

## Snowpiercer: Preparing for Winter as an Activity System

Edmund Ankomah

Preparing for battle, getting battle gear, and learning all there is to know about the unrelenting adversary in the hope that your conquest and victory ensures your survival. This is what preparing for winter means for those new to snow and the icy cold. In this article, Edmund Ankomah explores finding winter gear as an activity system, and how it compares to acquainting oneself in new writing situations.

“It was a time for warm embraces, for smiles, for toasts and reconciliations, for renewing old friendships and making new ones, for laughter and kisses. It was a good time, a golden autumn, a time of peace and plenty.

But winter was coming.”

— George R.R. Martin, *Fire & Blood*

There is an Akan proverb that says *Obi nnim a, Obi kyere*; to wit, “if someone does not know, someone teaches.” The principles underlying this proverb are that there is no shame in not knowing, that no single individual is a repository of knowledge, and that knowledge sharing is an important communal activity. Often, the reluctance to seek knowledge or information when one requires this form of assistance owes largely to an unwillingness to acknowledge our limitations as individuals and a misguided desire to not appear vulnerable. This might seem like every day, conventional wisdom, but sadly, it’s wisdom that we, as individuals, struggle to accept. As writers, whether we are cognizant of this or not, every act of writing, the process of transmuting ideas to words on a page, requires some form of collaboration. No act of writing is an isolated or disinterested activity. We draw on influences

from varying mental and social spaces when we write; engage with other writers; enact and initiate conversations within a community of readers and writers we may not know about; and employ different tools. Being aware of and acknowledging how important this community of knowledge resource is to our writing practices can be very rewarding. As writers, we often find ourselves in unfamiliar “literate” situations. It is important to remember, as you join me on this quest towards finding winter gear, that literacy does not only exist in the classroom space; that all around us, in the social space within which we live, are different enactments of literacies, each requiring different sets of tools and rules. I hope that by sharing my story of “seeking information” from different people (community) and employing varying research tools in my activity to prepare “adequately” for winter, you’d gain some insight on how to employ relevant research tools in your writing activity.

### Why Do I Call This An “Activity”?

Like most Africans who come to the United States for school, vacation or whatever purpose, I had not experienced snow or winter prior to moving. In fact, this was the first time I was moving from the mostly sweltering heat of a tropical region to a region whose weather dynamics were nothing like I had been used to. I come from Ghana, a West African country whose climate is tropical, with basically two fixed variations: rainy season and a (harsh) dry season (a bit like what you’d describe as summer in the Northern Hemisphere). The rainy season typically lasts from May to September in the north of the country, from April to October in the center, and from April to November in the south. Along the east coast, the rainy season is shorter and goes from April to June, with a break in July and August and a slight recovery in September and October.<sup>1</sup> In Accra, the central administrative capital where I am from, the first showers arrive in March, peak in June, and increase again in September and October. On the coast, as well as in the rest of the country, the “summer” months are the least hot of the year, though the humidity is higher than in inland areas because of the proximity to the sea.

So, I guess, what I’ve tried to do is to describe my experience of weather; I’d perhaps like to call this my antecedent knowledge of weather patterns before hopping on an airplane to the United States. **Antecedent knowledge** refers to the knowledge that a person brings with them from their past to new situations and venues. So, perhaps my antecedent knowledge of climate as it functions in the United States, it’s fair to say at this point, was generally a

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1. <https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/ghana>

medley of misconceptions, misguided generalizations, and myths. Because I had had no actual experience of winter, the only information I was working with was images from popular culture and the media. Indeed, one of my misconceptions was that it snowed everywhere in the United States—like a lot! Also, I assumed that if you were born in the United States and had lived here all your life, you probably had a stockpile of winter gear. During the course of this project, I unlearned a lot of these misconceptions. Actually, maybe it's fair to mention that, even though I hadn't had prior experience of winter or snow, when I informed a couple of my professors back in Ghana that I was going to Illinois State University (ISU) to pursue my PhD, the response was either shock or sympathy—"shock" that I had taken the ill-informed decision to move to a place with vindictive winter and "sympathy" that I was beyond redemption. I had no choice but to endure the harsh cold for five years of doctoral study.

