

# Identifying the Symbiotic Potential Between Writing and ADHD

Ali Bazzi

Ali Bazzi explores the understudied and often understated relationship between writing and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Bazzi shares ways to see that, when harnessed effectively, writers with ADHD can transform the writing process from a daunting task into a holistically expressive, fulfilling, and transformative activity.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) often makes academic pursuits, namely writing, uniquely challenging for students—and many with the condition will tell you that it's hardly out of a lack of interest that these difficulties present themselves. We tend to mischaracterize writing as having a universally accepted process of development and organization, and understandably so. Like science or mathematics, the rules of language continue to be fine-tuned by their arbiters and passed down to us to master through standardized curriculum and five-paragraph argumentative essays. Accuracy can be important in professional and academic settings, and certain forms of standardization—even hyper-specific MLA citations (that's MLA 9th Edition, not 8th)—help us effectively structure and relay information in ways that are consistent. However, some of us with ADHD often find the structural aspects of writing more difficult than many would have the energy to describe, as the lack of focus and thought regulation has been shown to result in poor structure, grammar, and content accuracy in students with the disorder (Re and Cornoldi 315). Such active trains of thought can make ideas feel sporadic and difficult to manage, which is why some writers with

ADHD, such as myself, have lost valuable time trying to circumvent these symptoms to produce academic work.

Naturally, these struggles can leave people like me prone to discouragement over our ability to write both creatively and academically. Sometimes, the process can be so daunting that it prevents me from wanting to start at all, even when writing about subjects I find interesting. It's an ultimate tragedy, especially considering the diverse thought processes, unique ideas, and creative aptitude commonly expressed both by children and adults with ADHD (Boot et al. 1857). Funnily enough, I was never told it might help to tailor my writing around these symptoms rather than try so hard to pretend they don't exist; learning to do so could help students and writers with ADHD harness our cognitive ability to create truly original and inventive works. Additionally, the potential that writing holds in its mediative ability (Roozen) may even help effectively mitigate the many anxieties and real-world struggles people with ADHD often struggle with. When encouraged and appropriately guided, people with ADHD may find writing immensely fulfilling, and the process could pose a considerable two-way benefit for both the writer and their work.

## ADHD and Literate Activity

If writers with ADHD wish to use writing for their personal benefit, it helps to understand exactly what we mean by writing. In schools, we are often taught that literacy means reading and writing. For this reason, many of us tend to associate being literate solely with the ability to read and write. In some ways, that is what literacy means. But we often hear people throw around phrases like “computer literate” or “financial literacy” as indicators of one's understanding of those subjects. So, in the broadest of terms, as I understand it, literacy can be defined as the ability to understand something. We conflate literacy with reading and writing because, in school, we are often asked to learn by reading and show we've learned by writing. But processes of understanding take place in lots of ways between multiple individuals or between an individual and themselves. We each have different brains, which means we each understand things differently—ADHD or not. Regardless of what we call it, **literate activity** is our human process of understanding things in the world using written, spoken, or any form of language and symbols to interpret, understand, and communicate with ourselves and each other (Walker 118). Your understanding of literate activity may differ from mine, but neither one is inherently more valuable or productive than the

other. The most important thing is to value our literate activity to the extent that it helps us understand what we are trying to engage with.

When discussing literate activity, particularly in relation to ADHD, I want to distinguish between “regulated” and “unregulated” literacies. “Regulated literacies” resonate closely with Deborah Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship, which describes literate sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). To put it simply, regulated literacies are literate activities with stakes. They are assigned to someone—usually by an academic, professional, or social institution—and subject to judgment or an expected outcome by someone affiliated with some kind of institution. Think of school assignments, work emails, essays, or just about any activity that is regularly judged by others as part of a reward-based or accrediting system.

