

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

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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.

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



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

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).

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.

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

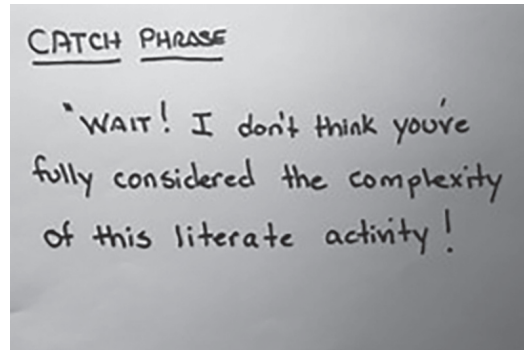


Figure 6: CHAT Person's catch phrase from Joyce's 2017 drawing.

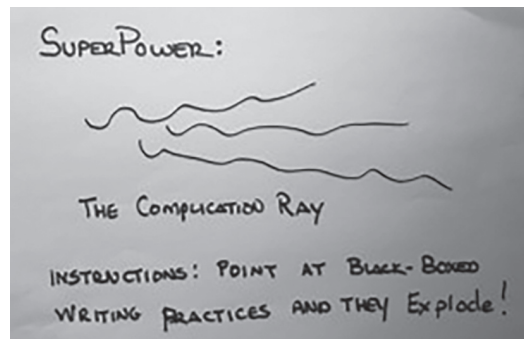


Figure 7: CHAT Person's superpower tool from Joyce's 2017 drawing.

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

“**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.).

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.

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?



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

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

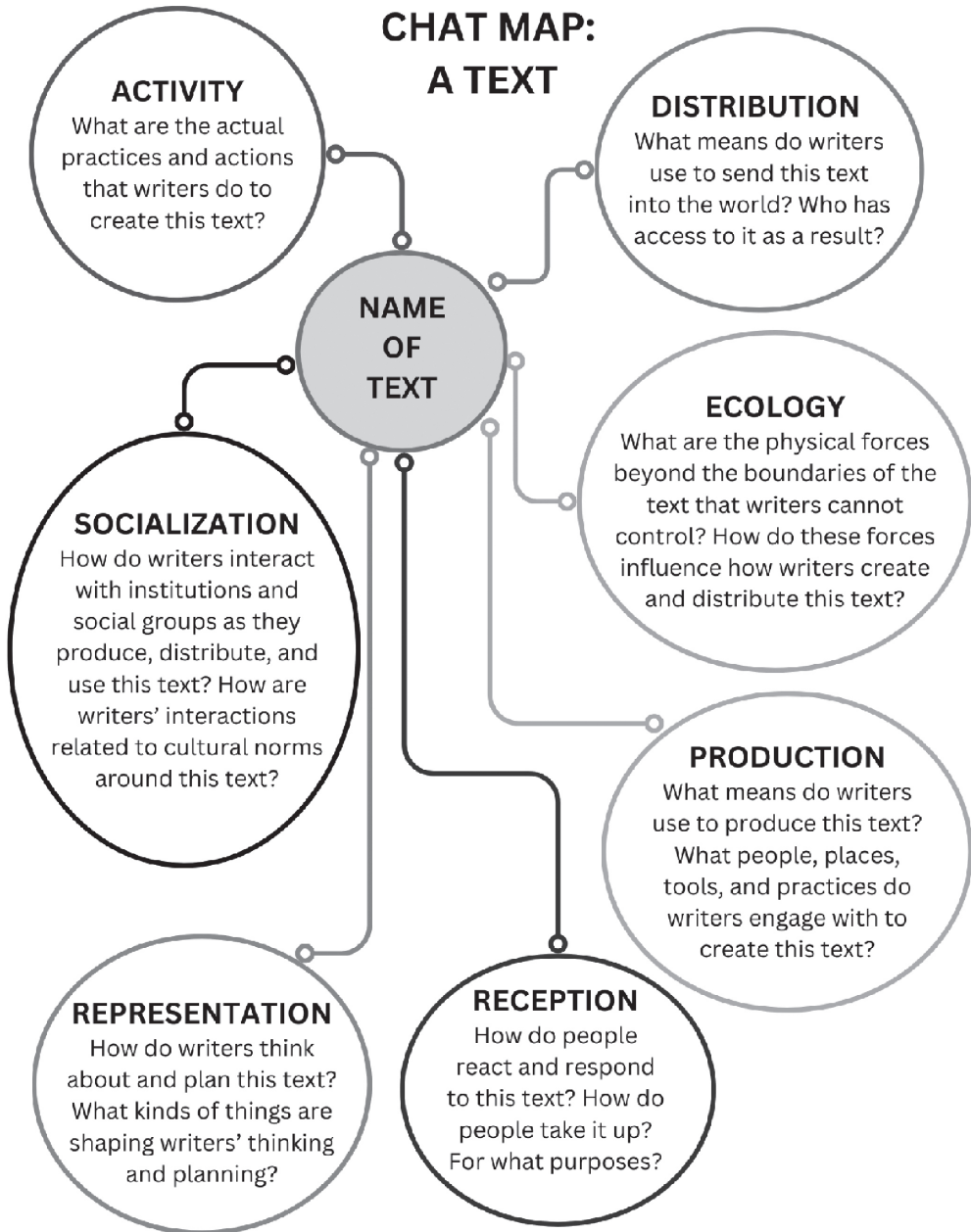


Figure 9: A CHAT Map to analyze a text in the world using CHAT-grounded terms and questions.

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.

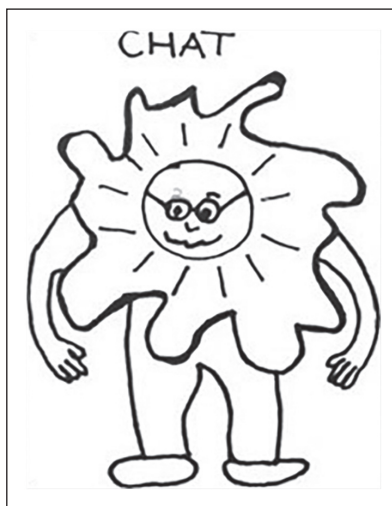


Figure 10: Joyce's drawing of CHAT as a stretchy fried egg.

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.

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Notes



Drawing by Jessica Kreul