GRASSROOTS WRITING RESEARCH JOURNAL

Issue 15.1 – Fall 2024

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-64617-526-0

The Illinois State University Writing Program
Stevenson Hall 133
Illinois State University
Campus Box 4240
Normal, IL 61790-4240

Produced in consultation with the English Department's Publications Unit.

Interior layout by Stipes Publishing L.L.C.

Printed by Stipes Publishing L.L.C., Champaign, Illinois.

GWRJ Mission

The *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (GWRJ) is dedicated to publishing writing research by everyday writers like you—like all of us.

Who we are

We are committed to publishing GWRJ authors who are undergraduate writing students, graduate student teachers, university faculty members, high school teachers and students, middle school teachers and students—anyone! Because we are all writers and writing researchers.

What we do

We encourage people to write about any range of subjects that intersect with writing research. You might describe how you practice writing in your lives, how writing works toward specific writer and community goals, how you're learning writing as a complex activity over time, or how writing makes things happen in your worlds.

What we publish

We look forward to receiving submissions for genres we often publish (like full-length GWRJ articles), and we are always excited to experiment with new genres and media whether they're some we've created recently (GWRJ Short, Documenting Literate Activity) or ones we hope you might create and share with us.

Visit our GWRJ webpage for more information and an archive of past issues since 2010.

www.isuwriting.com/grassroots-writing-research-journal

GWRJ Writing Facts

We have all learned stories about what writing is and how we learn and practice writing. Since our GWRJ mission is to publish complex, messy, different kinds of stories about writing and writers, we hope these GWRJ Facts make clear how we think about writing.

GWRJ Fact: Everyone is a writer.

More than privileging any one kind of writing, we think it's important to publish accessible writing content, style, and everyday grassroots research from a wide range of writers.

GWRJ Fact: All kinds of writing are valuable.

We encourage writers to use a more informal, conversational tone and style without privileging formal or overtly "academic" language to be more accessible to readers.

GWRJ Fact: Writing advice doesn't work for everyone all the time.

We know there is no one piece of writing advice that works for all writers and all writing situations because people learn and write differently across different writing situations.

GWRJ Fact: Writing is a messy activity.

We know that writing doesn't have neat formulas for success because writing is a complex activity that involves challenges that change over time.

GWRJ Fact: Writers learn from other writers.

We encourage writers to show readers how we learn about writing and specific genres through research and practice, not by being told what to do in school.

GWRJ Fact: We are always learning about writing.

We know that no one is simply a "novice" or "master" writer because we are all learning writing in progress as we encounter different writing situations.

GWRJ Fact: We don't all learn writing in the same way.

We know that learning writing is not universal (or unique) because we learn writing in specific ways, moments, and genres that work for us–until they don't.

GWRJ Fact: Writing is never general.

We encourage writers to show how writing is specific all the time and related to the genres we write in, the languages and tools we use to write, and the cultures and communities we write for.

Contents

From the Editors

Janine Blue and Rachel Gramer

As our 15th year of publication at the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* begins, we are excited to share this new issue with our readers. We hope you enjoy this new issue as much as we do.

An Overview of GWRJ 15.1

- Who's writing in this issue? GWRJ issue 15.1 offers a diverse lineup of articles from writers in middle school, college, graduate school, and beyond.
- What topics are people writing about? GWRJ issue 15.1 includes articles about naming children, horseback riding, notebooking about music, using tabs on digital devices, researching the Bachelor Nation fandom, and how people are trying to BeReal on social media.
- How are people writing about these topics? GWRJ issue 15.1 contains several GWRJ genres to make visible that we can share our understanding of writing complexity in many different ways: full length GWRJ articles, GWRJ Shorts, Picturing Literate Activity pieces, and Conversations with GWRJ Authors (with that author's previous issue article reprinted here for readers).

What We're Doing in the GWRJ

The Writing Program at Illinois State University (ISU) relies on a framework we call P-CHAT, or pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory to teach writing as complex literate activity in the world. Our CHAT-grounded research terms and practices, namely writing research and genre research, provide frameworks and tools for all writers to do things with writing that exists in the world. We use CHAT-grounded research tools to do things like:

- Identify, trace, and describe how we actually write;
- Name, describe, and interrogate how writers take up genre conventions;

- Produce, assess, and revise texts in specific genres and writing situations; and
- Figure out how to use our writing research knowledge and experiences in the future.

In GWRJ issue 15.1, we feature 14 articles that bring new perspectives and familiar voices together to describe how people research, analyze, and do everyday writing, genres, and literate activity in the world.

What Are This Issue's Themes?

As editors, we see a few themes in GWRJ issue 15.1 that you can read more about in this letter:

- Theme #1: Different Kinds of Research for Writers
- Theme #2: Doing Genre Research and Analysis
- Theme #3: Literate Activity as Who We Are
- Theme #4: Literate Activity as What We Do

What we continue to find so exciting and important about these GWRJ issue 15.1 articles and themes is the continued focus on writing identity and community. They remind us that, while writing is a particular and personal journey for each of us, no one ever truly writes alone.

GWRJ Editorial Content for Readers and Writers

To begin GWRJ issue 15.1, we've included two pieces ahead of this letter about who we are and what we do: the **GWRJ Mission** and **GWRJ Writing Facts**. We hope that these pieces show you our views on writing and the work of the journal for readers, contributors, and other writing researchers engaging with this issue.

We have also brought two pieces of editorial content from the back of the journal to the front: **Researching for the GWRJ** and **Writing for the GWRJ**. You'll find these pieces after this letter. We hope that they show you how we see people doing the work of researching literate activity and writing pieces for the GWRJ, in ways that we get to see all the time as editors. So whether you're considering submitting something to the journal or just experimenting with some kind of writing or genre research, we hope you'll find these texts useful resources for investigating and writing up how people, tools, and situations affect our writing and writing identities in complex ways.

Theme #1: Different Kinds of Research for Writers

We want to direct your attention to how the first four pieces in GWRJ issue 15.1 show us different kinds of research in practice, using different research methods depending on people's antecedent knowledge and writing goals.

- First, **Joyce Walker** and **Rachel Gramer** discuss CHAT as a powerful research tool for understanding the intricacies of writing. They share one method, a CHAT Map, to offer insight into how writers can use tools to research our own and others' writing practices.
- Next, **Ella Kruse** delves into content research in their analysis of the vibrant fandom of "The Bachelor" series. Ella explains how the fan community of Bachelor Nation communicates as a discourse community and how what's happening on social media is as crucial as the show's content itself.
- Following that, **Jessica Kreul** shares their journey of navigating ISU internships in their GWRJ Short. Through their personal experiences and explaining their research practices, Jessica emphasizes the importance of tailored research, from content research for their interview with the ISU Publications Unit to genre analysis to prepare for their work with the *Grassroots* journal.
- Finally, **Steve Lamos** rounds off the research exploration in their article about notebooking, a writing research method they've used to understand the various, complex literacies around them. As a drummer in a band, Steve traces the rhythm patterns they see while documenting the various literate activities they engage in, showcasing how dynamic and alive literate activity is.

Theme #2: Doing Genre Research and Analysis

We then see how GWRJ issue 15.1 articles turn to exploring genre research and analysis of various kinds of genres, showing us we can analyze conventions and practices around any genre activity from people to stickers.

- This reprint of **Alicia Shupe's** article on reading people as genres highlights how societal expectations and representations don't always come from a moral viewpoint. Through tracing the history of their dyed hair, Alicia examines the conventions people have placed upon them throughout their life and how people's conventions change over time and through social transformation.

- The transcript of **Alicia Shupe's** interview with **Janine Blue** for Conversations with GWRJ Authors is featured after Alicia's reprinted article. This sit-down focuses on how Alicia came up with the idea for their article and the different forms of research they implemented to align with their writing researcher identity.
- Following that, **Felicity Schryer's** full-length article discusses Beatles stickers as texts and fans' creative reception of them. Through exploring their love for the Beatles and the history of Beatles stickers, Felicity also explains how Beatles stickers function as simple yet intricate forms of communication among fans, carrying inside jokes and hidden meanings only dedicated fans would understand.
- Finally, **Laurel Staniszewski** also analyzes the genre of stickers but focuses on the conversations around book stickers. Through an exploration of sticker advertisement, Laurel considers how the need for book stickers from corporations such as Netflix, and their reception from readers who pick up the books in stores, don't always align.

Theme #3: Literate Activity as Who We Are

In the remaining GWRJ issue 15.1 articles, we see people explicitly doing literate activity work in various ways. In these pieces, writers focus on how literate activity is a part of everyone's identity that should be examined to understand ourselves better.

- **Janine Blue's** Picturing Literate Activity centers on her laptop's many internet browser tabs and Google profiles, highlighting the reflection of their different identities in digital realms. Using images, Janine illustrates the close connection between their online literate activities, profiles, and open tabs. They also talk about how their way of perceiving and engaging with the world heavily influences their digital literacy practices.
- Next, **Caitlin Migon** explains the communication app BeReal, which fosters self-acceptance and genuine connections among users through its quick, front-facing selfie posting. Caitlin inspects the app's features using P-CHAT terms, breaking down the literate activity into dissectible parts and drawing on their previous experience sharing selfies on social media to underscore BeReal's potential for promoting self-acceptance and nurturing lasting friendships.
- It is only fitting that the following article is authored by **Chloe Migon**, one half of the twin sister duo of Caitlin and Chloe featured in this issue. Chloe documents the humorously complex literate activity behind

baby naming. By using P-CHAT terms and the antecedent knowledge gained from their mother's baby naming process, Chloe explores how parents might come to name their children, especially twins.

Theme #4: Literate Activity as What We Do

GWRJ issue 15.1's final three pieces focus on specific tools and spaces that writers use to do literate activity in our daily lives.

- **Grace Betts'** Picturing Literate Activity delves into the unique ways they and their friend use their day planners, illustrating the individualized nature of this literate activity. Using photos, Grace demonstrates how personalization transforms stationery through unique codes, abbreviations, and symbols only the writer can decipher. They also emphasize that, despite shared calendar dates, the events and experiences within each seven days vary significantly among individuals.
- Next, **Ella Bickerman** discusses equestrian literacies and uptake in their full-length article, exploring the literate activity behind humans and horses reading each other to find ways to form trust and companionship. Additionally, Ella goes over the tools and activities used to do this work and how equestrian athletes use their discourse communities to become better riders and horse handlers.
- Lastly, to close out GWRJ issue 15.1, **Didar Hossain** shows us their work desk in their Picturing Literate Activity piece. Their images allow the reader to step into Didar's writing and research space, and their narrative details the magic they feel comes from their desk, aiding them on their journey as a graduate student and teacher and through complex literate activities.

The End? Submitting to the GWRJ

Our GWRJ issue 15.1 concludes with **Submitting to the GWRJ**. As we continue in our 15th year of publication, we continue to receive a wide range of articles from writing researchers interested in publishing their research in the journal. In the coming year, we hope to continue to receive submissions that reflect diverse perspectives, explore distinctive genres, and provide a richer understanding of the culturally and historically informed spaces in which our writing practices are embedded. If you'd like to submit something for consideration for publication, we hope you will.

Researching for the GWRJ

Since we know our approach to everyday—or grassroots—writing research might be pretty unfamiliar to a lot of people, we have developed some questions to get you started on your writing research and to show you how we see people approach writing research in the GWRJ.

Getting Started on Writing Research

What might you write about?

Ask yourself: "What is it about writing in the world that is interesting or meaningful to me right now?"

How might you narrow your focus?

Ask yourself: "What kinds of genres are people writing in? Where? When? How? What specific writing practices are visible or invisible in this situation?"

How might you begin with your story?

Ask yourself: "What previous experiences do I have with this writing practice or situation? Where was I? When? Who else was there? What tools was I using? How did I feel?"

Who else has written about this before?

You can visit the GWRJ Past Issues webpage to find a link to the GWRJ Tags that you can use to search our past issue archive for articles by topic and writing terms and concepts. From there, you can locate existing GWRJ articles to see how people have shared their own stories about similar kinds of writing practices and situations.

What might you research?

Ask yourself: "What can I unpack and/or learn more about this writing practice or situation?"

How might you do your writing research?

Ask yourself: "What would I need to do in order to unpack and/or learn more about this writing practice or situation?"

What if you're not sure how to do writing research?

You can think about all kinds of research: things you have done in the past, things you may have been asked to do in school, things you may have done to research things other than writing, and things you have heard about but haven't practiced before.

Some potential research methods include:

- Narrative writing: telling stories about past and/or present writing experiences to make meaning out of your understanding of writing practices or situations.
- Survey or interview: asking other people questions about their experiences to expand your understanding of a specific writing practice or situation.
- Creating an archive: collecting writing texts to look at patterns or practices across different people, times, places, media, or situations.
- Memory work: using your memory of personal experience to do narrative writing, make lists, or map out something you've done in the past.
- Mapping or drawing: creating visual maps or drawings to figure out some of the complexities of a writing practice or situation.

Who else has done this kind of research before?

You can visit the GWRJ Past Issues webpage to locate existing GWRJ articles to see how people have done their own writing research, whether they're writing about writing practices and situations that are similar to yours or not.

You can also search for writing research beyond the GWRJ, to find other published research about writing practices. You can consider popular and academic sources of information that you find online and bring in other kinds of writing terms that can be relevant and accessible to a wide range of readers.

How might you plan to do your writing research?

Ask yourself: "What will I need to do to help my research be credible and reliable?"

Depending on your research method, consider what you will need to write or collect, what you will need to talk to people about and when, what you will need to do and where, and who you will need to ask for research support.

GWRJ Approaches to Writing Research

Investigating my own writing practices

- How do I produce specific kinds of writing for specific situations? Using what tools? For what purposes?
- Who do I make these kinds of texts for? How do people use them? Where and when?
- Where am I when I do this kind of writing? When?
- How do I feel when I am doing this kind of writing? Why?
- How have I learned to produce this kind of writing for what kinds of situations?
- How have I used writing as a tool to do specific kinds of research? How does my research impact my writing practice?
- How has my writing for this kind of situation changed over time?
- How do I use this kind of writing across different situations?
- How does this writing practice allow me to participate in specific cultures and communities?
- What cultural norms and practices do I have to understand in order to produce this kind of writing?
- What are the limitations around this writing practice?

Investigating others' writing practices

- How do other people participate in specific kinds of writing practices? Using what tools? For what purposes?
- Who do people make these kinds of texts for? Where and when?
- How does this writing practice allow people to participate in specific cultures and communities?
- What cultural norms and practices do people have to understand in order to produce this kind of writing?
- What are the limitations around this writing practice?

- How do different people participate in this writing practice differently? Why?
- What can I learn about this by observing people participate in this writing activity?
- What can I learn about this by asking people about their participation in this writing activity?
- How have different people learned to produce this kind of writing differently? Why?
- How do people use this writing practice to generate ideas for research and for writing? Or to revise their writing?
- How do people use this writing practice as a tool to conduct research?
- How has people's participation in this writing practice changed over time? Why?
- How do people use this kind of writing differently across different situations? Across cultural, linguistic, and/or geographic boundaries?

Investigating a genre in use

- What do I already know about this genre? How?
- How do people create texts in this genre? Who are they? What tools do they use? Why do they make texts in this genre?
- What kinds of distinctive features does this genre have? How do people recognize these features as necessary for this genre?
- Who uses texts in this genre? How do people use them? Where and when?
- How do writers learn how to produce texts in this genre?
- What are the technological and/or social implications of this genre?
- Where does this genre sometimes begin? Where does it go?
- How has this genre changed over time?
- How do people use this genre in different writing situations? Across cultural and/or geographic boundaries?

Writing for the GWRJ

Some GWRJ Genre Conventions

We have all learned stories about what writing and writers are "supposed to be." Since the GWRJ publishes different kinds of stories about writing and writers, we hope these genre conventions about GWRJ article content help people who want to write for the GWRJ.

Accessibility to readers

GWRJ articles do not need to privilege any one kind of writing, but they should be accessible to a wide range of readers in their content, style, and approach to research.

Tone and style

GWRJ articles do not need to privilege formal or overtly "academic" language, but should instead use a more informal, conversational tone and style.

Writing as complex

GWRJ articles do not need to tell other people what to do when writing, but should instead show readers how writing is a complex activity that requires more than simple advice.

Making learning writing visible

GWRJ articles do not need to teach other people how to write for any or all writing situations, but should instead show readers how writers can learn about writing and genres through research and practice.

Writing as lifelong learning

GWRJ articles do not need to be narratives of writing success or triumph, but should instead show readers that writing is a lifelong learning activity involving challenges and accomplishments.

Addressing complex readers

GWRJ articles do not need to be aimed at "novice" or "master" writers, but should instead show readers that we are all learning writing in progress as we encounter writing situations that are both familiar and new to us.

Writers learning differently

GWRJ articles do not need to represent ways of learning writing as universal or unique, but should instead show readers how someone learned about writing in some specific ways in some specific moments and genres.

Writing as never general

GWRJ articles do not need to make statements about writing in general, but should instead show readers how writing is specific all the time and related to the genres we write in, the languages and tools we use to write, and the cultures and communities we write for.

GWRJ Writing Resources

Visit our "Writing for the GWRJ" webpage to find resources for writing for the journal.

www.isuwriting.com/writing-for-gwrj

What are GWRJ genres?

Descriptions of all current GWRJ genres, their evolving genre conventions, and lists of examples published in the GWRJ

- GWRJ full-length articles
- GWRJ Shorts
- Documenting Literate Activity
- GWRJ Co-Interviews
- Picturing Literate Activity
- Grassroots Graphic Articles
- GWRJ Uptakes
- Multimodal Digital Grassroots Writing Research

What makes a great GWRJ article?

In brief videos, 7 GWRJ writers and editors share insights about what they think makes a great GWRJ writing research article.

CHAT and Literate Activity: Research and Writing Tools for the Complexities You Didn't Call For

Joyce R. Walker and Rachel Gramer

Joyce Walker and Rachel Gramer unpack CHAT and literate activity as writing superpower tools that all writers can use to better understand how and why writing is complex all of the time. They use CHAT-grounded research terms to share one writing research method to make writing visible as a complex activity: a CHAT Map.

> "All I can say is, I hope that whoever decided that CHAT should be the focus of this writing class is fired and then put in jail."
> —Anonymous student

The purpose of the above quotation is to illustrate that we don't "do CHAT" in the Illinois State University Writing Program because it's easy, or because it has some incredibly simple structure that will cause people to immediately become incredible writers forever. We don't use CHAT because writers encounter it here and say something like, "Wow, this is so great! Why did no one ever teach me this before?" Although some people do sometimes say that, we're going to assume you might not be one of them (yet?).

We use CHAT-grounded research terms to investigate **literate activity** because writing is complex. And despite the many simple models for creating supposedly clear and concise writing all the time—and the millions of textbooks and self-help books sold every year that claim they can help you to become a "good writer"—the fact is that writing happens every day across time and space, in very different settings, with and for different kinds of people, who all have different kinds of language habits and cultural traditions,

By **literate activity**, we mean all the various things that people do, all the tools we use, all the interactions we have when we are writing in the world. You can follow this QR code to check out the ISU Writing Program website's Literate activity terms page (n.d.) for more terms and definitions related to literate activity.

using different kinds of tools in different ways. And well, that much different is endlessly complex in ways that "good writer" doesn't account for—and no single set of "good writer" skills can do enough to account for all of these complex differences either. So it's more important to us to say: if something isn't simple or easy, let's not treat it like it is.

Let us illustrate.

Fact: Writing Is Complex When Ideas and Texts Are Remediated Over Time

Version #1 Is Born

This text—the one you are reading right now—started off as a presentation that one of us (Joyce) gave to teachers-researchers at the University of Illinois Center for Writing Studies in 2016. That presentation began with Joyce sitting, with a laptop that she doesn't have any more, in an apartment where she doesn't live any more, on a sofa that she does still have (Figure 1). We'll call this text **Version #1**.

Figure 1: Where Joyce was sitting when she started a version of this text in 2017.

Version #2 Is Born

But! Then this text was changed substantively for a talk that Joyce gave to writing teachers at the University of Illinois in 2017. This is the one that you can access if you follow the QR code to the ISU Writing Program's Literate activity resources page (n.d.) (Figure 2). We'll call this text **Version #2**.

Figure 2: A QR code that can take you to the Version #2 of this text.

Version #3 The Text Just Keeps Coming

But wait, there's more! The other one of us (Rachel) then asked if we could **remediate** the text shared on the program's website into an article to publish in the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. That's what you're reading right now: a co-authored piece that's meant for writers like you. And so we have **Version #3**.

What's remediation?

"**Genre remediation** is the practice of transforming a text in one genre into a different genre. It is an activity that requires writers to mediate (change, transform) something again (re-), including altering its conventions to work toward different goals and/or in different writing situations" (Genre research terms, n.d.).

Because we have multiple versions of this piece of writing, we can use this writing situation to share a couple of facts about how writing is complex in ways that we experience over time. There are lots of writing facts in the world and in writing studies research, but we'll just unpack a couple of them to keep this part brief(ish).

Fact: Texts Are Different Than What Writers Plan and Expect

According to 2017 Joyce, the first "text was different than the one I thought I would create when I sat down to write it," and "[the second] version of the text is very different from the one I created for [the first] setting" (Walker 2017, p. 1). However, both of these first two versions did have some shared goals: to try to convince people that it was OK, and not really all that scary, to allow our literacies to be complex; and that learning in complex situations, while it can feel confusing at first, is ultimately a great way to learn content (i.e., how to write a particular kind of text or to write in a particular situation) while also learning to be flexible and resilient when moving around in a world that is saturated with literacies. We'll be honest: besides wanting to remediate

this for the GWRJ, we didn't have any other explicit plans or expectations for Version #3, but as the authors, we don't have control over the life this version might live, or how people who read it might remediate it in the future.

But even as it's in progress as I (Rachel) am writing this sentence right now, my plans for when I started this remediation have already changed, too, based on many things:

1. How long I procrastinated starting a first draft of Version #3;
2. How much time I've got right now in my Tuesday to get a Version #3 draft going;
3. What I'm remembering I loved about Version #2 for teachers that we're revising for writers instead of deleting;
4. Things I wrote that made this article too long and had to be cut, hopefully to create whole other future GWRJ articles; and
5. My remembering of what I loved about these writing ideas that's made me feel like I can let go of my initial plan to control exactly what I was going to write (I do this a lot—Type A folks, I see you) and instead pursue whatever trajectory this piece of writing is taking me on right now on a gray Midwestern March afternoon in 2024.

Fact: Texts and Their Writers Move Around a Lot

Texts don't just take us to thinking places we didn't know we'd go. They also move around a lot in the physical world. Consider this quote, also from 2017 Joyce, "Over a single year, this text [was] in many different **places** and … interacted with many different **people** and **tools**. It contains multitudes" (Walker 2017, p. 1, emphasis added). Now, in 2024, Version #3 is again in different places: Rachel's using yet another different laptop to start this remediation and sitting on yet another different couch (though it's also blue: not unrelated because she really loved Joyce's blue couch before she got one) and still working on a first full draft on a plane to Texas to see the 2024 solar eclipse (as you know, writing takes so much time).

This Version #3 is also being co-authored by two people who didn't really know each other at all in 2017 (we had met once at a conference in Tampa, FL), but have now been working together as teachers, researchers, administrators, and friends for 5 years (Figure 3). We've co-authored one piece of writing with four other people, but this is our first official GWRJ collaboration for publication. And instead of writing something brand new,

we are remediating an existing text, which is also something we haven't done together before.

Figure 3: Joyce (left) hosting Rachel on Lake Michigan in 2021.

Finally, Version #3 is also being written across different tools that are digital devices (multiple because co-authors who live and work in different places, and Joyce also often uses an iPad in addition to a laptop) and platforms on those devices (some on our own devices like MSWord, or Adobe, and others that we share for GWRJ like Microsoft Teams). And because we're publishing this in the journal, we also use different editorial tools within document files, to insert new images (using AirDrop on iPhone), add QR codes (using a QR code service), and add text boxes (also using Microsoft Word).

Fact: Writing Is Complex in Any Time

OK, you might be saying, of course, if you're writing something over seven years, it's guaranteed to be complex. But what about when you're not writing or remediating a text over such a long period of time? Well, writing is also really complex at any one time: writing always happens differently than what we expect, and it takes us to different places from moment to moment.

For one of the 2017 versions of this text, Joyce shared a story (revised slightly for this Version #3):

> As I was originally working on this piece, I was struggling to explain what concepts of CHAT can do when they are linked up with learning and practicing writing. But nothing was working.
>
> So I'm sitting there, laptop in lap, and thinking, "What does it mean to me that we use a CHAT based understanding of writing in the ISU Writing Program? How can I explain this to people in just a short text? How do I get writers thinking in different ways about writing? Which I need to do, because we are already writers and how we think about writing is already there, locked in place, in our brains, and our antecedent knowledge can make it hard for us (maybe) to make room for new ideas. One of my mentors Paul Prior calls these already-in-place ideas "the stories we tell ourselves about writing," many of which aren't actually true—but more on that later.

Figure 4: Where Joyce moved when she needed to draw in 2017.

So I am sitting. Frustrated and a little sad.

But then I had an idea! So I moved physically from one place to another in my apartment (Figure 4). And I started to draw pictures. Because even though I really, really can't draw (as you will see later in this GWRJ article), I do find my own pictures funny for some reason. Plus, the activity of drawing them seems to make me less frightened of sounding stupid when I write. Because I can't possibly write worse than I draw, I guess?

> What I came up with was the idea of a superhero called CHAT Person who changes the way writers think about and practice writing in the world. Because who doesn't need a superhero sometimes to save the day and make things easier for people even when they're always going to be complex? So, I decided to draw a set of illustrations to answer the question: what can a literate activity approach bring to learning and practicing writing? (Walker, 2017, p. 2)

What Is CHAT? And How Is It Related to Literate Activity and Writing?

To understand the superhero Joyce created and why they're called CHAT Person, let's first tell you what CHAT means when we use it in all caps as an acronym and not lowercase to describe the activity we do when we talk to people every day. **CHAT** is an acronym for cultural-historical activity theory, a theory with a long history that began in the 20th century as way to help explain learning and child development. As a framework, CHAT has some pretty specific assumptions about how human behavior actually works in ways that build on each other and mean some things for us as people who are always learning and developing as writers. Namely, that, as social work researcher Kristen Foot (2014) describes (p. 330):

1. As humans, we learn and grow not individually, or not only individually, but collectively in a wide range of social groups (p. 333–34).
2. As we learn—and, in fact, in order to learn—we use and adapt tools in all kinds of ways (pp. 335–36).

3. Our learning—including what we can learn and how we learn it—is shaped by both individuated and collective meaning-making, including the idea that we both interpret and mediate tools, texts, ideas, and relationships (pp. 338–39).

You'll see here that, so far, CHAT isn't explicitly about studying writing. And that's accurate. Lots of people in different fields use it to study all kinds of activity in the world—and how it is that people keep on learning and doing that activity. Because CHAT is basically a theory to understand any kind of social activity in the world that people learn and practice everyday. To do so, to really understand it, CHAT as a theory requires us to unpack all that complexity (tools and texts, ideas and relationships, learning and growing in social groups) within the very specific cultural-historical contexts in which it's happening. Applying CHAT as a framework means that, without understanding those contexts, we can't really understand the activity in all its complexity—and so we can't really understand it at all, unless we're just guessing, making huge assumptions, or relying on what someone else told us that may or may not be accurate, useful, or harmful.

In ISU's Writing Program, we use CHAT to study literate activity. That is, we have taken up CHAT as a framework (for 15 years now!) to create a method of researching some very complex literate activity work: how people participate in literate activity, in and through various modes (including but not limited to page-based, print-based, text-based writing), over time, with various tools, to produce specific kinds of texts, to work toward particular goals, in particular writing situations (Literate activity terms, n.d.). Because human literate activity is so complicated, we use CHAT as a tool that helps us:

1. Research: investigate literate activity based on research-informed evidence of how it actually happens and works in the world;
2. Show: make visible literate activity that's happening all the time in ways we don't always think about;
3. Analyze: break down literate activity into multiple, often overlapping components so that we can start to understand it better; and
4. Articulate: describe literate activity, its components, its goals, and its role in helping us become more self-aware and hopefully more effective communicators.

In the ISU Writing Program, we use both CHAT and literate activity as frameworks that help us describe and unpack the complex activity of writing: there's people, histories, tools, interactions, modes, languages, communities,

resources, bodies, and emotions—all involved in producing and using writing across spaces and times (Literate activity terms, n.d.). We use literate activity as a phrase, concept, and framework to expand what we might think about that counts as writing because literate activity includes reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking, and feeling—all social practices that shape how we communicate with each other in the world (Literate activity terms, n.d.; Prior, 2005).

Of course, this is complex work. And that's why we could always use some help.

Enter: CHAT Person, the Superhero You Probably Didn't Call For

To visualize what all this could mean for writers like you, 2017 Joyce created CHAT Person. CHAT Person meets a lot of the superhero cultural expectations: they have a sidekick, the ANT (Figure 5); a catch phrase about—you guessed it—complexity (Figure 6); and a superpower tool, the complication ray (Figure 7). Every superhero also has a mission. CHAT Person's mission is twofold (at minimum). First, they want to help writers see that literate activity is complex and that we shouldn't try to pretend it's not—which is what we are really doing when we try to break down "good writing" into a series of hard-and-fast rules, or when we point to a single kind of writing and say, "Oh, that's what 'good writing' looks like all the time!" Second, by seeing things as complex as they really are, they want to help us see that we can be more successful over time in our efforts as writers if we work to investigate the different people, tools, situations, genres, dispositions, and emotions that shape what, when, how, and why writing gets done in the world. And every part of CHAT Person's superhero entourage helps them work toward this mission.

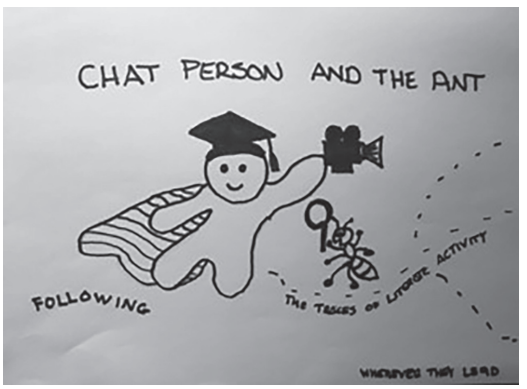


Figure 5: CHAT Person and The ANT as drawn by Joyce in 2017.

As a sidekick, the ANT is holding a magnifying glass (Figure 5), so he can look at any activity more closely. The ANT stands for actor-network theory, which is a theory often connected to CHAT, and while that's one more theory than we have space to talk about in this article, the ANT in this drawing connects to the idea, presented by sociologist (specializing in

science and technology studies) Bruno Latour (2005), that it's important for researchers to follow the actors (human and non-human) and really pay close attention to the activities that are happening when we're trying to understand how meaning is made in the world (p. 12).

When they arrive on the scene, CHAT Person unleashes their catch phrase: "Wait! I don't think you've fully considered the complexity of this literate activity!" (Figure 6).

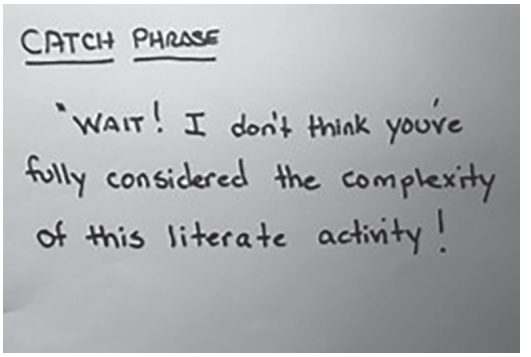


Figure 6: CHAT Person's catch phrase from Joyce's 2017 drawing.

Then, CHAT Person breaks out their superpower tool: a complication ray (Figure 7) that they can point at complex literate activities. It's like a writing X-ray that takes everyday writing tasks and lets us see what's really going on. Joyce wrote in her 2017 drawing: "Instructions: point at black-boxed writing practices and they explode!" In this reference, the black box is referring to Latour's idea that when tools or activities (or genres) become commonplace—that is, when we encounter or use them regularly—we often stop thinking about how they were constructed in the first place and how their use has evolved over time. The complication ray, in Joyce's 2017 brain, was a superhero tool that would open up black boxes around tools and practices so writers would be able to see, essentially, what they're made out of in a cool, sci-fi kind of way.

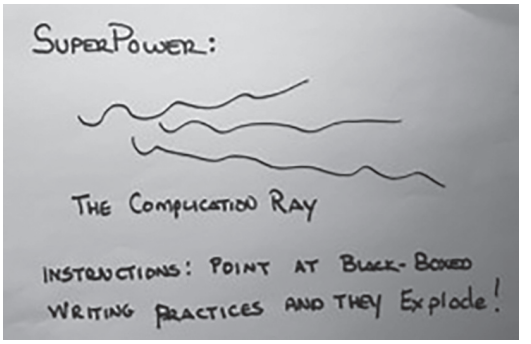


Figure 7: CHAT Person's superpower tool from Joyce's 2017 drawing.

As in any superhero encounter, when it's been successful, we should be changed by the experience in some way that helps us even after the superhero has left the scene. The idea is that, hopefully, once we have encountered the superpowers of CHAT Person, we can no longer pretend that there's only one way to write well, or that all good writing has the same qualities. Once we've used our literate activity X-ray and magnifying glass, we can no longer act like any one idea about, or judgment of, our writing ability covers all kinds of communicating in all kinds of situations, no matter what others say when they tell us we are or are not "good writers." That's a cool thing about this superhero that, even if you called for them for a different reason (or not

at all), you might not have expected: interacting with CHAT Person could start to shake up those stories in your head about what kinds of writing you can't do or aren't good at.

Replacing the fiction of being all good or all bad at all writing, CHAT Person and the ANT can show us instead the complex reality: that learning a single way to write, and calling that one way good or bad, is not as useful as we may have been led to believe and is not actually happening in the diverse settings in which we write. Instead, what we need to do is learn to look closely and complexly at the activity of writing, at what's happening within a piece of writing, and investigate how the elements within that piece of writing are, in fact, connected to all of the countless people, tools, and situations that surround, influence, and categorize any piece of writing. What CHAT Person illuminates is that we don't become better writers by learning to write in one way, or by following all the different—and conflicting, right?!—advice we get from individual teachers, webpages, or even the most advanced AI tools. Instead, we can become stronger, more effective writers over time when we can really learn to see the complexities that happen when we are writing. And that can be a frustrating experience for writers who just want to be told that there is one way to do all writing all the time, just to get it done. We get that it's frustrating. But. It's also facts.

What Does the CHAT Writing X-ray Show? Activity and Mediation

So now your next question might be: how does this CHAT superpower tool work? Because actually, it's a superpower that all writers can learn. One way that a CHAT superpower tool works is to make two key writing concepts more visible to us in practice: activity and mediation.

The concept of activity is particularly important to learning and practicing writing. Too often, we are taught to see writing only through the lens of the texts that we produce when we write, rather than as the practices we engage in whenever we are participating in creating texts. Often, even when we do see **writing as activity**, we still have a powerful story in our heads that involves a single person who sits down and writes. That's it. This story tells us that the words we type or handwrite are the only things that matter and that nothing else is important to our writing efforts and successes. But! This story about writing actually gets in our way when we're trying to understand writing in more nuanced detail than just "sit down and write," and it hinders us when we are trying to do kinds of writing, or find

ourselves in writing situations, that are new or unfamiliar to us as writers. It hinders us because it doesn't help us do anything specific. Just sit. And write. This story in place in our heads—and in our culture—is what CHAT Person's complication ray points us to: that writing—in all situations, every time—is never as simple as a single writer, using a single writing tool, in any single moment, making marks using some type of media. A writer's CHAT superpower tool says instead that activity is key to understanding how meaning gets made: writers who are individually taking up collective ideas and social practices, using multiple tools and modes to do so all the time, to make different kinds of texts. And these activities require different knowledge, language, kinds of research, and kinds of readers to help us make meaning together in the world in ways that aren't just about solitary me sitting down to write a five paragraph essay about some general subject for a general audience that doesn't actually exist.

> "**Writing (as) activity** refers not just to a person who sits down to produce a kind of written text. Instead, writing activity includes all the practices involved in mentally, physically, and emotionally learning to make meaning through writing within and for different situations and communities" (Writing research terms, n.d.).

