

Writing with Tattoo Ink: Composing that Gets Under the Skin

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Phillips describes the process of tattoo compositions as a collaborative writing process that occurs between an artist and a client. For the client, the composing process involves making decisions about what she wants her tattoo to communicate to other people about her. For the tattoo artist, the composing process involves making informed decisions about placement, effect, design, ink, and color based on the client's request. Ultimately, the process of composition, no matter the medium, involves learning about a new genre, making informed decisions, revising, and considering the trajectory, or path, of a text whether it's in the skin or on a page.

The things that we remember about the people we love compose indelible images in our imaginations and our memories. I'm going to share two stories with a base common to both: tattoos as an editable written process. The first story belongs to my grandpa and the second story belongs to my friend, Derek. Although neither story is directly mine, together they inform my understanding of the writing process and delineate changes in tattoo genres over time in interesting ways.

My grandpa was born a little more than a century ago—1908 to be exact. For much of his adult life, he was a coal miner in a deep mine operation in Southern Illinois. Long before I knew him, he was tough. After he retired, I spent many summer days sitting with him after “playing” at work in his garden. He'd roll up his sleeves and I would see a funny looking greenish-black eight-inch-long smudge on his inside left forearm. When I was seven, I remember repeatedly asking my grandpa what that smudge was. Little kids are persistent...they will keep asking until they either drive you nuts or get an acceptable answer. I was no exception. Grandpa told me that the smudge was “a mistake” he made in his youth and that was about it. My dad, not overly fond of my grandpa as it turned out, told me that grandpa had a tattoo of a

naked lady on his arm. It didn't look like one. My dad told me that later in his life my grandpa "got religious" and didn't want the tattoo anymore. There weren't any lasers back then to remove the lady in question, so he strapped a bar of lye soap—a very caustic substance—to his arm until the tattoo blurred and you could no longer identify its "taboo" features. In effect, he edited what he thought was "a mistake." Because he is dead, I can't ask my grandpa why he made the decision to write on his skin, why he wanted to remove it later, or what compelled him to try to do so anyway. However, since curiosity dies hard and my grandpa is no longer around to ask, I wanted to ask someone else about those decisions made throughout the tattoo process in order to see if it is similar to the writing process.

Without a doubt, Derek Casey has helped me understand how those decisions get made. Derek is a twenty-four-year-old college student who is a tattoo enthusiast, collaborator, and composer. Derek has a number of tattoos, and each one has a story affiliated with it. Unlike my grandpa, Derek likes to talk about his collection and how he worked with his artists to design and compose each one. Derek has a pineapple on his right hand to represent his place of birth, Hawaii, where there is a rich and long tradition of tattoo art. Above that on Derek's forearm he has an assortment of images that he

let his artist compose sight unseen on his skin. This reflects a trust built on earlier cooperation with his artist, Scott Kalina. Derek said, "Scott knows the importance of my identity as a half-Mexican American. And the tattoo of the skeleton with a sombrero shows this identity. When I saw the completed tattoo inked on my skin, I was really happy with the result because it reflected so many of our conversations and friendship." Fundamentally, Scott and Derek were functioning as team collaborators in a kind of blind-faith peer review. Unquestionably, many writing situations call for the same kind of brainstorming, partnership, and trust that Derek and Scott established over time.

My conversation with Derek about his tattoos made me reflect on my grandpa's feelings regarding the writing on his skin. He felt ashamed of something that didn't have anything to do with the content of his character. Nevertheless, his composition—a tattoo—had a kind of trajectory in his social circle that deeply upset



Figure 1: Derek Casey outside of the Lock 16 Café next to the I&M Canal in LaSalle, Illinois on October 9, 2011.

him. Trajectory, as I understand it, means the path followed by an object moving through space; it is the way that something travels beyond the original intent. As my grandpa moved through the space of his life, this object written just under the dermis of his skin changed its meaning. Grandpa revised the composition, but could not erase it entirely.