By contrast, I see unregulated literacies as any literate activity that isn’t created to be judged and assessed by one of these systems. That isn’t to say that people don’t engage in judgments about unregulated literacies; it’s just that judgments people might make about these activities and texts don’t happen within a specific institutional process and, usually, without any real stakes involved. Unregulated literate activities can range from journal writing to conversations, from Reddit posts to brainstorming an idea, or from starring a location on Google Maps to naming your alarm something unique because that specific word is what reminds you of the task you need to complete.

At first glance, and likely due to how education inevitably shapes our perceptions of literacies, it may be difficult to grasp how unregulated literate activities can benefit a writers’ personal, academic, or professional lives, particularly for writers with ADHD. In my experience, we often develop a compulsion against our symptomatic habits in an effort to productively engage with society. However, embracing ADHD symptoms through certain forms of unregulated literacies, including personal literacies, can use ADHD symptoms to benefit writers’ personal, professional, or academic lives.

### **Literate activity**

Using Paul Prior’s description of literate activity, Joyce R. Walker defines **literate activity** as the limitless ways we use written, spoken, or any form of language and symbols to interpret, understand, and communicate with different aspects of our community and environment. We all constantly engage in our own forms of literate activity, even when we don’t call them literate activity (Walker 118).

## Personal Writing and ADHD

ADHD results from a deficit of the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine, two chemicals that are essential to help the brain maintain focus and motivation. For the neurodivergent ADHD among us, this can manifest in poor life habits at a young age, such as low academic performance and behavioral issues. As a result, children with ADHD are more likely to be penalized for what, to them, may seem like innocent and inconsequential behavior. These patterns can lead to feelings of inadequacy, which can cause neurodivergent children to internalize the belief that they are inherently deficient and less capable than their peers. If symptoms carry into adulthood, it can become increasingly difficult to maintain a healthy professional and social life due to the added weight of trying to function in a world that expects neurotypical behavior. As a result, anywhere between

### Neurodivergence

The root word neuro refers to nerves, and in this case, the nerves inside the brain (think neuroscience). Divergent means different from. **Neurodivergent** describes those whose brain chemistry is different from what is considered typical, or neurotypical. While I am referencing people with ADHD, neurodivergent can be used to describe those with autism, dyslexia, and other diverse cognitive conditions (Wiginton).

**Personal literacies** are the unique ways we use unregulated literacies to engage with and/or understand our environment (Roozen). This can be done through journal writing, sticky notes, mental reminders, or anything the individual finds productive. While personal literacies are unregulated, not all unregulated literacies are necessarily personal. In this article, I see an unregulated literacy as personal when it's applied by the individual, for the individual.

one-third to one-half of all people with ADHD also develop an anxiety disorder at one point in their lives (Rosen). All people can sometimes feel overwhelmed by a mixture of our thoughts and self-perceptions, but for people with ADHD, this state of mind can feel constant and never-ending, often making it difficult for us to follow and address a train of thought. This is where I see the benefits of personal literacies coming into play for me—and potentially other writers with ADHD, too.

While unregulated literacies such as brainstorming are emphasized as useful writing tools, one incessant failure committed within language curriculum is the failure to address how personal literacies can benefit students (Roozen), made worse if we struggle to engage with elements of writing as a whole. Personal literacy is a tool to explore new avenues of creative expression and emotional catharsis because writers can articulate our inner monologues in many different ways. By allowing writers to visualize, track, and organize our thoughts without fear of stakes, pressure, or judgment, personal literacies that are unregulated, such as journal writing, can be accessible tools to help mediate our inner