So, these are but a few reasons I see preparing for winter as a deliberate, involved activity; I don't know if it compares to other activities like learning how to swim for the first time or the adrenaline rush and asphyxiating fear that occasions being behind a steering wheel for the first time. "Preparing for winter" bears an uncanny resemblance to a quest into the unknown, a journey filled with mystery, uncertainty, excitement, and fear—lots of it. I compare this sense of mystery and anxiety to the experience of staring at a blank page or screen. The sense of uncertainty and sometimes inadequacy we feel as writers right before we type the first couple words that would herald a march of 1,500 or 3,000 more words. If you love adventures—especially reading exciting tales of death-defying quests into unknown lands to slay monsters in order to win a much-coveted prize—you might understand how and why I see the process of preparing for winter as an exciting activity.

### **Knowing What You're Up Against: A Crucial Part of the Activity**

So like I mentioned earlier, because I had had no prior experience of winter or snow and everything I had heard about Illinois weather were frightening tales about how terribly cold it got in Illinois at times, I knew I had to do some real investigation about everything I needed to do in order to *survive* the winter. Who did I need to speak with? What meteorological/climatic data did I need to consult in order to get a true picture of the wintery evil I was about to face? What tools did I need to slay the frosty horror I was about to face? I also needed to know the local lore about winter in Illinois; what were the documented and unspoken rules in dealing with winter? I remembered we were in the month of September, and in a few months, this arctic fiend

would rise from its slumber, and wreak icy terror on us all! Thinking about all of these decisions I had to make and the people I had to speak with, I forged in my mind the image of an **activity system**: a network of actors (components) that aid in the realization of a particular goal (objective). It is a collective formation with a complex structure that serves as the primary unit of analysis in **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**.<sup>2</sup>

CHAT can be useful for making sense of the world, and, in ISU's Writing Program, we use a version of CHAT to make sense of the literate activity. Oh! **Literate activity**—that is another writing program concept which refers to all the things people do when they produce and use different kinds of writing in the world. It is important to remember that any/every literate activity is a system of encodings that informs and creates discourse. Thus, literate activities exist in different rhetorical situations. So, in trying to compare the process of preparing for winter to the activity of producing written work, I intend to show how different writing scenarios require different preparatory rituals and tools in order to enact writing in those particular situations. "Preparing for winter," for me, was kind of like preparing to produce a new kind of writing or genre I had not previously engaged with. I needed to do some research; I needed to acquaint myself with the rules of the activity; I needed to clearly define what my outcome/goal/objective was; I needed to engage with a community of practice that was familiar with the activity in order to be successful. That's essentially what we do when we engage with new or different genres of writing; we engage with a network of resources that help us create the genre.

Every activity relies on a network of actors to make it possible. The actors are the people, ideas, social concepts, and tools that make the activity possible. Activity systems list a network of six interdependent actors: Subject, Object, Tools, Community, Division of Labor and Rules. The subject of an activity system is the person performing the action; in this case, that will be me. In other specific writing situations, the subject will be the writing researcher: the individual who goes about gathering and analyzing data for a particular writing project. The object (or objective) is the purpose, outcome, or goal for which the activity is being carried out. In this case, the objective will be finding winter gear (being adequately prepared for winter). The tools refer to any apparatus or gear that people within this activity system use to get things done. For our purposes, because our objective is to survive winter, the tools we would need to actually achieve this would be our winter gear (jackets, boots, scarves, gloves, etc.). In this case, our objective and tools intersect. The community refers to the social group/environment where

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2. <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/cultural-historical-activity-theory/480>

the activity takes place. Again, for the purposes of our activity and intended objective, our community consists of the actual geographical space (Normal, Illinois) as well as the people who inhabit this space, including indigenous folk, other Bloomington-Normal residents, and the university community. Identifying and acknowledging the community for which an activity is intended or within which that activity is carried out, is an important part of why we are framing this as a rhetorical activity. A rhetorical activity is one that is situated and contextually cognizant; it recognizes that actions do not happen in a vacuum and are always mediated by prevailing social-cultural factors.

