GRASSROOTS WRITING
RESEARCH JOURNAL

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From the Editors

Julie Bates

Every issue of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* to date has demonstrated just how robust and fascinating writing research and studies in genre and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) can be—and the 6.1 issue is no exception. These fourteen new articles showcase how our talented writers are delving into the depth and complexity of writing research in its myriad forms, ranging from studies of literate practices and rigorous genre investigations to explorations of the ways writing knowledge transfers to new situations and illustrations of a diverse array of writing research methods.

Our first three articles underscore in rich and varied ways how writers can investigate their own literate practices as well as the practices of others. **Oriana Gilson** explores a genre close to her heart—letters from her grandmother—by examining the antecedent genres and activities that shaped her grandmother's letter-writing through the years. **Lucy Belomoina** looks at her personal Facebook profile through the lens of CHAT and considers how the choices she makes on the site are influenced by the activity system of Facebook, audience, and the trajectory of her posts. Then, illustrating the ways that writing and writing research are an everyday part of running a business, **Angela Sheets** chats with That's So Sweet cheesecake shop owner Lindsay Bachman to learn what writing is like for her on a daily basis.

Following these forays into literate activity, we feature the work of five writers who undertake a variety of fascinating genre investigations. **Thaddeus Dieken** will have readers thinking about summer well into the fall with his project, which combines writing research and music theory to examine what makes the hit singles of five consecutive summers so darn catchy. Next, **Kaitie Schable** investigates the seemingly simple genre of movie blurbs and digs into how complex that little chunk of text on the back of DVD cases actually is. Channeling her inner Sherlock Holmes, **Caitlin Berek** employs CHAT analysis and takes a close look at the characteristics and conventions of a number of popular mystery novels before she attempts some mystery writing of her own. In an article formatted to look like a story on fanfiction.net, **Erika Romero** unpacks how individual fan fiction stories and websites devoted to these fan texts function as activity systems. Last in this section is **Samantha Ginzburg**, who details her research journey into the history and trajectories of the postcard genre and her discovery that postcards are a lot more than a souvenir.

The next three articles delve into what happens when writers take what they know from previous writing situations as they move into new ones. In a joint interview, **Vanessa Garcia** and **Laura Skokan** connect aspects of CHAT to the challenges they each faced in new roles (Vanessa moved from composing a sketch show as an actor to being a director; Laura went from college student to teacher). **David Giovagnoli** details how he experienced the collision of two activity systems as he moved between creative writing and textual role-playing, and **Ally Mohs** utilizes CHAT to show how people can take what they learn from writing research and apply those ideas in a completely different—yet still incredibly complex—situation, such as learning to play a piece of music.

Authors of the final three articles in this issue simultaneously demonstrate fascinating ways of undertaking writing research at the same time that they seek to examine aspects of self-expression that manifest themselves in dramatically different ways. By examining the outsourcing of self-expression that occurs when consumers purchase greeting cards, **Lisa Dooley** determines that her research may not be as clear-cut as she originally thought. **Cody Parish** brings readers along on his detailed—and incredibly up-close—exploration of the writing that often appears in college campus restrooms. Rounding out the new articles in this issue, **Mac Scott** channels his thirteen-year-old self as he looks specifically at the letter *I*, exploring the ways power dynamics and cultural pressures combine to dictate what "good" writing is.

The 6.1 issue concludes with a reprinting of "Publishing with the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*," which seeks to encourage prospective writers to submit their rigorous investigations that complicate literate activity by thinking about how people, tools, and situations affect writing in complex ways. As we enter our sixth year of publication, it's exciting to note that we are receiving record numbers of submissions from writing researchers interested in publishing their studies in the journal. This is an indication that the writing research encouraged by our journal has had a very real influence in our readership community, one that resonates with developing writers and speaks to the journal's continued efforts to make public all kinds of writing practices. We ask that you, readers, please keep those submissions coming. We look forward to more submissions that reflect a diversity of perspectives, explore a variety of distinctive genres, and provide a richer understanding of the culturally and historically bound spaces in which these genres are embedded.

The Genre of Grandma's Letters

Oriana Gilson

Oriana Gilson uses texts she loves—letters from her grandmother—to explore the lessons we can take away from an analysis of everyday writing. Incorporating textual analysis, interviews, and secondary research, Gilson examines the antecedent genres that helped shape her grandmother's writing style and the ways in which her grandmother transferred her understandings of writing from one composing experience to another. Using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Gilson invites us to consider how the activities surrounding the production and reception of a text can provide insight into our own writing selves.

> *"A history of letters, in other words, must also include a history of letter writing as a social and cultural practice."*
> —*Rebecca Earle*, Epistolary Selves

My sister, cousin, and I frequently find ourselves in the middle of a gathering, huddled together, recounting a recent letter we received from our grandmother. Sometimes our focus is on the actual sharing of information— Giovanna graduated from college, Carlo is getting married, or Kelsey has started a new job—but most often, we are talking about the letters themselves. There is something in these letters that makes them so uniquely Grandma. She writes about everything from the chores she hopes to accomplish that day to her feelings about the importance of embracing cultures different from our own. Yet regardless of the topic, the style is unmistakable: she talks about the day-to-day happenings in her life and the lives of her family members, her words flow in a way that reveals a stream of consciousness, and her language is free from pretense or formality. Her letters tell stories, offer advice, recall histories, and remind the reader of his or her place within the community of our family. Most compelling is that whether she is describing how she

chopped the zucchini for lunch or is comforting you on the loss of a loved one, Grandma's style of composing always makes you feel like she is right there and that the two of you are engaged in a personal conversation (Figure 1).
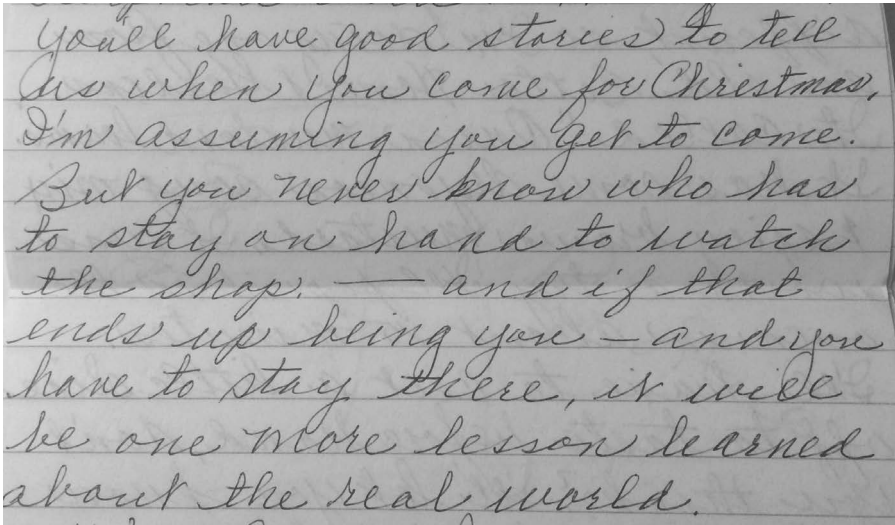
Figure 1: A snapshot of a handwritten letter sent to my cousin from my grandmother.

It is not only the letters, but also the woman behind the letters, that fascinates me. My grandmother defies so many of our contemporary (and academic) stereotypes of what it means to be a "writer." She never attended college, and although she was an integral part of the family businesses, she never "worked outside the home." Yet she is one of the most prolific writers I know. She has written an autobiography of her life focusing on her maternal family and is currently writing the autobiography/biography that she and my grandfather discussed but that he was unable to finish. She composes songs, holiday cards, lists, prayers, and recipes. Just a peek at her kitchen table reveals various piles of annotated documents: church bulletins, newspapers, cookbooks, comics, and notes. While she might not fit into our traditional conceptions of a writer (the academic with impeccable grammar and punctuation, poring over drafts of scholarly prose), she is most certainly a writer in every sense of the word.

It is exactly this juxtaposition that has always fascinated me about my grandmother's writing and that made her composing process seem like a perfect fit for this journal. The journal is a haven for research into all genres of writing, but it is a particularly welcoming forum for exploring forms that are either underrepresented or underappreciated in mainstream academia: tattoos, graffiti, cereal boxes, and coupons have all graced the pages of the journal. As one who leans toward more traditional forms of research and

writing, working within the genre of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* provided me with a unique sense of freedom which I don't normally encounter when faced with academic research or writing. The genre of the journal invites a combination of the personal and academic, and in my case provided a scholarly impetus to engage with someone I consider infinitely interesting, but with whom I never have enough time.

Prior to this article, bringing personal experience to the forefront of academic research was something that I agreed with pedagogically (I encourage such writing in my students), but not something I had necessarily acted upon personally. So it was with more than a little trepidation that I set out to articulate the focus for this piece. As I began to write, I became increasingly aware of how difficult it can be to take something that is deeply personal—i.e. my grandmother's letters and emails—and view it through a lens that allows for dissemination to a wider audience (whoever might read this article). I had trouble focusing myself—the fact is, I found myself wanting to tell the entire story of my grandmother, our relationship, and our conversations. It was not until I started immersing myself in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) that the idea struck me to study the letters through a rhetorical and activity-system approach, as opposed to a purely historical lens. In a basic sense, CHAT is a theory that invites us to think about the complexity of texts through analysis of how, when, why, and for what purpose a text is created. Incorporating elements of CHAT pushed me to look at the "how/why/what" of my grandmother's letters (Walker 72). Rather than look at my grandmother's letters as stories about my family, I could read them as a model of one person's writing process, as parts of a much larger system, and as examples of how writing functions as a social practice. No longer was I focused solely on the content of each letter, but rather on the activity surrounding the letters and the writer. I became interested in answering the questions: How did she compose these letters? Why did she decide to compose? What can I learn from her letters and her process?

What We Don't See on Paper

> *". . . nor should the letter be studied in isolation, separated from the context and purpose for which it was written."*
> —*Rebecca Earle,* Epistolary Selves

Going back through my grandmother's letters and learning about her process was both more fulfilling and more enlightening than I could have imagined. As I approached our work together, I decided it made sense to

talk to Grandma about what informed her decisions as she sat down to write. Basically, I thought I would explore the *antecedent genres* and *transfer* that she recognized in her writing. In a very basic sense, an *antecedent genre* is a genre that one has worked in before and that might influence how a new genre is approached. For most American college freshmen who attended high school in the 21st century, the five-paragraph essay is an all-too-familiar antecedent genre. Regardless of individual feelings about the five-paragraph essay, knowledge of the structures required in that particular genre might encourage a student-writer to incorporate or reject certain conventions. *Transfer* is not quite as easy to pinpoint, as it occurs when an individual carries a skill(s) with her from one situation to another (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström; Bawarshi and Reiff). For instance, many college courses require that a student complete a prerequisite prior to enrollment. So, I can't enroll for a physics course unless I first complete certain math courses. The rationale is that having completed the required math courses, I will *transfer* the key concepts from math and apply them to my understanding of physics.

Because I believe you can learn so much fascinating information by applying CHAT principles to writing practices, I was excited to discuss what antecedent genres my grandmother identifies as informing her letter writing and the ways in which she transfers the skills used in one genre to another. Surprisingly, her initial response to inquiries regarding her letter-writing process was some form of "I couldn't say, I just do it." Yet this shouldn't have surprised me at all; the fact is that most of us don't consider how we write something, we just write it. In trying to get at my grandmother's process, I was asking her to recall antecedent genres for a style of writing she has practiced for more than seventy years.

As a way to bridge process (the mental and physical acts that factor into the way my grandmother writes) and product (the physical letters) and to rephrase my inquiry into the antecedent genres that influenced her letter writing, I started with the obvious: school. My grandmother is of The Greatest Generation, schooled in an era in which students were drilled in grammar and punctuation, taught specific forms of writing, and would never dream of starting an address to their teacher with "Yeah, so . . . " I admit that I had a picture in my mind of little Grandma sitting in her elementary school, being taught the do's and don'ts of letter writing. So, in our conversation surrounding how she learned to write, I inquired: "For instance, did they teach you about letter writing in school?" Her response surprised me.

She immediately said, "Oh, if they did, I did not have it." But then she thought for a moment and said, "Well, in English we learned salutations [Dear so-and-so] and all these parts." She continued to note other ways in which her schooling influenced her writing: she acknowledged that when she

would write a business letter (she and Grandpa owned a family business), she thinks she built on the structures she had learned in her English class. She remembered learning about salutations, writing your address and the date at the top, and signing at the bottom. But when recalling what she learned in school, it was purely structural. To get at how she learned to compose a letter in her own unique way, that style that my sister, cousin, and I know so well, our conversation moved outside of what she learned in school. It was not until she began recalling her interactions with family, correspondences back and forth with specific individuals, and the events and situations that prompted her to write in the first place that Grandma could really tap into those activities and experiences that helped her form her writing self.

Why Write: The Genres of Grandma's Letters

"[G]enres hold the power to create the illusion of recurrence despite subtle or even major differences between writing tasks."
—Angela Rounsaville, "Selecting Genres for Transfer"

Grandma wrote because she had reason to write. When she was still in high school, forces beyond either her or her mother's control prompted her mother to move back to the South and my grandmother to remain in the Midwest. So they kept close by writing letters. When she wrote to her mother, she emulated her mother's style. While both mother and daughter would include general information about themselves, much of what was written in the letters was in response to what was going on in the other person's life. She explained that her mother would "take down the letter that you just wrote her . . . [and] she would respond 'I'm glad you got to go [to wherever you wrote about going], and I'm glad you did this, and I'm glad you did that.'" The letters seem a perfect fit for a mother and daughter to write—they were all about the other person.

Then Grandma got ready to write for a new purpose—keeping in touch with my grandpa, who was training in the South as a fighter pilot for WWII—and she naturally transferred the conventions she had used in a previous genre (writing letters to her mother) to the new one (writing letters to her sweetheart). She explained that after all the time writing to her mother, celebrating every bit of information that was shared, it didn't occur to her to do anything different. So Grandpa would write to Grandma, telling her about what he had done that day in training and at the base; then she would write back, commenting on everything he had told her in his last letter. She would respond with letters that said things like "I'm glad that you had a good formation today" or "I'm glad" that he did anything else he had mentioned

in his previous letter. She was transferring the skills she had learned in school and from her mother to a new writing situation. But it wasn't long before Grandpa wrote back and suggested that her style didn't fit the genre: he told her that he didn't want to be reminded of what he was doing every day, he wanted to know what *she* was doing each day. And so her letters changed to meet the audience and the genre.

Not surprisingly, elements of each of these antecedent genres still appear in the letters Grandma now writes to her grandchildren, particularly the style she adopted when she started writing to Grandpa. From the first line of the letter, Grandma starts painting a picture for you. Frequently, she invokes the thought or action that prompted her to write, but at other times, she just starts talking.

- "I just put bread in the oven, and I truly do think of you every time I bake bread."

- "Happy Birthday, lovely! I'm jotting a quick note on a Saturday evening."

- "Yup, I just finished putting some clothes in the dryer and sacking up some things for the Goodwill."

- "It is about 9:30 pm and I just got out of the shower and was drying my hair, when I thought about the fact that I had never written to say thank you for the hair dryer you gave me."

- "Yep, I have 3 'fiddler's on the garage roof' and I only have two fiddles in the house, so one of them will just have to sing, I guess."

Her letters continue in much the same fashion, but frequently move away from what she is doing to what is going on in the lives of family members. And while she makes note of important events such as jobs, travel, or sicknesses, her focus is on the everyday. In one letter, she details a night of passing out candy to trick-or-treaters:

> We were all over at Aunt Mel's house last night. The spooks started coming about 4:30 and thinned out about 9:15. Aunt Margaret, Aunt Sophia, Brian (Jackie and Kelly were off at a twirling competition), Jen, grandpa and I were all there. Mel had put a heater facing grandpa . . . Jackie had made a veggie pizza before she left, for Brian to bring. I made a big tub of caramel corn and we had hot tea and coffee, so we were all taken care of.

This passage includes no big events nor breaking news; it is simply a night of passing out candy. But for someone far from home at that time, passages like this made me feel connected. Little details like why Jackie and Kelly weren't there, the heater for Grandpa, and the food they ate makes it feel real.

Yet as I reread Grandma's letters, it was not this aspect of her writing that came as a surprise. I expected to encounter details of the everyday, as I consider this one of the defining features of her writing. What did surprise me were the stories, histories, and advice interwoven with the details; elements that elevate her letters from the purely expository to the poetic. One of my favorite letters centers on her decision to tear down an old home that she and my grandpa had purchased when they were first married. The house shared plumbing with an apartment building that grandpa built and so required a non-traditional demolition. As the wife of, and frequent assistant to, a man that built homes from the ground up, she expresses surprise at the number of specialized contractors required for the demolition. And while the history she includes in this letter is one I cherish, it is the language and lesson found in the final line of this excerpt that stays with me the most:

> . . . [the demolition] entails having one man dig the trenches, another man to lay the plumbing lines, another man to take down the house, etc. Your grandfather did all of those things himself, in our day. But of course, the world keeps going around and times and modes of doing things change, so I must go with the flow or be washed away by the tide of new ideas.

It is as though she is writing these words both for the reader and for herself.

Finally, I cannot present Grandma's letters without sharing another cherished part of her writing process: the salutation. I am compelled to do so because I love her style and I think it reveals how one can transfer an antecedent genre. As Grandma did, most of us learn to start our familiar letters with some form of "Dear so-and-so." And while many of Grandma's letters do adhere to the traditional form, she is comfortable transforming the conventions to fit her mood, purpose, or audience. She might start a letter with "Dear sweet one," or "My Dearest Oriana," and she frequently includes the name of a family member or friend that she knows will be visiting at the time that the letter is received. Rarely does Grandma write to me without including the names of my husband and children in the salutation. While I'm certain she doesn't anticipate my one- and three-year-old reading the letter, her salutation is an acknowledgement that her thoughts are with our entire family. Even in her salutations, Grandma makes you feel like a part of something bigger.

Early on in her writing life, Grandma learned that what worked well for one type of letter (mother to daughter) was not a good fit for another (girlfriend to boyfriend/civilian to soldier). Although the physical and structural aspects of the letter invited her to see letter-writing as a singular genre, it was not long before she discovered that within one genre (as is almost always the case)

lie myriad subgenres. Likewise, she discussed in our conversations how she continues to make subtle changes in her letters depending on the person for whom, or purpose for which, she is writing. While this may seem obvious, it is a skill that many writers do not come by naturally.

Her process seems to unfold chronologically, but getting at how Grandma learned to write was not a straight path. Her initial response to my question "When did you first start writing letters?" was that she started writing when my grandpa left for the war. It was not until much later in the conversation, when she started explaining that after she and grandpa were married she continued writing to her mother, that she said, "Well, now I guess I told you a fib." Until that point, the process of writing and learning to write from her mom had been overshadowed by her letters to Grandpa. Writing is influenced by so many factors outside of ourselves, that we frequently forget all the antecedent genres that influence our ability to successfully (or unsuccessfully) compose within a certain genre.

It was not until we started discussing *why* Grandma wrote her letters that we began to discover *how* she learned to write her letters. Immersed in the stories of the activities and people surrounding her writing, the memories of the *how* are easier to identify. If we want to really get at all the people, situations, and ideas that influence our writing, it helps to remember what motivated us to compose in each instance. Our writing is always built on past practice and shaped by our interactions with others. Grandma's letters are wholly her own, but to a certain degree, they are of her mother and of her husband too—they are shaped by those whose own writing she took up and adapted to new situations and new genres of writing.

From Paper to Digital

> *"[T]he habitual use of any tool brings about 'amplifications and reductions' not only in the moment of use but in the physical and psychological structure of the user."*
> *—Jody Shipka,* Toward a Composition Made Whole

I must confess, that when it comes to Grandma's correspondences, I say *letter* regardless of whether the message was conveyed to me on a piece of paper or via email. But I thought both my understanding of these different mediums, as well as Grandma's process in moving from one to the other, worthy of exploration.

Much like her initiation into letter writing, Grandma learned to write emails by talking to those around her. As personal computers became

more and more common in the early 2000s, Grandpa enrolled in a mini-course on personal computers for social and business use offered at the University of Illinois. Immediately following the course, he transferred all of their business and financial accounts into programs he designed on the computer. Anxious to share the wonders of the computer with his wife, the two of them set up an AOL account for Grandma.

The activity system influencing the way Grandma composes online continues to grow. Her writing influences and is influenced by a variety of individuals, acts, and ideas. She talks to her kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids about how to work within the email system, she emails questions, or she'll type her question into Google. Outside of her purposeful activities to shape her composing practice, more subtle influences—the spotty Internet connection, to whom she is writing (some friends of her generation are still written to by hand since they are not comfortable with the Internet), what device she is using (her iPad, phone, or PC)—and myriad other factors have a role in shaping her writing process.

Grandma's letters are an excellent example of how our writing is historically and culturally situated. They are influenced by her being of the WWII generation, by her relationship with those to whom she writes, by her work and family, and by the evolving cultural ideals and literary practices of the time. Grandma's transition from writing letters by hand to typing "letters" via email was prompted by a number of factors: physical, temporal, and generational. Her move to email offers insight into the ways in which transitions in the physicality of our writing process are not only acted on by the composer, but also act on the composer.

This examination of the physical relationship between an individual's body and her composition reveals itself fairly explicitly in my grandmother's transition from writing to emailing. The most obvious physical change between writing and typing is that Grandma can type an email faster than she can write a letter by hand. And while this factored in to her decision to switch to email, if it was simply a matter of writing speed and convenience, she could have typed and printed her letters long ago. It wasn't just the speed of the physical tools that swayed the transition from letters to emails; rather, her decision was influenced by how her physical process was translated into a textual artifact.

As part of the generation that grew up studying and practicing the visual art of writing, Grandma has always had beautiful handwriting (Figure

2). The visual aspect of her letters was something noted by all who received them. But she has dealt with hand tremors her entire life and they became more pronounced with each passing year. As her tremors became more prevalent, she was aware that one of the most important physical tools for her writing by hand was not as reliable a tool as it had been in the past. It is in this way that the tool (her hand) acted on and encouraged a change in the writer.
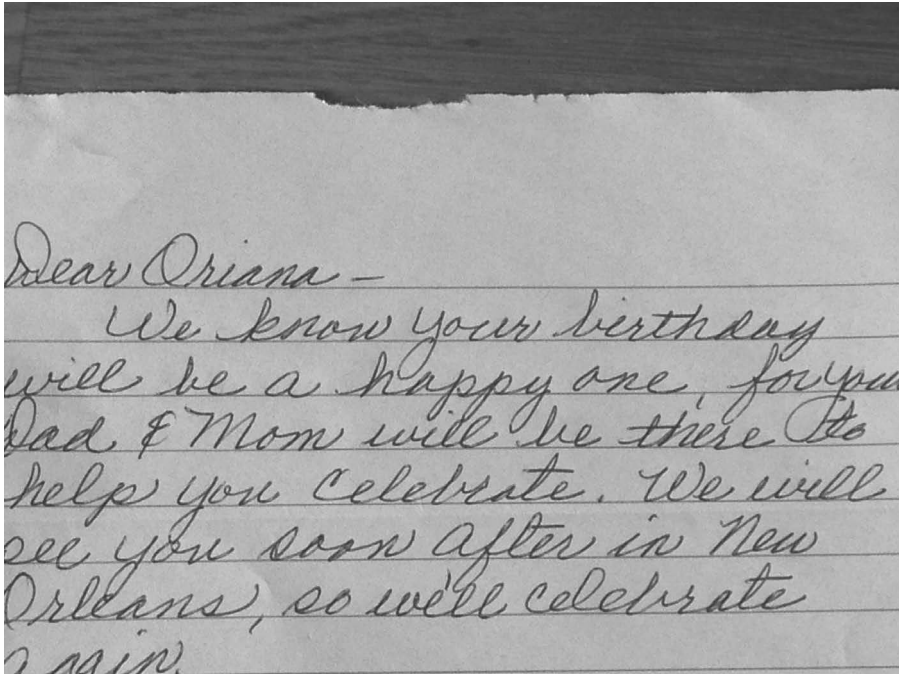
Figure 2: A snapshot of a handwritten letter sent to me from my grandmother.

Grandma was also cognizant of the roles of time and societal norms as she made the transition from letters sent through the United States Postal Service to emails sent via the web. The shift to electronic communication allowed for movement of the artifact between composer and audience to go from a matter of days to a matter of seconds. While this is not always of significant consequence, Grandma does like being able to congratulate a grandchild on an occurrence the same day she learns of the event. Birthday letters can now be composed on the day of the event rather than a week in advance. Additionally, as her writing has started to include recipients of younger generations, the reception of an email is one that many of Grandma's readers are familiar with and act on more readily (frequently by responding with his or her own email). Thus, the system moves faster from the point of initiation to the loopback.

Are All Activity Systems Created Equal?

> *"[L]etters display the signs of the distinct environments in which they were conceived."*
> —*Rebecca Earle,* Epistolary Selves

Unlike many (myself included) who treat email as a different genre than letter-writing, Grandma approaches this change more as a transition in mode than a shift in genre. Her emails read almost exactly the same as her letters. While there are no longer pictures or maps embedded within the text, there is no mistaking that her electronic correspondence is, for all intents and purposes, a letter. She still begins her emails with an affectionate salutation before either commenting on something regarding the reader or, more likely, by explaining what she is up to at the moment. The body of the text is dominated by talk of family and work, threaded with humor, confidence-boosters, and advice. To end, she frequently explains what she's off to do next before closing with a traditional, letter-style sign-off.

So if it is faster, easier to write, easier (in many cases) to receive, and maintains many of its defining features, is Grandma's transition from letters to email a win-win? I'm not sure it is that simple. The truth is, for many of us, there is something in a handwritten letter. Grandma readily acknowledges that there is "just something different," something wonderful, about receiving a letter that simply isn't the same with an email. It is something beyond the words or ideas contained in the letter, something that is tempting to peg as the purely physical aspects lost in digital communication: the opening of an envelope, the feel of the paper, the unique shape of the letters, the smudges of ink. CHAT works well here: from the production (the writer at a table with a piece of paper and a pen) to the ecology (the tattered envelope or letter that is "lost" en route), the activity system surrounding the letter is fraught with romanticized ideals. Yet I don't necessarily think one is better than the other. Email provides a number of advantages (such as ease of composing and delivery speed) that alter the activities around a "letter" composed in this format. So, it isn't really a matter of better or worse, but simply different.

What Can We Learn from Grandma?

> *"[A] body of private and potentially important texts exists that is only accessible to researchers with a personal connection to the source."*
> —*Joyce Walker,* The Methods and Methodologies of Qualitative Family Research

Among many in academia, neither the composition nor study of everyday writing garners the same prestige as more traditionally "academic" forms of writing. Unless the sample of writing is composed by a famous (or infamous) figure or recounts an important event or period in history, it is treated as insignificant. Too frequently, we focus purely on content and ignore the inherent activities, processes, and participants involved in every piece of writing. When taken together, the composition and study of everyday writing is indeed a lens through which to view the events or ideas recounted in the document, but it also allows a glimpse into all the factors that led to the composition of that document, as well as what will occur as a result of that document's trajectory.

So, what is learned from the study of one person's letters? I believe that the answer can be as limited or limitless as our research allows. If I had simply read my grandmother's letters for content, very few outside my family would even care to know what information I might extract. The exploration of everyday writing, or really any writing, invites us to go beyond an analysis of content. Universal applications are found in the systems working through and on the writing. My grandmother's process of learning to write within a certain genre and form, and then adjusting, changing, and refining her process to fit the cultural, historical, familial, technological, and physical surroundings, are an example of how our writing-selves must be ever-ready to adapt. A key to all of these adjustments is that the writing—whether it is an email of congratulations or a handwritten letter of condolence—remains uniquely the writer's. As writers, the more skills we transfer, tools we call upon, and resources we access, the more prepared we are to adapt to new writing situations while maintaining our individual writing identities.

Note to readers: With the exception of my own, all family names included in this article are pseudonyms.

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Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down:
How Facebook Implicates Happy Users in the Activities of Literate Practice

Lucy Belomoina

In this article, Lucy Belomoina analyzes her personal profile on Facebook through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Lucy examines how she operates within the activity system of Facebook and, through discussion of her research and personal experience, she defines key CHAT terms such as trajectory and audience.

Today it seems as if everyone I know is registered on Facebook. As of December 2011, a Nielson Media Research study found that Facebook was the second-most accessed website after Google, and by January 2014, it reached 1.23 billion active users (Wikipedia). People use Facebook for different reasons, including socializing with friends, family, and colleagues; selling goods and services; dating; and engaging in professional and business networking. Facebook today has become a very popular communication genre.

Is Facebook Making Us Happy?

According to a 2011 study, Facebook earned its success due to the positive emotional state that users experience after visiting their personal accounts for three minutes (Mehta). Psychologists call this psychophysiological state "Core Flow State," which is a state characterized by highly positive emotions and "high arousal" (Mehta). In other words, Facebook users feel that everything is, well, just flowing, running smoothly in their lives, when they view their profiles. For example, when I go to my profile page, I see great photographs

of me and posts of my achievements, smart ideas, happy moments, and so on. That is, life is shining on Facebook.

Another study conducted in 2011 by Hancock and Gonzales also revealed that Facebook users experience an ego-boost after viewing their own Facebook pages for as long as three minutes as compared with the same amount of time looking at the mirror or just sitting in a room (Hendrick). It seems that the way we self-select the information that we decide to include on our Facebook profiles helps to create a better image of self in our own eyes and confirms that version of ourselves as who we strive to be.

My initial research started out of curiosity about why this particular social networking website is so popular. This led me to research Facebook's popularity, as I thought some explanation should be available online. After reading several articles from such online magazines as *Psychology Today* and *WebMD* as well as reading about Facebook on *Wikipedia*, which is a good website for initial research, I satisfied my hunger for knowledge and had to admit—I definitely fashion a better version of myself on Facebook. After viewing my own profile for three minutes, I do experience that ego-boost researchers are talking about. I certainly can't speak for all Facebook users in the world, but in my case researchers got it right.

But then, as a writing researcher, I started to wonder about the activity system of Facebook. Like, OK, I get it, I represent myself on this website quite successfully, but what is it on Facebook that allows me to do so? That is, how does the activity system of Facebook as a social networking service operate and how do I use this activity system? What is the trajectory of my posts? By the trajectory of my posts, I mean the direction they take as they move through Facebook space and how these posts are taken up by my audience. I usually hope that my audience will give a "like" to my posts, provide a positive comment, and even further share my posts on their pages. I find such feedback to be "cool," as I receive reassurance that my posts are worthy and interesting. I would call such a trajectory a positive one. But let's get back to the prior questions. In order to answer them, I turn to cultural-historical activity theory, or CHAT.

CHAT and Facebook

You might be wondering what CHAT and activity systems are. I will unpack these important concepts as we move along. As Joyce Walker, the Writing Program Director at Illinois State University, explains, thinking about writing in complex ways helps us understand "(how people act and communicate in

the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts) that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices" (74). These three important questions—how, why, and what in relation to writing practices—encourage a researcher to investigate a writing activity from a lot of different perspectives. To be exact, it is necessary "to examine ALL of the possible influences of a text on society and society on a text (including cultural and historical factors as well as the actions and activities of the author and the audience)" (Hercula). CHAT covers all of the activities in writing, from coming up with an idea and writing it down to later discussions of this writing in a café.

Similarly, Facebook is a great example of a writing activity system, which is all of the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together in order for this social website to run. CHAT is certainly at play when we consider factors that influence the making of the text and how it is received by the audience. By taking into account all the conditions that may be affecting me as an author of my profile page and my audience, I can achieve the most effective communication. This is one of the reasons why CHAT is so important. To give a real-life example, I decided to use my personal profile—how I operate within the complex activity system of Facebook, and how I, from the perspective of an author, consider some of the key components of CHAT in order to achieve the most effective communication.

Welcome to My Page

So let's dive into my world. If you look at my cool profile (just kidding), you will see a complex activity system at work. My posts are not the only thing communicating something about me, the author of the page. The images and links that I share as well as the cover, profile pictures, and memberships to certain groups are also communicating something. Even miscellaneous information, such as my favorite movies, TV shows, books, and sports, all communicate something about me. In other words, you can see a complex activity system at work where different genres are all conveying information to my audience, who consciously or not, receives a message from all of these components. For example, my cover picture (Figure 1) is a nature scene of Buryatia, which is the place where I come from. I inform my audience from the very start that I am proud of my hometown as well as of nature in Siberia. Furthermore, I comment on my profile picture "Buryatia, Ulan-Ude," which sends an implicit message about my ethnic background if my audience decides to google where in the world Ulan-Ude is. I am quite clear about who I am, what ethnicity I belong to, what my professional interests are, and my genre preferences in music, movies, and books.

Figure 1: Background image of Buryatia, Ulan-Ude, on my Facebook profile page.

When I communicate information on my Facebook page, I am considering aspects of CHAT whether I realize it or not. I, as the author of my profile, make active choices about the content I post and consider the effects these choices have on the components of my Facebook page as well as the effects that these components have on my audience. For example, the content of my profile is informal, as I use Facebook not for work or commercial purposes, but to connect with my family, friends, and colleagues both outside and within the US for chatting online, being in the know of each other's personal and professional lives, and even receiving mutual emotional support on various kinds of matters. For these reasons, the content I share includes interesting articles, anecdotes, funny pictures, and family pictures as well as comments on professional matters that can be discussed in a relaxed atmosphere. This approach allows the layout of my profile to be casual and the language and sentence structure to be informal as well. This representation of myself through the components of my profile is part of CHAT that, as has been mentioned before, explains the "influences of a text on society and society on a text" (Hercula).

