

# GRASSROOTS WRITING RESEARCH JOURNAL

Issue 12.1 – Fall 2021

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## From the Editors

Samantha Moe

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With this issue, the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* begins its twelfth year of publication. 12.1 continues to feature a variety of articles from undergraduates, graduates, and other writing instructors whose work provides an important and intriguing look into genres, literate activity, and more. With this new issue of the journal comes a new genre we've dubbed Picturing (Pandemic) Literate Activity Spaces. This new genre aims to feature a collection of photos, drawings, collages, and any other visual representation of our composition spaces during the pandemic semester. We're especially invested in learning how our embodied experiences living through this pandemic time have affected our writing, researching, and composing practices.

Additionally, we feature fourteen new articles ranging from genre and literate activity to the ways in which P-CHAT is at work within the many activity systems we use. As we continue to expand the scope of the journal, these articles and include nuanced conversations about current events and their accompanying genres, as well as the multimodal literacies we use in our communities. They take a closer look at what literate activity means, as well as the different ways it shows up and transforms in our lives. What we continue to find so important about these articles is their continued focus on communities. During an isolating pandemic, these articles express the ways in which we use what genres we have, as well as learn about new genres we're unfamiliar with, to form new connections, as well as to reconnect with loved ones through use of virtual spaces. These articles feature different ISU Writing Program Learning Outcomes through research into the literate activity of looking at scientific literacies, true crime podcasts as a genre, and activity theory in video games. With this latest issue, we also had the opportunity to bring back former *Grassroots* author and professor Kevin Roozen in a dual-interview with *GWRJ* intern and student Anya Gregg. Certainly, the work of the contributors to this issue continues to expand our collective understanding of the multifaceted nature of genres and the work of writing and researching in the world. We hope you enjoy this new issue as much as we do.

To start off issue 12.1, we are introducing our newest *GWRJ* genre, Picturing (Pandemic) Literate Activity Spaces, or PLA for short. The call-for-papers was created by New Consultant Mentor, Demet Yigitbilek and Grassroots Managing

Editor, Samantha Moe. Our first PLA piece in issue 12.1 features **Eleanor Stamer's** current workspace where she works on her coursework this semester. Next, **Maura Pauline** explores the importance of scientific communication and its impact on our communities, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Maura uses a genre analysis breakdown of scientific articles, explaining to readers the four key elements to reading and understanding article abstracts, background information, scientific methods and materials, and finally, the data. Our second article, written by **Lisa Hanimov**, features an analysis of the different literacies involved in living with Type One Diabetes. Through different image examples, as well as key-terms, Lisa explains her experience living and learning about the different, crucial genres she encounters everyday living with type one diabetes.

The next three articles focus on the ways in which pedagogical chat, or, P-CHAT influence our stories and community interactions. **Darcy Allred** moves us into a cultural-historical activity theory focus on the different "meta-genres" she has been utilizing during the pandemic. Darcy also shares her uptake of these different literate activities, as well as focuses on the ways in which she overcomes some of her fears of digital spaces in order to maintain communication with friends and family. Following, we feature our second PLA submission by Dorothy M. Stone. Continuing to focus on pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, **Jessica Pina Santos** demonstrates how she chose her major, International Business. Jessica examines the different skills she has learned, as well as uses P-CHAT to frame and analyze her experiences. **Anthony Ferretti** uses P-CHAT and genre analysis to explain the different steps he takes while working at ISU's student-run radio station, WZND.

Next, **Shawna Sheperd** analyzes True Crime podcasts as an activity system, presenting different multimodal genres and multimedia products present within the podcast world. Following, **Ellen Sundermeier** uses P-CHAT and more specifically, the concept of socialization, to focus on the genre of handwritten letters by *The Lord of the Rings* series author, J.R.R. Tolkien. Ellen also shares her own letter-saving processes, and provides many different examples of handwritten letters as genre. **Jonathan Blake Fostar** uses a genre analysis to explore Nicolas Cage, not as an actor, but as a genre. With a focus on different Nicolas Cage films, Jonathan delves into Nicolas Cage™ and the different ways the actor becomes the genre. Following, **Eleanor Stamer** discusses the history and trajectory of fanfiction. Eleanor explores many different genres of fanfiction, from tweets to fanzine, and features the many ways fanfiction has continued to transform.

The next articles focus on the ways in which communication and tools change in video games, emoji development, and our studying habits. **Edcel Javier Cintron Gonzales** takes us into the world of *Super Mario Sunshine*, using a genre analysis to break down the ways material rhetorics and activity theory are present throughout the game itself. **Steven Lazaroff** then researches, and employs, emojis as a form of communication. Steven looks at translanguaging in discourse communities, and how emojis move through different spaces. Next, **Anya Gregg** discusses the process of remembering information, as well as the different tools and habits we employ to help us remember. Anya also discusses “multimodal homeplaces” as a way to connect with our writer-researcher identities and different writing genres.

Our last article, by **Roy Rowan**, discusses mindfulness meditation as an important source of uptake. Roy also examines the different ways meditation-as-uptake can work, as well as the different literate activities that can take place in meditation. Lastly, we feature a collaborative interview between two writing researchers, **Anya Gregg** and **Kevin Roozen**. Anya and Kevin ask each other a series of questions about each other’s different literate activity practices and their writing research. This interview also features the different tools Anya and Kevin use that help them with writing in a multitude of situations, and their discussion of how unique and individualized methods are to every writing researcher.

The 12.1 issue concludes with a reprinting of “Publishing with the Grassroots Writing Research Journal,” which seeks to encourage prospective writers to submit their rigorous investigations of how people, tools, and situations affect writing in complex ways. As we begin our twelfth year of publication, we continue to receive record numbers of submissions from writing researchers interested in publishing their studies in the journal. In the coming year, we hope to receive even 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 *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* Presents:  
Picturing Literate Activity, “Pushing to the End”**

Eleanor Stamer

PLA Narrative: This desk has become the place where I do everything: classes, internet surfing, applying for jobs, and working for the *GWRJ* (along with the occasional existential crisis). I have plenty of personal things on the desk, which can distract, but they're also great for when I need a break from the screen.

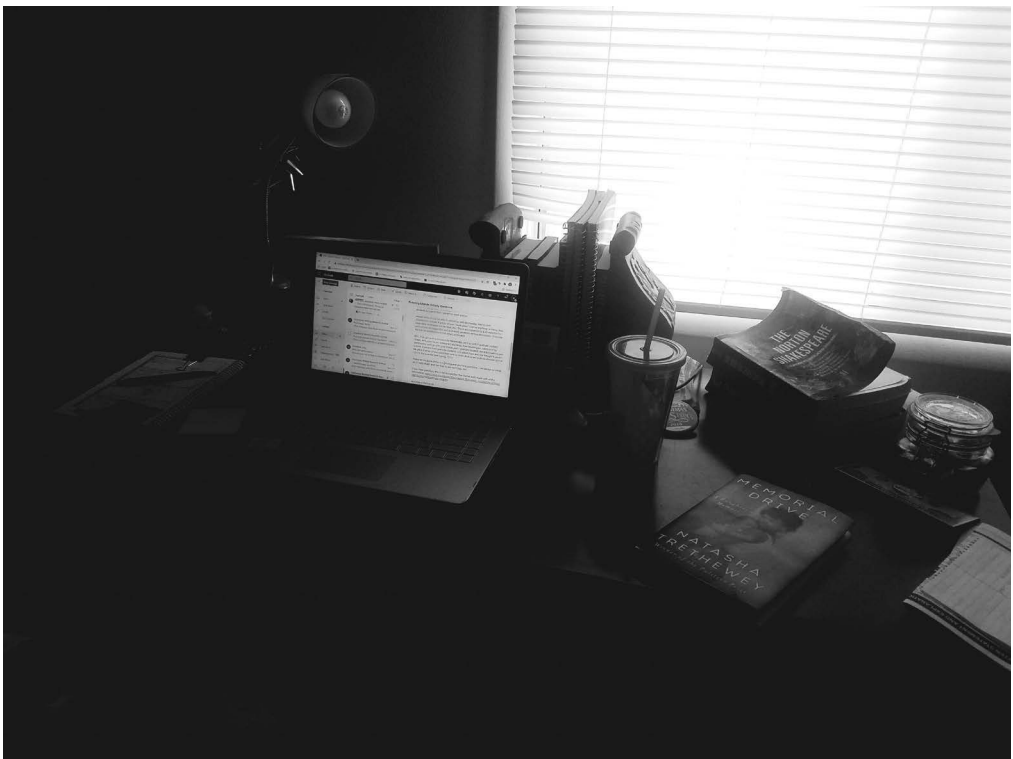


Figure 1: Working at the desk, trying to keep a little bit of order.



Pandemic Bio: **Eleanor Stamer** is in her last semester of undergrad; trying to push through to the end of her degree.

# I Find Your Lack of Scientific Literacy Disturbing: An Everyday Joe's Guide to Evaluating Scientific Literature

Maura Pauline

In this article, Maura Pauline explores the importance of scientific communication and its impact on the greater public, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Pauline provides an easy-to-follow guide for nonscientists to help them read and better understand scientific articles, as well as performing a genre analysis to discuss how the P-CHAT principles apply to scientific literature.