The second critical concept that CHAT as a superpower tool works to make visible is the idea of mediation. If writing as activity refers to all the practices involved in making meaning, **mediation** directs our attention to how these writing practices are changed, influenced, even transformed as we are doing writing. We don't just use a tool to do a writing task. We innovate. We repurpose. We expand. As writers, we constantly invent new-to-us ways of taking up tools and applying them to activity to make things in the world in ways that change what we do, influence how we do things, and transform our knowledge and understanding of ourselves as writers. Mediation is always in motion, it's always interactive, and it's always socialized and socializing—because it's always contingent on places, people, institutions, and cultures. Tools mediate writers' activity (think about where we access Wi-Fi to do research online, and how our digital devices' operating systems are set up to allow us to access some things more easily than others by default), and writers mediate tool use in and over time (we abandon a keyboard to draw despite some of the stories-in-place in our heads about what kind of artists we are, or we use tablets to do certain things that companies then make a new app for). Our writing activity isn't static or unchanging, and it's also not something that is dictated by a single tool or a single way of knowing how to use any of the resources available to us as writers. A writer's CHAT superpower tool shows us, instead, that tools and writers—and our purposes—change over time, culturally and logistically, and always in relation to complex meaning-making goals between complex people through textual production (writing).

If you put these two concepts together—activity and mediation—you get a CHAT-grounded literate activity approach to learning and practicing writing that investigates how the activities of writing happen, over time, with various tools, among different people, across different institutions; and also how the productions of writing—what actually gets written, shared, and used, and taken up by others—are influenced by the sometimes complicated relationships between these factors. And we use this CHAT-grounded approach to literate activity to understand more in depth that what we make as writers is complex, ongoing, and often invisible even when it's happening literally right in front of us every day.

What Do Activity and Mediation Show Us? Writing Is Always Particular, Not General

Relying on both activity and mediation, we also get a framework that helps us research, practice, and understand writing as **particular**: that is, there is always a writer (or group of writers) experiencing a particular situation in a very particular time and place in which our mediated activity is playing out. There is always: this particular writer, in this particular time and place, trying to learn to write in this particular way, for these particular reasons, hoping for these particular effects.

Remember: CHAT Person's complication ray doesn't allow us to believe generalizations like "clarity and brevity are the most important skills for all writers." Instead, we now must ask questions and do some research to arrive at a more nuanced—or particular—answer to multiple questions that any generalization just glosses right over. In this instance, we might start with an interrogation of the general statement:

- Are there writers whose writing activity is expected to be clear and brief most of the time?
- If so, are clarity and brevity really the most important skills for these writers?
- If so, why?
- Or another way of asking why is: who and what is mediating this situation for these particular writers (if they do exist)?

We might then use that information to consider what something described as clarity and brevity (words that might be brief, but concepts that aren't actually clear in the same ways to all writers) actually looks like—and does—in some of the different situations and genres these writers are composing.

And the CHAT complication ray says we should keep asking questions, like:

- Quantifying: How many words count as brief in a particular situation?
- Qualifying: What kinds of words are clear to whom?
- Structuring: What kinds of sentence structures help writers to be clear to particular readers?
- Diversifying: What other modes support brevity and clarity, like design elements or headings?

With questions like these, we can begin to research the relationships between people, texts, writing tools, and all kinds of mediational influences on real people's writing activity in particular times and places where people are telling writers to embrace something abstract like brevity or clarity. Through this research, we can begin to trace things like where texts come from, how they're created, how they change over time, and who uses them.

How Do Writers Do Research into Writing Complexity? Or, What's a CHAT Map?

Let's say, at this point, you might see some value in breaking down complex writing activity so that we understand it better, and you might see how having some kind of writing superpowers might have helped you as a writer in the past. But your next question might be: what do we do to begin doing this kind of research into writing as complex activity? Literally: what do we do to start?

In ISU's Writing Program, we ask writers to start by doing some **writing research**: that's the big umbrella term we use to describe the practices of investigating our own—and others'—writing activity as complex and mediated, as situated and particular. What this means for writers in our program is that we don't tell people exactly what to do for every or any writing situation. Instead, we say: there are multiple ways you can figure out what to do for this specific writing situation. So let's attempt some of those.

> "**Writing research** is the practice of investigating how our writing practices, skills, tools, and embodied feelings shape how we write, learn writing, and adapt to writing in particular situations" (Writing research terms, n.d.).

One research method for doing writing research is to use CHAT-grounded terms as a writing research tool to identify aspects of written texts and writing activity. We use seven CHAT-grounded research terms to research and describe a text, a genre, or a kind of writing activity: activity,

"**CHAT** can be used **as a writing research tool** to investigate how our writing activity is connected to the people, tools, and situations that influence our writing of specific texts. When we use CHAT as a writing research tool, we are usually using CHAT terms to break down, name, and unpack otherwise invisible writing practices so that we can then more accurately describe the complex relationships between them" (Writing research terms, n.d.).

distribution, ecology, production, reception, representation, and socialization (Prior et al, 2007). Since it's important to start somewhere, we are sharing how we see these terms as useful for describing a text, rather than a genre or a kind of writing activity. And since there's always more than one way, we'll share them here in two forms: (1) as a list and (2) as a visualized word map that we call a CHAT Map (Figure 9).

- **Activity**: What are the actual practices and actions that writers do to create this text?
- **Distribution**: What means do writers use to send this text into the world? Who has access to it as a result?
- **Ecology**: What are the physical forces beyond the boundaries of the text that writers cannot control? How do these forces influence how writers create and distribute this text?
- **Production**: What means do writers use to produce this text? What people, places, tools, and practices do writers engage with to create this text?
- **Reception**: How do people react and respond to this text? How do people take it up? For what purposes?
- **Representation**: How do writers think about and plan this text? What kinds of things are shaping writers' thinking and planning?
- **Socialization**: How do writers interact with institutions and social groups as they produce, distribute, and use this text? How are writers' interactions related to cultural norms around this text?

We borrow these terms from a multimodal research article by 12 writing studies researchers (Prior et al., 2007). You can find our working definitions of these terms online (Literate activity terms, n.d., Figure 1), and if you'd like to read more about the definitions, we recommend revisiting past GWRJ articles (Figure 8) like Tyler Kostecki's Understanding language and culture with cultural-historical activity theory in GWRJ issue 3.1 (Fall 2012) and Joyce Walker's Cultural-historical activity theory: Because s*#t is complicated in GWRJ issue 6.2 (Spring 2016). In this article, we just focus on the questions we can

Figure 8: A QR code you can follow to access GWRJ past issues.

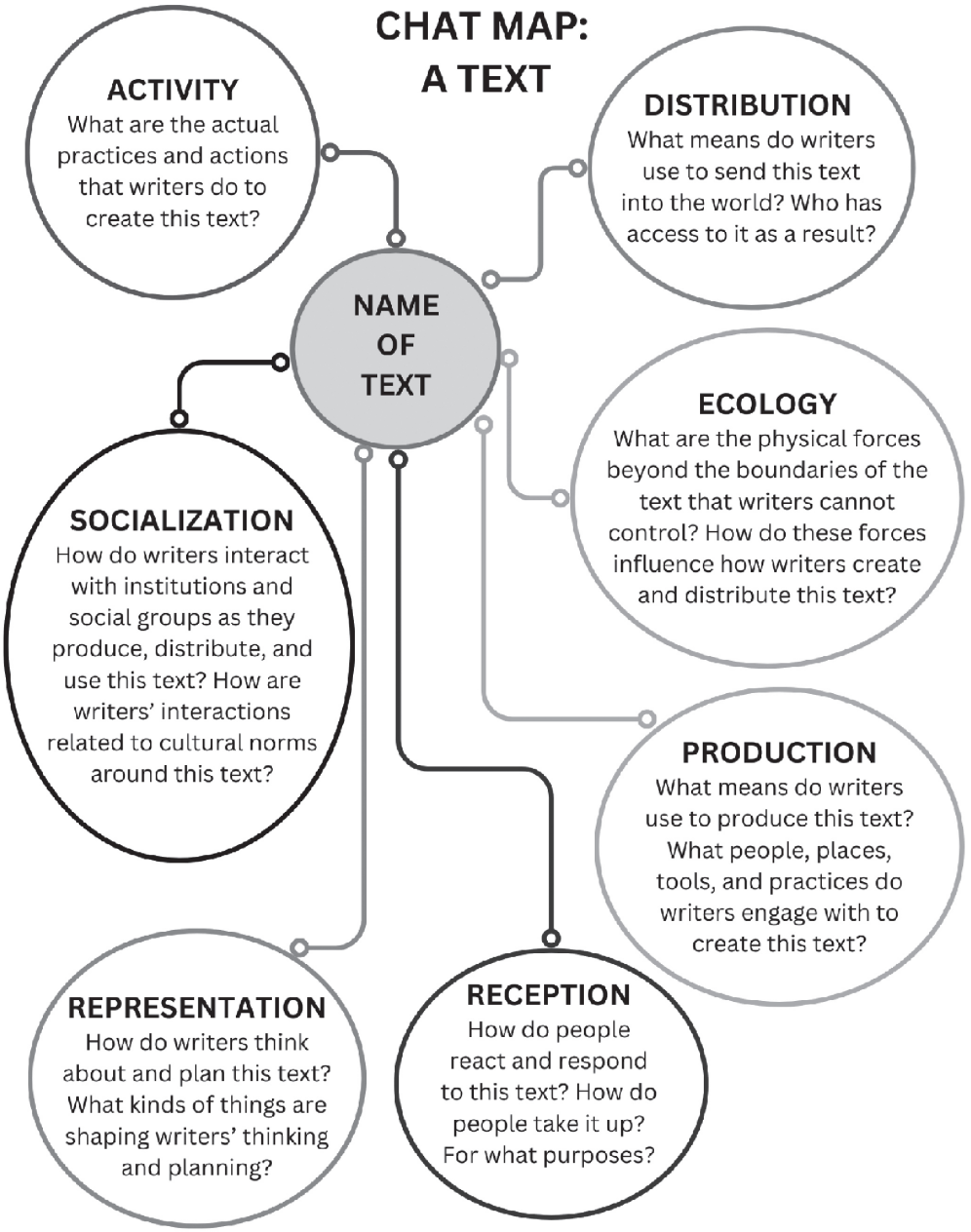


Figure 9: A CHAT Map to analyze a text in the world using CHAT-grounded terms and questions.

ask as writing researchers, but those articles have expanded definitions and description of the terms and what they help us do as writers.

These CHAT-grounded research terms, among many others from writing and genre studies researchers, are designed as a collective structure that writers—and therefore writing researchers—can use to make visible how

various people, tools, institutions, genres, and situations interact with, shape, and are shaped by texts we create and use in the world. If we used these terms to map out a text-in-use across two (or more) different times, cultures, or communities, we could also use a CHAT Map to trace the movement and evolution of people and texts-in-use in the world across times, cultures, and languages.

If you look at the CHAT Map nodes, you might notice that the terms aren't really in any order—because there isn't one. If writing, writers, and texts are complex, there isn't one place to start and end every time that will work. Instead, we have to move around the CHAT Map as we need to; and as we zoom in and out, our maps expand and contract with our needs, directing our attention to places that are most fruitful, interesting, or meaningful to us as writers. We might zoom in to focus on a single important activity or group of people who take up a text, and we might also zoom out to determine as many things as possible that we can think of that are mediating or influencing a particular text.

And here's where another Joyce drawing comes in: because CHAT Maps don't have a pre-determined starting or ending place, or any kind of neat, required shape at all really, Joyce once drew an image of CHAT that kind of looks like a fried egg (Figure 10). In Joyce's mind, the irregular shape would expand and move around to allow writers to see different things about a text based on how we think and understand what's happening. The CHAT-egg is more like a stretchy blob that can go wherever writers need to go. It can also expand backward and forward in time to trace the origins and travels of a text, and its makers and users, across times and spaces.

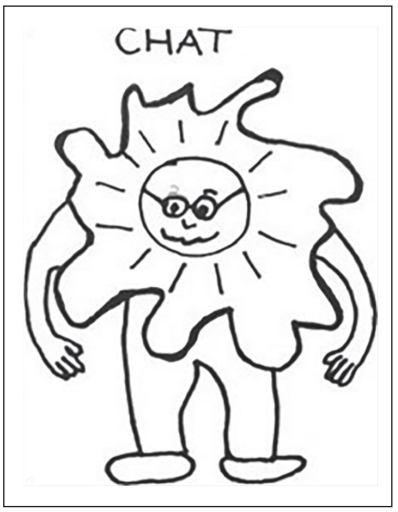


Figure 10: Joyce's drawing of CHAT as a stretchy fried egg.

Since there's also no one way to make a CHAT Map, as writers we also don't need to feel like we need to figure out how all seven CHAT-grounded research terms are somehow equally applicable to every writing situation. In fact, not all of the terms are equally relevant for every text, or as accessible for us to research with the time and resources we have available. Let's return to Joyce's story about trying to write the first version of this article to analyze and illustrate this one more thing about CHAT.

CHAT Mapping Just One of Joyce's Writing Stories

Remember when 2017 Joyce said she was originally working on this piece and was struggling to figure out how to explain what she wanted to explain? She wrote:

> But nothing was working.
>
> So I'm sitting there, laptop in lap, and thinking, "What does it mean to me that we use a CHAT based understanding of writing in the ISU Writing Program? How can I explain this to people in just a short text? How do I get writers thinking in different ways about writing? Which I need to do, because we are already writers and how we think about writing is already there, locked in place, in our brains, and our antecedent knowledge can make it hard for us (maybe) to make room for new ideas. One of my mentors Paul Prior calls these already-in-place ideas "the stories we tell ourselves about writing," many of which aren't actually true …
>
> So I am sitting. Frustrated and a little sad. (Walker, 2017, p. 2)

We might use the representation questions here: How do writers think about and plan this text? What kinds of things are shaping writers' thinking and planning? 2017 Joyce is thinking! And struggling. She has a seat, a laptop, and a plan-in-place, too: explain something complex about writing so people might think differently about it. Some of the things that are shaping 2017 Joyce's thinking are thoughts she has in her head from a mentor about the stories-in-place in every writer's head. What's also affecting her thinking is recognizing her own body and how it feels to struggle with writing: sitting. Frustrated. And a little sad. (Writing is hard, y'all.)

> But then, remember, 2017 Joyce had an idea:
>
> But then I had an idea! So I moved physically from one place to another in my apartment. And I started to draw pictures. Because even though I really, really can't draw … I do find my own pictures funny for some reason. Plus, the activity of drawing them seems to make me less frightened of sounding stupid when I write. Because I can't possibly write worse than I draw, I guess? … So, I decided to draw a set of illustrations… (Walker, 2017, p. 2)

Here, we might use the production questions: What means do writers use to produce this text? What people, places, tools, and practices do writers engage with to create this text? 2017 Joyce might have tried to start by typing words on a laptop (a writing tool and part of the writing plan), but then she changed the means she was relying on to communicate, shifting instead to drawing by hand on a table. In this instance, Joyce engaged in one place (living room sofa) with one tool (laptop) with one practice (writing via typing words in a document) to begin with; and then engaged with a whole other set

of things that mediated how she continued to create this text in a different place (office table) with a different tool (pencil and paper) and a different practice (making drawings she can laugh at and is still willing to share).

We can't use all of the CHAT-grounded research terms here to analyze this one writing story from 2017 Joyce. We could use the activity questions as questions that are broader than the production questions: What are the actual practices and actions that writers do to create this text? But other terms have questions that it's not possible for us to answer as writing researchers based on this one writing story that we have access to:

- Distribution: We don't know how exactly how the text (Version #1) was sent into the world, not specifically anyway. And we don't know much about who had access to it as a result.
- Ecology: We can't see in this piece of writing what physical forces beyond the boundaries of the text 2017 Joyce cannot control or how those forces might have influenced how she created and distributed the text.
- Socialization: We don't have access to knowledge about how Joyce interacted with institutions and social groups to produce, distribute, and use the text; or how 2017 Joyce's interactions were related to cultural norms around the text.
- Reception: Even though we shared a little bit about who got to hear the talks that Joyce gave, we couldn't determine how people reacted and responded to those talks, how people have taken it up, or for what purposes.

We might be able to make inferences about some of these, because you've now read this Version #3 GWRJ article remediation of those talks. But that's not information that's accessible to us by looking at only piece of writing and would require a different kind of writing research that would involve talking to the writer and tracing the text, in addition to reading the text and relying on the stories in the text.

But no matter what, no matter how many of these writing research terms you'd be able to unpack substantively, you'd still have one place to begin, one method for doing writing research: CHAT Mapping a text, a genre, a writing activity, a writing situation, or even a writer. Like you.

How Does This Writing Story End?

2017 Joyce drew a kind of concluding-for-now (but never completely finished) image for us, too (Figure 11). After their experience with CHAT

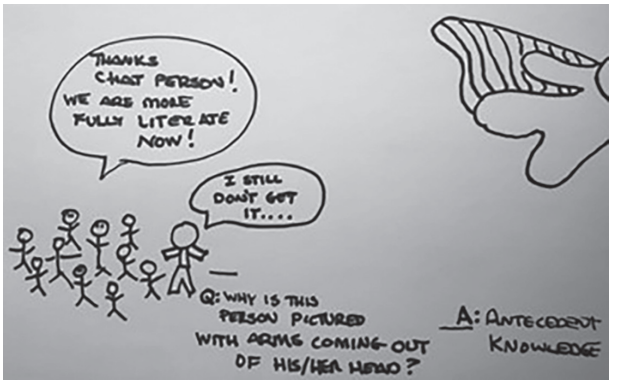


Figure 11: Joyce's drawing of people who have encountered CHAT Person.

Person, people in the drawing say, "Thanks, CHAT Person! We are more fully literate now!" The figure to the right in the drawing is CHAT Person with their cape, flying away, probably thinking, "My work here is done."

But then there is one person, somehow larger than the others (and 2017 Joyce didn't know why—that's just how drawings get created, too). This person says, "I still don't get it …"

So 2017 Joyce asked herself the question, "Why doesn't this person get it?" And answered herself in the drawing, too: **antecedent knowledge**. Because of course no writing superhero can change everyone's writing stories all the time. Sometimes, someone still doesn't get it. Honestly: sometimes we're that person. And sometimes, we don't even know that we don't get it, or know what we don't get. But even though CHAT Person hasn't gotten through to someone even after using their sidekick, superpower tool, and catch phrase—a CHAT-grounded approach to literate activity does have an answer for why this happens. This writer's antecedent knowledge about and experiences with writing (their writing knowledge, memories of learning writing, emotions and attitudes about writing) are interfering with them being able to see writing in a different way than their stories-in-place tell them is true.

> "**Antecedent knowledge** refers to the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations" (Uptake terms, n.d.).

So how it really turns out depends on us as writers. Which is complex. It just is.

We face a daunting challenge when we refuse to allow writing to be reduced to simple, rule-based structures that can be applied uniformly across all writing situations every time. We probably will complain about the

amount and kinds of work that writing research demands of us as writers—so much examining what we do and what we know, when it would be much simpler to just clickety clack out a draft and move on. But, if we're willing to try to let go of our writing stories-in-place and open to feeling frustrated for different reasons (other than writing is hard, we don't know what to do, or we don't want to), then it's possible that we can use CHAT-informed writing terms and writing research methods to make rules-for-now or guidelines-for-just-this, creating some structures for ourselves that can support us (as structures are supposed to do) as we encounter particular new-to-us writing situations throughout our lives. In other words, we could become more flexible, more adaptable, more successful writers if we let go of trying to believe that it makes more sense to keep things simple. Hopefully, we can use writing research methods to help us learn to use our writing knowledge over time, adapting as we look closely and carefully at what is new and different in each particular situation. Including how we ourselves become different kinds of writers using different kinds of tools (including CHAT) elsewhere—and elsewhen—in our writing lives.

References

Foot, Kirsten. (2014). Cultural-historical activity theory: Exploring a theory to inform practice and research. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *24*, 329-47.

Genre research terms. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program. Retrieved April 5, 2024, from http://www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms/.

Kostecki, Tyler. (2012). Understanding language and culture with cultural historical activity theory. *Grassroots Writing Research Journal, 3* (1), 79–88. ISU Writing Program, https://www.isuwriting.com/gwrj-issue-3-1/.

Latour, Bruno. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford University Press.

Literate activity resources. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program. Retrieved April 5, 2024, from https://www.isuwriting.com/activity-resources/.

Literate activity terms. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program. Retrieved April 5, 2024, from http://www.isuwriting.com/activity-terms/.

Prior, Paul, Janine Solberg, Patrick Berry, Hannah Bellowar, Bill Chewning, Karen Lunsford; Liz Rohan; Kevin Roozen, Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau, Jody Shipka, Derek Van Ittersum, and Joyce R. Walker. (2007). Resituating and re-mediating the canons: A cultural-historical

remapping of rhetorical activity. *Kairos, 11* (3). http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/11.3/binder.html?topoi/prior-et-al/index.html/.

Prior, Paul A. (2005). A sociocultural theory of writing. In Charles A. MacArthur, Steve Graham, and Jill Fitzgerald (Eds.), *The handbook of writing research*. (pp. 54–66). Guilford Press.

Uptake terms. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program. Retrieved April 5, 2024, from https://www.isuwriting.com/uptake-terms/.

Walker, Joyce R. (2017). The adventures of CHATperson and the ANT: Cultural-historical activity theory as a writing pedagogy. ISU Writing Program, Retrieved April 5, 2024, from https://www.isuwriting.com/activity-resources/.

Walker, Joyce R. (2016). Cultural-historical activity theory: Because s*#t is complicated. *Grassroots Writing Research Journal, 5* (2), 151–68. ISU Writing Program, https://www.isuwriting.com/gwrj-issue-6-2/.

Writing research terms. (n.d.) ISU Writing Program. Retrieved April 5, 2024, from https://www.isuwriting.com/writing-research-terms/.

Joyce R. Walker is an Associate Professor at Illinois State University. She researches different ways to trace literate practices and learning through time and space and memory. Clara, her dog, loves Benson (Rachel's dog), but is not, alas, loved in return.

Rachel Gramer is an Associate Professor at Illinois State University who teaches writing and writing teachers as ISU's Writing Program Director. She researches a lot of things, from interviewing people about their stories about learning to watching YouTube videos about how to change a tire. Wherever she is right now, she wants to be on a warm beach working on her selfie collection with her dog, Benson.

Notes

Drawing by Jessica Kreul

Bachelor Nation: Deep Dive Into a Discourse Community

Ella Kruse

Ella Kruse investigates Bachelor Nation, the discourse community of the popular romance reality TV show franchise "The Bachelor." Kruse researches the history of Bachelor Nation and analyzes how members share common practices, language use, and goals.

My Love/Hate Relationship with "The Bachelor"

You're probably familiar with the reality television show "The Bachelor," you know, that one where a guy is trying to find the "love of his life" while dating 30 women at once. Well, ever since I was little, I can remember awaiting the day that my mother would deem me old enough to watch the show.

Why was I so excited to watch a trashy television show as a child? For context, my mom has been watching the show since before I was born, so every Monday night for as long as I could remember, she would kick us out of the living room so she could watch. Every season finale, she would go to our family friend's house for a watch party and come home with a red rose—the essential symbol of the show. She always swore she would stop watching after "this season," but she always got sucked in again (as seen in the 2010 Facebook post in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Facebook post by Beth Stoeckel Kruse (2010).

The big day finally came in 2019, when my mom said she'd let me watch Hannah Brown's season of "The Bachelorette." This was truly a rite of passage for me and my younger sister Delaney, thus the addiction was solidified.

I've been a mostly faithful viewer of the franchise watching the following seasons of "The Bachelorette," "The Bachelor" (minus Season 26), and "Bachelor in Paradise." When I moved to college, I continued to watch the show and discussed it with my mom and sister over text. Then Season 27 of "The Bachelor" was announced and came out that winter, and I set out my plan to convert my new friends. I was successful in my endeavors, and for the next 10 Mondays, we would pull out the projector and watch the show. It became our weekly hangout ritual. I found the show much more enjoyable when I began to watch it with my friends, filling the hole left by not being able to watch with my family. I believe it is a community experience. During the episodes, my roommate Mari would comb through Twitter and send us her favorite tweets, and I'd send Instagram posts to our group chat as they popped up the following days. This was my friends' introduction to Bachelor Nation, the online community centered around the franchise.

What Is Bachelor Nation?

There are currently four Bachelor franchise shows. It all started with "The Bachelor" in 2002, then "The Bachelorette" in 2003, then "Bachelor in Paradise" spawned in 2014, and now "The Golden Bachelor" premiering in fall of 2023. (There were also some less successful spinoffs: "The Bachelor Presents: Listen to Your Heart" in 2020 and "The Bachelor Winter Games" in 2018.)

The premise of "The Bachelor" and "The Bachelorette" is this: each season of the show follows the lead, an eligible bachelor or bachelorette, searching to find love in a group of about 30 contestants. Each episode follows two one-on-one dates (intimate dates where the audience and lead get to know the contestant better) and a group date (this is usually where the drama and shenanigans stem from). At the end of each episode, there is a rose ceremony where the lead hands out roses to the contestants they want to "continue the journey with." The contestants who do not get a rose must leave the show and go home. By the final episode of the season, there are only two remaining contestants, one of whom will get proposed to. As the show progresses, viewers become more attached to some contestants, or people collectively despise others. This is often the point where viewers want to connect to share input and discuss our opinions. Whose side of the

argument are you on? Did someone go home when they deserved to stay? Who do you think should be the next Bachelor or Bachelorette? These and other questions are brought up by viewers desperate to share our opinions.

Given that "The Bachelor" is reality TV, there is a lot of drama. Since the show began, it has gotten a lot of fan discussion outside of the weekly episodes. Through these discussions, a discourse community was born. The ISU Writing Program defines a **discourse community** as "collections of people or groups that work toward collective goals through specific genres" (Genre research terms, n.d.). Bachelor Nation is an example of a discourse community with shared knowledge of the people involved in the show, shared language use from aspects of the show, and complex communication practices as fans interact with each other. Bachelor Nation is a fandom made up of fans of "The Bachelor" and other shows within the franchise. The group is a collection of (mostly online) communities of people who discuss shared knowledge (what is happening in recent episodes, spoilers to figure out who the lead has picked and if they are still together) and use communication practices to participate in activity beyond the show (like interacting with past leads). As a discourse community, Bachelor Nation relies on participant discussion and interaction, especially the shared reactions of viewers.

> "**Discourse communities** are collections of people or groups that work toward collective goals through specific genres. Often, when we talk about discourse communities, we describe their communication practices, shared knowledge and language use, and the power structures that shape community features both to people who participate within the discourse community and others" ("Genre Research Terms").

Since "The Bachelor" and its related shows have been on the air for more than 20 years, Bachelor Nation as a discourse community must have changed over time, especially because the way we communicate with each other has changed a lot since 2002. Most importantly, "The Bachelor" started airing before the rise of social media. But nowadays, most Bachelor Nation participants interact through social media sites. Personally, I largely associate Bachelor Nation with major social media platforms because that's how I've mostly interacted with it as a community, but I thought it would be interesting to see how the community evolved.

Discourse communities can evolve over time, and members may come and go, but at its core, do the goals of the community and what it provides to a group of people stay relatively unchanged? In this GWRJ article, I discuss how the discourse community of Bachelor Nation has evolved over time by comparing the components of the community off and on major social media platforms.

Researching Bachelor Nation Beyond Social Media

I already had some antecedent knowledge of the history and of the community because my mom had brought it up in discussion before and I had been exposed to the community before. The ISU Writing Program understands **antecedent knowledge** as all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing (Uptake terms, n.d.). So I knew that, in the early seasons of the shows, fans mostly connected through talk radio or workplace discussions. It was an easy way to connect with coworkers and have something to talk about. Connection was the driving factor of the discourse community, but I didn't have a lot of information about what else was happening before major social media platforms like Instagram.

So I conducted content research in order to find out more information about the early practices of Bachelor Nation. The ISU Writing Program defines **content research** as "the practice of seeking, finding, and processing information from a variety of places" (Content research terms, n.d.). Through additional content research—and not just my antecedent knowledge—I learned about specific Bachelor Nation discourse community practices before and off social media.

Shared Norms and Practices

Discourse communities develop their own shared norms and practices. For Bachelor Nation, fans mainly connected through online forums before major social media platforms became the community's main channel of communication. On forums, people would discuss and react to what happened in the latest episode. Forum users, who referred to themselves as sleuthers, would try to guess the outcomes by picking up on clues from television previews. For example, they would guess that the first girl to exit the limo on the proposal day is the girl who will be broken up with. In the previews, they often show the hem of the dress and shoes but, of course, not the girl. The sleuthers would try to track the shoes or dresses in other parts of the show to figure out and guess who the final girls were before it was revealed in the final episode of the season. This was one norm in practice on Bachelor Nation forums.

This discourse community practice has continued online even on platforms that aren't major social media platforms. Now, sleuthers interact and post on Twitter, like when they discovered who they thought won Season 24 of "The Bachelor" based on Venmo accounts! According to a Women's Health article following this rumor, "Both Peter and Hannah Ann have private Venmo accounts (a.k.a. celeb couple style), and the other ladies are

public (a.k.a. former reality stars reverted to normal IRL)" (Nied, 2020). Hannah Ann was the winner of Peter's season, so the sleuthers were correct. Even without using major social media platforms, we still see instances of Bachelor Nation members searching for connection and knowledge related to the show that they can then share with others.

Shared Language Use

Discourse communities also often use shared language within their community. An example of this shared language use would be the community-wide usage of the term sleuthers to label those who attempt to figure out who won the season before it is revealed on the show. One limitation to trying to research Bachelor Nation off or pre-social media is that it's harder for us to access what people used to say. So while there's likely more shared language use, sleuthers is one clear example of how people in this community adopted a term from elsewhere (like detective novels or TV shows with people who sleuth out crimes) and applied it to themselves as a shared practice.

Shared Goals

One of the defining aspects of a discourse community is shared goals: what the community is working toward and its driving force. From what I could find in my content research, it seems like the shared goals of Bachelor Nation off major social media platforms were to form connections with fellow watchers and use any available resources to share in the practice of sleuthing to try to figure out spoilers.

Bachelor Nation Today: Norms and Practices

Contemporary Bachelor Nation is nothing without major social media platforms, most notably Instagram. Using my antecedent knowledge, my current experience, and some more content research, I can share lots about the defining aspects of Bachelor Nation as a discourse community relying on major social media platforms as tools for communication practices.

One shared practice that stands out in Bachelor Nation is that past contestants and leads continue to be part of the community through major social media platforms. They often become influencers, start their own brand, write memoirs, and much more—thanks to the support of the online discourse community. In recent years, many contestants apply to get on the show in hopes of becoming Instagram famous and eventually reach influencer level, which is an example of how some members of the discourse

community (the future and former contestants) participate in the show because of what they might get from the discourse community (and others) after they appear on the show.

As part of the Bachelor Nation discourse community, the average fan has access to multiple shared practices using shared digital tools. The first is interacting with "The Bachelor" show alumni, even possibly the most famous of them. As the most followed contestant on Instagram, past Bachelorette Hannah Brown has 2.7 million followers. Instagram seems to be the easiest way for fans to interact with past contestants through story Q&As, DMs (direct messages), and comments. The other shared practice is similar to how people used forums: discussing the show and sharing reactions to it. For Bachelor Nation members, platforms like Twitter and Reddit are more centered around the fans of the show and their reactions to specific episodes. However, on Instagram, there are also many accounts dedicated to Bachelor Nation, such as retweet accounts where people can find things like the dresses contestants wore. There's also an account (@bachelordata) where the creator analyzes different aspects of the franchise: the likelihood of someone winning based on the type of date they go on, kiss counts, follower gains per episode, relationship timelines, dress colors, and more. So in addition to interacting with contestants and sharing reactions to the show, Bachelor Nation members can also participate in the shared practice of learning more details about things surrounding the show (and not just who the winner is, was, or might be). And Bachelor Nation members on major social media platforms provide more subinterests within the community: podcasts with past stars, accounts dedicated to funny tweets, and data on dress color.

One important difference from before Bachelor Nation members relied on major social media platforms is the lack of spoiler sleuthers in any of the accounts I describe above. Instead of forums, if Bachelor Nation members want to seek out spoilers, they have to turn to Reality Steve, who always somehow has the inside scoop. Viewers can easily look up who the final four picks are or who the final rose possibly goes to. With Reality Steve's monopoly on spoiler information, the forum sleuthers fizzled out, and most of the information on the other major social media platforms accounts is about different aspects of the discourse community.

The Most Dramatic Discourse Community Yet? Language Use

With the community reliance on major social media platforms and the chance to become a famous influencer by being on the show, we start to

see new shared language use. For example, contestants are now able to be accused of "being here for the wrong reason." This is shared phrase commonly used to describe a contestant who seems like they go on the show hoping to become famous or specifically to win the Bachelor or Bachelorette competition, rather than to "find true love."

Another example of shared language use in any online discourse community is community-specific hashtags. Bachelor Nation uses the following hashtags across social media to access related posts: #Bachelornation, #TheBachelor, #TheBachelorette, or #BIP.

Because Bachelor Nation exists mainly on social media, one really visible part of the shared language of the discourse community are the shared inside jokes via memes and/or tweets that rely on tailored lingo and are shared across major social media platforms. As part of my content research, I looked through past Twitter posts using the shared language hashtags (above) to find recurring community inside jokes within Bachelor Nation.

The first recurring joke is the overuse of the idea that this is "the most dramatic" season or episode yet, used by the show's advertising and the host. Throughout recent seasons, the franchise has claimed that whatever season is airing will be "the most dramatic," and this is repeated by the host of the show every single episode leading to the finale (Figure 2). Most of the

Figure 2: Host Jesse Palmer teasing "the most DRAMATIC moments" of a season in a future episode (2023).

time, the hosts can't even get through saying the line with a straight face. But, since they say this every season whether it's true or not, it has become an inside joke with the show that's often circulated on social media in ways that Bachelor Nation members immediately understand.

Another Bachelor Nation shared inside joke is "Yosef has a daughter at home," which is a joke about a contestant. In season 18 of "The Bachelorette," the show featured Clare as the bachelorette. During the show, one of the contestants, Yosef, yelled at Clare, saying "he had a daughter at home" and that he was ashamed that she would have to witness what happened on the show. He was referring to the fact that one of the group dates featured the men in speedos. After Yosef berated Clare for something she didn't do (that would be the producers' decision), she promptly sent him home. But Yosef still became a meme heavily circulated in Bachelor Nation (Figure 3). Anything that may have been considered taboo for women at some point in history (Figure 3's example is women wearing bikinis) is bound to get someone to tweet a meme that Yosef "has a daughter at home."

Sometimes, shared jokes are directed at the couple who "find true love" in the final episode, often regarding their short relationships after the show ends. In live tweets during the show, there are many references to guessing how long the couple will stay together after the show (Figure 4). Only five of the past 28 Bachelors are still married to the final choice. As of March 2024, the latest Bachelor, Joey, and the season's winner, Kelsey, are engaged and plan to get married. No one ever said this reality television show was a foolproof way to find love. But because of these stats, Bachelor

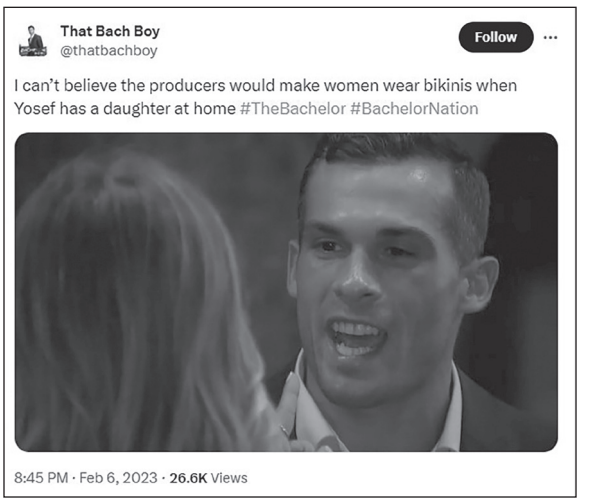


Figure 3: One of many uses of the "Yosef has a daughter at home" joke (That Bach Boy, 2023).