An Author (To an Extent)

Social websites, however, allow their users to be in control of their profiles only to an extent. Similarly, I act within a bigger activity system of Facebook and represent myself through a personal Facebook page, but I have to consider Facebook page layout. For example, I can't make my cover and profile pictures

visible only to my friends because this option is not available on Facebook. Thus, a public audience can still view these pictures and learn something about me. As I don't really think about them seeing my cover and profile pictures, these viewers are what I would consider an unintended audience. Furthermore, if I share a certain article, a thread of suggested articles shows up underneath my article, even though those articles are not necessarily related to the one I found important to share with my audience. The same works for my friends on Facebook. For instance, one of my friends recently shared an article, "What BuzzFeed Would Look Like If It Only Featured One Baby Named Ben" (Figure 2), which is about a mom who created a Tumblr parody of BuzzFeed where she shares monthly images of her baby son, Ben, on a quilt designed to look like an article from this popular Internet news media website. Underneath this article, a suggested article about Uber, a ridesharing service, popped up, which is completely unrelated to the article my friend shared. The article is suggested, however, because it also includes the words "Ben" and "BuzzFeed." As we can see, it is programmed into the activity system of Facebook to suggest new information for us based on what we shared or liked, even if we do not intend to share that suggested information with our audience. This unrelated article shared by Facebook results in my friend's post having an unexpected trajectory.
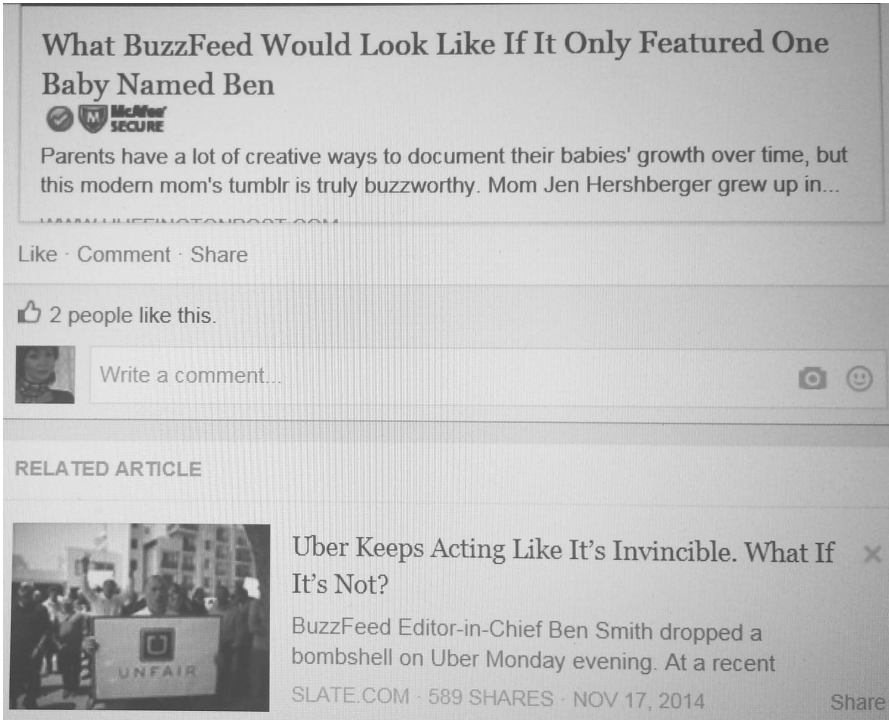

Figure 2: Shared and related articles in my Facebook news feed.

Thus, the system of Facebook shapes the choices I (as an identity-building author) make and the trajectories of my texts—how they appear, who sees and interacts with them, and how this process works to help reinforce that identity-building. In other words, it is not enough to say that it is the author and his or her audience that interact, but rather we should look into that in-between space where these interactions happen.

Certainly, my friends on Facebook also have a huge effect on the content of my Facebook profile by commenting on my posts, shares, or pictures, or by further sharing them on their Facebook pages. The specific affordances of the Facebook interface shape the way they comment, re-post, or like my posts, shares, or images. For example, if my friends like a certain image on my profile page, they have to push the "like" button and an image of hand with the thumb up will appear with their names under the image.

This is how the Facebook interface allows users to show their satisfaction and agreement with something posted on this site. Now if my friends on vk.com, which is a Russian social network website, like an image on my profile page, the "Like" button has a heart (Figure 3). The heart will not appear unless you push the button. Moreover, on the vk.com site, no names appear under the image, so you'd have to hover over the "like" button in order to see who liked the image. So, ultimately, the interface and the audience interconnect with my own choices within the activity system of Facebook, and all have an impact on how I represent my personal profile on this website.

Figure 3: An image of Russian cuisine liked by three friends of mine on vk.com.

Visual Rhetoric

One of the important factors of my representation on Facebook is visual rhetoric. By "visual rhetoric," I mean any images and pictures that I share with the audience. This component plays a crucial role in the creation of the content of my profile. I agree with Lee Odell and Christina Lynn Prell that composing is not only words, but also "interanimation of words, visual images, and page (or screen) design" (qtd. in Shipka 22). Sean Williams further explains that composition is not "linear, print-based texts," but rather "meanings are made, distributed, received, interpreted and remade . . . through many representational and communicative modes—not just through language" (qtd. in Shipka 21–22). So in my case, images and pictures are also texts that contribute to the creation of my image on Facebook. By choosing what visual and written rhetoric to post on my web page, I contribute to the creation of an image of who I want to be, and by doing so, I hope that the genre of my Facebook profile will have a positive trajectory.

Trajectory

As I mentioned earlier, I hope that my audience will "like" or give me a positive or informative comment on my post, be it a statement on a professional matter or a spur-of-the-moment shared thought about how much I like living in Normal, Illinois. Come to think of it, the ego-boost that users on Facebook experience due to the ideal image that they purposefully create on their Facebook profiles is also one positive trajectory of our selected information we choose to post. As Ryan Edel explains, trajectory consists of two components, which are "the direction a work goes in physical space [and] the way people take in a work, the way they adapt and adopt it as part of their lives" (98). The latter might also be called an uptake.

Indeed, when I post a message on my profile, the text sometimes has an unexpected uptake. For example, on my post: "Driving around in Bloomington-Normal. I'm loving it!" I received a comment from one of my friends, Olya Cochran: "Leah says Thank you for the biky ☺ she had a blast!" I did not live in Bloomington-Normal at that time and was driving around in search of apartments that day. While I was in Bloomington-Normal, I happened to drop off a bike for my friend's kid. While my post was actually related to my admiration of the town, Olya gave my post a totally new trajectory, and her uptake of my post was influenced by the positive changes that happened in her life because of my trip to Bloomington-Normal that day. Indeed, trajectory is one of the key aspects of CHAT, as trajectory demonstrates that the actual act of writing is only the tip of an iceberg.

Conclusion

Ultimately, as a Facebook user, all of my interactions with the site illustrate the way that CHAT plays out online: everything from the physical activity of posting a message to my page to the digital interactions that happen as that post is read, commented on, and used by others. The importance of using CHAT comes in its ability to help us understand that texts are social entities—cultural-historical communications. They are human/tool interactions that take place at particular historical moments and are influenced by concrete cultural values. For example, selfies are appreciated in this particular historical period we live in (and I chose a selfie for my author bio photo for this article), but in the 1950s, self photographs weren't even possible because of limitations of the technologies available for taking photographs.

Another important takeaway about CHAT is that I have to consider the activity system of Facebook that influences the way I represent myself on this website. My audience contributes to my identity-building as well by actively interacting with the content of my web page and giving the information and images I post new trajectories. Finally, the way my audience and I interact is conditioned by the layout of Facebook interface, that in-between place that has agency of its own. Thus, the way communication takes place on Facebook is affected by culture, history, and the activity system of this website. By considering the implications of CHAT, we can ensure our communication on Facebook—or anywhere, for that matter—is as effective as possible.

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That's So Sweet:
Where Writing Research Stops (and Starts) for Cheesecake

Angela Sheets

Angela Sheets met with twenty-four-year-old Lindsay Bachman, owner of That's So Sweet, a cheesecake shop in Lexington, IL. They met at the now-closed Normal, IL, satellite branch of the shop and chatted about how writing and writing research are an everyday part of running a business.

ANGELA: What types of writing or materials do you produce?

LINDSAY: A lot of our writing tends to be on the social media spectrum: Facebook posts, things like that. It's a lot of figuring out what's appropriate and what's not, what to say, and what to draw people in and get people's attention. I also do a lot of quick little e-mails back and forth. Things as simple as that. I have written and come up with all of our printed materials too, like our printed menu (Figure 1). I'm working right now on a pamphlet that's just wedding-oriented, because we do a lot of wedding things. When it came time to opening the Normal store, there was more proposal writing and things like that than I had ever done. So that's not on an everyday basis, but I've done that.

ANGELA: Can you tell me more about that proposal you had to do to open the Uptown Normal shop?

LINDSAY: Right. I did that quickly. I looked at this space late morning of one day, and I sent my proposal in at like 6 or 7 a.m. the next day. I just really wanted to move on this space, so I didn't give myself a whole lot of time to go

That's So Sweet
cheesecake bakery

est. 2011

Favorite Flavors

9" ~ $35, 6" ~ $22 or 4" ~ $12
MINIS ~ $20 PER DOZEN

ORANGE • LEMON • KEY LIME • COCONUT
WHITE CHOCOLATE • COOKIE DOUGH
ANDES MINT • CHOCOLATE CHIP

Specialty Flavors

9" ~ $40, 6" ~ $27 or 4" ~ $12
MINIS ~ $20 PER DOZEN

WHITE CHOCOLATE RASPBERRY • BLACKBERRY
CHOCOLATE COVERED STRAWBERRY • PISTACHIO
WHITE CHOCOLATE BLUEBERRY • PEACH AMARETTO
BANANA SPLIT • BANANA CREAM PIE
TURTLE • BIRTHDAY CAKE • COOKIES & CREAM
PEANUT BUTTER CUP • NUTTER BUTTER
SNICKERS • PIÑA COLADA • SALTED CARAMEL
CARAMEL TOFFEE • WHITE CHOCOLATE MACADAMIA NUT
ALMOND JOY • BLUEBERRY STREUSEL • BUTTER PECAN
SNICKERDOODLE • PINEAPPLE UPSIDE DOWN CAKE
STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE • HAZELNUT MOCHA
BROWNIE • MAPLE BACON • MEXICAN MOCHA

Gluten-free cheesecakes available by request

429 WEST MAIN STREET LEXINGTON, ILLINOIS 61753
309.490.1016

102 WEST NORTH STREET NORMAL, ILLINOIS 61761
309.808.4504

Figure 1: That's So Sweet menu.

back and rework things. It was simple enough that I didn't have to do that. I knew they wanted it brief, and I tend to get fairly wordy (*laughs*), so that was difficult. They didn't want to read more than a page. They just wanted to know things like potential hours, days of the week, what we would be selling. I think I did a brief little paragraph about the store that was already running in Lexington. I told a little bit about us and just tried to sound more professional than I had done before. Two guys that work for the town gave me some ideas, but nothing super extensive to go off of. So I had to figure out what they wanted to hear without saying too much but saying enough to give them a good idea of what I did and what we were going to do with the space.

ANGELA: It was a competition for the space, wasn't it? Do you know who you beat out?

LINDSAY: There were four of us: me, a photographer, a hair salon, and a cupcake shop. They made us wait four weeks before they made a decision. So, I had kind of gotten to the point where I thought if it had been that long I probably wasn't going to get it. And then they didn't go into a whole lot of detail when they sent the e-mail that they had chosen me. And then, after I found out that we had the space, everything following that was a different proposal and a different approval process. We did some painting on the front of the building. Even my sign had to be approved. Everything. So that was all its own proposal. And it's just really brief, almost little blurbs just explaining what you're going to do.

ANGELA: For those proposals, were there forms for you to fill out or did you have to create your own formal documents from scratch?

LINDSAY: I created the formal proposal [for the space], and that was kind of nerve-wracking because I wasn't sure what that was supposed to look like.

But then there were forms for the painting and there's a sign permit form and things like that. So that was all easier.

ANGELA: Sounds like you do a lot of writing!

LINDSAY: Yeah, none of it is too extravagant or extensive, but there's a lot.

ANGELA: It doesn't have to be long to be complicated. I think about those social media posts, for example.

LINDSAY: They're harder than you would think. But if you do it right, it's the best form of advertising there is.

ANGELA: Would you consider your writing to be workplace-related, school-related, community, social, or maybe a mix of these?

LINDSAY: Workplace, some community, and some social, probably. When I think of workplace I think of—that's my platform for doing everything—it's *my* workplace, it's not necessarily other people's workplace. We do a lot of community events and we've done a couple things recently that we've gotten the community involved in. Social—I try to find a good balance between "Yes, we make cheesecakes, but there's people behind these cheesecakes," and "This is what we do sometimes when we're not making them." Or, I just took my staff away for a weekend and I shared some of that. I think people like to see things other than our actual product.

ANGELA: How does your writing function? What does it do or make possible?

LINDSAY: As far as social media and posting, it could be something as simple as one sentence that might draw somebody in the door. I will write more lengthy posts if I really want to talk about something. For instance, we did a fundraiser for the family of a boy who was killed by a drunk driver. He was a family friend, so I went into a little detail about that. But I would say mostly as far as social media and on a day-to-day posting basis, just drawing people in: this is what we're up to, this is what we're doing. Obviously with the printed materials, you want them to look nice enough and sound nice enough that somebody might come in and not purchase anything, but grab a menu and come back because they were impressed by that. Invitations and things like that, obviously, are drawing people to whatever you're doing. And then, as far as day-to-day e-mailing, it could be a potential bride, it could be—like you and I were e-mailing back and forth. When I was doing the process to get into this store there was a lot of e-mailing about the legal aspects and the lease and all that kind of thing down here. So that was new to me. My process for getting the building in Lexington was much different and much less formal.

ANGELA: You say were e-mailing people about legal stuff. Do you work with a lawyer?

LINDSAY: I do. I work with somebody specifically on contracts and things like that. I have gotten to a point where I'm going to have my employees sign a non-compete, just basically they're not going to take my recipes and go sell them somewhere else. The lawyer also does things like lease revisions and reading over things. We purchased the building that the Lexington store is in, so we just have an attorney to handle all of that stuff.

ANGELA: What tools do you use as you produce your texts? And by texts, we can mean anything. So on your pamphlets, for example, you have visuals, which we could categorize as a type of text. So what tools do you think come into the production process?

LINDSAY: As far as designing, and that sort of thing, I leave that up to a professional. I like to think I'm fairly good with the word part of things and the writing part of things, and I know what I want things to say, but as far as laying out and designing them, I actually use Fabulous Affairs, a business down the street. They do that for me. I'm not as technologically savvy as I would like to be.

ANGELA: What other tools do you use? Like, when you're engaging in social media, are you doing that primarily on your phone, on a laptop?

LINDSAY: I use my phone. I have a laptop at the Lexington store but I don't tend to carry that with me just because iPhones can do everything that a laptop can. I have a page manager app on Facebook that lets me go into pages I'm the admin of. I have one for here [in Normal] and Lexington has its own page. And that's helpful. And I can write three days' worth of posts and schedule when I want them to post, and that's been a time saver, because there are mornings where it's eleven o'clock and we opened at ten and I'm like, "Oh shoot, I didn't post the chalkboard yet," or "People don't know what we've got today." So kind of lining that up and preparing myself for a busier day.

Figure 2: The chalkboard at That's So Sweet.

ANGELA: What's the chalkboard?

LINDSAY: We write our flavors on it (Figure 2) and every morning we just take a picture of that and post it to Facebook (Figure 3) and that's how people know. If they don't want to call in or just take their chances, they can check our Facebook page. And we post that every day.

ANGELA: So, another piece of writing to do each day.

LINDSAY: Yes, yes (*laughs*), something as simple as scribbling on a chalkboard, I guess.

ANGELA: Yeah. If you didn't have that it would be really difficult to communicate. That's why we say it doesn't really matter the size of the text that you're using. I mean, you talk about how a sentence or two on Facebook might be the thing that draws people in.

Figure 3: A Facebook post featuring the chalkboard.

LINDSAY: Right. Exactly. And I think the chalkboard thing, people have kind of started to associate that with us. I have a chalkboard in Lexington and that's what they know to look at when they come in.

ANGELA: Are other tools involved in your writing process?

LINDSAY: As I opened this store, I had somebody in a manager position and I gave her the logins to everything, our Instagram and our Facebook, and she's an admin on the Facebook page, so she does the posting to this store. And that's—I wouldn't have thought of another person as a tool, but it is. (*laughs*) And, honestly, I'm a pen and paper person. I would much rather sit down and handwrite something than type it. And I don't know why. I just like it. So I usually have a notebook with me. It's weird. I could be, like, driving in the car and think of something that I want to post the next day, or trying to go to sleep at night, and—and I don't sleep with the notebook (*laughs*)—my husband might not like that—it's just a good way to kind of collect random thoughts, because we all have them. And I sometimes, if I think of something and don't have my notebook with me, I'll use the notepad app on my phone. I'm a list person, to-do lists.
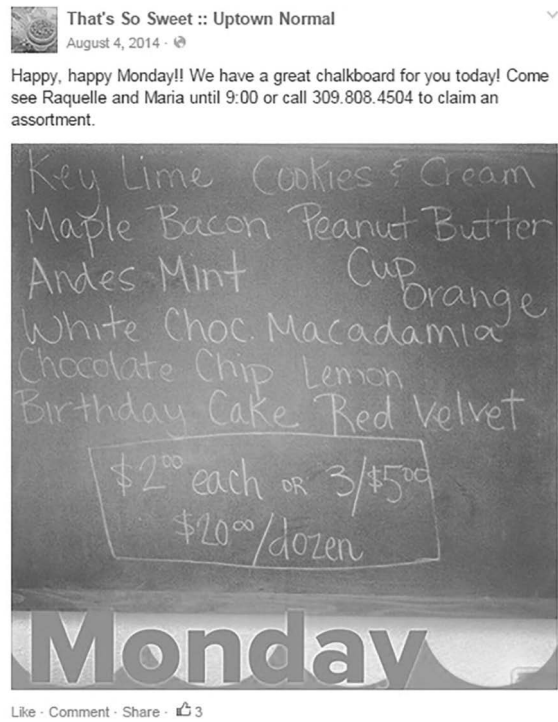
ANGELA: What tool do you think is the most powerful for your writing?

LINDSAY: I couldn't do anything without my phone because that's how everything gets blasted out. Yeah. I honestly feel like I come up with my best ideas just when I'm doing something completely un-work-related: driving somewhere, trying to go to sleep at night, things like that. And that sounds kind of silly, but sometimes it's not a physical tool at all that makes you think of the best things.

ANGELA: So, like, having that downtime in your process, kind of?

LINDSAY: Yeah. Yeah, uh-huh. I think sometimes I have to be away from it all to really, truly think about all of it.

ANGELA: What would you consider as parts of your writing process that are particularly tangled, troublesome, difficult, or negative?

LINDSAY: As social media goes, I had to get over the fact that one person might not like what I'm saying, but 500 might like it at the same time. And that's okay. (*laughs*) Like if I post something and I wake up the next morning and we have, like, two less likes, I'm like, "Oh shoot, what did I say wrong?" (*laughs*) And sometimes it's just a lack of time or running around like crazy. And honestly, my least favorite thing is to sit down and respond to e-mails. I hate it. I hate it! (*laughs*)

ANGELA: You mentioned that you use social media for advertising, but what other mediums do you go through?

LINDSAY: I don't. I tried radio advertising. I took somebody up on a good deal and I did three months of radio advertising. And it wasn't by any means bad, but the return on investment wasn't enough to make me do it again. Honestly, word-of-mouth, people talking about good things, and Facebook are the best things. And I've really enjoyed Instagram. Sometimes I think, with our product, pictures speak louder than words.

ANGELA: I've looked up your Facebook page, and your photographs are really attractive. Is there any sort of special techniques you had to acquire to be able to make that sort of text—an attractive food photograph?

LINDSAY: I've heard from professionals that food photography is a lot more difficult than photographing people. I just have some really helpful apps that I like to use. And it's been trial and error. I might think something will look great in my head and then I actually snap the picture and it doesn't. But it's just practice. One of my favorite things to do is taking the pictures and

editing them. I have a nice camera that I don't use like I should, but for quick everyday shots, I use my iPhone.

ANGELA: Cool. So who all is involved in producing the texts that you produce?

LINDSAY: I use Fabulous Affairs for the design and printing. But the text, I've done myself, and just sent them what I wanted things to say. As far as social media posting, my manager down here does that in the mornings. Typically, she'll do the crucial morning post and if I want to add anything in the afternoon, I'll do it myself.

ANGELA: Who else is involved in your writing processes for things like contracts or your lease or mortgage?

LINDSAY: For my insurance, we meet yearly to just to make sure that, if I've purchased equipment or purchased anything big enough to make insurance go up, we meet and make sure that that's all squared away. As far as opening this space (Figure 4), my lease actually did have to go to the town council meeting, and I was present. When it came to the mortgage for the building in Lexington, there was a lot of communication back and forth between me and the attorney and my banker.

Figure 4: Lindsay Bachman, owner of That's So Sweet.

ANGELA: What kinds of research are involved in developing your texts?

LINDSAY: I actually did a lot of research just for various things, into how other similar types of businesses were laid out—their promotional materials and things like that. I follow a lot of bloggers that have similar types of businesses that I am trying to model the website after. I've just tried to pick and choose what I like about what other people are doing and try to put everything together. As far as legal things, when it comes to things like a non-compete agreement or a bridal contract, we kind of took the bones of a simple, generic contract and personalized it a little bit.

ANGELA: What kinds of research go into developing your recipes?

LINDSAY: When I was still working out of my home, I basically tore the kitchen apart and figured out a base recipe that I could call my own. And it's really simple. And I think that's what makes it so good. And then, if we want to do a specific flavor, we might google a recipe for it and pick and choose what we think will work. And then it's just trial and error usually from there. But everything is just the same base recipe, and we have those written and in a safe place, but we don't have to look at them on a daily basis. But they are written down for future reference, we have it all in a notebook.

ANGELA: What kinds of skills did you need to produce the texts that you do? And did you need to learn anything new, or brush up on old skills?

LINDSAY: It's funny, a couple of weekends ago, my high school English teacher was in the store, and I was talking to her. Even just simple grammar like the different forms of your/you're, the different forms of their/they're/there—the things that you think are so simple, those are the most important. Because you could write something wonderful and spell three words wrong and people aren't going to take you as seriously as if it was completely correct.

ANGELA: Who has the most control over some of your writing activities?

LINDSAY: When it comes to Facebook posting, my audience definitely does. Because if I post something that doesn't go over well, then obviously I'm not going to do that again and they've had some control over that. I just went to a small business workshop in Chicago called Facebook Fit. And even the people on the panel discussions that have hundreds of thousands of followers said the same thing. They'll still try things that don't work. So I guess that made me feel better.

ANGELA: So, what would you consider are the goals of the writing pieces that you produce? And how do you know if you've achieved those goals?

LINDSAY: Just getting people in the door and relating to people. Likes on Facebook are also a direct reflection, if I post something that three or four

hundred people have liked, obviously it's going to show up on other feeds and other people are going to find us. The proposal got me the space (*laughs*), so I must have done something right. And I don't know if that was my writing or my type of business, but I think if I had a great business but wrote a really crappy proposal I probably wouldn't have gotten the space.

ANGELA: You mentioned that you feel like you're learning some things as you go: what are some of those things?

LINDSAY: The legal aspects of things, the insurance aspects of things. I mean, I'm insured for things I never thought I'd be insured for in my life. (*laughs*) Sometimes I think trial and error is the best way to do things, at the same time. Some of it truly takes some time management. Even things as simple as knowing when the most people will see a Facebook post. Seven o'clock at night is a lot better than seven o'clock in the morning; everybody's at home on their couches by that time.

ANGELA: Are there other types of writing that you anticipate doing later and where you feel that some of the skills and knowledge you've developed so far will help you?

LINDSAY: I think so. Something we've talked about doing in the near future is blogging. So that will again probably be trial and error.

ANGELA: So you anticipate using the same process that you've used before as you're developing your new process?

LINDSAY: Probably. I've even gone so far as to post on Facebook and ask people what they would like to read about on a blog. And people have some pretty fun ideas.

ANGELA: Well, thanks for taking the time to talk to me about all the writing you do.

LINDSAY: A lot of these things are not the type of writing that I would have thought of as writing. But it *is* writing.

Acknowledgements

Angela Sheets is a recently graduated MA student in Professional Writing at Illinois State University. She hails from the cornfields of Not Chicago, Illinois, and currently works as a training developer at COUNTRY Financial®. She has rarely met a tea she didn't like.

Summer Hit (Me Baby One More Time)

Thaddeus Dieken

If you've ever wondered why some songs are so darn catchy or what causes certain tunes to soar to popularity while others remain in a state of anonymity, you're not alone. In this article, Thaddeus Dieken lets his curiosity about this very topic lead him on an exploration of the Number One hit singles of five recent summers. Along the way, he uses key music theory concepts to help him understand what makes some songs so likable.

Introduction

If I were to ask you to write me something, what would you do? Would you write an e-mail? A letter? Maybe even an essay? A large portion of people think that writing only applies to the forms of expression we learn about in our English classes. Contrary to this popular belief, writing does not have to be black and white; it can be colorful. Writing can take you on an intense journey without containing any words. One of these (mostly) non-alphabetic forms of composition is music, and for this writing research project, I am attempting to understand how to write successful music, specifically the "summer hit."

Every summer there is that one song that we just can't seem to get enough of. No matter how hard we try to convince ourselves otherwise, it really is catchy. Like, *really* catchy. But what is it about a pop song that causes it to become so successful? As you may already know, "pop" music has received a lot of flack in the past decade or two for being "too predictable" and "very formulaic." Rest assured, this is not going to be another interminable, pretentious rant about modern-day music. However, as a musician, I often find myself pondering the writing process of these "chart topping" singles, and what, exactly, launched

them to unprecedented levels of popularity. This is why I decided to take it upon myself to investigate what makes a song capable of taking the world by storm (even if it is for just a few months). As with many other things in the world, there is science and theory behind how pop songs work. There are reasons that a song sounds nice, and there are reasons that a song does not sound nice. My goal, by the end of my research, is to obtain an understanding of the factors that go into the composition format that is the "summer hit."

I selected the summertime single because music is diverse, and I needed to have a smaller pool of options to select from. It would be impossible to compare Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" to "Ridin'" by Chamillionaire. Not only are these two songs in totally different genres, but they also vary tremendously in overall popularity. To ensure accurate results, the songs I chose to analyze had to be of the same genre. I then decided pop music would be the ideal genre for my study, as it is appreciated by so many people. However, it would be too easy to simply select five pop songs that sound similar and point out all the traits they have in common. My research would be more conclusive if I chose the songs based off of a factor that is something other than my own preference, allowing for unbiased results. The factors that went into my selection process would be popularity, season, and year released. After deciding on these factors, I visited the *Billboard Magazine* website and found an article titled "Summer Songs 1985– 2013." Thanks to this resource, I was able to choose the five ideal tunes. At the time I conducted my research, these were the No. 1 hits for the past five summers:

> 2013: "Blurred Lines" – Robin Thicke ft. T.I. & Pharrell
>
> 2012: "Call Me Maybe" – Carly Rae Jepson
>
> 2011: "Party Rock Anthem" – LMFAO ft. Lauren Bennett and GoonRock
>
> 2010: "California Gurls" – Katy Perry ft. Snoop Dogg
>
> 2009: "I Gotta Feeling" – The Black Eyed Peas

Music Theory Explanation

I feel that I should warn you that I am an undergraduate music major, and throughout my analysis I use various skills that I have acquired from my music theory classes. Over the course of my research, I analyzed each song for its:

- Song structure (e.g. AABA, etc.)
- Major vs. minor key signatures
- Chord progressions

Without further ado, let's dive into a brief, but hopefully informative, music theory lesson.

Song Structure

If you have experience in poetry, song structure may be something that you are familiar with. Essentially, music is all about repetition. Musicians will write a section of the song that will likely be repeated later on (rhythms, melodies, lyrics, or all of the above). We then take these individual repeating sections of a song, assign them a letter, and then put the letters in chronological order of when they appear in a song. So, let's say a song has a verse, followed by a chorus, followed by a verse, followed by a chorus. We would assign the verse a letter value of "A," and the chorus a letter value of "B," so the song's final structural label would be ABAB. Sounds pretty straightforward, right? It really is; however, it does get a little bit more complicated than that. The vast majority of songs nowadays contain a bridge, which is a unique section of the song, typically appearing before the last chorus. Say we have a verse, followed by a chorus, followed by a verse, followed by a chorus, followed by a bridge, followed by one final chorus. If we were to write it out, it would look something like ABABCB. This song structure is incredibly popular in modern music; in fact, I find it nearly impossible to think of any song on the radio that does not follow this pattern.

Major vs. Minor Key Signatures

"♫ Do, a deer, a female deer. Re, a drop of golden sun. Mi, a name I call myself . . . ♫" It is probably safe to say most of us are at least vaguely familiar with the classic *Sound of Music* song, "Do-Re-Mi." But did you know that when you sing this song, you are actually singing a major scale? The major scale consists of seven repeating values. These values are: do, re, mi, fa, so, la, and ti (then the cycle repeats). If you have access to a piano, you can actually play a major scale very easily. Or you can hear a C major scale being played at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAAUcj7nngI.
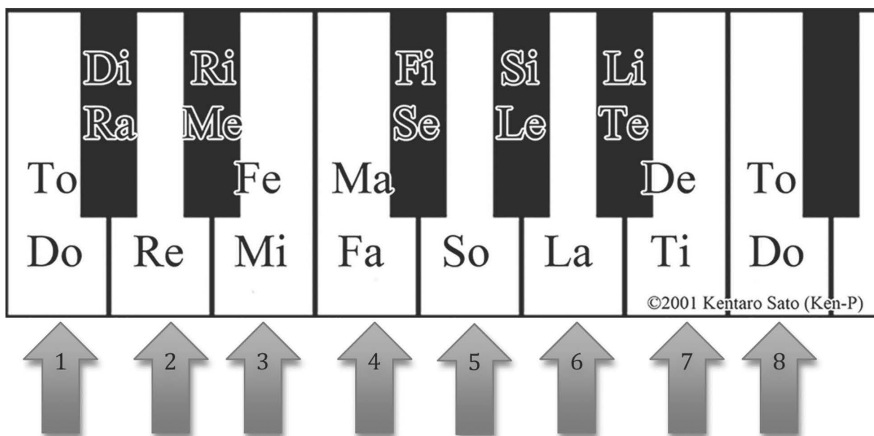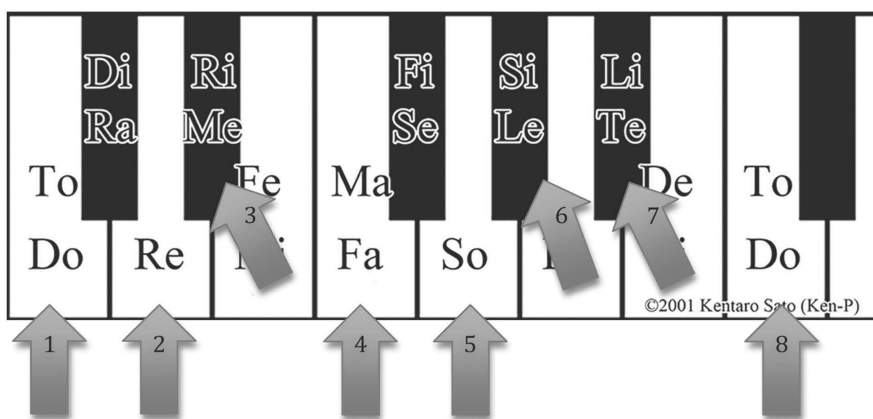

Figure 1: This C major scale is a modification of a Solfège syllable system for scales created by Kentaro Sato, available at www.wisemanproject.com/education-e-solfege.html. I added the arrows to the image to make it clear how the C major scale is played.

Go up to the piano and, starting on the note with an arrow labeled "1" in Figure 1, play all the white keys in the numerical order indicated. Congratulations! You have now played a C major scale. The reason it is called 'C major' is due to the fact that your first note ('do') has the pitch value of C. Please note that I chose the key of C for this demonstration because it is considered one of the easiest to play (because it is all white keys; not every key is this way).

Now that I have explained major keys, it is time to flip the page and explain minor key signatures. Minor is a very similar concept, except the third, sixth, and seventh notes of the scale are lowered by one-half step (there are other variations of minor, but for time's sake I'm only explaining this one).

Figure 2: This C major scale is a modification of a Solfège syllable system for scales created by Kentaro Sato, available at www.wisemanproject.com/education-e-solfege.html. I added the arrows to the image to make it clear how the minor scale is played.

After playing this (Figure 2), you might notice that it sounds like a sad, dark, maybe even more "evil" version of what you played before. This is the cool thing about minor key signatures; they sound so unique. Minor keys are often used to narrate dark, gloomy times, which is why we associate them with sounding "sad." This does not mean that every song that uses a minor key is supposed to be sad. Some can be happy; it is just a listening association people often make. Actually, minor keys are very popular in country, rock, and blues songs, though this isn't to say they aren't used in pop music as well; Lady Gaga and Adele use minor key signatures for a huge portion of their songs (which also explains why their songs sound so abstract and different than most pop songs).