My whole life, I have loved science. I love the mystery of designing and completing an experiment and the constant discovery of new facts. I also love sharing all the new scientific facts I learn with others. Ask anyone in my family, I jump at any chance to explain scientific concepts to anyone, no matter how nerdy my sister might call me. Given all this, one may think that the novel coronavirus taking over mainstream media and putting science at the forefront of society would be a dream! Unfortunately, you would be mistaken. It is nothing less than a nightmare, and not just due to the increasing cases.

As more and more articles about discoveries surrounding this new disease, COVID-19, came out, I found myself getting more and more frustrated. Many articles misused scientific data to suggest faulty conclusions, or cherry-picked their quotes to get a fear-instilling and catchy headline. “How could people actually believe this stuff?!” I consistently asked myself. As a matter of fact, “the World Health Organization has called the situation an *infodemic*: an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—rendering it difficult to find trustworthy sources of information and

reliable guidance.” After writing a paper for science class, it finally hit me. For years, I have been taught not only science, but how to read and write scientific literature. These skills are something only science majors spend time learning.

Scientific writing can seem like a foreign language. There are a lot of words, phrases, and ideas that aren’t used in everyday communication that no one would understand unless they have studied science. When understanding these papers seems impossible, it leaves the general public at the mercy of the mainstream media. As previously mentioned, these aren’t always the most trustworthy sources. Whether the journalists writing articles

don’t know how to evaluate scientific papers, or intentionally misrepresent the facts, scientific advice and conclusions shouldn’t always be trusted. Oftentimes, if the study referenced is listed and can be accessed by the general public, it’s much more accurate to simply read said study yourself. This leads to a new problem for the general population: how does one even go about decoding scientific texts?!

In this article, I plan to reveal some important science “secrets” to help better evaluate these papers, as well as conduct a **genre analysis** to help identify the important sections of scientific literature. Finally, I am going to do a P-CHAT analysis of scientific literature in order to illustrate how other societal factors can impact how we take up and evaluate this kind of information.

### Genre Analysis

According to the ISU Writing Program, a Genre Analysis is “looking very closely at a particular genre and investigating all the different features that might be present.” It can also be a deeper analysis, including how genres are used and taken up by the public, and how they are used by certain agendas.



## Spilling the Tea on Science: Science Principles They Don’t Teach You in Middle School

News outlets really like to make things concrete, to have a solid answer for every question a reader may want to ask. Unfortunately, science doesn’t fit well into this mold.

Unlike other sources that can be proven right or wrong, “science is not about certainty . . . science is about the **error bar**.” Some may assume that scientists get all their answers from the raw data collected. Unfortunately, gathering the raw data is usually the fun part, as after that, the statistical analysis begins. Scientists use these statistics to test for one thing: significance.

Testing for significance is the way scientists can prove the validity of their results. As an example, let's imagine we're looking at a study about COVID infections that includes 1000 male and 1000 female participants who had been infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In this fictional data set, 800 males and 775 females who were infected died. One might immediately see this and assume that since more males died, COVID-19 must be more serious in males than females. The problem is, we can't make that conclusion without using statistics to determine the significance of the difference between the two groups. Perhaps, many of the males were ages fifty to sixty-five, heavy smokers, and had diabetes, all of which are factors that we know increases risk of being strongly afflicted with COVID-19. Because there are so many possible factors that could have caused this split, you can't tell for sure by looking at the raw data alone. This is the same process that scientists go through with their raw data sets from their own research projects. The point of a research project isn't just the results, but rather the significance of the difference between variables. As mentioned before, science isn't about certainty. Since scientists cannot base their claims off of 100% yes or no answers, they use significance as a way to support their claims with the most likely causes.

The second important thing to understand about science is that it's always changing. As new projects are being done, and more research is being added to the body of work, scientific beliefs will change. This doesn't mean that science isn't to be trusted and is always wrong, it simply means that we won't ever know all there is to know about scientific concepts. All we can hope to do is examine the most up-to-date research and keep adding to it as time goes on.

## I'm Overwhelmed!: A Genre Analysis of a Scientific Paper and the Parts that Really Matter

So, a local news site has uploaded an article about a new COVID-19 study, but it seems a bit off to you. Upon first finding this article, or any other article that interests you, you should see the original study referenced. The study

### The Error Bar

Error Bars are graphical representations of variability. What? Basically, they are visuals that are included in graphs to help viewers understand the likelihood that the effect being studied is due to some identifiable cause, rather than just being caused by chance (or a sampling error). They can help someone reading a study understand whether the results being reported are *significant*. For more information, scan the following QR code:



might appear as a hyperlink in the first few paragraphs, or a separate link at the end. Once you find the scientific paper, there are a few initial questions to ask yourself. First, look at the site/institution the study was produced by. Do you know anything about this site that might cause you to be skeptical? Do they have any motives for wanting a specific result? Are they reputable? If you can't find anything sketchy about the institution that sponsored it, keep reading! If you do, maybe go back and look for a different study. Oftentimes, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of scientific papers written on the same topic!

Second, look to see if the paper has been **peer reviewed** yet. If this paper has already been published in a scientific journal, it has most likely been peer reviewed. So, if you are looking for information about the recent

### **Replication**

In science, the term Replication refers to repeating a similar study and getting similar results (which indicates that the first studies results are not due to some kind of accident or error).



novel coronavirus, look at the top of the article to see if it has been peer reviewed yet. This is important, as most articles are so new that they haven't been peer reviewed. This is actually super important to look out for! Peer reviews serve as a way to keep scientists honest. They also serve as a way to further validate results by **replicating** them. If a paper hasn't been peer reviewed yet, keep in mind that regardless of what the results of it are, it could be an anomaly, as no one has tried to (or been able to) replicate them yet. Now that we've gone over some of the key terms important for gauging the honesty of an article, let's look at a breakdown of what the article itself is comprised of.

### ***Abstract: The "Spark Notes" of the Study***

The first part of a scientific paper is called the **abstract**. This paragraph serves as a summary of the whole paper: the inspiration, the experiment, and the results. This part of the paper doesn't have too much confusing background info and is a good place to start, even for someone not familiar with the subject. It is almost like a guide for the rest of the paper and can set you on the right path for understanding the key findings.

### ***Introduction: Step Right Up and Meet the Background Information***

If you remember taking the science portion of the ACT, you probably remember being very confused by the vocabulary and concepts you didn't really understand. Reading the introduction of a scientific paper will likely bring on the same feelings. This section of the paper is supposed to serve as

a source of **background knowledge** about the subject being discussed. It might introduce the gap in knowledge trying to be filled, or past experiments that inspired this study. If you are already familiar with the subject, go on and read this section, you might learn something new! If you are not familiar with the field of study, you can skip this section.

### *Materials and Methods: The To-Do List*

Once again, this section is really long and confusing, with many technical terms. There is one part you might want to look closely at. **Methods** is the section of a paper where a scientist will explain their process, not only for the actual experiment, but also for the way their samples or their subjects are handled. This section is really important to look out for. Even without statistics training, this section can still be understood. Any experiment or study should be free of biases, so look at this part and ask yourself some questions to determine the validity of the results. Were the subjects randomly selected? How many subjects were observed/tested? How many different factors were they observing/testing for? These questions can help you determine if the methods have been improperly influenced or appear unbiased.

### *Results: The Raw Data Doesn't Lie. Or Does It?*

This section can also be rather intimidating. There are graphs and tables everywhere! This section is really just the **results** with no explanation, just the presentation of any data gathered. You can skip this section if you have no familiarity with the subject (the important part is in the next section: discussion).

If you do want to look at the results, here are a couple things to keep in mind:

If there are graphs, pay attention to each **graph's axis**. What is their scale? Some graphs are manipulated to make it seem like the differences between categories is much more, or less, than it really is. Just double check that the scale of the axis makes sense in the context of each graph.

If data tables are present, first take a breath! There are a lot of numbers in these, but not all of them are important. The only

#### **Graph Axis**

An axis is a reference line on a graph used to show measurements. On most graphs, there are two axis, one that goes up and down and one that goes horizontal. Various numbers are placed along these axis, and certain distances and along specific scale (like counting by 5s or 10s). Sometimes these scales can be manipulated to create the illusion of certain relationships within the data that aren't really there.

The QR code below offers more examples of how graphs can be manipulated to skew data perception.



number you really need to look for is at the end of the table, typically called the **p-value**. This is another statistical concept, but in reality, it's not that difficult to understand. This value represents the percent chance of the result happening at random, not because of the variables. The lower this percentage, the more likely it is that this result was due to whatever factor was being controlled by the experimenter. A typical value used for comparison is .05 (or 5%), so typically anything under this is a good result.

### *Discussion: Let's Talk about It*

This is a very important section! As science students, we are taught that this section of a paper should discuss the impact of the results: what gaps in knowledge they fill in, how it can improve treatment or public policy, and what experiments could be done next. This really is the important section for someone just looking to educate themselves. For instance, in a paper on the coronavirus this section might include information increasing our understanding of how the disease is spread, or how it might impact the development of vaccines. For a paper on climate change, this section may include predictions about what might happen in the environment based on their study's results.

### *Conclusion: Predicting the Future?*

As in any paper, this section just wraps up everything already written. You might want to skim it just to be sure that you didn't miss anything. This section may also state some future experiments the scientists want to do based off of the results they got or suggest new studies that might further advance our knowledge. This section will help give you an idea of the future direction of work in that particular field. This is especially important if you plan on staying up-to-date in that field of study!