Before I talked to Derek, I did some initial research on a useful website.¹ In the not too distant past, many Americans associated tattoos with sideshows, sailors, bikers, and, in my grandpa's case, working class coalminers. Now, tattoos are more readily accepted and people who get them are as varied as the designs, styles, and reasons for getting tattoos. Writing in this genre is done by injecting ink just under the surface, or in the dermis, of the skin. Writing on the skin has history, trajectory, and it represents personal associations and partnerships with artists. Together the client and artist create a "written" composition that is kind of "life-writing." Derek said, "A meaningful tattoo reflects individual taste, style, artistry, and identity. What bothers me most is the commercial nature of some tattoo requests and shops. There is a perception that it is 'cool' to have a tattoo like everyone else's. That's not cool; that's conformity and commercialization of a unique art form." What Derek describes, and objects to, is the kind of composing that does not have any "below-the-surface" research, meaning, or trajectory.

First, Derek told me about the stories behind his tattoos. He also explained the collaborative writing process because he is learning how to create tattoos as an apprentice in a reputable tattoo studio. Ultimately, he explained why he decided to have words and images permanently written into his skin. The stories relate to his life and his experiences and shape who he is as a person. This helps him stay focused on his longer-term plans and goals. He said, "I had the words 'Hobo Life' written across my fingers because I wanted a permanent reminder of where I have been in the past to carry forward into my future. I want to be able to stay humble and appreciate where I have come from and how much my friends have meant to me when I have needed them. Basically, tattoos are an extension of who you are and how you represent yourself to the world."

Of course, there is more to Derek's story. A deliberate understanding of the tattoo process takes a long time to learn how to do well, if one takes it as a serious "written" art form, which Derek does. "There are people who learn how to make quick compositions, but they garner neither respect nor gather much skill because there is very little critical inquiry incorporated into their 'writing' process," Derek said. Derek indicated that most people getting a first tattoo take a long time to make a decision, and when they do they want their tattoo to look *exactly* like an existing image. They don't usually want much

feedback or collaboration from the artist, which, Derek insists, makes the best tattoos: “They end up with boring compositions that don’t show much expression or convey much meaning.”

When I thought about this as a writer and reader, I realized that those less familiar with tattoo genres are imitating an existing “real world” genre, but no depth or revision is incorporated into the decision-making process; hence, the final product may not hold one’s attention or imagination—in fact, to a writer, it is a *de facto* form of plagiarism. As a reader I juxtaposed Derek’s analogy with a bad pulp-fiction novel that one picks up for a dime at a yard sale versus reading a first-edition timeless work of art in a rare book room: the first is disposable; the second is enduring and leaves a lasting impression.

Next, Derek described how he is learning to “write” in a tattoo genre. He said, “Anyone can get a certificate that says they can tattoo, but they don’t really know what they are doing in the collaboration process, and they have no historical understanding of the different kinds of tattooing like ‘Old School Sailor Jerry Tattoos’ or ‘Native Hawaiian Tattoos,’ ‘The Japanese Tradition,’ and so on. It is a different kind of writing process and you have to experiment on different parts of the body to learn how to ‘write’ in that place and across that context. For example, the ink has to be injected differently on a boney surface as compared with a muscular or fleshier surface. You have to think about the color of the ink and the skin tone. The movement of the muscles under the skin can stretch the image and make it look odd. A careful, as you say, ‘writer’ pays attention to those details.”

The process that Derek describes is a lot like learning to write in different genres. Derek notes that the composition process involves multiple drafts and revisions. For tattoo compositions, storyboards and critical feedback on ideas are crucial steps along the path to the final product. Derek explained that the best examples of great tattoo “writing” are usually collaborative in nature. For example, Derek and his artists worked as a team on a large tattoo image that is being inked onto his back. He told his artists his initial ideas and overarching themes. Next, Scott Kalina and Adam Kamphaus, an ISU art school alumnus, collectively drew a large mock up. The mock up was hung on the wall at the back of the artists’ tattoo studio and was revised, redrawn, and reedited for months before one line of ink was ever placed on Derek’s back. This led me to consider tattoo production in greater detail, for I wondered how a tattoo artist learns to write on a human subject.