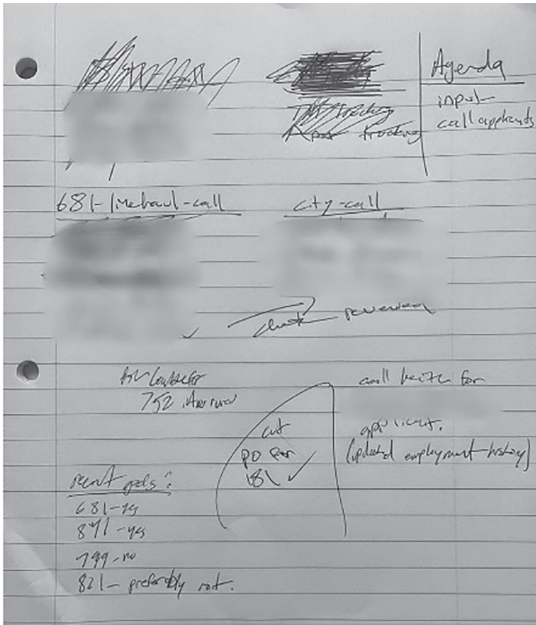
conflicts (Roozen 541) and potentially mitigate ADHD symptoms. Other kinds of personal literacies can help writers sort out our thought processes, recall memories, and recognize the regularity of ineffective writing habits. Writing in planners and on sticky notes can be especially beneficial for supporting people with ADHD to navigate real-world difficulties. While a model for structure, a planner can also be tailored around a writer's lifestyle, which helps us foresee and prepare for future responsibilities. This can be done in whatever way works for a writer.

For example, I can be quite forgetful, which makes it difficult to rely on my short-term memory for daily tasks and obligations. To work around this, I opt to use Google Calendar since it is already integrated into Gmail (Figure 1). How else would I keep track of my assignments?

Add on that my current job requires me to constantly multitask, manage hefty amounts of data, and accurately coordinate information between dozens of different people throughout the day, which can sound like an operational nightmare for somebody with ADHD. So, to help me get through the day with minimal collateral, I rely on another form of personal unregulated literacies: I keep a small notebook on my desk and use it to track daily tasks (Figure 2). Each morning, I open a fresh, new page and dedicate it to things I need to remember that same day, writing them down as they come to me. By the end of the workday, the page looks far from anything legible or coherent—but were it not for these sloppy sheets of paper, my

SUN 27	MON 28	TUE 29	WED 30	THU 31	FRI Sep 1	SAT 2
					COMP 475 - 4 Assignme	
3 LING 461 422 - CD1	4	5 COMM 366 Readings 8am General Motors vir	6 COMP 300 4 Things	7 HRM Disc. 1 Pt 1	8 COMP 475 - 3 Assignme	9
10 COMP 300 8 Things HRM Intro & Two Respon Itinerary	11 HRM Ch. 5&6 LING 461 Weinstock Ch.	12 COMM 366 Readings COMM 366 Group Studie	13	14	15 COMP 475 Essay & Revis	16
17 COMP 300 6 Things HRM Disc. Post Ling 461 Reading	18	19 COMM 366 Have Some Y COMM 366 Read Ch. 4, 5	20	21	22 COMP 475 Essay, Practic	23
24 COMP 300 2 Things HRM Case Study 1 LING 461 CD2 & Reading	25 HRM Ch. 7&8 and Group	26 COMM 366 Crit. Analysis COMM 366 Unit 2 Readin	27	28	29 COMP 475 Essay, 2 Assis Journal Entry	30

**Figure 1:** A screenshot of my Google Calendar that shows how I tracked homework assignments for the month of September.



**Figure 2:** A page from the notebook I use at work to keep track of my daily tasks.

time at work would likely be a lot less productive. Is it pretty? No. Is it neat? Not by any means. Am I the only person in my office who still keeps a notebook? Yes. Does it work for me? Without a doubt. Neurodivergent people can have a lot going on in our minds. We may be perfectly adept at performing a task and maintaining a deeply intuitive understanding of how to do so, but with so much going on at once, we can forget the small things, like remembering to actually do them. That’s why a mere three-word agenda can be enough as long as it keeps my daily responsibilities within my line of sight.