## **P-CHAT Analysis**

In the ISU Writing Program, P-CHAT, or pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, is a way to look at a text and understand how it interacts with the world around us. There are seven terms that fall under P-CHAT, a CHAT-based model used for thinking about the complexity of literate activity. In the context of scientific literature, I am only going to focus on reception, socialization, and representation.

These three terms actually work very closely together, especially when looking at scientific literature. **Reception** refers to the ways in which a text



is taken up and used (ISU Writing Program). The reception of scientific literature really depends on the person who is reading the text. In other words, what happens when someone clicks on a link to a scientific paper from a news article? If the person is a scientist, they will read the whole article and learn something new. If the person is an everyday Joe with no scientific training, they will probably look it over and decide it's too confusing. They might then exit out, taking what the article said as the truth rather than coming to their own conclusions about it. This term also refers to how people may repurpose the article, like the way journalists may misuse scientific studies to prove a point, oftentimes even in opposition to the conclusions of the original study.

**Representation** refers to the ways in which people who produce a text plan it and talk about it. This is actually a big issue with scientific writing. Scientific writing is mainly written by scientists, for scientists. The problem is that in today's day and age, especially during a pandemic, results of these studies are becoming more important for all non-scientists to understand. When science becomes part of new political policies with the potential to appear on ballots, people need to be able to understand scientific concepts and studies in order to form educated opinions. Fortunately, this is becoming a shared goal for the scientific community. Although this article might serve as a quick way to increase your literacy in science, scientists have some literacies of their own to learn. If knowledge is meant to be understood by the general population, it needs to be presented in a way that doesn't require an intensive background in science. Scientists also have the responsibility to think about the ways they present their research, especially when it relates to public health and policy. Scientists must rethink how they present their research if they want it to be accessible and understandable to everyone.

This leads us to our third concept, **socialization**. This term refers to how people and institutions interact when engaging with texts. This could refer to many possible situations, such as the way a journalist and their employer might interact with a paper. If a journalist has a particular stance (or their employer does), they may interpret the study in a way other than what was actually concluded by experts. This could be done accidentally or intentionally to serve another purpose. There are numerous ways that the socialization of scientific studies can be beneficial, and not used in a misleading way. Scientists use studies to grow their field of knowledge. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, the first papers coming out were about the physical nature of the disease, what classification it was, and what its DNA sequences looked like. After these things were discovered, scientists could use the information presented in those studies to discover how it was transmitted

and how it functioned in the body. Now, scientists are using all the previous information discovered to create a vaccine to help fight COVID-19. Without sharing their findings and building off other people's work, we wouldn't know half as much about COVID-19.

Whether we understand it or not, science is becoming increasingly important in all of our lives. It is easy to apply this to life in our current situation, but this will still be true long after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Self-driving cars, personalized medicine, and other new technological advances will eventually require legislation and policies to regulate them. When these events occur, it is everyone's responsibility to educate themselves, in order to make wise decisions in our daily lives, and vote in informed ways on new policies.

This article is meant to serve not just a guide, but also as a conversation starter. The strategies listed in this article are my personal recommendations, and after reading this, I hope you take the opportunity to talk to the scientists that might be in your life. This could be for advice or tips for decoding scientific literature, or just to learn about their area of expertise and their understanding of the scientific method. In the end, it is up to all of us, scientists and not, to leave our biases at the door and invest ourselves in expanding our literacies in order to make the information we all need more accessible, available, and understandable.

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**Maura Pauline** is a senior from Naperville, Illinois, who studies cellular and molecular biology at Illinois State University. In the fall, she will be attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to get her masters degree in Biomedical and Health Informatics. Her research interests lie in genomics and personalized/precision medicine. In her free time, she enjoys playing cello, watching Netflix and enjoying a good cup of coffee while daydreaming about being on *Survivor!*

## Beyond Type One

Lisa Hanimov

At first glance individuals may not consider living with Type One diabetes (T1D) to include a whole range of literacies, however in this article, Hanimov explains how T1D is innately and naturally a form of literacy. She shares how her *diabetes literacies* emerged overtime encapsulating new relationships, medical tools, and becoming self-aware to help support her health.

When I look at food, I don't mindlessly admire it and haphazardly get to shove it in my mouth. I see sugar, in the form of carbohydrates, plotted on a multidimensional graph with proteins and fat and serving sizes and sickness and exercise and needles piercing into my triceps. I didn't always do this. Before I received the diagnosis that I had Type 1 diabetes (T1D), I saw food as food and ate it as such—simply, casually, with no real thought attached. The spring of my third-grade year, during my first Florida comprehensive assessment text (FCAT), I began to drink an excess amount of water—not because I was nervous about testing, but to fill my quench for thirst that was never satisfied. The mass consumption of water lead to my bladder always being full, which meant I became familiar with using the restroom. The deciding factor was when I no longer could contain my bladder and woke multiple times throughout the night to urinate. Thirsty, hungry, and tired, I began to put on weight which was unusual since I was eating well balanced meals along with getting regular amounts of exercise. On March 9th, 2010, it was decided that I would be admitted into the hospital, and since that day, I would have to forever execute formulas, memorize where to

**Literate Activity**

In his article, “Unraveling “Writing”:  
Interweaving Maverick Literacies  
Throughout a Literate Life,” in  
the spring 2021 issue (11.2) in the  
*Grassroots Writing Research Journal*,  
Kevin Roozen explains that Paul  
Prior developed the term “literate  
activity” (1998, p. 138) to describe all  
of the many ways that texts are part  
of people’s lived experiences in the  
world. It extends beyond our typical  
ideas about “reading” and “writing”  
to include the broad range of  
practices and processes we employ in  
the creation and use of a wide array  
of texts.

give myself injections, and grasp the function of machinery to give myself the ability to live a considerably normal life.

For readers of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, an article about living as a diabetic might not seem, at first glance, to be very connected to studying literate activity. But the fact is that to live with Type 1 diabetes is to become aware of, and involved in a whole range of new literacies. In the remainder of this article, I’d like to share a description of how my *diabetes literacies* have emerged over time. These literacies include awareness of my symptoms, reading and understanding information about my condition, and using a range of medical tools to help support my health.

To live with Type 1 diabetes, I have to be constantly aware of my insulin, a hormone produced in the pancreas that unlocks your cells so they can use the energy in your food, which circulates in your blood as glucose. A healthy person’s pancreas pumps out insulin in exact, perfect doses, masterfully managing the level of available glucose so that it never rises too high, which could lead to many complications, or too low, which could kill you on the spot. My pancreas, however, doesn’t make insulin. It can’t. For reasons no one can fully explain, my own immune system killed off the Beta 2 cells that produce it. That’s what Type 1 diabetes is—an autoimmune disease in which your body turns against itself. It’s frequently confused with the more prevalent form of diabetes, known as Type 2, but the diseases are not the same. Unlike Type 2, Type 1 diabetes can’t be prevented or managed with diet, exercise or oral medications. Instead, it requires artificial insulin, through injections, not pills, to stay alive. Before insulin was discovered in 1922, Type 1 diabetes was a terminal disease. Today, artificial insulin means that a Type 1 diagnosis is not a death sentence. But living with diabetes takes much more than simply giving yourself shots. It requires constant, unwavering attention to your meals, lifestyle, and medications. Even the most conscientious person with diabetes will never achieve the balance that a healthy pancreas effortlessly maintains. If I take too much insulin, my blood sugar will drop too low; my body will sweat and tremble; I will become anxious, irritable, and confused. If I don’t quickly eat something to give my body the glucose it needs—or, worse, if it’s the middle of the night and I am too deeply asleep to notice the warnings I could lapse into seizures, become

unconscious, and never wake up. I am fortunate to have grown up in an era where diabetes has become easier to manage. With our society becoming more aware and with advancements in technology, my mother can now sleep less anxiously. I have evolved from where I first started twelve years ago, but I still rely on the traditional formulas and calculations to help fight for my life.

Another literate activity that I've had to become familiar with, is correctly using the medical tools I use to keep my diabetes under control. To function properly, diabetics inject insulin through the bloodstream. But before you implant the needle, you have to make sure you prime the syringe, pump the plunger, fill up the barrel with the appropriate amount of insulin, tap out all the air bubbles, have a person nearby to double check your calculations, and then the needle is ready to be instilled into the desired disinfected area. To begin my transition from never owning my own needles to becoming educated on how to inject myself, my doctors gave me a “Bag of Hope.” This bag embodied useful resources that helped me navigate the challenging period of adjusting to a life with T1D. Along with educational materials, a special friend—Rufus, the Bear with Diabetes—was also a part of this assemblage. Although Rufus is a lifeless stuffed animal, he was the first tangible element that showed me I was not alone while learning to take shots and test for blood sugars. Rufus is a teddy bear of the classic design, but he sports a diabetic alert bracelet and has red patches on his paws to show where the finger pricks should be done. Other colored patches on his body indicate where he should take his shots (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Rufus, the bear with Type One Diabetes.