Nation members will immediately understand Figure 4's inside joke that someone "checks all her boxes … for a couple months."

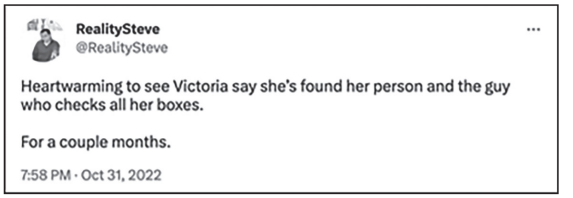


Figure 4: A Bachelor Nation shared joke about the length of post-show relationships (RealitySteve, 2022).

Next, we have the Bachelor Nation hating/teasing of the host, Jesse Palmer. Hate might be an extreme word, but I'm sure some Bachelor Nation members would use it. After Chris Harrison, the past host of "The Bachelor" and its many spin-offs, left in the middle of Season 25 due to controversial comments, they replaced him multiple times. At first, it was two past bachelorettes, Kaitlyn Bristow and Tayshia Adams; then a brief appearance by David Spade; and finally Jesse Palmer took over. Jesse is a past bachelor, retired NFL player, and college football announcer. Bachelor Nation members saw him as a strange choice, to say the least. A lot of people had loyalty to Chris Harrison, but I could care less. Honestly, Jesse has grown on me. But as a member of Bachelor Nation, when someone makes inside jokes about him as the host, I understand the humor immediately, like in Figure 5 when someone teases that he is doing his real job (being a football announcer) at his fake job (hosting "The Bachelor") when he hosts the Bachelor Bowl as a bit on the show.

The last inside jokes that I'll share here that Bachelor Nation members would immediately understand are about the show's producer interference. Experienced watchers with antecedent knowledge of what goes on behind

Figure 5: Host Jesse Palmer getting teased about hosting the Bachelor Bowl (Finegan, 2023).

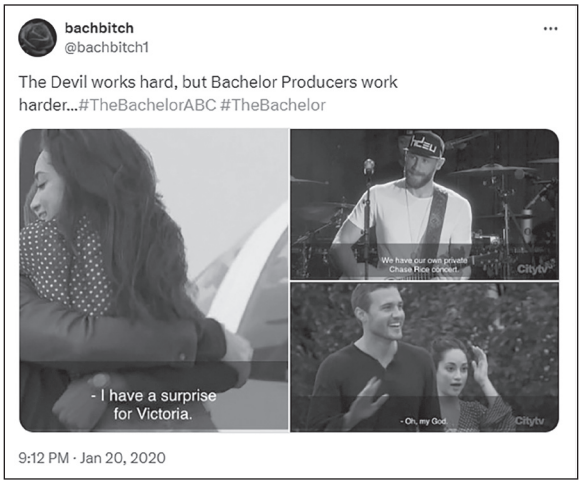


Figure 6: An inside joke about producer interference (Bachbitch, 2020).

the scenes are aware of how the producers create drama and often exploit the contestants. I feel like I have even more antecedent knowledge about this now since I wrote a persuasive speech for my COM 110 class on how reality shows exploit contestants. When wild things happen on the show, I am now more aware of how producers can edit and rearrange footage to make it sound like someone is saying something they might not have said. But because this is a running joke on social media, Bachelor Nation members can all get the references, as in Figure 6, which references a time when the show's producers manipulated the situation that they then recorded when they hired a contestant's ex-boyfriend to be the musical guest on her one-on-one date.

Bachelor Nation Interview Research: Shared Goals

Every discourse community, by definition, must have more than one person to participate in shared practices, language use, and goals. So to research the shared goals among current Bachelor Nation members, I decided to get some input from people who are part of the discourse community. I interviewed four people I know who have varying degrees of involvement with Bachelor Nation to see what they thought were the shared goals of the discourse community right now.

First, here's some info on who I interviewed:

Beth (my mom) has been watching the show since 2002 (Season 2 of "The Bachelor"). She is a major fan. She even held a finale party for the

latest season. Figure 7 shows some of the party favors she made. Her main method of connection to Bachelor Nation is through Instagram where she follows past contestants and winners, listens to podcasts, and watches live tweets on Twitter.

Figure 7: Finale party favors Beth made for the finale of Zach's bachelor season.

Becki, a family friend, has been watching on and off since 2003, but she then started to consistently watch in 2017. Her main method of connection was the podcast "The Popcast with Knox and Jamie" and Instagram.

Delaney, my younger sister, has been watching since 2019 (Season 15 of "The Bachelorette"). She isn't very connected to the online scene of Bachelor Nation since she doesn't follow any accounts directly, but she does get posts that will pop-up on Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok.

For Mari, my roommate, this is her first time watching the show (thanks to me)! Her only method of connection is looking at Twitter during commercial breaks, but she has been getting recommended posts on Instagram and Twitter related to Season 27 of "The Bachelor." Her relationship with the show and discourse community is purely based on the fact that I convinced her to watch with me.

Below, I share their replies to my two primary interview questions.

Ella: How involved in Bachelor Nation would you describe yourself?

Beth: I think I'm more involved than the average person I know. Definitely not an extreme super fan, but I listen to podcasts, and I like to follow past people from the show—but not Reddit level.

Becki: I guess somewhere in the middle. I really watched so that I could appreciate the commentary of my podcasters, but then it also gave me things to talk about at work and with friends.

Delaney: Not too involved. I don't seek out information. I just listen to the drama that you and Mom tell me. I've tried to convince some of my friends to watch it, but I don't think it's worked. I like having people to talk to about the show. I just don't know a lot who actually watch.

Mari: Pretty not involved. I really just like looking at the tweets, but I only really watch the show to spend time with everyone.

Ella: What do you think is the point of Bachelor Nation?

Beth: To be able to talk about what is happening and see others' opinions on what happens. Also, to make fun of it. I think I still watch the show because I like to see what people are saying on Twitter, so that's a big part of it.

Becki: I think it's something that allows people to connect, and it can be easy topics of conversation amongst people you might not even know well.

Delaney: Maybe people just like the show a lot. They probably like to talk about it, too. I think people like to make fun of it. I think everyone kind of makes fun of it now because it kind of sucks.

Mari: Naturally, fans of a show/artist tend to band together because people really try to find someone to relate to and talk about things to form a community. That's psychology. People are a social species, and people want to belong.

The interview participants seemed to come to a consensus on one possible shared goal of Bachelor Nation: this community strives for connection. Is this constant over time, based on my research and experience? Yes. The connection was just achieved in different ways based on the norms and practices of specific times—and the tools that people use to make connections. People like to share experiences with others. Viewers want to find solidarity and connections. With social media, we're able to easily interact with others around the world and share the things we love.

The Final Rose

Before major social media platforms dominated, people connected through online forums. As major social media platforms came into play, there were more outlets to meet members of Bachelor Nation—and more expanded ways to participate through different kinds of accounts where people shared more information that they also found online. There were also different kinds of members adding to the community, including past contestants, so the connection wasn't only between viewers but also the participants of the show. So any shared practices, language use, and goals evolved over time as more people had more ways to participate in the discourse community. Though the norms and practices and language adjusted to fit the medium, the driving force of Bachelor Nation is to discuss the events of the show and, in doing so, to form connections and relationships as a community.

References

Bachbitch [@bachbitch1]. (2020, January 20). The Devil works hard, but Bachelor Producers work harder … #TheBachelorABC #TheBachelor [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/bachbitch1/status/1219457736125095939?lang=en

Bellitio, Becki. Personal interview. April 23, 2023.

Content research terms. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program, Retrieved March 5, 2024, from https://www.isuwriting.com/content-research-terms/

Faudoa, Marisol. Personal interview. April 18, 2023.

Finegan, Grace [@finegan_grace]. (2023, February 6). Jesse Palmer doing his real job at his fake job 🤔 #thebachelor [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/finegan_grace/status/1622772935973908480?cxt=HHwWgMC9_eXYn4UtAAAA/

Genre research terms. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program, Retrieved March 5, 2024, from http://www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms/

Kruse, Beth. [@Beth Stoeckel Kruse]. (2010, July 19). If Ali doesn't pick Chris I will never watch the bachelor again! for real this time … unless he is the next bachelor [Facebook post]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/beth.stoeckelkruse/

Kruse, Beth. Personal interview. April 16, 2023.

Kruse, Delaney. Personal interview. April 16, 2023.

Nied, Jennifer. (2020, Feb. 10). Who wins Peter Weber's 'Bachelor' season in 2020? The cast's Venmo accounts reveal it's [SPOILER]. Women's Health. https://www.womenshealthmag.com/life/a30611566/bachelor-winner-peter-weber-venmo/

Palmer, Jesse [@JessePalmerTV]. (2023, Mar 14). If you think you've seen the most DRAMATIC moments of the season … think again 👀 #TheBachelor [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/JessePalmerTV/status/1635826569598910470?cxt=HHwWjIC2saPmz7MtAAAA/

RealitySteve [@RealitySteve]. (2022, October 31). Heartwarming to see Victoria say she's found her person and the guy who checks all her boxes. For a couple months [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/RealitySteve/status/1587247631591505925?cxt=HHwWioC8ufbThIcsAAAA/

Suzana [@bachelordata]. (n.d.). Instagram posts [Instagram profile]. Retrieved April 25, 2023 from https://www.instagram.com/bachelordata/

That Bach Boy [@thatbachboy]. (2023, February 6). I can't believe the producers would make women wear bikinis when Yosef has a daughter at home #TheBachelor #BachelorNation [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/thatbachboy/status/1622788689188339713?cxt=HHwWgoC-yeDtpoUtAAAA/

Uptake terms. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program, Retrieved March 5, 2024, from https://www.isuwriting.com/uptake-terms/

Ella Kruse is a sophomore majoring in entrepreneurship and small business management at Illinois State University, with the hopes of one day owning her own bakery/bookstore. She enjoys spending her free time baking, reading, crafting, and watching TV with her dogs.

GWRJ Short: The Interview Begins When the Research Does

Jessica Kreul

Jessica Kreul discusses the research practices she engaged in when applying and interviewing for two internship positions through the Department of English at Illinois State University in this GWRJ Short.

In the past two years, I have applied for and been offered two internship positions: one was for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (what you're reading right now!), and the other was a production intern position for the Publications Unit, a branch of the English Department which publishes the Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter, Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora, and Spoon River Poetry Review, among several other publications. When I heard about there being openings for these positions, I immediately began my personal application process with research. I wanted to know more about these internships, the hours I would be working, and the tasks that I would be

The Publications Unit at ISU

For those who may be unfamiliar with this unique entity, "The Publications Unit is a service and instructional branch of the Department of English, which provides editorial, technical, marketing/advertising, graphic design, and desktop publishing/production support associated with several independent literary publications, scholarly journals, and a small fiction press" ("About Us"). The Pub Unit also provides education and practical and work experience for a variety of students in the department interested in scholarly publications, journals, and nonprofit presses (from students in the Publishing Studies sequence, to undergraduate interns, to graduate assistants).

responsible for completing to make sure that I was capable of doing a great job in those roles before I formally applied. Once I applied and was offered the opportunity to interview, my research became crucial as I focused on preparing to speak with the hiring teams and securing these positions.

Preparing for the Publications Unit

In order to prepare for my interview with the Publications Unit, I first conducted research online and became well-versed in each publication that the Pub Unit is responsible for. I also researched the general mission and goals of the Pub Unit. To do this, I used the Publications Unit's website as my primary source and took notes so that I could study the information and have it easily accessible for reference (Figure 1). According to the ISU Writing Program website, **sources** are "the items that you find and rely on when you are doing writing, genre, and content research," and they can be "texts you and others have created, your own memories and experiences with writing

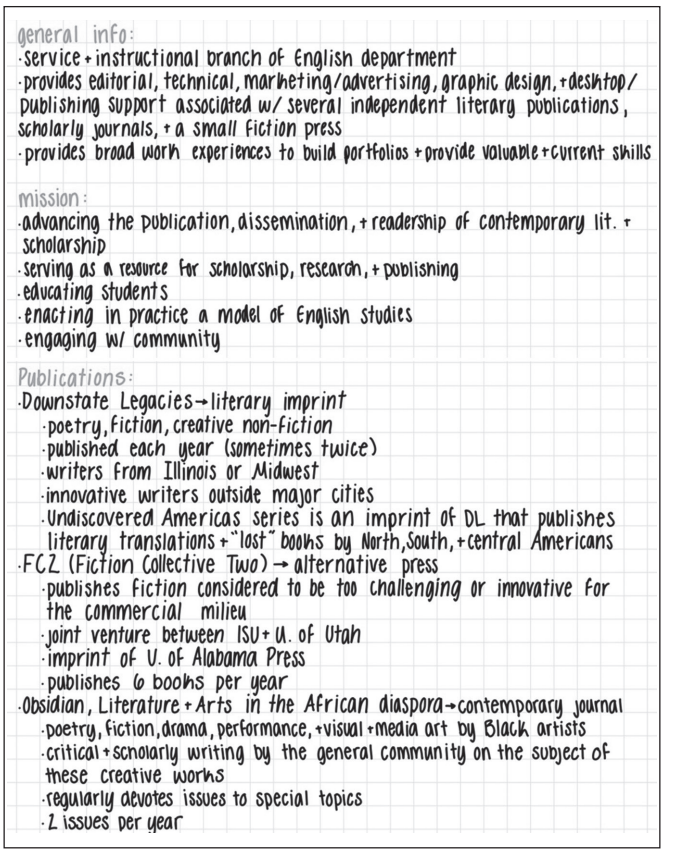


Figure 1: My notes about the Publications Unit from my research.

and particular genres, and academic journal articles or books you find in library databases and other places online" ("Content Research Terms"). While I was doing this research, I attempted to envision myself working on these publications and took note of what I appreciated about each of them and what excited me. For example, I looked at the website for The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter to get more information and scrolled through past issues. I immediately noticed the format and design, which shares many similarities to an actual newspaper, and took note of what I appreciated about it (I remember loving the image placement and font!). At that point, I had only worked on manuscripts that were going to be turned into the traditional book format that we are used to seeing, so I figured working on this newsletter would be a unique experience that would allow me to learn new design skills. Because of this research, I knew that if the conversation steered toward the publications, I would have more to say about them than just the blurbs that are found on the website because I had actually read and interacted with them. I also didn't know if I would have any sort of say in what projects I got to work on, assuming I was offered the internship, but I wanted to have a notable choice and explanation just in case. This extra consideration in my research process proved to work out in my favor as I am now working on The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter for the second time!

Primary sources

According to the ISU Writing Program's "Content Research Terms," "**Primary sources** refer to original objects or documents that contain 'raw' material or first-hand information," meaning "artifacts that you or others have created yourselves."

Secondary sources

Also found under the ISU Writing Program's "Content Research Terms," "**Secondary sources** refer to sources that interpret, comment on, or discuss primary sources." These are usually "referring to texts that people have written about other texts, including research books, scholarly journal articles, media reviews, and so on."

It is a good practice to consult online sources first and read through the organization's website and find any secondary sources that discuss either the organization/company itself or their internship program. This form of research is called content research. "**Content research** is the practice of seeking, finding, and processing information from a variety of places" ("Content Research Terms"). I learned everything I could about the Publications Unit by looking through their website, the websites for each of their publications, and the Pub Unit's social medias, all while taking notes on things I thought I would want to remember and be able to talk about. Dedicating time for content research will allow you to enter the interview already knowing the values and goals of the organization and what you would be contributing to as an intern. In my case, it was most helpful for me to

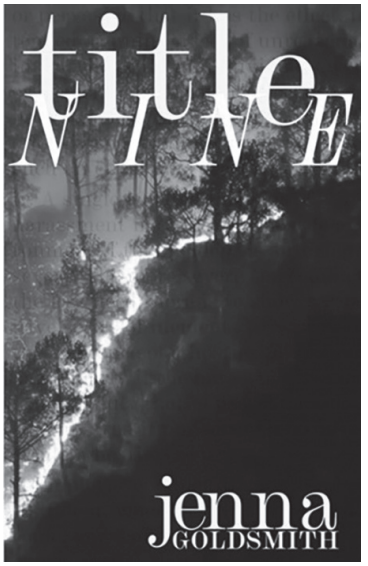


Figure 2: The cover of "Title Nine" by Dr. Jenna Goldsmith.

know some specifics about some of the publications that come out of the Pub Unit as that is what I would be working on.

In addition to my online research, I also went through the work that I completed during my time in English 254: Introduction to Professional Publishing, which is a class that is taught by and within the Publications Unit and that also functions as PRESS254. PRESS254 is a chapbook press and publishing workshop where students get hands-on experience participating in different parts of the publishing process from editing to design and marketing, culminating in a finalized, published chapbook at the end of the semester. During my time taking this class and being a part of PRESS254, I got the opportunity to publish the chapbook "Title Nine" by Dr. Jenna Goldsmith (Figure 2)—an insightful and radical collection of poetry that I highly recommend checking out (shameless plug for Dr. Goldsmith and the Pub Unit, I know!). By going through my past work and using it as a source, I was able to refamiliarize myself with the different steps in the publishing process such as mechanical cleaning (making manuscript-wide changes for formatting, style, and consistency) and the way I had to present edits, along with the different programs in Adobe I had to use for design and image work. I already knew that much of the work that I would be doing in the internship would be similar to the work I completed in English 254 in order to complete the chapbook, so I thought it would be a good idea for me to refresh my memory on the publishing process since it had been a couple of semesters since I'd taken the course. Additionally, this research made me better prepared to talk about my experience with English 254 and how I think I would manage the tasks and workload of the internship, which made me appear as a more knowledgeable, conscientious, and prepared candidate.

Joining *Grassroots*!

The process of applying for and being accepted as a *Grassroots* intern was different from the Publications Unit's process, but my research methods for preparation purposes were quite similar. I didn't have to go through a formal interview for *Grassroots*—I applied online and answered some questions. I then received a follow-up email with additional questions to be answered and was offered the internship. As I did with the Pub Unit, I first checked

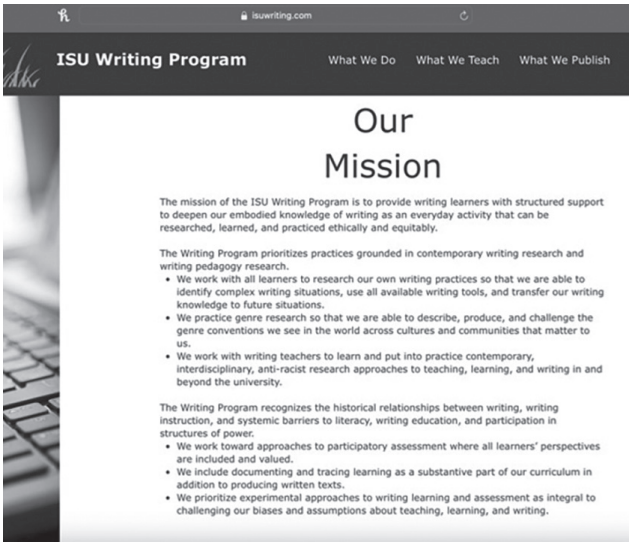


Figure 3: A screenshot of the ISU Writing Program website ("Our Mission").

the appropriate website—the ISU Writing Program's site—and read up on everything related to *Grassroots*. I found the most helpful and informative elements to be the Writing Program's mission (Figure 3), the description of the journal, and the terms and concepts list. These helped me to understand the goals of the journal and the types of articles and genres that I would be working with if I were to secure the intern position. I also viewed previously published journal issues and read several articles. During my reading, I conducted a genre analysis to better understand what a *Grassroots* article requires. The ISU Writing Program defines **genre analysis** as "the practice of breaking down what we see people doing in specific texts in a genre … When we do genre analysis, we describe the relationship between visible genre features (length, structure, formatting, different modes, language use) and the social goals of those features, including their cultural-historical contexts in specific times and places" ("Genre Research Terms"). So, I was paying attention to the fact that the articles mentioned and discussed multiple terms and concepts, the use of images, and the general structure of how the articles are broken down but flow together. These are examples of **genre conventions**, which are the "characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre" ("Genre Research Terms"). The most noticeable and prominent convention was the use of terms. This made it clear to me that *Grassroots* articles could cover a range of topics including crocheting, true crime shows, house hunting, and anything else that can be researched and discussed, but they had to incorporate terms from the Writing Program and inform upon and expand on or analyze those

terms in some way. During my research, I made sure to become familiar with the terms and understand how they function to spread knowledge about writing and research practices. Learning about all these genre conventions is a part of **genre research**, which includes participating in "activity like finding our own examples in a genre and analyzing what people do—and how they do it—in those examples" ("Genre Research Terms"). By reading some of the articles and browsing through the journals, I was able to get a pretty good sense of what the journal was trying to accomplish and what components played a necessary part in that.

This entire preparatory research process made it much easier for me to fill out the internship application and feel confident in my answers as well as answer the follow-up questions because I had come to know the journal so well. Without this initial research, my answers in the application may have been vague and lacking in explicit skills that I could bring to the journal. Once I secured the intern position, the foundation of knowledge that I had created for myself came in handy when it came time for me to actually start working with articles and attempting to develop them. I was aware of the mission of the journal and the conventions that are required of *Grassroots*' particular research genres, all of which made me feel much more confident and stable as a new intern being assigned journal content for the first time. In this case, research not only helped with the application process, but with the work of the internship as well.

Research as a Stress Reliever

The application and interview process for internships and jobs can be incredibly daunting and filled with stress and anxiety. There is probably no amount of research and preparation that will entirely ease those feelings as it is just within the nature of the application process, especially if you really want that position. Despite the amount of research that I did, I still felt some nerves heading into my interview at the Pub Unit. However, I did find that I was more worried about presenting myself in the best way through my demeanor and appearance as opposed to worrying about what I may be asked and how I will answer, and I think I have my notes to thank for that. There are many reasons why it is incredibly important that you prepare for the interview process any way that you can. Having background knowledge will allow you to enter the interview feeling confident about the position that you are applying for. When I walked into my interview for the Publications Unit, I was aware of what the intern position would require of me and felt comfortable that I would be able to handle the workload and do a great job on the tasks that I was assigned. This allowed me to demonstrate that I was

suited for the position, and it also boosted my confidence when answering questions. Of course, my preparation did not allow me to thoroughly and effectively answer every question that was thrown my way as there were certainly some that I wasn't anticipating. While I did allow myself to panic for a few seconds after being asked these questions, my thorough research process provided me with a foundation of knowledge that I could pull from to piece an answer together, which eased my stress before and during the interview. Through my own experiences, I have found it to be true that research and preparation are crucial for making sure that you are a good candidate and that you can present yourself as one throughout the application process, but especially during an interview. Whether it is applying for an internship or job in editing or accounting, these skills and the ability to conduct productive research can prove to be a massive help in portraying yourself as a composed, knowledgeable, and self-assured candidate, even when the interview nerves take over!

Works Cited

"About Us." *Publications Unit*. Illinois State University, pubunit.illinoisstate.edu/about/. Accessed 29 Mar. 2024.

"Content Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/content-research-terms/. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

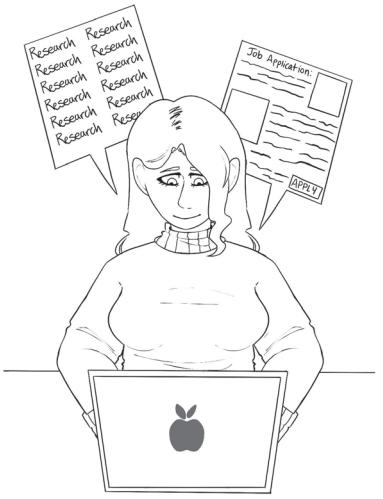
"Genre Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms/. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

Goldsmith, Jenna. *Title Nine*. PRESS254, 2022.

"Our Mission." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/our-mission. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

Jessica Kreul is an undergraduate English major at Illinois State University. She hopes to progress her writing skills before graduating and entering a career in editing. Besides her love of reading and writing, Jessica also enjoys working out, playing "Animal Crossing," and watching movies.

Notes



Drawing by Maddie Silk

Drawing by Grace Betts

Rhythms and Resonances of Notebooking

Steve Lamos

Steve Lamos explores how notebooking (a regular writing practice focused on routine life events) can capture both interesting rhythmic patterns of literate activity and interesting resonances (that is, transformative connections) between and beyond these rhythmic patterns. Lamos further analyzes the specific rhythms and resonances of literate activity that they experienced as a professor who also drums in the band, American Football.

Introduction: Notebooking, Drumming, and Professing

I recently turned 50 years old, which means I've been playing music for about 45 years: my parents had me take up the violin at age 5; I then asked to start on trumpet at about age 8; later, around age 21, I took up the drums. Turning 50 also means that I've been notebooking about (and with) music for more than 40 years: that is, for more than four decades now, I've been both engaging in regular rhythmic writing processes about and producing various kinds of writing about how music feels. I recently ran across one of my earliest examples of paper-based notebooking from age 8 that mentions my very first gig with my dad back in late December 1981 (Figure 1).

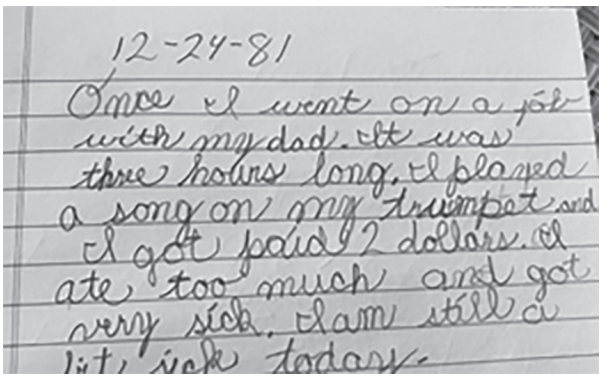

12-24-81
Once I went on a job with my dad. It was three hours long. I played a song on my trumpet and I got paid 2 dollars. I ate too much and got very sick. I am still a bit sick today.

Figure 1: A childhood notebooking entry from late 1981.

After stumbling onto this example in a notebook earlier this year, I wrote the following on Instagram:

> **3-2-2023**
> I vividly remember that I played one song, sat at the bar for the rest of the three hours, and ate a whole jar of maraschino cherries as the poor bartender tried to keep me occupied somehow. Needless to say, those cherries re-emerged all over the front seat of my dad's 1980 Toyota wagon as we drove home about 2 a.m. I suppose there's a lesson here about music and family and life, but I've clearly been ignoring it during the 40+ years since I wrote this …

I've also recently run across paper-based notebooking entries from college, including my first rock tour ever with a group of my friends as their roadie/trumpet player in 1995. (I had recently started playing drums by this time, but I wasn't in a band yet.) Figure 2 is part of an entry where I describe my role on that tour. As I look back at this particular entry almost 30 years later, I notice that I had just quit my first job—a minimum wage gig at a restaurant that was filling the summer between my last semester of undergraduate work and my first semester in an MEd program that was designed to prepare me to teach high-school-level language arts. I also notice here that I'm wishing that I could be a real full-time member of the kind of band with which I was touring.

A third example is typical of the recent extensive notebooking that I've performed in my role as the drummer in a band called American Football—a Midwest emo band that I started with two college friends in 1997, that broke up in 1999, and that was resuscitated in 2014 with the help of the internet fan culture. Since 2014, I've played as the drummer of this part-time band even while also working full-time as a professor in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado-Boulder. Since about 2016, I

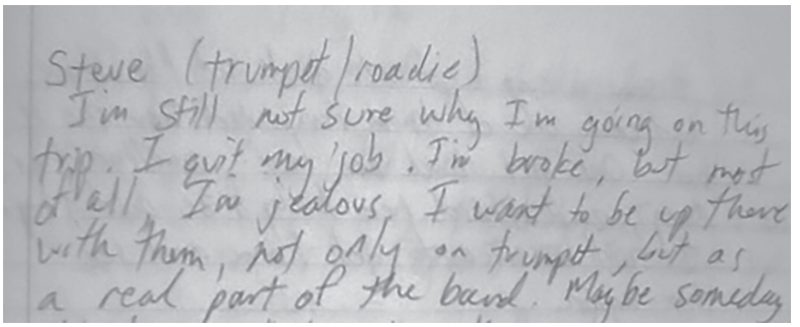


Figure 2: A college-age notebooking entry from mid-1995.

have notebooked literally hundreds of (word-processed) pages in the style of the following entry, which is taken from a recent trip over a long weekend in September 2023. This trip required me to both jump on a red-eye flight after my first-year writing class to get me to Asheville, NC and then catch an early morning flight from Nashville, TN back to Denver, CO before my next face-to-face class session (scheduled for 3:30 p.m. MST) a few days later:

Midwest emo refers to a genre of independent music that features odd time signatures, angular rhythms, and heart-on-the-sleeve lyrics. The Wikipedia entry for this term offers a summary of its history and present use ("Midwest emo" para. 5).

> **9-11-2023**
> Woof. On a plane, midflight, at 11:30 MST [after two flight delays]. Scheduled to teach at 3:30 MST. Not sure whether it's gonna happen. Not my usual [situation], but here we are.
>
> In any case, flying back from Nashville … after a really busy [time]. If I make it to teach, it'll be one for the record books. If not, it'll still be one for the record books, but I'll have a strike against me [for having to cancel class] …
>
> [Yesterday] was mostly van time: I worked some on my class, I journaled a bit, and I snoozed with music on. On this trip, I did finish writing some thoughts on an overall conclusion for Chapter 4, and so I think that it was reasonably successful. I also managed to get some grading done this morning, which is a bonus …
>
> [The room] was one of those really, really dry[-sounding] ones: [another dry-sounding hall] is the closest comparison that I can think of—and I think that the other fellas agreed with me. During check, it felt fine. During our performance, though, it felt really sterile and exposed. Each tiny little blip feels amplified in that context—and I'd say that it takes the fun out of things. My sense is that it might have sounded pretty good out front, and I say this in part because [the opening band on this trip] sounded so good out front … and because [our sound engineer] mentioned that he was glad that the trip ended in Nashville rather than [in Durham]. Funnily enough, [Durham] felt pretty incredible on stage: except for [one problem in one song], I felt very confident and comfortable and in control. Here, I felt very vulnerable and exposed.

This entry is fairly representative of my usual notebooking work since 2016: it includes a bit about where I am at the moment of writing (a plane); a bit about my most recent experiences with travel (a van trip from Durham to Nashville, followed by a delayed flight home that threatened my ability to teach in person—although I did end up making it back for class with about 20 minutes to spare); a bit about what happened on route (I worked on teaching materials; I notebooked; I snoozed; I worked a bit on a book chapter; I worried about possibly missing class); also, a fair amount about the embodied feelings and sensations that I associated with playing the night

before (the last gig of this trip was at a venue that felt a bit more sterile—and therefore much less fun than other places we'd played on this short trip).

I'll be spending a great deal of time in this piece talking about how and why these examples of notebooking have proven increasingly important for me as a literate person, especially in the context of my rather unusual musical/academic experience as a drumming professor during the last ten years or so. Specifically, I'll be arguing that such notebooking has long allowed me to participate in a number of simultaneous rhythms of musical and written literacy. Philosophers and theorists of rhythm Henri LeFebvre and Catherine Regulier characterize **rhythm** as a kind of difference that occurs cyclically across time—what they describe as "long and short times, recurring in a recognizable way, stops, silences, blanks, resumptions, and intervals in accordance with regularity" (87). At the same time, LeFebvre insists that rhythm involves the inherent capacity for change: "there is no identical absolute repetition, indefinitely … there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference …. Differences induced or produced by repetitions constitute the thread of time'" (16-17). Rhythms (including literate rhythms) thereby bring about change in ways that make it possible for new and interesting things to emerge.

Furthermore, I'll be arguing in this piece that the rhythms that I've performed, gathered, documented, and considered through notebooking have at times come into a kind of interesting resonance. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa defines **resonance** in a general sense as the state whereby the rhythm of "one body prompts the other to … vibrate [rhythmically] in turn" (165) such that these rhythms "mutually reinforce each other, their amplitudes growing ever larger" (167). Rosa thereby suggests that resonance can serve as a connective and additive relation—a relation in which rhythms occur separately but nonetheless in a kind of unison. Importantly, however, Rosa also emphasizes that resonance can, under certain circumstances, enable a more transformative relation: it can enable a kind of cascading rhythm-in-concert across distinct bodies in ways that create newness. He writes that, during such transformational resonance, "one body stimulates the other to produce *its own frequency*" (165, emphasis in original) such that "bodies in a resonant relationship each speak 'with their own voice'" (165). Transformational resonance of this type can create a state in which two bodies begin acting in a new, expanded, and novel relationship through rhythm in ways that ultimately exceed either of them individually.

In this GWRJ article, **rhythms** are best understood as cyclical and repeated activities encompassing music, personal writing, and academic writing that possess the capacity for change.

Resonance is a state in which rhythms interact and transform into new and unexpected forms that seemingly exceed the sum of their parts.

I'll be spending a great deal of time throughout this piece talking about what rhythms and resonances of notebooking this American Football experience as a writing studies professor have done for, through, with, and beyond me. But before I can get into more specific arguments, I need to spend a bit of time outlining two (rhythmic) histories of sorts. The first will provide a quick overview of my journey with the band American Football itself. The second, meanwhile, will sketch my work as a musical notebooker throughout the course of my life, including my time with this particular band.

A (Rhythmic) Micro-History of American Football

American Football (or AF, as I'll call it moving forward) started in 1997 when I was in the first year of my PhD program in Writing Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). I had been playing drums and occasional guest trumpet in a number of bands in the Champaign-Urbana area since about 1994, engaging in the rhythmic work inherent to playing in indie bands: meeting other musicians, writing material, playing gigs, recording music, and so on. However, in early 1997, I also started playing with two third-year undergraduate guitar players. One of these guys, Mike Kinsella, was already somewhat famous for his work as a drummer in a band called Cap'n Jazz, but was now playing guitar and singing a bit; the other, Steve Holmes, was his longtime friend, roommate, and a one-time creative writing classmate of my girlfriend (and now partner of 28 years) Tracy Pearce. Mike, Steve, and I wrote songs and practiced together regularly—indeed, rhythmically—for the next two years in the tiny rental house that Tracy and I would later come to share. We also played live 10 or 12 times around the UIUC campus, in Chicago, and in a few other places across the Midwest during this time. As we engaged in these rhythms of writing and performing music, we also started to resonate more and more as friends and bandmates. This resonance led to our recording two records together: a three-song EP that came out in 1998 and a nine-song LP that got recorded and released in 1999. (EP stands for extended play single, which usually means two or three songs on a single physical release. LP stands for long-playing record, which is usually regarded as a full-length album. Our AF EP had three songs; our first LP1 had nine songs; our later LP2 and LP3 releases had nine and eight songs, respectively.)

Unfortunately, AF broke up in 1999 immediately after our full-length LP was recorded: the guys had graduated and wanted to move back to Chicago to start new lives and jobs and families; I, meanwhile, was committed to staying at UIUC and completing PhD coursework, research, and dissertation writing. I was quite upset about AF's breakup at first, as the American

Football LP had (somewhat amazingly) gotten a bit of initial favorable press in Spin magazine and College Music Journal, despite the fact that the band didn't exist to support the album. But that initial press quickly faded—and the rhythms of our lives each continued. Tracy and I got married in 2001. I also worked (very slowly) on my PhD while also holding a full-time job as the director of the writing center at UIUC from 1999 until 2004, a job that introduced its own rhythmic routine of a rather nine-to-five office environment into my otherwise academic life. After completing my degree, I then took my first Assistant Professor position at Illinois State University, where I stayed just a year. I resonated both with the institution and my colleagues at ISU—but I did not at all like the regular rhythms of driving to and from Champaign, IL where Tracy and I were living each day. (Tracy taught high school down the street from where we lived in Champaign, and so we did not want to move to Bloomington-Normal.) At the same time, to be totally honest, I was growing weary of the rhythms of midwestern life more generally: I increasingly disliked the overcast winters, the hot and humid summers, and the general feeling that I'd lived in the same area for too long. This dissatisfaction led me to seek out my current position at the University of Colorado-Boulder in 2005.