This was going to be my first winter ever, and I had no prior experience of winter. I don't believe I can emphasize how real my trepidation and anxiety were! I needed to familiarize myself with the social-cultural rules and implications of being in an entirely new geographical space. The rules are the social, cultural, or other norms and practices that influence the activity. They are the invisible actors that can still have a major impact on the activity, and they can be explicit or implied. Rules also provide necessary context and help us appreciate what may or may not work in a particular rhetorical situation. You cannot cheer or applaud while the orchestra is still performing or whisper in the ears of participants during a poker game. In order to "survive" in these different rhetorical situations, we'd need to know and adhere to the rules that mediate action in these social spaces. I say "survive" because there is always some form of (undesirable) consequence that arises from not observing the rules.

### Knowing What You're Up Against: Engaging with the Community

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle" (Sun Tzu, *Art of War*). Even though it was September, I could sense, with each rising of the sun, at the beginning of each day, a noticeable waning of its glory; gradually, the frosty fiend was pulling the sun into its cold embrace, and soon, one day, we'd awake to grey, gloomy skies, the sun usurped, its warmth no more, and in its place the merciless, icy hands of winter. So, I knew "winter was coming"; like a brother of the Night's watch—the shield that guards the realms of men—I had to prepare for the Long Night.<sup>3</sup>

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3. This is a reference to HBO's *Game of Thrones*.

My first decision in my bid to understand the wintery evil I was up against was to do some research on the climate in Illinois over the past decade. I found so much information, perhaps more than I bargained for. I even put in a request for climatological data for Illinois from the National Center for Environmental Information (NCEI), and they sent a 195-page climatological summary of daily temperature and precipitation patterns.

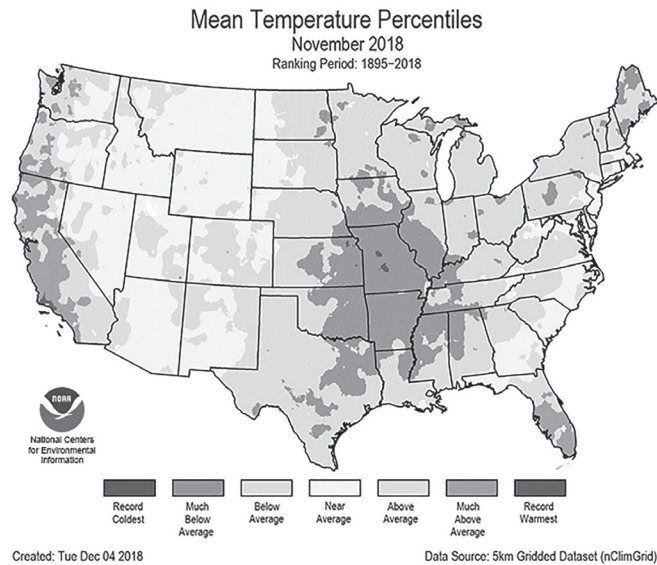


Figure 1: Mean Temperature Percentiles (1895–2018)  
 Source: WeatherNation, <https://www.weathernationtv.com/news/november-recap-fires-colder-and-wetter/>.