## Unregulated Literacies for Academic Writing

Comparing the writing of ADHD students to those of non-ADHD, or neurotypical, peers, educational psychologists Re and Cornoldi found ADHD student writing to be “poorer than those of the controls for structure, vocabulary, grammar, length, and accuracy,” but containing a greater “richness of themes” (315). This suggests an equal proficiency in conceiving new ideas and diverse subject matters (Re and Cornoldi 321). When it comes to academic writing, generating ideas is often not the problem for ADHD writers. Rather, the issue begins to present itself when putting those ideas down. This is one potential reason why the importance of clear expression and organization makes academic writing such a daunting process for students with ADHD. Since motivation plays a crucial role in sparking people’s creative potential—and the cognitive traits desirable for effective writing aren’t lost on the neurodivergent—it should be no surprise that when people with ADHD have difficulty expressing our creativity, it hinders our motivation to write.

Despite its lack of formality, many writers, especially younger ones, may be surprised to learn how embracing unregulated literacies may benefit their writing in academic situations. Unregulated literacies, such as journaling, can allow ADHD writers to see our thoughts in front of us, removing the

burden of having to remember our thoughts when moving to our next idea. In fact, people with ADHD often enjoy the mental aspect of brainstorming as it allows us to explore our ever-active trains of thought with zero rules or regulations. Since expression can be difficult for me, learning to structure and relay my ideas through academic writing can be incredibly rewarding; but to effectively write and find fulfillment in academic writing situations, I need to explore strategies to coherently verbalize and consolidate my thought processes using unregulated literate activity practices—which, ironically, starts with an initial disregard for coherence altogether.

## Just (Don't) Focus

We are often taught that writing should be approached with an organized structure or idea in mind, which can be a very unhealthy approach. When trying to write as someone with ADHD, I tend to have multiple chains of ideas going through my brain with little coherence, which can be difficult to regulate. The most accurate description of my thought process that I've heard is that of a television that keeps switching between channels with the remote nowhere to be found. When I began to take my own writing seriously during high school and my first few semesters in college, far too often I would find myself sitting in front of a blank screen without knowing what to write. Or, consequently, how to start.

Maybe all it took was rigorous amounts of conceptually vague prompts and inquisitive figure-it-out essays before the paradigm shift hit me, but in navigating writing with ADHD, I've found that using unregulated literate activity to embrace random ideas is a pretty good first step toward developing good ideas. As I learn more about writers, I find many writers who feel the same way. Professional writer Anne Lamott writes, "The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time ... Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper" (2). We make it a habit to internalize our academic struggles due to standardization's dominance over education curriculum. This is why many of us try to compensate for this lack of confidence through our writing—and trust me, that doesn't work. Brains do not produce standardized thoughts, let alone ADHD brains, so we ought not to be so harsh on ourselves, especially during the early writing process when we might need unregulated literate activity practices the most.

What seems most unique to me about my writing process is that my initial writing tends to precede my outline. At its most basic, my writing

### Externalization

In writing, **externalization** refers to the process of expressing or conveying internal thoughts, feelings, concepts, or understandings in a visible form. In other words, it's the act of writing down what's inside our minds and making it external or accessible to ourselves or others through writing (Bazerman and Tinberg 61).

process involves writing as much content as possible about the subject, forming an outline around which to organize that content, and then restructuring it into a cohesive piece of writing. It is important, however, that I first determine the barest of information for my academic writing situations. Long et al. prioritize identifying a topic, purpose, and audience as a framework for influencing the trajectory of the brainstorming process (23). For me, the result could be as simple as the following: “Topic: dog nutrition; purpose:

