I suppose in the past I felt that they were always the same for school projects. My audience was my teacher, my purpose was to meet the demands of the prompt, and the genre was “academic essay.” In addition, unless the assignment was particularly creative and zany, I never assumed any role besides myself. I had some idea of the variations that could crop up— I could tell that a scientific research paper was different from a literary criticism essay, for example. I just never realized how integral these elements are when creating a piece of writing. My entire perspective has shifted, and I pay much more attention to the audience, purpose, genre, and even my own role now.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The final stage, with its emphasis on application, is also where a writer starts to think about how writing is learned and how it should be taught. Once they have learned to use strategies in their own writing, they can pass them on to others.

I firmly believe that writing is learned by writing. There is no way to improve if you do not practice often. Therefore, it is important for students to write a lot, but it is also important for teachers to do so (Gallagher, 2011; Gallagher, 2014). It is simply impossible to teach

writing if you are not a writer yourself. Teachers should know what they are talking about when they assign tasks, and they should know what strategies and tools exist and how they can be employed. That way, they can give their students actual guidance. Writing teachers should write, and they should do it alongside their students and share their drafts so that students can see what a writing process looks like— namely, messy (Gallagher, 2014). I cannot think of a single time in my academic career that a teacher shared drafts of their own writing with the class until I was nearly finished with college. The difference that would have made, the effect that would have had on my early perceptions of writing, would have been incredible. As I go forward, I plan to write in my free time to hone my skills, but also write in front of my students to give them a guide.

I was stunned to realize how crucial that kind of guidance is. Though I have always preferred having examples to look at, I assumed it was just that— a personal preference. The concept of providing authentic mentor texts (Gallagher, 2014) has completely changed the way I think about writing assignments. I now realize that there should always be a range of examples of successful real-world texts provided for students to analyze and emulate, so that they understand the features that are expected in a piece from their assigned genre. Students can also look at successful pieces of writing to find strategies for increasing the complexity and effectiveness of their own work (Myhill, 2009). They can look at the language choices and structures used in particularly interesting pieces, so that they can incorporate elements into their own writing. Whatever the writing assignment, mentor texts are always immensely helpful.

In addition to mentor texts, teachers should give explicit instruction. While this seems like common sense, I was amazed by how many teachers do not give good instruction, and how much of a social justice issue it is. Many students do not have the opportunity to learn the language of schooling and the demands of academia, and they are barred and challenged at every turn by gatekeepers (Schleppegrell, 2004). It is the teacher’s job to give them skills and help them navigate, so that they can acquire the power that has been denied them because of the culture they were born into (Delpit, 1988). Teachers should be very clear about their expectations for each writing assignment. Relatedly,

they should be incredibly explicit with their grading criteria, so students know what they need to do to be successful. Explicit instruction is the cure for many of the problems that left me in the Myths and Misconceptions and Cognitive Dissonance stages for so long— if students are taught what they are supposed to be doing, they will be able to do it, instead of constantly worrying that they are messing something up.

The emphasis in writing classrooms should always be on the process. Teachers need to give students plenty of strategies that they can use along the way, and then provide adequate time for them to employ the

strategies. Because writing is collaborative, there should be frequent opportunities for students to give and receive thoughtful peer feedback (Elbow, 1981). When teachers themselves give feedback, they should focus more on rhetorical issues than formal errors, especially if the feedback is given during the process (Connors & Lunsford, 1993). The idea is not to penalize students for violating prescriptivist rules, but to give them a full toolbox that can be used to create interesting, complex writing that addresses the audience, purpose, and genre of each individual writing project in appropriate and effective ways.

REFERENCES

- Bloor, T. & Bloor, M. (2013). *The functional analysis of English* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bishop, W. (2004). *Acts of revision: A guide for writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Breuch, L.-A. M. (2002). Post-process “pedagogy”: A philosophical exercise. *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, 22(1), 119-150.
- Connors, R. J. (1985). Mechanical correctness as a focus in composition instruction. *College Composition and Communication*, 36(1), 61-72.
- Connors, R. J. & Lunsford, A. A. (1993). Teachers’ rhetorical comments on student papers. *College Composition and Communication*, 44(2), 200-223.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people’s children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 280-298.
- Derewianka, B. (1999). *Exploring how texts work*. Maryborough, Australia: Australian Print Group.
- Elbow, P. (1981) *Writing with power*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Elbow, P. (1992). Freewriting and the problem of wheat and tares. In J. Moxley (Ed.), *Writing and Publishing for Academic Authors* (p. 33-47). New York, NY: University Press of America.
- Flower, L. & Hayes, J. (1980). The cognition of discovery: Defining a rhetorical problem. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(1), 21-32.
- Flower, L., & Hayes, J. (1981). A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 365-387. doi:10.2307/356600
- Gallagher, K. (2011). *Write like this: Teaching real-world writing through modeling and mentor texts*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Gallagher, K. (2014). Making the most of mentor texts. *Educational Leadership* 71(7), 28-33.
- Hoey, M. (2008). What can linguistics tell us about writing skills? In Forey, G. & Thomson, G. (Eds.), *Text Type and Texture* (pp. 175-190). London, United Kingdom: Equinox Publishing, Ltd.
- Kent, T. (1999). *Post-process theory: beyond the writing process paradigm*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press.
- Murray, D. (1972). Teach writing as a process not product. In T. Newkirk & L.C. Miller (Eds.), *The*

essential Don Murray: Lessons from America's greatest writing teacher (pp. 6-26). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Myhill, D. (2009). Becoming a designer: Trajectories of linguistic development. In R. Beard, D. Myhill, J. Riley, & M. Nystrand (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of writing development* (pp.402-414). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Nunnally, T. (1991). Breaking the five-paragraph-theme barrier. *The English Journal*, 80(1), 67-71. doi:10.2307/818100

Sargent, M.E. & Paraskevas, C.C. (2005). *Conversations about writing*. Toronto, CA: Nelson.

Schleppegrell, M.J. (2004). *The language of schooling: A functional linguistics perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Shaughnessy, M. (1976). Diving in: An introduction to basic writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 27(3), 234-239. doi:10.2307/357036

Sommers, N. (1980). Revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers. *College Composition and Communication*, 31, 378-388.