This job at CU, which I have held ever since 2005, offered very different life rhythms near the mountains, especially in terms of hiking, biking, skiing, and other outdoor activities. I found these new rhythms quite resonant with my life as an Assistant Professor from 2005-2011, with my life as an Associate Professor with tenure starting in 2012, and with my life as a dad for our son (born in 2011) and daughter (born in 2014). However, what I didn't find terribly resonant from 2005 until 2014 was music: while I did play drums for fun in Colorado in both original projects and cover bands (including writing music with new musical friends and bandmates), I never really found sustained musical activity of the sort that I had experienced with AF at any point in Colorado. I resigned myself to playing drums for fun as just one of many life rhythms here near Boulder.

Apparently, though, while each of us former members of AF was busy making other plans, the AF LP record was busy making a new life of its own with the help of the kinds of rhythmic activities that are common to internet chat boards, file-sharing arrangements, and even CD burning culture. Specifically, between 1999 and the early 2010s, fans of Midwest emo were evidently circulating our LP, rhythmically and widely, without any real notice on the part of us original AF members.[1] Around late-2013, however,

1. I did have a couple of students during the later 2000s mention to me that they knew of and liked American Football, but these kind words didn't prompt me to investigate the status of the record at that time.

we members did start to notice that this LP was clearly resonating with a fanbase that we did not know existed. Specifically, Steve Holmes reached out to tell me that the American Football LP had drawn enough online attention such that it would be reissued in an expanded format by our original label, Polyvinyl Records; he also informed me that we had been asked to celebrate this reissue with two reunion shows the following year—one at a festival in Champaign-Urbana, home of the band and the label, and one more show in New York City at a place called Webster Hall.

Needless to say, I was excited for what would amount to the first actual AF shows in support of this record, now 15 years later: we'd be re-entering the rhythms of playing live together—and we'd be experiencing the rhythms of an album release and press cycle once again for this reissue. But I was not yet as excited as I would soon become: circulating news of the AF reissue crashed the Polyvinyl website; tickets for our two reunion shows went on sale soon thereafter only to sell out in moments; two more shows were added to Webster Hall as a result, which sold out almost instantly as well. All of this excitement eventually led us to reform as a reunion band (with a new fourth member, Nate Kinsella, on bass) for a two-year run from 2014 until 2016 of 30+ shows across the US, Europe, and Japan. The rhythms of playing live grew stronger and louder over these two years as we squeezed in shows on weekends, over holiday breaks, and during short stretches during summers. Performing also enabled us to reactivate rhythms and resonances of writing and recording together: we recorded enough new material for two new records—now known as LP2 and LP3[2]—that further enabled us to play about 70 additional shows across five continents from 2016-2020, to take an extended hiatus from 2020-2023, and then to return to writing and touring again in mid-2023 with a dozen or so more shows.[3]

Ultimately, then, this last decade has found the little and seemingly insignificant LP record we did back in 1999 just before breaking up—now known as LP1 as a way to distinguish it from our two more recent records—routinely included in a kind of canon of Midwest emo music. LP1 has been increasingly mentioned among the most influential records of this genre by the likes of Rolling Stone, Spin, NME, Kerrang!, Vulture, Stereogum, The Guardian, Alternative Press, Pitchfork, NPR, Brooklyn Vegan, and many others. It has also been publicly cited as a strong influence by a range of

2. Each of the band's albums is technically self-titled as American Football, but they're usually distinguished by band and fans alike as LP1, LP2, and LP3.

3. I had actually quit AF from 2020 until 2023 so that I could deal simultaneously with the death of a family member, a new administrative position, and some other life issues. The other members had talked about carrying on with a new drummer, but ultimately did not choose to do so. In early 2023, after I had been able to spend some time dealing with issues that I just mentioned, I asked to rejoin the band. Happily, the other members agreed—and we've started up a new round of writing and performing since then.

contemporary artists including the 1975, Hayley Williams, Phoebe Bridgers, Bartees Strange, Ethel Cain, Yvette Young, San Holo, and more. We're now approaching the 25th anniversary of the release of this record in 2024, and it seems more resonant than ever. This resonance still feels quite strange to me, especially given both the odd history of this band and my own continued involvement in it as a middle-aged professor.

A (Rhythmic) Micro-History of My Notebooking Practices

While my time in AF dates back to college, my work as a notebooker dates back much earlier than that. I first started notebooking around age 8 at the encouragement—the insistence, really—of my parents. Every week or two, my folks would insist that I practice writing, using cursive, by describing things we had done together as a family. To facilitate this, they bought me something called *The Gnome Notebook*, a blank journal with a picture of—you guessed it—a gnome lost in written contemplation on its cover. My earliest notebooking (gnotebooking?) entries were focused mostly on the rhythms of family activities: a trip to baseball game, a game of Nerf Hoop indoor basketball with my brother, accounts of playdates and activities and arguments with neighbor kids, and so on. But my notebooking at the time also included references to playing music, including the maraschino cherry incident with which I started this piece as well as a few other references to playing trumpet with my dad or playing violin at various recitals. I notebooked at least somewhat regularly in this rhythmic way until middle school, aided by the fact that my other friends also kept notebooks through this time: we occasionally even shared what we were writing with one another. Once high school hit, though, I actually stopped notebooking for a long while: I must have felt too busy to notebook about music (or about anything else, for that matter) on a regular basis.

I did return to notebooking once again toward the end of college, mostly as a way to write about the rhythms of playing music with the many pre-AF indie bands in Champaign in which I had become involved by the mid-1990s. I would write regularly and rhythmically about whom I was playing with; about how things were going in terms of writing and playing and performing and recording; about how much or little I was practicing; about how well or how poorly I was getting on with various bandmates. I would also increasingly write about my growing relationship with Tracy, both its joys and challenges, at that time. (Feel free to insert your favorite college-kid emo diary joke here.) As I got further and further into my MA (and then later my PhD), however, my notebooking waned once again: I felt too tired and worn out to notebook on top of all of my other academic writing each day.

Finally, my third and by far most prolific stint with notebooking began in early 2016, about a year-and-a-half into the first AF reunion shows. Since 2016, I've found myself writing and reflecting on music, academics, and life regularly to the tune of 500+ single-spaced typed pages and counting. (Feel free to insert your favorite middle-aged guy emo diary joke here.) I initially started notebooking because I wanted to start keeping a rhythmic record—in the verb sense—and preserving some sort of record—in the noun sense—of what was happening on these AF trips. Notebooking like this connected me to my past history with this activity even as it also gave me a great sense of pleasure in the present: I loved the idea of keeping track of what was happening as it happened, and I loved the idea that I might end up re-reading these entries later, even years later. I suppose that the rhythms of notebooking as a practice resonated in some way with my own sense of full literate personhood: as writing studies scholars Kevin Roozen and Joe Erikson argue, "We don't become who we are, write how we write, represent how we represent, by cutting ourselves off from all other domains of our lives …. [Instead,] [w]e become who we are and engage in disciplinary activity by tying together and connecting all the resources we have developed in ever surer and richer ways" (1.05).

I also found myself attracted to notebooking because it got me writing each and every day while on AF trips, regardless of circumstance or surroundings, in ways that enabled me to do my "real" professor job. You see, in my day-to-day professional life, I could generally count on some kind of consistently rhythmic work routine—that is, I could usually work and write similar times (say, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.) in regular places (say, my office on campus or my desk in the basement of our home) in somewhat controllable circumstances (say, while wearing headphones playing my favorite music to work to and while sitting near the fridge and coffee maker). On AF trips, in contrast, all of that routine—indeed, all of that regular rhythm—was gone. One tour day might find me arriving to an airport at 5 a.m., checking in a massive pile of gear and baggage for a 7:30 a.m. flight, and then alternating between dozing and working on academic stuff in an airport lounge, an airplane seat, a van seat, or the back of a club. A second day might find me not having to leave a hotel until late morning with just a couple hours' drive such that I might work a bit longer and more consistently. A third day might find me not having to travel at all so that I might have more of a semi-normal workday before afternoon soundcheck—and maybe even a nice walk through a new city at some point after soundcheck. I thought to myself that, if I were to survive this experience, then I had to learn how to get work done even in the middle of this seemingly arrhythmic madness. Emails would keep coming. Student drafts would keep needing to get read and responded to. My

own reading and writing and thinking would need to keep getting done. I figured that notebooking might help to prime the pump in terms of my day-to-day productivity so that I might find productive work rhythms on the road.

Soon after I started notebooking regularly, though, I came to see it as important rhythmic and resonant work of its own. Notebooking each day quickly gave me a way to bring what used to feel like totally different aspects of my life—music, travel, writing assignments, grading, reading, writing, thinking—into interesting new kinds of contact. As I engaged in notebooking, I would see new rhythmic ideas and observations resonating frequently, and often unexpectedly: drumming and traveling and teaching and researching and writing would often combine and transform in some really wonderful and novel ways—so much so that my notebooking experiences in the context of AF and academic work quickly became some of the most enjoyable of my adult life.

How Notebooking Works

Having sketched these rhythmic histories quickly, I want to spend the rest of this piece trying to say more about both how and why I think that notebooking works for me in the present day. I begin by offering three assertions about how I think this notebooking functions. I then provide one extended example of a time when the rhythmic activity of notebooking these AF and academic experiences simultaneously yielded some unexpectedly resonant results for me.

Assertion #1: Notebooking Is Rhythmically Habitual

I have already suggested that notebooking about AF is very much a rhythmic practice—that is, it very much involves regular writing practice about regular routines of life while also acknowledging the potential that these practices and routines have to change in interesting ways over time. More specifically, though, I believe that such notebooking engenders important **rhythmic writing habits**, especially what composition scholar Marilyn Cooper describes as the habits of "observation" (94), "connection" (94), and "wonder" (95). The habit of observation, Cooper argues, involves looking carefully at the surrounding world, or what she describes as "being attentive to the materials, to the subject matter of writing" (94). Connection, meanwhile, involves a kind of active consideration of how observed things might connect with each other to form new combinations, or what Cooper

According to composition scholar Marilyn Cooper, notebooking involves **rhythmic writing habits** that include "observation" (noticing), "connection" (bringing together), and "wonder" (thinking deeply about new things to notice and connect) (94-95).

characterizes as "connecting past and present with the subject material through memories and experiences of daily life" (96) in ways that allow a notebooker to "mak[e] a new thing from the old" (96). Finally, wonder relies on a kind of active consideration of how this newness might impact the world in interesting or unforeseen ways—what Cooper describes as some sort of "felt recognition that something matters in a particular way" (95). Notebooking thus enables us as notebookers to notice things using rhythmic observation practices, to connect them through rhythmic routines, and to use our sense of curiosity to drive further rhythmic observation and connection.

Assertion #2: Notebooking Often Generates Resonance

As I've also implied already, notebooking about the AF experience can also become at times a resonant practice—that is, reflective of a state in which rhythmic vibrations initially appearing in one body come to cause vibrations in one or more other bodies through the transfer of energy in ways that end up being transformative. Rhetorician Casey Boyle explicitly stresses this important potential for resonance within notebooking through his discussion of transduction—which is the mechanism underlying resonance whereby "energy is transformed from one kind of signal to another" (79). Specifically, Boyle argues that notebooking is best understood as the "transductive practice of assembling multiple media fragments in one place" (139). Such transductively enabled resonance ultimately allows notebooking to function as a kind "multimedia assemblage" (139) that enables new kinds of rhythms to interact and potentially transform one another. Indeed, Boyle insists that notebooking's operation as such a resonant multimedia assemblage allows for "structures and systems of information to make 'sense' and for its practitioner to become informed by events of circumstance" (138). Notebooking, in short, enables a kind of transductive energy exchange that allows new kinds of sense and new identities for notebooking practitioners to emerge from various (multimedia) entries.

Assertion #3: Rhythmic Resonances of Notebooking Bring Together Musical and Academic Experience in Interesting New Ways

In a general sense, the rhythmic and resonant dimensions of notebooking seem especially well-suited to capturing some of the unique benefits of writing about embodied musical and academic experience. Indigenous sound studies scholar Dylan Robinson describes the general practice of writing about music as a kind of resonant theory that allows people to make new knowledge by writing with, through, and beyond their embodied experiences of musical engagement. For Robinson, writing about the bodily experience of music as it unfolds affords a kind of direct and potentially unique means to access how

Why write about music?

Indigenous sound studies scholar Dylan Robinson argues that writing with, through, and beyond our embodied experiences with music helps us make new knowledge in the world.

music makes a body feel: it operates "where writers' and readers' bodies move alongside music's body" (78) in ways that promote "'writing with' a subject in contrast to 'writing about' [something]" (81). Such a "writing-with" approach sees body and knowledge as integrally connected rather than separate—and therefore ultimately views writing about the embodied experience of music as generating potentially unique and special insights.[4] Or, to blend Boyle's language with Robinson's concepts here, I'd argue that notebooking about music enables a potentially unique and resonant multimedia assemblage, one directly entangling embodied musical experience with reading, writing, and thinking about such experience in new and interesting ways.

Notebooking AF and Academics: An Extended Example

In order to best illustrate the potential rhythmic and especially resonant power of these notebooking processes in action, I want to turn now to one last set of extended notebooking examples. Both were written the day after a gig in Dublin, Ireland in September 2017 that came at the end of two-week AF trip:

> **9-5-2017 (part I)**
> Quick thoughts on last night:
>
> We got to Dublin, where it was also cool and overcast with hints of rain. (It never really did start raining, though.) Things didn't start out well: we arrived later than we thought, and I was worried that my trumpet was permanently damaged. So, right when we got to the club, I ran out to try and find a brass shop: supposedly, there was a guy two blocks away …
>
> The [gear] was also late, which made for a sweat to get things started. Sound on stage, meanwhile, wasn't very good: I could hear, but things were distorting. By the time we got done checking—and very late at that—things seemed like they'd be a [mess] …
>
> [A few hours later,] we went on stage. It was [hot] right from the get-go, and muggy as well. But, from the first minute I sat down, [I actually] felt great. I could hear everything well enough, everyone was loose, and the lights made it feel special. Truly. The woman doing the lights kept everything dark and mellow, with lots of reds and oranges. There was an occasional spotlight (e.g., when I played

4. Robinson also insists that such a writing-with approach has at least two critical functions. First, it promotes longstanding Indigenous views of "nonhuman relations" (79) in ways that can "help move beyond the anthropocentrism that reinforces the subject's mastery over an object" (79). Second, it queers normative ways of understanding music as "white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle class" (81) by stressing the "intersubjective pleasure of touch in writing" (93). Such a writing-with approach can thereby bring important new critical perspectives to the insights afforded by musical engagement.

> the horn), but I felt like she got the point of the band. I felt right in the zone, and by song #3—"Instincts"—things started to feel special.
>
> Gotta say, too, that the new setlist is pretty great: it does a nice job of ebbing and flowing, and I don't feel like there are any flat spots. At the same time, I feel like it saves the best for last: "So Lost" into "Honestly" into "Never Meant" is a nice touch—and all of those went real well. I also decided to play the horn solo after "Honestly": I was worried that doing so might kill the mood a bit, as we had just come out of something loud and fun. I had actually let loose on the drums a bit, and I even had XXX egging me on from about 3 feet away, as the guitar boat was right next to my hi-hats. Super fun, and one of the more energetic "Honestly" versions of the tour. Good times there.
>
> [As well,] the horn solo felt special … It was kind of magical. The crowd went dead silent, my tone was good, and everything felt very musical. After "Honestly," and with the lights and vibe as it was—hot, but just the right amount of hot and sweat—I think that it made for a nice contrast and a fine penultimate number. After that, "Never Meant" was fun and inspired for the second or third night in a row: the sing-alongs make that song worth it. (Oh yea: I heard singing along on "So Lost" last night, too: clearly, these kids are listening to the new record.) …
>
> The night finished by catching a lift to the hotel with the backline guy and heading out for a piece of pizza to fill my stomach. The hotel itself sucked, with a big clocktower outside the window that rang, quite literally, every 15 f*cking minutes. And the mattress was worse than no mattress at all. Glad to be going home in that sense ….

As I look back at this passage, I see quite a bit of what I think that Cooper would characterize as the rhythmic habit of observation. Indeed, I seem to be noticing here a range of interesting rhythms rooted in my embodied experience from this previous night in Dublin, noting in particular:

- rhythms of arrival and departure:
  - getting to the club late (par. 2);
  - trying to sleep in a terrible hotel before flying home the next morning (par. 7).
- rhythms of (or, perhaps more accurately, arhythmic sensations of) difficulty:
  - dealing with my damaged instrument (par. 2);
  - enduring a difficult sound check (par. 3).
- rhythms of environment:
  - "Dublin, where it was cool and overcast" (par. 1);
  - "it was hot from the get-go, and muggy as well" (par. 4);

  - I felt "just the right amount of hot and sweat" (par. 6);
  - "the lights made it feel special. The woman doing the lights kept everything dark and mellow, with lots of reds and oranges. There was an occasional spotlight (e.g., when I played the horn), but I felt like she got the point of the band" (par. 4).

I also see myself starting to engage in a bit of Cooper's habit connection here—as well as a bit of her habit of wonder—as I started to think about the larger rhythms and even resonances of my performance and how they began to create a kind of flow across a set list:

- rhythms of performance:
  - "the new setlist is pretty great: it does a nice job of ebbing and flowing, and I don't feel like there are any flat spots" (par. 5);
  - "'So Lost' into 'Honestly' into 'Never Meant' is a nice touch" (par. 5);
  - "The horn solo felt special … it was kind of magical. The crowd went dead silent, my tone was good, and everything felt very musical" (par. 5).

Across this first journal entry, then, I see myself practicing the rhythmic habit of observation trained itself toward various rhythms: I tried to record, to the best of my ability, highlights related to what I had seen, heard, felt, and otherwise experienced the night before in ways reflective of what I try to do each and every time that I notebook about the embodied musical experience of AF. But I also notice certain ways in which habits of connection and wonder were starting to generate some level of new insight for me about that particular evening as well: indeed, I was beginning to notice how these individual rhythms were working in tandem to generate a larger sense of value of significance for this specific night. The set list was coming together. The trumpet solo was working. The night was starting to feel special to me.

Things become more interestingly resonant, however, in a later part of this same entry. Here, I start speculating about some of the ways in which this particular show in Dublin got me thinking in depth about some of the more general dynamics that make for a memorable show, aided by more overt examples of Cooper's habits of connection and wonder:

> 9-5-2017 (part II)
>
> I'm thinking [now] about some key ingredients at showtime: the crowd, both in terms of size and demeanor. Is the room full (e.g., T5; Dublin), semi-full (e.g., Brighton), or disastrously empty (e.g.,

> Sasquatch or f*cking Champaign)? Is it cold? Hot? dry? Humid? Can we hear the crowd or no? Are they watching or singing? Are they bored or checking their phones or even heckling (e.g., Berlin) Is there a group in front that's having enough fun in order to draw inspiration? Or are they yelling "you suck"? … Those kinds of nights are sh*t, no matter the preparation.
>
> But [then] I think of last night, which I do believe was a top-5 (or at the very least top 10) all time, up against places like T5 or Reading or Pitchfork. In a case like that, things come together: the sound on stage is good and I can hear everything. The temperature is right: I'm sweating but not dying. The crowd is singing along when they're supposed to and quiet when they're supposed to be; people are paying attention and having fun and dancing, all of that kind of thing; the horn isn't giving me grief, nor are the drums. Those are the nights worth remembering—the ones that tend to stick with me. Last night was one of those nights, I think …
>
> On the right kind of night, there's a mutuality—a clear flow of vibes between and among the band and the crew; among the band and crew and the crowd; among the band and the crew and the crowd and the venue and the feel and the sights and the temperature, even. It all works together …
>
> For our part, we band members want to create that same kind of situation. We're the catalysts in an important way. (Or maybe, if I take [new materialist] work seriously enough, the songs are co-catalysts along with us—and it's clear that these songs and related images and memes have taken on a life of their own in some important ways that underscore the potential power of her arguments regarding circulation.) But we actually want the same thing as well: we want to be part of a communal positivity and communal sense of fun and good will. There's not real argument or explicit message in the way of a political rally or new speech (although, of course, music is part of such things). There's instead a sense of communal longing and participation. And I think that sense resonates awfully strongly with what Kevin Leander and Gail Boldt are talking about: participating in literacy for its own sake, because it's pleasurable, because there's a sense of connection and joy and circulation and amplification at stake. These are pretty important goals, so it seems to me.

As I look back at this second passage, I again see myself observing certain rhythms that might tend to make for a better experience than a worse one in general: how full is the room? (par. 8); how are the physical conditions in terms of temperature, humidity, access to water on stage? (par. 8); how is the crowd responding to and interacting with us and our music? (par. 8). But I actually spend much more time here engaging in connection and wonder to reveal deeper resonances. Specifically, I start to connect ways in which the

particular rhythms of a good night seem to begin interacting to generate the following:

- resonances of coming together:
  - "The temperature is right: I'm sweating but not dying" (par. 9);
  - the crowd is "singing along when they're supposed to a quiet when they're supposed to be" (par. 4);
  - such events create "nights worth remembering—the ones that tend to stick with me" (par. 9).
- resonances across band, crew, crowd, and environment:
  - "there's … a sense of communal longing and participation" (par. 8);
  - there exists "a mutuality—a clear flow of vibes … among the band and the crew; among the band and the crew and the crowd; among the band and the crew and the crowd; among the band and the crew and the crowd and the venue and the sights and the sounds and the temperature, even. It all works together. (par. 10).
- resonances with scholarship and my own scholarly thinking:
  - "If I take [new material] work seriously enough, the songs are co-catalysts along with us" (par. 8);
  - there is an emerging sense here that "resonates awfully strongly with what Leander and Boldt are talking about: participating in literacy for its own sake, because it is pleasurable, because there's a sense of connection and joy and circulation and amplification at stake" (par. 8).

These last passages reference resonance quite explicitly as they describe new things coming together across seemingly disparate areas of my life: here, I notice how the rhythms of notebooking are interacting with rhythms of playing and experiencing and soundchecking over time; with rhythms of striking drums and sweating and getting excited or angry or frustrated; with still other rhythms of reading, writing, thinking, and reflecting. I even reference two theorists of literacy and affective pleasure—Leander and Boldt—whose work I was engaged with at this time. All of these things are coming together in ways that I had not expected but that I appreciated deeply nonetheless. In particular, these resonances helped to transform these combinations of rhythms into new things: new insights into the reasons that a particular Dublin show felt special; new insights into more general ways to distinguish especially good shows from the rest; new insights into how these musical experiences tie directly to reading and writing and thinking about literate practice (and vice-versa).

These resonances were much more emergent than planned or forced. That is, I didn't necessarily try to make these resonances happen—but they happened anyway. They also suggest that notebooking can, at least at times, bring about a kind of process that operates beyond human intention or volition in some of the ways that Boyle mentions. Indeed, I seem to chip away a bit more at these issues, rhythmically, each time that I return to them such that things start to come together, resonantly, on their own accord. Still further, these interesting resonances help me to see a bigger picture emerging in terms of how music, scholarship, and life co-create each other. Different forms of sound, music, and embodiment begin combining and interlacing through notebooking with other forms of reading, writing, and thinking in ways that clearly exceed the sum of their parts. These processes, in turn, generate new insights into connections between a particular trip and larger kinds of thinking; new insights into the power of ideas that span past experience, present thinking, and future aspirations; and even new insights that have ultimately enabled me to write the piece that you are now engaged with as readers.

Conclusions and Suggestions

I hope that these particular excerpts, themselves just a few of dozens of resonant instances that I might have shared, usefully illustrate some of the ways that notebooking has yielded interesting rhythms and powerful resonances for me. These include some very practical outcomes, on the one hand:

- A means to navigate the AF experience for more than 8 years now since I started notebooking in 2016;
- A means to enable me to keep doing my professorial work throughout this entire experience;
- A means to generate new academic work at the intersection of these experiences (since beginning notebooking, I've written two articles, drafted much of a book in progress, and also written this piece that you're all reading now).

More interesting to me, however, is the way in which the rhythmic resonance that this notebooking has enabled has generated some new insights into burning questions that I wouldn't even have known to ask before starting on this particular journey:

- What is rhythmic and resonant about notebooking? about academic writing? about drumming? about all of them, all at once, when they function as a (multimedia) assemblage?

- What might musical rhythms and academic rhythms achieve in tandem that they can't otherwise?
- What new techniques for living and being through music and writing simultaneously might be cultivated through notebooking work like this?
- In what ways might notebooking come to comprise a "real" life work of its own worthy of time, attention, and analysis?

This last question even animates me as I write now. I'd say that, for me, the rhythmic resonances enabled by my notebooking AF has generated a new kind of hybrid of musical and written experience for me that actually exceeds either individually. I continue to appreciate both activities separately, of course, but I especially appreciate them now as they interact within notebooking practices and products: through notebooking, I get to re-experience the intensity of being on stage but while also (re-) writing and (re)-reading and (re-) thinking these intensities through theoretical and academic lenses. I also derive new energies and intensities from these sorts of writing, reading, and thinking activities that feed new energies into my playing. And even my teaching has been impacted: I've recently begun teaching Writing on Music in ways that reflect both my playing experiences and the research work that I've been doing. These rhythms now resonate with each other in wonderfully vibrant ways. I had not anticipated any of this, but I am deeply grateful for it.

I hope, finally, that my discussion here might encourage readers like you to experiment with notebooking embodied musical experience—or, if you'd prefer, other kinds of embodied rhythmic experiences instead—for yourselves:

1. If you love music, try notebooking about it regularly. If not, then try writing about something else that affects you deeply in some sort of rhythmic way: sport, yoga, video games, conversation, or anything else at all that brings you into some sort of mental and/or physical flow state. Jot down your thoughts about how, where, with whom, and why you experience this sort of rhythmic activity, and do so as consistently as you can: daily, weekly, bi-weekly, monthly. Using Cooper's habit of observation to help you, strive for a rhythm in your writing about rhythm.
2. When it makes sense to do so, try to set rhythmic experiences in relation through Cooper's habits of observation and wonder. Don't force things, of course. But do try to cultivate a situation in which these sorts of rhythmic experiences might come into some sort of potentially transformative resonant relation as naturally as possible.

3. See what transformative resonances you might be lucky enough to participate in if and when conditions line up just right. Enjoy them if they do, and see what sort of new sense they provide for you.
4. Don't overthink the whys of doing any of this. Just do the thing. Trust the process. Be open to the idea that things will happen if you let them.

I'm definitely not trying to offer prescriptions here for how the notebooking of experience must work. There is no "must" here. But I do hope that, with luck, these rhythmic practices and emergent resonances might do for you what they've done for me—that is, provide you with new ideas, new insights, and new sources of excitement across the many facets of your literate lives.

Works Cited

Boyle, Casey. *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice*. Ohio State UP, 2018.

Cooper, Marilyn. *The Animal Who Writes: A Posthumanist Composition*. Pitt UP, 2019.

Leander, Kevin and Gail Boldt. "Rereading 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies': Bodies, Texts, and Emergence." *Journal of Literacy Research*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2012, pp. 22–46, DOI: 10.1177/1086296X12468587.

LeFebvre, Henri. "The Critique of the Thing." *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*. Translated and edited by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, Bloomsbury, 2004, pp. 16-28.

LeFebvre, Henri and Catherine Regulier. "The Rhythmanalytical Project." *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, translated and edited by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, Bloomsbury, 2004, pp. 71-92.

"Midwest emo." *Wikipedia*, 26 Jan. 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midwest_emo.

Robinson, Dylan. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Minnesota UP, 2020.

Roozen, Kevin and Joe Erickson. *Expanding Literate Landscapes: Persons, Practices, and Sociohistoric Perspectives of Disciplinary Development*. Computers and Composition Digital P/Utah State UP, 2017, ccdigitalpress.org/book/expanding/.

Rosa, Hartmut. *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*. Translated by James C. Wagner, Polity Press, 2019.

Steve Lamos is an Associate Professor in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric and English Department at the University of Colorado-Boulder and the drummer for the band American Football. He researches issues of race and racism in basic writing, labor issues in composition, writing on music, writing pedagogy, and other topics.

Manic Panic: When You're Not a "Natural" Rainbowhead

Alicia Shupe

In this reprint from GWRJ 13.2 (2023), Alicia Shupe explores the importance of genre analysis and conventions and using critical thinking in concert with antecedent knowledge to read people much as we might read a text.

Do You Read Me? People as Genre

Have you ever sat at a restaurant or café table near a window and watched the people on the street walk by? If you have, you know that, in general, you'll see all kinds of people with all kinds of diverse stories and backgrounds moving through all sorts of tasks important to their daily lives. One might be on the way to work, another on the way home; someone is running a shopping errand, another picking up their school-age children. As you watch them coming and going, it's likely that you've formed ideas of what their lives might look like. But where do those ideas come from? How do you know that the man crossing the street in the nicely fitted suit talking on his cell phone is a business professional? What do you believe about the young woman riding the bicycle and wearing the brightly colored tie-dye dress? You may not be aware of it, but as you're watching these people go about their lives, you're actually "reading" them. Their clothes, their hair, their posture, their actions—all work together to create a story of who this person is and what their business in the world may be. In other words, their external presentation acts as a genre convention that tells you who they are. The ISU

Writing Program defines **genre conventions** as all the things a writer could discover (and discuss) about a particular genre that makes us recognize it as, well, what it is ("Genre Research Terms"). That is to say, genre conventions tell you how to understand something as belonging to a certain genre.

You may have guessed the man was in business because of his expensive-looking, well-fitting suit, which suggests he is someone who wears a suit often and needs to maintain a certain appearance. You may have also guessed his profession because he was talking on a cell phone and carrying a briefcase. You may assume that the young woman on the bicycle is a free spirit because of the tie-dye dress or her seemingly carefree smile. Some of these assumptions may be completely accurate. Some may not. Unlike reading a text and applying genre conventions to understand the work the writing is doing, reading a person as a genre can be a bit more complicated.

Genre Conventions: Who Are You and How Do You Look?

The ISU Writing Program defines **genre** as a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable ("Genre Research Terms"). Whoa! That's kind of a lot. If genre is a kind of production, then how can it apply to people? Well, there's actually a simpler answer to that than you might think. Have you ever heard the phrases "product of society or a "product of their environment"? What those sayings are hinting at is the fact that people are shaped by the places where they grow up and the people they interact with. Each society has its own set of rules and cultural values. As we grow and become active participants in the world, we internalize those values and then learn to behave in a way that fits with those learned conventions. Here's an example to help it make a little more sense: as a child, you may have been taught to say "sir" or "ma'am" when you're speaking to someone older than yourself. You may have also been taught to wear certain fancy clothes if you attended church or Sunday school. Why? Because wearing fancy clothes to church is supposed to show respect. In my house, my mother's answer to "Why can't I wear my soccer shirt to church?" was "Because I didn't raise a hooligan." At eight years old, I didn't particularly have a definition for hooligan, but I could understand that it was important to my mom that I looked clean and well put together: a decent reflection of her parenting. She didn't want the other church folks to think she hadn't taught me to be respectful. My mother knew that other adults would look at me and read me as either well-behaved and well-taught or wild based on my appearance. Just as a reader and a writer might do when trying to figure out which genre a

book, song, or movie is, they would look at the final product—me as a child—and assign me a genre based on the conventions I exhibited. Unkempt hair, a soccer shirt, and excitable behavior would equal a "wild" classification, whereas a fancy dress, clean socks, and smooth hair (impossible with my natural curls) would earn me a classification as one of the "good" kids.

As I've shown with the example of watching people come and go on the street, this type of people-reading is not singular to church folks and children. We all do this constantly. It's how we understand whether we want to engage with someone before we ever say "hello" for the first time. Reading people as a genre gives us some insight into who that person may be, whether we share values, whether we might get along, and whether we want to invite them into our world. But is reading people as a genre always benign? We'd like to think so, but the truth is that people, like texts, do not exist in a vacuum. Our genre conventions can be pushed and even broken. Think of Lil Nas X recording "Old Town Road" with Billy Ray Cyrus: Is it rap? Is it country? Is it pop? Is it something new and something else altogether? The same is true of people. Just because someone wears a suit doesn't mean they fit neatly into the box of conservative business professional, and just because someone has dyed their hair blue doesn't mean they fit neatly into the anarchist punk box. Our value systems that allow us to apply genre conventions to people and read them as belonging to a certain group were shaped by the worlds in which we grew up, which means there is plenty of room for stereotypes, discrimination, and misinformation. There are myriad ways to misread someone based on appearance, and those misreads can have very real consequences for the life of the person who is misread and misjudged at first glance.

Did God Give You Blue Hair? The Limits of Antecedent Knowledge

When I was twenty years old, I dyed my hair Electric Blue. The logic for this change was quite simple in my mind: After two decades as the daughter of a pastor, constantly concerned with how other people would read my appearance and categorize me based on the conventions of the genre to which they decided I belonged, I'd decided I wanted my external appearance to match the person I knew on the inside—someone who was beginning to realize she didn't care all that much about fitting specific genre conventions and who wanted a little room to figure out which bookshelf she belonged on all by herself. Also, blue just happened to be my favorite color at the time, and I thought it was pretty, so … there was that. I grew up in the '90s and was a teenager in the early aughts, so I'd seen brightly

Reading is a term often used in Black Queer culture, particularly in the Trans, Drag, and Ballroom communities. The term is typically applied when one points out and "exaggerates" the flaws of another (@robby-pooh).

While the context was different for me, there is some overlap between this term and what happened in the following story.

It is also worth noting that reading people as a genre, when considered in this cultural context, has a traceable history that should not be ignored. The subculture that popularized the term is often marginalized and disadvantaged in mainstream education, literacy, and reading opportunities (texts).

colored dyed hair in pop culture for most of my life, but, having also grown up in an incredibly conservative church, I didn't know anything about the history of dyed hair or about the history of **reading** people in Black Queer culture. I didn't know anything about punk subculture. And I was definitely not prepared for how the rest of the world would read my new genre. I knew how the church would respond, but since I'd broken from that religion, I wasn't concerned. Naively, I thought the rest of the world wouldn't care what I did or how I looked.

In the summer of 2010, my sister took me and a friend to see Bon Jovi at Soldier Field in Chicago (see Figure 1 at the end of this article for a full-color image). As we walked through the tunnel to the field, we passed several security checkpoints where we showed our tickets, opened our bags, and were waved through. At the last checkpoint, my sister and her friend, a blonde and a brunette, were waved through, but the security guard who checked my ticket asked me to wait. I stood for what seemed like a lifetime—it was probably no more than ninety seconds—before she finally sighed and said, "Blue hair? Did God give you blue hair? Do you believe that God is imperfect in his knowledge and made a mistake when he gave you your natural hair? You think you can improve on God's design with blue hair?" I was stunned. First, because this security guard sounded like she'd spent some time talking to my father. But then, even more so because I couldn't understand how the strands growing from my head had anything to do with her or any relationship to whether or not it was safe for me to take my seat (which I paid for) on the field at a rock concert. Of all the places I might have expected to be read as divergent from the norm, a rock concert was not on the list. These were supposed to be my people! I couldn't say anything. For the first time since choosing to rewrite my genre, I felt a little wave of shame, like she had just pointed out something very wrong with me and done so for the world to see. I get it now: what I was feeling was a reaction to being read both as a genre and in the cultural context noted above. I think about this moment often, and my reaction varies from wishing I'd said any manner of thing about the politeness of minding one's own business to simply wishing I'd managed a kind word that might have changed her perception. But at the time, all I managed was a

defiant chin thrust and a grunted, "Mmhmm," which was returned before she summoned me through the gate and to the field.

Of course, more than a decade later, I understand a little better what was happening in that interaction with the security guard. She was using her antecedent knowledge of natural hair colors, of religious convictions, and of people with dyed hair and transferring all that knowledge onto her reading of me. **Antecedent knowledge** is all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing ("Uptake Terms"). And since writing and reading are inextricably linked activities, the same is true of readers. When we read a text or a person, we apply the things we already know to help us interpret what we're seeing and make meaning. Unfortunately, as I've said before, some of what we know about people comes from stereotypes born and replayed throughout our culture. The security guard was simply engaging in an implicit, instinctive form of **transfer**, a process that occurs when one is "applying antecedent knowledge to a new situation" (Haley 30). As a security guard, I'm sure it had been her job to read people and make snap decisions about them long before she'd ever met me. But when we engage in reading people like genres, that sort of quick reading and reliance on antecedent knowledge that may include stereotypes, while understandable, is imperfect. You can learn just about as much about a person's identity and personality at a glance as you can by skimming a 600-page novel for ten minutes. You might get a hint or a whisper of the gist, but you won't know them.