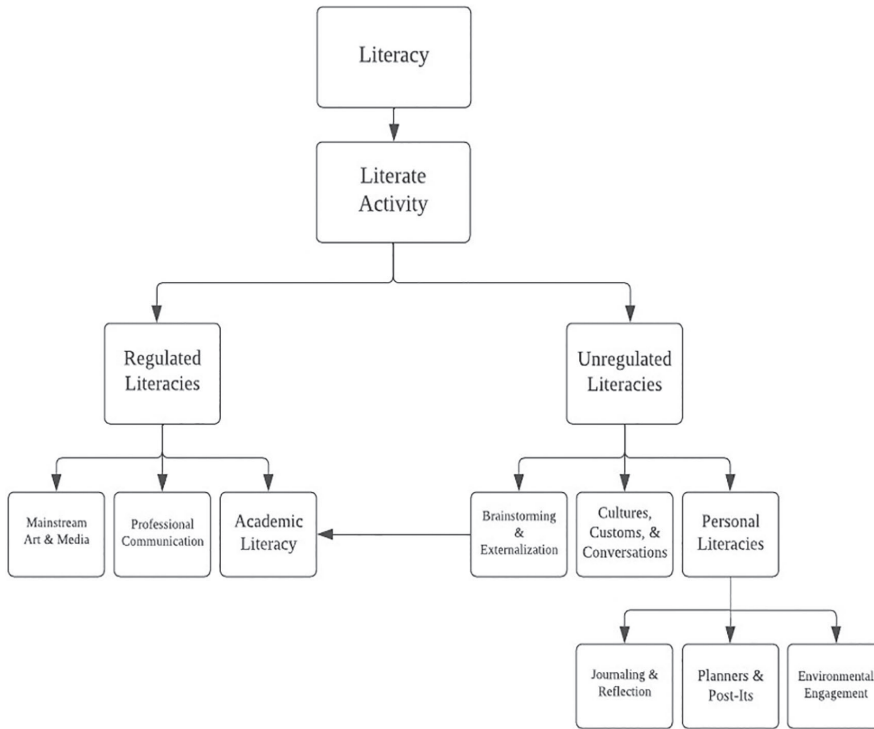
show the best way to feed your dog and keep them healthy; audience: dog owners.”

Once I have established those basics, I find it necessary not to let the burden of finality intrude on my next literate activity steps. In other words, it doesn't have to make sense right away. In a process called externalization, paper can become a space to ramble about anything that comes to mind regarding the subject matter (Bazerman and Tinberg 61). I write whatever comes. I see externalization as writers actively transcribing our inner monologues. These can be more or less focused, depending on what the writer is thinking. The process can be a test of confidence because so many of us are made to believe that the natural ways that we process language are not sufficient to be taken seriously in academic writing situations. So, let me say: that's far from the truth. Trust yourself, and you could seriously be surprised with what you create. As Anne Lamott writes:

You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, “Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?” you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love ... that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages. (1)

By allowing myself to make sense of my own ideation and thought processes through externalization, the types of unregulated literacies I shared here actually benefit my writing process (Figure 3). For me as an ADHD writer, my hands can't always write what my eyes don't see, so for





**Figure 3:** A flow chart of the different kinds of literacies and literate activities identified in this article and how I use them in relation to one another.

me physically laying out and visualizing my thoughts provides a base to determine what works and what doesn't.

This is where attention deficit can show its benefit—the neurodivergent nature of ADHD cognition can result in unique ideas that should be included. Take my dog nutrition example into further consideration, where I was writing as I thought:

What do I know about dog nutrition? My friend has a husky. I wonder what he feeds him. What dog food brands does he buy? What are the most commonly purchased dog food brands? I should research what's good for dogs. Dog food brands have a lot of ingredients. Are they good ingredients? Once I find out what's good for dogs, I can find out if those brands include those ingredients. Do they have preservatives that are bad for dogs? Actually, I've seen my friend cook chicken for his husky. Is there something to that?

