My Semiotic Junk Drawer: Literate Practices, Remediation, and Maybe Even a Little Magic

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In this article, Joyce R. Walker shares her thoughts about the idea of a "toolkit" for writing. She advocates changing our metaphors in order to better describe what really happens when we write. Instead of thinking about building a tidy, narrowly focused writing toolkit, she wants to convince you to consider what skills and knowledge might be hiding in the complex space of your writing junk drawer.

I was once explaining to some friends how I pack when I travel. I said something like, "I've realized it's a good idea to bring a little of everything" (meaning various kinds of painkillers, band-aids, sewing thread, Shout™ wipes for cleaning stains, etc.). I rattled off a long list and finished with something like, "I've just realized I'm happier if I make sure to keep the things I might need with me." I felt like this was a smart way of articulating why being prepared when I travel mattered to me. But my friend responded to my enthusiasm over the supreme importance of the well-stocked travel kit with a slightly exasperated look, commenting, "They call them purses, Joyce, and they had them before you were wise."

I remember what struck me about that exchange. I thought, "but I'm not talking about an *everyday purse*, I'm talking about *traveling*!"

You see, when I'm near my home, I never carry a large purse. I hate having to lug a lot of stuff around, so it really hadn't occurred to me to think of the activity of carefully packing a savvy travel kit as connected to the pointless (in my mind) activity of lugging a giant, heavy purse around, full of useless stuff I could just keep at home. In my picture of the world, a

small purse (or no purse) meant being light on your feet and adventurous (yes, I'm so brave that I'll risk taking the bus to work without an emergency safety pin). But somehow, I just hadn't connected the cavalier understanding of "it'll all work out" that I have when I'm in my local environment to my opposite confidence in the idea that, being far from home in a hotel room without access to a drugstore, I must prepare for every eventuality.

Joyce's Epiphany: It Matters how We Imagine our Literacies

Using concepts from the ISU Writing Program, I might describe this sense of "opposite confidences" as an intuitive understanding that different literate activities require different kinds of literacies (and different tools to support those literacies). In my *travel* literacies, my access to resources was different, and so my negotiation of the tools I needed to have close at hand was also different. It's interesting, though, that I failed to consider that other people might understand the idea of travel differently and so might see carrying a large, well-stocked purse as a kind of (local) savvy travel skill as well. This also seems to fit with how difficult it can be for us, as writers, to imagine that someone else's collection of key literacy tools might be very different from our own.

In this article, I want to explore the idea that our metaphors for understanding how we organize and access our tools (for example, what goes in a "purse" versus what goes in a "travel kit") can have a really powerful impact on how we understand the environment in which we use them (traveling to distant places devoid of a CVS pharmacy vs. taking the bus to work). And although I've started this story with purses and travel kits, my goal is to move to a different set of metaphorical containers—toolkits and junk drawers. I argue that this kind of metaphor might help us to better imagine how we organize and use various resources when we write. Metaphors matter. The pictures we make in our minds to describe our worlds matter. My goal is to consider both the ways we use *semiotic resources* when we act as writers in the world and to examine the ways that our perceptions about those resources (not just how we might use them, but how we might

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Callout 1: Semiotic Resources

According to semiotics scholar Theo Van Leeuwen (2004), "Semiotic resources are the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically—for example, with our vocal apparatus, the muscles we use to make facial express and gestures—or technologically—for example, with pen and ink, or computer hardware and software—together with the ways in which these resources can be organized" (p. 3).

imagine, value, and represent them to others) can shape our actual practice in interesting ways.

The ISU Writing Program uses the concept of **writing research identity** to describe the complex blend of knowledge, emotion, memory, and intention that shapes who we are (and what we can do) as writers in the world. The Writing Program explores how the metaphors we use to understand our literate activity shape our identity as writers, arguing that our metaphors need to reflect, as much as possible—a more flexible understanding of our resources. After all, when we use metaphors that make writing seem all tidy, organized, and one-size-fits-all, we risk turning ourselves into writers who can't adapt very well to new writing environments.