Chord Progressions

Now that we have established a basic knowledge of key signatures, it's time to move on to our last music theory lesson, chord progressions. In their book

The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis, Jane Piper Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin define a chord as "a group of pitches sounded together" (A55). What they are saying is that notes have a certain sound when played together, and a chord usually contains three or more notes that produce a certain overall sound. The note that a chord is based off is referred to as a "root." The reason we refer to this chord as a "C major chord" is because the chord is built off of C.
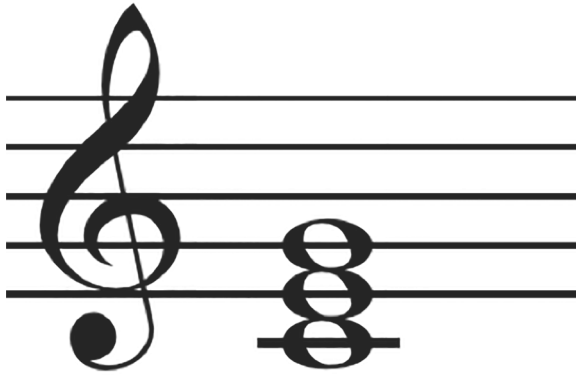

Figure 3: The C major cord contains the notes C, E, and G. Image created by Hyacinth available at www.commons.wikimedia.org.

Most musicians tend to play multiple chords throughout a song. Typically, these chords come in a sequence that is known as a "chord progression." Chord progressions are the backbone of writing music, and they are crucial to know when you are analyzing music. When analyzing chord progressions, we give each chord a Roman numeral value based off of where its root appears in a key. Say we have a song in C major, and in this song we notice a G chord; we refer to this chord as a V chord because G is the fifth note in a C major scale (Figure 4).
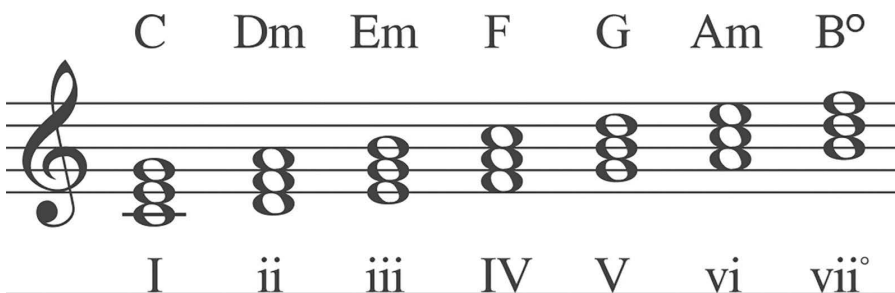

Figure 4: The C major chord progression with Roman numeral notation and scale, from "All You Need Is Love (And Perseverance)" (Fast), available at http://writ330.finearts.uvic.ca/group4/2013/02/18/all-you-need-is-love-and-perseverance/.

How about a demonstration? Say you play a song written in C major, and in this song you play a C chord, followed by an F chord, then a G chord,

and finally an A (minor) chord; we would analyze this as a I–IV–V–vi chord progression. (FYI: The Roman numeral for six is lowercase because it is a minor chord.) This progression is important because there are a large number of songs within the last century that contain this exact chord progression (e.g. "Let It Be" by The Beatles, "Don't Stop Believing" by Journey, and "Paparazzi" by Lady Gaga all use a I–V–vi–IV progression).

This essentially wraps up our crash course in music theory. Now let's take these concepts and apply them to the repertoire of songs we will be analyzing.

Hypothesis

Prior to any form of research or investigation, it can be important to create some embodiment of a hypothesis. Having selected my five songs, I instantly identified each of them as your standard, super-upbeat, repetitive pop song, easily capable of being stuck in your cranium for weeks at a time. Because of this, my hypotheses revolved around generalizations relating to pop music.

First off, the fact that I cannot remember the last time I heard a popular song play without a verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus format led me to automatically assume that each of these songs would have ABABCB song structure.

Next, I went out on a limb and said that all of these songs would be in a major key signature. Major keys are often associated with a feeling of happiness and joy when being listened to, and as far as I know, "Call Me Maybe" by Carly Rae Jepson definitely does not give off any feeling of despair. This isn't to say that the key has to be major for it to be happy; it is plausible for a minor key to sound happy. However, I did not think it was likely that any of these five songs would be in a minor key.

For my song structure hypothesis, I referenced Axis of Awesome's very popular YouTube video, "4 Chords." If you have not had the pleasure of watching this video, I would highly recommend it. They are an Australian comedic music group that demonstrates that a huge portion of modern-day songs all use the same chord progression of I–V–vi–IV. Now, when I say a huge portion, I mean a HUGE portion. In their video, this group goes through dozens of popular songs, transitioning seamlessly from one to the next due to the fact that they all use the same chords. (There are some live performances from this group, in which they use fifty or more songs.) Anyway, what I am attempting to say is that I predicted that all of these songs would have very standard and simple chord progressions, and I also predicted that at least one of these five songs would follow the I–V–vi–IV pattern.

I just want to make one thing clear: all of these were very rough guesses. I, by no means, full-heartedly believed that all of these predictions would be true.

Results & Analysis

To be honest, the analysis of each of these songs proved to be more time consuming than I initially had hoped. Altogether, I probably spent somewhere around eight hours finding sheet music on free sheet music sites, analyzing the chords, reading the lyrics, and writing summaries of my findings (see Figure 5 for an example). If you thought it was unbearable having to listen to some of these songs on the radio once or twice a day, imagine listening to them on repeat for an hour (I had "Call Me Maybe" stuck in my head for at least two days afterward).

Figure 5: "Call Me Maybe" analysis. Personal photo by Thaddeus Dieken.

Chord Progressions

After my research concluded, I was relieved to find that not all of my hypotheses were complete rubbish. Though I was not perfect in my predictions, I found that I was spot-on when predicting that these songs would follow simple chord progressions. In fact, Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" consists of two chords (I–V). Though the simplicity of this chart-topping single made me laugh, there is a lot to be said about how incredible it is that somebody was able to make two chords sound so catchy. I was also pleased to find that my hypothesis "at least one of these five songs will follow a I–V–vi–IV chord progression" was true. Interestingly enough, the song containing this progression is none other than "Call Me Maybe" by Carly Rae Jepson. The remaining songs contained variations of a standard I–IV–V progression.

Major vs. Minor Key Signatures

Unfortunately, my luck had worn thin, for not all of these songs were in major keys like I had initially predicted. I was surprised to find that LMFAO's "Party Rock Anthem" was written in F minor. Granted, this does make some sense, as it has a techno feel to it, rather than a cliché, bright, "poppy" sound. Nevertheless, it does help illustrate my previous point that not all songs written in minor have to be sad; it just sounds sad when played in the context of a scale.

Song Structure

Every song I analyzed followed the standard ABABCB song structure. The interesting thing was the variation of what the "bridge" was in each of the

songs. For example, in "Call Me Maybe" and "I Gotta Feeling," the bridge was the one part of the song where the singer(s) simply sang a different melody than the rest of the song. However, in "Blurred Lines" and "Teenage Dream," the bridge was the section in which the featured rap artist spit a few lines. The most interesting bridge, in my opinion, was in "Party Rock Anthem," because it did not even have any words; it was simply a section right before the final chorus that contained a lengthy, catchy techno beat. So, even though each of these songs followed the exact same overall structure, they each had their own means of individualization. This means that even though my blunt hypothesis was correct, it is not nearly as poor of a reflection on the creativity of modern-day music writing as one might think.

Lyrics

The final piece of the puzzle that is writing a summer hit is lyrics. The lyrics of a song can sound ridiculous when they are being read or recited rather than sung. In my analysis, I found that every one of these songs used very simple, repetitive phrases. Take the Black Eyed Peas ballad, for example. They repeated the line "I gotta feelin' that tonight's gonna be a good night," for a fairly large portion of the song. Another example would be Carly Rae Jepson's song that, again, contains no variation of lyrics in its choruses. You are free to feel however you want about this, but before you begin to accuse the writers of being dim-witted, there is actually a very intelligent reason behind this. Actually, there is a very intelligent reason behind why everything about these songs is simple.

The Genius Behind Simplification

Now I had my results, and, to be honest, I was really disappointed in modern-day music. I know this sounds pretentious, but I was really hoping to discover some hidden aspect of popular music that proves the stereotypes wrong. I began asking myself, "Why is this so well liked by such a large portion of people if it is so simple?" Then it hit me. *That's the point*. If you think about it, pop is the musical equivalent of vanilla ice cream. It's not usually anyone's favorite, but almost everybody will still enjoy eating it. The same concept applies to this genre of music; it's about the overall likeability, not the substance.

Sure, there is plenty of music that is unique, but that isn't the point of a summer hit. In order to create a song capable of being the soundtrack for an entire season, it has to be liked by (almost) everybody, which means that the true formula for composing a summer jam is simplicity. Simplicity in music means containing as few chords as possible, being as short as possible, and being easy to relate to.

Sit and ponder all of the biggest summer hits. Have they ever been about something incredibly specific? No! By ensuring that the lyrics are as generic as possible, writers are able to appeal to a broader audience, possibly even creating a form of "call and response" between the performer and his or her audience. Not to mention that you can tell they were written with the summer season in mind. (It's not like "California Gurls" was going to be popular in the winter, after all.) All of these songs are either about a fun party scene or a love interest, which, in the summer, are both very popular agendas. If the artist were to pour his or her heart out about something incredibly specific, a lot of people would not be able to relate to the song, which is crucial to sales.

Final Thoughts

At the end of the day, you have two choices. You can either write music because you love it, or you can write music because you love money. Sure, a lot of pretentious music listeners may ridicule you for writing for a paycheck, but if you want to make a living in music, you'll have to accept the criticism (and the big fat check). There is nothing wrong with either choice, but if you want to be forever immortalized as the voice of a summer, just remember: simplicity is key.

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Thaddeus Dieken is currently a sophomore at Illinois State University majoring in Choral Music Education. This is not only his first time submitting an article to the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, but it is also his first time writing an essay in college. When he graduates college he hopes to obtain a position as a high school-level chorus teacher. In his free time, Thaddeus likes to find new music, hang with friends, and watch an absurd amount of TV shows/movies on Netflix.

Not Just a Blurb: A Genre Investigation in the Movie Aisle

Kaitie Schable

In this article, Kaitie Schable investigates the genre of movie blurbs. Blurbs are present on the back of every movie DVD case and can be easily overlooked, but as Schable discovers, they are a fascinatingly complex genre. Blurbs are used as a marketing tool, offering an interesting overlap between the world of cinema and the world of language. Through genre investigation, Schable shares how blurbs, though seemingly simple, actually impact the world.

It was another day at the store, on my typical Tuesday Night Walmart Run with my roommates. After picking up all of our groceries, something caught our eyes: discounted DVDs. We eagerly scurried over to the "Five-Dollar DVD" sign, but this deal came with a challenge: sifting through the huge bin of already rummaged-through DVDs. TONS of them. So how were we supposed to find the perfect five-dollar DVD? More than likely, we would choose a movie with an appealing cover that we had heard about from commercials and reviews from others, but what else? Have you ever turned the DVD case over to look at the back? Furthermore, have you ever considered that the small paragraph describing the movie is actually a unique genre of writing?

Although I understood the basics of what genre was, it wasn't until I began to really study the paragraphs of description on the back of DVDs that I realized just how complex genres can be and how they make particular activities possible. I started to generate some questions, such as: *What is the purpose of the text on the back of the DVD?* Or: *Is there a name for this text?* After doing some research, I found some answers. According to Oxford Dictionary online, the passage on the back of a DVD is called a blurb, and it is used to promote a

variety of genres. A blurb is defined as "a short description of a book, movie, or other product written for promotional purposes and appearing on the cover of a book or in an advertisement." This helps us understand the basics of what a blurb is and what its purpose is. Now we can explore further.

Just from the definition of a blurb, I learned that blurbs are written for promotional purposes, but I decided to think more about this. The purpose of a back cover blurb is similar to the purpose of the cover of the DVD and the placement of the DVD on the shelf at the store. The purpose is to *sell*. Potential buyers want a quick rundown of what they can expect from a movie and its plot. In this case, the reader doesn't spend much time on the text, so the length of a blurb plays a large role in its effectiveness. Most blurbs are not more than a paragraph or two long. This means that the writer must condense their writing to a few sentences to grab a potential reader's attention.

Once I realized how necessary blurbs are in the marketing and advertising of DVDs, I couldn't help but wonder who writes them. Through my research, I learned that in most cases, the marketing department of the movie studio writes them. As a result, there are some political and legal issues that can come along with this. Due to the nature of a blurb, there's no official "reviewing" of a blurb, other than to double check that there's no violation of false advertising laws (Beam).

Now that I had some background information as to how blurbs are written, why they are written, and how they are effective, I decided to dig a little deeper into this investigation. What words do the blurb creators use to draw us into these movies? To answer this, I decided to look at a bunch of blurbs and see what
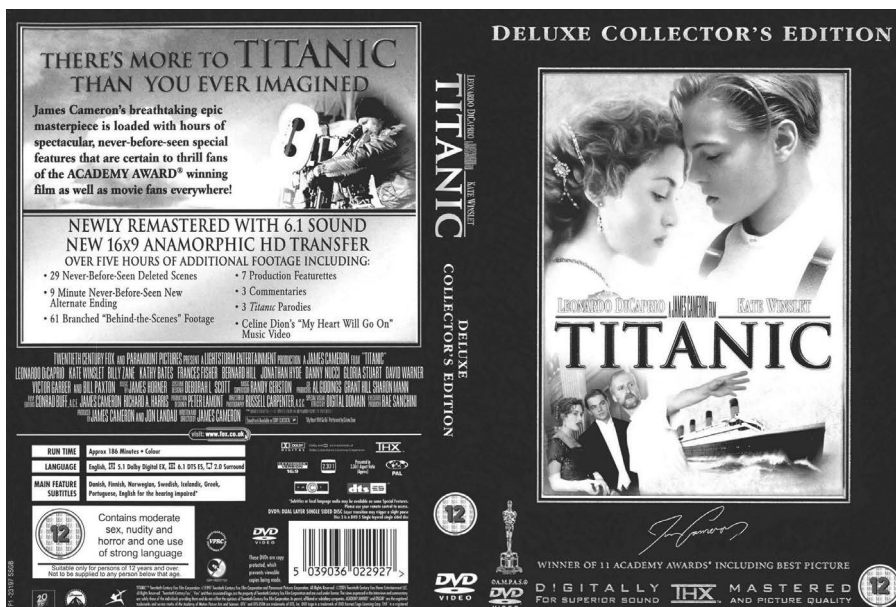

Figure 1: DVD cover for the movie *Titanic*.

I could figure out about them. It's important to keep in mind that this can change depending on the genre of the movie. Let's take a romance movie, for example. The blurb for the movie *Titanic* contains words such as "breathtaking" and "sweeping love story," and they are distinctly chosen to reflect the genre of romance (Figure 1). Let's compare this to a movie like Alfred Hitchcock's infamous *Psycho* (Figure 2). Words such as "terrifying climax" and "horror and suspense" are laced throughout this particular blurb. So why are these blurbs so drastically different? Well, the authors want you to be able to determine what the movie is about, while also catching your interest through subtle marketing. Thinking about this element led to my next step in this investigation: analyzing some specific examples. This is easier than it seems—simply take a look at the back of a DVD. For my first example, I decided to look at the movie *The Bourne Legacy*.

Figure 2: Back cover of Alfred Hitchcock's infamous *Psycho*.

Here's the blurb from the back of the DVD:

> *The Bourne Legacy takes the action-packed Bourne series to an explosive new level. On the verge of having their conspiracy exposed, members of the government's intelligence community will stop at nothing to erase all evidence of their top-secret programs—even the agents involved. Aaron Cross (Jeremy Renner) must use his genetically engineered skills to survive the ultimate game of cat-and-mouse and finish what Jason Bourne started. Also starring Academy Award® winner Rachel Weisz and Academy Award® nominee Edward Norton, critics are calling this "a thrilling edge-of-your-seat heart-pounder" (Meg Porter Berns, WSVN-TV (FOX), Miami).* (The Bourne Legacy)

This is an example of a blurb from an action movie. The first thing I noticed was the kind of words that have carefully been chosen: words like "explosive new level" and the critic review saying it's "a thrilling edge-of-your-seat heart-pounder." These kinds of words are used to draw viewers in, causing them to want to buy or watch the movie. Words can have a huge impact on people, especially when the words are powerful and strong. This is what makes blurbs so unique to the literary world. They are such short pieces of work, but when done correctly, they can speak volumes to the audience.
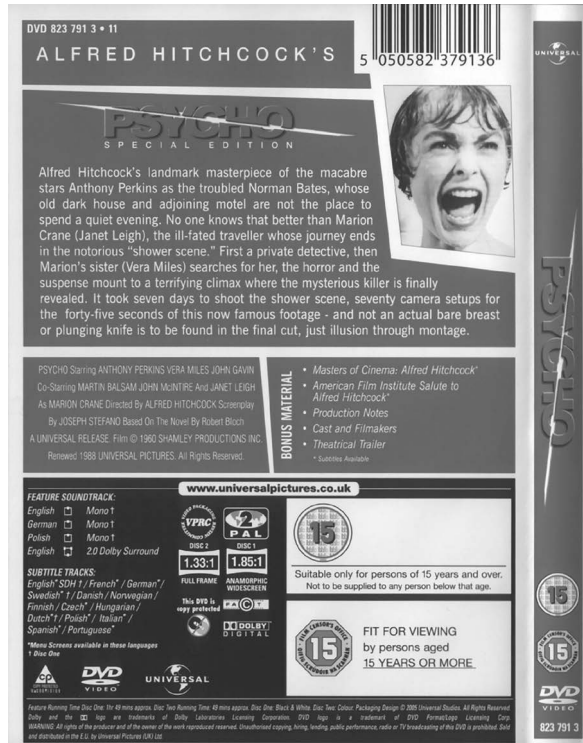
Because blurbs can have such an effect on audiences, they are the perfect way to market a particular movie. It was no mistake that the author chose to include the names of the famous actors that star in this movie, because that too can have a large impact on an audience. Sometimes blurbs include testimonies from famous celebrities or critics. Many times you even see a statement such as "5 stars." These are all language choices that are designed to convince you that you should purchase the product.

In order to dig further into this idea, I decided to look at a group of DVDs and see if my initial observations were valid. I looked at each DVD to see whether or not certain blurbs identified the actors in the movie by name. To begin, I looked at four DVDs. What I began to notice with some of these DVDs is that they used phrases like "Academy Award® winner" or they referred to previous movies in which the actors starred. Actors' names and reputations can play a large role in the effectiveness of blurbs. For example, I looked at the DVD *Water for Elephants*, starring Reese Witherspoon and Robert Pattinson. The blurb for this movie strategically says "join Robert Pattinson (The Twilight Saga) for this epic tale . . . " This shows that the marketing departments know that Robert Pattinson was associated with a largely popular movie, and that including his name and the movie he was associated with will draw in larger audiences. But what if actors in certain movies *aren't* famous, award-winning actors or are just starting out in the movie industry? Does the blurb for that movie take a different approach since the studios can't highlight the popularity of the actor? From what I could tell after looking at blurbs for movies that starred lesser-known actors, many of them relied on movie reviews and overall summaries of the plot rather than on the star power of the leading actors. Blurbs seem so small and insignificant, but it is apparent that every word is calculated and used as part of a marketing strategy in order to gain interest among viewers.

Now that I had broken down the different parts of blurbs for better understanding, it was time to take my investigation to the next level. After realizing how much detail goes into a blurb, I decided to test out the effectiveness (or sometimes lack of effectiveness) of movie blurbs. I decided that first I would conduct an experiment on myself. It was time to revisit the discount bin at Walmart.

As I walked around the DVD bin looking for something new to watch, I tried to make note of why I was drawn to certain DVDs, and I made sure to look at and read the back of each case thoroughly. Were there comments made by movie experts and critics? What kind of language did the blurb use to convince me to choose the DVD? I tried to limit my bias by looking at DVDs that I had never seen, and I tried to ignore DVDs for movies that I had heard about from friends or advertisements. I wanted the blurb to speak for itself. Finally, I settled on one DVD, *Big Daddy*, which was released on June 17, 1999, starring Adam Sandler.

Here's the blurb from the back of the DVD:

Thirty-two-year-old Sonny Koufax (ADAM SANDLER) has spent his whole life avoiding responsibility. But when his girlfriend dumps him for an older man, he's got to find a way to prove he's ready to grow up. In a desperate last-ditch effort, Sonny adopts five-year-old Julian (COLE SPROUSE, DYLAN SPROUSE) to impress her. She's not impressed . . . and he can't return the kid. Uh-oh for Sonny! (Big Daddy)

The language found in this blurb is quite different from something that was made more recently, such as *The Bourne Legacy*, which was released on August 10, 2012. This variation might be due to the differing genres (action vs. comedy), but the phrasing can also be linked to the timeframe. Just as the topics of movies change over time, so do approaches to writing blurbs. The blurb for *Big Daddy* is fairly simple, giving just the actors' names and a modest description of the plot. However, when comparing this blurb to *The Bourne Legacy*, we can see some differences. For example, the blurb from *The Bourne Legacy* gives more detail about the actors, including the title of "Academy Award® winner," and also gives one critic's review. These two blurbs accomplish the same purpose in different ways.

After I watched *Big Daddy*, I reflected on the effect that the blurb had on me. Naturally, it is hard to predict whether or not you will like a movie solely based on the blurb itself. However, the blurb can play a large part in your movie selection and how you feel about the movie when you watch it. If you read a blurb for a movie you find interesting and then are disappointed by that movie, you are very likely to remember that particular incident. After watching this movie, I felt that the blurb did the movie justice. The fun, quirky attitude of the blurb was reflected in the plot of the movie. The blurb makes light of the difficult situation and takes a fun approach to a very serious matter. Although the message of the movie is deep, the movie itself seemed very lighthearted, and I thought that the simplicity of the blurb was the right choice for this particular DVD. The movie shows the unexpected relationship between a young boy and a man who never had to take care of anyone but himself. As the movie continues, it shows the relationship between the two as it slowly develops. At one point during the movie, viewers see how inexperienced Sonny is with children when Sonny tries to give the boy a bath and fails miserably, which highlights the comedic tone of the movie. The blurb for this movie fulfilled its purpose, by giving the audience clues to the tone and attitude of the movie as well as what they can expect in the plot and who the actors are.

My overall experience with this blurb and DVD was fairly positive. But my opinion is not the only one that counts. Therefore, I thought the next step of my investigation should be to interview others and see how their blurb experiences have turned out. Needing participants for my study, I casually asked for some other opinions from some very willing friends.

I conducted informal interviews with twelve different people in order to further understand the effectiveness of blurbs. The first question I asked was

whether or not interview participants thought blurbs played a big role in their movie selections. The responses can be found in Figure 3.

Do blurbs play a large role in movie selection?
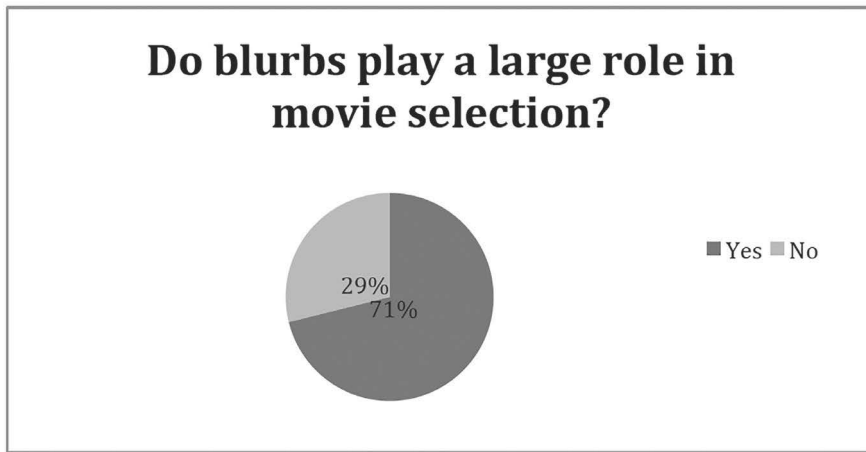
29%
71%

■ Yes ■ No

Figure 3: Participant responses to whether blurbs play an important role in movie selection.

Seventy-one percent of my interviewees stated that blurbs do play a large role in their movie selection. This can be explained for many reasons. Blurbs give us insight into the most basic outline of the plot. They also inform us of any actors that are in the movie, give reviews and ratings, and help us identify what kind of movie we may be watching (romance, thriller, comedy, etc.). Blurbs can serve as guidance for a viewer who may not have even heard of the movie. Blurbs are there to draw the viewer's attention and to coax them into wanting to watch the movie. This is the whole reason for the creation of blurbs! If we aren't even interested in the basis of the movie, why spend money on it?

I decided to go one step further in my interviews. The next question I asked my interviewees was whether or not they would buy a DVD that they originally wouldn't be interested in simply because the blurb was well written and caught their attention (Figure 4).

Would you buy a DVD because the blurb is well written?
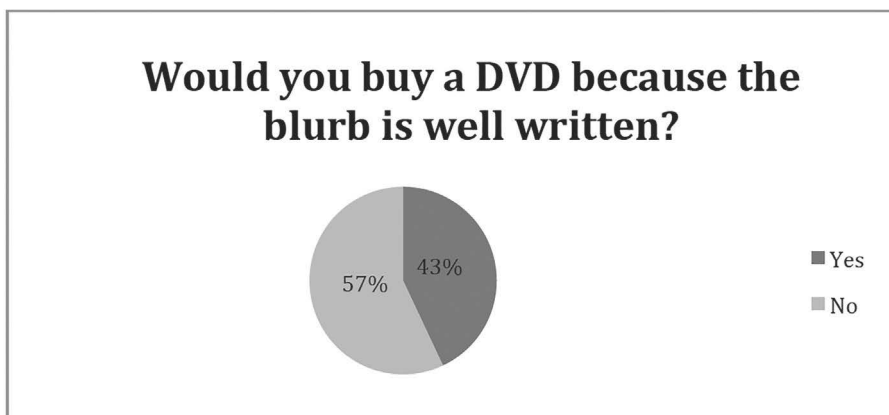
43%
57%

■ Yes

■ No

Figure 4: Participant responses to whether a well-written blurb can interest viewers in a movie they wouldn't normally buy.

These results were quite interesting. The interviewee responses were fairly close in regard to whether or not they would buy a DVD just because the blurb was well written. It is likely that if a blurb is catchy and interesting, some viewers may correlate this to an intriguing movie. However, during the interviews, I asked the respondents who answered no to the question why they would not buy a DVD if the blurb was well written. One respondent answered that in order to buy a DVD they would have to hear about it from other sources as opposed to just relying on the blurb. However, if the blurb is poorly written or does not catch their attention, they would not look into the DVD. This means that although audiences may not truly appreciate a well-written blurb, a poorly written blurb could have a major effect on the decision to buy a movie or not.

There was one last question to ask my interviewees. I decided to ask if they would blame a blurb if they watched a movie that sounded good on the cover but that they didn't end up liking (Figure 5).
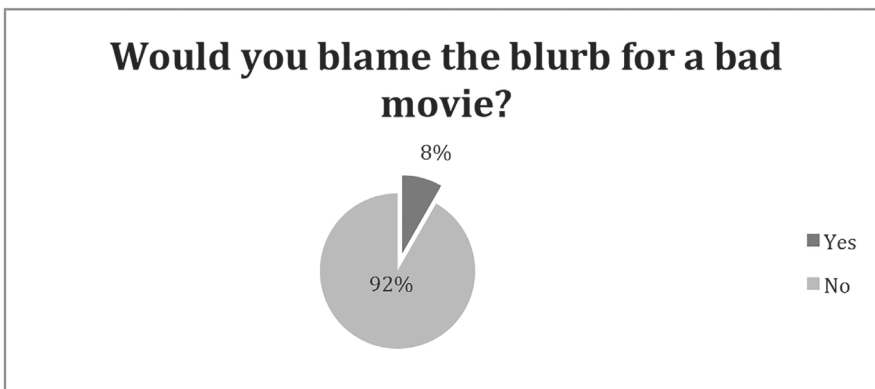

Figure 5: Participant responses to whether they would blame a blurb if a movie they viewed was not as good as they were led to believe by the description on the DVD cover.

The results for this question show that the blurbs aren't always to blame for bad movie choices. Most of the time, if a movie is bad, viewers blame bad producers, bad actors, etc. This led me to the observation I've been making all along. People *do* pay attention to blurbs when they want a quick overview of the plot so they can decide whether or not they want to pursue what the blurb is promising them. However, it is beneficial to know what the blurb is trying to communicate and what the underlying goals are—in other words, it's important to remember that the ultimate aim of the blurb is to convince consumers to watch that movie.

Try to observe blurbs next time you're sifting through a huge bin of random DVDs or trying to find a new one to watch. Read the blurb carefully;

observe the language and what it's trying to communicate to you. You might find something interesting that you may have blown by previously.

Immersing yourself in genre investigation can create new knowledge and understanding of a process or piece of work that you may not normally think twice about. Even a small task such as deciding between two DVDs can spark a new discovery about a genre. When examining how a specific genre got where it is, what it does, and what it takes to create it, we can see that writing is alive and is *useful* in the everyday world. Looking at format, language use, and the overall strategy of writing blurbs can give everyone a better understanding of how to produce this particular genre. Blurbs show the effectiveness of language and how it can influence decision-making. So maybe our appreciation for the little things, like blurbs, can teach us how to value the writing all around us.

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Mystery Novels: Becoming the Sherlock Holmes of Genre Analysis

Caitlin Berek

Throughout this article, Caitlin Berek uses the techniques of genre analysis to explore elements of the complex process of mystery novel writing. Discussing concepts such as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), genre characteristics and conventions, and the notion of analyzing other productions of a genre for guidance, she dives in and breaks down the thrilling world of mystery novels.

Mystery is everywhere in the world; from what I can see, it's a secret desire. The tall, dark, and handsome guy standing on the other side of the room; the latest murder in the news; or pop culture's abundance of mystery television shows and books—I love the idea of the unpredictable and trying to solve problems single-handedly, which is why I got caught up in the world of mystery.

I started my journey into this genre when I was in eighth grade reading the Pretty Little Liars book series written by Sara Shepard (Figure 1). I was obsessed. I personally felt as if I was piecing together the clues and solving the crimes. I loved how Sara Shepard wrote the series of Pretty Little Liars—every page left me wanting more. The novels were already incredibly popular with the audience
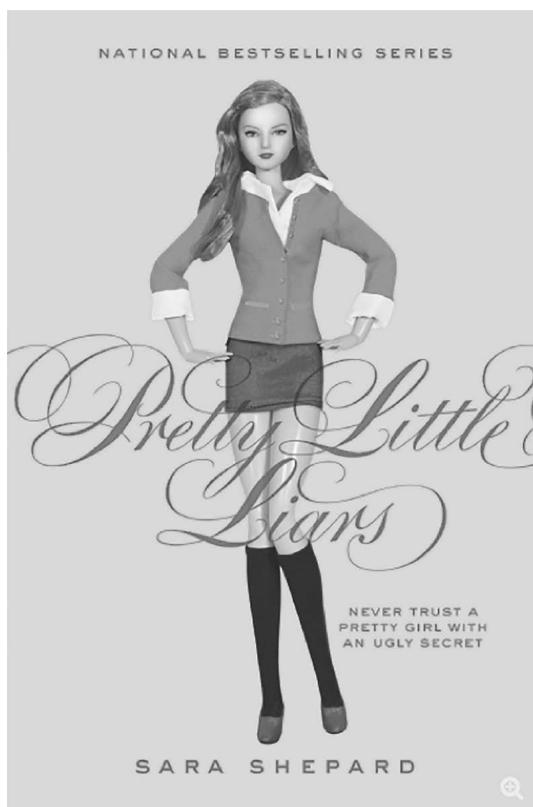

Figure 1: *Pretty Little Liars* cover (Pedarkwa).

I was a part of, until the television show premiered and the series became even more popular than before. Seeing this continual growth in popularity made me intrigued about the genre of mystery novels and what it is about them that makes me love them as much as I do. So with that interest in mind, I chose to break out my genre analysis skills and my knowledge of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and take a crack at the writing process with my own mystery story.

"There is nothing like first-hand evidence" – Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*

A great approach to studying genre is to do a genre experiment, or actually try out the kind of writing you are learning more about. To begin writing my own mystery short story, I started with what every author should: research. I sat down and brainstormed a giant list of questions that I had about the genre of mystery stories. I began thinking of all the reasons why I love reading novels—particularly the elements of surprise. From my observations and antecedent knowledge, I realized that mystery novels have a set of main conventions and characteristics; however, I needed more than my own brain to figure out what they were. So I researched my first question: "What are the conventions of the characters for mystery novels?" In the course of my research, I found a "The Five Essential Elements of a Mystery" chart (Penguin). According to this list, the most popular mystery novels involve a protagonist who takes it upon him/herself to solve the crime, plus a cast of clients, victims, and suspects.

These characters are vital to the mystery genre, but my research also showed that two other conventions seem to have a greater importance: the crime and the clues to help solve it. According to a "Genre Characteristics Chart" that I found in my Internet searching, the clues throughout the novels are what keep the reader involved (Scholastic). If the audience isn't engaged in the crime and with the characters, they won't have any desire to read books in this genre.

The information I found about clues shaped my second research question: "Are there different types of clues in mystery novels?" It turns out there are two kinds that authors use. The first is a foreshadowing clue, meaning something used to warn or signify a future event. The second form of clue is a red-herring clue, on which I had to do follow-up research. I found that red-herring clues are the exact opposite of foreshadowing (Scholastic). These types of clues are used to lead the audience to mistaken

conclusions about what happened or who the perpetrator was. I have been a victim of red herrings so many times and I had no idea that was what happened. This research was helping me to discover how sneaky mystery novelists can be.