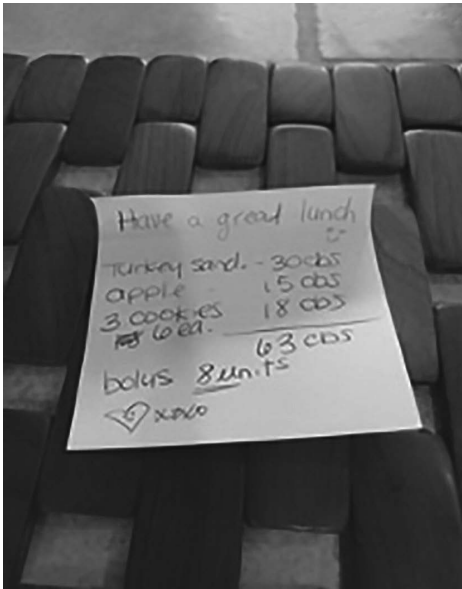
Rufus was the first concept I had to master, even before the formulas. The doctors gave me **saline**—a solution that consist of salt and water—and extra syringes so I could practice giving shots to Rufus before executing them on myself. I learned the proper regions where shots should be injected and the benefits of rotating my insertions to allow my raw tissue to have a break. It amazes me that a stuffed, muted bear was an instrumental force in my life that offered me strength and support. Rufus foreshadowed the training, education, discipline, and life altering experiences I would later encounter.

No insulin dose comes without a calculation. What and how much I consume has to be established before I eat. There are four different types of injections to learn about: carbohydrate coverage at a meal, high blood sugar correction dose, total meal dose, and total daily insulin requirement (Lantus). First, you have to understand that no two diabetics will be entirely similar. A diabetic's correction ratio, carb ratio, and target ratio is determined with an endocrinologist, a doctor who deals with all biochemical processes that make your body work. These doctors make calculations based on the patient's weight, height, fitness level, and an individual's true habit of diabetic maintenance. There is no guarantee that what your doctor assigns will work perfectly, so with trial and error the patient is able to see what works best for them and their lifestyle. In my beginning stages, these formulas were foreign to my knowledge, and I heavily relied on my mother until I was fully capable of taking responsibility for myself. With my life constantly being on the line, it was mandatory that I followed my mother's instructions. At home the task of staying alive was much simpler and less uneasy; however, when I began to attend school again this mission made me nervous.

Fortunately, we were informed to request a 504 plan from my school administration so together we could develop formal plans to give me the proper support I needed. By law, I was given accommodations to drink juice in class, use the bathroom as desired, take injections at lunch and have a personal nurse. Even with the presence of a nurse around me, my mother handwrote lunch notes that corresponded to what I was eating. The notes always included the total carbohydrates, as well as how much insulin to inject for the meal (Figures 2 and 3).

These daily notes cushioned my shift back into school; the full weight of T1D was not yet fully on my shoulders. Over my elementary and middle school years, I developed habits to nourish my body while learning to accept this new lifestyle. This process of adapting meant that not only did I have to learn a whole new range of literacies, as did my mother, but we used additional kinds of new literacies to make adults at my school aware of the situation.





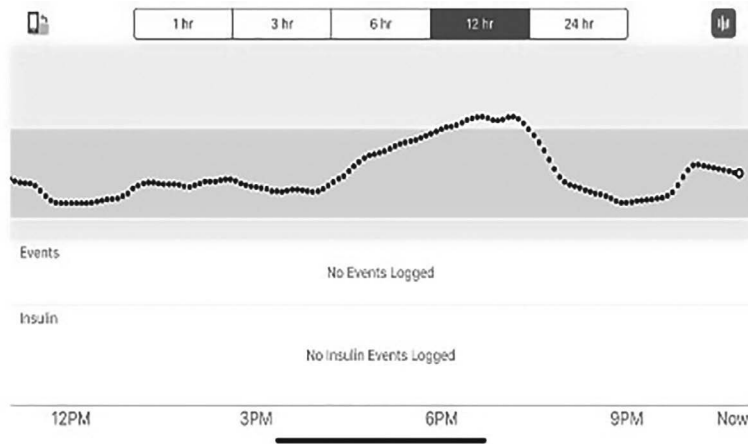
Figures 2 and 3: Examples of the daily lunch notes my mother would write.

In addition, my mother and I together developed literacies that helped us both feel safer. Up until I went back to school, my mother and I were inseparable. The fear of death lingering over our shoulders made it more impossible to detach from one another, which is why these lunch notes were so important. My mother was able to keep an eye on me through the nurse knowing I was injecting properly. This helped me to become more self-reliant.

At age 11 I was introduced to a new approach in caring for my diabetes and was coached on how to use an artificial pancreas. From the beginning of the changeover, I immediately saw a decrease in my **A1C**—a test that measures what percentage of your hemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen, is coated with sugar (glycated). The higher your A1C level, the poorer your blood sugar control is and the risk for complications intensifies. This godly machine executes all the formulas for me, has insulin storage, personalized settings, alarms and requires a new insertion roughly every three days. Now I can have flexibility and adaptability in my life to perform the activities I enjoy and my favorable tendency for spontaneity are now more acceptable. When I moved to insulin pump therapy with Animus Ping in 2012, which uses Dexcom Graphs, though I would still continue to monitor, it was so liberating to be free of guessing and hoping the insulin delivered by my needles would work as I expected. The pump gave me freedom to be the most metabolically normal I had felt in years.

As technology progressed my pump had advanced and is now integrated with my **Dexcom CGM**. CGMs are continuous glucose monitors which constantly tracks blood sugars to my phone or pump (Figures 4 and 5).

A sensor gets plunged through the first layer of skin, reaching blood vessels and situates there for about ten days. Connecting to the sensor is a transmitter that records blood glucose levels via Bluetooth to detect patterns and falls in blood sugar, alerting when my levels are on the rise, or when it's heading low. The Dexcom was a challenge to become familiar with in the



Figures 4: Example of my Dexcom CGM blood sugar readings.

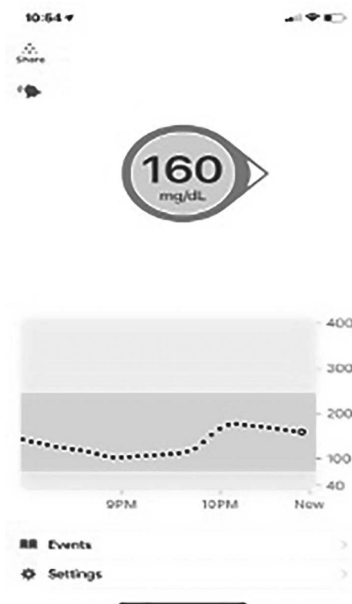


Figure 5: Example of my Dexcom CGM blood sugar readings.

beginning. A new blood sugar would be plotted onto the graph every five minutes, with arrows displaying what direction my glucose was heading in.

All of these texts can be considered literary inscriptions, which Latour and Woolgar (1979) describe in their book *Laboratory Life*, as more than just the traditional things people might think of as texts. Lucas Weber (2018), in an unpublished classroom paper, discussed the concept of inscriptions, and he was able to conclude that literacy is everywhere. Weber continues to say that he believes that the charts and handwritten inscriptions evident in aviation are a prime example of an extension of literacy, which I can advocate for. Latour and Woolgar (1978) discuss the complicated literacies that take place in laboratories, including the kinds of reading of machinery that are involved in my diabetic literacies. Although the graphs that I am reading are electronic and no handwriting is required from me, learning to read charts and understand them should definitely be considered a literate activity. There is so much to grasp and determine from glancing at my Dexcom graph. I remember getting my first pump when I was in elementary school, and thinking “Wow, my life literally runs on batteries now.” That being said, I am always unsettled by the fact that these devices can fail, and I would be in trouble. Having a backup plan in mind is not unusual with the circumstances I live with, so I am grateful to have my roots of computing all the formulas by hand.

Type One diabetes has taught me that diabetes, in and of itself, is a form of literacy. I had to learn how to read my body and then act upon what I was feeling. To this day, I have pump complications and have to resort to using my syringes until the problem is resolved. Technology has made living with T1D less of a burden for both me and my loved ones. However, I am grateful to have spent a few years without the technology to really acquire an appreciation for the advancements and become more in tune with my diabetes.

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# Technophobia in a Pandemic: Learning Combinations of Literate Activities to Write and Survive

Darcy Allred

In this article, Allred investigates the ecological factors involved in writing before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. She shares her confrontation with technophobia amid the urgent need to substitute face-to-face writing and social practices with digital media. Along the way, she draws upon concepts including P-CHAT, multimodality, and “meta-genre” to look more closely at the ways we “do” writing, and the several literate activities that go into its processes.

## Introduction

When the pandemic first upended (and continues to upend) the world, so did we have to upend both minor and major details of our day-to-day activities. College students, myself included, who had been admitted to school in the fall of 2020, faced a pile of questions and concerns regarding how classes would convene. This worry was now added to immediate concerns about our health and that of our families and communities. As a society, we also dealt with other irritating domino effect problems, like access to toilet paper. A lot of us endured borderline agoraphobia or took to panic shopping. I was one of the food hoarders. I would overstock, then check the expiration dates on every food item, neurotically calculating how long I could survive on the rations in my fridge and cabinets before needing to go to the grocery store again. This rationing strategy didn't exactly pan out since stress eating completely derailed my calculations . . . and I stress ate a lot. I was quickly steeped in the pandemic anxiety stew of devising apocalypse strategies. This was when Missouri had only two reported coronavirus cases. As I type, the state now has over 500,000 cases.