The Semiotic Toolkit

Let's start with toolkits. The idea of a "writer's toolkit" is a popular one. It's easy to find web pages, books, textbooks, infographics, videos, and a whole range of other resources that present the "toolkit" as a useful metaphor for helping writers to think about the tools they need. You may have even heard this idea in some writing class you've had.

Toolkits, as defined by the online version of the *Oxford Dictionary*, are "A set of tools, especially one kept in a bag or box and used for a particular purpose." The dictionary also defines a toolkit as "a personal set of resources, abilities, or skills." The metaphor of a writing toolkit (or a writer's toolkit) fits right in with this second definition; but what happens when we start to think a bit more carefully, and critically, about a toolkit as a way to store and organize our tools?

Because several of my family members are carpenters, when I try to conjure up the image of a toolkit, the idea of a carpenter's toolbox or bag is what first occurs to me. Notice that in this image, the toolkit is very organized (see Figure 1). If you are familiar with tools of this kind, you might even be able to clearly identify all of these tools and what they're used for. However, while I love how the image of a toolkit can help us to think about the tools and resources we use for writing, I have a problem with the uniformity and neatness of this image.

Figure 1: A very organized toolkit.

Callout 2: Literate Activity

Literate activity, as Paul Prior (1998) explains it, conceives of writing as multimodal, situated, mediated, and dispersed. It understands writing to be located not only within the tasks of doing and reading and writing but also a part of our lived experience, which is saturated with textuality (p. 138). In other words, writing is more than just the texts we produce; It is embedded in all the communicative activities we engage in as humans and in the everyday resources we use to engage in those activities.

For example, this toolkit is limited by the way it's prefabricated—both in that someone else has chosen which tools I (theoretically) will need and because there isn't room for me to add new or different tools. As a visual metaphor for writing resources, this toolkit is problematic. First, in the real and messy world, writing tools don't stay the same; they transform as they move through different *literate activities*. Second, as each person uses a particular writing tool or resource in a particular environment, all of the elements of that system—the person, skill, knowledge, tool, or activity—can transform, sometimes in unexpected ways.

A Hammer Mostly Hammers, but Writing Tools Transform

Let's unpack this idea that writing tools and knowledge *transform*. As Phillip Pullman (2007) writes, "The intentions of a tool are what it does. A hammer intends to strike, a vise intends to hold fast, a lever intends to lift. They are what it is made for" (p. 681). If our writing tools were like the tidy toolkit pictured above, then our writer's toolkit would contain tools that are mostly used for very specific things, such as a hammer for hammering nails. But while a hammer can be used to strike other things besides nails, a hammer should probably not be used to hammer in a screw because that wouldn't work very well. In addition, people might use hammers for other kinds of activities beyond just hammering. As a friend of mine pointed out when he read this article, a hammer could also be used to pry things—or even as a tool for measuring when one doesn't have a tape measure. My point is that writing tools are quite a bit more flexible than a hammer, and they are made up of not just material tools—like a pen or computer—but our knowledge and practices as well.

Let's start with a basic example. Emojis are a literacy tool that transforms—not just in the way we use them but also in how we understand how they can (or should, or might) be used. And the way an emoji is used isn't just about *where* it's used (i.e., in this article versus in a text message), but also about the writer's intentions. Are they using it ironically, supportively, expressively? An emoji is also shaped by the way a particular reader might understand its meaning and how they understand the intentions of the writer in choosing it (see Callout 3). Like a hammer, the basic function of an

emoji might be understood as a linguistic tool that people use to add visual or emotional content to their messages. However, the interpretation of emojis (how they actually work in a particular setting) can vary quite a bit.

This takes us back to the idea of semiotic resources and how they might fit with the visualization of a toolkit. Van Leeuwen (2004; see Callout 1) says that semiotic resources are "actions, materials and artifacts" (p. 5). They aren't just physical tools such as a hammer, although they can be. They can also be things we do (for example, our body language when we speak), materials we might make things out of, and actual tools (pens, paper, computers) that we might use. Our interest (as writers) in these resources isn't just that they exist; we also need to think about how we use them and how these uses can transform over time with different users and in different spaces.

Callout 3: Emoji Conflict

A University of Minnesota research study, cited in a 2016 article on the online news source, *The Daily Dot*, found "a wide range of sentiment misinterpretation across platforms (because different platforms display emojis differently), as well as quite a bit of variation in the ways different readers interpret emojis, even when using the same platform" (Larson).