### U.S. Selected Significant Climate Anomalies and Events for November and Autumn 2018

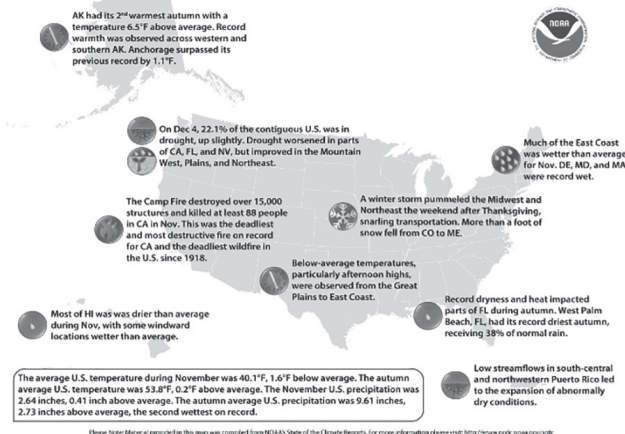


Figure 2: Climate Anomalies and Events (Autumn 2018)  
 Source: WeatherNation, <https://www.weathernationtv.com/news/november-recap-fires-colder-and-wetter/>.

The data I got from “WeatherNation” confirmed my fears: in the period spanning 1895 to 2018, the Illinois region had recorded “above average” precipitation and “record coldest to much above average” mean temperature percentiles. The icy villain had indeed terrorized the local folk for as long as memory could serve.

Another decision I made in my attempt at understanding the true nature of the icy villain, whose presence inched closer by the day, was to speak with some local folks. Ring a bell? Community, one of our activity system concepts! I had a chat with Kelly Pierce, one of my classmates, who is a local and has spent thirty-one winters in Illinois. Thirty-one! Clearly Kelly had some interesting insights to share on the whole process of preparing for and surviving the Illinois winter. Here is a brief transcript of the conversation I had with Kelly:

*How frequently do you go shopping for winter gear?*

Not very often, actually. I have a couple decent pieces of winter gear I keep in my closet. I don’t have my winter stuff with me right now. They’re in the basement at my father’s place. I definitely intend to go grab them before winter. I guess I go winter coat-shopping every five years, maybe, because sometimes the lining in the coat gets ripped and it becomes necessary to replace it.

*Do you typically do walk-ins or online shopping?*

I prefer shopping in person, generally. I tend to do my shopping on Black Friday sales. Sometimes I shop in April in anticipation of the next year’s winter. Otherwise, some of the shops I have been to are Kohl’s, JCPenney, and Burlington. Fifty to a hundred dollars might get you something decent. I tend to buy coats that are a size up so it will still fit when I’m wearing bulkier clothing. I don’t shop online because I like to try my clothes on before I buy them. I want to touch and feel the fabric as well.

*Could you describe to me what your attire looks like on a typical chilly winter day?*

Errmmm . . . so, I think the winters we’ve had in the last couple of years have not been as intense as in previous years. I think last year we had temperatures as low as thirty degree Fahrenheit or negative four degrees Celsius. For something like that, I would probably wear a t-shirt, another piece of clothing underneath that, a hoodie, and a coat. Also, a scarf, gloves, a stocking cap, and boots (mid-calf to knee-level). It always helps to remember that jeans get soaked easily in the snow—and trust me, you don’t want that! So, it always helps to invest in some really good boots.



Figure 3: Kelly Pierce in her winter armor.

So, my intent in carrying out these interviews, like I mentioned earlier, was to try to understand the wintery demon I was about to face. I approached this activity as a kind of **genre research**, which is research that is conducted to create a specific kind of text for a specific kind of situation. Genre research is a crucial aspect of learning outcomes three and four of ISU's Writing Program. According to the ISU Writing Program website:

Our program uses the study of genres as a key part of our learning. This means we don't agree with the idea that "writing" is something you can teach (or learn) by writing just one kind of text (like school essays, for example). Instead, we focus on looking at all the different kinds of texts that are produced, and at how a specific writer's skills need to change and adapt to meet these diverse writing needs.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the ultimate objective of my research wasn't to produce a particular kind of text, my investigative approach to understanding a particular context is an important activity that writing researchers do. As writers, once we learn to understand and evaluate how particular texts work in particular rhetorical situations, we gain knowledge that helps us disrupt or modify genre conventions to meet our peculiar writing demands. For me, this activity of research—of understanding the "fiend" one was up against—was an invaluable tactic if I was ever going to survive five years of wintery purgatory in Illinois.