You'd think if you're the introverted, artsy kind of person (like me) that being forced to shelter-in-place is the ideal scenario to really tackle those backburnered creative projects or churn out some new ones. But for me and some friends who I spoke with living in various cities during the first months of the pandemic, we found our creative mojo stunted. We were inconsolably scared. Like most artsy people in March of 2020, we didn't know how, where, or from whom to find inspiration or energy, given the bleak information that dominated our mental-emotional bandwidth. We felt next-level writer's block, entirely swallowed up by the abyss of works-in-progress, too jaded to step into any concrete goals of writing spaces, and too confused on where to start. *How* are we supposed to write in a time like this, and *what* do we write in a pandemic?

I came up with a couple of half-hearted quarantine writing activities—a little “Quarantine Creations” pocket journal, mostly of cooking recipes, including one for my thirty-first birthday cake (Figures 1 and 2). I experimented with other random ideas that are likely to remain an ellipsis, forever contained in that little pocket journal.

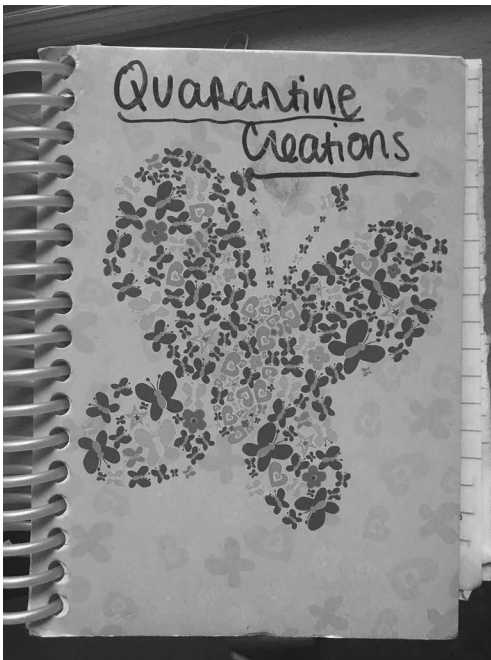


Figure 1: “Quarantine Creations” pocket journal of creative projects during the spring 2020 shutdown.

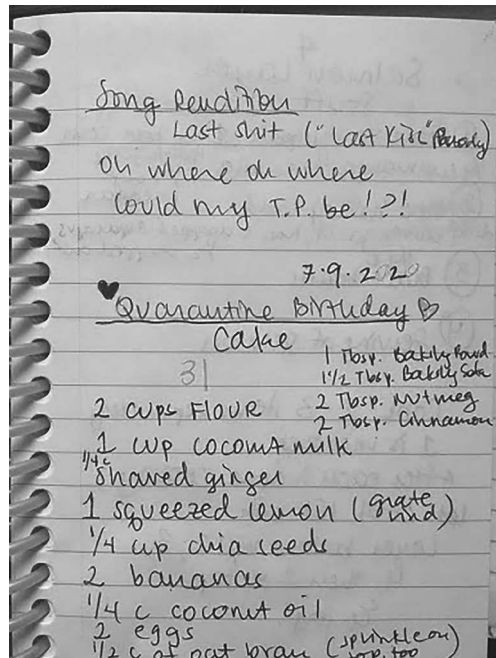


Figure 2: Two entries of “Quarantine Creations”: top, a silly idea for a song-lyrics rendition; bottom: a very bland quarantine thirty-first birthday cake recipe I made out of leftover ingredients, because I couldn't justify running to the grocery store for only a few items.

## Adapting to Digital Literate Activities When You're Technophobic

As a writer, and as a social being, my values of engaging in material and face-to-face (F2F) spaces were brought to a screeching halt. It took the threat of the human population being wiped out to break from my stubborn media/modal preferences of the page and F2F interaction over digital realms. I've long resisted embracing digital media for creative and academic uses. I've clung to my earliest notion of what writing is, when I first fell in love with getting lost in spiral notepads, and wearing down pencils to their eraser in elementary school. Throughout my young adulthood, I made a ritual out of writing inside coffee shops or sitting on park benches in close proximity to spaces stuffed with strangers to "people watch" (nothing creepy) (Figures 3 and 4). These spaces provided infinite and wondrous inspiration opportunities and fueled my process of generating words in my mind and putting them onto the page.



Figure 3: A coffee shop I used to visit often to gain inspiration. St. Louis, MO | January 2019.



Figure 4: Mooney Park, a bench I used to write and read on for hours. St. Louis, MO | May 2014.

Another big reason I preferred the page and F2F human interaction is due to my mild-to-moderate case of technophobia, paired with an intense case of social media anxiety. Instagram and Facebook are my highest levels of social media fluency, and recently I deactivated these accounts because it's been too stressful juggling tabs, classes, e-mails, ReggieNet, all in one screen during local and global crises. To some extent, most (if not all) students are haunted constantly by the sea of open tabs on our computers. We should do our poor eyes and brains a solid, and every so often indulge in the liberating feeling of going on an app-deletion spree.

### Uptake of New and Old Literate Activities in Response to Crises

Despite my technology qualms, I knew it was a must to overcome some fears of digital spaces. I had to if I wanted to maintain my commitments to people and interests I cared about, and to behave in ways that effectively endorsed the safety and survival of the population. The pandemic is a phenomenon, but the ways we adapt and use languages, resources, and tools to respond when unfortunate events emerge are not entirely new. Our writing identities, and our identities in general, are reshaped constantly by ever-shifting events. We've had to acclimate to a slew of perpetually changing situations, consequences, and activities as the coronavirus continues to spread. Our approach to writing and community activities are reliant upon newly unfolding information, and updates on how to interact in public spaces. We are always in a state of trial and error-ing different genres of communication, improvising by going with what we know, and modifying when necessary.

Despite the preemptive apocalypse planning and doom scrolling that sucked up most of my energy, I did continue to write, even more rigorously in my journal. This was the primary **literate activity** and **genre**, or type of

A **literate activity** is closely related to the concept "activity system." Via ISU Writing Program's website, activity systems are "[...] key to understanding how a given genre works, as genre is the tool (or tools, as an activity system may require more than one genre and/or tool) that the participant(s) use to achieve the objective [...] Understanding activity systems also allows us to see the complex ways that they interact with people and communities."

composition, I took to during the 2020 spring shutdown. I wrote mostly obnoxious circular thoughts, but some were worth returning to—mainly, concerns about my grandmother. It was in late March of 2020, about two weeks since her assisted living facility had notified family members that they could no longer physically visit, that I remembered her son's birthday was coming up soon (my mother's brother, my uncle who I never got to meet). I wondered, sixty-five years ago during her first pregnancy, days before she would give birth, what nerves, pains, preparation, was



my grandma going through in the 1950s (Figure 5)? Given the fact that she was born in 1926 and had vivid memories of her family’s impoverishment during the Great Depression era, I wondered if there were any similarities to her experience during the fifties. Was she worried that the worst could happen again, and what she could do in case it did? Was she feeling the same way most folks have felt during this current pandemic, like an anvil could fall from the sky? Was she making sure her rural Oklahoma home’s fridge, pantry, and cleaning supplies were well-stocked in case her water broke and she couldn’t get to a hospital in time?



Figure 5: Grandma Betty Robertson working in garden.  
Miami, OK | circa 1954.

## Ecology of Writing and Activity Situations

Knowing how exceptionally resilient and resourceful my grandmother has been as long as I knew her (a true Jane-of-all-trades), I deduced that she had acquired certain Depression-era tactics that served her swimmingly throughout multiple periods of her life. She endured some of the harshest, most painful conditions due to factors that were beyond her control. But she learned how to carry over certain tools and skills when met by various forms of adversity—which is a marvelous model for how we might think about the tools used in literate activities when encountering unforeseen circumstances.

We explore **P-CHAT (pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory)** in ISU’s Writing Program as a way to articulate certain writing/activity situations. The seven related terms that the program has developed to help writers talk specifically about literate activity systems is called P-CHAT. One of the terms, which can help describe the components of analyzing texts and the process writers go through in composing texts is **ecology**. Most people might think of the term “environment” when they hear the word ecology, which isn’t too far off in meaning since it relates to the surrounding factors and context a writer is within while generating

Via ISU Writing Program’s website, “[...]we use **CHAT** to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world [...] CHAT allows us to focus on any aspect of the myriad elements of textual production, so it is more robust than these other methods for investigating texts.”

a text. Questions we can ask when analyzing the ecological elements of a text include...

- What products and materials go into the making of a text?
- Where do those materials come from?
- What limits are there on the availability of those materials?
- Who has access to those materials?
- How much do they cost?
- What are the effects on the economy when those materials are scarce?
- What impacts does using those materials have on the environment?  
(Sharp-Hoskins and Frost)

I found myself considering many of these questions when I first received the heartbreaking (but necessary) news that I could no longer continue weekly in-person visits to my grandmother, due to the staunch measures senior care facilities were taking to ensure the safety of their residents. So, the alternative to F2F visits? I don't think you'll need many guesses as to what platform I used to continue interacting with Grandma Betty.