A second research question of interest to me was: "What are the subgenres of mystery novels?" So I continued my research before I sat down to write my own personal mystery. I found four subgenres of mystery writing; no wonder it has been hard to figure out the difference. According to Mysterynet.com, these subgenres are known as locked room/puzzle, cozy, hard-boiled, and police procedural. Mysterynet.com explained the different subgenres in a clear way. The police procedural subgenre shows up a lot, especially in television series. Since it fits with my love of solving crimes and clues, the experience of watching these types of television series helped me develop an antecedent knowledge about this subgenre. I knew right away that police procedural plots involve the police and the steps they take to solve a crime. I knew less about hard-boiled mysteries, which are formed when one specific character is working to solve the crime separate from the justice system, like a vigilante character (Marling). The other two forms of mystery novels, puzzle/locked room and cozy mysteries, I had to do further research about. Locked room or puzzle mysteries do in fact include a locked room or a puzzle. The authors of these types of novels often have the victim of the crime found in a room with no exit and the other characters solve the escape of the murderer. The cozy subgenre is described as having the characters in the novel reside in a secluded house, and the focus is on how they use clues to solve the murder. Figure 2 illustrates some of the mystery subgenres I learned about, plus a few more.

Figure 2: Part of a larger fictional genre chart, this image shows some of the subgenres of mystery novels and how they relate to thrillers. The entire chart was posted by Jeannette de Beauvoir on the *Beyond the Elements of Styles* blog.

What's really interesting about the conventions of mystery stories is that in some ways they seem self-explanatory, but they also are filled with hidden meanings, making writing in this specific genre that much more desirable to me the further I got into the research. Conventions of this genre are sometimes elements you pick up quickly after reading or watching a few mysteries, such as the basic question and answer method of plots. Questions like, "Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?" create a mystery, a need for an answer and thus an investigation. Mysteries have been around from when we were little, we just didn't realize it then, and all this time, we were developing our knowledge of the genre without even knowing it.

"Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last." – Sherlock Holmes, *His Last Bow*

Before I began writing my own mystery story, I realized that I needed more information than just what type of characters to have and what subgenre to write in. I needed to know more specifics about typical characteristics of the genre. The characteristics of a genre can be as broad as how many pages, what the title is, and how many chapters there are. However, characteristics can also be as specific as what kinds of conflict are typical or how that conflict can be resolved.

From my antecedent knowledge of mystery novels, I know that most titles include something about the crime, a sort of foreshadowing tool. Take the Nancy Drew or Sherlock Holmes novels, for example. In order to further analyze the common characteristics in this genre of mystery novels, I made up a chart with several questions (Figure 3). To gain a broad perspective of the genre I chose the first book in the series of three different types of novels: Nancy Drew, *The Secret of the Old Clock*; *Pretty Little Liars*; and Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*.

What this question chart is stating is that even these three very different mystery novels still have a number of common characteristics. All three novels are the same subgenre; however, the plot lines are very different from one another. This shows how the mystery genre can be adapted in so many ways. Another similarity between the novels is the type of characters included. In each novel, at least one main character is working to solve the mystery at hand, but there are others that help make the story more interesting for the readers.

Question	The Secret of the Old Clock	Pretty Little Liars	A Study in Scarlet
What subgenre is the novel?	Hard-boiled—Nancy Drew is trying to solve the case without using the police for help.	Hard-boiled—the four girls try to solve their friend's murder without the help of the police since they think the police are involved in it.	Hard-boiled—Sherlock Holmes and Watson work together to solve the crime.
How many characters are included in the novel?	Nancy Drew is the main detective in this series but the novel is filled with minor characters, too.	There are five main characters that are in this book but there are multiple secondary characters that make the plot more interesting.	There are two main characters that are the sole crime detectives throughout the novel. However, like the other novels there are also secondary characters as well.
What types of characters are included in the novel?	The novel has a handful of secondary characters that help Nancy solve these mysteries, such as her friend Helen, who invited her to the camp where the mystery began.	There are a wide variety of characters based on each of Spencer, Emily, Hannah, and Aria's families, including mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters. There are additional characters, too, such as the infamous "A" who continues to taunt the girls.	The characters are all different to make the storyline interesting. However, the main characters Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are mentioned the most.
How does the novel conclude?	Nancy solves the mystery and the characters go back to happily living their lives.	This series is continuous so we do not know the conclusion of the mystery just yet.	The conclusion of this mystery is that Holmes explains how he solved the case to his partner Watson.

Figure 3: Chart of questions made to analyze the common characteristics in mystery novels.

"Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth." – Sherlock Holmes, *The Sign of Four*

After I figured out the basic characteristics of the genre, I brainstormed more about what I wanted for my mystery. I wanted it to be in the cozy subgenre with at least five characters, and I wanted to write something that would be "popular," in other words, something that would have broad appeal. I chose five characters because I wanted to have more personalities to develop with the story lines and more opportunity for conflict. I think the cozy subgenre is very popular today—many mystery and thriller novels and movies are set in that subgenre.

One of the things I learned from studying CHAT is that it's important to consider how a genre is talked about and how it's thought of in society. I believe that mysteries are extremely popular in today's society, and there are so many great original mystery novels that are increasing in popularity. I personally love the conventions of the genre, such as the suspense and the opportunity to share the struggles of the plot with the characters, and I think this plays a big part in why the audience loves the genre. This notion goes hand-in-hand with the CHAT term *socialization*, because socialization involves how readers interact with the mystery novels and one another, as well as how the novel influences and is influenced by social and cultural practices at the time. Mystery novels are great reads because the authors draw you as a reader into the story and use the clues to get you thinking and predicting the characters' next moves. Even beyond the text itself, many readers of novels end up interacting with other readers and discussing the books during and after they read them. They might even join Facebook groups or fan fiction websites to keep the interaction going.

Taking these terms into consideration, I discovered that a lot of work goes into writing in this genre. You can't just sit down and write about a murder or kidnapping and think it will make it to the *New York Times* Best Sellers List. I wanted my story to be directed to a target audience of young women, preferably high school to college readers. With this audience, I could draw on what I learned in my research about the genre, but I also had the freedom to make the plotline more relatable to my own life. This seems like something other authors probably think about too, because combining what you know about a genre with your own experience means not having to imagine too much, making the writing process easier and reading more enjoyable.

With a target audience in mind, I realized I then had to think about the *reception* of this genre, which is another term related to CHAT. Reception includes how the audience will think about the piece and how it's taken up by the culture the author has targeted. Using myself as an example with *Pretty Little Liars*, I know that many people in my age group have a positive perception of the novel series. I wanted to integrate that in my own writing, so I decided to include some elements from *Pretty Little Liars* that my peers enjoyed. I surveyed ten women in my age group and asked them what they particularly liked about the *Pretty Little Liars* novel series. My results are as follows (Figure 4).

Participant	Response
1	The suspense of the plot
2	The relationships built between characters
3	The action
4	The drama
5	The suspense
6	The crimes and how they're solved
7	The characters themselves
8	The suspense
9	The connection between the characters and the reader
10	The suspense

Figure 4: Survey taken on what readers like best about the Pretty Little Liars novel series.

From this survey I learned a lot about the reception of this particular genre. I now know that of the people I surveyed, four out of the ten love the suspense of the novel series, three out of the ten thought that the characters and their relationships were the best, and the other three people polled loved the action, the drama and the how the crimes are being solved. The survey ended up with results that were very interesting and helped me form a better idea of readers' reception of this particular mystery series. Now that I have a sense of key elements of reception at work in a mystery novel, I can include these elements to enhance the story that I am writing.

I have also learned in studying CHAT that what the audience thinks and says about your novel or genre in general determines the *trajectory* of the piece. Trajectory is defined as where the life of this genre leads. It's not just about who reads the novel, but who writes reviews of it, who talks about it to their friends, who posts about it on Facebook, and other activities that get discussion of the novel out into the world. Without a strong trajectory, a novel will not last and will slowly fade away without ever becoming popular. Knowing what I have learned about trajectory and reception, I believe the target audience that I chose for my story is spot on. With an audience of young adults, preferably girls, my story has the potential to have quite a trajectory. Teenage girls are famous for ruling social media sites, so if they enjoy my story enough to post about it, the audience will grow. If readers post great things about my story, then reviewers may take that into consideration and give me better reviews. It's a domino effect of how well the story will do in the public eye.

So with all of my research at hand, I started making decisions about my story. First, I determined that my characters would be a group of teenagers on vacation. I wanted to intertwine a clue aspect into my story as well, so I created one character as a villain while the others had to figure out who that villain is. I believe that this type of storyline has potential because the characters I will develop will be similar to characters from other successful examples of the genre.

"Nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person." – Sherlock Holmes, *Silver Blaze*

So there you have it, the genre of mystery in all of its complicated characteristics and conventions. OK, well, I suppose this is really just the tip of the mystery iceberg. I discovered a few important aspects and tried these out in my genre experiment, but I also realized that if I were going to publish a mystery novel, I'd need to do a lot more research and find out even more about this complex genre. This genre is more than just a story about a man or woman solving a crime, and through my research I found that mysteries are often deep, meaningful explorations of pain, suffering, and the search for justice. Mystery stories are more than just a "beach read" or a novel for a book report; mysteries are written to involve the readers, to change the way they think. There are so many aspects of this genre to analyze by looking at characteristics and thinking about CHAT terms that it makes me appreciate mystery novelists and the great work they have accomplished so much more than I did previously.

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Caitlin Berek would like to dedicate this article to her grandfather, Frank Sidney Moyer, who helped her figure out the mystery of life. Caitlin is currently attending Illinois State University and majoring in Biological Sciences. She hopes to go on to medical school in Chicago to become an optometrist. When she's not spending her time analyzing genres, she's nose deep in science and loves every bit of it.

Story Summaries and Author's Notes and Reviews, Oh My!: The Activity System of Fan Fiction

By: Erika Romero

In this article, Romero explores how fan fictions function as activity systems, both as individual stories and on a website solely devoted to these fan texts. To help readers understand the various elements discussed in the article, its format has been designed to mimic that of a story on fanfiction.net.

Rated: S – English – General – Fan, Student – Chapters: 1 – Words: 4460 – Reviews: 12 – Favs: – Follows: – Published: Aug 1, 2015 – id: – Complete

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A/N: So one of my many assignments this semester was to write an article for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. Of course, I immediately knew I wanted to write about fan fiction, but I wasn't sure where to get started. So, my next step? Research, of course! Who was I to deny myself some time on fanfiction.net (the fan fiction website this article explores) for the greater good of a class assignment? After ~~reading~~ researching some stories, I realized just how many activities are involved when reading on this site, and *voilá*, an article topic appeared before my very eyes! "Activities → Activity Systems," my brain screamed at me. ENG 101 instructors at Illinois State University, myself included, often use this term, activity system, but what does it mean? While I can tell you the definition—a system of "goal-directed, historically situated, cooperative human interactions" that have specific subjects, tools, rules, and objectives (Russell 53)—I think applying it to an interesting genre (fan fiction!) will prove more satisfying. Fanfiction.net is one website that definitely qualifies as an activity system, but it builds on the systems within each individual story posted on the site, as well. So, without further ado, let's dive into one specific fan fiction and explore how the various components work together to create a so-called activity system.[1]

Have you ever wondered what happened to Dexter Morgan or Rory Gilmore after their shows ended? Do you wish [insert name here] survived the final battle in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*? Are you upset that Arthur Pendragon didn't find out about Merlin's magic until the last episode of the BBC series, *Merlin*? If your answer to any of these questions is yes, or if you can think of any other book, television show, movie, video game, or other text that you would change if you could, then fan fiction is here to make your wishes come true. If you don't know what fan fiction is, just ask any search engine and you'll get thousands of results about what it is and

where you can find some to read (or write). Basically, fan fictions are stories written by fans that explore "what if" situations, like filling in plotline gaps or creating alternate universes where an event from the original storyline does not occur or happens differently, changing the rest of the plot. For the sake of space and time, I can't discuss all the sites that have fan fiction here, so as I mentioned above, I'm going to focus on one particular site, fanfiction.net, as it is well known and often used by the global fan fiction community.[2] I also won't be able to describe the site as a whole, as explaining every facet of the site would require all the pages of this journal. Instead, this article explores the components that make up a fanfiction.net fan fiction, as readers must juggle multiple elements when interacting with fan texts on this and other fan fiction-focused sites. As I mentioned in the author's note (A/N) above, this site is an example of an activity system, one in which "people, texts, tools, and rules [. . .] work together to achieve a particular objective" (Sheets 134). I've included a diagram of an activity system below. I have intentionally made the illustration quite simple to reflect the limitations of fanfiction.net. This particular site does not allow writers to attach or paste image into their stories. If writers wish to incorporate an image, however, they might produce one similar to the following diagram.
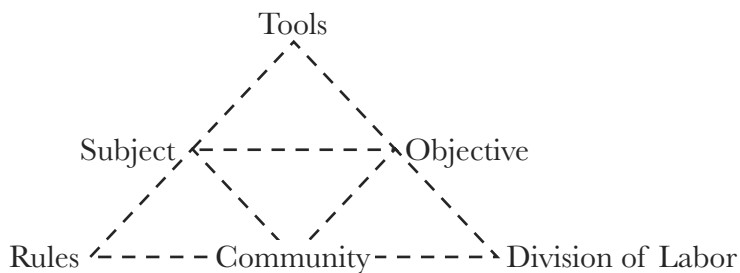
Figure 1: Diagram of an activity system.

If you'd like to experience our fan fiction activity system exploration firsthand, complete the following instructions now. For those who'd rather just read about it without going to the website, this article includes some screen shots of the example text, so you can keep track of the various components. To find the specific story I'm analyzing, follow these steps:

1. Find and turn on a device that has access to the Internet.
2. Open your Internet browser.
3. Type in fanfiction.net into the address bar. Press enter.
4. On the site's home page, the search bar appears on the top right of the screen. Change the search category from "Story" to "Writer."
5. Type in the username "Lynse." Hit enter.
6. Click on "Lynse." You'll be taken to her profile.

7. Scroll down until you find the story titled *Intentions*.

8. Click the title. The story web page will open.

(Note: The process I just described is one of the fastest ways to find a specific story. However, it is exactly that: just *one* way, not the "correct" way. Searching for a new story to read involves a completely different set of steps. For that process, the home page is a great starting point; just click on one of the categories—Anime/Manga, Books, Cartoons, Comics, Games, Misc, Movies, Plays/Musicals, TV Shows—and find the fandom you want to explore.)

At this point, some of you are on the site and some of you are just reading this article. In either case, let's start exploring an actual fan fiction story. What's misleading about the definition of this term is the assumption that it consists solely of the story—the plotline a writer has decided to create for his or her readers. This belief does not hold true in reality, however, as this site both imitates and plays with other genres. Genre, in this specific case and for the purposes of ENG 101 at Illinois State University, is defined as "any type of specific textual production that you can examine as a unique example of some kind of communication, created in response to situational requirements" (Illinois State University Writing Program 3). For example, consider a novel that you've checked out from a library or bought at a bookstore. Does it only consist of the story being told? No, it likely has a book cover, a table of contents, a blurb on the back cover, and perhaps an audience age range listed, if it's marketed towards children or young adults. These are examples of the genres that make up a book, as each communicates different information (or perhaps different versions of the same information), due to the situations that require them. Is the book extremely long? Perhaps a short, exciting blurb summarizing it will attract readers. The table of contents can help them keep track of when different plot points occur. The age range can signal the difficulty or ease of the story's language. Reading a book, then, doesn't only involve reading the story; it is just one element in the activity system of reading.

Nonetheless, readers can choose to skip certain elements, like the blurb, and go straight to the first chapter. This jumping around is more difficult with fan fiction, though, due to the way the digital medium affects the activity system. When searching for a story to read on fanfiction.net, you cannot skip the blurbs, which are referred to as summaries, because the stories are listed by their summaries, not just their titles (Figure 2). In addition, the summaries don't just include the writer's short description of the story, but also multiple data points that help readers decide whether or not they want to give the story a chance.

Figure 2: *Merlin* fan fiction story list, found by doing a story search for "Merlin" on fanfiction.net.

As I mentioned in my first endnote (are you reading them?), the beginning of this article is formatted to mimic a fan fiction summary, along with the data points that are still applicable for this article.[3] This article is rated 'S' for student, for example, and its main characters are fans and students.[4] As part of the fan fiction's activity system, summaries involve their own tools (words and data points), rules (character limit), and objectives (enticing readers to read the full story). Some readers might decide to only use the title, writer's username, and data points to decide which stories to read (similar to only using the title, author's name, and age range to choose a book), instead of reading the full summaries. This is a very inefficient approach to this site, however, considering there are over a million stories to choose from. Yes, you read that correctly. Over a million stories are currently on fanfiction.net, with *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fan fiction alone almost making up the first million. By excluding certain genres in the activity system, these readers are hindering their ability to fully engage with the fan fiction and the community. Likewise, if the writers don't take part in the full activity system, creating only the data points but not a written summary, for example, they limit their chances of gaining readers. But even if a halfhearted approach is taken, you can't escape the summary, because once a story is chosen and opened, the first story element that appears underneath the website header is the summary, not the story itself. Take, for example, Lynse's *Merlin* fan fiction story, *Intentions*. Once a reader opens the story's web page, the following information appears at the top of the page (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Story summary of *Intentions*, a fan fiction written by Lynse on fanfiction.net, accessible via www.fanfiction.net/s/9030577/1/Intentions.

Readers can interact with multiple components of this activity system element. You can click on the writer's username and go to her profile page, which includes whatever information she provides about herself as well as links to all her stories. You can click the story rating to see what qualifies as a "K+" story.[5] You can click on the number of her reviews, which takes you to where all her reviews are compiled in a list by chapter and date submitted. Finally, you can click on the "Follow/Fav" button, which allows you to set reminders for when a chapter is uploaded (follow story) and/or when the writer uploads any story (follow writer) or bookmark the story and/or writer in your profile (favorite story/favorite writer). Keep in mind, this button only appears if you are a member of this site, which you can become by clicking the "Sign Up" option on the top right corner of each of the site's web pages.

While you now know how the various interactive aspects of the story summary work, it is also important to know that covert meanings are often included in the written summary itself. Lynse's summary for *Intentions* is short, giving readers just enough information to get them interested in the story line. However, it's the information after her rhetorical question that illustrates multiple subtle, but extremely important, functions of summaries that are not immediately evident to new members of the activity system. First, consider Lynse's statement that there is "no slash" in this story. Slash is one of the many slang words used by the fan fiction community. A slash story is one where a romantic relationship between two men is central to the plotline (femslash is the term used for female same-sex couples). So, in this case, the phrase "no slash" lets readers know straight away (pun intended?) that the following story does not feature homosexual relationships. At this point, you might be wondering, why does she feel the need to mention this in the summary? While some might turn this into a discussion of homophobia (which is one possible reason, if not in this story, then in others), it is more likely that she includes this statement because Merlin/Arthur slash fan fiction is quite prevalent in the community, and therefore she can prevent readers from being disappointed (one way or the other) and leaving angry reviews by warning them in advance. Next, she writes, "possible reveal fic," which is another signal to readers who have strong preferences on whether or not Arthur Pendragon should find out about Merlin's magic in the story. Once again, she uses her summary as a warning to readers, attempting to help them decide whether or not to read her story.

Lastly, in the story summary, Lynse lets readers know that a sequel is currently on the site as well. These two words, "sequel posted," tell those familiar with fan fiction more than a novice member might first assume. Is it just her attempt to advertise another story? No, not completely, because by including this information, the writer signals that while this story is labeled as complete, it might not feel complete, as there is another story that follows it, one that might be unfinished. This is important, as it once again illustrates that the writer cares about her readers' feelings when reading her story, enough for her to take the time to update the summary of a completed work. This story summary consists of two short sentences, a rhetorical question, and three short warnings. Depending on the readers' familiarity with fan fiction, the amount of meaning created by this summary varies greatly, illustrating how just one element of the fan fiction story's activity system strongly affects the reading experience. It also shows that the character limit rule of this genre—story summaries are limited to 384 characters, around the size of three Tweets—does not necessarily limit the amount of information the author can provide to readers.

Now that the story summary has been explored and analyzed, we can finally get to the fan fiction story itself, right? Well, the answer to this is actually "No," because most stories on this site have an "author's note" before the story itself begins. For those of you not following along on fanfiction.net, here is the author's note for *Intentions* (Figure 4).

A/N: This story takes place within the three years between series four and five, though there's a possibility that I'll end up with a story that disregards series five. I still haven't decided yet. That will all depend on how successful Arthur is, I suppose. But I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's just safely say this story is set after *The Sword in the Stone: Part Two*, shall we? Also, if anyone's wondering, no slash, any spells that show up over the course of the story will be taken from the *Merlin* wiki page, and the young boy who starts off this tale will disappear back into the woodwork once we get into the meat of the story.

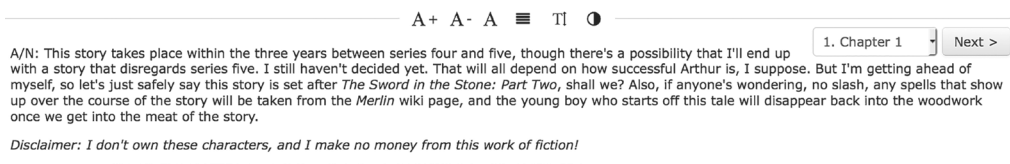*Disclaimer: I don't own these characters, and I make no money from this work of fiction!*

Figure 4: Author's note for *Intentions*, a fan fiction written by Lynse on fanfiction.net, accessible via www.fanfiction.net/s/9030577/1/Intentions.

Like my author's note at the beginning of this article, this author's note lets the reader know this paragraph isn't part of the story by labeling it "A/N." Some fan writers use different forms of this abbreviation or the full term, depending on their personal preferences. Others use visual cues instead, bolding, underlining, or italicizing the author's note, distinguishing it from the story that follows. Likewise, the information provided by the authors differs depending on what they feel they need to impart to their readers. Why not just include this information in the summary? Because the character limit rule of that genre restricts them. By placing an author's note after the summary and before the story, these writers have found a way around the rules of the site. There is also the possibility that they are familiar with another popular fan fiction website, archiveofourown.org, which has a separate section for an author's note built into the page layout.

Whatever the reason, most stories have an author's note, even if it is just used for purposes of the disclaimer. Figure 4 shows Lynse's disclaimer, and most stories on fanfiction.net have a variation of this statement. Disclaimers let readers know that the writers don't own the characters or texts that they are basing their stories on. Why bother letting the reader know that they don't own them or profit from their stories? Isn't that pretty obvious? Disclaimers are an unwritten rule of fan fiction, an attempt to protect writers from copyright infringement. However, due to a few recent publications, like the *50 Shades of Grey* trilogy (based on the author's *Twilight* fan fiction), and Kindle Worlds, where fan fiction can be published for profit, disclaimers are not as prevalent as they were a few years ago. For this reason, the other information provided in the author's note is likely of primary importance to writers and readers, as it often provides additional warnings about what readers can expect to see in the story. Some writers also use their notes to explain why they are writing their stories or how often readers can expect a new chapter.

For the purposes of our analysis, how does Lynse's author's note affect, or try to affect, the reader's reading experience? She begins by placing her story in the television series' timeline, explaining that it takes place between season four and five of *Merlin*. She takes the time to warn readers that she might discount season five in her story. This is another example of how meaning-making occurs differently depending on the specific activity system, as the distance between the TV series' plot and her own might upset some readers. Once again, this writer is making writing decisions that help ensure her readers have a high chance of enjoying her work, since some prefer fan stories that keep the show's plotlines largely intact. As I mentioned earlier, filling a gap in a text's plot is a major reason why fans write and read fan fiction. This brings us to two more terms used by the fan fiction community (and fandoms in general): canon and fanon. In the fan fiction activity system, canon refers to the "original" storylines that fans adapt in their own stories.[6] So, for example, a fan writer might explain in his/her author's note that s/he is not including the *canon* couple of Arthur Pendragon and Guinevere, but the *fanon* couple of Arthur and Merlin. Fanon can be loosely defined to include any plot that occurs in a fan fiction story, but it is more often used to describe plot lines that largely reoccur in fan fiction stories, like the Arthur/Merlin relationship in the *Merlin* fandom. Once again, familiarity with the community that surrounds the fan fiction is an important factor when navigating this system.

In Lynse's case, the majority of her author's note focuses on letting the readers know which areas of canon she is and isn't diverging from in her story. At the end, her last statement before her disclaimer assures the reader that the unknown character whose point of view begins this story is not a main character. I say *assure* for a very specific reason, one that originates once again from my understanding of the fan fiction community. Original characters (referred to as OCs) are characters that writers create and include in their fan fiction stories; they are not

part of the canon, but the writer's specific fanon. Unfortunately for this specific story, OCs are not well liked by a large number of fan fiction readers; many will refuse to read a story that has characters not at the very least mentioned in the canon texts. This is why the final piece of information Lynse provides in her note isn't just a fact about the story—the unknown boy is not a main character—but a promise to readers that the OC will not be there to bother them for long. Instead of another warning, this is a plea to give her story a chance and not stop when they immediately encounter an unfamiliar character. They just need to get past the first chapter, she promises. By using her knowledge of the fan fiction activity system when writing both her story summary and author's note, Lynse increases her readership numbers, her readers' chances of enjoying the story, and the likelihood of receiving positive reviews. As her objective for publishing fan fiction is likely to get as many readers and positive reviews as possible, the decisions she makes for every element of her text goes towards meeting this hoped-for outcome.

Having explored the story summary, data points, and author's note, we've finally reached the largest element of the reading experience: the fan fiction story. The stories, of course, vary depending on many factors, including (but not limited to): the author's reasons for writing, writing style, age, gender, sexuality, country of origin, and language knowledge. The length of the story and its chapters, the time between updates, if it's ever completed, and more are all story characteristics that depend upon the individual writer's circumstances. Because the whole story need not be published all at once, the power dynamics in this system favors the writer over the reader. Readers often become attached to stories that take years to finish, if they are finished at all. Some uncompleted stories are "adopted" by a reader and completed by this fan of the fan texts, but this isn't that common of a practice.[7] Fanfiction.net does have features that give readers the opportunity to limit their negative experiences on the site. Consider Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Filter options on fanfiction.net.

These filter options, which appear at the top of the story summaries list, allow readers to limit the stories in the list by their word length, their status as complete or in progress, their main characters, their rating, their language, and/or their "genre." Keep in mind, the use of the word genre in the fan fiction community differs from the Illinois State University Writing Program's definition. In fan fiction, the genres listed in the filters are categories that help classify the story's plotline, similar to when categorizing movies or books by genres like "comedy" and "tragedy." In this case, the author is asked to specify if his or her story focuses on friendship, horror, romance, humor, or any of the other twenty-one genres listed. In this way, readers have some control over what the site offers them; instead of needing to search through thousands or hundreds of thousands of stories centered on plotline types that don't interest them (I'll pass on any "Western" *Harry Potter* fan fictions), they can narrow down the list to those that have the most potential to meet their interests. In addition, the filter options match multiple data points that appear in the story summary, forming another connection in the fan fiction activity system.

There is one final written element that plays a role in this system, and it is one that also offers some control to the readers: reviews. Once the reader reaches the bottom of his or her screen, s/he has finished reading the chapter and is now staring at a blank textbox, just waiting to be used (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Review textbox.

If the reader is not a member of the site, or just not logged in, s/he has the option of including a name or username as part of the review. If logged in, the username automatically appears beneath the review textbox. Reviews have no character or number limit, so readers can send brief or detailed comments or critiques about each chapter, and they are often encouraged to do so by the writers in their summaries and author's notes (or by a final

"Please Review" included after each chapter ends). Writers may also ask their readers if they are interested in becoming a "beta" or "beta reader," someone who edits their chapters and offers suggestions for improvements. In this way, the division of labor component of this activity system does not solely fall on the writers of the stories. Readers' suggestions sent through reviews or private messages can influence future chapters. Likewise, beta readers can offer suggestions to a story's organization or plotline in addition to grammar and syntax edits. Both the writers and readers can see story reviews, though they only appear in the story's immediate activity system as a numeric data point. Readers can click on this number and go to a new page with all the reviews listed in chronological order, with the most recent appearing first. This option gives readers the chance to look behind the scenes and trace if any future plot points were affected by the reviews.

Some authors admit to being influenced by reviewers in their author's notes, but others leave that to the reader to research if they feel the need. Through reviews, the line between writer and reader becomes blurred, making this final element an integral one in the activity system. In order to continue mimicking a fan fiction story, I've included this article's version of reviews: my editors' feedback (Figure 7). Due to the difference in medium, you'll have to imagine that you've clicked the **12** in my article's summary in order to see this final image.

Comment: I don't think you need to talk about other sites, like Editor 1 suggested, but you should probably mention a bit earlier that you're ONLY going to talk about "fanfiction.net" so that your readers don't expect a wider range of subject matter.

Comment: I don't have too much to say overall, which is a good thing! My main concern is the large number of footnotes. You may want to consider changing these to endnotes as to not continuously distract the reader in the middle of the essay. That, and you may want to consider moving some of those notes into the body of the article, as a few of them (mentioned in previous comments) would work well incorporated in the actual text. Overall, this is a pretty "finished" article in my opinion.

Figure 7: Feedback on an early draft of my *GWRJ* article, written by assistant editors.

I received these two reviews after turning in my second draft; both of them affected the final version of this article. Due to the comment on the left, I added the fact that fanfiction.net was my sole focus to my author's note. Due to the one on the right, I made my footnotes into endnotes and lowered their number from nineteen to seven (by deleting a few and adding the rest into the body of the article). These reviews, among others, led to changes in this article, but it was left for me to decide whether or not I'd take my readers' advice when revising. Such is the case for fan fiction, but with one major difference: while I needed to make

changes in order to get this article published, fan fiction writers are only limited by the rules of the site, not the suggestions of their reviewers. Site administrators can take down stories they feel break the rules given to the writers (acting outside of the genre's situational requirements can lead to harsh repercussions), but they cannot require writers to change elements of their stories in order to have them published in the first place. This is just one difference between fan fiction and an article about fan fiction and one example of how the rules and objectives of different activity systems guide the subject's writing decisions.

If someone attempted to map the entirety of fanfiction.net's activity system, she or he would need a lot more time and space than I have here. However, while the building blocks of this system can be perceived as the subjects (writers and readers) who are trying to meet their objectives for writing and reading fan texts, there is also the possibility of seeing the fan fictions themselves as the foundational elements of this global system. Taking this second approach, I've broken down the components and genres that make up a fan fiction's activity system. If a fan is inspired to become a writer of fan fiction, and that individual author's goal is to spread his or her stories and gain as many readers as possible, then each element of the fan text—its summary, data points, author's note, chapter, and reviews—must be considered and combined together in order to achieve this objective. I've only explored the first chapter of one story on fanfiction.net, as *Intentions* has fourteen chapters and its sequel has thirty-five. There is plenty left to discover about this story's activity system and that of others on this site. This article is just a first step on a very long journey. I hope you continue it now that this ~~fan fiction~~ article has come to an end.

Endnotes

[1]For those of you unfamiliar with fan fiction, you should know that this article imitates its format, starting with a story summary, then an author's note (A/N), followed by the actual story (the main body of my article), and ending with reviews (Figure 7). Even parenthetical notes like the one after the instructions to find *Intentions* can be found in fanfiction.net stories.

[2]Why am I introducing the site here, when I already did so in the A/N? Like many fan fiction community members, some readers of this article might skip the author's note and go straight into the story, or in this case, article.

[3]For the other articles in this journal, the summary takes the form of an abstract instead, which illustrates the fluid boundaries between genres.

[4]"General" is one of the options of fanfiction.net, as this data point is used to signal the focus of the story (for example: adventure, romance, hurt/comfort, horror, etc.). "Published" lets the reader know when it was first put on the website (or the first draft completed, in my case), and "updated" shows when the latest chapter was uploaded (or when my article was officially completed).

[5]"Suitable for more mature children, 9 years and older, with minor action violence without serious injury. May contain mild coarse language. Should not contain any adult themes."

[6]I use quotations around original because a lot of these texts are themselves adaptations, including the television show, *Merlin*. Other examples are TV shows and movies based off of comic books, like *Arrow* and *The Avengers*.

[7]Another interesting fact: Most community members consider it unacceptable for a reader to continue an unfinished story without the writer's permission. Beliefs about who owns a text are more complicated than they first appear.

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You've Got Mail: Researching and Analyzing the Genre of Postcards

Samantha Ginzburg

In this article, Samantha Ginzburg examines how postcards can be much more than a souvenir. By exploring the history and trajectories of postcards, she suggests that the postcard is actually a complex genre and that even when a genre may look simple, there is often more to it. Ginzburg concludes by sharing how re-creating a genre helped her become a better researcher and writer.

Whenever I go on vacation, I always go to the lobby shop of the hotel I am staying in to look for a postcard to send home to a friend. Although sending postcards is not as popular as it used to be, it has grown into a tradition for my family and me. Since I really did not know much about postcards, I decided to do some research so I could become more familiar with how postcards came to be and how they differ from similar genres.

Researching Postcard History

My first step in researching the history of postcards was doing a Google search. One of the first things I found was an article that tied postcards to my heritage. I discovered that historians can determine what happened in the past by examining postcards. This is how Galit Hasan-Rokem, a Hebrew Literature professor, examined the history of Jewish culture. I found "Mobility in a Modern Genre: Jews and Postcards" particularly interesting because I am of Jewish descent, and surprisingly, studying this genre has helped me learn about my own culture. Hasan-Rokem was able to study the Jewish culture

all the way back to the early twentieth century through postcards. Earlier postcards showed more of a historical overview of religion in the Jewish culture. As Galit studied more modern postcards, she discovered that some postcards depicted how men and women shared a balance in work and labor. It was completely unexpected that I would find an article relating to Jewish culture when doing a simple Google search for the history of postcards. I anticipated articles relating to traveling and how postcards became important to those who traveled in the past, but I found that there is much more to this genre than I expected.