I can't know for certain what was going through her mind as she made those comments and held me back for the extra security check, but I can reflect on my own uptake process after that situation. **Uptake** is the process we go through to take up a new idea and think about it until it makes sense ("Uptake Terms"). It is also a tracing of what we've learned and how we've gone about learning it. It took more than a few years for me to finish tracing my uptake from that encounter, but it consisted of two valuable lessons that I learned, both of which came from standing in that vulnerable position and feeling judged and more than a little surprised. Lesson number one: Misreading people as a genre can work from both sides of the conversation. I had assumed that, because I was going to a rock show, I would be among like-minded individuals who wanted to express themselves creatively and externalize their internalized individuality. I hadn't thought about the stadium employees having different values, emotions, or antecedent knowledge. And lesson two: After two trips around my body with the security wand, I learned for the first time that boldly colored, unnatural hair color can be viewed as a threat to the norm and, as such, can be a threat in general.

Divergent from the Norm: What Happens When Genre Conventions Are Broken?

That day at Soldier Field convinced me of the importance of finding people who would know and accept me as I am. I'd always felt a bit different from the people I grew up around, so it became important to me that I show even more of my inner self on the outside. At twenty, I figured that if people could see my divergence before they got to know me and still choose to lean in, maybe they would eventually be able to accept me.

The other thing that day brought up was my curiosity. Why did that security guard think it was OK for her to speak to my personal life? And more importantly, what was it about blue hair that felt so morally or culturally threatening or triggering? After all, I was a law-abiding, taxpaying citizen who was working eighty hours per week as an accounts receivable clerk for an auto parts manufacturer. I didn't use party as a verb. I didn't even have a crowd to run with. When I wasn't in school, I spent most of my evenings at my eight-year-old niece's swim practices.

I needed to understand more about the history of brightly colored "unnatural" hair.

It Didn't Start with Kylie Jenner: History of the Genre

In my twenties, I spent a lot of time trying to catch up on all the trends and pop culture I'd missed as a sheltered teenager and, as young people are wont to do, also trying to figure out what I liked and what kind of artists I could identify with. Music has always been a huge part of my life and my identity, and each time I found a new artist that I liked, I'd end up downloading their whole catalog and falling down a YouTube research rabbit hole (that's a really polite way to say: I dare you to find a Nirvana documentary that I haven't seen at this point). So, I feel like I have something of an understanding about the relationship between brightly colored hair and punk subculture. But, for this article, I wanted to understand even more. Once more to the research rabbit hole!

According to an article written for Byrdie.com (whose tagline is "Your one-stop destination for insider beauty secrets"), humans have been dyeing hair since 1500 BC, but the first documentation of an unnatural color dye is credited to William Henry Perkin, who "created the first synthesized dye in 1863"—a mauve color he named Mauveine (Hopp). From there, the article chronicles the rise of L'Oréal in 1907, the American obsession with platinum blonde hair thanks to Jean Harlow and Howard Hughes's film in 1931, and

eventually the beginnings of celebrity endorsements and partnerships with hair color brands in the 1980s (Hopp).

And then, nothing. There is a gap in the timeline of the Byrdie article between the 1980s and 2014 when Kylie Jenner debuted her teal tips. "In May of 2014, while most of the population was embracing ombré and other, more natural-looking hair color techniques, Kylie Jenner took the opposite approach and made her first major hair color transformation … with the now-iconic teal blue tips" (Hopp). Given what I know about the punk movement and that my own "first major hair color transformation" happened a full four years before Kylie Jenner, I was stumped to see this suggestion of an origin for brightly colored hair. The Byrdie article is not the only one I've seen that marks the fashion timeline in this way. So, I left behind the mainstream beauty websites and went on to specifically researching punk history with the hope of discovering punk fashion trends that filled in the gap between the '80s and 2014.

While I was researching punk subculture, I learned that women were dyeing their hair pink as early as 1914 (Felsenthal). However, at that time, it wasn't a subversive punk move; it was the height of wealth and fashion (Felsenthal). Still, that didn't explain how brightly colored hair moved from being something coveted by the upper classes to something that resulted in me being stopped by a security guard in 2010. If anything, it just complicated the reading. But that kind of makes sense too, right? After all, genres do not work outside of the systems in which they're created any more than people exist apart from the systems in which they live. My instincts and antecedent knowledge told me that as fashions change and are taken up by other groups, then the meanings change with them. Since the punk movement is more recent than the fashionable ladies of 1914, I continued my search.

To the best of my research, it seems that brightly colored hair dye is a product of the glam punk scene in New York City and was first made popular by Tish and Snooky Bellomo, who created the Manic Panic brand in the East Village at St. Marks Place in 1977 (Laskow). It was the first punk brand and store in the US, and though they sold all sorts of vintage fashion items, they eventually became famous for their brightly colored hair dye (Laskow).

Kylie Jenner and other famous people who have brightly colored locks have helped to mainstream the fashion and creative self-expression so that "Manic Panic is going through a bit of [a] renaissance right now, as pop stars from Rihanna to Katy Perry decide to dye their hair bright blues, red, pinks, greens, and more"; however, "the company [and brand] got its start [at] the store on St. Marks Place" (Laskow). Given the brand's success for more than forty years, it feels fair to equate their longevity with the continued popularity

of brightly colored hair even beyond the New York punk scene (especially now that you can buy their products online).

So, You've Dyed Your Hair. Now What? A Close Reading of Your New Genre

If choosing to dye your hair a bold or bright color is a form of self-expression, perhaps the last and biggest question is "what are you expressing?" For me, I like to color my hair the way that some people like to decorate their homes for the seasons. For Christmas (2020), I dyed my hair dark evergreen with a single streak of "ice" blonde (see Figure 2 at the end of this article) and ended up matching my Christmas tree. Apparently, green and gold are my Christmas aesthetic.

When I'm choosing a new color, the questions I ask myself (and my stylist) are often about how I'm feeling in the moment, what season we're in, and just as a practical and logistical consideration, what color am I trying to cover up?

Autumn is my favorite season—I am a Scorpio, after all—so once August hits, I find myself getting excited about going back to school, the leaves changing colors, and upcoming holidays, and that is often reflected in my hair color. This is usually the part of the year when I give up cool blues or bright, summery pinks and start coloring my hair with deep reds, dark purples, or other muted tones one might associate with fall. In honor of the spooky season, my current vibe is navy blue, violet, and dark green—colors one might see in typical Halloween decorations. But once Valentine's Day passes, the winter snow is deep and beginning to turn black on the side of the road, and I'm counting the days until I can see (and sneeze at) grass again, out come the pastel Easter colors. Icy blues, lilac, peach—I've even done dusty rose à la 1914 (see Figure 3 at the end of this article). All this seasonal decoration and internal moodiness can be seen atop my head, but you'll never find marshmallow Peeps in my cupboards, and I just won't ever remember to hang a cobweb or Easter Bunny on my door.

Final Thoughts: Once More for Those in the Back

I know that some people may make assumptions about my character when they see the color of my hair; I've experienced it not only in 2010, but too many times since then to name here. I also know that the color of my hair does not have any impact on my ability to do my job, to be a kind and ethical person, or to function as a productive member of society.

I guess the trick here is understanding that genre conventions can shift and change given the context in which the genre is working. For example, horror movies are scary. There are certain conventions employed to make you feel unsafe as you watch: dramatic music, darkly lit scenes, cinematography that attempts to replicate the feeling of running or looking over your shoulder (e.g., "The Blair Witch Project"). But when those conventions are employed in an insurance commercial, we understand that those things aren't meant to scare us out of buying the insurance but are being used to make a larger point.

The same is true when we're reading people. Just as you would employ a genre analysis to any other text, we should also employ this critical skill while we read people as a genre. The ISU Writing Program's definition of **genre analysis** teaches us to look underneath the surface features of visual design, sentence-level qualities, and style and tone to uncover how genres can be subject to (and can enforce) cultural, social, commercial, and political agendas ("Genre Research Terms"). My hair is not purple because I identify as a punk; it's purple because I like purple and am excited that it's autumn. But if you asked me about my politics, you'd probably find out that I have some real questions about the genre of "people" and the conventions we construct to define others as a final product.

Figure 1: Blue hair and Bon Jovi.

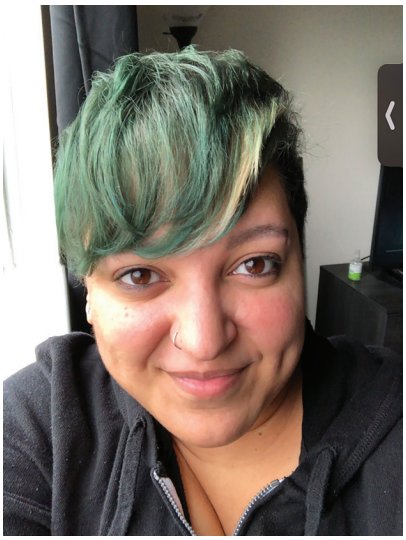


Figure 2: Green holiday hair.

Figure 3: Dusty rose hair.

Works Cited

Felsenthal, Julia. "Pink Hair Is All the Rage—Just Like it Was in 1914." *Slate*, 12 May 2011, The Slate Group, slate.com/culture/2011/05/pink-hair-is-all-the-rage-just-like-it-was-in-1914.html.

"Genre Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms/. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.

Haley, Michael. "Remediating the Runway: How Transfer and Remediation Allowed 'Project Runway' Help Me Write a Book." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, Fall 2018, pp. 25–34, www.isuwriting.com/_files/ugd/63de80_68f273d41e614cb48558a656c07eb247.pdf.

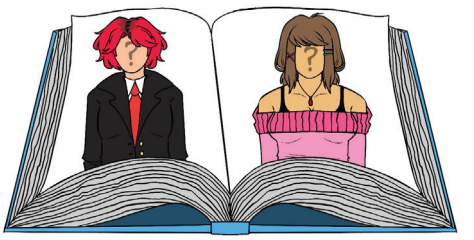
Hopp, Deven. "From 1500 BC to 2015 AD: The Extraordinary History of Hair Color." *Byrdie*, 10 Feb. 2022, Dotdash Meredith, www.byrdie.com/hair-color-history.

Laskow, Sarah. "Manic Panic Isn't Just a Hair Dye Brand: It Was the First Punk Store in America." *Atlas Obscura*, 4 Nov. 2016, www.atlasobscura.com/articles/manic-panic-isnt-just-a-hair-dye-brand-it-was-the-first-punk-store-in-america.

@robby-pooh. "Reading." *Urban Dictionary*, 21 July 2013, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Reading.

"Uptake Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/uptake-terms/. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.

Alicia Shupe is a PhD student in creative writing (fiction) at Illinois State University. Her research interests include feminist theory, trauma, and the telling (or not telling) of women's stories. When she isn't writing her own fiction, she's probably watching "Grey's Anatomy" on Netflix (again).



Drawing by Maddie Silk

Conversations with
a *Grassroots* Author

Keeping It Personal: A Conversation on the Importance of Self in a GWRJ Article

Alicia Shupe and Janine Blue

In this interview transcribed from an episode of the "Conversations with GWRJ Authors" podcast series, Alicia Shupe talks with Janine Blue about how she came up with the idea for her GWRJ article "Manic Panic: When You're Not a 'Natural' Rainbowhead." Shupe shares how they researched such a personal topic of discussion and why everyone can start writing a GWRJ article by looking inward.

How does a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article come together? According to GWRJ author Alicia Shupe, the answer is using antecedent knowledge as a first step, doing content and genre research of GWRJ articles, and simply having fun along the way. In this transcript of an interview from the podcast series "Conversations with GWRJ Authors," Janine Blue interviews Alicia about her article-writing practices and emphasizes the significance of making GWRJ articles personal. Her thoughtful and engaging responses show us that nothing is more important in an article than the person telling the story and that enjoyment is essential to writing and research practices.

Janine Blue: Hello, and welcome to the series "Conversations with GWRJ Authors." Today, we are speaking with Alicia Shupe about her article "Manic Panic: When You're Not a 'Natural' Rainbowhead." In this article, Alicia discusses the concept of reading people in the same ways that we might read genres, especially as it extends to hair, makeup, and other creative forms of self-expression. She explores the importance of genre analysis and genre conventions and how we all use critical thinking in concert with antecedent knowledge to read people, much

like we might read a text. It's fascinating, colorful, and such a unique idea. Alicia, thank you so much for being here.

Alicia Shupe: Absolutely, Janine. Thrilled to be here. Thanks for having me.

Janine: Yeah, absolutely. So, just to kick things off, how exactly did you come up with the idea for your article?

Alicia: You know, it's funny. It was something Dr. Joyce Walker said to us in the fall of 2021, my first semester [at Illinois State University], and I will completely blow this quote because it's been a minute since then. But she and Dr. Gramer encouraged us to choose a topic that fascinates and energizes us or that we have enough curiosity to research and revise consistently. That notion reminded me of this paper I'd written as an undergrad on how women with tattoos are perceived. A lot of my work comes from a place of me fighting back against accusations that have been levied at me, especially as a millennial female with, you know, punk hair and tattoos and all the rest of it. So that same feeling of indignation at the idea that anyone would feel entitled to an opinion about me, my hair, or my tattoos flared up and inspired this piece.

Janine: I love how you got your idea from your own life. That's what's so great about the *Grassroots* journal. All the articles are about people in their lives, the things they care about, and things that matter to them. It's great that you wanted to talk about yourself, in a way, in this article. So, how did you decide what ISU Writing Program terms to rely on to connect to your article?

"**Genres** are typified responses to recurring social situations. Often, when we talk about genres, we include so many different kinds of written texts (… text messages we send every day, the forms we fill out to apply to colleges and jobs), seeing them as recognizable responses to recurring situations (… communicating with friends and family, wanting to attend college or get a job) that accomplish specific social action in the world (… we feel connected, we get paid)" ("Genre Research Terms").

Alicia: Oh, my gosh, pure coincidence and serendipitous timing. It's really difficult for me to write anything without a personal perspective. One of the things that makes writing so much more interesting for me is trying to work out, you know, where I am and how I feel about things. And I was teaching [ENG] 101 and taking [ENG] 402 at the same time I was writing this article, so **genre** was on my mind fairly consistently. But what really sealed it is that I was walking down the stairs in the University Street garage, and I passed another faculty member, an older gentleman. Just after we passed each other, he called back to me, "I like your hair," with the most

genuine enthusiasm in his voice. It caught me off guard, and as soon as I realized that it caught me off guard, I began to question why I'd read this lovely man as someone who was likely to judge me in two seconds, just a quick glance. And he'd read me, too, but differently than I'd assumed. And so that was the seed for the piece. After that, it was a matter of considering which learning outcomes would work together with genre and why.

"**Genre analysis** is the practice of breaking down what we see people doing in specific texts in a genre, and it is a part of doing genre research. When we do genre analysis, we describe the relationships between visible genre features (length, structure, formatting, different modes, language use) and the social goals of those features, including their cultural-historical contexts in specific times and places" ("Genre Research Terms").

Janine: That is such a striking thing to say. That you had this moment in your real life with someone, and how just the feeling you got from it inspired you to write your article. That is just so powerful and moving. What did your writing practices look like as you were writing your article?

Alicia: Like my typical writing practice: which is a lot of thinking and pacing, talking to myself, revising, and then revising again. I also took a lot of [**genre analysis**] clues from reading the *Grassroots* journal … in the fall of 2021, paying close attention to the way authors had to use anecdotes and tone (Figure 1). More than anything, I was nervous about sounding like I was writing for a textbook. So, I wanted to think of this article more as a genre lesson [for writers] than as a required class reading. I wanted it to be something [people] could engage with and feel like I was talking to them, not at them.

Figure 1: Scan this QR code to check out the Fall 2021 GWRJ, issue 12.1, that Alicia used to do genre research.

Janine: Yes, exactly! Again, you're just saying amazing things that connect to the journal because it's not like a typical textbook that you spend hundreds of dollars on that's got all these different critical analyses from all of these, you know, older scholars—people you've never heard of. It is, you know, a journal about humanity. It is about real people, who they are, and what they like to research. I'm glad you could connect who you are to your topic for the journal. So, what kind of research did you end up doing? Any sort of activity or genre research? Maybe content or topic research?

Alicia: I leaned heavily on my **antecedent knowledge** at first. I've been dyeing my hair rainbow colors since 2010. At this point, I've had quite a bit of experience with other people giving unsolicited opinions, making jokes, asking invasive questions, "reading" me basically, in both

Antecedent knowledge

Antecedent knowledge refers to the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us situations ("Uptake Terms"). In this case, Alicia is including previous embodied experiences with being "read" as a person because of hair styles and colors.

Content research

"Content research is the practice of seeking, finding, and processing information from a variety of places. When we talk about content research, we often focus on the activity of researching content for texts or artifacts that we will be writing, including evaluating all information, citing and attributing information ethically, and recognizing all research as someone's writing for a particular writing situation" ("Content Research Terms").

senses of that term. [**Reading**, here, refers to an interpretation of genre in that these folks were looking at me and my hair and deciding based off those brief interactions what kind of person I may be and how they could trust or engage with me. However, reading here also refers to how the term is used in Black and queer circles, such as with drag families, where reading is defined as naming the ways in which a family member can be found lacking or deficient. A "read" in this context is a sharp criticism that leaves nothing to doubt regarding the ways in which a family member is lacking aesthetically or practically.]

Once I thought the idea through, I knew the **content research** had to focus on why [this experience kept happening]. I knew why it bothered me, but why did these folks do this and say this? So, with those research questions in mind, and of course, understanding that any answers I turned up would be generalized, I flew down the Google rabbit hole looking for origins of colored hair and then looking for connections between that history and the social-cultural context for acceptance or rejection.

Janine: Wow, that sounds like a cool process. You're talking about how you started with antecedent knowledge, and that's something that we don't talk about enough in research in general. You can start with what you already know: your history, your past, and how you feel about the topic. Sometimes in school, we think about research, as you know, primary sources, using JSTOR, and all these other things. But what you already know from your experience is the most powerful point of starting research you can have. So that's just great that you're talking about that.

Alicia: Absolutely. This article doesn't exist without my history.

Janine: As we're talking about how personal the research was for you, I want to add that the *Grassroots* team was very excited to have your pictures in color. We [don't print all] pictures in color, but your article is such a visual piece that there is no way we could have an article about rainbows and color and not have it be in color. How did you decide what hair photos to use for this article?

Alicia: It was really exciting for me to have the distinction of being the one article in color. Oddly enough, the particular decision of which pictures was one of the more organic decisions I had to make for this process. I'm very much a writer who discovers as I draft, so the pictures came about as a result of the points in my life that fit the story and the lesson I was trying to weave. Each time I remembered something that had been said to me or a moment that I felt particularly strong as a result of the way I looked in the mirror, I'd note that in my writing and then check my camera roll for proof. To be fair, though, knowing images are a *Grassroots* **genre convention** likely shaped which moment sprang to mind while I was writing as well.

Genre Conventions

"Genre conventions refer to the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre. When we identify genre conventions, we include genre features that might be visible (length, structure, formatting, different modes in use, language use, tone, content included, citing or attributing information) and social goals that we more likely have to infer (why these elements, valued by whom, toward what purposes" ("Genre Research Terms").

Janine: Yeah, your article has amazing pictures with all these colors, which is fascinating. We're so happy you're willing to share those pictures with us. These intimate moments of your life where, as you said, you had various reactions. You had different feelings about how people spoke to you and how you thought about yourself. So, we're honored that you shared that part of your life with us. Another question I want to ask you is what you remember about your interactions with the *Grassroots* editorial team. And did editorial feedback shape your article in any way and the published version of your piece?

Alicia: Oh, of course. I was more than a little surprised that the team received this work so warmly, not because of who was on the team, although they're all amazing, lovely, wonderful humans. Shout out to the *Grassroots* team!

Janine: Aww, thank you very much for saying that, Alicia.

Alicia: No problem, it's true. But I think it was because there is so much personal history in this piece, and I had such mixed feelings as these moments of my life were happening. And even as I was writing them, those feelings were coming back up. And so, to see that connect with the team in such a big way and have such an enthusiastic, encouraging response about taking it into publication, I think, was surprising for me but a welcomed surprise. As far as shaping the piece, I think what I remember most about the editorial process is the balance between revision notes and authorial autonomy. As far as I recall, the revision

notes always came back with a tone like, "Hey, we suggest you could do this, but we trust you," and that was just such a good feeling as a writer, especially for a first publication, to have my work seen and valued for the voice that was already present. I definitely learned to trust myself more during this process. And because of the team's feedback.

Janine: Oh, that is just wonderful to hear because, definitely at *Grassroots*, we never want to take autonomy away. We never want to change an author's voice. All we want to do is suggest how to improve the piece. And we're just so excited when people submit their pieces, and they're about all these unique and interesting things. We never want to take away from people's lives, what they want to write about, or what they have to say. Again, we want to help you polish it a bit or give you suggestions on how to expand on certain things. But yes, we never want to take away anyone's voice. Because as we've been talking about, the *Grassroots* journal is a journal of different voices and experiences. So, I'm glad you felt empowered and trusted yourself when working with the editorial team because that's exactly what we want every author to feel when they submit their piece and we work with them.

Alicia: Absolutely. The team is fantastic.

Janine: Great, great. So, moving along, what surprised you about your *Grassroots* article research and writing experience overall?

Alicia: How quickly it went and how far back the roots of colored hair history go. I wasn't expecting to find out that women were coloring their hair the same rose pink I used in 2020 back in 1920. That was surprising. I, of course, knew that there were roots to the punk movement and even, you know, some of the like sub-glam rock movements back in the 1970s. But seeing that this went back to the beginning of the 20th century was both empowering and surprising because there was part of me that was like, "See you! We've been doing this for 100 years!" Which was exciting as a natural rainbowhead. But, at the same time, it also showed how slowly cultural understandings tend to evolve that, 100 years later, I'm still having these conversations about, you know, whether this is an OK choice for me to make for myself.

Janine: Yes, I was surprised, too, when I saw that in your article about how far back women coloring their hair went. I was like, "Where is this in all the history books?" and "Why aren't we talking more about, you know, the cool pink and blue hair that these women would don?" I agree with the fact that, 100 years ago, this was still happening. But even now, there's still this apprehension of "How will I be perceived?" That says so much about culture and how slowly things can move but, at the same

time, how punk women have always been. So yeah, again, that's just another empowering thing. It's just knowing how far back hair dyeing went, which was just so cool. OK, so, Alicia, my last question for you today: What advice would you give to people who'd like to write an article for the journal?

Alicia: There are a few things that I would say. First of all, go with your gut. If it's something you find fascinating, your audience will feel that and appreciate it. And, of course, the opposite is true as well. If you are bored with this, that will translate into your writing, and that's something I tell [undergraduate writers]. So, I would give that same advice to anybody writing for the journal. The other thing is to give yourself some room to play. Try not to take yourself or the piece too seriously because that can also drain the life and the fun from your writing, from the piece, from the research. And choose something that you can live with for a while and revise because, obviously, if you choose something that you're going to be bored with within a week, both of those other points will just, you know, be in conflict. You won't feel the same playfulness or life or fascination with it.

Janine: Again, you're saying such amazing, wonderful things. I do agree to write something that you enjoy. Again, we think about critical texts and English textbooks that are 400 pages long, and it's all this dense material you have to read. But the *Grassroots* journal is, again, just stories of people's lives. And if you're going to write an article, you might as well write about something fun or that you care about and that you won't mind having edited and worked on for a draft or two. I also tell [undergraduate writers] to write about things they care about because, believe it or not, that's what matters most: if you're enjoying what you're writing about. Sure, you can write something you don't care about and muddle through the process, but why not choose a topic that will actually make you enjoy the writing process? That's the most important thing, I think.

Alicia: 100% agree. Yeah, tell me the story and why I should care about this.

Janine: Absolutely. So, thank you for being with us, Alicia. Once again, the *Grassroots* team thanks Alicia Shupe for participating in today's interview, and be sure to check out her article "Manic Panic: When You're Not a 'Natural' Rainbowhead" reprinted in this issue of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, or in the original print in GWRJ 13.2. Alicia, thank you so much for today. I've loved talking to you; you've just had the most amazing things to say. So, we're glad that you're here with us.

Alicia: Anytime. Thanks, Janine.

Works Cited

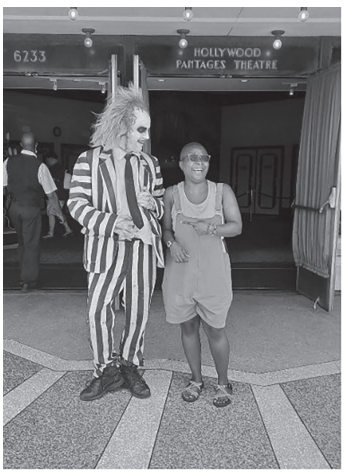
"Content Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/content-research-terms. Accessed 9 Oct. 2023.

"Genre Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms. Accessed 9 Oct. 2023.

Shupe, Alicia. "Manic Panic: When You're Not a 'Natural' Rainbowhead." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2023, pp. 67–78.

"Uptake Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/uptake-terms. Accessed 9 Oct. 2023.

Alicia Shupe is a PhD student in creative writing (fiction) at Illinois State University. Her research interests include feminist theory, trauma, and the telling (or not telling) of women's stories. When she isn't writing her own fiction, she's probably watching "Grey's Anatomy" on Netflix (again).



Since writing "Making Sense of All the Writing: My Embodied Literate Activity" for the 14.2 GWRJ issue, there still has not been much change for **Janine Blue**. She's still learning, teaching, and writing. She still uses her weighted blanket and enjoys simulation games. She did recently receive an extremely cool purple fidget spinner and caught up on some reading.

Let It Be: The Beatles in Sticker Form, a Genre Analysis

Felicity Schryer

What do Beatlemania and decorating water bottles have in common? You guessed it (or maybe you didn't if you didn't read the title): Beatles stickers. Felicity Schryer looks in-depth at the genre of vinyl stickers and how Beatles vinyl stickers operate as texts for Beatles fans.

Here, There, and an Introduction

"We're more popular than Jesus, now." —John Lennon

With this extremely controversial quote, Lennon showed the world how big the Beatles had become in the 1960s. He later retracted his statement in response to the public reaction, but to be able to say that, true or not, shows how popular the Beatles were.

Beatlemania is something that will never be replicated. No superstar, not Taylor Swift or Harry Styles, will ever have what they had. Screaming girls, police escorts—you don't see that type of thing today. OK, so you might. But that particular type of mania, Beatlemania, is a thing of the past, and it's a thing of John, Paul, George, and Ringo. Their influence on music is still felt today. They were the first boy band and one of the first rock bands; the music and the impact that the Beatles created will still be felt long after they've all died. Their music and style has left an enormous mark on the industry. Widely considered the best rock band of all time, so much of rock and pop music (and their offshoots) can be directly traced to the Beatles.

Figure 1: Scan this QR code to visit the official Beatles online store (*The Beatles Store*).

Many musicians, like Bruce Springsteen and Dave Grohl, are consciously influenced by the Beatles and will list them among the bands that have shaped them.

It follows that the Beatles still have fans 60 years after their meteoric rise. These include people who, whether they are musicians or not, enjoy the music and feel connected to the band. And how do those Beatles fans express themselves? Well, one way they do this is by purchasing a huge range of different kinds of gear. The licensing of these products is big business. People can purchase official Beatles gear on the online website, The Beatles Store (Figure 1). Speaking for myself, as a huge Beatles fan, one way I engage in fan expression is through Beatles vinyl stickers.

The Long and Winding Road Begins

When I was working to come up with an idea for a *Grassroots* article, I struggled with choosing a topic more than anything else. But at one point in the process of brainstorming, I looked down at my water bottle and saw something: a vinyl sticker of the famous photo of the Beatles strolling down a street in Bloomsbury in the 1960s (Figure 2).

Inspiration struck—what if I wrote about Beatles stickers? At this point in the writing process, I was practically out of options and would've done

Figure 2: The inspirational sticker.

anything that sounded remotely interesting. The Beatles were interesting to me. They have always been my favorite band and I could spend hours talking about how important the Beatles were to the development of music (though this didn't end up having much to do with this article).

Stickers would be the hard part, I decided, as I studied the rest of my water bottle, turning it slowly around and staring at all the stickers decorating it. I obviously used this genre plenty, but I wasn't sure how to write about it. And stickers didn't feel like something most people would consider a genre, which kind of just made it more interesting to me. In the ISU Writing Program, **genres** are "many different kinds of written texts," like stickers, that we can see "as recognizable responses to recurring situations" (having a place to put a sticker and wanting to express something about yourself) "that accomplish specific social action in the world" (like showing people you are a Beatles fan) ("Genre Research Terms"). As I researched the world of vinyl stickers, I realized how complex and interesting this genre really was.

Here Comes the (Beatles) Sticker

All genres have histories. They are connected to other genres, and they evolve over time. You might ask, what history could there possibly be in vinyl stickers? And what even is a vinyl sticker? What great questions!

You have probably heard of vinyl records, and the material in those records is the same in the stickers covering your water bottles and laptops. It's used for its waterproof properties and because it can be colored easily (Novak, et al.).

For those who are interested in the history of stuff, here's a bit about the evolution of vinyl as a product. Vinyl was first discovered by accident in 1926 and was used in many products including piping. Vinyl usage in pressure-sensitive products started in 1937 when it was used for road signs (Nielsen). This failed, and vinyl fell off the radar until the 1950s when new developments in the industry allowed vinyl to be used across the country, from bumper stickers to US military logos (Nielsen). In 1960, short-term display signs also became available and kick-started massive advancements. Available vinyl colors widened from the original options of white, black, red, and blue, and advancements included film for windows among other things (Nielsen). Also in the 1960s, microreplicated air channels were created allowing air to escape so you no longer had to stop and pop air bubbles with needles and knives (Novak, et al.). And, in 1991, electrostatic printers were designed, allowing for liquid toners to be applied, which means that more graphics could be created faster (Benedek 627).

Are you still with me? If you are getting bored with the history of vinyl, all you need to know right now is that the vinyl stickers on your water bottle, laptop, or other belongings are a product of decades of development in the industry. And now, here comes the fun part.

The explosion in the use of vinyl stickers began in the 1990s, according to the website StickerYou:

> By the 1990s the sticker craze was in full swing. Stickers could now be smelly, fuzzy, puffy, scaly, perforated, and some could even glow in the dark. Stickers were used as promotional items for TV Shows, musicians, movies, and toys. People collected stickers in books, put them on luggage, walls, cars, clothes, and everything in between. ("StickerYou 101")

Stickers are everywhere today. They decorate street corners and light poles, and you can run across them in nearly every city (at least every city that I've been to). Stickers are often used to express personality and as a conversation starter. Because they are relatively affordable, they can be used everywhere and are an easy way to express personality in something simple and colorful.

And this brings us to back Beatles stickers. Part of the British Invasion era of music ("List of British Invasion Artists"), the Beatles are still celebrated today for their groundbreaking songs. Because of this, they still have many fans, including me. As I explained before, people use vinyl stickers to express aspects of their personality, so fans of the Beatles (including me) use vinyl stickers to show our love of John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

And while we're talking about the history of Beatles stickers, I should talk about my interactions with Beatles stickers and vinyl stickers in general. My dad is a big fan of classic rock, so I grew up with the Beatles, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Bruce Springsteen, and others. I can't remember a time without knowing who the Beatles were and knowing their songs.

I first used vinyl stickers when a good friend of mine gave me a gift of musical- and book-themed vinyl stickers (I love musicals, and I'm a big reader), and I immediately put them on my water bottle. I didn't want to put them on something permanent or easily lost, so my water bottle was the best option. I would replace the stickers as they deteriorated over time.

On my birthday, a friend of mine gave me Beatles stickers as a gift. I immediately used them to replace some of the stickers on my water bottle. This is how they came to be on my water bottle on that fateful day when I looked down and wondered, "Hey, why don't I write an article about that?"

All We Need Is Conventions

I discussed some of the history of vinyl stickers above, but what about Beatles vinyl stickers specifically? When I ask this question, I'm really asking about the genre conventions of Beatles stickers. According to the ISU Writing Program, "**genre conventions** refer to the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre" ("Genre Research Terms"). Simply put, if you understand Beatles stickers as a genre, you can ask questions to differentiate them from other kinds of texts.

To make a Beatles sticker a Beatles sticker, it has to clearly show that it is a Beatles sticker. (Did that sentence confuse you? It confused me.) What I mean is, the sticker has to include elements that would allow someone to recognize it as (a) a vinyl sticker, and (b) a sticker that is related to the Beatles. So really, it's pretty straightforward—or maybe it's not because Beatles stickers can be very different (in size, shape, and color) and still be Beatles stickers if the aforementioned basic conventions are met.

Beatles stickers usually have a picture of the Beatles with some flair, song lyrics, or an album cover. As I work to describe the conventions of the genre of Beatles stickers, I'm going to split it up into four categories: album covers, song lyrics, iconic photos, and puns. You must remember, though, that there can always be overlap in the categories, like when there is an album-themed pun.

Album Covers

For any band, albums are incredibly important, and this is the same for the Beatles. Depending on what you count as an album, the Beatles released 12–17 albums during their roughly eight years together. (They released US versions of some albums, which can count depending on who you talk to.) Out of these albums, I would make the case that the earlier Beatles albums are much less likely to be made into stickers. Early Beatles albums aren't as famous, and they often just have the Beatles' faces. For example, the Beatles have an album called "With the Beatles," which shows their half-shadowed faces (Figure 3). This would not make a good sticker because you're missing half of their faces, and there's not much that you can do with it. Their later albums like "Yellow Submarine," "Abbey Road," "Help," and others are much more famous and much easier to transform into stickers because they have more detailed and vibrant covers and, therefore, are better options to

Figure 3: Scan this QR code to see the cover of the Beatles album "With the Beatles" ("With the Beatles").

Figure 4: An example of an album cover turned sticker ("Beatles Stickers").

transform into vinyl stickers that will also appeal to fans (Figure 4).

Song Lyrics

The Beatles wrote many, many famous songs which still have relevance and impact in popular culture today. Because of this lasting relevance, the Beatles' song lyrics still impact music listeners today. Songs like "Blackbird" and their various love songs are made into stickers to allow Beatles fans to be able to remind themselves of the beauty in those song lyrics all the time.

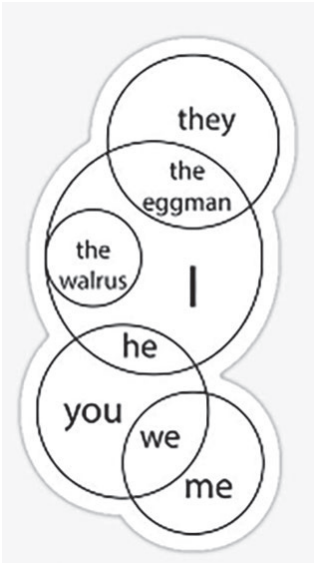


Figure 5: A sticker poking fun at the Beatles song "I Am the Walrus" ("Beatles Stickers").

There is another reason why song lyrics get turned into stickers and that is their "hippy" or "weird" element. The Beatles wrote many great songs. They also wrote many weird ones, and some Beatles stickers poke fun at these weirder aspects. For example, in Figure 5, there is a picture of a sticker depicting how the song, "I Am the Walrus" could be interpreted. There are also stickers poking fun of songs like "Strawberry Fields Forever," "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," and "Come Together." They have lyrics like "nothing is real," "in her kaleidoscope eyes," and "one and one and one is three." Often, these lyrics barely make sense in the context of the songs, and a listener can tell which songs may have been written while under the influence of certain mind-bending drugs. (The Beatles admitted the use of drugs while performing and writing some of their songs [Nelson].) Beatles fans lovingly poke fun at some of the trippier Beatles' songs through stickers and other memorabilia.

Iconic Photos

Just like many modern stars, the Beatles were photographed wherever they went. Sometimes these would be staged photo shoots, and other times they would be paparazzi photos. This category has the most overlap with the other categories. For example, not only is Abbey Road an album cover, it is also a very famous photo. (Personally, I believe it falls into the album cover label, but an argument could be made.) And sometimes these famous photos will have song lyrics below them.