By the way, the concept of flexible semiotic resources fits right in with the ISU cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) terms. You may already have learned about CHAT in this issue, but if you haven't, you can check out other articles in this issue, as well as resources on the *isuwriting.com* website). The idea behind the seven key terms that ISU uses to investigate literate activity (production, ecology, representation, activity, reception, distribution, socialization) is not that they provide a really specific, orderly (or organized) way to plan or execute a particular writing task; instead, these terms are meant to be used flexibly to help us investigate what's going on in a particular text or writing situation or to help us think about what we might do when we're struggling with a new genre in a new setting.

So, to recap, semiotic resources are all the things we might *use*, *do*, or *make* when we communicate in the world (through alphabetic writing, images, sounds, body language, etc.). My argument is that visualizing these resources tucked away tidily into an orderly toolkit—with a place for everything and a specific use for each tool—might not really help us represent what goes on when we write.

From Toolkit to Junk Drawer: Messy Spaces for Messy Processes

In the real world, I'm guessing that most carpenters don't work from toolkits that look much like the first image I presented. To investigate this, I asked
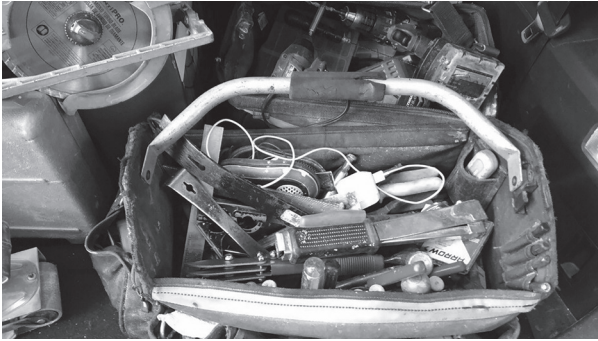
Figure 2. A tool bag.

Figure 3. A tool truck.

my brother and his partner (who are both carpenters), to send me photos of their toolboxes. My brother's partner sent me a picture of her tool bag (see Figure 2). As you can see, it's not nearly as orderly as the perfect toolkit in the first picture. But wait—there's more! My brother actually sent me a photograph of the entire back of his pickup truck, which was bursting with random artifacts from his current work site—not all of which are even recognizable as tools (see Figure 3). However, even though these toolkits are messy, they still contain (for the most part) everyday resources (actual tools and materials) that are used in the execution of carpentry and construction activities. In some cases, there might be scraps or leftovers—objects that are not necessary or might be reused for different kinds of projects, like a scrap piece of word or a leftover box of washers. These "messier" (or we could call them "more complicated") pictures do a bit better job of representing the complexity and sometimes random nature of the resources we make use of when we write (especially when we're writing in new settings or genres). Still, I think the metaphor of the **junk drawer** is actually a better visualization of our everyday literate activity.

Can you picture a junk drawer that you might have in your home, apartment, or dorm room? My own memory goes straight to a drawer in the kitchen in the house I grew up in: it was in a green, metal cabinet that we used to keep all kinds of leftover bits. Yes, it held kitchen stuff such as twist ties or a box of toothpicks, but there were also all kinds of strange artifacts in that drawer that you wouldn't necessarily connect with a kitchen: string, old PEZ™ dispensers, rubber bands, paper clips, pens, notepads, odd keys, etc. The way I understand the concept of the junk drawer is that most people have one somewhere—maybe a drawer in their kitchen, office, workshop, or even in the trunk of their car (if they spend a lot of time in their car). A junk drawer could be a drawer, but it could also be a whole cabinet of random

things, or a box, or storage cube. Whatever. The usefulness of the junk drawer isn't what, exactly, might be in it; instead, it's based on purposes—that is how users might intend to use these items (in ISU CHAT terms, that might be understood to be its **representation**). That's because when one is creating a junk drawer (not that we do it deliberately, necessarily—they sometimes seem to create themselves), different choices and uses will shape its contents. The **production** of a junk drawer includes things like:

- Where is it located?

- Did it start out being a "catch-all" space on purpose, or did it just evolve?