It was going to be complex to plan Zoom sessions with not only my grandmother at the assisted living facility, but also too my brother and my mother who lived in a different city. I already had Zoom installed on my tablet, but my mother was not exactly literate in this particular digital media. I drove an hour to her house to help install Zoom on her desktop computer, I helped her get familiarized with its features. Then I e-mailed the assisted living community's general manager to schedule appointments

throughout the spring and summer with me and the households of my mother and my brother (his household happens to be fluent in Zoom, so I didn't need to travel to his place to help install the app). We arranged these Zoom sessions with Grandma Betty every couple of weeks. For a ninety-four-year-old with dementia (with the help of her nurse) she seemed to get the hang of it relatively quickly (Figure 6). In Zoom sessions Grandma didn't always remember exactly who

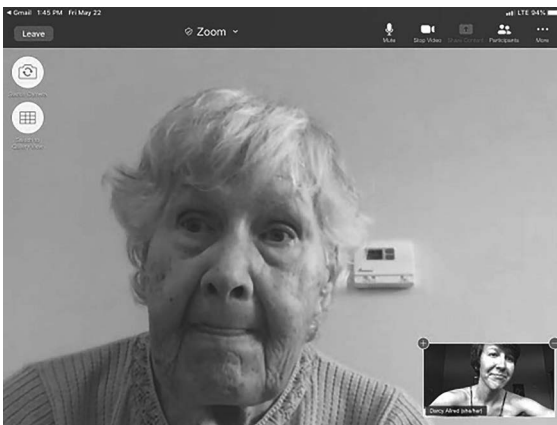


Figure 6: Grandma Betty and me on her ninety-fourth birthday. Zoom call May 22nd, 2020.

I was, but she was able to follow a conversation and crack jokes as if she had been in a F2F conversation. She recognized the familiar mode/media of synchronous interaction due to her prior knowledge (or, **antecedent knowledge**) of digital genres like phone calls and videos.

Most of us have had a loved one or a community we belong to with whom we can't be in direct contact, whether it's due to this pandemic's mitigation measures, or perhaps a geographical barrier where you're in two different states or countries. It's pertinent to take up new technologies as public and interpersonal relationships are affected in such a way that requires us to communicate with repurposed, **remediated** literacies and genre knowledge. The genre here that I had to remediate was that of a F2F visit into a Zoom call. I used various additional texts to communicate and interact with my grandmother, especially for the Zoom call on her birthday. The gifts that I would've given her in person, were delivered to her by the facility's staff after I dropped them off the day before the Zoom call. These layers of literate activities were determined by the ecological factors (coronavirus and safety measures) at play.

**Remediation** in terms of literacy and genres is defined by the ISU Writing Program as “[a] process in which a text is altered for a new purpose, allowing it a new trajectory or situating it within a different activity system.”

For her gifts, I used the same genres she's been accustomed to, using **multimodal composing**— which means using multiple modes outside of just alphabetic text, including visual (pictures), symbolic, aural (sound), oral (spoken), and gestural modes. I gave Grandma Betty a little wooden birdhouse colored with markers and inscribed a message on the back, a birthday card with a handwritten letter, and some of her favorite snacks packed with various visual and textual designs (color, font size), and symbols that effectively communicate to her that they're indeed her favorite treats (Figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7: Multimodal birdhouse birthday gift.

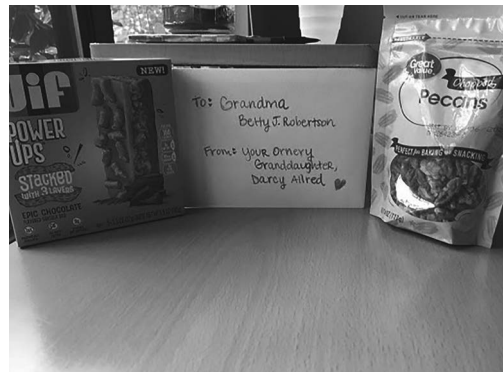


Figure 8: Multimodal birthday treats.

The event of my grandmother's birthday celebration took a bit of additional coordination and communication on my part leading up to the actual Zoom call, where I spoke with her synchronously (aka "in real time"). All of the behind-the-scenes planning for my Zoom video call with Grandma Betty consisted of myriad of activities and communications before we could actually interact over Zoom. This is pretty complex in how one single genre and activity, a Zoom birthday call, requires so much preparation and multiple modes of instructions and communication in order for it to actually happen! A term we could use for this genre and its necessary activities is **meta-genre**, which Janet Giltrow defines as the "atmospheres surrounding genres" (qtd. in Bawarshi and Reiff 94). You could look at it as an expansion of how we think about the ecological factors and how we sometimes have to carry out many (not so easy) steps in writing and other literate activities.

### **Safety and Sentimental Purposes of Digital and Material Media**

Since March of 2020, and hopefully not for too much longer, we have been constantly resituating ourselves as writers, students and as human beings during a pandemic that's also colliding with the US's socioeconomic tipping points (including ongoing systemic racial injustices/disparities, the Digital Divide, food insecurities, etc.). The community discourse and activities that have been maintained or created to help meet writers' needs during these public and economic crises are key in how our writing research identities are adapting radically in unison, but also in isolation. This impacts the literate activities we're taking up, in writing or non-writing activities, and changes how we used to think about and engage with texts and their authors. COVID-19 challenges us to jump the hurdles of digital communication by combining new and old ways of participating within digital spaces, while still using old genres like letter writing and multimodal composition.

This pandemic has forced us to get more creative in how we conduct social interactions, and to explore digital media in order to stay connected with friends and loved ones. While it's crucial to digitize much of our pre-pandemic communication, there's still value to continuing to create correspondence with people we can't see in person with material tools (paper, coloring utensils, glitter, sharpies). In the earlier days of the pandemic, I found solace in exchanges of letter writing, crafts, and care packages that my friends and I sent to one another in the mail. Like my Zoom calls with Grandma Betty, I think it's in our loved ones' best interest to adopt certain digital genres to ensure their safety. However, we don't have to *entirely* replace our previous genres of connection with Zoom and phone calls. It's important to keep all our literate tools sharpened and within reach on our toolbelt, including the

material ones. There's certain material genres and media that allow us in even our most isolated situations to revisit fond feelings and memories of human connection. One of my former teachers, Lauren Markham, writes about the value of the physical text in contrast to digital text:

[...] email became the territory of logistics and commerce, less room for the slow sorcery of correspondence. Perhaps an ex-boyfriend put it best in a letter he wrote me in 2006. 'I think daily of writing an email, but I feel there's something more concrete and therapeutic about a letter' (Markham, "For the Love of Mail")

## Final Thoughts

The writer is never wholly in isolation, even in a pandemic—as despairing and lonely as it can be. Collective thoughts, experiences, and socio-historical contexts always show up in some shape or form or media in our written and spoken languages. A pandemic doesn't just affect the media in which we're used to sharing as writers, or the individual tools we use for writing, but it also affects the activities we're able to do that inform our writing practices. The value of creating anything to share with a community is that, there's some element of struggle that writers respond to, and some of those hardships come from the very ecological situations they're within. A good example of this is poet-educator, Ocean Vuong's story right before he made his break. The factors that were beyond his control included poverty; he was living in a cramped, noisy household during the writing of his debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. This steered Vuong to, "[...] write in his bedroom closet. (As a queer author, he says, 'The irony is not lost on me.') It was a refuge: a laptop, lamp and Vuong with his headphones on [...]" (Nguyen, "Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong's New Book").

New and ecologically affected writing situations are constantly occurring, and require us to re-adjust accordingly if we want to see our writing goals through. Adapting to everyday literate activities through various genres in a virtual format to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 pervades almost everything we do. And it's difficult. It's very, very difficult to feel meaningfully connected with other humans the way we used to. I'm so homesick for in-person interaction beyond my biweekly grocery store trips, that I've considered making cardboard cut-outs of students and teachers in my apartment during Zoom class sessions (I'm not singularly bananas for this, I was inspired by Major League Baseball teams putting fan cutouts in stadiums during games). But despite these virtual obstacles, we can attempt to embrace the same spirit of writing we took on pre-pandemic. Writers strive to problem-solve, create, and collaborate with the tools and skills

available to us at the moment, while recalling our antecedent knowledge to help us survive and grow stronger through the events happening around us in the present.

### In Memory of Betty Joy Robertson

May 22, 1926–February 24, 2021

To the woman with relentless curiosity and spunk who always told me “don’t ever get old, kid,” because she never did.



Figure 9: Image of Betty Joy Robertson.

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Notes

Emojis Across Humanity





*The Grassroots Writing Research Journal* Presents:  
Picturing Literate Activity

Dorothy M. Stone

PLA Narrative: My literate spaces shift as the semester goes on. In the beginning, I think I'll associate my desk with doing work, but once my back has gotten sore from sitting on the exercise ball, I start to seek something more comfortable. Plus, being in my own room, I can be as messy as I want with my literate practices (and my environment!), but working in a common space forces me to be clean and focused. In a way, both spaces are contradictions: freeing but inflexible, or comfy but constrained.



Figure 1: It's important to make yourself comfortable! This semester, Dorothy has made the couch her home for doing work.