I continued my research using the Internet and found several more articles about the history of postcards. Cards, in general, have been around for thousands of years, but the first known postcard dates back only to 1840. Theodore Hooke, an English writer, was the first person to post a picture postcard. John Charlton then patented postcards in 1861. The year 1908 could certainly be considered a good year for postcard production because over seven million postcards were sent out in the United States (*Emotions*). Today, that may not seem like a lot, but back in 1908, it certainly was. Postcards began as ads that were mailed out. This was a good way to advertise because postcards were cheaper to mail than regular mail. The time period when postcards were mostly used as advertisements is known as the Pioneer Era. Both advertisement and regular postcards during this era looked different than the ones we are familiar with today. For example, they did not include a line down the middle separating the address from the message. Another difference was that people were not allowed to write on the side of the postcard that included the address. Instead, they had to write over the picture, so their messages were even more limited than what they are on today's postcards.

Companies were thrilled about the invention of the postcard, but they did not sell well to consumers at first. People did not like the fact that postmen could read the messages they wrote, but as people eventually realized that postcards were cheaper to send, they began to appeal more to consumers ("A History of Picture Postcards"). This is something that is still true today—people are always looking for a way to save some money. This may actually contribute to the reason that postcards have lost some of their popularity today, however, because it is cheaper to send an e-mail or a text message. Economics play a big role in how we communicate with others.

It is important to keep in mind that postcards did not appear overnight. Greeting cards, lithographs, and envelopes with pictures on them are all examples of antecedent genres that influenced the creation of the postcard. Lithographs are classified as small cards made of wood

or paper (*Art History*). Unsurprisingly, small cards made of wood were not a very effective means of communication. They were large, bulky, and inconvenient. Making postcards a bit smaller and thinner made them much easier to mail.

The White Border Period of postcards occurred from 1915 to 1930. This era is known for the white border around the picture on a postcard, which helped save money on ink. Since this era happened right after World War I, companies in the United States did not have a lot of money to spend on printing cards, so the white border made postcards more cost-effective. Yet around this same time, many people lost interest in sending postcards because movies were becoming popular. More time spent going to the movies meant less time spent sending postcards to friends. The competition for visual entertainment pushed postcards to the back of people's minds and, consequently, postcard companies struggled (*Emotions*).

In the early 1930s, postcards became more popular again because creators began printing them on linen cloth. This made the colors more vibrant and caught the eye of the consumer more effectively. This led to the modern photochrome era of postcards, in which postcards have pictures that are the closest they have come to actual full-color photographs.

As World War II began, postcards' popularity decreased due to supply shortages, but they quickly regained popularity once the supply shortages ended. Around this time, all other postcard companies either merged with the photochrome postcard companies or went out of business. Postcards continue to be very popular today and it seems unlikely they will ever disappear. They have become a tradition to many families, including mine, and make a great souvenir to send to someone to let them know they are being thought of while the sender is away (*Art History*).

Exploring Types of Postcards

Another important factor to keep in mind when researching a genre is how many subgenres it includes. In my research, I've found five types of postcards. They include view cards, greeting cards, historical cards, art cards, and photographic cards. View cards are postcards that have images of a place that has changed over time or no longer exists. Historians like to examine these cards because not only do they get to analyze a picture of something they would have not otherwise seen, but they also get to read the message and possibly see what the place was like when the consumer purchased the card. Greeting cards are postcards designed for sending greetings for
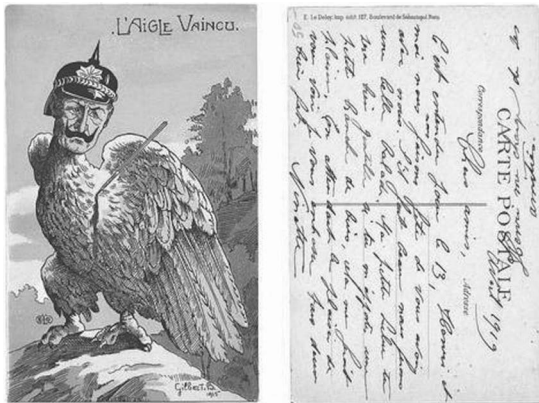
Figure 1: An example of a historical card showing World War I propaganda, found via online collectibles store Vicmart at www.vicmart.com/i-2638-wwi-france-anti-german-propaganda-postcard.html.

a specific event or holiday. These postcards used to be sent for every holiday, but as demand died down, selection has become limited mostly to postcards for major holidays and birthdays. However, some people may choose to use any postcard as a greeting card by writing a sentimental message like "Happy Birthday" or "Get well soon" on the postcard, while still indicating from where they are writing. Historical cards focus mainly on events and social norms. If you were to find a postcard with war propaganda on the front (Figure 1), it would be an example of a historical card. Art cards are the most wanted among postcard collectors. They are actual pieces of art and run at much higher values. These cards display prints of artwork rather than photography. Photographic cards are also known as photographic art cards. These cards include photography that would be recognized as art (*Art History*).

Tracing Trajectory

Although postcards were not originally used for what they are today, most people would say the purpose of a postcard is to send a message to a friend or loved one while they are away from home. However, postcards have many different uses. They can be used as evidence for historians and scientists to examine. They can be collected by avid collectors, which is known as deltiology (*Emotions*).

In some cases, postcards can also be used as sociological historic evidence. Researcher Jeanne van Eeden collected a group of old postcards from West Africa for examination because she wanted to get a better idea of what tourism in Africa was like in the past. She found that postcards often depicted the whites as ruling the land. It was often white people who were in the pictures on the front of the postcards (van Eeden 602). According to van Eeden, many things can be determined by looking at an old postcard, including technology, nature, landscapes, and tourist activity of the time (601).

Other research examines postcards from a very different perspective than van Eeden's historical study. Wei-Jen Chen and several other researchers

published a study that looked at whether sending a "crisis postcard" to people who had attempted suicide before would make them less likely to reattempt. The people in the study received small postcards that gave tips on how to cope with suicidal thoughts and support to help prevent another suicide attempt. The cards were small enough to fit in a pocket so they could be taken anywhere. Unfortunately, the results showed that the postcard had little to no effect (Chen et al).

The trajectory of postcards now extends far beyond mailed cards sent between people who already know one another. Today, people even send postcards online—and to total strangers. The blog PostSecret was created in January 2005 by Frank Warren. People anonymously create postcards telling their deepest, darkest secrets and mail them to the PostSecret address, then Warren posts them on the PostSecret blog for people to read. Warren says he got the idea for this blog one night in Paris, France, where

Figure 2: A screenshot of a postcard from the PostSecret website.

he had purchased a few postcards and put them in a nightstand next to his bed. He had a dream where he was examining the postcards with messages written on them. He then re-created the postcards he had seen in his dream and released them to the public. Not too long after, he created the PostSecret community so other people could create their own postcards. The blog went viral, and now every Sunday, Warren posts pictures of the postcards he receives. This form of a postcard has a completely different trajectory from a typical postcard. Instead of relaying a message to one person via mail, the message is posted to the world via the internet and is done so anonymously. In addition, taking the trajectory of the anonymous postcards a step further (and back to print), Warren has even had books of the postcards published.
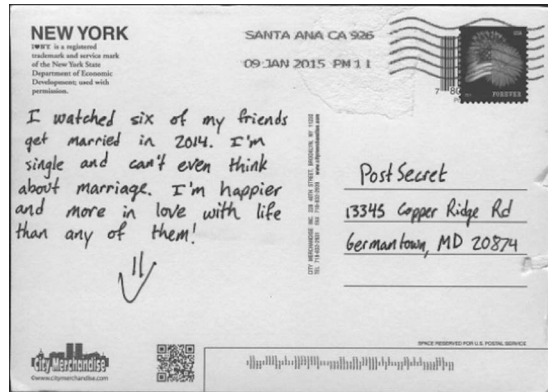
Uncovering My Research Process

You may be wondering how I know so much about postcards. I obviously was not born knowing all of this information, so I had to do some intense research in order to be as knowledgeable as I am about postcards. My first step, as many other college students can relate to, was Google. I simply typed "postcards" in the search bar. I found a lot of relevant information, including articles that gave me information on the history of postcards.

I then decided to go to the Milner website and look for scholarly journal articles. I searched the terms "postcards" and "history" and found the two articles that related to the trajectory of postcards, which were the van Eeden article and the psychological study article. I also examined a few postcards I had sent my friend over the years that she had happened to keep. This helped me understand the general guidelines of postcards, but also how there is not a set standard. Some of the cards were the average four-by-six-inch rectangle, while others were cut into shapes. For example, one of the postcards was shaped like a turtle. The postcards I looked at on PostSecret also had variations.

Producing a New Genre

I decided to create my own postcard (Figure 3) to further understand the process of making one, which meant I had to do more research in order to create a genre that I had never created before. I have sent postcards to my friends, so I decided to look at those as examples. I also searched the terms "postcard" and "template" in Google images, and I found some guidelines to reference. According to the United States Postal Service website, a postcard has to be approximately four by six inches ("Sizes for Postcards"). I then noticed on all of the examples of postcards I reviewed that there were lines on the left side for a message and lines on the right side for an address. There were obviously fewer lines on the right side so I kept that in mind when creating the back of my postcard (Figure 4). I also decided to include a divider between the message and address and an area to place a stamp. The easiest way to do all of this was simply in a Microsoft Word document. For the picture, I wanted to have a place that was important to me. My family and I always used to vacation in Maine. I included a picture of the ocean in Maine as the front of

Figure 3: The front of the postcard I created.
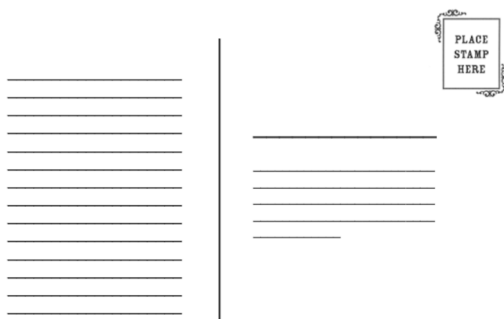
Figure 4: The back of the postcard I created.

my postcard. Although not all postcards include text on the picture, I decided to write something so the postcard stood out a little more. I included "Greetings

. . . From Maine" on the front so it was obvious as to where the postcard was coming from. After designing everything on Microsoft Word, I printed it out and attached the front and back side together to create a homemade postcard. By creating my own postcard, I learned that every genre, no matter how simple it seems, has specific requirements and takes time to create.

Connecting to CHAT

Representation, distribution, socialization, and production are a few terms that are involved in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Examining aspects of CHAT helps break down the necessary elements to re-create a genre. By creating a CHAT map, I was able to understand why I was creating a postcard and what use it would be if I were to actually distribute it.

CHAT can be used to help investigate any genre. It essentially helps researchers to analyze the complex elements that make up the foundation of a genre. We can also use CHAT to examine why we use genres and what goes into the production of them. Anyone can interrogate and gain more in-depth and nuanced understanding of a genre, no matter how complicated, using CHAT, so if you are ever stuck on a project or even in a real-world situation, CHAT can help you figure out where to start and how to reach your goal.

Representation

In her article "Just CHATting," Joyce Walker argues that representation "highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it . . ." (75). Location is a key factor in determining what goes on a postcard. Companies that create postcards probably create more postcards to sell for popular tourist spots such as Disneyland than they do for, say, Lincoln, Nebraska. Furthermore, the message that is handwritten in the postcard is determined by the audience to whom the consumer is sending the postcard. Decisions related to representation lead to the success or failure of a postcard—in this case, success might be measured by how many of a given postcard are actually purchased and sent through the mail. When I created my postcard, I envisioned a postcard that would be sent from one of my favorite vacation spots and planned to find an image that would clearly represent that location to anyone who might send or receive my postcard. At that point, I could begin the process of actually producing the postcard.

Production

Production is important to bring a genre from a thought to a product. Many things are required for a professional-looking postcard. You would need a graphic designer to design the template and edit the photo on a computer

program. You would also need a photographer to take a nice picture for the front of the postcard, which would require a camera. Finally, you would need the right type of cardstock and a quality printer and ink to print the finished product. After production, the process leads to distribution.

Distribution

Distribution is how a genre is dispersed among consumers and readers. Being aware of appropriate places for distribution helps get postcards to the proper audience. Postcard companies produce and distribute their products to a variety of places ranging from hotel gift shops and tourist sites to gas stations. According to the Travel Channel, the most popular vacation spots include places like Paris, France; New York, New York; Rome, Italy; and Cancun, Mexico ("Top 10 Vacation Spots"). Since these cities are always drawing in tourists, odds are that many postcard companies distribute their products for sale in these locations. The type of postcard distributed at a given location may vary. For example, many (though not all) postcards at Disneyland are more kid-friendly than those sold in Las Vegas. Of course, as I demonstrated, it is also possible to create your own postcard to distribute to a friend via the mail, as long as you follow the appropriate postal guidelines.

Socialization

Socialization is the interaction among people from the time the genre is in production through its use. Postcard companies send postcards to stores, where they are purchased by consumers. Consumers then interact with their chosen audience by writing a message on the postcard they purchased and mailing it. Sending a postcard is a kind gesture. A lot of people send postcards to family members or friends because postcards let loved ones know that even though people close to them are on vacation, they haven't been forgotten. However, some consumers also choose to purchase postcards and not send them to anyone. Sometimes they buy postcards to add to a scrapbook or collection. In this way, the postcard becomes more of a way of capturing a memory than of sending a message to someone else.

Conclusion

Although postcards have not been around for long, it appears as though they will not be going anywhere anytime soon. Online greetings may continue to gain popularity, but I do not think they will severely impact the postcard market. Although I am always connected to the technological world, I still like to pick up a postcard when I am on vacation and send it to a friend. Postcards are personal and material in a way that online cards are not.

Researching a genre that I was not familiar with helped me gain access to knowledge about writing and research that I would not have otherwise encountered. For anyone wishing to learn more about the writing process, I strongly suggest researching an unfamiliar genre, re-creating it, and writing about your experience. All in all, it helped me become a better writer.

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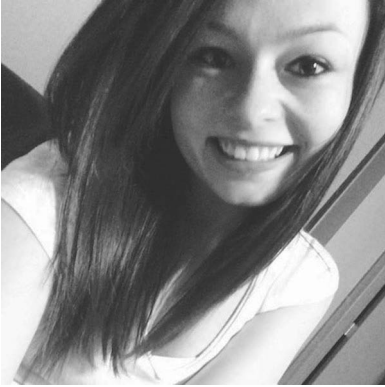
Samantha Ginzburg is currently a junior at Illinois State University majoring in nursing. Ginzburg loves spending time with her dogs, Bravo, Gracie, Carmen, and Quinn. When she's not watching *Grey's Anatomy*, *House M.D.*, or *Scandal*, she's usually at work at the cupcake shop Sweet Temptations.

When "Leaning In" Becomes "Falling on Your Face"

Vanessa Garcia
and Laura Skokan

Composing in a familiar genre becomes extremely complicated when switching into a leadership role. In this article, Vanessa Garcia and Laura Skokan team up to explore the challenges they faced in their new roles, while also addressing the genre of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article itself and how genres require a step away from the familiar. This interview examines these shifts through cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT).

This article is conducted as an interview. As the interviewer, I will adopt the convention of putting my questions in italic and speaking from a neutral position as if I were a non-entity (if the reader would be so kind as to mentally cross out the above "I" and "my," it would please the interviewer).

The two interviewees are Vanessa Garcia and Laura Skokan, each of whom recently worked to transfer knowledge as they changed positions within a literate activity system. Even though the compositions they created might be in the same genre as before, the tasks, concerns, and subgenres within that field are completely different. Vanessa went from composing a sketch show as an actor to being the director of one, and Laura composed the classroom genre as a student only to become the teacher. While this switch is the main focus of the interview, it should be noted that Vanessa was a 2013–14 *Grassroots* Undergraduate Writing Research Scholar, a coveted yearly scholarship where the recipient works with the journal to create an article. As is the case with most articles (*Grassroots* and others alike), Vanessa wrote multiple drafts. The interview will address the earlier stages she went through to get it here. This is the culmination of her work.

New Writing Activities

1. What sort of writing activities do you do now that you're the person in charge?

VANESSA: The writing activities I did for my sketch comedy show varied from writing comedic sketches to texting my cast about rehearsals. Many of the writing activities I did to get the sketch show on its feet included: putting up flyers for auditions of the show, making audition sheets for the people auditioning, posting the cast list through emails and Facebook, setting up and posting a rehearsal schedule, writing sketches/scripts, texting the actors and others involved to remind them about rehearsals, setting up a Facebook group for the cast, and designing programs/flyers and other pieces of information for the show.

LAURA: Oof. So many more than I originally thought. I have to come up with homework (the assignment itself and the actual written-out description), the projects (including revisions based on the students' needs), comments on homework, prompts for in-class activities (even when they're not written out for the class, I need to write them for myself). The syllabus. And I gathered examples of the kinds of texts that I need to create, which isn't physically writing, but is an activity thereof. I also have to determine if what I think is really cool is actually relevant, and, more importantly, marginally cool to an undergrad. You know, paying attention to its *Reception*.

2. How did you learn to do them? (What examples had you seen? What things did you have to modify in order to make your examples fit your needs?)

VANESSA: I have directed a couple of shows before this one and have been a committee head for other clubs, so I have gained a lot of knowledge on how to reach my cast members, audience, and the show itself. With past shows I have done, texting seemed to be the medium that reached my actors the fastest, so I took this into account for my sketch show.

LAURA: Yeah, deciding on the right vehicle for *Distribution* is so important to your message getting out there. When I would send a mass email to the students through ReggieNet, a lot of them would say they didn't get it. Whether or not that was true, I realized I needed a different vehicle to make sure information got out to everyone. The only thing I knew they all got was the homework (because they all had to make submissions). So that's where I put important non-homework-related information. When we had the library day, question three in the assignment was, "Tell me where we're meeting next class." Everyone showed up. The homework was an effective tool to use.

VANESSA: *Distribution* IS important! One of the things I noticed was how the tools, or the *Production* techniques you use, really impact the final product. For my sketch show we had made this really awesome program (Figures 1 and 2), and worked really hard to make it, but we realized that in order to make enough copies for everyone and have it in color, it was just going to cost more than we had. We had to resort to putting the information into Word documents and printing three on each page (Figure 3). This wasn't what we wanted at first and it impacted what originally we wanted to put out there, but I think the audience still responded well to the programs we gave them. It's weird to think of money as a tool and how much our tools (or lack thereof) changed what we were able to put out into the world.
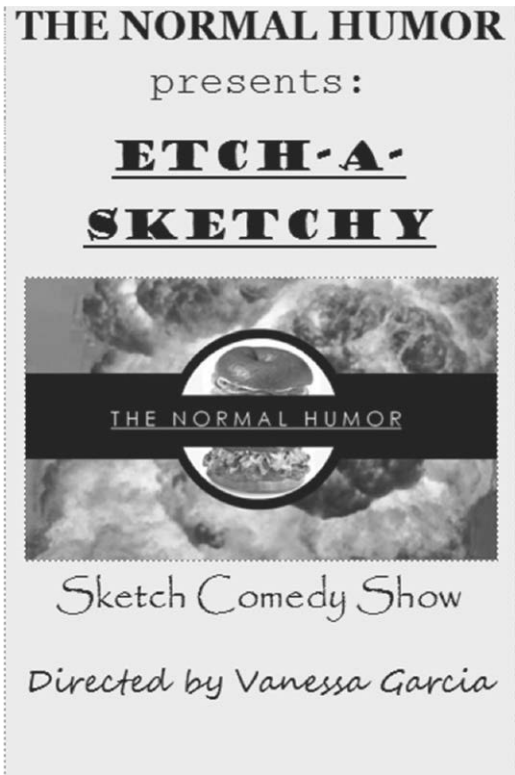

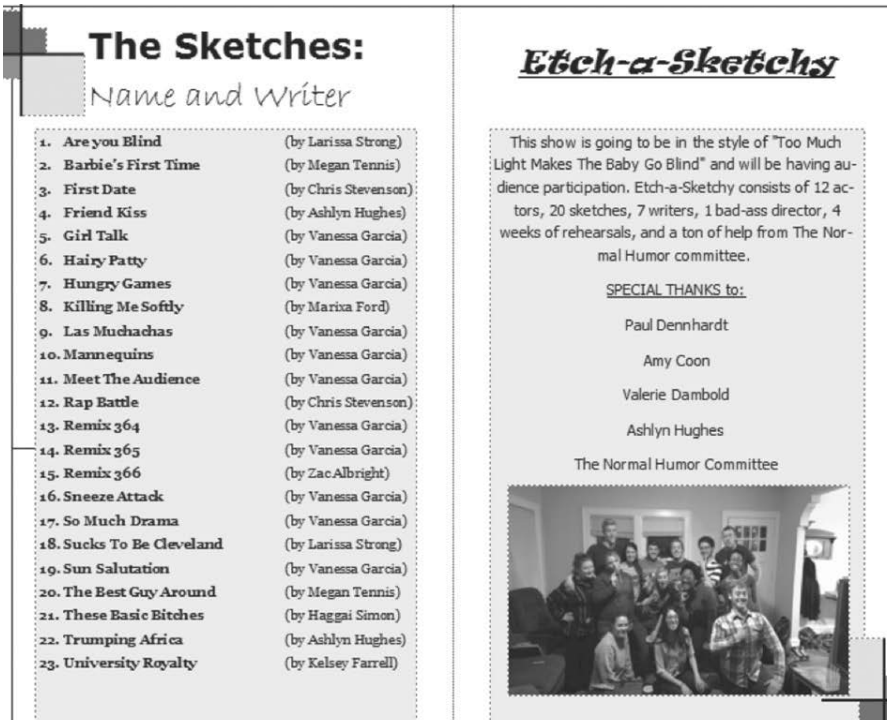Figure 1: Front cover of original program, which was to be printed in full color.

Figure 2: Inside of original program, which was to be printed in full color.

ETCH-A-SKETCHY
Directed by Vanessa Garcia
1. Are you Blind
(by Larissa Strong)
2. Barbie's First Time
(by Megan Tennis)
3. First Date
(by Chris Stevenson)
4. Friend Kiss
(by Ashlyn Hughes)
5. Hairy Patty
(by Vanessa Garcia)
6. Hungry Games
(by Vanessa Garcia)
7. Killing Me Softly
(by Marixa Ford)
8. Las Muchachas
(by Vanessa Garcia)
9. Rap Battle
(by Chris Stevenson)
10. Remix 364
(by Vanessa Garcia)
11. Remix 365
(by Vanessa Garcia)
12. Remix 366
(by Zac Albright)
13. Sneeze Attack
(by Vanessa Garcia)
14. So Much Drama
(by Vanessa Garcia)
15. Sucks To Be Cleveland
(by Larissa Strong)
16. Sun Salutation
(by Vanessa Garcia)
17. The Best Guy Around
(by Megan Tennis)
18. These Basic Bitches
(by Haggai Simon)
19. Trumping Africa
(by Ashlyn Hughes)
20. University Royalty
(by Kelsey Farrell)
Cast
Larissa Strong
Marixa Ford
Vicki Sanders
Caitlin Graham
Megan Tennis
Ally Morton
Luke Schneider
Zac Albright
Brendon Krantz
Haggai Simon
Ryan Engleman
Roger Janisch
Chris Stevenson (AD)
Anne Tobin (SM/understudy)

Figure 3: Black and white program, printed three to a page to save costs.

3. Were there any examples that were not successful at first? And what were the steps you took to get around that?

LAURA: I fancy myself a decent writer, but writing as a teacher has a completely different set of genres and skills I'm still in the process of learning. There was a homework assignment last year that I'd written as a block of text, and it didn't get great response from the students. So this semester I really tried to concentrate on *Reception*—making it clearer for the student. I made the text into numbered questions that built off of each other (a tip I'd picked up from fellow grad student Michelle Wright). And it worked so well! They got this extremely complicated idea (that "good grammar" isn't a stable, universal fact, it's genre-dependent) and made insightful connections, without me having to "teach" it in class. Other students did the exact same readings the year before and I had asked similar questions, but it seemed like the way I presented them this time, the way they were ordered, was what really got through to them.

VANESSA: That's really awesome that trying to focus on *Reception* is what made your students understand the material more clearly. This reminds me of the time when a friend of mine wrote a sketch for the sketch show called "First Date." After rehearsing it a couple of times, a cast member was telling

me that he didn't quite understand the sketch and felt that it didn't follow the 5-point structure (Figure 4) that I gave the cast on how to write a sketch. Then other cast members started tearing the sketch apart in front of the writer and everything got out of hand. There was a lot of negativity in the room so I knew I had to step up as the director. I can't remember what I said, word for word, but I said something along the lines of "Alright guys. What needs to happen is: First, Chris is going to work on a second draft of the sketch following the five-point structure; second, as actors you do not tell other actors how to act and you do not tell other writers what to write. I am the director and I am the one who is in charge of directing you and the writers of this show. Please trust me and know that I am leading you into having a wonderful show and for this I need your positive energy and professional focus." This "stern" talk really showed my cast who was in charge, and they soon apologized for being disrespectful toward the people who are writing/working hard for them to put up this show. Communication is what got them to focus, so this kind of matches up with your *Reception* change.

LAURA: You're really clear with the function of each role. I find that to be so tricky to realize for yourself. When I'm creating assignments, I tend to over-write. As a student, if I'm handed a block paragraph, I'm less likely to read it. But as a teacher, if I want something to be nuanced, my default is to write long paragraphs. This is my *Antecedent Genre* spilling over. When I was a playwright, monologues were a genre-appropriate way to convey complex ideas. But now that is transferring over into assignments (a different genre/audience), and so it doesn't work.

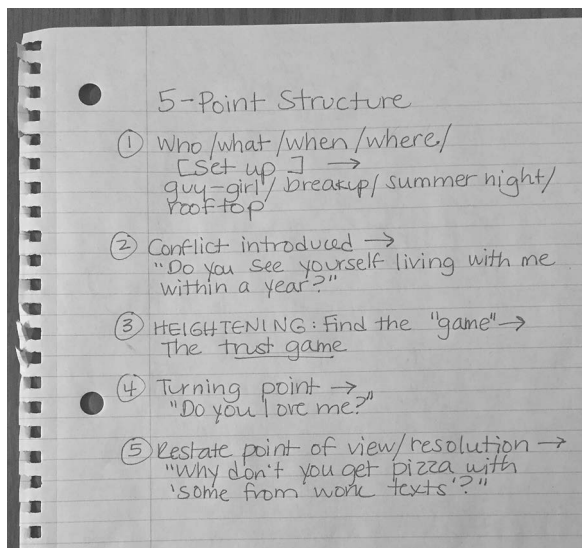Figure 4. The five-point structure for sketches.

Genre Research of the Leadership Role

4. *When you weren't in charge (i.e., for Vanessa, an actor, and for Laura, a student), what things did you learn from studying the person who was (director or teacher)?*

VANESSA: Over the summer I observed things about my director for the sketch show I did at Stage 773. He was very chill. He was okay with people

coming in late, and people not being memorized, though he encouraged us a lot to make sure we were memorized and on time, but also knew that it was up to us to make that happen. He definitely put the responsibility on us as actors to do our part of the work. I liked this about him, because it pushed me to work really hard on memorizing my lines and being there on time to rehearse in the space. He gave us breaks when needed and gave us great notes in between scenes. His notes were very specific and to the point and I really appreciated that about him. He gave us direction in one sentence, whereas for me it takes a while to say what I need to say and, therefore, I have a hard time explaining to people how I picture the scene(s) going. I am more of a visual learner, so I have to see it done, to then explain what it is I want. This is something I want to work on, but I know that with more experience as a director I will be able to establish my ideas easier and project them aloud to my actors in a simpler way.

LAURA: Aw. That's really nice. My brain automatically goes to the bad examples. Like if I got annoyed with a teacher, I would nitpick every assignment in order to prove how useless it was. I could only take these assignments in on a very limited scale. Cutting it down by asking, "How will this ever help me in my life?" Probably a self-fulfilling prophecy, I left those classes feeling like I didn't get anything out of them. What I focused on, instead, was a list of "nevers"—things I would never do if I was ever in charge. (*Side note: I may have done all of them.*) With teachers that I liked, I focused on the information they were saying and less on how they were saying it—*why* I was getting so much from them. It was seeing the trees and not the forest.

VANESSA: I totally get you. I am the same way with actors I watch. If I like their style of acting I am more likely to watch more of their movies and study their methods whereas with actors I don't particularly like I probably wouldn't watch their upcoming movies.

5. *Now that you're in charge, what things do you wish you had paid attention to?*

LAURA: Well, I wish I had at least considered that maybe there was a bigger purpose to the assignment than what I was immediately seeing. I probably would have gotten more out of them as a student, but it would have been so helpful to me now as a teacher. Same goes for paying attention to the teachers I liked. Moving class discussion along especially. If it's done well, it's nearly undetectable. As a student, I felt like it magically happened. As a teacher, I see that class discussion is a combination of the atmosphere the teacher created, the comments the teacher uses to encourage or shape the conversation, and only then is it the group of students themselves. I want to go back to study those subtle skills.

VANESSA: That's kind of like my experience with the sketch show I did over the summer, but slightly different, because I was with people a couple of years older than me and all were professionally involved with comedy, whereas, with my show at ISU, I worked with students my age or younger. We are also peers and had some classes together, so getting them to respect me as their director was tough at times. At the first rehearsal, I had to put my serious face on and let them know that I am here to work and produce a great show by providing them with my skills and experiences. There were times when the focus and energy would be negative so I would have to sternly talk to them. I wish I could have established certain rules I wanted the actors to adhere to in the rehearsal process before we started to let them know that this was serious business for me and having them behave professionally was something I needed.

6. *What has been the most difficult thing about becoming a director/teacher (and actually executing the role of a director/teacher rather than just studying it)?*

VANESSA: The most difficult thing about becoming a director is gaining respect. Through watching directors I've had and working with professionals, I have learned that to be taken seriously, I need to have respect. In order to have respect, I must, in turn, give it to my actors. By treating my actors as professionals and giving them the same respect that I wanted, I was able to gain their attention and loyalty to not only myself, but to the show as well. They saw how much I loved this show and how much hard work I put into making it happen. I saw my actors reciprocated it by posting Facebook statuses, sharing pictures of the cast, and spreading the word to their friends and family about the show. Seeing them do all of these things really showed me how much they, too, loved this show and how they respected me enough to support me and trust me in this hilarious journey.

LAURA: Your observation that your persona affects the group—that's *Representation*! And gaining respect is such an important part of being the person in charge, but, kind of like you're saying, how you get it changes depending on the situation. My first semester of teaching, I didn't want to be perceived as a pushover. I don't think this is uncommon for new teachers, because you feel insecure so you compensate by acting tough. So when students wrote me to say they were sick, I made a conscious decision not to say, "Feel better!" Instead, I answered with a simple, "Thanks for letting me know." I also didn't use exclamation points when they did something awesome in their homework. These felt too much like the "friend" role and not what I imagined for "teacher." This semester, I decided to be a human. The genre can handle both. I was a teacher and in charge both semesters.

VANESSA: The teacher/student or director/actor relationship is always hard when you want to show your authority and not be too much of a "friend," as you said. I completely agree that doing both is a good solution to showing you're in control, but that you can be approachable as well.

7. *What has been the most unexpected thing you've had to deal with?*

VANESSA: I was working with an actress who is my age and has had her fair share of experience in improvisation. This was the first show she had ever acted in that wasn't improv, so working with her was a lot of fun, but very stressful at times. There would be rehearsals where she would stop to give other actors direction on how to act or do something (and as an actor you only want direction from the director, because it is looked down upon when actors try to direct other actors). There would be moments when I would be leading a focus exercise/warm-up game where she would stop it and say she wasn't feeling it or that she didn't understand it. Because she is used to working with her improv group and their style of warming up, she closes her eyes to other types of rehearsal processes. It was hard when she would stop a rehearsal, because I could tell that the other actors were annoyed by it and many of them came up to me and told me that her energy and attitude really brought them down. I had to stress to everyone (even though I was just directing it towards the one actress) that they needed to be open to working with me, to trust that I know what I am doing, and to be open to new ideas. Once I talked to the group as a whole about being open, I think she noticed she was bringing us down and decided to change her attitude.

LAURA: What's really interesting to me about what you're saying is that it seems like two different genres colliding. This actress was so used to how things are done in improv that switching to this new genre of sketch was completely disorienting to her. She is not remotely alone in that. I think one of the most important things to recognize, in any new situation, is simply that one isn't in the genre they're used to. Some of the skills they use to navigate this new situation will definitely come from their past, but the actual genre they produce has to shift or it's not effective. That's happened to me in class when we're having a discussion and students are carrying on a side conversation. I think, "Someone should shut that student up," and then I realize that 'someone' is me. I'm more familiar with being a student and not being the one to shape the conduct of the classroom.

8. *What skills have come naturally to you when you're in charge? What are you really good at? Where do you think those beneficial skills came from? What in your past has trained you or allowed you to think in ways that are proving successful?*

LAURA: Well, one thing isn't quite training, but I'm much better one-on-one than I am talking to the whole class. I'm shy by nature, and so I want to cover every concern possible in my response quickly. So when there's confusion in the class, it's hard for me to address it without overwhelming people. But if I'm talking to one student, I can see where the confusion is coming from and then directly address that.

VANESSA: I totally know what you mean about not wanting to overwhelm people. Some of the skills that have come naturally to me when directing are helping the actors truly embrace their character. I have the ability to allow the actors to find those discoveries in the text without me telling them what it is or overwhelming them with too much material. I am able to get them out of their comfort zones and commit to their actions by side coaching. Side coaching is when the actors perform their scene, and the director coaches them through it without stopping the performance. I think this skill came from watching my Second City teachers and Illinois State University teachers do this. Being a comedian, too, has helped me reach my actors and guide them in the right direction of the scene. Learning at the Second City Training Center and watching many theatrical productions has allowed me to not be scared to go all out. I have learned that we make mistakes in order to grow and be successful, so we have to play around with our scenes to know what works. Nothing ever comes out right the first time, so why not have fun figuring out what works and what doesn't?