However, there are some stickers that must fall into this category. For example, Figure 6 shows a sticker of the famous photo of the Beatles walking down the street in Liverpool. This photo became iconic afterward, and there is a statute where that photo was taken today. There are other examples of this, but this is the most common adaptation of a famous photo.

Figure 6: A sticker depicting that famous photo in Liverpool ("Beatles Stickers").

Puns

Personally, I don't like puns. However, other people do, and there are stickers that appeal to this share of the population. An example of this is the "John Lemon" sticker (Figure 7). A play on the name of John Lennon, this falls into the category of puns and is the most obvious example. You can find multiple versions of this sticker, but you can also find other stickers with puns. Figure 8 shows the Sergeant "Peppurr's" Lonely Hearts "Cat" Band, another example of a play on words to create an effective sticker.

This category often falls into one of the above categories too. For example, a common sticker to appear is a famous photo of the Beatles but with actual beetles. This is both a pun and a famous photo adaptation and, therefore, is another example of overlap.

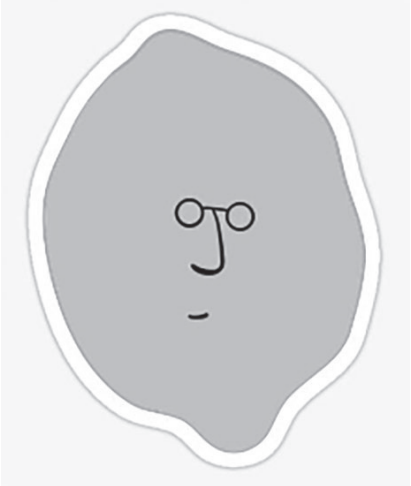


Figure 7: The John "Lemon" sticker ("Beatles Stickers").

Figure 8: The Sergeant Peppurr's Lonely Hearts Cat Band sticker ("Beatles Stickers").

Researching Fields Forever

After all this research I had done, I thought I was in a pretty good place for recognizing the genre conventions. But there are always more questions to ask—and that's where P-CHAT comes in. According to the ISU Writing Program, **P-CHAT** is a theory used to understand and study writing as complex ("Literate Activity Terms"). There are seven P-CHAT terms that we can use to understand how texts are understood, produced, and disseminated, and how texts—and their genre conventions—are used to make meaning in the world. So even after doing genre analysis in the previous sections of this article to identify some genre conventions of Beatles vinyl stickers, I can still use any P-CHAT term to ask more in-depth research questions about vinyl stickers as texts in the world. Even though there are seven terms, I'm going to focus on one that I see as most relevant to apply to vinyl stickers: reception.

Reception is defined as "how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)" (Walker 76). Reception isn't just how other people perceive a genre or its conventions; it is also about how someone uses it in real life for their own purposes.

So how does reception work for vinyl stickers? As I mentioned above, I have vinyl stickers that decorate my water bottle. I also use them to decorate different notebooks and folders I own. My parents both have University of Illinois and National Parks stickers on their laptops, and my sister has various stickers on her water bottle too. I have friends who use stickers on their cell phones, and there are people in my school who put stickers (somewhat illicitly) on lockers. These are all common examples of ways that I've seen vinyl stickers used and what I believe were some of the intended uses when the stickers were made.

One of the most useful anecdotes that I know about reception is a story about what happened when my sister and I first got a pack of stickers. We both chose to put them on our water bottles. My sister and I took very different approaches. I like things ordered and planned out. My sister likes doing things spontaneously and going with the flow. When I put the stickers on my water bottle, I organized them and planned it out beforehand. I made sure that the stickers would be evenly spaced out and organized. I wasn't going to have the same type of stickers next to each other, and I wasn't going to waste any space on my water bottle. My sister went right at it, putting stickers everywhere. There were huge gaps, and the stickers were randomly placed. My and my sister's receptions were so different that they caused us to approach the genre in completely different ways (Figure 9).

Figure 9: My and my sister's water bottles.

How many times have you seen a person stick a sticker on their forehead? Or their cheek? Or some other part of their face? And people put stickers elsewhere out in the world too: on street signs, on buildings, etc. They do this both with and without permission from the people who own or control those surfaces. In many cases, this isn't what was intended when the sticker was created, and this is a consequence of humans being unpredictable.

So, like all vinyl stickers, Beatles stickers are a complex genre and the way they are used or misused is all about people's reception in practice.

A Hard Day's Conclusion

What makes a Beatles sticker recognizable as a genre? How do people use vinyl stickers in different ways?

These were the questions I set out to answer when I started this article, and I think that I have had moderate success. Throughout my long and arduous journey through the history and an analysis of vinyl stickers, I hoped to answer these questions.

Did I succeed? I think the answer is a resounding maybe.

Really, Beatles stickers are a complex genre that has developed in interesting and unusual ways. Vinyl stickers themselves are fascinating, and the evolving forms that vinyl stickers take is a fascinating research area that lots of people write about. The Beatles made music 60 years ago, but modern technology allows Beatles fans to have a new way to represent their band that did not exist in the 1960s. As a very specific genre, Beatles stickers have many conventions that go into making them recognizable and appealing to fans. By researching and analyzing their genre conventions, I have learned that something simple I look at every day is more complex than I realized, which is what research can do for us as writers and users of everyday genres like vinyl stickers.

Works Cited

"Beatles Stickers." *Redbubble*, www.redbubble.com/shop/beatles+stickers. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

The Beatles Store. usastore.thebeatles.com/. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

Benedek, István. *Development and Manufacture of Pressure-Sensitive Products*. Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1998.

"Genre Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting/com/genre-research-terms. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

"List of British Invasion Artists." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 Sept. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_Invasion_Artists. Accessed 6 Nov. 2019.

"Literate Activity Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/activity-terms. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

Nelson, Steven. "Drug Use Belied Beatles' Squeaky-Clean Image." *US News & World Report*, 2014, www.usnews.com/news/special-reports/articles/2014/01/22/drug-use-belied-beatles-squeaky-clean-image#:~:text=As%20early%20as%201961%2C%20the. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

Nielsen, John. "Vinyl: A History." *Signs of the Times*, 12 Mar. 2008, signsofthetimes.com/vinyl-a-history/. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

Novak, Richard, et al. "Rapid Fabrication of Nickel Molds for Prototyping Embossed Plastic Microfluidic Devices." *Lab on a Chip*, vol. 13, no. 8, 2013, p. 1468, https://doi.org/10.1039/c3lc41362d. Accessed 16 Oct. 2019.

"StickerYou 101: Stickers through the Ages." *StickerYou*, 9 Apr. 2019, www.stickeryou.com/blog/post/stickers-through-the-ages. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 71–80.

"With the Beatles." *The Beatles*. www.thebeatles.com/beatles. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

Felicity Schryer is an eighth-grade student at Washington Middle School. She has grown up with the Beatles and is an incredible drummer on the Beatles Rock Band. She spends a lot of her time playing saxophone and piano, watching Jeopardy, playing Scholastic Bowl, and reading Agatha Christie books. She has an incredible ability to kill plants, which is why her picture is of a plant that is still alive.

Notes

Drawing by Grace Betts

A Reader's Worst Fear: A Genre Analysis of Those Pesky Book Stickers

Laurel Staniszewski

Laurel Staniszewski investigates the genre of book stickers, which have a powerful influence on customers and book publishers. Staniszewski discusses why book stickers are placed on book covers, how the genre works, and how people perceive the small round bits of information.

If you have ever been on BookTok (the side of TikTok for those book-obsessed people) you have probably seen the controversy around book stickers. How can a small sticker leave a whole community of book lovers so enraged? As someone who has been on BookTok and loves to read, I am quite familiar with these opinions and all this talk around book stickers. It got me thinking: What's the point of these stickers if they have gotten so much negative attention and people don't like them on book covers? I had assumed that they were there for marketing, but I wanted to dive deeper into the topic. I wanted to find out not only if my assumption was correct but also how they help with marketing, if they are successful, and if it's really worth ruining a perfect book cover. Do they really help sell more books?

The Sticky History

Today, stickers are stuck all over the place. They're on water bottles, binders, cars, laptops, windows, and of course, books. They have evolved as a way to express individualism, communicate information, and act as powerful

Figure 1: A postage stamp from the 1800s ("A Timeline of the History of Stickers").

and influential marketing tools. It's easy to purchase stickers from a store or make your own with a kit and then simply do with them as you please: highlight your favorite sports team, band, or TV show quote, or let the world know you love your pets. But the original use for stickers was quite simple: identifying food and consumables. Historians believe that the earliest stickers were created by shopkeepers in ancient Egypt, who would plaster sheets of paper to the walls of their ancient market stalls to advertise their wares (Millard).

Adhesive paper was invented by Sir Rowland Hill in 1839 ("Who Invented Stickers?"), and his innovation led to postage stamps—another form of sticker (Figure 1). With this new sticky-paper technology, people began using stickers for marketing purposes in order to differentiate crates when they were being shipped to grocery stores and businesses (WebSticker):

> [In the mid-1800s] the paper label format grew from the practice of painting directly on crates and tying tags to packages. A faster and more uniform method for marking products was becoming necessary because of a growing economy that demanded consistency and identification. The new adhesive labels were popular on things like pill bottles and fruit crates. (Vinyl Bandits)

Figure 2: Food labels from the late 1800s and early 1900s ("A Timeline of the History of Stickers").

Much like stickers today, these labels were usually brightly colored and eye-catching to grab the attention of the customer but also to be clear to the supplier what was included in each crate (Figure 2).

In the 1930s, stickers for food categorization expanded to include ingredients and nutrition facts ("A Brief History of Labels and Stickers"). This change was driven by the Great Depression because people wanted to get the most value for money, and new government regulations required these facts to be included on packaging materials ("A Brief History of Labels and Stickers"). As stickers with nutritional information on food and medication became more in demand, so did the need for more convenient stickers. In 1935, R. Stanton Avery, the founder of Avery Labels, created

the first self-adhesive stickers that allowed people to peel off the back for it to stick ("A Timeline of the History of Stickers"). The innovation suddenly made stickers portable and cheaper to switch out when information about the product was modified.

The sticky substance used on stickers today is vastly different from the original adhesive created by Hill. Up until the 1950s, the substance was a gum paste very similar to what was used on early postage stamps, and what is still used today on envelopes that need to be wetted to activate the adhesive ("History of the 'Sticker'"). The method used to print these stickers was called lithography, and it was the first type of commercial art ("A Brief History of Labels and Stickers"), a "process of printing from a flat surface treated so as to repel the ink except where it is required for printing" ("A Brief History of Labels and Stickers").

By the 1950s, stickers for advertisement were mainstream across many types of goods, and a new method of label printing emerged. This new method was called flexography, and it involved flexible and fluid inks ("A Brief History of Labels and Stickers"). It was better than lithography because you could now print on flexible materials such as cardboard, paper, vinyl, rubber, and plastic, which also made peeling stickers off their backing much easier. Around the same time, label design also saw a change. Stickers no longer had to have small font, faded images, or grainy background colors. Labels could have big, bold text, more intricate designs, and a plain, clear background. And eventually, starting in the 1970s, they even carried scents when scratched (Figure 3). Throughout the 1950s to the 1980s, stickers became a major advertisement tool for more than just food. They were used for political campaigns (Figure 4), personal mantras, and musical artists. Additionally, they were

Figure 3: 1970s scratch and sniff stickers ("A Timeline of the History of Stickers").

Figure 4: A popular political sticker from the 1950s ("A Timeline of the History of Stickers").

used by teachers to incentivize students, particularly the scratch and sniff varieties.

Interestingly, as stickers gradually became more popular to put on products such as car bumpers, windows, bottles, and posters, sticking labels on book covers was not as trendy. The need for stickers for literary marketing purposes did not seem to become mainstream until the late 1990s when bookstores and libraries slowly saw a decrease in business compared to digital and multimedia entertainment and educational outlets. At the same time, the need to put stickers on literary texts became more in demand as popular books were being made into blockbuster films, adapted into TV shows or miniseries, or became a part of celebrity book clubs, which I will talk about in more detail in the next section.

Sticking to What's Conventional

Now that we've talked a bit about the history of this genre and stickers themselves, let's talk about what makes a book sticker a book sticker, which could also be described as genre conventions. **Genre conventions** are characteristics that are considered typical or conventional for a genre. According to the ISU Writing Program, "Genre conventions refer to the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre" ("Genre Research Terms").

Since we're on the topic of genres, I want to discuss something very important. When people hear the word genre, it's common to think about kinds of books, music, or movies, such as horror, romance, or mystery. However, the concept of a genre is far more complex and interesting than that. Those genres I just listed are actually categories of the larger genres of books, music, and movies. That is because **genres** are "so many different kinds of written texts … [that are] recognizable responses to recurring situations (making a website, teaching a class, communicating with friends and family, wanting to attend college or get a job)" ("Genre Research Terms"). When we identify a genre by its conventions, "we include genre features that might be visible (length, structure, formatting, … tone, content included) … and social goals that we more likely have to infer" ("Genre Research Terms"). So, a book is a type of genre because it has specific features that make it recognizable, and it responds to a recurring situation. There's a clear difference between music and movies because each comes with conventions that set them apart and cause people to interact with them in different ways. Road signs? That's a genre! Math equations written on a classroom whiteboard—genre! Menus, iPhones, billboard advertisements,

winter hats, price tags, the list goes on and on! Look on your desk or in your backpack right now: if you're looking at something that has specific characteristics, features, or conventions that set it apart from other things, you've got a genre on your hands!

Now back to the genre conventions of book stickers. The book sticker is normally small and round and goes on the cover of a book. It can either be a permanent sticker printed onto the book's cover or a temporary sticker that can be removed (though not very easily). The purpose of these stickers is to help with marketing and to influence customers to buy the book. The dimensions vary depending on the kind of sticker. On the cover of the book, "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry," the dimensions of the Newbery Medal sticker are about 4.5 x 4.5 centimeters (Figure 5). Smaller stickers, like Reese's Book Club stickers, for example, are about 3 x 3 centimeters. Things like color, text size, font, and images all vary depending on the kind of book sticker. These stickers normally have something to try to pull readers in, like bright or eye-catching colors and bold text. Some common examples of this genre are Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime Video original series/movie stickers (Figure 6), discount stickers, sneak peek stickers, award stickers, and book club stickers such as those for Reese's Book Club and Oprah's Book Club (Figure 7). Stickers like the book club and original series stickers aren't actual stickers, they're just printed on the cover. Other stickers, like discount stickers and Barnes & Noble exclusive edition stickers, are literal stickers,

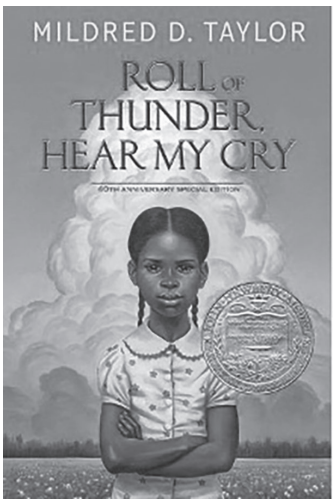


Figure 5: A version of the cover of "Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry" with the Newbery Medal sticker ("Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Puffin Modern Classics)").

Figure 6: An example of a popular book with an Amazon Prime Video sticker ("The Eye of the World").

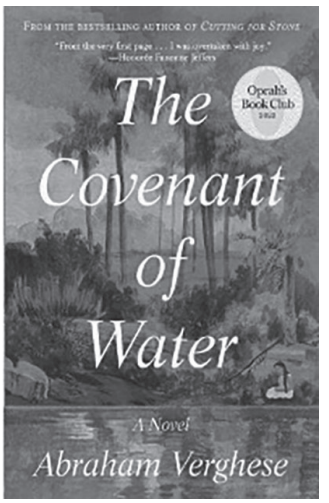


Figure 7: A version of a book jacket with an Oprah's Book Club sticker ("The Covenant of Water (Oprah's Book Club)").

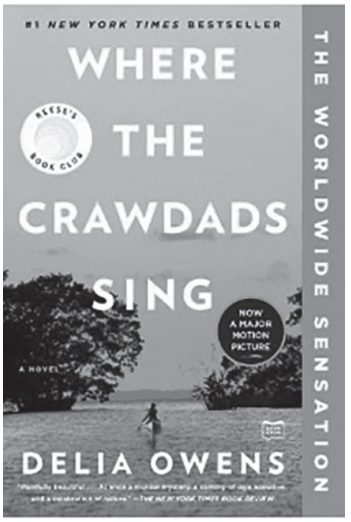


Figure 8: A version of the cover of "Where the Crawdads Sing" with a Reese's Book Club sticker ("Where the Crawdads Sing: Reese's Book Club (A Novel)").

probably placed there by employees. All of these stickers serve different purposes in the marketing of books.

Stickers like those for Oprah's Book Club and Reese's Book Club signify an in-group identity. These stickers are meant to give people a sense of affiliation or closeness to celebrities and members of their book clubs. They are really great marketing tools and can make a book incredibly popular. One example of this is "Where the Crawdads Sing" by Delilah Owens (Figure 8). This book was the September 2018 pick for Reese's Book Club, and it gained a huge amount of popularity. The covers were adorned with Reese's signature sticker, and the book has now sold more than 12 million copies. While the book probably could have gained fame on its own, Reese's Book Club helped. I can admit that I bought this book because I had heard of it on the internet and knew that it was a Reese's Book Club pick, so I assumed it was good.

I recently bought "Normal People" by Sally Rooney and thought this book was a great example because it has not one, not two, but three stickers on the cover (Figure 9)! It has a Hulu original series sticker, discount sticker, and The New York Times' "100 Notable Books 2019" sticker. Because this one book has so much sticky business on the cover, I want to talk a bit about the conventions of each sticker. First, the Target 20% off sticker. This is a kind of store sticker, placed on the book by Target employees, that people tend to peel off after they purchase the book. You might be thinking, "Why is it there if people are just going to peel it off?" The answer is pretty simple: it's there for marketing. They are trying to get customers to buy the book. Although one sticker isn't going to decide what book you buy, it can definitely help influence you. This sticker is the biggest on the cover, the dimensions being about 4 x 4 centimeters. The 20% is larger than the rest of the text on the sticker. It's meant to catch your attention. This is something commonly seen with book stickers. They will almost always have something that is bolded and made to pull in possible buyers.

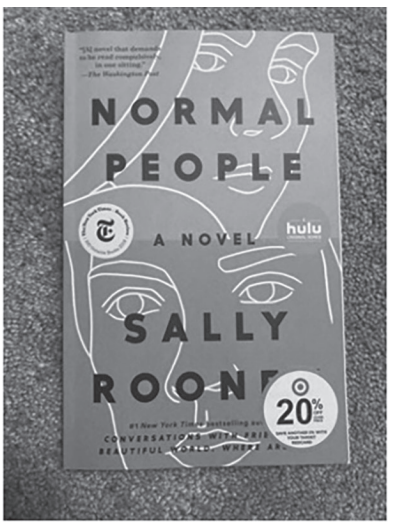


Figure 9: My copy of "Normal People" by Sally Rooney.

The next sticker is the Hulu original series sticker. This sticker is about 2.5 x 2.5 centimeters, so it is a bit smaller than the Target one. However, it is a bold green with thick white lettering which sticks out on the book cover. This platform, along with other streaming services, have logos that customers often see on their digital devices. They are in competition with each other for viewership, and now also for readership, so each streaming platform uses their font and color scheme for their stickers to make them noticeable on books shelves and display tables. Hulu stickers are a bold green. Netflix has the iconic red text on a black background, and Amazon Prime Video stickers are a vivid blue. As a person who loves to read, I can admit that I have seen these "Now a Major Motion Picture!" or "Coming soon to Netflix!" (Figure 10) stickers and have thought to myself, "Oh! I want to buy that book so I can read it and then watch the show/movie!" So, at least in my case, these stickers do their job.

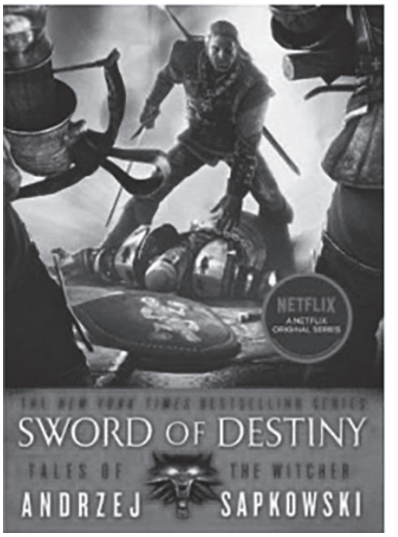


Figure 10: An example of a Netflix promotion sticker on a book cover ("Sword of Destiny (The Witcher, 2)").

Now let's consider The New York Times' "100 Notable Books 2019" sticker. This sticker is the same size as the Hulu original series sticker, about 2.5 x 2.5 centimeters. Before getting this book, I had never seen this sticker, but I was able to infer that this book must be highly rated and pretty good to have earned this sticker.

Book stickers are an intricate type of genre that comes with specific conventions that set them apart from other sticker genres such as bumper stickers or sports logos. Even streaming giants such as Netflix and Hulu have to adhere to recognizable genre conventions to sell their merchandise. Even though the book sticker genre is structurally small, it is a very influential and successful marketing tool.

Sticking Research Together

For my primary research in the genre of book stickers, I decided to conduct an interview. I wanted to interview someone familiar with the genre, so I decided to interview a major bookstore retailer employee. I had the questions I was going to ask planned out when I went into the interview. After arriving at the store, I approached some employees at the customer service desk and explained my research topic. A manager volunteered to help. I recorded the

interview on my phone and typed it out later. The interview ended up being a lot less intimidating than I anticipated and lasted about 5 minutes. Here is the interview:

Me: Are the stickers placed there for marketing?

Employee: Most of the book stickers are. Which ones are you looking at?

Me: Things like the Netflix original series stickers and the Reese's Book Club stickers.

Employee: Yeah. They are there for marketing purposes. A lot of them are printed on like that, but some we do add. Especially if they're like the Barnes & Noble special editions and things, so yeah, it's definitely a marketing thing to try and get people to pay attention.

Me: If they have the Netflix original series or some sort of award sticker, are they more likely to be placed on one of your tables?

Employee: It depends on what the sticker is, but yeah, it does actually influence us. Especially if we're doing a display on books that are being made into movies, we look for that sticker, and we put them on there. Or the Reese's Book Club, we always have a Reese's Book Club table, so if it has that sticker, it's more likely to go there.

Me: Do you think they are successful?

Employee: It depends on what the sticker is, and it does depend on the book itself. It's not going to sell just because of that sticker, but if you have somebody, for instance, who follows the Reese's Book Club, yeah, they're a lot more likely to pick that book up and look at it. And it still has to catch their attention, but it does get it in their hands more often.

When asking the question "Are the stickers placed there for marketing?" I had a pretty good idea of what the answer would be. I knew from my research and also my antecedent knowledge that these stickers were used for marketing purposes, so the employee's answer wasn't a surprise to me. **Antecedent knowledge**, which "refers to the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations" ("Uptake Terms"), played a significant role in the research and writing of this article. In my case, when I started my journey into creating this article, I already had some prior knowledge of the book sticker genre and its conventions and purpose. I was already on BookTok and a part of the debate about book stickers. As an avid reader with friends who also love to read, I had been exposed to these kinds of marketing stickers before. I had even

purchased books based on the advertisement before I started researching the genre and writing about it. Additionally, I already had opinions and feelings about book stickers that helped guide my research and set the tone I wanted for this article. Finally, as someone who buys books, I knew Barnes & Noble would be a great place to ask for an interview regarding the topic.

One answer that I found interesting and was very helpful in my research was the employee's answer to the question "If they have the Netflix original series or some sort of award sticker, are they more likely to be placed on one of your tables?" Unlike the first question I asked, I didn't know what the answer to this question would be. The manager said book stickers actually do help books get placed on Barnes & Noble display tables, which is a huge deal to authors in regard to name recognition and book sales. Customers are much more likely to pick up your book when it's on a display table, and if you have a sticker on the cover, it could also help boost sales.

BookCHAT

When researching and writing this article, I realized how much book stickers rely on how buyers interpret the value of the information, meaning how much readers truly care if a book cover has a Reese's Book Club or Netflix sticker on the cover. I'm usually drawn to these stickers, like when I purchased "Where the Crawdads Sing." I get excited over seeing book stickers that say "soon to be a Netflix original movie." However, somebody else browsing shelves or doing online shopping might not care if a book is being made into a movie or has a sticker about the book being a part of a club. Finding out a book is being turned into a Hulu miniseries might actually dissuade some readers from purchasing a book.

As I considered this idea further, I thought about the research tool P-CHAT and the term reception and how it is a vital aspect of book stickers and researching the genre. P-CHAT is an important tool for me because it allows me to think about book stickers, their history, and how they function in society today. I was introduced to the idea of **P-CHAT** by Dr. Joyce Walker of the ISU Writing Program, and it stands for **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory**. Yes, this may seem like a mouthful, but it's simply a fancy term for a research method that allows us to study the genres we encounter daily and see all over the world. P-CHAT is a theory that includes seven concepts: production, representation, distribution, reception, activity, ecology, and socialization. The tool allows us to zoom in and focus on different aspects of a particular genre to better understand how complex it is and helps us make good and educated choices when interacting with

the genre (Walker 71). I'm only going to focus on reception in regard to the genre of book stickers.

Reception deals with "how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)" (Walker 76). There is certainly strong reception around book stickers, which is crucial for advertisement agencies and bookstores to be mindful of. Readers could possibly be deterred from buying a book because of a sticker, which obviously isn't what the people who produce the stickers intend. At the same time, readers could possibly be drawn to buying a book because it has a particular advertisement sticker (remember the Reese and Oprah book clubs I mentioned?). The customer's opinion of the stickers, and if the stickers influence them to buy a copy of the book, all depend on the customer's reception. I have previously mentioned my excitement and curiosity about these stickers when I visit bookstores. I would say my reception is generally positive—at least for the removable stickers. But I also opened this article talking about how the culture of BookTok finds them pesky, unnecessary, and ugly. Some readers simply hate all book stickers and bond on BookTok over their feelings and opinions that this genre ruins otherwise beautiful book covers. The negative reception is strong enough to take up a percentage of BookTok discussions, as well as threads on Reddit under r/books.

During my research, I came across a quote from Jeanette Smith in a Change.org petition to make the Netflix original series stickers removable:

> As a person who likes to read a lot, I also thoroughly enjoy the covers. I feel the covers are also a significant part of the reading experience. I often enjoy looking back and admiring at how gorgeous the cover is when I'm reading. The issue I see here is that once the book is adapted to some form of movie or TV show, the Netflix sticker is added to the cover. I know for a fact that many people find them gross and disgusting and want them removed because they ruin the whole illusion of the cover.

As an avid reader, I have to agree with the author of the statement. I hate the permanent stickers on books. People have even gone so far as to start Etsy shops to sell more aesthetically pleasing stickers that match the book's cover and hide the permanent stickers (Figure 11). These shops are a perfect example of what reception in P-CHAT can look like because it's not just readers feeling unhappy, but people repurposing book stickers and turning them into pretty works of art that don't advertise anything.

Books are both widespread and personal. They're used and seen all over the world while also remaining tightly squeezed in someone's arms. Regardless of anyone's personal thoughts about book stickers, they definitely have a strong reception that creates debate around their purpose and usefulness, and that is what advertising is supposed to do—create a buzz and get people talking and noticing.

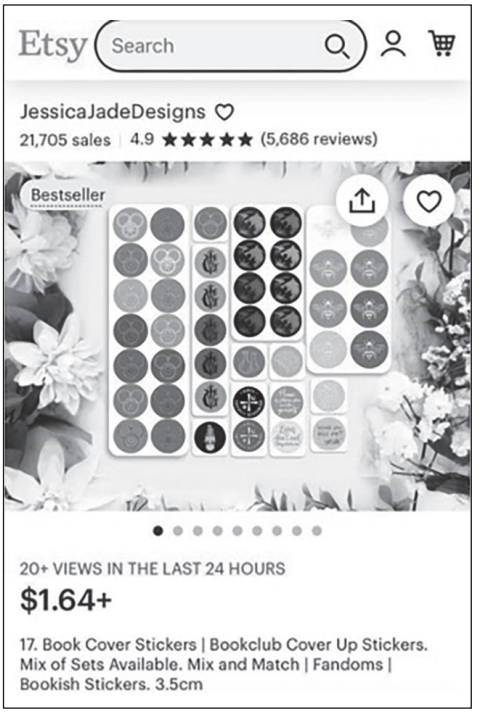


Figure 11: An Etsy store that sells book stickers (JessicaJadeDesigns).

Sticking Around Until the End

Throughout the course of researching and writing this article, I've realized this genre is more profound than it seems. Even though it's just a small sticker on the cover of a book, it's a powerful and influential marketing tool as well as a genre that people are emotionally invested in. My initial curiosity for this genre came from BookTok and being a lover of books, but through my research, I learned how sacred and profitable a book cover is and how stickers have always been an important advertising tool. I came to understand P-CHAT, and it has changed how I look at the world in terms of writing. I take more time to appreciate that everything with writing, from restaurant menus to billboard advertisements, are genres that somebody, somewhere, took the time to write. Genres are everywhere, no matter how big or small, and they all play important roles in our society.

Works Cited

"A Brief History of Labels and Stickers." *Vinyl Bandits*, www.vinylbandits.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-labels-stickers. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

"The Covenant of Water (Oprah's Book Club)." *Amazon*. www.amazon.com/Covenant-Water-Abraham-Verghese/dp/0802162177. Accessed 20 Mar. 2024.

"The Eye of the World." *Macmillan Publishers*. us.macmillan.com/books/9781250832368/theeyeoftheworld. Accessed 20 Mar. 2024.

"Genre Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, n.d. www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms.

"History of the 'Sticker.'" *Maverick Label*, 10 Oct. 2010, blog.mavericklabel.com/blog/history-of-the-sticker. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

JessicaJadeDesigns. "17. Book Cover Stickers | Permanent / Bookclub Cover Up Stickers. Mix of Sets Available. Mix and Match | Fandoms | Bookish Stickers. 3.5cm." *Etsy*, www.etsy.com/listing/1078586797/17-book-cover-stickers-permanent?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=jessicajadedesigns&ref=sr_gallery-1-1&organic_search_click=1. Accessed 8 Mar. 2024.

Millard, Katie. "Katie's Contemplations: The history of stickers." *The Post*, 29 January 2023, www.thepostathens.com/article/2023/01/opinion-katies-contemplations-history-stickers. Accessed 8 February 2024.

"Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Puffin Modern Classics)." *Amazon*. www.amazon.com/Roll-Thunder-Puffin-Modern-Classics/dp/0140384510. Accessed 20 Mar. 2024.

Smith, Jeanette. "Sign the Petition." *Change.org*, www.change.org/p/make-the-fake-netflix-stickers-real-stickers-that-can-be-removed.

"Sword of Destiny (The Witcher, 2)." *Amazon*. www.amazon.com/Sword-Destiny-Witcher-Andrzej-Sapkowski/dp/0316389706. Accessed 20 Mar. 2024.

"A Timeline of the History of Stickers." *Maverick Label*, 11 Jan. 2018, blog.mavericklabel.com/blog/a-timeline-of-the-history-of-stickers/. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

"Uptake Terms." ISU Writing Program, n.d. www.isuwriting.com/uptake-terms.

Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 71–80.

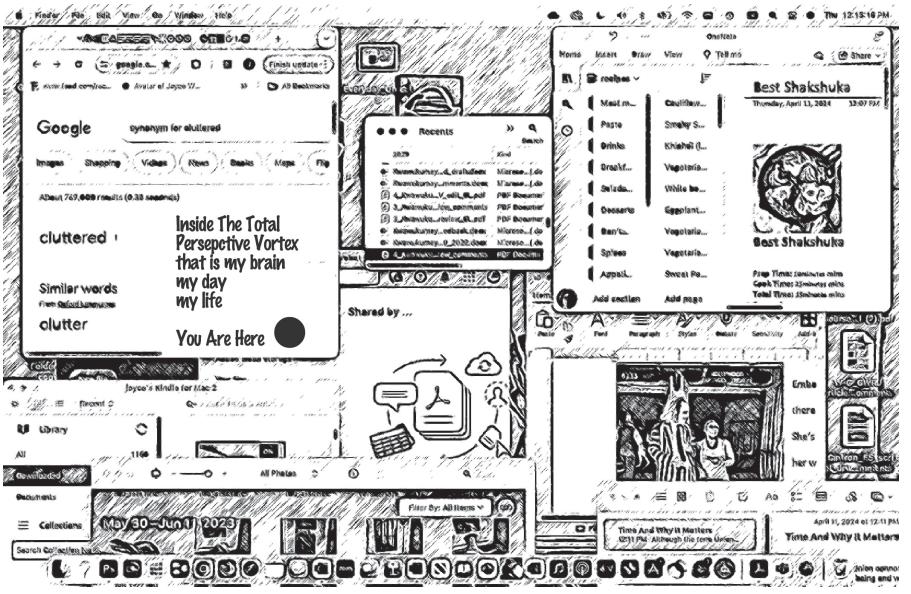
Websticker. "The History of Bumper Stickers & Interesting Sticker Anecdotes." *Websticker*, 7 Jan. 2021, www.websticker.com/blog/the-history-of-the-bumper-sticker/#:~:text=The%20first%20true%20%E2%80%9Cpromotional%20stickers. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

"Where the Crawdads Sing: Reese's Book Club (A Novel)." *Amazon*. www.amazon.com/Where-Crawdads-Sing-Delia-Owens/dp/0735219109. Accessed 20 Mar. 2024.

"Who Invented Stickers?" *Wonderopolis*, wonderopolis.org/wonder/who-invented-stickers. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

Laurel Staniszewski is a student at Washington Middle School. At school, she participates in cheer, track, musical, and NJHS. When she's not at school, she's probably at dance, drinking coffee, or hanging out with her friends.

Notes



Drawing by Joyce Walker

Picturing Literate Activity: Tab, You're It

Janine Blue

Through images, Janine Blue demonstrates the presence of her diverse identities in digital spaces via browser tabs and Google profiles and interprets how organizing her digital life affects her mindset.

When I launch the web browser on my laptop, I'm greeted by the familiar sight of a desktop full of strategically placed tabs slowing down the processing power (Figure 1 is what my browser top currently looks like). It's a testament to the multitasking madness that has become an integral part of my digital life (as is my computer politely nudging me with random, terrifying technological glitches to signal that I should probably close some tabs), with each browser tab representing various tasks or projects I'm currently working on or are right around the corner. It's not uncommon for me to have one tab dedicated to research for something related to my student-ing, a tab regarding teacher-ing, a tab for ISU-ing, a tab for emails, multiple Google docs, and YouTube, of course, for humanity breaks. Keeping the various parts of myself organized and readily accessible in this way is an excellent practice for my life as a human who wears many hats. It can be a dizzying array for those who unfortunately take a glance at my screen, but I easily

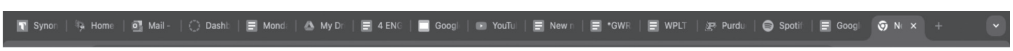


Figure 1: My current lineup of tabs.

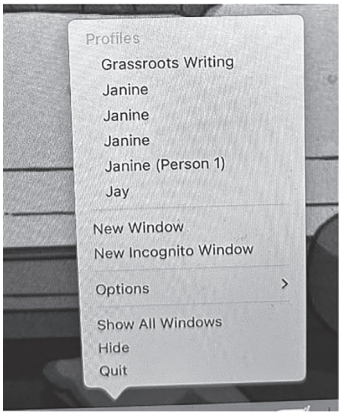


Figure 2: What pops up when I right click my web browser.

navigate through them because each tab is a portal to a different aspect of my virtual existence.

I have also accumulated a collection of Google profiles over the years that enable tailored experiences for me (Figures 2 and 3). Each Google profile serves a distinct purpose, whether for "Jay, the published creative writer," "Janine, the graduate student," "Janine, the graduate teacher," "Janine, the editor," "Janine's Premium YouTube binge profile," and my favorite, "Janine, (Person 1)." Her profile only contains what makes her happy—purple, streaming, and stuff she likes to read, look at, and shop from (Figure 4). It's also where her family and friends exist for her in digital space. This compartmentalization streamlines my virtual life, like having different rooms in a house (my computer) that are interconnected by me as the foundation.

