

YOU CAN LEARN TO WRITE IN GENERAL

Elizabeth Wardle

There is no such thing as writing in general. Do you doubt this claim? Test it out. Go to your desk right now and attempt to write something in general. Do not write for any specific audience, purpose, or context. Do not use any conventions that you've learned for school, work, creative writing, and so on. Just write in general.

You can't do it, because it can't be done. There is no such thing as writing in general. Writing is always in particular.

It's not just common sense that tells us that learning to write in general is not possible. Many studies of writing have been done—in workplaces, in classes across the college landscape, and in social and civic settings. They tell us that every new situation, audience, and purpose requires writers to learn to do and understand new possibilities and constraints for their writing. Writing fan fiction in Wattpad requires understanding what other fans expect, what fan fiction writers and readers think good fan fiction is, and what the technological medium supports and allows. The same is true for any other kind of writing—we write in our journals and think of our future selves or anyone who might find the journal. We write as biologists for other specialists who understand previous findings and value the ideas of some biologists more than others. As students write across their general education courses, they find themselves repeatedly asked to write essays or research papers, but often learn the hard way that their history teacher, poetry teacher, and philosophy teacher all mean and expect very different things by “essay” or “research paper.” This is because context, audience, purpose, medium, history, and values of the community all impact what writing is and needs to be in each situation.

There is no writing in general, and thus no single class or workshop or experience can teach people to write. once and for all. But people want to believe that it's possible to write in general because this belief makes writing seem less difficult and allows them to believe that writers can get a one-time writing inoculation that will extend across all settings. If this is the case, then non-English teachers and employers are off the hook; they don't have to help students learn to write in their classrooms or workplaces, they can just criticize writers for not being able to meet their expectations—and criticize English teachers for not doing their jobs.

The idea that we can all learn to “write in general” is not just a harmless myth. It's a dangerous idea that needs to die because it hurts students and frustrates teachers and employers. And writers who believe it are easily discouraged because they don't know how to learn what they need to learn in new writing situations.

A better conception of writing is one in which we all remember (realistically) our own experiences learning to write in different situations, and then apply that memory to our expectations of what we and others are capable of achieving. A better notion of how writing works is one that recognizes that after learning scribal skills (letters, basic grammatical constructions), everything a writer does is impacted by the situation in which she is writing. And thus she is going to have to learn again in each new situation. Yes, she can apply and repurpose some of what she already knows how to do, but she will have to learn new things and not expect that what she already knows about writing is easily applicable in new situations. This means that when an employer hires a student fresh out of college and asks her to write a report for the CEO, he might expect that she knows what a report is in general, but he needs to remember that she's never seen a report at this company (she needs some examples), does not know the CEO and his idiosyncrasies (she needs some insider info), and does not yet understand what people in this setting consider important (she needs a heads-up on that). Similarly, parents should expect that their child might struggle when writing in a new class, or when moving from high school to college because learning takes time and requires being immersed in the context. Journalists and critics need to remember that texting employs certain conventions that are appropriate for their medium and purpose—and those are not destroying writing in general, because there is no writing in general. All of us, then, should give ourselves time to anticipate new writing situations, look at examples, find out what people's

values and expectations are in them, and give ourselves time to practice and learn what we need to know in order to write successfully in that new situation.

If we can remember that there is no writing in general and no magic formula that will help us write well in all situations, we are more likely to be able to use (or transfer or repurpose) what we know effectively from prior writing situations. This is because we will be aware of the new context, on the lookout for examples, and willing to accept that struggle and practice are simply a part of learning to write in a new situation. Too frequently, writers attempt to rigidly use what has worked for them in other situations, only to find out the hard way that such rigid re-use is not appropriate in the new setting. These ideas—that there is no writing in general, that writers always have more to learn, that failing or struggling are a normal part of writing—are some of the many threshold concepts of the discipline of writing studies. In other words, they are things researchers have learned, and things that will help writers be more effective, if only they can accept them in place of the common cultural assumptions about writing that are not always accurate.

There is no writing inoculation, because there is no such thing as writing in general. But this isn't bad news. Rather, it gives all writers permission to keep learning, to fail, and to engage in new kinds of writing in new situations.

Further Reading

For more about transfer of learning, see David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's entry on transfer of learning in the *International Encyclopedia of Education, Second Edition*. For more about transfer specifically for writing, see Aviva Freedman and Christine Adam's "Learning to Write Professionally: 'Situated Learning' and the Transition from University to Professional Discourse," Anne Beaufort's *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*, Patrick Dias et al.'s *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*, Elon University's "Elon Statement on Writing Transfer," and a special-issue in the journal *Composition Forum* on transfer of writing-related knowledge and skills.

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Author Bio

Elizabeth Wardle is Howe Professor of English and Director of the Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence at Miami University (Oxford, OH). She has directed the writing program at the University of Central Florida and the University of Dayton, experiences that have contributed to her ongoing interest in how learners use and transfer prior knowledge about writing, and how courses and programs can best help students learn to write more effectively. She regularly gives talks and workshops around the U.S. on how threshold concepts and knowledge about writing and knowledge transfer can be used to strengthen writing courses and programs.