LAURA: That's interesting. I've actually kind of adopted a similar attitude. Realizing that I've been conditioned to be a student and not a teacher means that I need to experiment with different techniques. It's like finding the parameters of a genre. Like, I'll throw an odd-ball question out in a homework assignment with a shrug. Sometimes it doesn't work, but sometimes I get amazing and unexpected results. This is an attitude I've learned from playwriting, where you can't get precious with what you've written.

   9. *What was the process like writing a* Grassroots *article?*

VANESSA: I'm not going to lie, writing the article has been one of the most stressful projects I have ever worked on in my life. Meeting deadlines, revising, and doing research was just a ton of work, and it got very overwhelming for me at times. At the same time, I enjoyed researching comedy and seeing how much I actually knew about it. I was very impressed with how much knowledge, effort, and work I was able to contribute to the article. I have learned how to become a better writer along with learning about the different types of writing genres. Putting up a sketch show, performing in a sketch show in Chicago, and writing an article on sketch comedy has really shown me how much momentum I am gaining as a comedian. Since receiving this

scholarship for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, I have started a comedy group called The Normal Humor, been at classes at Second City, acted in a sketch show at Stage 773, and directed/wrote/produced my own sketch comedy show. These are all factors that I can use to reflect on my writing process of my original article. If it was not for my experiences outside of this writing project, then my readers would not know my qualifications. My experiences have been shaping me as the writer I am today and as the ideal person to talk to my readers about how comedic processes like this work and how comedy is a huge part of everyday life.

LAURA: That experience is not uncommon for writing a *Grassroots* article. In addition to teaching, I am also an editor for this journal, so I see a lot of early drafts. Most of the writers really have a difficult time finding the genre of the *Grassroots* article. It *looks* like the articles are just about some random genre, and so a lot of submitting writers believe anything goes. The default position is to make this a research paper. So you talking about the research you did and your *Representation* of yourself as a qualified and experienced expert is plugging right into that. I don't want to in any way imply that you're not an expert or there isn't research, but to focus, instead, on the fact that research does not equal research paper. The research paper is an *Antecedent Genre* coming through. A research paper is a specific genre (actually many specific genres, I've been horrified to find in grad school) and the articles in this journal are an entirely separate genre. In fact, the very nature of the research in this journal is different. Writers turning in more of a "research paper" tend to state lots of facts about their genre. The journal, however, studies *how* the genre functions. Like you studying effective ways to get information out to your actors, or me studying other grad students' course documents. This is a really frustrating distinction because we feel successful in our *Antecedent Genres* and switching might mean that we're failing at something. Failure, while frustrating, can actually be one of the most helpful tools in writing research. (Eric Longfellow's *Grassroots* article "Sexting" in issue 4.1 is a great model of this. His *Antecedent Genre* of fiction writing keeps interfering with his ability to seduce his girlfriend textually.) Because failing allows us to recognize that we're composing in the wrong genre—be that a text (like me for creating assignments) or a show (like your actress did)—and is the first step to being able to spot the differences between the genres. And once we can do that, we actually start becoming more effective in the genres we're composing in.

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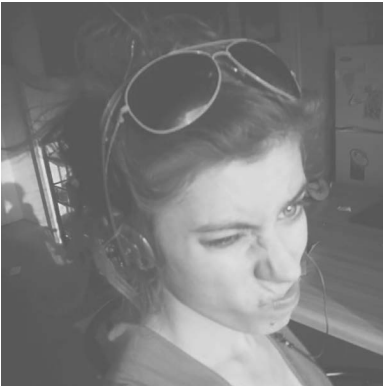
Laura Skokan is a second-year Master's student, with a focus in creative writing. She is currently working on a graphic novel for her thesis as well as overcoming a deep-seated fear of her sewing machine. Your thoughts and prayers would be most welcome. [This bio should in no way serve as a model for genre-appropriate writing.]

On Space Battles, Character Development, and Overwriting: Genre Interference in Textual Role-Playing

David Giovagnoli

It's not always easy when writers learn to switch between two different genres of writing. In this article, David Giovagnoli tells a literacy narrative in which he moves between creative writing and textual role-playing and then struggles when he tries to incorporate too much of one genre in the work of another.

In my first creative writing course in college, I wanted to write science fiction. It was a genre I was comfortable and familiar with; at that point I'd been writing it with my friends online for about five years. I was told "no" with some variation of the phrase "we don't teach science fiction at the university level," by my professor, Adam Davis. It's possible that if I had been a little more persuasive, I could have done it—but he made a good case for branching out into other forms of writing. In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Davis describes how he didn't allow this sort of writing in one of his creative writing workshops: "I banned alt-worlding from my advanced creative-writing workshop. Told my students that their fiction had to take place in real environments with real people, facing problems that are actually likely to confront us (as opposed to stories involving international spy rings, penal colonies on Proxima Centauri, or aliens)." In other words, the genres Davis was asking his students to create were limited to the realm of the 'literary.'

As a novice writer, I thought this attitude was snobbish, but I'm beginning to understand its necessity. As Davis states, this was purely a pragmatic decision

based on the realities of the world of writing: "They were invested entirely in invention—mere cleverness. That's fine for a one-off, but the venues for that sort of thing are few. If the fundamentals aren't in place as well—and they weren't—that market dwindles to zilch." Science fiction has a reputation for being driven by appeals to cool settings and effects and clever situations. This isn't a reputation that's entirely undeserved; fifty years of pulp science fiction stands as evidence. And yet, there are hundreds of thousands of completely realistic novels that few mainstream critics would ever call "literature" either, such as the romance novels you might find in the grocery store book aisle.

Less than two weeks later, Christopher Gavaler wrote a rebuttal to Davis's piece:

> A story's setting, real or speculative, predicts nothing. Yet Davis bemoans the influence of pop culture, believing that all the alt-worlds infecting film, TV, and popular literature have mutated his students into lazy zombies instead of disciplined writers. If so, it's got nothing to do with "alt-worlding"—all fiction writing is alt-worlding. There is no such thing as a work of fiction that takes place in the real world. Stories exist solely in words. That's an unbelievably obvious fact.

Strong words, to be sure. What he says is true, though; the umbrella genre[1] of fiction is predicated on the fact that it's, well, *fiction*. If the characters and plot aren't real, why should the setting be? The problem with science fiction must be something else, then. As Gavaler puts it:

> I define the term [literary fiction] as "character-driven." Nonliterary fiction . . . is plot-driven and includes any story in which characters act according to the needs of the plot rather than from an artfully crafted illusion of psychologically complex motivation. Plot is still important—without it, the best you can hope for is a beautifully chiseled character study that lacks any page-turning momentum. But, I ask, is the plot serving the characters, or are the characters serving the plot?

Literary fiction and non-literary fiction are similar but competing activity systems.[2] The divide between them, however, is not at the realism of the setting but at the way in which the author balances characters with

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[1] An umbrella genre is a larger unit of categorization than a genre; a genre is to an umbrella genre as species is to genus in biology. Umbrella genres can stack within one another to expanding degrees of specificity. Fiction and Novel are both umbrella genres, while Romance Novel, Gothic Novel, Mystery Novel, and so on are genres.

[2] In this context, an activity system is the totality of the cultural, historical, social, physical, and cognitive processes that go into producing and consuming a text. For further information on activity theory, see Walker's "Just CHATing" in Issue 1 of *The Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, available at www.isuwriting.com.

plot. As an example, Tom Clancy has written a best-selling series of modern military thrillers that are painstakingly accurate with their details. As Jack Ryan navigates through these novels, his actions are predetermined by the genre convention that the hero must win in the end—his decisions do not come from a realistic psyche, but rather the conceits and demands of the plot. In this case, there is a realistic setting without the "psychologically complex motivation" that Gavaler describes. Though it is a problem to throw science fiction and other "alt-worlding" out as non-literary, like Davis does, his fears were not unfounded when it came to my own writing as an undergraduate.

Since long before college, I had been writing with my friends online in what I considered a creative way. I assumed that I could write about anything I wanted to in a creative writing course, but I failed to take into account that the field of creative writing had its own genre expectations and demands beyond simply being "creative." In a collegiate creative writing classroom, the knowledge I brought to the table from writing collaboratively about science fiction stories was not immediately applicable.

First Steps into Textual Role-playing

In about 2003, I was heavily into computer games. In particular, I had a fascination with a first-person shooter known as *Star Trek: Elite Force*, which allows players to take on the role of a member of the crew of the starship *Voyager*, with the mandate of eliminating aliens with high-powered weaponry. The multiplayer mode allowed players to compete with one another (mostly anonymously) from around the globe, in capture the flag mode, or simply in a battle royal-style death match. There was a chat interface, but I never used it much. I never really even noticed it until I stumbled onto a server with only a few other people one evening. This was my introduction to textual role-playing.

The most basic rule of the game is: shoot the enemies. Yet curiously, they weren't shooting one another. Rather, their character avatars were crouched around a table in the room that represented the ship's briefing room. In the chat window they were pretending to be actual Starfleet officers, preparing for a mission. I, of course, was to have no part of this and killed them all, before signing off in boredom.

It wasn't until a few months later that I joined a server that was specifically labeled for role-playing purposes. Intrigued, I gave myself a rank and a position. First, Lieutenant, as that seemed respectable. Then, Commander, because that sounded more important. Within a few seconds of that, I was kicked (that is to say forcibly removed) from the server.

I Googled the name and found the organization's website. There was a litany of rules (one of the most important being that you didn't get to pick your own rank), which went far beyond the original game. Players weren't supposed to shoot each other. Or run. Or be profane. Or have sex with one another. In-character statements and out-of-character statements were marked in certain ways in the chat stream (Figure 1). I was completely confused as I waded through this new activity system, before finally figuring out the purpose of the whole thing: the first-person shooter became a visualized chat room, where people could act out *Star Trek*-style plots with characters of their own invention.

Figure 1: A typical scene in a textual role-playing session, posted by Serris on *Trek BBS* at www.trekbbs.com/showthread.php?t=259312. The text was added by the author to illustrate how conversations would scroll across the top of the screen during role-playing.

Neat! Fully versed in the rules, I signed back in and started playing. I caught onto the conventions of using technobabble[3], pretending to do various tasks on the ship, and responding to the out-of-character silliness as we went through various missions. I've long since forgotten most of what actually happened, but after a few weeks, I was invited to join the organization. Over the next few years, I worked my way up from Cadet to Captain in the organization's *Star Trek* division, and then Grand Moff and Jedi Master in the *Star Wars* division that was formed later, once *Star Wars: Jedi Academy* (a game based on the same software engine as *Elite Force*) was released.

It was a lot of fun. Even with some silly restrictions ("missions" were supposed to be, as much as possible, realistic simulations of the daily lives

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[3]A phrase like "No, no, no, no, no, this sucker's electrical, but I need a nuclear reaction to generate the 1.21 gigawatts of electricity I need" or "Divert power to the subspace intercooler" would be technobabble.

of Starfleet officers—an ironic nod to Davis's position), I spent hours every day after school online playing with my new friends. In any given session, we would produce as much text as any hour-long television script, while acting out various scenarios. This text was created off-the-cuff and on the fly, and yet with a great deal of intricacy and attention to genre conventions.[4]

Unlike most texts, however, the trajectory[5] was strictly internal—that is to say those who produced it were simultaneously consuming it. Because of the way that the servers for our games functioned, the stories we created were lost once everyone had logged out (or after about 500 lines of text had been sent back and forth). The system was designed to let players strategize about how they would win the game, not to let people *write*, after all.

While players did socialize and bond through this activity, for the most part characters didn't grow or change; they served the plot of the day. When faced with an enemy dreadnought[6], the sensible course of action would be to call for reinforcements, but that makes for a boring game, and so we'd attack it. It makes sense that a group of people in deep space for a long time might start to form romantic bonds, but we were teenagers and that was icky. So, our stories were limited to a certain kind of writing—that non-literary, plot-driven writing that Gavaler identified in his article.

The liminality of the texts we produced, that is to say, the fact that it disappeared after we created them, was something of a problem. After a while, we realized that someone should probably write down what happened in a more permanent way than the chat allowed for, and so we started to post session recaps and reviews, so we could discuss what happened and how it could go better and get feedback from our friends who weren't in that session. Various competing criteria (excitement vs. believability, pacing vs. time spent playing, attention to detail vs. avoiding quibbling, etc.) were applied to these sessions, and the summaries began to get more and more complex as we wrote them longer and longer.

As our stories got more sophisticated, so did the technology we used to tell them. Modifications were developed for the software to let us represent what was going on in the story through visual and auditory actions by our avatars, ships could be represented more accurately in the game, and there were a

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[4]Genre conventions are the characteristics that define a genre. For example, a Wikipedia article has citations, images, a "neutral" point of view, and links to other Wikipedia articles. Novels are fictional, typically have chapters, and are over 40,000 words long.

[5]As the term suggests, trajectory is the path a text takes from its initial conception and production to its reception by other people. This is both physical and metaphysical content—throwing this issue of the journal away and learning something from this article are both examples of trajectory.

[6]A kind of warship; picture a Super Star Destroyer.

wide variety of locales to choose from for adventures off the ship. The text we produced almost become secondary to the talents being displayed by the software designers and artists producing these environments for us to play in.

The Move From Virtual Reality to Pure Text

Eventually, we "discovered" that we could write about our characters' exploits in the *Star Trek* universe without actually being on the server. This made it easier to play with people in radically different time zones and allowed us to really sit down and think about our contributions before posting them. Unlike before, when editing simply wasn't possible due to the real-time nature of the process, we could focus on writing in a way that was a little more sophisticated. Of course, we "discovered" this sort of writing in parallel with a number of other existing groups on the internet, who variously labeled it PBEM (Play-By-Email) or PBF (Play-By-Forum) role-playing. Later, specific website software systems were developed for this activity (Figure 2 shows one version of this system), leading to other acronyms, and in recent years, it's often called "collaborative writing" or "collaborative storytelling." For simplicity's sake, I am labeling this genre "textual role-playing."
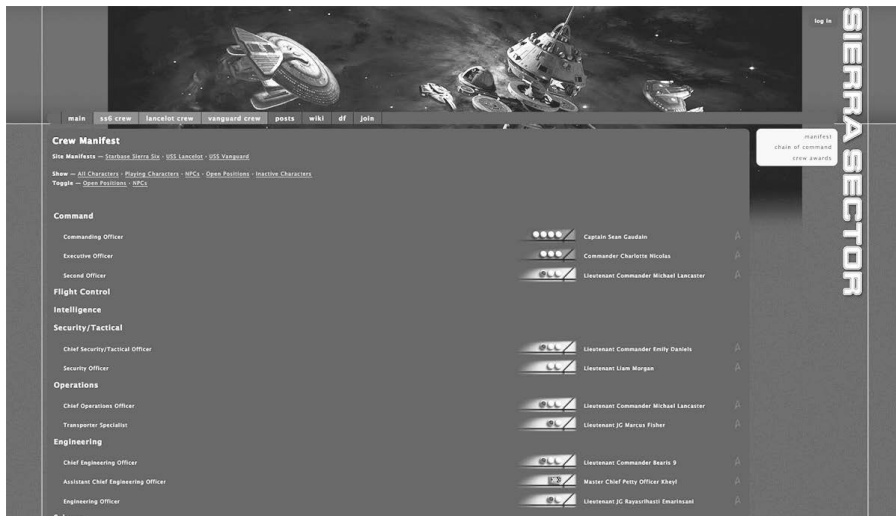
Figure 2: An example of a manifest of characters used in a textual role-playing game, from the *USS Lancelot* website, available at www.uss-lancelot.org/index.php/personnel/index/3.

This genre is distinct from fan fiction[7] in two important ways: it uses only original characters, and authors must agree on a shared canon between texts.

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[7]Fan fiction is an activity that centers around fans writing new adventures for their favorite television, movie, and comic book characters. This practice originated with *Star Trek* zines in the '70s and now occurs primarily on the Internet. Because it uses other peoples' ideas and characters, it is sometimes controversial for copyright reasons.

By contrast, fan fiction is characterized by the use of the characters native to the specific franchise or universe being explored, and there is great variety in the continuities written by different authors. It's not better or worse, but different; both genres require a significant amount of thought to do effectively.

The textual role-playing groups I found were organized into Fleets, Task Forces, and ships, with a military-style hierarchy and complex system of government in each of them. This type of writing is very similar to the kind that was produced in the first-person shooter I described above, but it had a definite advantage in terms of trajectory: anyone could read what was produced, as long as the website remained online. The intended trajectory remained internal, but the addition of surveillance by an unknown, universalized audience made attention to quality even more important.

After my first organization folded (due to reluctance to move away from the live model), I joined another of these groups, again working my way up from Ensign to Rear Admiral over several years of writing. I was part of dozens of ships (which self-labeled as "simulations," hence the internal use of the term "simming" to describe this literate activity), most often as a crew member and occasionally as a captain (equivalent to the game master in other role-playing systems). Fresh from live role-playing, my initial contributions were fairly straightforward and non-literary; my characters served plots, because that's what the game still wanted.

The Clash Between Textual Role-playing and Creative Writing

By the time I entered Davis's class, I was accomplished in the genre of textual role-playing. It was easy for me to come up with complicated stories on the fly and to write the dialogue and technobabble to support it. I wanted to use this knowledge of an antecedent genre[8] to ease myself into the unknown of academic creative writing (a phrase some might call a contradiction, but that is a topic for another time). I was forced to learn something new, to go into characters' feelings and motivations as they moved through the world.

The short story I produced in that class was a saccharine, insipid, adolescent love story that has mercifully been lost to the depths of time and space. (Davis told me it reminded him stylistically of Austen's *Emma*, which I'm sure he meant as a compliment . . .) This story of boy meets boy, falls in love with him, is rejected by him, and then ends up with him anyway was not my best work (as you can see from the pronoun-antecedent difficulty in this

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[8]An antecedent genre is a genre you know how to produce before learning how to produce a new genre; sometimes this is helpful, but sometimes the knowledge you try to transfer actually makes it *harder* to learn that new genre because you think it's similar to the antecedent genre in ways it is not.

sentence), but it had something different from my usual writing: the plot was dependent on the characters' thoughts and emotions, on their struggles and disagreements, and not a need to find the MacGuffin[9] or rescue the Vulcan ambassador from a Klingon plot. The characters moved the plot, rather than vice versa, at a very rudimentary sense. There was not much plot to speak of and it was a clear case of authorial wish fulfillment (the protagonist gets what he wants in the end for a less-than-clear reason), but there were no zombies or explosions.

I didn't realize at it the time, but this was a pivotal moment in my development as a writer. After that class, I continued to participate in textual role-playing, but my contributions began to get longer and more sophisticated. While most players were content to work with the plot, I enjoyed the down time between missions better, when characters could relax and develop. As my prose got more sophisticated, my characters began to get more three-dimensional, simultaneously incorporating aspects of my real life (they tended to be introverted, knew Latin, and had a stand-offish sort of sarcasm) and things I wished were aspects of my real life (they were generally tall, athletic, gorgeous, and good at math). While I carefully researched characters to make sure that their backstories were believable, this level of wish fulfillment sometimes bordered on "Mary Sue" (a term borrowed from fan fiction that refers to a character who has too many skills or abilities that could unbalance the scenario), often a form of author-insertion.

After a few years, I got better about giving my characters flaws to balance out their strengths. My favorite character balances brilliance with a pathological need to enforce even the most nitpicky of regulations with Draconian glee. This was used to great comedic effect when he ended up being the only Goody Two-shoes on the entire ship.

And while I think I mastered character creation, my writing continued to upshift in a literary way. I thought this was good. In what other manner should my alter-ego (and of course my actual ego) be expressed than in glorious, unassailable literary prose? Generally, people liked this—my contributions were long and detailed. They started taking longer and longer to write, though. Where before I could write two or three sections in a given evening, as my posts got more complicated, they started taking entire evenings or sometimes multiple days to compose.

I frequently got stuck with writer's block, or worked out different ways my contributions could be written in my head over the course of a week or

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[9]An example of a MacGuffin is the giant diamond the filmmakers in James Cameron's *Titanic* are searching for. It doesn't actually have a function; it's just valuable. A counter-example is the One Ring in the *Lord of the Rings*, which does have powers of its own and is quite useful.

more. As a creative writer, that is completely legitimate—no one can rush the muse. As a player in a game depending on regular contributions, it was untenable. I got more and more behind, sometimes dropping off the face of the earth for a month at a time due to anxiety about perfecting a post, and when I did contribute, my ideas were character-driven, while my friends were writing in a plot-driven way.

That is not to say that my fellow players were not excellent writers; their posts were engaging and enjoyable to read, but they managed to do them much more quickly than I did. Where textual role-playing had almost been the antecedent knowledge interfering with my performance in a creative writing class, the situation was now reversed: my identity as an academic and creative writer was making me a worse player in this game. This is what I now realize to be cross-genre interference, or competing knowledge between two similar, but distinct, genres.

I'm still very attached to many of the characters I've played with over the years, but I think I should take a page out of Davis's book and ban this sort of literary interference in my textual role-playing. As he states, "I hated imposing my alt-worlding ban. I see it as a serious offense against contemporary pedagogy, student-centered and affirming, which I support. I've never had to do this before. With any luck, I'll never have to do it again." I think that science fiction can be literary, and that characters with interesting psychologies can exist in textual role-playing, but going too far in that direction made my writing worse for the genre I was engaging with.

In an earlier draft of this article, I used the phrase "objectively better" to describe how I was writing in textual role-playing following my exposure to collegiate creative writing. This is an objectively false statement because the quality of one's writing is entirely dependent on the specific activity system in which it is created. While the exclusion of alt-worlding from mainstream creative writing is a topic worthy of its own article (or book), it is important to remember that academic creative writing is not *better* than science fiction, just like my writing was not *better* because it had hallmarks of 'literary' prose. Rather, moving too far away from the accepted genre conventions in an activity system can result in conflict. Sometimes, this conflict is productive—new genres often emerge from the interactions of existing genres—and sometimes it becomes irreconcilable. In my case, I was not aware of this interference between genres, and it was only later, through this exercise of writing research, that I was able to identify what had happened. Now I see that my trouble stemmed from an unclear understanding of the genre conventions of both collegiate creative writing and textual role-playing.

As a writing researcher looking back on this narrative and other such literacy narratives that I have experienced as a student and writer, I can now see these two activity systems as related but distinct activities; to excel in either, I must understand and be able to apply their genre conventions with intention. In closing, let us venture to the Dagobah system, circa three years after the Battle of Yavin. When Luke Skywalker comes to Yoda to learn the ways of the Jedi, he is frustrated that Yoda expects him to begin as a neophyte, but it is only when Luke unlearns what he has learned—when he is able to set aside his antecedent knowledge of what it is to be a Jedi—that he is able to understand and apply Yoda's teachings. I did not believe that I could abandon the techniques I brought into textual role-playing from creative writing and still succeed, and that is why I failed.

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Playing with Genre: An Interpreter's Tale

Ally Mohs

In this article, Ally Mohs digs deep into the way musicians prepare to play a piece of music. By looking at sheet music through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Ally focuses on how a person can take what they learn through writing research and apply those ideas to different, incredibly complex situations, such as learning to play a piece of music.

I'm what you might consider a music snob. I play both the violin and viola and can sing pretty okay (not *American Idol*-worthy, but still not awful). I can read alto and treble clef almost fluently and can figure out how to read bass clef in a life-or-death situation. While I am able to read music, this does not necessarily mean that I am an expert at actually playing whichever instrument these clefs call for me to play. Even if I can somewhat fake my way through whichever piece of music I need to play, I also know there is a lot of background information that is needed in order to play the piece with as much integrity as intended by the composer. It may come as somewhat of a surprise, but playing a piece of music is actually more than just playing a bunch of dots on a page. I learn this the hard way whenever I am given a new piece of music. Although a certain piece may be new to the musician personally, each individual piece comes with its own set of interpretations, all depending on who the musician, or interpreter of the piece, is.

Although I am a self-proclaimed music snob, I experienced my fair share of panic moments when my high school orchestra director wrote on the board "New Music!" Without fail, every time I saw those words, my thought process went a little like this. "Shit, what have I gotten myself into?" I would

calmly unpack my instrument and take my seat, bracing myself for what was to come. While the director was talking, she passed out the music, causing the panic inside of me to increase as everyone around me would begin to chatter with excitement about the new music. I mean, come on people, this may be the end of the world as we know it. Once the music was placed in front of me, the panic would only heighten as I saw what we were actually going to have to play. "Serenade for Strings." I would then think: Are you kidding me? Those are sixteenth notes in a set of three eighth notes. Nope, I can't. I refuse to play this. I can't get through this piece without losing every ounce of sanity I have.

Now What?

Before we take on those first moments of panic, it is important to gain a better knowledge of what exactly cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) actually means. CHAT combines historical theory, cultural theory, and activity theory into one nice acronym. It allows readers to step back from what they are reading and get a better sense of how all three of these theories interact with one another. At the time when I was actually reading the many different pieces of music, I didn't really understand what it was that I was doing. After learning about CHAT, I realized I had been using the CHAT approach when I was learning a new piece of music. This is how a typical first run-through of a new piece of music went for me:

After I took a few deep breaths, the panic subsided enough for me to begin to think clearly again and focus on the task at hand: getting through this piece of music. Before anything else, I needed to go through the ***production***, or what helped shape the piece—the parts of the music that make it actual music. The musician looks at things such as the speed in which the piece will be played, where it gets loud and soft, etc. (Figure 1). What do I need to look at in order to actually begin to play the dreaded new piece of music (aka "Serenade for Strings")? Well, here goes nothing.

- What is the key signature (what sharps or flats will be in the piece)?

    It's in C Major. That means no sharps or flats. Okay, not too bad, that makes this piece a little easier . . . but not by much.

- What is the time signature (how many beats will be in a measure)?

    It's in 6/8 time. So it will be counted in either six or two.

- What is the tempo (how fast will this piece actually go)?

    An eighth note equals 126. Not too fast, not too slow. So she'll be beating most likely in two since the eighth notes will be a little too fast to beat normally.

• Any major changes throughout the piece?

> There are a few throughout, but stylistically, it should be fine.

• Who is the composer?

> Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Alright, he's a pretty cool dude. He has written a lot of good pieces of music. Hopefully, this should be a cool piece.

Next came the hard part: actually playing the piece. As any normal person would do before a big moment, or not-so-big moment, I would give myself a pep talk. It went along the lines of: Remember to look ahead when playing. It makes things a little easier. Don't get too caught up on mistakes. You got this.

Figure 1: Shown above are some of the important details that a musician must look at in order to play any piece of music.

Here Goes Nothing

After I completed the first run-through of the piece, I thought to myself: that went pretty smoothly, no major bumps in the road, just a few hiccups, nothing a little practicing won't fix. Then came the hard part: actually learning the piece. As we packed up, the director told us to do some research. In what time period was it written? What was the story behind the piece? Who was the composer? What was their life like? What historically was going on at that

time? And so on. By answering these few questions, the interpreter is able to gain a better grasp on what it is that makes this particular piece unique. What makes this piece stand out among the hundreds of other classical pieces?

First, I needed to figure out how I was going to get all of this information. Because I am a frequent user of Google, my automatic idea was to use my favorite search engine, so I just hopped on my computer to surf the web. I had to figure out what to do first. Should I start with the composer or the piece? I thought it was better to get to know the man behind the piece before the piece itself, so I typed in the composer, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Figure 2).
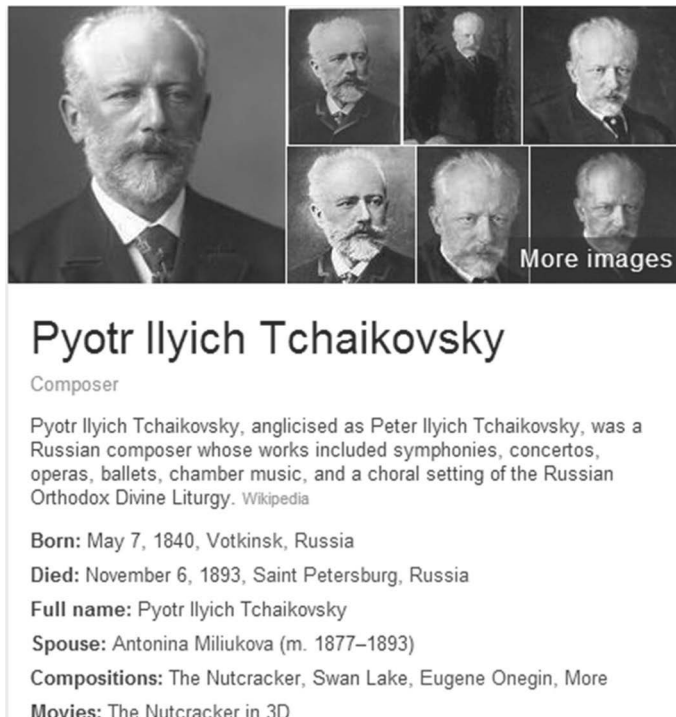
Figure 2: Biographical information on Tchaikovsky found via Google.

Okay, so Tchaikovsky wrote a lot of music to be performed with other artistic talents, such as dancing and singing. But what does that mean? How could looking at his other pieces help me to understand the piece I was playing? By looking at Tchaikovsky's pieces before and after he wrote "Serenade for Strings," a musician is able to see where he was coming from as well as where he was going, thus painting a picture of his life as a composer. By gaining this perspective, the musician is better able to grasp what it is that makes the composer unique. What is the message behind this piece? What is the composer's ***representation***, or how he wants others

to see this particular text (and how they actually see it)? How did he go about writing this when he did? After years of reading concert critiques and reviews, I know the best way to find this information is by looking at program notes. For most concerts, the program includes background on the pieces being played; and thanks to technology, most programs are available online, making it easier to retrieve the information that you are looking for. For example, at a Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert, attendees will receive a small booklet containing advertisements for upcoming performances, information on certain spotlight performances, and details on what pieces will be played at that particular show. Many, but not all, programs contain basic information about the piece. Because of the ***distribution*** of the piece of music (how it gets circulated into people's lives), a lot of major concerts have notes on each of the pieces being played and give a background on the piece, thus creating an understanding of whatever piece of music is going to be played.

You Want Me to Play What?

Since it was important to dig a little deeper into the background of the piece of music, it was time to turn back to one of the easiest ways to retrieve information, Google. Since there are many professional orchestras that have performed this particular piece, programs notes were not hard to find. After looking at several different programs, I came across one that seemed to stick out to me. The particular program is from the Los Angeles Philharmonic. This program note showed some background on Tchaikovsky and then went into further detail about the piece itself. According to the program note, "Serenade for Strings" is "a piece from the heart" (Los Angeles Philharmonic). This particular piece "defines the precedent of classical models" (Los Angeles Philharmonic). By the time the piece reaches the fourth movement, the listener will hear a sense of unity that draws all of the movements together. So now that we know a little bit more about the piece from the program notes, we can move on to the more important part: actually playing it.

Researching for the piece is only half of the battle. The fun is only just beginning. When you get to the actual playing of the music, there is a lot more involved than you might originally think. Music is more than just dots on a page. It tells a story. This being said, musicians must think of the ***reception*** of the piece, or how people take it in. Musicians must play to the best of their ability in order for the audience to really appreciate the piece that they are playing. The audience has not done as much background research as the musician has and they only experience it once, so how can the musician play the piece and connect with the audience? The musician has to tell the music's

story and show the audience what the piece means not only to the composer, but also to the musician AND to the audience. It is important that musicians draw the audience in and make them look at the piece and find meaning in it. Musicians need to play it stylistically and understand what it is that they are playing. In other words, they must look at ***socialization***, or how people use the piece. What will one member of the audience tell his or her best friend about that particular piece? How will the performance of the piece affect how the audience reacts to other pieces, or even to the same one years down the road? This, yet again, required more research.

First, I looked at what the beginning tempo of the piece was. *Andante non troppo*. Seeing as I don't speak Italian, I had to look it up to get an understanding of how fast the piece should be (Figure 3).

an·dan·te 🔊 [ahn-**dahn**-tey, an-**dan**-tee; *Italian* ahn-**dahn**-te] ❓ Show IPA **adjective, adverb, noun, plural an·dan·tes.** *Music.*
adjective, adverb
1. moderately slow and even.
noun
2. an andante movement or piece.

non troppo (ˈnɒn ˈtrɒpəʊ)
adv
  1. (Classical Music) *music* (preceded by a musical direction, esp a tempo marking) not to be observed too strictly (esp in the phrases **allegro ma non troppo, adagio ma non troppo**)

Figure 3: Definitions of "*adante*" and "*non troppo*" found via online dictionaries.

Okay, so since *andante* means it's a moderate tempo and *non troppo* means to not take that for face value, *andante non troppo* means the tempo is going to be kind of slow but not too slow. Interesting. Confusing, but still interesting. As I said earlier, I don't speak Italian so in order to play the rest of the piece, I had to look up the rest of the terms so that I could actually understand what I was doing. After looking up the definitions for all the fun little Italian words, it was important to include my findings on my piece of music, so I could understand what the words were telling me. Then I could look at the style of this piece. Although it is similar to a piece by Mozart, this work is still very much Tchaikovsky's, which means that while playing the piece, I needed to combine elements from both of these two stylistically different composers.

Practice Makes Perfect

After you know what everything means and how exactly you are supposed to put everything together you can begin to think about ***activity*** and ***ecology***, which are elements of CHAT that focus on both the physical moments

of authors and tools (what's actually happening) and the physical and environmental boundaries of the piece. Where do you want this piece to go? What do you need to do to make sure that this piece gets to where you want it to go? When trying to perfect anything, from playing an instrument to trying to learn how to do a backflip, you need to practice this piece over and over again until you can no longer get it wrong. You need to have your fingers know what to do if your brain fails you and you lose track of where you are.