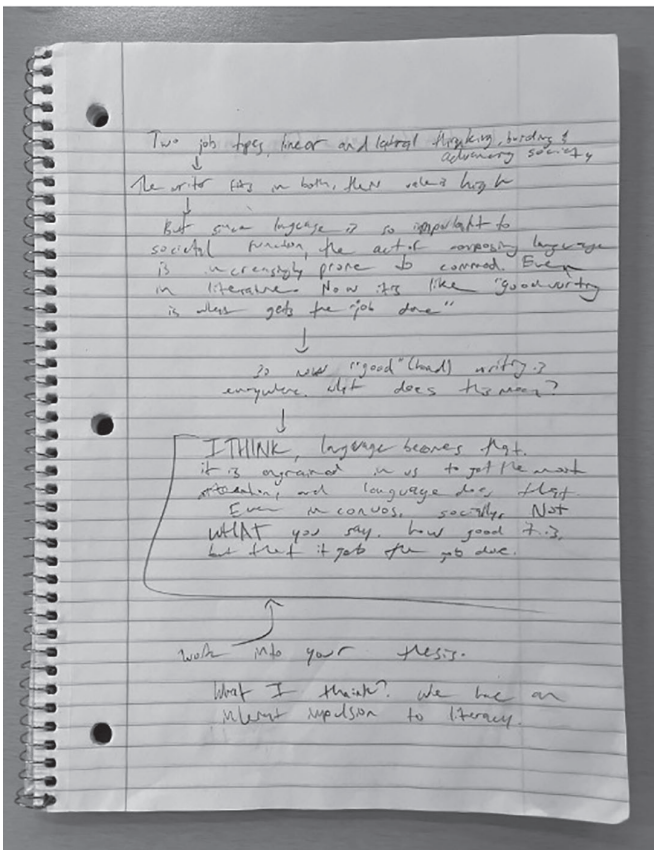
(It should go without saying, but that was substantially polished for legibility.) Identifying these ideas is an intuitive process, so I don't anticipate

the order in which they come. When free of pressure, and with the self-granted ability to write whatever comes to mind, I find that good ideas flow in much more quickly for me. I have never seriously considered anything regarding dog nutrition, so when improvising that example, I had no pre-determined statements to make. Other than a few small observations, I let my questions guide me. These sorts of questions provide a direction around which I guide my writing and research as an ADHD writer.

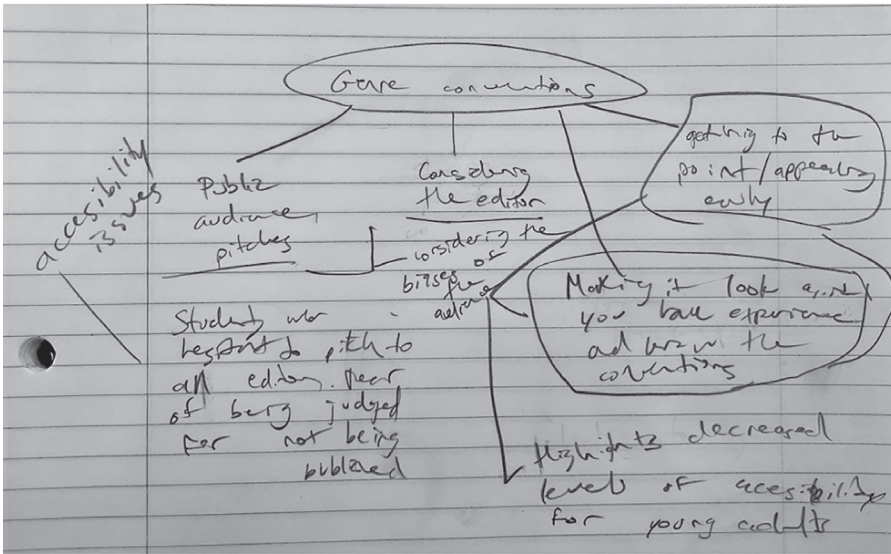
Alternatively, mind mapping on paper can also be part of ADHD writers' unregulated literate activity practice to help navigate thoughts and harness ideas. Mind mapping is a process that includes visually connecting ideas and “major nouns, verbs, and adjectives, as well as phrases to use in writing each paragraph” (Collins). That seems like a broad definition—because it is. People with ADHD tend to structure our practices in ways that make unique sense to us. Just because two mind maps are different in structure does not mean that one is any more or less productive than the other. I use mind mapping when I struggle to lay out ideas chronologically and make them