- What kinds of activities typically happen in the spaces surrounding the junk drawer? (Kitchen stuff happens in kitchens, but an office junk drawer would be shaped by different kinds of activities.)

- Do the people who use the junk drawer like to keep their spaces really organized, or are they comfortable with a lot of clutter?

- How big is it (that is, what kind of room is provided for the storage of junk-drawer type objects)?

All of these elements will have an impact on what goes into the junk drawer, what people pull out of it, and even how they imagine using various artifacts for different purposes. That is, if I'm looking in my kitchen junk drawer for a twist tie and can't find one, but I do find the leftover rubber band that was used to hold together the stems of a flower bouquet I bought last week, I might choose to close my chip bag with a rubber band. This would kind of be *off genre*, but would probably still work. Using items in a junk drawer includes a kind of convergence—a coming together of tasks, locations, tools, and intentions.

I understand junk drawers to be spaces that tend to "grow up" around a set of practices. They evolve in response to our needs. Unlike a tidy toolkit metaphor, they are shaped by us and by the environment they are in, and they can also shape (sometimes in interesting ways) how people can (or might) use their contents. For me, this is a lot more like the way I understand my writing resources. What I have available to me as a writer in any particular environment, is shaped by where I am and the texts I've produced or used in the past (and even by how successful I perceive those texts to have been), as well as by the literate activities I can imagine participating in in the future. My writing is shaped by the tools I know how to use as well as whether those tools are available to me. And (I think this is the coolest part) I can combine and recombine my tools, knowledge, and experiences to do different things depending on what I can imagine and who I want to be (and

sometimes what I think I might be able to get away with). Adding graphics to a five-paragraph essay? Why not? Using emojis in a business memo? Maybe yes, maybe no. Even something as simple as a contraction (changing a formal-sounding "you did not" to a more casual "you didn't" or the even more casual, "Oh no you di-ent") can change the meaning of a text in an important way, making it less formal in tone but also potentially changing the reader's experience significantly. Using the metaphor of the junk drawer to visualize the container from which I draw these choices is useful, because I don't think we're always completely aware (or even aware at all) of how we take up and use our semiotic resources or how all of this helps to shape our overall writing identities. Rather than gazing at a tidy, organized toolkit and thinking solemnly, "Let's see, what's the right tool for the job?," I think we often tend to just "use the tools at hand." Sometimes that might be a problem (remember the hammering screws example), but sometimes it's just how we get the job done.

At this point in my article, I think it might be helpful to take a look at some actual junk drawers. We don't all use the same kinds of tools in the same ways, of course, because we all have different experiences as writers, so I asked some of my Facebook friends to share photos of their junk drawers. And they did. In fact, they found it really entertaining and immediately started posting about how interesting it was that everyone's junk drawers were so different and making jokes about the organization (mostly disorganization) of these spaces.

Exploring Junk Drawer Diversity

I'll admit I found the images pretty fascinating (I also realize this makes me kind of weird). I kept noticing things like the combination of different artifacts. Some had mostly kitchen items or office-type items, but some included a huge range of random stuff.

One person, who didn't contribute a photo, said, "I am too OCD to have any junk drawers in my place :-/," while someone else (who also didn't post an actual photo—perhaps fortunately) quipped, "I call that my house."

As I looked through all the photos (I collected thirty of them in a single afternoon), I realized that I really did think that—as a metaphor for a writer's practice—the junk drawer came closer to describing what goes on in a person's mind when they write. I also think that it reflects the messy ways that we sometimes make use of our semiotic resources and how these resources can work to shape our writing identities. In many writing situations,
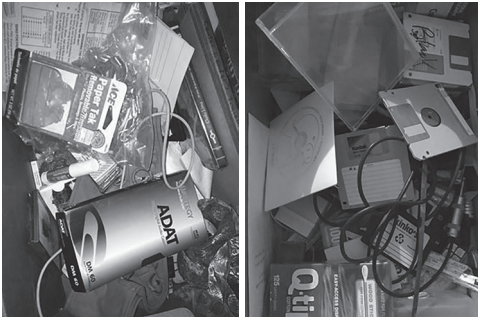
The Diversity of Junk Drawers: A Visual

A Kitchen Junk Drawer

Figure 4: The person who posted this one wrote, "I could just take a picture of my desk! But I won't."