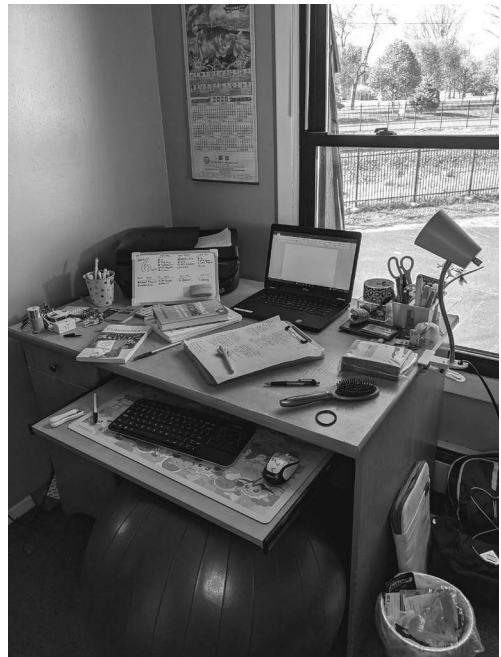


Figure 2: There's more going on around Dorothy's desk than there is on that paper she's writing ...



Pandemic Bio: **Dorothy Stone** doesn't mask the truth about her literate spaces, but it's on her to-do list to clean up!

## International Business Major Experience

Jessica Pina Santos

In this article, Jessica Pina Santos demonstrates how she chose her major, International Business. She presents the importance of cultivating particular skills and genres of writing in this field, and how cultural-historical activity theory is applied in understanding crucial elements of these forms of writing and their advantages to her major.

### Choosing My Major

It was December 2018, I was almost graduating from high school, and I still was unsure what major to study in college. I think it is important to mention that I was born and raised in Mexico, and I have studied and live in Mexico all this time. However, I've always had one goal clear in life; to share my culture with others, as well as to open my horizons and incorporate different perspectives in my life, along with learning from others.

During those days, I remembered being stressed about choosing my major right away. In Mexico, once you start college there is no opportunity to change majors, unless you drop from school, and start over again. So, you can imagine how desperate I was to find the perfect field, the field I'd want to work in for the rest of my life. I found that applying **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory**, also known as P-CHAT, has helped me make important decisions for my career. P-CHAT represents the combination of three bodies of theory, that is, three ways to think about the world—cultural theory, historical theory, and activity theory. P-CHAT helps to understand complex practices and how activity systems assess cultural and historical

evolution. Specifically, the Illinois State University Writing Program uses P-CHAT as a way to focus on helping writers think about complex ways that writing works in the world.

To learn more about potential majors I had in mind, such as law, accounting, and finance, I did general research on Google. I looked into what skills I should possess in order to succeed in these majors, what different jobs I could get, and I read more articles related to the different majors. As I read, I found out that the writers of these articles were applying one of the seven P-CHAT terms, **representation**. According to Joyce Walker, representation, “highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it,” meaning that writers had ideologies, frameworks, and ideas that influenced them while writing these articles (75). I had to be very careful about what articles to read to base my choice of major on because people tend to write from their personal experience, which can be different from mine.

However, after days of research and hundreds of personality tests taken, I went back to my life goal and thought about the skills I already possessed, and I chose International Business as my major, and I am still happy with the decision I made in 2018.

### How to Get the “International” Experience from International Business?

After high school, I decided to attend EBC College, in Merida, Mexico, for the early years of my college career. I was having an amazing experience. I had made it through freshman year almost all of sophomore year when all the International Business major students had to attend a study abroad meeting. At the meeting, we were told studying abroad was not a requirement, but we would gain a lot of experience if we studied abroad anywhere, if we wanted to.

I became extremely excited, and I was determined to study abroad, it had always been my dream. I talked to my parents that night, and they said yes! The week after I started my application, I had to choose three possible destinations. Using my grades, the school would decide if I got to go on my first, second, or third choice.

After months of waiting, the school’s international department had a big event, where they revealed what country all the students that had applied would be traveling to next semester. After the big reveal, I was extremely happy to learn I got my first choice: Millikin University.

Upon discovery, my heart was beating very fast, I was so excited that the first thing I did, was to search “Millikin University” on Google. Here is where another term of P-CHAT, **socialization**, is applied. Socialization is when people, companies, or even institutions interact and get together to produce, distribute, and use texts. In this case, Millikin University gathered several people to create Millikin’s web page, the one I was reading at that very moment when I got the exciting news.

After months of preparation and packing, I moved to Decatur, IL. I lived such an amazing experience that I decided to transfer there that same year.

At Millikin University I have not only been able to share my culture, but also to learn a lot about international business, and how important writing, reading, and research can be in my chosen field. I also have come to understand and learned about the forms of writing that I would be using when I graduate, and all the elements these different genres should possess.



Figure 1: Jessy sharing her culture by showing an altar at Millikin University on the Day of the Dead.

## Important Skills to Succeed in International Business

International business is the discipline that designs and manages strategies for international commercial operations. International business also analyzes the best options for negotiating deliveries of goods or services. This major allows a person to manage export programs, implement innovation projects, and design commercial exchange strategies.

Transcultural and translingual are writing skills, which relate to more than one culture and language, have been extremely important for me, especially in the international business field. They will definitely help me master the ability to conduct in business from one country to another country by applying international treaties, exchange agreements, and economic agreements that facilitate commercial exchange. These skills will also help me acquire a global vision of the economy and international business, not only from commercial knowledge but also from logistics and

customs knowledge, because in order to communicate effectively customs and languages differences should be taken into consideration. To be able to succeed in this major, and the possible jobs in this field, such as supply chain and logistics, international finance, international marketing, human resources, and many others certain capabilities might be needed to do so. Subsequently, I am going to talk more about the skills I found that got my attention.

The first skill listed is “talent for languages.” This indicates to me that I need know more than one language and be good at it. It also indicates I should enjoy learning different languages. Knowing more than one language will help me communicate effectively with the buyer, supplier, investor, and so many other important people in order to generate commercial agreements with companies and brands around the world, and I must have the ability to express myself and understand others who speak a language other than mine. Here is where the next term of P-CHAT comes in place. According to Joyce Walker’s article “Just CHATting,” **reception**, “deals with how a text is taken up and used by others” (75). In the language context, it is very important to make sure to understand the language correctly and make sure you are getting exactly what the other person is trying to say. It is very easy to just think from singular perspectives and hear what we want to hear, however, in business, this is not an ideal practice. We have to be 110% sure of what the other person is saying. This is where I think transcultural and translingual writing come into place. Knowing how to express yourself in written form across cultural and national boundaries, helps you have an effective communication style with people from different countries. It is important to know the differences in writing style of different cultures because they do vary, and it is important to understand the particular context.

The second skill listed is “capacity for analysis and synthesis.” To promote commercial agreements and create business proposals, professionals in this career must be able to analyze, manage, and interpret information, as well as synthesize and present information. The third skill listed is “Leadership.” Although some people believe that leadership refers only to the ability to make other people follow them, this skill involves much more than this. Leadership involves motivating those around you, being persuasive, setting viable, specific, relevant, and measurable goals, and above all, getting a team of professionals to work together.

Last but not least, a person in this field must have a “taste for the business world and cultural knowledge.” A characteristic that distinguishes those who study international business is their passion for the business environment, entrepreneurship, and business models, and appreciation for cultural



Figure 2: Business meetings in Mexico are usually in restaurants; portraying culture difference.

customs and traditions. Cultural customs and traditions in international negotiations are essential to achieve the stated objectives. What is functional in one culture may not be so in another. In Mexico, when you are going to close a business deal with someone it is usual to give your partner an expensive gift as a symbol of loyalty; however, in the US that can be taken as a rude act. The idea that language use is essentially social also underlies current work in literary theory and sociolinguistics. This makes the P-CHAT concept of **ecology** very important, because ecology focuses on how texts and humans and tools work together in the material world. Ecology enriches our environment and is important to the well-being and welfare of humanity. It offers new awareness of the interdependence between people and nature, which is vital. It is important to consider the cultural differences between the countries that intend to commercialize or establish an agreement. Such differences help to identify the preferences of potential consumers, as well as to identify their different needs. Because business differs in every country, people might approve of your business model or you as a partner depending on the way you act, and if they can truly trust you. This is why cultural differences require a different approach.

## International Business and Its Genres of Writing

International Documentation is the set of representative documents of the export/import operation in general and the compliance of the intervening parties with regulations of the exchange market, credit, fiscal, customs, and so on, applied in each country in particular. These documents are of vital importance since they confer the ownership of the merchandise, they

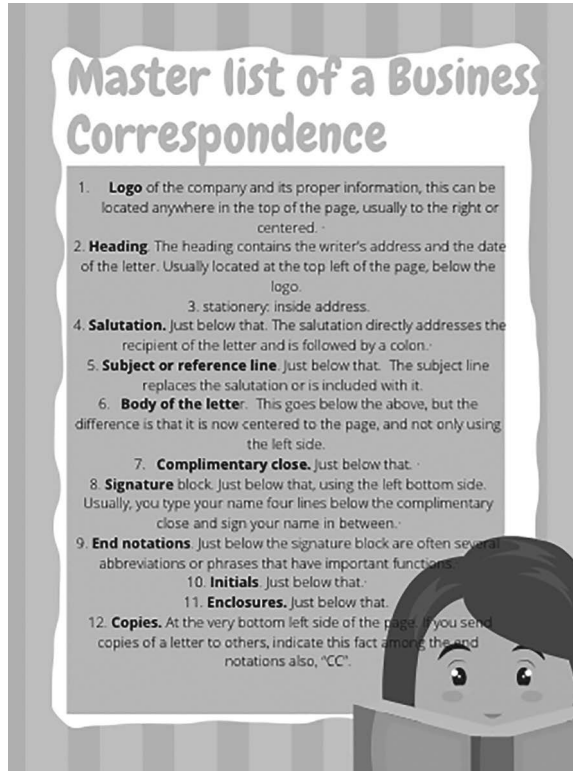


Figure 3: An example of a complete list of a Business Correspondence created by the author.

show that it is insured against possible risks, and they attest to its quality or quantities. Through interviews and research, I was able to find out more about three important kinds of documents that are used in international business.