The organization of distinct profiles and the aligned chaos of tabs definitely symbolize the way my mind works and how I navigate the world. It's a bit stubborn, a little excessive, somewhat bizarre, highly visual, and meticulously organized. What makes me sigh contently breaks other people out in a cold sweat.

Tab people get it. Not-tab people *get the urge* to rescue our computers. There are only two reactions: "How does your computer ever run? Why are you like this?!?" or "Same here. I've got twelve tabs open right now and nine

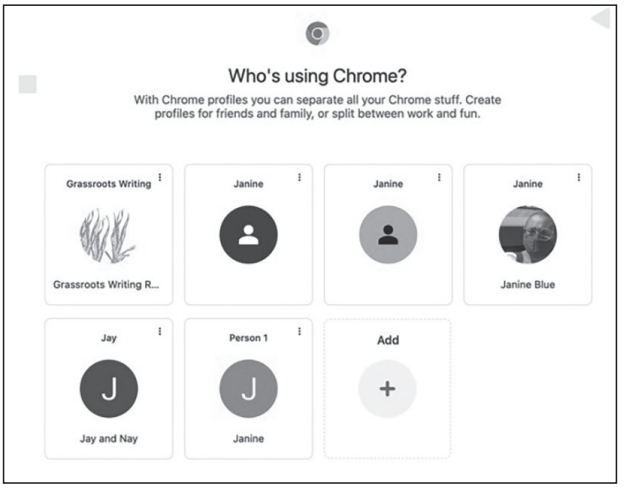


Figure 3: My Google profiles.

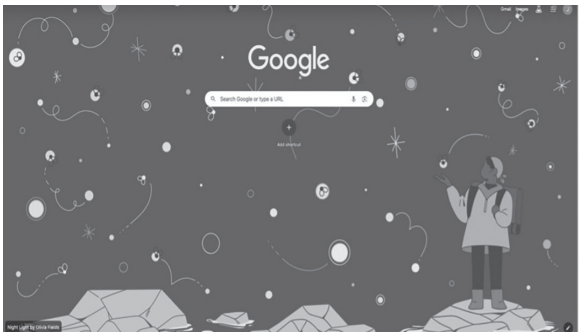
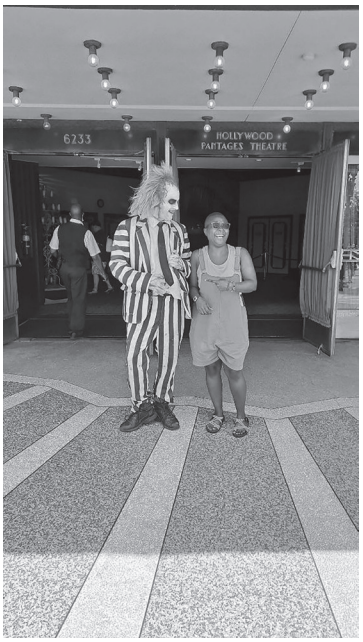


Figure 4: Janine (Person 1).

profiles." It is a sight to behold. Even more so for me, it positively impacts my mental health—a chaotic yet strangely comforting reminder that I do have a lot to do, but once it's finished, I can close the tab and exit the profile, relieving my laptop's aching muscles and allowing Janine (Person 1) to be the only identity in the room.

Since writing "Making Sense of All the Writing: My Embodied Literate Activity" for the 14.2 GWRJ issue, there still has not been much change for **Janine Blue**. She's still learning, teaching, and writing. She still uses her weighted blanket and enjoys simulation games. She did recently receive an extremely cool purple fidget spinner and caught up on some reading.



Notes

⚠ Time to BeReal. ⚠

Caitlin Migon

BeReal is an app that is often overlooked despite it allowing people to feel comfortable in their skin while participating in selfie-posting. Caitlin Migon shares how genre, activity systems, antecedent knowledge, and P-CHAT terms correlate to self-acceptance and long-lasting friendships, which they learned while taking ENG 101.

What Is BeReal?

On April 14, 2022, my best friend, Blaine, insisted that I download the new and trending app, BeReal. I questioned what it was and how it even worked. Every day, BeReal goes off and gives you two minutes to post a picture. The goal is to post within the two minutes to see what your friends are up to. If you miss the two minutes, you can still post. Not only does BeReal take a picture from the back camera, but it also takes a picture from the front camera as well. You can see the perspective from all angles which allows you to be real. There are features within the app that allow you to react and comment on your friend's post. Every picture taken is viewable until the next day when it goes off again. All posts are saved through the memory feature, which is my all-time favorite feature. It is a calendar that shows your post from each day. It is incredible to believe that I started with just my friend and I on BeReal. Now I have over 50 friends on BeReal, and I love to see what everyone has to share! Seeing my friends' faces every day always brings a smile to my face.

A lot of the new friends I made in my English 101 class happened to have the BeReal app. What was cool about my teacher, Professor Bowman (you're

Figure 1: Professor Bowman taking a picture for BeReal during our ENG 101 class.

awesome!), is that she was also aware of the app and didn't mind us using it from time to time during class. There was a day during class when the two-minute timer went off, I handed my phone to Professor Bowman, and she took our picture with me and my newly found friends in class (Figure 1). We all talked about it and realized that when BeReal goes off in a classroom setting, it can help students connect with each other and build empathy. It encourages everyone to participate and acknowledge that everyone has imperfections and struggles. Your post doesn't always have to be a perfect day at the beach or a skiing trip; it can be a picture of you lying in bed, relaxing on the couch, or even crying after receiving a poor score on a test. It's also a fascinating tool that can be discussed and examined in various ways in an ENG 101 class—which I will get into in the next section. Additionally, through the app, my classmates and I had an easier time making friends with each other and would be able to keep in touch even when the semester came to an end.

BeReal With Genre and Activity Systems

The idea to write this *Grassroots* article sparked when BeReal went off during my English 101 class earlier this semester. We had recently learned about genres and how often we view them in everyday life. A **genre** is a type of production—such as a movie, a resume, or even a street sign—that can be identified by its **conventions**, or its standard practices, features, and characteristics that make it unique ("Genre Research Terms"). A movie has features different from a Broadway play even though they both include actors and storytelling. A resume is unlike a job application or housing rental agreement because it has specific conventions that set it apart, and street signs have certain practices that people have to follow that distinguish it from traffic lights. I wondered if BeReal was considered a genre because it is definitely unique. It's not quite a messaging app, and it's not like Instagram even though the focus of both is sharing photos with the public.

Social media is definitely a genre and a broad one at that. It's a digital platform for communication across a global scale, which is different from

texting, emailing, talking on the phone, or mailing letters even though all are used as communication between people. As I came to this conclusion about social media as a genre, I understood that BeReal is a category or subgenre of social media. As I said, it's unlike Instagram due to the feature of it taking pictures from the back and front camera. It's also different from Snapchat because you have two minutes to post a photo. It's not similar to TikTok because one of the conventions is that it doesn't include videos. It's certainly not like Facebook or X (Twitter) because a characteristic of BeReal is that it's purely image-based. I personally think BeReal has a practice of promoting empathy, which isn't always the main goal of other social media platforms.

At the same time I was piecing together that BeReal was a genre, I also concluded that it was an activity system—another concept I learned in my ENG 101 class. According to the ISU Writing Program, borrowing from genre studies scholars, **activity systems** are cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal, using designated tools and rules to get there ("Literate Activity Terms"). BeReal is a perfect example of an activity system. The tools everyone uses are their phones and the app. There are guidelines for pictures you are allowed to upload, and the main rule is that everyone has two minutes to post one photo a day. That way, everyone can view what their friends are doing while on the app. I like that it doesn't encourage you to check the app constantly since everyone will be using the app once during the day. Additionally, with each picture you decide to post to the people on your friends list, you interact with others.

In ENG 101, I learned that activity systems are historically developed, meaning that they develop over time and interactively with the culture in which they operate. It wasn't until April 2022 that BeReal became a trending app. Now, many students at Illinois State University have the app downloaded or have at least heard of the app. BeReal updates their app to change for the culture we currently live in. An example of an update they added was the flashback for the year 2022. BeReal constructed a flashback video of the year with music and your personal posts. People were fans of this update and shared their videos on TikTok. It encouraged BeReal to have constant updates to better their app and to please the everyday users.

With all these discoveries about BeReal as a genre and activity system, I knew it was an exciting and layered subject for a *Grassroots* article!

"An **activity system** refers to a group of people or community working toward shared goals over time. When we talk about activity systems, we include the people in the system, the tools people use to accomplish shared goals, the rules surrounding their activity, and how people go about doing work in the system" ("Literate Activity Terms").

Sometimes I Don't Want to "Say Cheese"

Antecedent knowledge is a term we use to describe all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when they take up any new kind of writing ("Uptake Terms"). For the purposes of BeReal, we can think of antecedent knowledge as what potential users already know about selfies and social media prior to them downloading the BeReal app. For example, people might assume that BeReal has no positive effect because it is considered social media. Many of us have also had experience with taking bad selfies. Some of us have endured our pictures being negatively received from others or at least have seen people's pictures and videos being ridiculed on social media. Social media can be a scary and overwhelming genre. It's easy to become lost in a sea of unknown, faceless feedback. We internalize negativity seen online, and it can be hard to remember what's real—to be real.

I certainly had reservations about joining yet another social media platform and one that required me to show my face in one way or another. This was the prior, antecedent knowledge that I took with me as I downloaded an app I had never interacted with before. I first learned about antecedent knowledge in my 101 class when we discussed that prior knowledge isn't always helpful; it can hold you back, cloud your judgment, or give you false information about new things. I realized that was the case for me once I started using the BeReal app. My friends were just posting themselves in the moment regardless of what they looked like or their setting. I skimmed BeReal screenshots online and saw candid photos of everyday people in normal surroundings looking … well … normal. Michelle Santiago Cortes, a digital culture writer, shares, "the app is authentic, spontaneous, and candid and aims to make people feel good about themselves and their lives and say good-bye to addictive social networks." She continues to share that "it dangles the prospect of a social-media experience that feels fun and airy, that can be small and intimate and doesn't threaten you with your own 'brand'" (Cortes). Whenever I take a BeReal, I don't try to look good and impress; I do it for my own joy. As I scroll through my memories, I look at me smiling and laughing in blurry pictures. Figure 2 is a perfect example of taking a picture in the moment. It is a picture of my friends and me studying at the library for the night. I didn't sit there for a long time

Figure 2: A BeReal photo of my friends and me studying at the library.

trying to get a good picture; it was only for the moment. This allows you to be yourself and feel confident sharing your true self.

P-CHATting About What's Real

In my ENG 101 class, as I was learning about genre, we were also introduced to pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, known as **P-CHAT**. It's a type of research strategy used to examine genres and all their complexities, understand how they work in the world, and discover how people engage with them ("Literate Activity Terms"). There are seven elements in the research strategy known as P-CHAT: distribution, activity, representation, production, ecology, socialization, and reception. When I began to process that BeReal was a subgenre of social media, I figured I could use the P-CHAT elements to explore the platform. For this article, I am going to focus on five of the seven: representation, production, ecology, socialization, and reception.

As a P-CHAT term, **representation** involves how people want others to interpret and understand the texts they create in certain genres ("Literate Activity Terms"). When it comes to BeReal, representation presents itself when people post their pictures, and pictures are a great way to represent meaning and emotion. Users have to plan what their BeReal will be and what it will look like. Individuals have two minutes to post, so there is a bit of time to decide where to take the picture and how they will look. In that regard, BeReal photos are no different from selfies posted on any social media platform. However, the app is called BeReal, and the front and back photo feature encourages people to be themselves, displaying who they are and where they are at the photo alert buzz. It's not about wanting to impress the people viewing your content but to show people your honest state—being *real*. There's a motivation for users to be natural and present, not having fussed over their looks or surroundings. Some users also want to inspire and influence their friends or family on the platform to feel more comfortable in their skin. If photos appear perfect, it might not come across as genuine or true to the platform.

Production deals with how a text or genre is produced ("Literate Activity Terms"). Concerning BeReal, this simply means opening the app on your phone, deciding what type of picture you want, and then taking the picture. One aspect of decision-making for this process is determining who you may want to include in the frame or if you want it to be a solo shot. When I take my BeReal, I like to include all my friends so I can look back using the memory feature of the app and see who I was with that day (Figure 3). The location is another important factor of BeReal production. Where

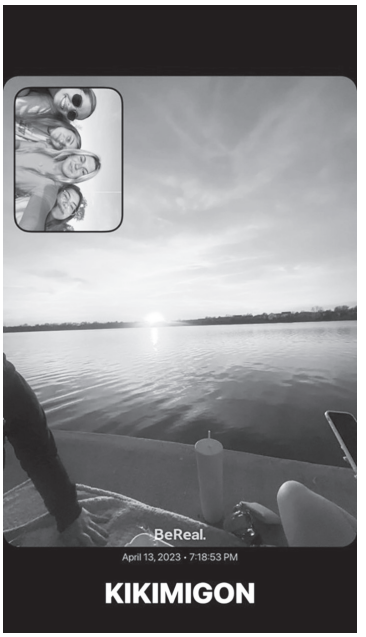


Figure 3: My friends and I taking a BeReal together as we eat outside for a picnic.

you are says a lot about what activities you enjoy or your daily schedule. One day I could be pictured at the mall with my mom, and the next day I could be photographed on a walk around my neighborhood park. I could also be seen in my ENG 101 classroom or in line at Starbucks waiting for my coffee and breakfast sandwich.

Ecology points to all the uncontrollable outside forces—environmental, biological, physical, and social factors—that influence the text or genre someone produces ("Literate Activity Terms"). When it comes to taking pictures, there are many factors that affect BeReal photos. One factor is weather: It could determine if you take an inside or outside photo. If it's a rainy day, it might deter people from posting outside. On the other hand, people who love the rain or want a diverse collection of photos may go out into the wet weather for a shot. The same goes for snowy weather and hot, sunny days. The condition of a person's phone is also part of the ecology of BeReal. If my phone battery is super low, I might not be able to post a photo. Likewise, if I can't access my phone for quite some time, I will miss out on the alerts and will have gaps of not having taken pictures. Location is another factor not always in people's control. Not every teacher will be OK with you taking a BeReal during class, and you certainly shouldn't take one while driving!

Socialization involves how we interact with each other as we engage with a text or genre ("Literate Activity Terms"). If I am with my friends and want to take a BeReal, I ask them if they want to be in it with me. If they do, I then decide if I'm taking the picture or not. I might ask a friend to take the selfie and tell the others to get ready to pose for the back camera. Sometimes I tell my friends to smile or make some sort of silly face as the camera clicks. There's usually laughter involved. And because of how much pressure society has placed on us all to be perfect all the time, there's usually the few seconds of fear and horror when someone goes, "But I look bad," or "My hair is a mess," or "Ugh, I don't have makeup on. I don't look good right now." It's these thoughts that BeReal tries to pull users out of. You're not supposed to look ready for prom night in the photos. You're just supposed to be yourself in the moment. This is also a conversation that usually happens between me and my friends as a BeReal is taken. We remind each other that what we look like isn't the point. All these conversations and comments that happen before

and after the picture is taken are a part of socialization, and I believe BeReal is trying to change the socialization of picture taking.

Lastly, **reception** revolves around how texts and genres are perceived and used by others ("Literate Activity Terms"). For BeReal, this means people's reactions to your pictures. As I mentioned when talking about representation, if photos look filtered or perfect, it can make others believe it's not genuine or might make them roll their eyes at the poster and find the photo annoying. It could even make people feel badly about themselves because their own shots aren't perfect. It's very easy for self-esteem to rise or fall when selfies are concerned. From the conversations I've had with friends, we usually compliment each other for our BeReals. There have also been times when my friends and I have subtly teased each other for obviously prepped photos.

BeReal is a very simple app that merely requires a user to post a single photo, yet through P-CHAT, it becomes clear how complex and compelling BeReal is.

What I Can Take Away

I never viewed myself writing about a social media platform in ENG 101, but here I am. I can apply my knowledge about genre, activity systems, antecedent knowledge, and P-CHAT to BeReal. I can confidently say BeReal has taught me to be myself. Never would I have thought I could share pictures of myself on social media without being judged. I no longer feel the need to fix my hair or smile when taking a selfie. I can be my true self and express that to all my friends on the app. I am so grateful to have met such genuine people in my English class and connected with them through the BeReal app. Not only did this create bonds, but it also made us closer to our professor. The feeling of not being judged for simply being ourselves is favored by just about everyone. We all want to live with no filters, no likes, and just be real.

Works Cited

Cortés, Michelle Santiago. "The Anti-Instagram App Promising to Make Us Feel Good." *The Cut*, 20 May 2022, www.thecut.com/2022/05/bereal-app-solve-social-media-problem.html. Accessed 3 May 2023.

"Genre Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting/com/genre-research-terms. Accessed 17 Feb. 2024.

"Literate Activity Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/activity-terms. Accessed 17 Feb. 2024.

"Uptake Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting/com/uptake-terms. Accessed 17 Feb. 2024.

Caitlin Migon is a nursing student at Illinois State University. In her free time, she enjoys being with friends and family and going shopping. She always enjoys Starbucks coffee on difficult school days.

What's in a Name? A Whole Lot of Literate Activity

Chloe Migon

Choosing a name for a child is simple, right? After Chloe Migon spoke with her mom, she thought differently. Migon demonstrates how the choosing of baby names could be an activity where ISU Writing Program terms and concepts can be applied in interesting ways.

I have always been interested in name identity, considering I am a twin with the same first initial, middle initial, and last name as my twin, Caitlin. The number of times that we have been combined into one person are innumerable (for example, our social security numbers or our driver's licenses). This experience has encouraged me to dive a little deeper into names, and I've realized that although we use names daily, we don't often think about naming as a form of literate activity. Think about it. Whenever we text someone, we use their name; whenever we call someone, we use their name. Naming, or rather using the names of the people around us, is an everyday literacy, and when we use names, it's a specific type of communication. As I thought about the idea of names as a form of significant communication and naming as an activity, I started realizing that my ideas correlate with ISU Writing Program concepts related to literate activity. People choose names, or choose not to use a name, based on a huge range of influences and goals: We might incorporate locations, sounds, experiences, or family connections into our name choices, and we can be influenced by cultural stereotypes, historic events, and the internet, sometimes in ways we aren't even conscious of. When we think of names, we're already imagining

what the child we're giving them to might look like or what their personality might be. Names are one of the first ways we learn to communicate; without them we would be so lost. In this article, I've used P-CHAT terms to consider how names are chosen and used in everyday communications. Here is the definition of P-CHAT, according to the ISU Writing Program:

> **P-CHAT** refers to pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, a term … use[d] … as a framework and tool for teaching writing. Lots of people use CHAT [or cultural-historical activity theory] across various disciplines, but … P-CHAT [is] a specific framework for teaching writing through a sociocultural approach to learning. ("Literate Activity Terms")

Basically, P-CHAT is a set of seven terms (distribution, activity, ecology, reception, socialization, representation, and production) that can be used collectively to help writers examine the complex settings and genres involved in our daily communications as humans. P-CHAT can also help a writing researcher to examine the choices people make when we are creating texts, or the different ways that people use texts and genres, especially when these uses create interesting changes in genres or activities over time. I'll be using some of the P-CHAT terms as I discuss the activities involved in how human names are chosen and how they are perceived by others in daily life.

Brooklyn Is Kicked Off the List: An Ecological View of Selecting Baby Names

When my mom found out she was having twin girls, she and my dad began searching for girl names. In a way, you could understand this as a form of genre research. They knew they were having twins, and they wanted to choose names that were related to each other in a significant way. They were searching for names that would "make meaning" in a way they wanted, and they knew that our names would be important—that they would make meaning not just for us, but for the people we would meet in our lives over time. My dad was set on having the names Ariana and Brooklyn, and my mom was set on Chloe and Noelle. My mom told my dad that Ariana reminded her too much of the rising pop star, Ariana Grande, and she told him Brooklyn reminded her of a New York or New Jersey name. This process of parents situating baby names within a web of life memories and experiences can be connected to the P-CHAT term ecology. According to the ISU Writing Program,

> **Ecology** is a P-CHAT term we use to investigate the broader environmental factors that shape and interact with writers producing and distributing texts. We use ecology to consider the

> physical and biological forces, both internal and external to writers, that may seem like they exist beyond the boundaries of the texts we're creating. ("Literate Activity Terms")

When applying ecology to the process of choosing baby names, we can look at all the ways that these choices exist within a big web of influences and possibilities. The parents (hopefully) choose a name they can agree about, but their choice isn't something they do unconnected to other people and the larger world.

For instance, my great-grandma, Granny Brown, was born on a cotton farm in Missouri. She was given the name Virginia Retha Sailors and then married my great-grandpa and became a Brown. To me, her name (Virginia Retha) just sounds so country, which is exactly where they were from. The middle of nowhere. But I assume that her parents made the choice of her name based on something—it might have been popularity (other people they knew using these names), to keep a connection with family (others in the family used those names), or for some other reason. But the result, for me, looking back, is that my great-grandma's name seems to fit the time and place where she was born. And this makes me realize that name choices must be connected to these outside influences—or, to use my P-CHAT terms again, to the ecology surrounding the people making a baby name choice in a particular place and time.

Hearing about my mom's objection to the name Brooklyn got me thinking about how parents sometimes name their children based on locations: places they love, places they visited, or even places where they think the child was conceived (Hanna). In naming my twin and me, my mom said she wanted more Midwestern names because we live in Illinois. She thought about the names she heard here in Illinois rather than in other places. If we had been in Florida, where we would vacation, she always said she would love to name her daughter a beachy name, but she didn't want a beachy name if we were living in the Chicago suburbs. For our names, she thought about popular Midwestern names at the time like Caitlin, Chloe, and Claudia. She knocked Brooklyn off the list while doing so.

Bye, Bye, Ariana: How Antecedent Knowledge Can Kick a Name to the Curb

Thinking about how my mom thought the name Ariana reminded her of the pop star, Ariana Grande, made me ponder how antecedent knowledge can influence the process of name-picking for children. **Antecedent knowledge** is another useful ISU Writing Program term, that "refers to the

facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations, [including] previous knowledge that we are often not required to describe or unpack explicitly" ("Uptake Terms"). In my mom's case, she associated the name Ariana with a pop star. However, when I hear the name Ariana, I think of my high school best friend. My mom wanted to avoid choosing a name that would make people think of someone else (someone famous or more well-known) rather than associating the name with me or my sister. In her case, she didn't want someone to think I should be a redhead or a singer, which were traits associated with Ariana Grande at the time. She then proceeded to knock Ariana off the list. In this example, we can see that that my mom anticipated that other people's antecedent knowledge (knowledge of Ariana Grande) might impact what that person would think about someone else who has the same name. And I think most of us can recall a time when we heard someone's name and realized it was the same as someone we already knew (or knew about), and the knowledge ended up shaping how we perceived the new person—which is kind of ridiculous if you think about it, but it's also kind of the way human beings work. This process of how humans make knowledge out of the things they know and experience could also be related to the P-CHAT term socialization—but more on that term in a later section.

Can Christmas Knock a Name Off the List?

My sister and I were expected to arrive in November, which led my dad to believe that Noelle was not a suitable name because it reminded him of Christmas. Just as a point of reference, Noel is a word that was borrowed into English from French, and it has associations with the idea of "birthday," as well as being a synonym for the Christmas holiday and for songs sung around this holiday ("Noel"). This example is also kind of about ecology, but I want to focus on the P-CHAT idea of reception to explain how my dad convinced my mom that Noelle was not a good name candidate. He got her to think about how other people would hear the name Noelle and think about Christmas, which might be kind of awkward—as in, people would say, "Why is your name Noelle when you weren't born close to Christmas?" And thinking about how people might receive and use a text is what reception is all about. **Reception** deals with "how people take up and use a text they've interacted with … how people might use, adapt, or repurpose a text in ways that writers may or may not have anticipated or intended" ("Literate Activity Terms"). While my dad saw Noelle as a Christmas name, my mom did not. He did not want people's reception of the name to be an assumption that he was obsessed with Christmas or to associate my name only with a holiday.

Because we were due in November (close to the month when people celebrate the Christmas holiday, but not the actual month), he felt that Noelle wouldn't represent us correctly. He also hoped to choose somewhat correlated names, and he didn't think that Chloe and Noelle were connected enough. When I asked him more about this, he responded, "If one twin has a Christmas name, it would be weird for the other to have a summer name. And, if you were due for November, why would we want to use a Christmas-time name if you weren't born near Christmas?" For all of these reasons, Noelle was knocked off the list by my dad.

I Named My Twin Sister … Technically

Well, if you're reading this article, you probably already know that my name did end up being Chloe, but you might be curious about how our final names ended up being chosen (with Brooklyn, Ariana, and Noelle all banned from the baby name list). What ended up happening is that my mom chose my name, Chloe, and my dad chose my twin's name, Caitlin. Done. But of course, my narrative about the literate activity of naming doesn't stop there. When I was little (Figure 1), I had to go to speech therapy. I had difficulty pronouncing some words and sounds, and I couldn't pronounce Caitlin in the way my parents were imagining when they named us. Instead, what came out was, "K-K." Eventually my mom picked up the nickname, and that became what she was called. Nowadays, her nickname has evolved to Kiki. So yes, technically, I did name my twin sister. The evolution of my sister's name connects to another P-CHAT term we're going to encounter in the next section: socialization, which focuses on the way that texts change over time as people use and alter them.

Figure 1: Pictured here, myself (right) and Caitlin "Kiki" Migon (left) at age 5 holding hands in Englewood, FL, before going down to the beach for a family dinner.

Wait—Are You Thinking About "In My Feelings" by Drake? That's Socialization

I don't want to assume anything, but it's possible that when you read my twin's nickname, Kiki, you immediately thought of the song by Drake, "In My Feelings," which contains the lyrics, "Kiki, do you love me?" If you made that connection, you were engaged in **socialization**. This P-CHAT term describes "how people and institutions interact as

texts are produced, distributed, and used … [and] how people represent and transform social and cultural practices as we interact with texts, whether we do so intentionally or not" ("Literate Activity Terms"). My sister's nickname, Kiki, evolved because I couldn't pronounce her given name, Caitlin. But since 2018, that nickname has also become connected to a specific song, especially for younger people, because "In My Feelings" became well-known in part through the social media platform TikTok. This illustrates how the name Kiki, and associated meanings for it, are constantly moving around in our culture and being connected to different ideas and feelings. However, if I asked my grandpa, who is 84 years old, he would probably just think of the name Kiki as his granddaughter's name, not some famous social media song and dance. (He doesn't use TikTok. He doesn't even have a cell phone!) So when we talk about socialization, we can't assume that everyone is a part of the cultures we are or that everyone in a particular culture will perceive the same connections or understand genres (or names) with the same set of associations. The process of association and evolution (socialization) of texts and genres is something that can have a big impact on naming practices, and I'll talk about that more in the next section, but in the meantime, I want to give a shout out to the P-CHAT term distribution. According to the ISU Writing Program, **distribution** involves "where texts go in the world so that people might interact with them … and how texts move to and do things in places that writers may or may not have intended them to go" ("Literate Activity Terms"). My grandpa would have absolutely no clue about the famous social media dance and song, but younger generations might know it. Or people might connect it to the character Kiki from "Teen Beach Movie." Both of these texts (the movie and the song) had a particular distribution (how they were distributed and who had access) that is definitely skewed toward younger people (especially younger Americans at the time). But my grandpa, on the other hand, would be so lost in our conversation about Kiki references. As I said before, he doesn't even have a cell phone, just a landline, so no TikTok; and I'm almost positive he hasn't seen "Teen Beach Movie" from 2013. Because he wasn't within the distribution network of these texts and doesn't use the same tools (like social media, TikTok, Disney Channel, and cell phones), his socialization of the name Kiki would be completely different.

Karen as a Genre: A Name Becomes a Genre Becomes a Meme

Thinking more about names and identity, not only do our cultural associations with names change over time, but some names can end up getting associated with ideas or situations in ways that change their meaning dramatically—

especially as they move across time and generations of people. The name Karen is a really powerful example of this. Whenever I hear the name Karen, I think of an older woman who is mean and nasty. This is because the name became part of a meme trend that associated the name Karen with the idea of a "specific type of middle-class white woman, who exhibits behaviours that stem from privilege" (Nagesh). In a BBC News article, "What Exactly Is a 'Karen' and Where Did the Meme Come From?" Ashitha Nagesh talks about the evolution of "Karen-memes" that had evolved up to 2020 and how they became popular "as a way for people of colour, particularly black Americans, to satirise the class-based and racially charged hostility they often face." For those who don't know an official definition, memes are defined in "The Meaning and History of Memes" in the New York Times as chunks of information that have a wide cultural reach because they pass from person to person in a viral way (Benveniste). Alexis Benveniste points out that cultural memes existed before the internet, but the power of memes to go viral online and become texts that influence culture in a short period of time is something that internet users, especially social media users, have a lot of experience with. In this case, the name Karen became a "text" that carries significant social meaning. In the process, the name Karen dropped in popularity—moving from 660th to 831st on the US Social Security Administration's list of most popular baby names; although it's true that before becoming internet-synonymous with unpleasant, privileged, middle-aged white women, the popularity of the name had been trending downward from its peak (Bologna). It was the third most popular female name in the US in 1965, when almost 33,000 newborns were named Karen (Bologna).

The association through meme culture between the name Karen and unpleasant behavior is something we can describe by using the P-CHAT term representation. **Representation** in P-CHAT focuses on how people think and "plan to produce a text … at any point and the activities and materials that shape how we think about texts" ("Literate Activity Terms"). So, the concept of representation can be used to identify the intentional way people used the particular name (Karen) to create an instant characterization of a white, middle-aged, hyper-privileged woman by using the name repeatedly in memes. And this worked, in part, because the name Karen was actually a pretty popular name for middle-aged white women (remember those 33,000 Karens from 1965?).

This transformation of Karen is a modern example, but as I mentioned above, this kind of thing isn't something that began only with the internet. A similar sort of transformation happened to Dr. Samuel Mudd after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Mudd was the doctor who treated John Wilkes Booth after he was injured during the process of assassinating

Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. on April 14, 1965 (Wilkes). At the time, Mudd was accused of being a coconspirator in the assassination, and even though he was later pardoned, the fact that his name was Mudd ended up connecting him (through socialization and memes, actually) with the concept of "muddying one's reputation" (Wilkes).

Trajectory, Generational Divides, and Hurricanes

Getting back to the Karen analogy, I also think it's interesting that when I asked my grandpa what he thought of the name Karen, he responded with, "Oh, my neighbor upstairs is named Karen. She is friendly and helps me and your grandma out a lot. I think of the name Karen as a kind, older woman." This shows how different people can engage with the same name in vastly different ways, depending on how they have experienced the name during their lifetime through interactions with different people with the name.

The ISU Writing Program term, **trajectory**, applies to this process of noticing "how literate activity changes across places, times, people, and artifacts … [and] how texts move through the world and change as people adapt and take them up" ("Literate Activity Terms"). Names (as texts) also have trajectories—that is, their meanings and uses change over time in response to different kinds of pressures. This might include personal trajectories (connections we make between people we know of or meet who have the same name), cultural trajectories (understandings that might be distributed through some groups but not others), or generational trajectories that occur (how names increase or decrease in popularity over time).

Figure 2: Pictured here, myself (right) and Caitlin "Kiki" Migon (left) at 2 years old sitting on our grandparents' bed in Englewood, FL. Retha Hill (Grandma) and Renee Migon (Mom) put curlers in our hair.

Considering this idea through my own experience got me thinking about my mom's name, Renee (Figure 2). I have not met a Renee my age, ever. I have only met Renee's who are about my mom's age of 50. (Sorry, Mom, for bringing your age into this!) But seriously, the name Renee represents an older generation, or at least it does to me. This is also true of my grandma's name, Retha. I have NEVER heard of someone about my age having the name Retha. But I do have friends whose grandmas' names are also Retha.

But the trajectory of names as texts in the world isn't just something that ebbs and flows with time. The popularity of names can be influenced, positively or negatively, by events as diverse as a famous person's bad behavior (Adolph Hitler), prejudice related to people in the media or popular culture (Caitlyn Jenner), or the effects of a particularly powerful storm, like when the name Katrina dropped in popularity after Hurricane Katrina (Bologna).

In my experience, I can also see how these kinds of influences can shape how we feel about words that aren't traditionally names for human babies but become associated with human names after they become popular. For example, when I think of the word "North" these days, I think of the Kardashians, and North isn't even a word that many people would associate with the name of a human. As new generations of parents generate new naming practices by giving their children different kinds of names (like directions, objects, or seemingly random words), the trajectory of these words-as-names can turn them, over time, into recognized baby names. That is to say, sometimes this happens … but sometimes it doesn't. For example, a famous couple on TikTok named their child Poot. When I think of the word "Poot," I most definitely do not think of a child, but perhaps in a different cultural or generational group, they do or they will! Who knows if Poot will become a run-of-the-mill name for babies by 2050.

Names Are (Not Only) Personal

I am sure by now you have realized that names can be powerful texts for making meaning in the world, but I wonder if you've given much thought to the expectations people have when they think of your name? A study done by researchers at Bloomberg University of Pennsylvania found that individuals with names that are commonly associated with lower maternal education and socioeconomic status were more likely to be perceived as having lower educational achievements, compared to those with names that are linked to higher social status (Welsh). This particular quirk of human psychology means, for example, that future teachers may expect Benjamin and Samuel to do better in school than Cody (Welsh).

These kinds of (mostly) unconscious biases are a built-in aspect of human behavior, but I was surprised (and perhaps you will be also) to learn the extent to which naming practices can be impacted by larger world events. For example, a study recently published in the Journal of Applied Psychology found that periods of economic hardship, like depressions or recessions, may have an influence on the names that people choose, with parents more inclined to choose less common names during these periods (Twenge et al.). Maybe this is why my grandma's name is Retha. She was born in 1940 during the Great Depression, so perhaps her mom wanted a more unique name. Likewise, during the pandemic, baby name experts predicted both a decrease in names that sounded in any way like "coronavirus" (names with "co" sounds like Collin, Corina, or Cora) and an increase in what they called "positive and hero-themed" names like Avery, Florence, and (literally) Hope (Harvey-Jenner).

Conclusion

It's intriguing to think about the names that might be popular when I have a child. For right now, I really like the names Giselle, Noah, and Leah. And I am sure some of you are using P-CHAT terms to disagree with me, but that's OK! While this article makes clear that name choices are often deeper and more complicated than you might originally have supposed, ultimately humans choose names that are meaningful for them and (they hope) for their children. Names are such an important part of our lives, which is why I think we should treat them like a gift. In particular, for myself and my twin, our names are like a personal gift that our parents have given us, and I appreciate the art that was made for me. I hope that this article, with all the twists and turns it takes in exploring the ways names are chosen and how their meanings can change over time, will make you more aware of (and maybe more careful about) making judgements about people based on their names. The way I like to think about it is that when I hear someone's name, I can treat it like a gift I'm giving back to them by valuing it as uniquely theirs, and I want to make real efforts not to respond to names based on assumptions, experiences, or unconscious prejudices. Instead, I might ask them to tell me the story of their name if they are willing to share it with me.

Works Cited

Benveniste, Alexis. "The Meaning and History of Memes." *The New York Times*, 26 Jan. 2022. www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/crosswords/what-is-a-meme.html.

Bologna, Caroline. "The Name 'Karen' Plummeted in Popularity in 2020." *The Huffington Post*, 1 June 2021, www.huffpost.com/entry/karen-baby-name-2020_l_60af11dde4b0a256831bce5e. Accessed 9 May 2024.

Drake. "In My Feelings." *Scorpion*. Young Money, 2018.

Hanna, Aoife. "All The Celeb Kids Named After Where They Were Conceived." *Bustle*, 3 Sept. 2020, www.bustle.com/life/celebrity-kids-named-after-where-they-were-conceived.

Harvey-Jenner, Catriona. "The Baby Names that have Risen in Popularity Since the Pandemic Began." *Cosmopolitan*, 28 Jan. 2021, www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/body/a32373881/coronavirus-pandemic-influence-baby-names/.

"Literate Activity Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/activity-terms. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024.