A Musician's Junk Drawer

Figures 6 and 7 (left to right): These next photos are contributed by a musician, and I thought it was interesting that he posted multiple pictures of different drawers in his house and studio and they all ended up having some music-related artifacts in them. This is a perfect example of how our everyday lives and identities shape the resources we might have available for our literate practices.

Random Tools

Figure 5: Another person wrote this description of her contribution: "The drawer with stuff I use every day and a bunch of broken/unidentifiable objects that still spark joy." She later posted that in looking at the picture she'd posted she noticed a lost item she'd been searching for but hadn't realized she'd put in the drawer.

Many Scissors

Figure 8: For some reason, I was really entertained by the fact that this junk drawer contained many, many pairs of scissors.

we don't really take the time to do a ton of research into a genre or explore possible techniques for presenting information or persuading people. We just use the tools at hand. In the case of the junk drawer that contained multiple scissors, for example, I'd be in good shape if I needed to cut off a tag from a new dress, or make a paper snowflake (not sure why I'd do this, but I could). However, I can also think of situations where I might open this drawer and

find a pair of scissors to be a less-than-optimum tool—*but I'd probably still use it*. For example:

- If I'm a lefty (which I am), I might not like using right-handed scissors for some jobs, but if I just need to cut off a clothing tag, I'm unlikely to insist on the left-handed scissors.

- If I were trying to open my new big-screen TV (which came in a large, heavy-duty cardboard box), I might find it difficult to get through all of the different types of bindings and packaging materials using only a scissors. But would I stop to get a more appropriate tool, like maybe a box cutter? Knowing me, probably not.

- And what if all of these scissors have been used for cutting paper a lot? They might no longer be sharp enough to cut some other things, like fabric, which requires a sharp scissors. In this case, if I chose to use the tools at hand, I'd be unsuccessful. In fact, the tool might ruin my project by cutting poorly or not at all.

- And as reviewers of this article noted, there are lots of other activities one might use a pair of scissors for that don't include cutting. My favorite example was "scraping a bit of paint off of the countertop."

The Writing Junk Drawer in Action

If I were to illustrate this idea of "the writing junk drawer"—a hodgepodge of collected knowledge, tools, and practices, used in the moment by writers who are busy or perhaps somewhat limited in the range of resources in their junk drawer—I might use the example of needing to create an infographic. If I needed to create an infographic, here are some things that I might think about as I began to rummage in my writing junk drawer:

- I can't draw, so I'll have to figure that out because I know infographics contain visuals.

- There are software programs for making infographics (although you have to pay for some of them).

- I can find web sites that teach me about tips for creating infographics.

- I know infographics need to be concise, so I have to make sure my information is concise and very specific.

- I know numbers and comparisons are often used to make "visual proofs" in infographics.

- My infographic will be printed, but I can't afford to print them in color, so I'll need to keep it in black and white.

- I know I'm not good at proofreading, so I'll need to find someone to help me with that.

- The intended audience for my infographic will, as I compose, exert a big influence on my writing (for good or ill) as I try to imagine how they'll respond to what I've done.

As I thought about the task, I'd also be (metaphorically) pawing through the materials in my junk drawer. This process wouldn't be like opening up a tidy toolkit and carefully choosing specific tools or pieces of information. Instead, I would probably find all kinds of random bits of knowledge, including things like how to search online for information I might need but also a lot of stuff about writing good paragraphs, thesis statements, and sentences. Not everything in the drawer would be useful for my task, but I don't necessarily need to pull everything out of the drawer and organize all of it. I just need to pull out the things I think might be useful, and sometimes I need to realize that what I need just isn't in there. This would mean I'd have to go out and acquire a new skill/tool/resource (like purchasing an infographic-making app). For a more complicated task, I might need to start by pulling out all the things I think I need and organizing them, but for some kinds of tasks I might just grab the first thing I see that *might* work and use that. The junk drawer is not a space that promises that everything will be OK if I just follow the rules and use *this* tool; it's a space where I have to sort, and rummage, and sometimes not find what I need.