Yet to musicians, performing a piece of music is more than just playing all the right notes and being able to make it through a piece without passing out. Chances are, more than likely I will mess up at one point or another, but that is okay. Playing a piece is not just about telling the composer's story, but also a little bit of my own. Through analyzing the different aspects of preparing a piece, I begin to interpret the genre of not only the piece, but the composer. If I mess up, oh well. It only adds to that particular story. Be careful not to get too caught up in the details of the piece. If you do, the point of the piece being played can be completely missed. Musicians need to be able to take all that they learn and transfer it into their playing. In order for people to care about what it is that you are doing, playing music or writing a paper, you have to care about it enough to make them care about it almost as much as you do.

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Mixed Messages: What Do Greeting Cards Really Say?

Lisa Dooley

In this article, Lisa Dooley examines the genre of greeting cards and the outsourcing of self-expression that occurs when someone purchases a card instead of making one. As she explains her coding methodology, Dooley reflects on the choices she made, trying to decipher why she focused on certain observations.

My daughter, Addy, was sitting at the kitchen table working intently on a project. Drawing, taping, cutting, and gluing, she began to fashion a piece of art tasked with carrying an important message on the inner surface of the carefully crafted bifold. A significant amount of time and thought had been put into this creation, this unique artistic rendering, and she presented it to me with great pride upon its completion. Dripping with wet glue, crowded with marker-drawn figures and red cutout hearts, and begging to be displayed in a place of prominence, this handcrafted artifact was an intimate expression of emotion.

As Addy got up from the table, she began to skip in place, barely able to contain herself as she handed me her creation. I closely studied the front cover while she begged me to look inside. As I carefully opened up the bi-folded construction paper, my fingers sticking to the tacky glue on the front, I was greeted with a single phrase, "Happy Birthday!" Written meticulously and spelled with the utmost consideration, the message was simple yet timeless, though the two-word phrase was not of priority to me, the card recipient. It was the care that had been put into making the card that resonated the most.

Addy had thought about her audience, planned the card's design, and written a simple yet concise message all by herself because she thought that the best person to make a "Happy birthday card for Mommy" was her. When asked by her father that morning if she wanted to get ready and go out with him to buy Mommy a birthday card, she immediately protested. Addy emphatically stated, "But I need to make her card because it's from me!" Unwilling to outsource her well-wishes, Addy created this birthday card herself.

The Way They Do the Things They Do

Understanding one's audience, conceptualizing a design, articulating a clear message while still conveying emotion, executing one's artistic vision, expressing sentiment, and successfully conveying a message are all integral parts of this expression-delivery activity system. While transmitting intimate feeling is the purpose of this process, the act of creating handmade greeting cards has fallen by the wayside in our contemporary culture, relegated now to the very young or as an afterthought by those who forgot to purchase a card. But why has this deeply personal act become the responsibility of another, an outsider?

Greeting cards, once created by the giver and symbolic of a very private and personal communicative process, have become mechanized, universalized, and, in turn, impersonal. Instead, expression is outsourced and purchased, reliant upon an "other" to communicate one's sentiments. In fact, self-expression was outsourced more than eight billion times last year in America alone (Dodson and Bells 14). This means that more than eight million times a day (14) an "other" clearly outside of the card giver/card receiver model is tasked with communicating an intimate expression of the card giver to the card receiver.

Don't Give Up Your Power!

A great deal of power is transferred when one relies on an outside source to compose a text that is meant to reflect his/her most intimate feelings and, thus, we enter into a paradox: self-expression is achieved through commercial, mass-produced means. It is within this paradox that greeting cards "threaten the ideology of expressive individualism because they involve people looking to the mass market for the symbolic materials with which to communicate the self, thereby ceding their independence in expression" (West 232).

I pride myself on my ability to express myself fully and effectively, but now, as I think about my own role in this card-giving activity system, I begin to feel more and more uncomfortable. Considering the activity of giving a greeting card as giving up an opportunity for self-expression, I have an

innate desire to research my own actions and to interrogate the reasons, and personal justification, behind the choices that I make.

Now, How Should I Go About This Research?

When beginning this self-reflective analysis, I isolated a few factors to consider: What role do greeting cards play in outsourcing expression? If self-expression is of great importance, then how does price of the card impact the giver as well as the receiver? What are the implications of low-priced cards when a price cannot, ultimately, be placed on communicating emotion? After careful consideration of these guiding questions, I went out into the field (ok . . . Walmart) and analyzed all of the cards available for purchase, excluding holiday cards, in the greeting card aisle. (In other words, I was the awkward woman standing in the aisle for two hours taking pictures of the front, inside, and back of every greeting card available.)

After many confused, sideways glances by my fellow shoppers, I went home to evaluate my findings. I transferred my pictures (232 of them, to be exact) from my iPhone to my Mac and began to sift through them, coding each card as I went. Coding is a method of assigning a code (makes sense, huh?) to data that you have collected in the hopes that trends will emerge. When I code data, I assign letters, phrases, words, and/or numbers to the information that I am analyzing in an attempt to group this information into categories. When I am finished, I look over the data and place the information into groups based on similar codes. It is in this way that I am able to identify similarities amongst my data sets.

First, I thought about the things I wanted to analyze about the cards that I had photographed for study. I knew that the price of the greeting card was important because I was interested in exploring the differences between low-priced cards and their more expensive counterparts. I was also wondering if the amount of writing on the front and inside of the card conveyed value; in other words, do more words/sentences equal more/deeper feeling? And, finally, I was interested in evaluating the format and style of the cards—embellishments, intricate detail, material used, protective coverings, etc.—while I discerned the significance of this information.

So I created a chart, on white lined paper in my college-ruled notebook, marking down the specs for each greeting card (Figure 1). The chart that I constructed included sections for price, greeting card genre, the number of sentences on the front of the card, the number of lines on the front of the card, the word count on the front of the card, the number of sentences on the inside of the card, the number of lines on the inside of the card, the word count on the inside of the card, as well as a description of the card and comments about its format/style.

Figure 1: The chart I made to code the data I was gathering. The data above the line is associated with the low-priced greeting cards, while the data below the line is associated with the high-priced cards.

I analyzed hundreds of greeting cards. When I was done I began to look over my findings, primarily focusing on the cards from a lexical perspective (this means that I focused on the words, the vocabulary used). So what did I find? As illustrated in Figure 2, I discovered that the value cards had significantly fewer lines of text both on the front cover of the card (average of 2.7 lines) as well as on the inside of the card (average of 3.3 lines) as compared to their more expensive counterparts (7.3 lines on the front and 6.1 lines inside). The same was true of the word count of the value cards (average of 5.6 words on the front and 12 words inside) in comparison to the pricier cards (average of 28.8 words on the front and 23.1 words inside).

	Outside Sentences/Lines Averages	Words on front Average	Inside Sentences/Lines Averages	Words inside Average
High Priced	3.7/7.3	28.8	19/6.1	23.1
Low Priced	1.3/2.7	5.6	1.4/3.3	12

Figure 2: The chart that I made when averaging data from my research.

Think About It . . .

But what does this mean? Does it mean that more expensive cards cost more because they have longer messages? Or that having longer messages means that more thought was put into creating this card? Perhaps it means that a fewer-word-count card means that less care was taken in creating and picking out this card (fewer words to read = less concern for the receiver of the message). Maybe, instead, this all means that the amount of words on/in a card is connected to the depth of the sentiment expressed by the purchaser and that the more deeply the card purchaser feels, the more money that they will spend on a card that contains a longer message.

My theories were numerous, so I figured that I should refer back to the chart that I created as I was coding the greeting cards that I photographed. When I looked at my own evaluation of these cards, I found a positive correlation between the card price and my assessment of "sincere" emotion (you know, heartfelt and believable emotion rather than the generic emotion so often communicated through this genre) as I took notes on the format and style of both high and low price brackets. While my "comment" section contained critical descriptions of low-priced greeting cards such as "cheaply made," "clip art graphics," "looks poorly hand drawn," and "plain white interior," my comments regarding the more expensive cards included observations such as "embellished," "contains cut-outs," "textured," "colored interior," "googley eyes," "foiled lettering," and "interior graphics/background." In addition I made observations such as whether or not the card was a bifold or a trifold, finding that all of the value cards for purchase were of the bifold variety whereas the more expensive cards were of both the bifold and trifold variety, and whether the card was covered in plastic (several of the more expensive cards were) as if protecting an investment.

Is This What Really Matters?

Now what does *this* mean? (This question does not refer to the number of folds or the protective covering.) I am questioning why I coded the cards in this

manner. Why does word count, the number of text lines, textured borders, number of folds, and whether or not there is a nonessential covering matter, especially when evaluating the vehicle transporting emotional expression? And, most importantly for myself, why did I decide to focus on these criteria? If my project is all about relinquishing and outsourcing expression, then why aren't I coding for that—how *can I* even evaluate and code for that—as I focus on both real and perceived value instead?

According to Dodson and Bells, "It has been suggested that the card's price is a sign value mediating the relationship signified by the exchange" (14). In other words, the more money spent on a card, the more valuable the relationship must be. This then begs the question: To what extent do cards function "as a vehicle through which to judge the quality or depth of interpersonal relationships" (14) and whether or not this function is connected to the price or content of the card being gifted?

In a study conducted by Dodson and Bells involving MBA students, researchers found that for some individuals "it was important that a high-quality medium be chosen as the carrier of their message. Because the card is often seen to reflect the giver's sincerity in acknowledging a relationship with the recipient, the quality of the card was seen to add value to the expressed relationship" (15). This is particularly interesting since quantitative (numerical) value cannot, in any measurable way, be placed upon self-expression and effectively conveying sentiment. What this study is saying is that higher-quality (read: more expensive) cards increase the assumed worth of the sentiment being shared.

Though these mass-produced vehicles of intimate expression are, ultimately, universalized and impersonal, some may argue that a handwritten message inside is the key to reclaiming this genre from the grips of a generic existence. I challenge this rationale, though, and wonder, rather, whether the handwritten note following the mechanically printed message adds personalization and sentiment or, instead, highlights the fact that the act of giving a greeting card is impersonal. Maybe, then, "[t]he act of adding a personal note provides the means for further personalizing a rather generic medium of communication" (16). If this personalization is recognized as necessary, in order to justify the means by which intimate sentiment is expressed, then why rely on an outside source to articulate the initial message being sent?

Rethinking What I Thought I Knew

If this connection between price, word count, and perceived sincerity is legitimate, what about the birthday card that Addy made for me? Does this mean that the free, simple, bi-fold card (containing no words on the front and only two words inside) is less valuable than a more expensive card that

could be purchased in the greeting card aisle at Walmart? This handmade birthday card disrupts my perception. Since I appreciated it more than I would appreciate a card that could have been purchased, my assessment of the greeting cards that I analyzed is debunked.

When I coded for the components that I initially assigned worth to, I was constructing a perception that prized quantitative data, one which assumed that more (words, embellishments, paper folds) translated to greater valuation and increased sincerity and sentiment. After experiencing the significance of heartfelt, hand-drawn, personally created expression of emotion, I recognize how easy it is to fall into the habit of associating price with intrinsic value.

My research, initially, did not include an examination of handmade greeting cards. Originally, I was only interested in the perceived worth of mechanically created cards sold to consumers through mass-market means. I am a researcher, I thought, and my article will be rooted in the research and analysis of for-purchase greeting cards. By illustrating the components of both high- and low-priced cards, I would be able to draw a connection between the implied worth of the message sent in cards of both price points.

Being Wrong Never Felt So Good

I was sure of my purpose, sure of my analysis after reading the cards and coding them for data. It was not until I received the birthday card from my daughter (Figure 3) that I thought about what I really valued: not the glitter or glitz, not the sharpness of the photograph on the front cover, not the word count or the sentence length, not the number of times that the cardstock had been folded. I valued the effort spent on creating the card, the ownership implicit in making it oneself specifically for the intended receiver.

When expression is outsourced, an outsider is relied upon to communicate deep sentiment and intimate emotion. Who is this outsider and how do they know exactly what you want to say? The answer is that they don't. Maybe,

Figure 3: Addy holding the birthday card that she made for me.

after all, it was Addy who had it right all along when she refused to go along with the purchase of my birthday card, when she declined to entrust an outside source with the delivery of her own personal sentiments. After all, my chart didn't have the ability to contain the most important code of all: self-expression.

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"the shit house poet strikes again"(1): Trials and Revelations of Bathroom Graffiti Writing Research

Cody Parish

Just as often as we enter restrooms, we likely encounter graffiti scrawled on bathroom stalls or in the space between the tiles of the wall. This article explores bathroom graffiti, interrogating first the campus restroom spaces where the tags can be found and then the tags themselves. From his findings, Cody Parish draws conclusions about the activity of creating bathroom graffiti, its representation and reception, and its overarching purpose.

First (2)

I came to this idea of bathroom graffiti when I remembered how one of my best friends made it his hobby to tag up (or write on) bathroom stalls throughout grade school. Anything from rough sketches of demented Joker faces to gang signs to funny phrases like the classic verse that starts, "Here I sit broken-hearted . . . " I bet you can fill in the rest. Although I've never felt the overpowering urge to tag a bathroom stall, I found this particular genre of writing interesting and amusing. So I figured I might as well give bathroom graffiti a good ol' fashioned try and see what I could find.

For writing research, I knew the best thing I could do was gather primary sources, which in this case meant I had to visit a lot of toilets. I knew that anywhere large numbers of people gather, such as college campuses, there are never any shortages of restrooms. Fortunately, I had plenty of previous experience with the unique smells and sights of your typical bathroom, being that I worked as a member of the "Grounds and Pool Crew"—a deceitful euphemism for the oh-so-coveted title of janitor—at a waterpark for a summer. So I was mentally prepared for the potentially shitty task ahead. I hate to admit

Follow Your *wet* DREAMS!

that I basically just started checking out bathroom stalls at this point, but that's what happened. I had a pen and notepad to write down my observations and my cell phone to snap pictures, but I didn't have many preconceived notions about where I wanted this writing research to go. I knew that I wanted to stick to bathroom graffiti in spaces occupied mostly by college students, but that was it.

During my first stroll around Illinois State University's restrooms, I quickly encountered a big issue in my search—every stall in Stevenson Hall was wiped clean of graffiti. Worse, I had the distinct feeling in my gut—no, not that feeling—that every stall across campus had gotten a do-over with a fresh coat of paint during the summer. To confirm my suspicion, I checked out several men's restrooms in Bone Student Center and Milner Library. Wouldn't you know it? All the stalls looked exactly the same: spotless. Suffice it to say I was taken aback. I was sure that those stalls would be full of restless students' scribbles and drawings. Nope! It seemed that I had chosen the worst project to undertake during a campus-wide fight against bathroom vandalism. Well shit. I didn't know whether I should press forward with my investigation or flush the idea down the toilet. All doubts left my mind, however, when I remembered the poignant words of my fellow Texan, Dale Gribble, "Hell, I ain't no quitter. I've been smokin' for thirty years" ("Torch Song Hillogy")! It was settled.

Figure 1: Sketch of "dude" smoking. (3)

My spirits rose as I started rationalizing the situation in my head. Repainting bathroom stalls had to be an annual summer pastime. Now that it was over, tags would pop up in no time. No sweat. Plus, I hadn't even visited a tenth of the stalls around campus. Yes, all the stalls had probably been wiped, but I had faith in the devious nature of ISU's student population to provide me with quality data for my research. And I wasn't proven wrong.

I revisited Bone a few days after my first failed search and was excited to discover an out-of-the-way men's bathroom in the far corner of the third floor. Not only did the reclusive location of this bathroom surprise me, but its urinal/stall ratio of five to one was also way out of whack. My spirits weren't high as I opened the lone stall door. Yet for the second time that night, I was pleasantly surprised. On the light blue wall at the right side of the enclosure, I read the following message:

> *you Found*
> *the Secret*
> *Bathroom*
> *Congrats!* (4)

Wow, how refreshing! I felt accomplished in a simple way. I had found some graffiti and an apparently hidden bathroom. Pats all around! And then, below that was written:

> *enjoy your private poop,*
> *you've earned it.* (5)

Hell, yeah! Thanks, I would, if only I came here for that reason. I happily noted these two samples and a couple others on my notepad and then made my exit. These were the only graffiti tags I collected all night, but they raised valuable questions about the writing research I was doing here. Before I could move forward with my investigation, I needed to find answers to these questions and tweak my approach accordingly. Here were my thoughts.

Have you seen this man? (6)

Unfortunately, I hadn't. I quickly discovered during my strolls through Stevenson, Bone, and Milner that the dismal restroom lighting made it exceedingly difficult to see into the stalls. Sure, I had my cell phone, but it doesn't have a light tool, and I couldn't find the flash option in the camera settings. Consequently, if a tag like the one I used for the subhead above (and the other tags I used for most of this essay's subheadings, as well as the ones in the margins of my article) was penned onto the stall, I had about a 50/50 chance of spotting it. If the tag was penciled or etched, the shadows took it for their own. As a result, I decided to carry a mini-flashlight in my pocket on

Smile, It could be worse

future bathroom investigations. (Nonetheless, I managed to take only a few photos that turned out well enough to publish in this article.)

I am Error (7)

I certainly made too many mistakes in the seat-of-my-pants approach I initially took for this research. Searching through every men's restroom in multiple buildings takes a lot of time. Moreover, it's impossible to get a decent look in each stall when students continually walk in expecting to relieve themselves in the very places I am trying to investigate. So how could I shorten the amount of time I was spending whiffing pungent bathroom colognes while simultaneously increasing my chances of stumbling upon the holy grail of graffiti? I took a seat—not on the toilet—and came up with the following parameters:

1. Only check the stalls of buildings students actually occupy, such as classroom buildings, Milner, Bone, and even a local coffee shop or two. What sense would it make to check the administration buildings? I'd spare myself and my nostrils the waste—of time and effort.

2. Make bathroom rounds between 8:30–10:00 p.m. because:

   a. I have class until 8:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays anyway, and

   b. I knew from my previous rounds that only the most dedicated students roamed the halls of the classroom buildings between these times. Oh! And

   c. Most buildings are locked around 10:00 p.m.

QUESTION EVERYTHING (8)

Okay, now I felt more comfortable with how I was actually gathering my samples, but I still didn't know what I was going to do with my notepad full of scribbles. Shit, again. My focus for this writing research project had really begun to wane, especially since a couple weeks had passed since I hopped on this joy ride. What could I do? I wasn't about to recreate bathroom graffiti. That would be too easy and just stupid. At the same time, I also wasn't in any position to interview some dude while he's tagging campus stalls. Too much risk of that tactic backfiring, not to mention the results would be twice as disastrous if I tried that in the women's restrooms. Nope, that option was definitely off the table. However, that brought up another flaw in my investigation—how could I get graffiti from women's bathrooms?

A Cry Out for the left Wall of Stall?

Why doesn't anyone write over here?

So many questions! I was getting a headache. Well, I couldn't just ignore women's restrooms altogether . . . but you wouldn't catch me strolling into one and snooping around, either. I wasn't opposed to asking for help, though I had originally conceived this idea being carried out by a one-man team. I decided to recruit a co-researcher, and who better than my girlfriend back home? I simply asked her to check out some women's restrooms at her university and record any graffiti she found. Thankfully, she agreed. We had already made plans for her to visit the following weekend, so when she arrived, she could fill me in on what she'd found. Then we both could spend some time checking out the ISU bathroom scene together—romantic, right? A late night ménage à trois: just me, my girlfriend, and "John."

Even though I'd solved the women's restroom dilemma, I still had no idea what I was going to do with my research. But you know what? Fuck it. I decided I'd deal with that issue later after I actually had enough graffiti samples to analyze. With my investigation revamped, I was ready to resume my search.

*Who likes under the stall play?.
Not the person shitting next to me apparently*

success is the best revenge (9)

After some strategizing, I mapped out which buildings to hit next. I decided that the Center for the Visual Arts was a must. Based on what I remembered of my artsy friends back home, I was willing to bet that these students couldn't pass up a chance to sketch out a couple bathroom-(in)appropriate designs for their fellow classmates' viewing pleasure. Sadly, the first floor restrooms were spotless. But the basement restrooms? That was a whole different ballgame.

When I entered the restroom closest to the stairway on the northern end of the floor, I knew immediately that my writing research had finally found its footing. There were drawings (more than I ever would've imagined for one bathroom), phrases, witticisms, and conversations on most of the stalls. It was like the flood gates had finally opened, and everyone had just kind of looked at each other, shrugged as if to say, "eh," and pulled out their writing utensils. My personal favorite was the role-playing response to the milk carton mystery man tag. It went like this:

> **Have you seen this man?**
> ya...who the fuck is he?
> . . . Dad?
>   yes, son.
>   it is me.
>   Dad. . . (10)

Only take drugs found naturally in nature + have been used by humans for centuries. eg. weed, shrooms, cacti, some forms of DMT

This was great! I finally had samples! I excitedly set about documenting all the different graffiti tags in my notepad and photographing the sketches. From this point on, I found more and more graffiti samples. Typically where there was graffiti, there was a shitload of it.

YOU
ARE
LOVED

Over the course of the following week and a half, part of which was spent in the company of my girlfriend (who didn't find any samples in the women's bathrooms at her university), I managed to check out most of the classroom buildings surrounding the quad for graffiti samples. I even revisited the places where I'd found the most success, like the Center for the Visual Arts. It was in this process of revisiting that I encountered yet another frustrating difficulty. As it turns out, the stalls weren't just wiped clean in the summer and then left to accumulate a year's worth of graffiti. No, these stalls were routinely kept in tip-top shape, meaning that my sly arch-enemies—the friendly building custodial staff—scrubbed these stalls every week or so. Imagine my surprise when I found the mystery milk carton man had disappeared! Now my temporal window for finding graffiti was redefined by the arbitrary cleaning routines of over a hundred janitors. Fucking fantastic. I also could no longer track the evolution of certain graffiti tags. Nevertheless, I managed to find a satisfying quantity of samples, from which I determined the buildings housing the most graffiti were Schroeder Hall and the Center for the Visual Arts. Each had one bathroom in particular that damn-near overflowed with tags. That's not to say that these were the only buildings in which I found my samples. Almost every building had a tag or two; however, the numbers game no longer mattered because I had concluded my search. I was now left to make sense of the shit I'd collected.

League
of
Legends
is the shit

Like any good writing researcher, I needed to delve into bathroom graffiti scholarship first (if there was such a thing) in order to support my research observations and eventual conclusions. Before doing this, however, I recorded my thoughts as they were, so that I could differentiate my personal impressions from those of the scholars I would read. Taking this precaution, I felt, was important because my theories were unique to my experience, and I didn't want to apply the idiosyncratic conclusions of another researcher to my own investigation unless our ideas overlapped.

The good intentions landed me in jail

With my preliminary impressions on paper, I was prepared for a formal introduction to bathroom graffiti. I booted up my laptop and began my new search the best way I knew how: I Googled "bathroom graffiti." Nothing fancy in that approach. Unfortunately, I got nothing fancy out of the results, either. Most of the sites in the search results were dedicated to humorous self-reported graffiti from around the world. Although I was tempted to let myself get sidetracked, I had to find some concrete academic studies to support my writing research. Switching to my second go-to resource, the dependable

"Betsy" of Internet search engines—Wikipedia—I plugged "bathroom graffiti" into the Wikipedia search bar. The first result that popped up derived itself from the root word "latrine"—this was my stop, folks. According to Wikipedia, Alan Dundes coined the term "latrinalia" to refer to bathroom graffiti in 1966 ("Latrinalia"). It was either latrinalia or the endearing catch-all phrase, shithouse poetry ("Latrinalia"). I scanned the rest of this short Wikipedia article and trained my eyes on the References section. I'd found that checking reference lists is a great way to find other relevant sources for any topic, even if those sources are listed on the likes of Wikipedia.

I noted promising citations and opened a new tab in my browser to search the Milner online journal databases. I accessed one of the two sources, Adam Trahan's "Identity and Ideology: The Dialogic Nature of Latrinalia," by searching *Academic Search Complete*, but Dundes's article, "Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia," was unavailable. I decided to make do with Trahan's article and checked his Works Cited list for sources that I could possibly locate later. As it turned out, this article provided a comprehensive overview of the limited scholarship on shithouse poetry. Between the information in Trahan's essay and what I gleaned from the sources in his bibliography, I felt like the stage was set for me to take a shot at articulating my observations and theories.

MADE (11)

Spatially Mapping the Activity

Tags were rarely located anywhere but inside stalls. More importantly, tags located in the stalls closest to the bathroom door were few and far between. If the bathroom housed more than four stalls, the tags were usually situated within the middle two or three stalls. If the bathroom had fewer than four stalls, most tags could be found in the stall furthest from the door. As most graffiti artists surely prefer not to get caught in the activity of defacing public property, the privacy of a bathroom stall located away from the door is about as attractive as a pee-less toilet seat to an intestinally troubled germaphobe.

Remediating Reception

After noting so many graffiti samples, I picked up on an interesting trend regarding the representation (how the writing is conceptualized, including main characteristics and conventions) and reception (how the writing is taken up and/or later repurposed) of the tags: students were treating this space as they would an online social forum like Facebook. I found a couple "posts," if you will, on a stall in Schroeder Hall, which depicted thumbs up and thumbs down options for an erased comment. It seemed that people were presenting

Look to wilderness for answers

Toy Story 2 was okay

graffiti as independent posts or comments in an effort to create a sort of bathroom community. Within this community, I found much of the familiar thematic content of Facebook statuses, such as greetings, general updates, opinion statements, social commentary, questions, advice and encouragement, advertising, and popular culture references.

Say, "Perhaps," to drugs...

Rush
ΠΚΑ

Fuck Communism

Sneak Points +5
Thanks for the points dude!
Yo dude, 1 wanted those points
Sucks to Suck (12)

Editing

At the same time, part of this culture of commentary that students had created within these bathroom spaces was devoted to educating peers on spelling and proper grammar. I'm personally thankful that we have people who take such an unnecessary burden upon themselves, because otherwise we'd never witness such hilarious fuck-up gems as this:

Will
T W
h
Matter
n D
You're
a
D
?

Your* (13; "Will it Matter When You're Dead?"; "Your*")

LIES
I love you
I miss you

Whether well-intentioned or not, sometimes those self-appointed editors of public spaces like the one above troll themselves, simultaneously affirming for keen-eyed bathroom occupants both correct and incorrect spelling, grammar, and punctuation practices, along with the glaring necessity for a spell-check option in bathroom stalls everywhere.

Groupthink

Like I said earlier, where I found graffiti, I usually found a shitload of it. It was like a groupthink mentality had taken over the bathroom patrons in a preservation vs. destruction dichotomy. This mentality lends itself to the broken windows theory proposed by James Wilson and George Kelling. They

claim that once the first window of a building is broken and left unrepaired, vandals will continue to break more and more windows (Wilson and Kelling 29). So once one student decides to write on clean bathroom stalls, it starts a snowball effect, and graffiti pops up all over the place.

Vandalism
is
Cool!!!
you said it! (14)

Winter is coming

Men vs. Women

Of the fifty-plus men's restrooms I checked, I found A LOT of graffiti. Contrastingly, of the twenty-plus women's restroom that my co-researcher visited, she found only one intelligible graffiti sample.

you are beautiful inside & out (16)

Yes, I see the disparity in the numbers here, but academic research supports these findings, too. Trahan cites four published studies spanning nearly forty years that concluded graffiti is more prevalent in men's restrooms than women's restrooms (Trahan 2–3) (15). Based on the scholarship, I felt lucky to have my one sample of women's graffiti (above).

Tiger got to hunt
Bird got to fly
Man got to sit
and wonder "why, why, why?" (17)

I had finally made my way back to the questions that had plagued me since the beginning of my investigation: What could I do with my research? Which direction should my article take? I mean, I didn't travel all around campus like a shitty Sherlock Holmes for countless hours collecting bathroom graffiti samples for the memories. I had developed a solid base of procedures for collecting my data. I performed the necessary academic research and used it to inform my observations. In theory, I had one helluva article in front of me, but I'd been sitting on all this information for weeks now, and I couldn't squeeze anything solid out of it.

I resigned myself to reviewing my notes and samples one more time. I couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculousness of this one tag:

behold!
The 2-ply dispenser! I'm a genius (18)

I feel like a shitty magician

What I found so silly was that the writer was taking credit for a device that had existed for who knows how long. It wasn't new, but this person reintroduced it as if to say, "Oh, yes, weary gentlemen, I present to you not just any crappy two-ply toilet paper dispenser, but the new and improved crappy two-ply dispenser." And that gave me an idea! It wasn't new by any means, but it was new to my investigation. I just needed to work with what had been present throughout my research—the inherent human need to communicate.

When I wrote my initial observations on bathroom graffiti, I noted that people seem to have a knack for repurposing unconventional spaces into communication forums, even if doing so constitutes delinquent behavior. Bathroom graffiti, as I saw it, is a celebration of the freedom to express ourselves in both a spontaneous and anonymous manner. This expression opposes the natural culture of silence traditionally found in bathrooms. In my experience, the bathroom is considered a space in which individuals take care of personal, private matters; as a result, talking takes a minimal, even taboo role. To circumvent that silence, some individuals communicate via writing on the stalls, despite the illicit nature of the act. As such, it makes sense that ISU's administration tries to inhibit the proliferation of graffiti in campus restrooms by having the custodians clean and repaint the bathroom stalls. For those who write graffiti, cleaning the bathroom stalls strips away their voice. Thus, students who write and rewrite graffiti onto campus stalls resist the culturally and authoritatively enforced atmosphere of silence within restrooms. In a way, graffiti represents more than just potentially humorous or offensive bathroom dialogue. It represents both the need to express oneself and resistance against those forces trying to divest individuals of this ability.

WHO
R
U
WHEN NO**1**
IS
WATCHING

As a writing researcher, I had come to a valuable conclusion about what I now preferred to call, if only for its natural eloquence, shithouse poetry. This writing genre wasn't simply about throwing a line or two onto the stall door for the hell of it. The compulsion to communicate underscores every piece of writing that we read on bathroom stalls, even seemingly empty statements like this:

ASSMUFFINS! (19)

I admit that I had a bit of help coming to this conclusion. On a stall in Schroeder Hall, I discovered some very wise words buried among the other bathroom graffiti.

They try to hide the words of my pen,
but the shit house poet strikes again (20)

I laughed when I first read this, but when I reviewed my graffiti samples later, I saw the truth within that statement—the soundless expression breaking the silence. Good show, shithouse poets. Good show.

Note:

There's no way I can conclude this essay without addressing the custodial staff of ISU: I applaud them. They made my research significantly less shitty, but also much more challenging. I tip my proverbial hat to them because my hardships with locating graffiti stand as a testament to their work. I hold no bad blood against people doing their jobs well . . . but damn, could they have at least saved some graffiti for me? It's okay. S'all good. No beef. Next time I'll just send out a memo.

> *If you have enough time to read all this,*
> *you should be reading a book instead* (21)

End Notes

1. "They try to hide the words of my pen, / but the shit house poet strikes again" – Pencil; Second Floor Men's Restroom, Schroeder Hall, Illinois State University.

2. "First" – Pencil; Second Floor Men's Restroom, Old Union, Illinois State University.

3. Sketch of "Dude" Smoking – Sharpie; Basement Floor Men's Restroom, Center for the Visual Arts, Illinois State University.

4. "you Found / the Secret / Bathroom / Congrats!" – Pen; Third Floor Men's Restroom, Bone Student Center, Illinois State University.

5. "enjoy your private poop, / you've earned it" – Pen; Third Floor Men's Restroom, Bone Student Center, Illinois State University.

6. "Have you seen this man?"; "ya…who the fuck is he?"; "Yeah, I have / He gives 25¢ / Foot Jobs"; "…Dad? / yes, son. / it is me. / Dad…" – Pen, Pen, Pen, Sharpie; Basement Floor Men's Restroom, Center for the Visual Arts, Illinois State University.

7. "I am Error" – Pencil; Second Floor Men's Restroom; Schroeder Hall, Illinois State University.

8. "QUESTION EVERYTHING / They are watching" – Pencil; Coffeehouse and Deli Men's Restroom, Normal, Illinois.

9. "success is the best revenge" – Pen; Basement Floor Men's Restroom, Center for the Visual Arts, Illinois State University.

10. See End Note 6.

11. "MADE" – Black Marker; First Floor Men's Restroom, Schroeder Hall, Illinois State University.

12. "Sneak Points +5"; "Thanks for the points dude!"; "Yo dude, I wanted those points"; "Sucks to Suck" – Pen, Pen, Pen, Pen; First Floor Men's Restroom, Center for the Visual Arts, Illinois State University.

13. "Will / it / Matter / When / You're / Dead?"; "Your*" – Pen, Pencil; Basement Floor Men's Restroom, Center for the Visual Arts, Illinois State University.

14. "Vandalism / is / Cool!!!"; "you said it!" – Pen, Pen; First Floor Men's Restroom, Center for the Visual Arts, Illinois State University.

15. Trahan cites the following four studies to support his claim that bathroom graffiti is more prevalent in men's restrooms than in women's restrooms: Kinsey et al. (1953); Dundes (1966); Farr and Gordon (1975); Arluke, Kutakoff, and Levin (1987). Interestingly, Trahan mentions a more recent study, Bartholome and Snyder (2004), that found no difference between the amount of graffiti in men's and women's restrooms; however, these researchers collected their samples from one restaurant in New York that encouraged their patrons to write on their bathroom walls. So what can we glean from this study? Apparently, women have roughly the same intestinal impulses to write dastardly phrases on bathroom stalls—they just prefer to stay on the right side of the law.

16. "you are beautiful inside & out" – Blue Ink; Second Floor Women's Restroom, Centennial East, Illinois State University. For the reader's enjoyment, here's a picture of a tag found by a female colleague in a stall at the University of Chicago:

17. "Tiger got to hunt / Bird got to fly / Man got to sit / and wonder 'why, why, why?'" – Pencil; Second Floor Men's Restroom, Stevenson Hall, Illinois State University. This tag is interesting because this short verse originates from Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Cat's Cradle*.