Nagesh, Ashitha. "What Exactly Is a 'Karen' and Where Did the Meme Come From?" *BBC News*, 30 July 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-53588201.

"Noel." *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/noel. Accessed 17 Jan. 2024.

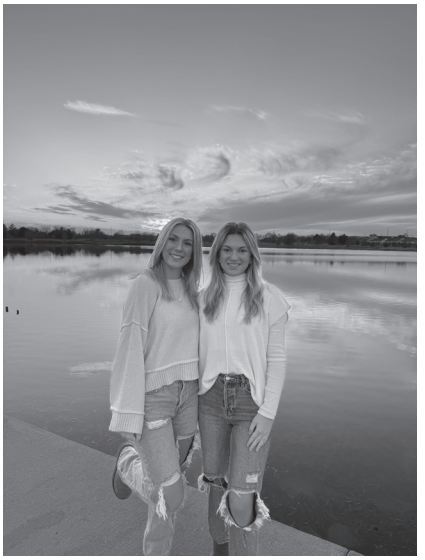
Teen Beach Movie. Directed by Jeffery Hornaday. Disney Channel & Rainforest Productions, 2013.

Twenge, Jean M., et al. "Still Standing Out: Children's Names in the United States During the Great Recession and Correlations with Economic Indicators." *The Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 46, 2016, pp. 663–670.

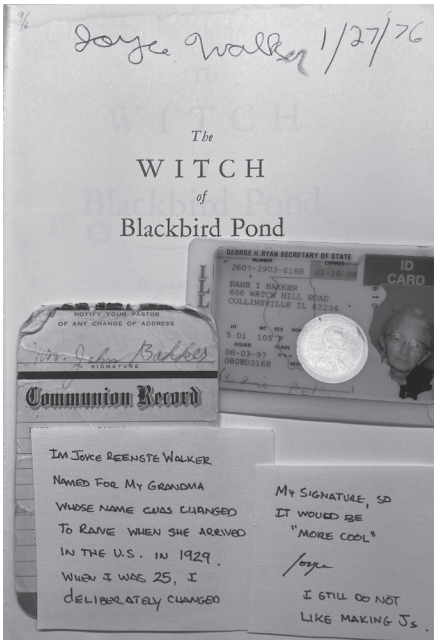
"Uptake Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/uptake-terms. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024.

Welsh, Jennifer. "Your Name Impacts How Others Judge You." *Live Science*, 01 June 2011, www.livescience.com/14394-educational-achievement.html.

Wilkes, Johnny. "Why Do We Say 'Your Name Is Mud'—and What Does It Have to Do With Abraham Lincoln?" *History Extra*, BBC History Magazine, 11 Feb. 2022, www.historyextra.com/period/georgian/your-name-is-mud-phrase-meaning-origins/. Accessed 9 May 2024.



Chloe Migon (left) is a freshman nursing major at Illinois State University. She hopes to work in a hospital in Florida with Caitlin "Kiki" Migon (right) after graduating college.



Collage by Joyce Walker

Picturing Literate Activity: Communicating With Your Future Self Through Planners

Grace Betts

Using two images, Grace Betts illustrates how individuals take part in literate activity every day through the personal languages of planners in this Picturing Literate Activity piece.

Many people think that they do not engage in literate activity on a daily basis, as they do not write essays or read novels every day. But what might surprise those same people is that literate activity can be any social practice or tool that helps us to communicate and accomplish goals. An example of literate activity that I, and many others, engage with on the daily is writing in a planner. This tool helps me to plan out what writing, reading, or other work I need to get done for the week. While this may seem mundane, when writing in a planner you are essentially communicating with your future self (Figures 1 and 2). Oftentimes, you are also making up your own secret language—whether that be through unusual abbreviations or a color-coding system—that only you will understand.

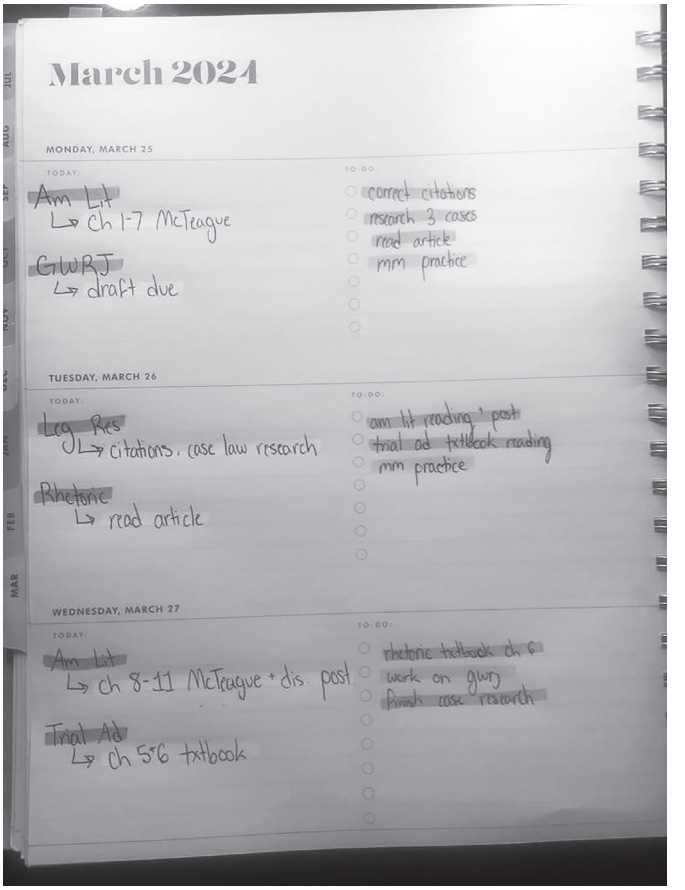


Figure 1: Pictured here is my weekly planner that tells future me what past me expected to accomplish on each day of the week. I create these plans on Sunday nights, which helps me prepare myself for the week ahead. There are highlight patterns in purple, yellow, pink, and blue, and only I understand what those colors mean. There are strange abbreviations and messages that would be confusing to any other reader. But to me, all the content in this planner makes perfect sense.

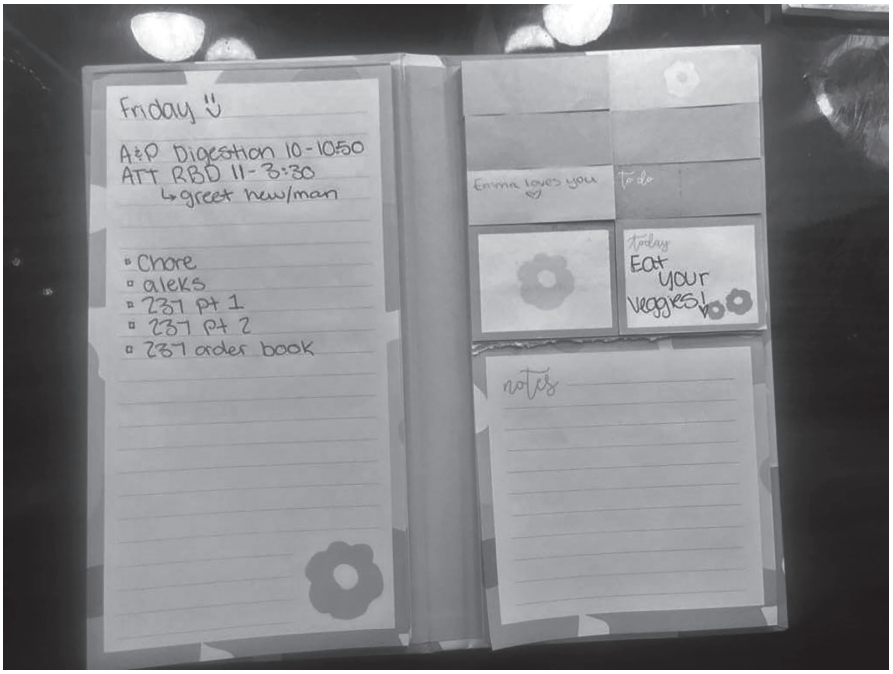


Figure 2: This is an image of my friend Meg's planner. As I try to decode the secret messages that past Meg is sending to future Meg, I am completely stumped. But to Meg, the abbreviations, arrows, and smiley faces all mean something. As a nursing major, Meg thinks she does not often engage in literate activity. But as she writes in this planner every day, Meg is actually participating in literate activity all the time!

Grace Betts is a sophomore at Illinois State University and is studying English and legal studies. Grace is an intern for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* and is involved with Alpha Gamma Delta, Food Recovery Network, and Pre-Law Club at Illinois State. In her free time, Grace loves reading fantasy novels and spending time with her friends.

Notes

Drawing by Joyce Walker

Chomping at the Bit: How Equestrian Athletes Use Literate Activity

Ella Bickerman

Ella Bickerman discusses equestrian literacies, especially the tools and activities through which horses and humans learn to *read* each other, and how they learn to communicate and collaborate with each other to achieve specific goals and outcomes.

I've been riding horses since I was 10 years old, and for as long as I can remember, I have loved these four-legged creatures. I am currently riding at a barn in Princeville, Illinois, that specializes in reining and cutting horses, and I have been riding for around 10 years. Since I've been involved in this community for a long time, I've become part of a discourse community of equestrians (please don't say horse people). **Discourse communities** are defined by the ISU Writing Program as "collections of people or groups that work toward collective goals through specific genres" ("Genre Research Terms"). The "Genre Research Terms" page goes on to say that, "Often, when we talk about discourse communities, we describe their communication practices, shared knowledge and language use, and the power structures that shape community features both to people who participate within the discourse community and others." The equestrian community is global—it's made up of people all over the world who share common goals, including becoming better communicators with their horses, developing their riding skills, and sharing different riding and training techniques. Equestrians also form into a huge range of sub-groups revolving around owning and riding different breeds of horses, participating in different disciplines of riding

According to the ISU Writing Program's "Literate Activity Terms" page, "**literate activity** is a way to describe the complex activity involved in people producing and using texts across spaces and times, in ways that are shaped by our histories, tools, social interactions, resources, bodies, emotions, and relationships with the world." By examining the knowledges, tools, communications, and texts involved in the activity of riding horses, we can analyze it as such.

and competing in horse shows, or learning a particular type of training or riding (the one I've showed in most is called western pleasure, which I'll explain more about in a bit). In becoming part of this community, I've had to learn a lot about the tack (gear and equipment) used in riding, and I've also had to learn how to move my body in particular ways, navigate specific spaces (like horse stalls and arenas), and participate in new kinds of interactions with humans (working with different trainers and understanding how judges make their decisions in placing classes). But one of the primary aspects of my learning has involved interacting and communicating with horses. Throughout my life, I've had to learn to communicate with many different horses and use different communication techniques to do so.

Whenever riding comes up in conversation, I notice that a lot of people have the misconception that riding horses is just sitting there, on top of a horse, while it moves around. But riding horses is a lot more than that—it's a complex **literate activity**, and in this article, we're going to examine some of the kinds of knowledge and tools a person needs to become an equestrian. I'll particularly focus on how horses and riders learn to communicate in order to partner in this activity.

Communication Tools for Equestrians

The first tool for communication between the rider and their horse involves the tack. If you're unfamiliar with the word tack, it means the saddle, bridle (which includes the bit and reins), saddle pad, and other equipment that goes on the horse. The tack is important not only because different styles of riding have different histories and traditions, but because the gear's design is influenced by the different kinds of goals people have for interacting with horses. Depending on the discipline of riding you're doing, you ride with different tack. For example, I ride in the western-style riding discipline, so I ride with a western saddle, saddle pad, and bridle (Figures 1 and 2). For people in the US who are just starting lessons, the differences between English and western style riding and tack are some of the first things they learn. Basically, a key difference is that western-style tack comes from a tradition of practical kinds of riding activities from when horses were regularly used for labor and pleasure activities, like "trail riding, rodeo and cowboy work"

Figure 1: This is a western saddle, part of the tack for the kind of riding I do ("How to Saddle a Horse").

Figure 2: This is a photo of a horse wearing a western bridle (also called a "headstall") with the parts of the bridle labeled ("Western Bridles & Headstalls").

("Riding Tack"). Western saddles typically have a larger saddle horn with a larger cantle, which is the back part of the saddle that helps to keep the rider in the saddle. An English saddle has an almost nonexistent saddle horn and smaller cantle as well as thinner stirrups that allow for a more "correct" position ("Riding Tack").

The type of tack also influences the way a rider communicates instructions and how the activity of riding feels to the horse—meaning that decisions about which tack to use might also depend on a horse's experience. For example, a stable might want to allow a horse to stay with the kind of tack they are comfortable with rather than asking them to switch between different kinds of tack. In my own experience, I have only ever ridden in western tack. Most of the barns I have ridden at had western tack because the western saddle offers casual riders extra support and comfort.

All parts of the tack, because they have contact with a horse, act like a mediator in the communication between a horse and rider. But the bit and bridle (see the diagram in Figure 2) are perhaps the most important communication tools because horses' mouths are so sensitive, and you have the most direct contact with the horse while using the bit. The bridle refers to the whole piece of tack surrounding the horse's head while the bit is the thin metal piece that goes in a horse's mouth and rests on top of their tongue. The bit is attached to the reins that the rider uses to convey instructions to the horse. While this might sound painful and extreme, it doesn't harm the horse when used correctly. While there are always people who misuse or aren't careful about how they use the tack, in this article I'm going to focus on riders and trainers who are using the tack correctly and who work to communicate with their horses in ways that don't cause unnecessary pain.

Using the bit, bridle, and reins, I can give the horse different cues, telling them to move right, move left, move backward, move forward, spin in a circle, or only move their front end or their hind end. This communication is vital while riding.

Another piece of tack that is used to communicate with the horse is the stirrups. The stirrups are the parts that hang down from the saddle and are where you put your feet while riding. The stirrups help the rider to position their body weight correctly in the saddle and to help maintain a rider's balance while riding. The rider needs to keep the balls of their feet where the band is at the bottom of the stirrup to make this an effective method of communication. As a western-style rider, when asking the horse I'm riding to stop, I'll bring my feet in the stirrups forward and lower my heels as well as sit deeper in the saddle. The horse will pick up on the change in my positioning and stop.

Physical Communication: The Rider's Posture

Another form of communication that occurs between horse and rider is the posture of the rider: the way the rider moves her body is often something that the horse can sense. This kind of communication can be intentional, but it can also be conveyed without the rider even realizing it. Horses are extremely sensitive to a rider's weight, which includes the position of your legs, how your weight is distributed in the saddle (otherwise known as your *seat*), and the position of your spine. While riding, your whole leg should be in contact with the saddle, especially your lower legs. Letting your heels float at the same height as your stirrups or keeping your heels down helps keep your weight distributed and keep your feet in the stirrups. Your seat is crucial to riding, and for most equestrians, it's something that develops over time, although some people naturally have a well-balanced seat. In different kinds of riding competitions, judges will award (or take away) points based on the way your body looks as you sit in the saddle.

To prevent injury to your horse, you must stay balanced in the saddle. If I am up there bouncing around, my horse is more likely to be off-balance, especially during faster gaits. (Gaits are the different types of movement a horse can do, like how humans walk, jog, run, and so forth.)

When a rider is learning to ride, they'll learn about all of these techniques and tools, and they'll begin to understand what to do with their body in order to try to communicate the appropriate messages to the horse. However, from the horse's perspective, even subtle differences can have a huge impact on the messages they receive. Depending on how the horse

you're riding has been trained, the way you hold your weight in the saddle can also be used for different commands. For example, in the western-style riding discipline, the majority of horses pay the most attention to messages they get from your seat and legs. So, if I were to sit deeply in the saddle (which is when you try to get the back pockets of your jeans to the saddle), I'm telling the horse that they need to slow down or stop. Recently, I was told by my new trainer, who trains reining and cutting horses, that a lot of riders he coaches keep their heels down too far. While this is acceptable and even taught in many western and English disciplines, horses who are trained in reining and cutting techniques understand the messages you're sending with your heel position differently. When riding in western pleasure, you keep your heels down for your whole ride. This can't be done with a reining or cutting horse because you're essentially riding your brakes, which means the same thing as if you were doing it in your car. This confuses the horse. After all, the position of your heels is telling them to stop or slow down, while in other ways you might be telling them to go faster because you're unaware of what your body posture communicates to the horse. Also, my trainer mentioned that if you continually ride your brakes, they will eventually burn up. This means that your horse will no longer respond to the communication of your heels asking them to stop.

Reining & cutting

In western-style horse shows, reining and cutting are both types of competitions where a rider asks the horse to do a wide range of very complex movements, either in a predetermined pattern (reining) or as part of a process of "cutting" a single cow away from a herd of cattle. Both require very nuanced and intricate communications between horse and rider ("Western").

When I'm riding, the slightest bit of pressure from my legs will tell the horse to go faster, while the absence of pressure communicates that I want them to keep the same pace or slow down, depending on the pressure I'm putting on the bit. In terms of understanding riding as a form of literate activity, this is a great example of how a horse and rider have to develop their communications over time, but it's also an example of how subtle miscommunications can impede the goal of the activity.

Another way that riders communicate with horses is through oral commands. A clicking or clucking sound is asking for a trot, while a kissing sound is asking for a canter. These are used with leg pressure to enforce communication. Another command is saying "whoa" when asking for a stop as well as sitting deep in the saddle and rotating your heels down in the stirrups. In most cases, giving oral communication is a way to enforce the physical communication you are giving the horse. The physical act of communicating is most important because that has multiple aspects, such as pressure on the bridle, distribution of weight in the saddle, and stirrup

positioning. While leaving out oral communication doesn't usually influence the horse, using only oral communication is something that can be achieved but that takes much more training. Only using oral communication is uncommon because if you have multiple horses in the same space, like an arena, using different oral cues could confuse your horse.

Texts of Riding

If we look at learning to ride as a particular kind of literacy, then we can also study (using **literate activity research** methods) the many different texts that riders have to learn to use and interact with as they learn to work together with their horses. In this situation, a text isn't necessarily some kind of document that uses alphabetic letters to communicate—after all, horses can't read. Instead, a **text** might be any kind of digital or material object that is used to make meaning. According to the ISU Writing Program, this way of thinking about texts is "meant to help us think about the kinds of things we write in the world that aren't just written documents, the kinds of things we create beyond word processing applications" ("Genre Research Terms"). To perform in equestrian competitions, a rider definitely needs to learn to read the horse, just as the horse needs to learn to read the rider. In addition, both need to learn different kinds of tools and materials that mediate their communication. The tools used might help and support communication in different ways, but they might also create barriers—it depends. From a literate activity research perspective, it's important to think about how these tools might end up impacting and influencing communications in different ways. For example, as I mentioned earlier in this article, the bit, a tool which goes in the horse's mouth, creates a link between the rider's hands and movements and the horse. This makes the mediated communication very different than if the rider were to put their hands directly on the horse. In turn, all of these tools and communications are combined when a horse and rider are working to reach particular goals or outcomes, which we might understand as another text—one that the horse and rider are producing together. For example, in the style of western pleasure riding, the text that the horse and rider produce is a slow, smooth gait that looks extremely comfortable to ride. According to the American Quarter Horse Association website, "When showing western pleasure, your horse should

Literate activity research

Leslie Hancock explains that in literate activity research, the central focus for researchers is "the production and use of texts, as well as how these texts mediate activity" (4). Hancock also uses the work of Paul Prior to explain that literate activity isn't just about "transcribing words," but can also include "many streams of activity … [such as] reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking, and feeling" (18).

be a pleasure to watch and a pleasure to ride—no matter what your skill level. All of your efforts when showing western pleasure should be aimed at making your horse look smooth" ("Showing Western Pleasure"). The goal of the communications between horse and rider in this style of riding is to be extremely discrete and hard for the judge to see. This means that the rider is using the lowest possible number of cues and the smallest possible shift in weight or change in positioning in the stirrup. This subtlety is designed to show the extremely high level of communication present between the horse and rider. The goal of having these buttons (communication cues explained more later in the article) is for the rider to communicate as little as possible while communicating as effectively as possible. These so-called buttons are created by trainers pouring lots of time into communicating with their horses and the horses creating muscle memory ties to this communication.

Western pleasure classes can be either a rail or pattern class, meaning that the horse and rider could be in the arena with all their competitors at once going around the perimeter (rail), or they could be competing one at a time, each horse and rider following a pattern given to them by the judge (pattern). A trail class is a patterned class where a series of obstacles are laid out for the horse and rider to overcome. These include mailboxes and gates to open, wooden logs to walk over, and bridges to cross. In order for a performance to be seen as successful, the horse and rider have to maintain clear, concise communication and work as a team. In cutting competitions, where cattle are released into the arena and the horse and rider must cut or pick one out from the herd and keep it separate, the horse has to be able to read which way the cow is going to go (a term coined as "catty") and stop them from rejoining the herd. This takes extreme athleticism from the horse and quick communication from the rider. In reining competitions, the horse and rider must execute patterns that require different kinds of very fast-paced maneuvers. The gaits of reining horses are faster than those of a pleasure horse, because this class is supposed to showcase the ability of a horse to do actual work (things a working horse on a ranch might do). The patterns involve large circles that split the arena in half to show the difference in gaits. Also included in this kind of riding are spins, where a horse will plant one hind foot and spin itself around to show how collected and supple they can be in their communications with their rider. Sliding stops are another aspect of reining techniques (Figure 3). This is where, while running, the horse will drop its hindquarters and lock their back two legs to

Figure 3: Scan this QR code to watch a video of a rider and horse taking part in a reining competition ("2022 Ford AQHYA World Reining").

slide. They have special shoes on their hooves called sliders to ensure they don't become injured.

For each of these styles, different training techniques and equipment and goals are involved, and different kinds of communications evolve between the horse and rider. Within equestrian communities, these different skills and patterns of communication are often valued differently. For example, a western pleasure show horse is usually referred to as a push-button horse because of all the commands the horse must learn that are given with very discreet cues. The idea is that the rider is pushing buttons (making small movements or giving short directions) and the horse needs to be able to make corresponding movements very smoothly for an effortless, almost automated look. On the other hand, a horse trained for reining needs to be able to move very quickly and change their body and movements in a more dramatic fashion. This is one of the reasons why a reining horse pays more attention to the rider's seat than an average horse because small movements of the rider's body must be interpreted quickly. This is also why a reining rider has to be very careful about how their weight is distributed and how they adjust their weight while riding.

Humans and Horses: Uptake and Antecedent Knowledge

Two Writing Program concepts that can help me talk about what it means to train a horse, or perhaps train with a horse, are antecedent knowledge and uptake. Being able to constantly learn, and use what you learn, is a crucial skill to have as an equestrian. The ISU Writing Program explains that **uptake** refers to what we "do or experience as we take up new ideas, terms, and/or practices," while **antecedent knowledge** refers to "the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations" ("Uptake Terms"). When it comes to humans and horses, the process of uptake requires active engagement from both humans and horses, and there are different kinds of uptake going on as they learn. There is the uptake involved in understanding generally how to work with each other (different riders and different horses), but there is also a specific kind of uptake that happens when a particular horse and human begin to work together. This uptake involves transferring antecedent knowledge that a horse or rider might have from past experiences, and making new knowledge as they get to know each other and ride together.

I saw this a lot while taking riding lessons at my old barn. A lot of the horses have little kids that ride them, which allows the horse to get away with a lot of bad behavior. This bad behavior, better described as poor listening, is due to the antecedent knowledge and uptake the horse gathers

from their usual riders. As the small children are learning to ride, they might not be as confident in their communication with the horse, or they might not have enough muscle in their legs to communicate effectively. The horse, not receiving clear signals, might develop an uptake where they disregard the rider's signals and just make their own decisions—for example, abruptly stopping during a ride because they don't want to listen anymore.

Antecedent knowledge, antecedent experience, & uptake

When we talk about antecedent knowledge and experience, we're referring to all the prior knowledge and skills we carry with us, as well as the feelings and embodied responses we have from prior experience, which also influence our learning and behaviors in new settings. Uptake focuses more on the moment of action, when new information is incorporated (successfully or not) into a situation, and it also focuses on how that new information shapes subsequent action (how what we learn in a particular situation changes how we understand what we're doing, and what we might do next).

In this article, both humans and horses are engaged in uptakes, and these uptakes are also definitely impacted by their antecedent knowledge. A key part of learning to ride successfully is remembering that your uptakes, as a rider, have to incorporate the horses' uptakes and antecedent knowledge into your actions and choices.

If these "non-listening" behaviors are part of the horse's antecedent knowledge, then when I get on them, I'll have to do a lot more work to keep them on task, gain their respect, and communicate effectively. Most people don't realize that horses are extremely discerning—they pick up almost instantly on what kind of rider you are. For example, if you aren't confident in your riding abilities and aren't going to make the horse you're riding listen to you, the horse will realize this. They might then start to do whatever they want because they know you aren't going to stop them. This behavior could include randomly stopping during a lesson, slowing down to a walk while you're trying to get them to speed up, or always trying to head toward the entrance of the arena so they can go back to their stall. How all of this relates to uptake is that I (the rider) need to anticipate what the horse is going to do next by reading their body language and physically feeling the way they are moving beneath me. I use the antecedent knowledge I have from years of riding to recognize the body language of a horse. I can feel when they begin to slow down and aren't driving through with their hip. This leads to them slowing down when I'm not asking them to and breaking gait, which will lose you points if you're showing. I can also feel the horse gathering their hind end to collect and make it easier to sit a certain gait, like a bouncy trot.

One horse that I rode at my former barn is named Rhonda (Figure 4), and she's a cool former western pleasure show horse that knows a lot of buttons. One thing that she likes to do is try to trot when she should be walking. I could always tell when she was about to do this because I could

Figure 4: Former western pleasure show horse, Rhonda.

feel her gather up her hind end and start to move faster. When this would happen, I would put pressure on my reins and sit deeper in the saddle to remind her that we're supposed to be moving slowly. Other times she would move from the outside of the arena by the rail toward the center, which isn't what you want. My former trainer would stand in the middle so she could see, so it was dangerous for her if my horse didn't stay at the perimeter of the arena. To tell Rhonda to move back toward the rail, I would apply pressure to my inside rein, bring my outside rein out to the side, and apply pressure with my inside leg to ask her to move her shoulder sideways to the rail. When I ride, I constantly assess the horse's movements to see what they are going to do next, and I use this uptake process to allow me to make corrections to their behavior. This is crucial because a horse that doesn't listen to their rider can be dangerous.

Another horse I used to ride was a gelding (a castrated male horse) named Brady who was usually ridden for English-style riding lessons, a different discipline than western riding. Since he was trained in a different discipline than Rhonda, he has very different uptakes, even when you give the same cues. For Brady, he is a lot more of a forward mover with longer legs, which means that he drives forward with his hind end, so his gaits are a lot harder to sit because they are bouncier and faster. While this is desirable in the English discipline, many Western horses simply don't have gaits like that. Most horses that I ride have smoother gaits due to their breeding as smoother gaits are an optimal trait in the western style of riding. In addition, Brady will sometimes engage in a type of poor communication that is also due to his antecedent knowledge: pulling the reins out of his rider's hands. He has learned this from the small kids taking beginner lessons who usually ride him. These kids often hold the reins really loosely. Brady has learned that if a rider isn't holding the reins firmly and he pulls his head down and forward, he can pull them out of their hands. What Brady is communicating with this move is that he'd like to stop and have a break, which he gets to do when the reins are no longer communicating messages about how the rider wants him to move. He could also pull the reins out of his rider's hands and then begin to walk toward the entrance of the arena, communicating that he wants to be done for the day. When I'm riding Brady, it is crucial that I use my antecedent knowledge of his learned habits (knowing when he's going to

try to get me to drop the reins) to make corrections to my own actions (how I hold the reins). In this way, I can adjust our communications so that we're moving together correctly.

Final Thoughts

Riding and training to ride, and riding in competitions, are all situations that include continuous, flowing, two-way conversations between horse and rider. The rider uses their body and weight distribution to correspond with the horse and give guidance. The horse responds to that guidance with their movements, and then responds to the rider with their own body language. During one ride, the difference in how the horse and rider read each other and move together can be astronomical. Although the horse and rider may both be communicating as well as they possibly can, sometimes wires can still be crossed and misinterpretations can happen, just like between two people. Both horse and rider must have minds willing to learn and be able to react and change behavior based on the other. Because of this, riding different horses can make you a better rider because you're forced to learn to communicate more efficiently and become more adaptive to the horse you're riding. I couldn't be more grateful for all the horses I have had the privilege of riding and communicating with. To Mimi, Grace, Rhonda, Brady, Toby, Pipi, and Burney: I wouldn't be the rider I am without you, and I owe you everything.

Works Cited

"2022 Ford AQHYA World Reining." *YouTube*, uploaded by AQHA Video, 4 Aug. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=18Owf1oM15U.

"Genre Research Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms/. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

Hancock, Leslie Rae, "Literate Activity Research and Narrative Analysis as Frameworks for Educational Change: an Examination of Writing Instruction in Two Alternative Education Programs" (2021). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1547. ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1547.

"How Are English and Western Horseback Riding Tack Different?" *Millbrook Tack Blog*, 7 Jan. 2023, Millbrook Tack, millbrooktack.com/blog/-how-are-english-and-western-horseback-riding-tack-different/. Accessed 19 Jan. 2024.

"How to Saddle a Horse with a Western Saddle." *My New Horse*. EQUUS, 16 Aug. 2023, mynewhorse.equusmagazine.com/2023/08/16/how-to-saddle-a-horse-with-a-western-saddle/. Accessed 21 Mar. 2024.

"Literate Activity Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/activity-terms. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

"Showing Western Pleasure: The Basics." *American Quarter Horse Association*, August 7, 2020, www.aqha.com/-/showing-western-pleasure-the-basics. Accessed 19 Jan. 2024.

"Western." *American Quarter Horse Association*. www.aqha.com/disciplines/showing/start-showing/showing-classes/western. Accessed 19 Jan. 2024.

"Western Bridles & Headstalls: How to Choose What's Right for You." *Riding Warehouse*, 2 Jan. 2023. www.ridingwarehouse.com/lc/training/tack/western-headstall-guide.html. Accessed 21 Mar. 2024.

"Uptake Terms." ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/uptake-terms/. Accessed 5 March 2024.

Ella Bickerman (she/her) is a junior nursing major at Illinois State University who wrote this article for her freshman English 101 class. She competed on the Illinois State Equestrian Club western show team and served as secretary on their executive board. She enjoys getting coffee with friends and reading when she isn't at the barn.

Drawing by Jessica Kreul

Picturing Literate Activity: The Magic of a Table

Md. Didar Hossain

How can a table participate in literate activity success? Didar Hossain shares a little bit about the role of a table in his study habits in this Picturing Literate Activity piece.

The table you see in the images is not an ordinary table. I do most of my homework and assignments here. It also contributed to the production of a GWRJ article (that I hope you get to read in a future issue). I wrote most parts of that GWRJ article on my laptop sitting at this table (Figures 1 and 2). I sometimes read lying on my bed, but if I do that, I easily fall asleep. On the other hand, if I keep a book on this table and sit on my chair to read it, that helps me concentrate on my studies a lot better. I keep it organized with some books, my laptop, and a water mug. It might not have a lot of physical space, but an organized table encourages me to work smartly and diligently. If the table is organized, it positively impacts my mental state and increases my motivation to work because I cannot concentrate on my writing research activities at a messy table. Overall, it is an embodiment of my success, and it aids me in the development of my writing researcher identity.

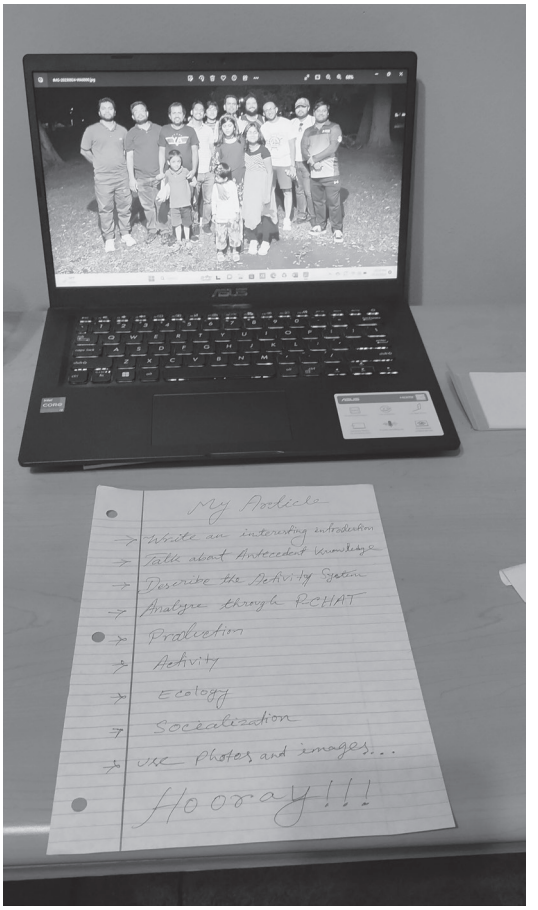


Figure 1: Here, I am preparing an outline for my GWRJ article on paper. This table lets me design my writing research activities.

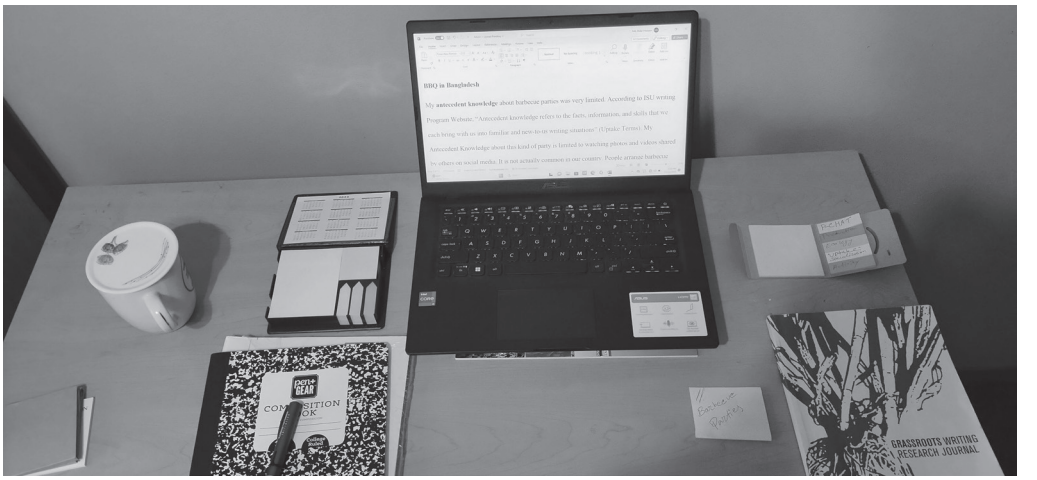


Figure 2: Here, I am typing my GWRJ article on my laptop. The table makes my typing job a lot easier and more productive.

Didar Hossain is a PhD Student in the Department of English at Illinois State University. He likes fishing, playing soccer, and reading books of his choice.

Notes

Submitting to the GWRJ

Visit our GWRJ webpage to find full details on "Submitting to the GWRJ."

www.isuwriting.com/grassroots-writing-research-journal

GWRJ editorial stance

- The *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* features writing by anyone looking to engage with literate activity in the world.
- We seek rigorous investigations of how people, tools, and situations influence writing practices in complex ways.
- We publish pieces across many genres, and we welcome submissions that experiment with genres that are new for the journal.
- We encourage submissions that reflect diverse perspectives, explore distinctive genres, and provide richer cultural-historical understandings of how people produce texts within particular genres.

GWRJ editorial team

Email the GWRJ editorial team at grassrootswriting@gmail.com when you:

- Are ready to submit a piece of writing research to the GWRJ.
- Have questions about, or want feedback on, a piece you want to submit to the GWRJ.
- Have ideas for other kinds of genres for publication that can help us expand and explore writing and literate activity research.
- Want to publish an audio or video piece on the GWRJ website as part of a journal issue.

GWRJ submission guidelines

Visit our GWRJ webpage to find full submission details:

- How to submit different kinds of files for text and images
- What elements to include in any GWRJ submission
- Image copyright details
- Consent form permissions needed for some submissions (interviews) or elements (some images)
- Author stipends for publishing in GWRJ (varies by genre)

Questions?

Email us at grassrootswriting@gmail.com.