Derek explained how tattoo artists learn to write on people. He described that in the past, some tattoo artists “wrote” on a dead pig’s skin first. An iconic tattoo artist named Norman “Sailor Jerry” Collins (b. 1911–1973) used this method, and it is likely the method that my grandpa’s artist used. In

a documentary highlighting Norman's work, Norman said he learned how to do tattoo art on pigs before he worked on people. The skin of a Chester White—a kind of pig with light pinkish skin—worked well as a “practice” canvas. There is no need to call the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, however. Derek distinguished that that was what people used to do. Now, Derek said that there is a special kind of practice surface that one can purchase to try out different writing styles, gestures, methods, and tools before one writes on a person. Artists also compose on the surface of oranges, grapefruit, cantaloupes, and tangerines because the skin of these varieties of fruit is thick and works well as an inexpensive practice surface. Nevertheless, nothing is as good as the real thing—human skin—and many apprentices practice on each other before they tattoo a paying client. Derek has not earned the right to write on a person because he has been an apprentice for less than a year. At this point in his apprenticeship, he makes a series of thumb-nail sketches for the client, digitizes the best roughs, revises the drawings, experiments with color combinations, seeks expert advice and client input, and once approved, transfers the designs onto the client, but he does not do the inking yet.

Just as any writer needs time and practice to learn and master a new genre, the ideal way for tattoo artists to learn the genre is through a professional, long-term (1 to 5 year) apprenticeship with a master-artist. The artist shows the apprentice how the process works, how to keep the artist and client safe from infections, how to maintain and operate the equipment, how to run a business, and how to work together with the client and other artists to create the best product and artwork.

Finally, I come full circle and think about my grandpa's day, which overlapped with Norman Collins's. I learned from a website that the modern tattoo machine started with Thomas Edison's Engraving Machine back in the 1800s. I don't know how my grandpa's tattoo was created exactly, but I do know how he tried to “edit” it. Derek explained that the tools used depend entirely on the genre of the tattoo. For example, “prison tattoos” have a lot of meaning to the individual participants, with a lot of emotional, spiritual, and redemptive themes, but the technology is pretty crude. In a contemporary tattoo studio, the equipment is becoming much lighter, which eases wrist and back strain; there are more than 100 colors of inks, and new rotary guns have changed the potential for complex compositions and creative expression.

One thing that Derek and I did not discuss was the process of laser tattoo removal, so I researched it later. Early in our discussion, Derek said that he would not have any tattoos removed because they reminded him of his personal history and the community of which he is a part: one that means

so much to his identity and future career prospects. Another friend I talked with about tattoos said that she is having all of hers slowly removed with lasers. She had a partner's name tattooed on her arm when she was young. They fell out of love, so she had the tattoo edited with additional ink, but the name keeps bleeding through to the surface. Both the tattoo process and laser removal are painful, but having a tattoo removed is more expensive than having the original "writing" placed under the skin. Curiously, yellow and green are the most difficult colors to remove, and black and blue are the easiest to remove. Ultimately, no laser removal treatment is one-hundred-percent effective.² It seems that "life writing" like this requires forethought to be visualized over the long haul.

Once again, there are useful connections applicable to writers working within a new genre. If one is to write something for a trajectory outside of a classroom setting, like a letter to the editor, an online blog, a community action fundraiser, or a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article, one needs to consider the audience uptake—how readers might respond to the written work—in addition to the writing and research practices necessary for any genre's effective production. To get more to the point, I don't want to write something that will cause me great regret later. I don't believe that one can fully control this though: all one can really do is think, practice first and frequently, get some helpful feedback, edit the work, collaborate, and keep at it. One may not end up with a "perfect" composition, but one is more likely to have created something meaningful, or useful. For the writer, depending on the context, the composition can be edited, but once it's out there, it's out there, as both Derek's and my grandpa's stories demonstrate.

Thanks to Derek Casey, Scott Kalina, and Adam Kamphaus of *The Sunken Ship Tattoo* studio in LaSalle, Illinois for sharing their composing process with me.³

Endnotes

1. If you'd like to see how this stuff works and where I got some of my information, see Tracy V. Wilson's article on HowStuffWorks: <http://health.howstuffworks.com/skin-care/beauty/skin-and-lifestyle/tattoo.htm>.
2. The following website, HowStuffWorks, has more interesting facts regarding laser tattoo removal: <http://health.howstuffworks.com/skin-care/beauty/skin-and-lifestyle/tattoo-removal3.htm>.
3. If you want more information about the artists, see www.facebook.com/thesunkenship.



Lisa Phillips is a PhD student in English Studies at Illinois State. She does not have a tattoo because she does not like pain. She thinks designing one for someone else could be cool, though. Lisa can imagine her Grandpa Stan learning his A, B, Cs in a once new one-room school-house like the one she drew.