I had interviewed one "local" (a white American who was born in the United States). I thought it'd also be interesting to get the perspective of another African student at ISU who was once in my situation to see what strategies she adopted to survive the cold. Miss Fatima Mohammed is an MBA student at ISU. She is Ghanaian (like me!). At the time of the interview, this was her third year at ISU; she had earlier completed a masters program in Agricultural Economics at ISU.

*Had you been to the United States prior to being admitted to ISU? Had you experienced winter prior to being admitted to ISU?*

Yes, before the master's program at ISU, I had been to the US on three other occasions, and I'd had some experience of winter.

*Could you share with me what your preparatory ritual is for winter? What are some of the things you do, decisions you make, etc.?*

I get my flu shot first. I normally check if my shoes fit and whether I need a new pair. I check for what I don't have, or any winter gear I want to try, then I buy it. For instance, this winter, I want to try mittens since my hands always get cold—even with the gloves. Then, I unbox and hang my winter clothing (I pack and box all my winter gear after winter for space).

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4. <http://isuwriting.com/learning-outcomes/>



*Could you describe to me what your attire looks like on a typical chilly winter day?*

So, my key to staying warm is layering and covering all parts up. I put on tights before my jeans or dress pants (I wear the former the most in the winter). On the top, I wear a thermal or tight sweater top, then a bigger shirt or sweatshirt. Apparently, the tight layer keeps the warmth and the loose layers help trap warm air from leaving your body while keeping away cold air. This was a tip I got when I was trying to figure out what works best. On top of it all, I put on my winter coat and winter boots. I wear thicker socks, too. The kind of coat and boots I will wear depends on how cold it is, and whether the ground is dry or not. My hair is covered with my veil, and I wear a scarf and gloves when I have to.

*Do you typically do walk-ins or online shopping?*

I got a large part of my winter stuff as gifts. I get the rest from Ross, Goodwill, and online. I consider pricing, primarily, but it has to be fashionable (she laughs) and has to serve the purpose. I find myself going a bit over the budget to meet these specifications.



Figure 4: Fatima, all wrapped up, braving the wintery menace.

## The Literacy of Finding Winter Gear

I began this article by hinting at the complexity of research—the involved activity that informs and sustains acts of “knowing.” That research of the nature and purpose I intended to embark upon, has a sort of relatedness with literate activity conceived as the set of activities we undertake to produce writing of any kind in the world. I would like to foreground this idea of literacies we find around us, everywhere in the world, in social spaces that we may not be aware of. This is an essential component of the Writing Program here at ISU—an underlying ethos that sets it apart from writing programs that exist elsewhere. The program asks that we be aware of the different kinds of writing that exist in the world; the communication and composition processes we find on web pages, online spaces, within social media spaces, in coffee shops, and even on clothing that we purchase require a special set of skills to produce the sort of composition that we engage with in those places, in those multimodal ecologies. ISU’s Writing Program believes it’s important to explore types of writing well beyond the traditional modalities of writing classes (which often involve mostly writing or typing text). It is important to realize that the world has moved beyond print-based texts; there exist a range of possible modes of production (both digital and material modes), and as writers who recognize that writing is always a situated activity, we need to be

able to learn to use the tools necessary for these kinds of productions. Visual literacy is just as important as textual literacy.

In my quest to find warm armor (clothing) to arm myself against the menacing hounds about to be unleashed from Arctic Hell, I engaged with some multimodal online shopping sites in a bid to find the perfect battle gear. The literate activity I found on these online spaces varied, but there were obvious similarities I found in the conventions that informed the information these merchants wanted to emphasize about their clothing.