18. "behold! / The 2-ply dispensor! I'm a genius" – Pencil; Second Floor Men's Restroom, Schroeder Hall, Illinois State University.

19. "ASSMUFFINS!" – Coffeehouse and Deli Men's Restroom, Normal, Illinois.

20. See End Note 1.

21. "If you have enough time to read all this, / you should be reading a book instead" – Coffeehouse and Deli Men's Restroom, Normal, Illinois.

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I Spy with My Little i . . .
The Manifestation of Power Dynamics

Mac Scott

In this article, Mac Scott discusses how power dynamics and cultural pressures construct rules about "correct" grammar and punctuation usage. Looking specifically at the capitalization (or lack thereof) of the letter I, he explores ways that "good" writing is actually determined not by one standard set of definitive rules, but by whether a writer effectively navigates the conventions of a specific genre.

Lisa: *You can't drive, Dad. He's got your license.*

Homer: *Well, I'm gonna try anyway.*

Homer turns the ignition and the engine starts up

Homer: *It worked! It's a miracle!*

—The Simpsons

Grammar's Tough. Amirite?

Is there anything more frustrating than grammar? Fewer things make children and adults alike feel insecure and inadequate. Whether it's marked-up essays, poor grades on Language Arts worksheets, a sinking suspicion that you were actually being taught a foreign language in your English classes, or a friend calling you out every time you use *seen* instead of *saw*, we have all had experiences with grammar that have made us feel, or continue to make us feel, well, dumb (Figure 1). Anxiety over grammar is one of the few experiences that can bridge differences and forge friendships. Admitting that you *don't get grammar* is a good way to get on people's good side. It's an experience pretty much everyone can relate to.
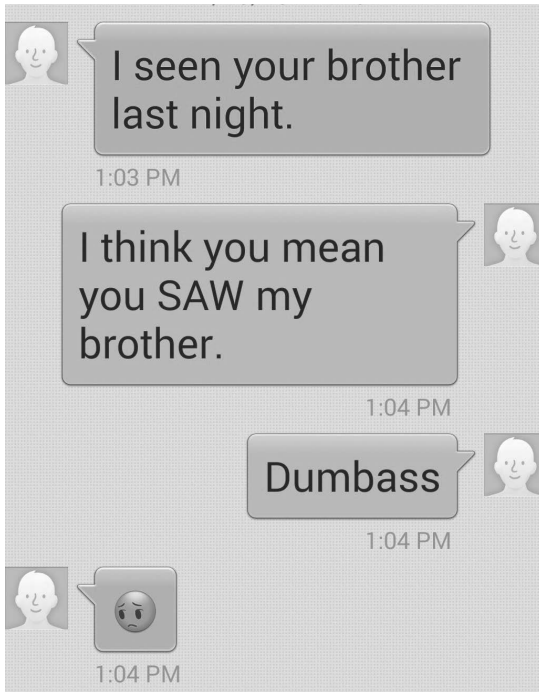
Figure 1: Someone sends a text but uses the "incorrect" tense. Hurt feelings ensue.

But even though many of us can't help but roll our eyes when someone reminds us it's *whom* and not *who*, grammar remains a powerful source of self-loathing. And it isn't difficult to see why. Most of us think of grammar as that thing we never knew enough of in school, and even those students who consistently received good grades in their English classes certainly had points taken off here and there. Grammar is just one of those things where you feel you always get *something* wrong. The logical extension of this is that everyone then feels at best a little anxious and at worst like a terrible human being.

This last thing—the part about feeling like a terrible person—isn't necessarily hyperbole. In their book *Grammar Rants*, Patricia A. Dunn and Ken Lindblom discuss our country's history of equating proper grammar with morality. They actually specify Illinois State University's President from 1862 to 1876, Richard Edwards, and his belief that "unskillful and slovenly use of [the English language] is disastrous to any accuracy of thought . . . The Normal University considers it a worthy service to do all that is possible to *remedy this evil*" (qtd. in Dunn et al 2–3). The authors point to a few other examples of ISU faculty from the 19th century purporting the belief that grammar = morality, and that incorrect or "bad" grammar = evilness (3). These ideas were hardly unique to Illinois State University, but the school's role as a prominent education college gives a small glimpse into how improper grammar and the people who employ it are often charged with no less than the downfall of modern civilization.

This is messed up, right? At the very least it's frustrating. For one thing, what we consider grammar often isn't what linguists consider grammar; a lot of times we're talking about punctuation or spelling. And a lot of these rules aren't really necessary. We've just been brought up to think they are. This can be evidenced by our own personal conversations through talking or text messaging. Those who believe (or who have been told repeatedly) that they are terrible at grammar are still able to communicate effectively with others. Linguists would claim this alone proves that a person does, in fact, understand his or her language's

grammatical structure. In a way, it's the same with writing conventions; if you post on Facebook, even if it's written with terrible punctuation and you use *there* when you should have used *their*, your friends will still probably know what you mean. If you break language rules, the world keeps spinning. In fact, many of the rules we break don't cause even minor confusion. If someone sends a text that says, "OK. C U their," I may roll my eyes, but I still know what they're saying. Message received, broken rules and all.

Reading the Rules

In *The Simpsons* scene depicted in this article's epigraph, Lisa reminds Homer of a rule: if the cops suspend your license, you can't drive. But what she really means is *you're not supposed to drive*. Homer, awesome as ever, takes Lisa literally. He thinks he literally won't be able to drive his car without his license. This interchange between Homer and Lisa is analogous to telling someone, "You can't end a sentence with a preposition," and having that person think it's impossible to do so. But just as Homer turns the key and the Simpsons drive off, you can end a sentence with a preposition and people will probably know what you're saying. In other words, you *can* break rules—*you're just not supposed to*.

With this in mind, the issue becomes when you *should* and when you *shouldn't* break these rules. Just because many of these rules don't make a whole lot of sense, that doesn't mean that breaking them doesn't have effects. Going back to *The Simpsons* for a second, Homer *can* drive, but driving on a suspended license is a crime. Similarly, breaking grammar rules can have an effect. Again looking to *Grammar Rants*, Dunn and Lindblom argue that "correctness is often a function of who is writing what for whom: who the reader is, who the writer is, and the power difference between them" (xi). In other words, whether it's a student writing for a teacher or a job applicant writing a resume that will be read by someone in a human resources department, the more powerful people tend to decide what is correct. Similarly, they're the ones who decide on a punishment. A student may get a poor grade. A job applicant may not get an interview with a resume filled with grammatical errors. Homer may get thrown in jail.

A Game Changer

So what? The quick answer is to make sure you're aware of your audience and how he or she (or they) will receive your writing. Be aware that your Facebook friends will interpret your not capitalizing proper nouns differently than, say, the professor you need to email will. Seems simple, right?

Eh, kind of. When we research any writing situation, regardless of the genre, we find it complex and evolving. After all, every writing situation is unique and influenced by countless elements, which in turn are influenced by countless elements, and so on. For this article, I want to look at just one of the influences currently having an effect on the way we write: social media.

It's important to note that social media, in and of itself, isn't bad or good. But how we use it—and how it lends itself to be used—does have an impact. Ask any adult to comment on the state of contemporary writing, and you might hear something about how writing today is *just awful*, and that it's all because of Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc. And that these mediums are bringing about the end, not just of the English language, but of our once-great nation.

But anyone who uses social media understands that the end isn't exactly near. When writing for Facebook, you may feel guilty about writing in a way that your 8th-grade Language Arts teacher would find "incorrect," but that's probably the extent of it. Comma splices on Facebook aren't ushering in the apocalypse; rather, the medium is changing the very idea of what *is* and *isn't* "correct."

Can i Get an Example?

Over the past couple decades, social media—rather, our communal participation in social media—has affected our understanding of writing conventions. This is exemplified through the capitalization (or lack thereof) of the pronoun *I*. From semicolons to split infinitives to paragraph breaks, knowing how to write "correctly" is difficult. But if there exists an easier rule to follow than capitalizing *I*, I don't know what it is. As far as writing conventions go, capitalizing *I* is as easy as they come. You're supposed to do it. Always. End of story.

Not quite. Despite the fact that this should be the easiest rule to follow, a lot of people "nowadays" don't capitalize it. We're left with a couple possible rationales: 1) either people lowercase it on purpose, or 2) something has happened to make it so that writers don't think *i* is as big of a deal as it used to be. I think it's both. But something must have happened for this to occur. Earlier, I mentioned that some writing rules don't make a whole lot of sense and that breaking them doesn't really inhibit understanding. Let's consider if this applies to capital *I*.

A Brief History Lesson

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, people started capitalizing *i* roughly 750 years ago. In Old English, *I* was actually *ic*. Pretty soon, the c was dropped, and this led to a writing convention revolution of sorts: "Reduced to *i* by

mid-12c. in northern England, it began to be capitalized mid-13c. to mark it as a distinct word and avoid misreading in handwritten manuscripts" (Harper). In other words, capitalizing *I* was a matter of clarity; it was too small to stand alone, too easily misinterpreted. But does this hold up today?

Since most writing occurs via computers or cellphones, it's next to impossible to misread *i*, unless you get wild with fonts. For example, if you text your friend without capitalizing *i*, that friend is still going to know exactly what you mean. If writing a lowercase *i* repeatedly caused your texts to be misunderstood, you'd probably stop writing it as such. And so would everybody else (Figure 2).

There's another theory for capitalizing *I*. In *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, Otto Jespersen discusses how some associate our capitalizing *I* with an English-speaking,

Western cultural emphasis on individualism. *I* represents an affirmation of self. In other words, we capitalize *I* because *I am super important*. Jespersen dismisses this, though, pointing instead to the historical development previously noted (223).

In my mind, the historical reason for capitalizing *I* doesn't hold water anymore, but the belief that you *should* capitalize it has been kept alive. Most of us have been taught from a very young age that you have to capitalize *I*, and this is powerful. Check out the lyrics to the song "I in the Sky," which was written by Steve Zuckerman and originally aired on a 1972 episode of *Sesame Street*:

> We all live in a capital I in the middle of the desert in the center of the sky.
>
> And all day long we polish on the I to keep it clean and shiny so it brightens up the sky.
>
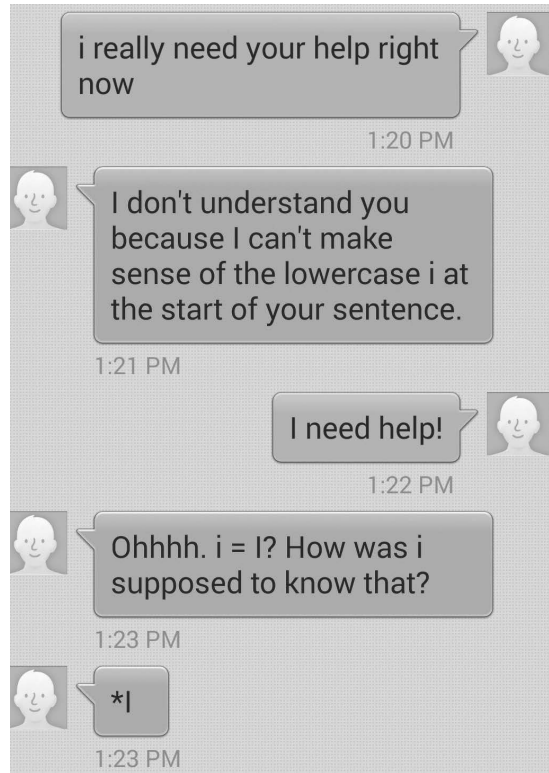> Rubbing it here and scrubbing it there. Polishing the I so high in the air.

Figure 2: A fictitious text message, where, if this type of confusion were actually possible, people would likely remember to capitalize *I*.

> As we work we sing a lively tune. It is great to be so happy on a busy afternoon.
>
> And when we're through with the day's only chore, we go into the I and we close the door.
>
> Capital I. Capital I. Capital I. Capital I.

These are the actual lyrics. It's honestly a pretty cool, trippy, melodious song, and I can't help but like it. And while Zuckerman is probably not commenting on the socialization of American citizens—at least those who live on Sesame Street—the lyrics do show how subtly this power spreads.

In 2015 we may find these lyrics kind of bizarre, but in 1972 they probably didn't seem all that indoctrination-y. In 1972, people capitalized *I*. Always. Pretty much always, anyway. I'm sure some people decided to buck the system and write without capitalization, but the vast majority of writing was done with *I*. Why? Because people in 1972 were socialized differently. In particular, this song was written before the social media "revolution."

A Game Changer (Again)

In the late-'90s, AOL Instant Messenger was the rage. I was in junior high, and I—along with all my friends—spent hours online every night typing to each other. It was the first time that a technology that allowed people to talk back and forth in real-time was so readily available to adolescents and teenagers (provided your family could afford a computer and Internet). All of a sudden, the ability to respond quickly was essential. Only we didn't know how to type as fast as we do now (because we were just starting to use social media). I think I even used the CAPS LOCK button to start every sentence. So it's not a surprise that one of the first things to go was capitalization. Our conversations carried on without capitalizing proper nouns or the first words in sentences (including all instances of *I*), and no one died.

Certainly, some "incorrect" writing came from people not knowing the rules. There/Their/They're, who/whom, comma splices, sentence fragments, ending fragments with prepositions, etc., were as complicated then as they are now, and that contributed to a lot of the "bad" grammar, spelling, and punctuation. But *I* is a different animal. All of a sudden, once capitalization took a back seat, it was no longer appropriate to capitalize *I*. And it's not as if we were breaking a rule that we didn't understand. Rather, using *I* in that genre—an instant message to a friend—was inappropriate. Capitalizing *I* became "incorrect," in a manner of speaking. What had been considered correct in more or less all genres for hundreds of years became incorrect in *this* genre. Earlier, I mentioned how power dynamics influence notions of correctness. Here, away from authority figures

and student/teacher power dynamics, using the writing conventions taught in school was weird. It came off as pompous. Perhaps rejecting capitalization was a way of subverting some hypothetical classroom authority. "Who do you think you are using correct punctuation?" I imagine someone saying. Either way, the use of *I* became nuanced, and therefore complicated.

Again, I'm focusing on capital *I* because, in theory, it's such an easy rule to follow. The way my friends and I used social media and the confusion of other writing conventions made it so that not following the rules became the norm. And *I* went along for the ride.

Applying CHAT to Online Chatting

It may be difficult to see the connection between the letter *I* and my experience writing online when I was in junior high, so I'll try to break it down with cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). To help make sense of the complexity of a writing situation, CHAT looks at it through seven different lenses: production, distribution, representation, ecology, socialization, reception, and activity. In Figure 3, I use CHAT to retroactively analyze various factors that influenced why my thirteen-year-old self would have broken from (or adhered to, depending on how you look at it) certain writing conventions when sending an instant message.

Production	This focuses on the tools I used to create a text (in this case, an instant message), e.g. my home computer, a keyboard, as well as Internet access.
Distribution	My text was delivered through AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), via the Internet, to my friends in real-time. This, in turn, made quick response times important.
Representation	I cut out all capitalization (including *I*) and practically all editing because it took too long, deciding traditional "correctness" wasn't as important as responding quickly. This wasn't a big deal, though, because *i* and *I* represent the same exact thing—me, which means using *i* doesn't cause any confusion. Eventually, avoiding certain writing conventions helped establish that I belonged to the same social group as my peers.
Ecology	No authority figures were around to pressure me to write "correctly." From computer and Internet access to the safety of my home, I grew up in an environment where I was able to focus a lot of my attention on socializing with my friends, which is something not every teenager can say.
Socialization	Because "correct" grammar reminded my friends and me of school (and you don't want your friends to think of you as a teacher), writing *too* correctly was considered, well, annoying. "Correct" writing, then, became inappropriate in certain circumstances. As such, my friends and I began to see lowercase *i* as normal.
Reception	Improper grammar and punctuation (including *i)* weren't a big deal because they were expected. My friend was more focused on getting a quick reply, and he would likely have called me out had I capitalized *I*, put commas in all the "right" places, etc.
Activity	The activity that went into creating my instant messages varied: my dad had to allow me into his office to use his computer, my friends and I would need to all be online at a certain time, we'd actually have to chat with one another, etc.

Figure 3: A CHAT analysis of my teenage Instant Messenger use.

What Are the Effects?

Between roughly the mid-thirteenth century and the advent of social media, you capitalized *I*. It had a good uninterrupted run that lasted the better part of a millennium. But after social media, for some of us our relationship status with *I* became complicated. I often felt that I *should* be capitalizing it, but I also felt that doing so in certain genres seemed wrong. Even though this started in junior high, I remember graduating from college and feeling anxious about whether or not I should follow proper capitalization conventions when I wrote emails to friends. I (and *I*) had a minor identity crisis. I had been trained to capitalize it, but I had been "corrupted" as a teenager. Even now, I often don't know whether or not I'll capitalize *I* on Facebook until the moment I post, and even then I kind of obsess over it.

Contrast my experience to that of previous generations. They grew up capitalizing *I*. Even though they may write in lowercase on Facebook or in a text message, in their heart of hearts, they think *I* should be capitalized. Not capitalizing it is fun and a sign of the times, so why not? But their default setting is still *I*. In other words, they break from capital *I* to write lowercase *i*.
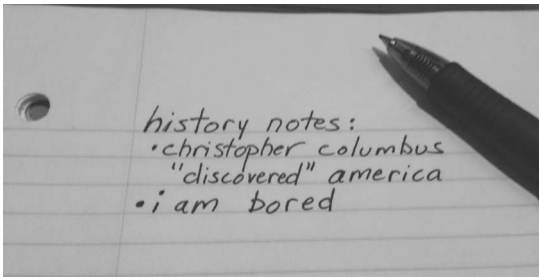

Figure 4: A fictitious example of how "kids today" often don't capitalize handwritten notes.

Now, contrast this experience with that of the generation of writers who grew up (or are growing up) with social media. For most of these students, the majority of writing is social media based, and therefore outside the watchful eye of authority figures. Before coming to school for my Master's degree, I spent a lot of time substitute teaching in elementary schools. From what I noticed, it's not uncommon for "kids today" to write lowercase *i* even when they're taking notes, which blows my mind (Figure 4). What started, at least for me, as a way to save time when typing to my friends on AOL Instant Messenger now occurs independent of the genre from whence it was forged. In other words, for some people today, their default setting is *i*; writing a capital *I* requires them to break from the lowercase.

Where Does This Leave Us?

Writing is complicated. It always has been and always will be. Every writing situation—every genre—is complex. Think back to the role that power

dynamics play in determining what constitutes our notions of correct and incorrect grammar and writing conventions. Most people in positions of power—the teachers, bosses, journalists, professors, parents, etc.—grew up with an uncomplicated view of *I*. They're no doubt aware that younger people, and even themselves on occasion, avoid capitalization in certain situations. They know firsthand that many people write *i* in places where it's still often considered improper (e.g. an email to a professor or an academic essay), and they probably know that writers do this because they have a different default setting. But the people in power still enforce the rules. Whether it's giving a bad grade or not giving someone a job or simply making a judgment about a person's intelligence or attention to detail, their allegiance probably lies with tradition.

Similarly, young people aren't dumb (at least not all of them). Even those people who stick to lowercase letters—including *i*—likely know that capitalization is "correct" in certain contexts. They probably know that it's not a good idea to write a paper (or a *Grassroots* article) in all lowercase letters, just like they shouldn't email a professor with *i*.

Despite all this—despite younger writers having some awareness of when to use *I*—the rule is sometimes broken in places where it *shouldn't* be. Maybe it's an accident. Maybe the software they're using doesn't autocorrect *i* to *I* and they didn't copyedit their text. Or maybe because after using i in the vast majority of their writing, they've been socialized so that they don't consider *i* to be indicative of lacking intelligence or some moral failure.

Either way, personal, contemporary writing will likely continue to whittle away at what Steve Zuckerman lyrically referred to as, the "I in the sky." Because today we don't all live in a capital I, and the idea that we do will likely become more and more tenuous. Rules are held together by power dynamics, which should be contested. And eventually the people on both sides of those power dynamics will have grown up in a world where *i* isn't that big of a deal. And at that point, what will happen? I don't know, but i'm excited to see how it evolves.

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Mac Scott received a B.A. in English Education from ISU, where he's now enrolled as a Master's student. He's on the English Studies track and is in the process of figuring out what that actually means for him . . . but he's got some good leads.

Publishing with the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*

GWRJ Editors

Our Mission Statement

The *GWRJ* is dedicated to publishing articles by writers and scholars whose work investigates the practices of people writing (and acting) in different writing situations and in a variety of different genres. We encourage both individuals and groups to submit work that studies and explores the different ways that writers learn how to write in different genres and settings—not just within the boundaries of academia, but in all kinds of settings where writing happens.

Because we identify "writing research" as any type of composition that endeavors to uncover new information about how people work with writing or how writing works, a wide range of techniques and styles of writing might be applicable. For example, a first person narrative, an informal conversation about writing, a formal study of writing, or even an artistic production could all be useful techniques for developing a *GWRJ* article. However, accepted articles will be informed by either primary research into writing behaviors and activities and/or by scholarship in the field of writing studies that addresses theories of how people learn to compose in different situations.

General Information

Submissions

Articles can be submitted to the *GWRJ* at any time. However, we do have deadlines for upcoming issues. For issue 7.2, which will come out at the beginning of the Spring 2017 semester, articles must be submitted by January 20, 2016. The deadline for consideration in our 8.1 (Fall 2017) issue is May 16, 2016. Please contact the Associate Editor at grassrootswriting@gmail.com with queries about possible submissions and to submit your work.

Queries and Drafts

The *GWRJ* has a strong commitment to working with interested authors to help them prepare for publication. So if you think you have a good idea but

are not sure how to proceed, please contact us. One of our editorial staff will be happy to work with you one-on-one to develop your idea and/or article.

Honoraria

The *GWRJ* offers an honorarium of $50 for each article published in a print issue of the *GWRJ*.

Style and Tone

Because we encourage so many different kinds of textual production and research in the *GWRJ*, issues of appropriate style and tone can be complicated. However, we can offer the following basic style criteria for authors to consider:

1. The readership of the *GWRJ* is writers. It is not "students," even though the journal is used by writing instructors and students. (The *GWRJ* remains the primary text for Writing Program courses at Illinois State University, and it's also used by teachers and students in other programs as well.) *GWRJ* articles should attempt to provide valuable content to writers who are engaged in the activity of "learning how to learn about" genres.

2. "Teacher narratives" are not acceptable as *GWRJ* articles. We are interested in material that looks at literate activities from the position of a "writer" or a "researcher," but articles that discuss ways to "teach" people about writing are not appropriate for this journal.

3. Language and style that is overly formal or "academic" may be unappealing to our readers.

4. A tone that situates the author as a "master" writer is often problematic. (We call these "success narratives," which are often how-to type articles in which the focus is on the author's learned expertise.) Authors should remember that no one "learns" a genre completely or in a completely simple way. So while writers (especially of first-person narratives) may write about successes, they need to complicate the genres with which they are working.

5. Tone or content that situates the reader as a certain kind of writer (whether as a master or novice) with certain kinds of shared experiences can be problematic because the readership of the journal constitutes a wide variety of writers with different writing abilities and experiences.

6. Whenever possible, articles should make use of published research about writing practices, but the research should be incorporated into the text in

a relevant and accessible way so that readers who are not used to reading scholarly research can still benefit from the references.

7. Articles should be as specific as possible about the genre or set of writing activities they are studying. Generalized studies or discussions of "writing" are not encouraged. Additionally, examples of "writing-in-progress" are always encouraged and are often necessary for articles to be useful to our readers.

Media, Mode, and Copyright Issues

The *GWRJ* can publish both visual and digital texts. We encourage multimodal texts, including still images, audio, video, and hypertexts. However, authors working with these technologies need to be careful about copyright issues as we cannot publish any kinds of materials that may result in copyright infringement. We can sometimes seek copyright permissions, but in the case of materials such as works of art or graphics/images owned by large companies, this is often not possible. This is true for print-based articles that use images as well. We can, however, include materials that are covered by Fair Use; see http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html for Fair Use guidelines.

Also, video/audio of research subjects can require special kinds of permission processes, so you should contact the *GWRJ* editors before beginning this kind of work. Research using subjects who are considered "protected" populations (people under eighteen and medical patients covered by HIPPA, among others) are not acceptable for *GWRJ* articles unless the author has received approval from Illinois State University or another institution to conduct research with human subjects.

Researching for *Grassroots*

What does it mean to "do writing research?" For the *GWRJ*, it means people observing, investigating, critiquing, and even participating in the activities that humans engage in that involve literate practice.

But what does it really mean? In more practical language, it means finding some situation where humans are doing things that involve language (which can mean composing in genres that are oral, aural, visual, etc., not just writing on paper) and thinking, "Hey, that looks interesting," and then taking the time to investigate that practice in some detail.

But this kind of research isn't just about people. It's really about what we call "activity systems," which just means that we want to learn about all kinds of complicated interactions, not just what a particular kind of text looks like or what a particular person does when they produce a text (although we're interested in those things, too). We also want to know about the interactions between people as they produce texts and the interactions between humans and their tools, practices, and different kinds of textual productions. And we're interested in how certain kinds of texts work to shape our interactions, for example, the ways the genre of resumes might shape how people interact when they engage in the activities of finding and offering work.

To help researchers who might be thinking about or engaging in literate practices that they'd like to investigate, we've created this list of the types of research projects that might be interesting or appropriate for the *GWRJ*:

Investigating Genres

These kinds of research projects usually investigate the nuances of particular genres: how they are made and who makes them, the distinctive features they have, who uses them, how and where they are used, and how they do particular kinds of communicative work in the world. This research is often straightforward, and, as some of the articles in our early issues reveal, this kind of genre investigation might have a "how-to" feel, because many of the authors creating these pieces are also trying to learn how to produce that genre. However, genre investigations can move far beyond these "how-to" pieces. There are countless ways that genres can be examined in relation to how they do work in the world, including investigating technological and social implications that our readers would be interested in. Following genres to see where they go and the kinds of work they are made to do can take an author well beyond simply describing the features of a particular kind of text. One issue that is of concern to the *GWRJ* editors is that genre investigations can problematically "fix" genres, that is, situate them as stable productions that are always the same. So we encourage researchers to consider the ways that genres constantly move and shift over time and in different situations.

Personal Explorations of Literate Practice

This kind of research is often closely connected to genre investigations. Authors examine their own practices to discover how they have learned to produce certain kinds of writing in certain situations, or they investigate particular kinds of composing practices, such as different practices for engaging in research or revision. Like genre investigations, these kinds of projects sometimes have a "how-to" focus, as authors learn to think about and explain to others the things they know (or are coming to know) about different literate practices.

Composing Practices

This kind of research looks at particular kinds of composing practices, including invention (coming up with ideas), research, revision, etc. It often overlaps with personal exploration research because authors are often investigating their own practices. However, this research could certainly involve interviews or observations of how other individuals or groups engage in these practices. One issue that concerns the *GWRJ* editors is that this kind of research can lead to assumptions that these composing practices are "universal"—that is, that they work in similar ways across all kinds of genres and writing situations. While it is possible to trace similar kinds of literate practices across different situations (and, in fact, it can be really interesting—see, for example, Kevin Roozen's writing research, "Tracing Trajectories of Practice: Repurposing in One Student's Developing Disciplinary Writing Processes"), it is important to remember that we really can't talk about an activity like "revising," for example, as if it's something that a person does the same way in every kind of situation.

Literate Activity in the Wild

While writing in classrooms or for school settings can often seem very cut-and-dried, these practices are really more complicated than they seem. Part of the reason we don't see the complications of many kinds of literate practices is that once we become "embedded" in the activity, it no longer seems complicated to us! We know how to do it, but we don't really remember how we learned to do it. Another reason that we sometimes miss the complications of writing is that there are "tropes" or particular ways of defining/understanding these practices that make them look simple and straightforward. An example of this is the activity of "writing a paper," which can bring up very stylized and simplistic images of how a person just sits down, does some research, and then writes a paper for a particular class. But in fact, not only are the acts of researching and composing much more complicated than this limited view might offer, but also, this kind of literate practice is actually much more interactive than we might generally think. The *GWRJ* is interested in investigations that look at specific situations/locations where all kinds of literate acts are happening. We want to see researchers "unpacking" what is actually happening when people try to compose particular kinds of texts in particular situations. We are also interested in research that looks at the ways that textual production is interactive—how it involves all kinds of interactions between different people and different objects, tools, and other entities over time. This kind of research can involve the interactions of people and genres and different cultural norms and practices.

Case Studies of Individual Literate Practices

This type of research focuses very closely on particular individuals and the kinds of literate practices they engage in in their daily lives. Some of our previously published articles that take this approach include research into the ways an individual learns to interact with a particular genre or particular literate situation. But we are also very interested in research that looks at literate practice more broadly and deeply. So, for example, how does an individual take composing practices from one situation and apply them to another? How does an individual learn to interact within a particular setting in which different types of genres are being produced (so, say, a new kind of work environment)? This kind of research can be constructed as a collaborative process in which one researcher acts as an observer while the other engages in an exploration of his/her personal practices.

Linguistics Writing Research

The work that currently exists in the journal in this area tends to focus specifically on grammar conventions or on the usage of particular kinds of stylistic or punctuation devices. However, we want to encourage linguistic writing research that is more robust and complicated, including projects that explore corpus linguistics (using a collection of data to look at particular kinds of textual practice) or sociolinguistics (investigating the particular ways that humans use language within social systems).

Global or Intercultural Literate Practices

It is only within a few issues of the journal that the *GWRJ* has been able to publish research on literate practices as they move across cultural and/or geographical spaces. For examples, see Adriana Gradea's article in issue 4.1 ("The Little Genre that Could: CHAT Mapping the Slogan of the Big Communist Propaganda") and Summer Qabazard's article in issue 3.2 ("From Religion to Chicken Cannibalism: American Fast Food Ads in Kuwait"). We would like to encourage more of this kind of research in future issues as we are highly interested in research that studies the ways that people and textual practices move across these kinds of boundaries.

The Researcher's Process

According to one of our *GWRJ* authors, Lisa Phillips, it can be useful for authors to investigate and articulate a personal process that will be meaningful for them when developing ideas for research projects. She offered us her notes on the process that she followed to create her article for the journal, "Writing

with Tattoo Ink: Composing that Gets Under the Skin." Her process is presented below in ten "steps" that GWRJ authors might find useful:

Step One

Come up with a general "topic" description. So the first question to answer is: "What is it about writing in the world that interests me?"

Step Two

As the process continues, think more specifically about the genre, setting, and/or specific practices under investigation. (Using the types of research we've listed above can be useful for focusing a topic.) So the second question an author might want to answer is: "How will I go about finding what I want to know?"

Step Three

Next, think about both the research practices that will be needed to gather data as well as the style of article that will be most appropriate. One excellent way to do this is to read existing articles and examine the different ways that authors have approached different topics and different kinds of research.

Step Four

Because *Grassroots* articles are a fairly unique kind of writing, authors may find it useful to consider past writing experiences that they might be able to draw on as they write. We call these "antecedent genres," and they can be important to think about because these prior experiences always shape how an author writes, especially when he or she is writing in a new and unfamiliar genre. While these antecedent genres will certainly be useful, they can also cause problems because aspects of an author's past writing may not exactly fit with the style, tone, or content that is appropriate for *GWRJ* articles. Some questions to ask here are: "What kinds of writing do I already know how to do that I can use to help me? How are they similar and how are they different?"

Step Five

It can also be important to think about "target genres," or types of writing that might be used as examples during the research and writing process. Obviously previously published *GWRJ* articles can be useful in this way, but it can also be interesting to think of other kinds of writing that might serve as examples. Writing research in the field of rhetoric and composition can be useful (for example, books and articles found on the

WAC Clearinghouse Website at http://wac.colostate.edu), but other kinds of research into social practices or even different kinds of journalism can be used as interesting models.

Step Six

Consider what kinds of visuals a text might need. Visual examples of different kinds of writing can be crucial to add interest and information to a text, but copyright issues will need to be considered. Charts, graphs, or other illustrations that highlight important aspects of the data you've collected can also be important.

Step Seven

Thinking carefully about what information (data) is needed to make the article credible and useful for readers is a critical step. Thus, once an author has made decisions about the type of research he or she wants to do, it will also be important for him or her to make a plan for how to do that research. Will it be necessary to visit sites where writing is happening? Interview people about how they produce or use different kinds of writing? Find historical examples of types of writing?

Step Eight

If the article is going to include observations of people's writing activities or interviews or surveys, you'll need to obtain the proper permission. The interview/image consent form for *GWRJ* articles can be found on our website: http://isuwriting.com/.

Step Nine

Although the *GWRJ* doesn't require any particular style of citation, we do require that authors cite all of their information. The editors will help authors think about what needs to be cited and how it can be done, but authors will want to think about the best way to cite. This includes considering the different ways that citation works in different kinds of writing; for example, scholarly journal articles cite very differently than newspaper or magazine articles or blog posts. Sometimes the style of citation can really affect how a reader thinks about the information in an article, so it's important to think not only about what to cite, but also how to cite it.

Step Ten

As the text is being produced, it is critical to keep in mind the needs and interests of *GWRJ* readers. They are interested in reading about a wide range

of topics, and they enjoy articles written in a wide range of styles. But since our readers have such a wide range of interests, it is important not to take them for granted. Writing that is interesting, lively, and accessible is important, but perhaps the most important thing to remember is that your research, no matter how it's presented, represents your knowledge and thinking about a topic related to writing that is important to you. And since we're all writers, and all of us are learning all the time about how to "do writing" in the world, sharing your knowledge is, ultimately, an act of community.

Questions?

If you have any questions about the journal or any of the articles, you can send queries to grassrootswriting@gmail.com. Part of our mission is to welcome and encourage all kinds of writing research, so if you have an idea that you want to develop, please don't hesitate to share it with us.

Works Cited

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