flow together. In Figure 4, by listing a small set of concepts I wanted to cover, I was able to formulate a thesis. The example in Figure 5 was for a short online discussion post. Anything that I learn through research and inquiry, I must articulate in my own words. This provides me with a more elaborate and complete information pool that I can use for my writing content.

Don't let this focus on academic writing lead you to believe that unregulated literacies are not equally useful when used outside of academic writing situations. I cannot emphasize the extent to which techniques such as

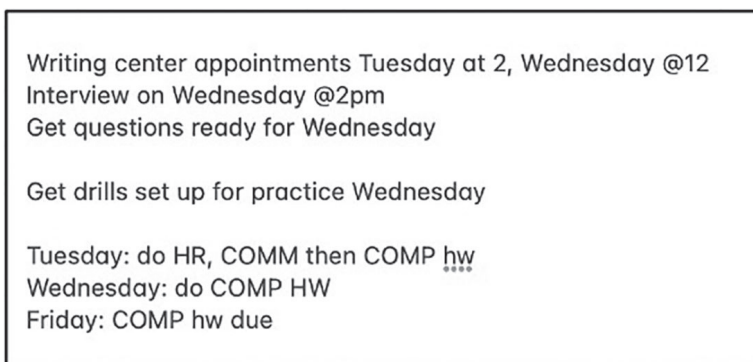


**Figure 4:** A mind map of concepts that lead me to a thesis.



**Figure 5:** A mind map I made to help me compose an online discussion post.

externalization and mind mapping have aided my personal life (Figure 6). Like many people with ADHD, I'm prone to feeling overwhelmed when I have a lot to do in a relatively short period of time. Picture a cognitive swirl of thought bubbles and green apple slices with my brain as the blender. When I feel this way, I quickly write down every responsibility I can think of—regardless of whether I put it in my calendar—in order to organize my thinking. It most often ends up in my Notes app. It's important not to let my worry over my responsibilities inhibit my ability to actually do them. In moments like these, it helps to have a single space where I can view, map out, and compartmentalize any possible sources of internal stress I may be feeling.



**Figure 6:** A screenshot from my Notes app with a list of my responsibilities for a few days.

## Filtering and Funneling

Now, how do I organize that content?

If a writer, with or without ADHD, asked me how they should organize their content, I would respond with the same question I ask myself: How would you like to have learned it? Writing, in part, involves structuring information in a way that the writer feels best communicates it. This means that, neurodivergent or not, writers should consider themselves just as much as they do another audience.

Assume you know nothing. If you have a hard time doing that, ask somebody else who knows nothing about the topic. The most productive forms of literate activity are the ones that work for you, and this is a concept that you can carry over into academic writing situations. For example, if I owned a dog and wanted to know how to properly nourish it, I would first like to know what nutrients are good for the dog and which are not. Then, I would like to identify whether the dog food I already use includes those ingredients. Depending on the outcome, I would like to be informed of proper alternatives. And there we have an outline. Using these kinds of unregulated literate activity is instrumental in planning the structure of our writing and streamlining our content (Long et al. 53). Early on, an outline does not have to be detailed or concise. For myself, a short list of topics laid out chronologically is all I need to organize my writing:

1. Introduction
2. Describe the nutrients that dogs need
3. Identify ingredients commonly found in most dog food
4. Provide alternatives
5. Conclusion

From there, I can collect my previously written idea fragments and arrange them in relation to the part of the writing they belong to. I then develop them into complete ideas and sentences, and finally, list them in an order that I feel best communicates my thinking. It can even act as a cheat code for constructing a paragraph. I call this part of my literate activity practice bullet pointing because the list of incomplete ideas resembles bullet points.