The Potentially Practical Takeaway: Junk Drawers as a Visualization of Literate Practice

I envision (as I write this) that a reader might ask (supposing that any of my readers are still with me at this point in my article),

<div align="center">WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT THIS?</div>

They might think, "OK, so, junk drawers. Got it. But how does this help me get writing done?" For those of you who are still valiantly reading along, I will now attempt to *Buzzfeed*-ify the junk drawer metaphor into a handy listicle of tips for writing in the world.

Five Junk Drawer Takeaways You Really Should Remember

1. **It's Where You're at**: The stuff that's in your writing junk drawer will depend on location and experience. Just like a junk drawer located in an office versus one in a kitchen, a writing junk drawer that a person creates mostly in a school setting will have different stuff in it than one you developed through posting on social media.

   > **Takeaway**: There are probably useful items hidden in your writing junk drawer from lots of different kinds of writing and reading experiences. Dig a little.

2. **Sometimes It's Just a Hammer**: In some situations, you can quickly find the tool you need—usually because the task is simple and/or really familiar to you. It's sort of like needing to hammer a nail and opening the drawer and finding a hammer. Bang. Bang. Done. It's great when it works like that.

   > **Takeaway**: It's OK to just use the tool at hand, if you feel sure that it will serve your purposes. It doesn't always have to be about CHAT research and complicated analysis.

3. **Improv Sometimes Tanks Big Time**: In some situations, you really need to go more carefully through the drawer and figure out if you can find the tools you need (or decide maybe you need to go out and buy a hammer). But because time is short, or the stakes are low, you just wing it. Like hammering in a nail using the flat end of a pipe wrench or something. But if you choose to wing it, and it doesn't work out, sometimes you just have to say, "OK. That didn't work—what tools do I really need to do this right?"

   > **Takeaway**: When you improvise with the writing resources you happen to have on hand, sometimes it doesn't work very well. Be ready to revise your plan and learn new skills when needed.

4. **Marie Kondo It**: Sometimes you might find things in your writing junk drawer that really don't have any purpose. Old bits of useless knowledge like, "never, never use I in an academic paper." I equate this to finding those little bits of hardware from the time you put that IKEA shelf together and had leftovers, and you thought, "I might still use this." Nope.

   > **Takeaway**: Sometimes it's a good idea to clean out your writing junk drawer and throw away pieces of knowledge (or maybe old fears or anxieties about writing) that are just going to get in your way.

5. **Writing Junk Drawers Can Be Mamazing**: Sometimes just looking through your writing junk drawer can surprise you. You might find odd bits and pieces of old knowledge and old texts that can spark something new and interesting. You might think of ways to recombine old skills with new ones or use your knowledge in a new way.

> **Takeaway**: Writing junk drawers can sometimes be a combination of magical and amazing. *Mamazing*!

A Final Note

When thinking about the junk drawer metaphor for my own writing practice and experience, I think my main takeaway is that "the right tool for the job" concept might be a great choice when trying to hammer a nail or create a resume. In these situations, I might be able to quickly find what I need and use it. And yes, sometimes I definitely need to pull out all the tools that might be useful, and then organize my tools for the task—it's not always a good idea to have your resources all jumbled and disorganized. I get that. (That's kind of what ISU's CHAT terms are good for—they can help you think about all the possible semiotic resources that might be important.) I mean, when you are trying to accomplish a complicated task, like, say, building a house, you can't start by going, "Let's just look in the junk drawer and see what we can find. Oh look, a stapler! That will be useful!"

But when I think about my personal writing identity—the complexity of the things I know, the tools I've used and the weird, backwards ways that I've learned to do certain things—these are practices that could never be represented by the tidy toolkit with everything in its place. Writing is so changeable, so context dependent, so downright mysterious sometimes that it can be impossible to imagine what semiotic resources I might need or might need to invent or repurpose. It can also be difficult to imagine how tools might transform as I use them in different settings. So the act of looking in the junk drawer does include a sense of magic in that when we open it, we can imagine not only tools that it might contain but also the pathways of action those tools might become part of—versions of texts we haven't even thought about writing yet. The writing junk drawer is a treasure trove of possibility, potentiality loose in time.

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