I noticed five features that cut across the online sites I visited: photos of the product, size charts, fabric properties, a customer review section, and, of course, pricing. All of these were extremely helpful in choosing a fitting armor. For instance, the star-rated customer review section offered insight into the product's insulation effectiveness. As writer-researchers, it is important always to engage with multiple sources in order to better understand a topic or genre we're working with. Even though there were photos of the product and product specifications, there was also the star-rated customer review section to help potential purchasers make their decision. Engaging with the multimodal interactive content on these sites was very informative. It was almost like Jon Snow's quest to find dragon-glass—the perfect weapon to slay the Night King and his army of undead, blue-eyed, frosty demons. Engaging with the literacy on these multimodal pages, I also realized how technical, scientific language was used to emphasize the product's effectiveness and reliability against harsh winter conditions. For example, the product's amazon page, which has since been taken down, uses phrases such as “waterproof, breathable technology,” “polyurethane (PU) coating,” “tri-component,” multi-layer, and “lab- and field-tested.” The use



Figure 5: Multimodal descriptors of a jacket, indicating size chart and layers.



Figure 6: Multimodal descriptors of a jacket, highlighting its properties.<sup>5</sup>

of this specialized language, for me, was persuasive. I felt I could trust the product. The emphasis on thermal technology, waterproof, breathable and windbreaker/wind protection technology were important considerations in deciding on a winter jacket. This was a crucial uptake during my research. Through my research on fabric properties for winter jackets, I found that polyester and fleece liners were common and important material compositions. As writers, understanding how a particular genre works, engaging with all its moving parts can be very rewarding for other literate activities we engage in.

## Uptake and Transfer for Writers

Now, you may ask, how does all of this talk of preparing for winter gear connect to writing? This is where transfer comes in. **Transfer** is the act of taking knowledge from one context and applying it to another (ISU Writing Program). Sometimes, as writers, we encounter new writing situations that require us to engage in a particular discourse community, which requires us to engage with the rules and norms that underlie that particular situation. It's always important to remember that all writing is rhetorical; all writing is informed by particular situations, undertaken to meet particular goals and serve a particular audience. Writing does not happen in a vacuum. It is not a disinterested activity. There are actors that enable writing to happen. The

5. Find these images at [https://www.amazon.com/MECASTAR-Snowboard-Waterproof-Windproof-Detachable/dp/B07KC67FM1/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=MECASTAR+snowboard+waterproof+B07KC67FM1&qid=1588212308&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/MECASTAR-Snowboard-Waterproof-Windproof-Detachable/dp/B07KC67FM1/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=MECASTAR+snowboard+waterproof+B07KC67FM1&qid=1588212308&sr=8-1)

tools we employ in a particular rhetorical context, whether they are visual or aural, will largely be informed by who our audience is and what our goal is.

As writers, if we recognize that writing is an activity, and that there are people and tools that we engage with (whether we are conscious of this interaction or not) in the production of writing, our decisions become more focused and we are able to produce rhetorically conscious writing. Outside of your class, you are going to engage with writing space that is variegated; you'll find that there exist many ways of writing in the world, a rhetorical community that will make different demands on your ability as a writer. Different writing genres require different skill sets. Adaptability becomes a writer's way of managing new writing situations, engaging with the actors in

that genre, learning the rules, and engaging with the community.



Figure 7: Edmund vs the Icy Villain.<sup>6</sup>

The main takeaway I've had from working on this project and working as a writer is that learning to create a new genre is not something you can do on your own. Writing is collaborative. This is perhaps the most important advice I can give to my fellow writers: we are not alone, and it's okay to have anxieties or fears when we encounter a new writing situation. But there's always help. There's always a system of actors that can help us acquaint ourselves with the new situation and help us to become comfortable with that genre.

## Works Cited

ISU Writing Program. "Key Terms and Concepts." *Grassroots Writing Research*, 22 September 2015, <http://isuwriting.com/key-terms/>.

6. This meme is based on the popular HBO series, *Game of Thrones*.

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