For myself as an ADHD writer, I find these unregulated literate activity practices rewarding since they help me track and develop my thoughts directly in front of me, something I find difficult to do without pen and

paper. At that point, filling out and connecting the bullet-pointed paragraphs becomes a much more tangible process. While I am doing this, it helps me to read the content out loud to form an appropriate sentence structure, ideally one aligned with my ways of writing. The content of sentences should support the aim of the section or paragraph they are in. When they don't, I write them anyway—and I move them later. Whenever I'm writing and something slightly unrelated yet insightful or useful comes to mind, I still write it. I even elaborate on it if needed, and then I continue what I was doing. I encourage writers with ADHD to read this carefully because I am addressing you directly: please do that. Whether you write a word or two, or a sentence or four, you will not believe the content you miss out on by not doing that. I often put these ideas to the side to remind me to move or include them later on. Most of my final drafts look like mass-rearranged versions of my rough drafts for this very reason.

In educational settings, it's important to be keenly aware of the organizational struggles that students with ADHD can experience, to work to destigmatize them, and to assist ADHD students in the classroom. ADHD writers can be encouraged to use tools such as dictionaries, spell-checkers, and thesauri to navigate writing hurdles. Since ADHD typically involves distraction, this is not something that we should avoid. Fragmenting and even controlled procrastination make the writing process less intimidating for ADHD writers, which gives people space to reflect on and further develop ideas (Collins). ADHD can also make it difficult to control focus when producing content, resulting in writing that is longer than needed due to an abundance of detail or restating of ideas. (My instructors can attest to this.) Here, ADHD writers can also be encouraged to explore practices toward brevity, such as shortening or combining sentences and removing repetitive statements and unnecessary content. For me, after developing a semblance of a draft, I revisit my list of the writing's purpose and establish which parts serve that intent before I edit accordingly. This helps me to make my work more concise and the content more relevant—a process that I call filtering and funneling.

## Conclusion

The relationships between ADHD and writing are under-researched and misrepresented. It's one reason I'd be foolish to pin the blame on any one educator for not introducing me to such beneficial writing concepts earlier. Considering the popular—and like many popular things, inexact—discourse surrounding ADHD cognition, too often the relationship is inadvertently seen as one of discord and not of potential symbiosis. Writing is a domain

that encompasses a wide range of literate activities, and the creative potential of ADHD should warrant it to be studied and observed as an avenue of literate activity possibility rather than an obstacle.

As a prominent official space of knowledge and discovery that we interact with during our early lives, educational curriculum so often shapes the logical frameworks around which we evaluate and understand our potential as writers. In order to open up the literate activity potential of writers, ADHD or otherwise, we should emphasize and encourage more unregulated literate activity practices in our curricula, beyond the five-paragraph persuasive essay and simple reports. Relying more on unregulated literate activity practices is one way to support all students—including those with ADHD—in holistically benefiting from writing and language classes, especially in light of easy-to-alter writing tools such as Chat-GPT.

I call for balance. By advocating for individualized writing strategies and emphasizing the merits of ADHD cognition, it's possible to cultivate a literate activity landscape where diverse thought processes are not only acknowledged but celebrated. That's not to say traditional or standardized approaches don't emphasize important concepts, such as structure and coherence; but many times, they inadvertently overlook, and often curb, the vast cognitive creativity and unique ideation patterns that can be exhibited by those with ADHD and other kinds of neurodivergence. If instead we could be taught to embrace our symptoms rather than avoid them, we might be able to embrace writing as a transformative outlet that channels our trains of thought into more coherent states of mind, transformative habits, impactful narratives, or just A+ academic papers. To reimagine the relationship between writing and ADHD as symbiotic benefactors is not only a point of obligation for educational and research institutions; it is an imperative.

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# Notes