I thought that interviewing Dr. Mark Munoz, would help me gain a better understanding of the writing styles and documents needed in my field. He is a well-known professor of international business at the Tabor School of Business at Millikin University, and editor/author of over 20 business books, including *Global Business Intelligence*, based on a multi-country study on the impact of globalization on the travel industry. During our interview he emphasized the importance **business correspondence**, because “this is a way to start any negotiation, and it is extremely important to communicate effectively with the person or company we are going to be working with.” Business correspondence, which can be in print (letters) or digital forms (e-mails, texts), have a huge range of important functions in international business. Its most important feature is the ease of reaching and communicating with different parties, especially since in international



business it is not always possible to meet people face-to-face. Before writing a business correspondence or any other form of writing, it is important to generate a complete list of the general conventions of that document, meaning that you should list all its elements and characteristics of elements to fill the document or write it successfully. Like earlier mentioned, reception is P-CHAT term that “highlights issues related to the way people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this” (Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program). The complete list definitely helps you get a better understanding and outline of what you have to do, creating an effective and concise business document, including thinking carefully about how a reader will perceive the document, and what they might use it for.

The next genre I found in my research is the **proforma invoice**. The proforma invoice is a provisional invoice that the company delivers to the client, and it specifies the details of future commercial activity. A proforma invoice has no commercial value, it is simply a document in which the details of a future final invoice will be specified. In the document, the price, a base, and taxes that correspond to the services or products required should be included. It is similar to a budget proposal, but with more specific information about the transaction.

And the third document I will talk about is the **packing list**. The packing list should inform about the contents of the package; this information should complete the information on the invoice and must be issued by the person who makes the shipment, the sender. This document is mandatory because it facilitates selective recognition by the customs authorities and is of great importance, especially in physical customs clearance. It also works as proof for damage and loss of items in the package when they have been broken.

## My Experience

Being able to export and import one product or service to another country has always fascinated me. It is a way to share your culture, tastes, and beliefs with another society. Doing this research, I found out that soft skills are an important part of the international business major. Soft skills are non-technical skills that relate to how you work. They include how you interact with colleagues, how you solve problems, and how you manage your work. These skills will help me communicate effectively and succeed in business wherever I go. It is also very important to know and understand its forms in writing to be able to succeed in this field, and P-CHAT has not only allowed

me to find my major but has also helped me navigate and comprehend all these complex genres related to the international business field, preparing me for the future.

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**Jessica Pina Santos** is seeking her undergraduate degree in international business at Millikin University. She loves classical dance and tacos. She enjoys learning about other cultures and other people's perspectives. Her goal is to reach out to the Latino market in the United States.



Notes

Beyond  
Type  
One



## Chatting about the Radio Station

Anthony Ferretti

It's a typical Tuesday morning for Anthony Ferretti as he gets out of bed and heads to the campus radio station for his weekly newscast. Find out how cultural-historical activity theory, years before the pandemic hit, plays a role from start to finish as he prepares to go on-air.

### Rise and Shine

RING! RING! RING! RING! It's a brisk Tuesday morning. I wake up to the annoying sound of the alarm on my iPhone. Part of me wants to hit the snooze button, but I know that if I do, I'll be late for my shift at the radio station. That wouldn't be good, especially since this is the career I want to pursue. Not to mention I've got to get from the 8th floor in Watterson to the basement of Fell Hall.

My passion to become a professional broadcaster began when I was younger. I'd watch (and still do watch) Blackhawks games and listen to the sports broadcasters, thinking about how they bring the game to life. However, I officially began my journalism career during senior year of high school when I wrote for the school newspaper. I wrote about what is going on around the school and I also created crossword puzzles that would be featured at the end of issues.

Once I arrive at WZND, Illinois State University's student-run radio station, there are a myriad of things I have to do during my shift. While it

was overwhelming at first, I was able to get the hang of it thanks to ISU's version of **cultural-historical activity theory**, or, **P-CHAT**. The ISU Writing Program uses P-CHAT to help us study and understand complex genres that we experience in our world. Specifically, I will look at production, representation, distribution, socialization, reception, activity, and ecology as they relate to WZND.

## Radio Station Genres

A lot of my work at the radio station consists of different **genres**, or, the kinds of texts that have specific conventions we can use to recognize them. The Illinois State University Writing Program explains that identifiable genres can develop in any form of writing; I deal with a number of different genres as a reporter, including soundbites, actualities, wraps, news stories, and newscast. In order for me to successfully complete these genres, a **genre analysis** is necessary. Doing a genre analysis refers to the activities involved in looking very closely at a particular genre and the different features that are present or absent. I will break down each of the genres used at the radio station in the following paragraphs.

One of the most important genres I use is called a **soundbite**. A soundbite is a ten-to-fifteen second piece of audio on a certain topic which typically comes in the form of an interview or press conference. Interviews range from thirty seconds to five minutes. Once I am finished with the interview, I email the audio file to myself and find the best eight to twelve seconds from that interview. From there, soundbites help us create two new genres: actualities and wraps.

An **actuality** is that eight-to-twelve-second audio clip with writing that occurs both before and after the soundbite. Once I find the part from the interview I want to use, I convert the segment into its own file and save the file onto the computer. From there, I write a couple sentences that leads up to the audio file for the one concluding sentence. For example, if the Redbirds won their match 3-1, I would say something about how they had a strong performance on both sides of the ball and transition into a clip from the head coach explaining their emotions about the win. Then, I do a genre analysis to make sure the soundbite fits the time frame, is saved into the proper place, and the writing before and after it makes sense.

A **wrap** is a one-minute piece with two soundbites from the interview along with my words that explain what occurred during the game or what happened during an event. Although it is similar to an actuality, the composition is different. For a wrap, I would start with a brief introduction

for the anchor to read. From there, the wrap starts with some words from me leading up to the first soundbite followed by the soundbite. I complete this process once again before I sign off and the anchor reads a concluding sentence. Part of my **genre analysis** for making a wrap is to ensure that the pieces I recorded and the soundbites used all fit together smoothly so it doesn't sound like I put this together in two minutes. Both actualities and wraps are played on the air the following day during a newscast.

A **newscast**, in our case, is a broadcast of the latest news and sports stories along with the weather. It lasts roughly four minutes and is made up of three news stories, two sports stories, and a brief weather report. The news stories consist of two local stories (ISU, Bloomington/Normal, or Illinois) followed by a national news story. Then, we write a local sports story followed by national sports stories, mainly scores of a game or a short preview of the next game. Finally, the weather report consists of the current temperature and what the forecast will look like in the next few hours.

A final genre we often use at the radio station is a **news story**, which is a recap of the event or game written by the reporter who covered the event. They are relatively short in length and include a title, location of the event, a lead to recap the most important parts of the story, a couple paragraphs, and a quote. I have included an example of an article that I previously wrote for WZND (see Figures 1 and 2 on the next page).

## Editor's Note

### *CHAT-ing About Radio*

As I mentioned earlier, the P-CHAT terms are really important because they allow us to focus on the many elements in textual production. There are seven terms we use to help organize the world around us: production, representation, distribution, socialization, reception, activity, and ecology. Each of these terms helps us sense of literate activity, and I will break down each of these terms more as they show up as it relates to the radio station.

### *How a Newscast is Made*

Everything that I am thinking about before I write my newscast up until I perform my newscast all goes into the **production** of my piece. Production deals with the means through which a text is produced. A newscast, much like everything else that's made, relies heavily on production. If I couldn't write anything for my newscast, then there would be no reason for the listeners to

"NORMAL — Redbird Women's Basketball showed heart on Valentine's Day after nearly taking down the Loyola Ramblers 86-85 in a double overtime thriller.

Illinois State came into the contest 1/2 a game behind the Ramblers in the MVC standings and looked to end a 2-game skid. Head Coach Kristen Gillespie said the Ramblers deserved to win given the team's slow start, but the Redbirds came up big in crunch time to earn a much-needed victory:

"I thought (Loyola) played an outstanding 40 minutes," said Coach Gillespie. "We really struggled to guard the ball but we did enough down the stretch just to get stop when we needed and made some big baskets."

The Redbirds trailed the Ramblers 64-58 with 0:41 seconds left, but a quick three-pointer by Lexi Wallen and a basket from Tete Maggett off her own steal cut the deficit to a 1-point game. With more than a second to go, Wallen nailed a game tying 3-pointer, and overtime was needed.

The 5th year senior followed her performance late in the game with another game tying layup late in the 1st overtime. Then with :01 to go in the 2nd overtime and the Redbirds down 1, Wallen sunk both of her free throws to seal the victory for ISU.

Wallen finished with a career high 35 points, 10 of which came in the final 0:36 of the 4th.

The Redbirds return to the court Sunday afternoon when they take on the Valparaiso Crusaders. WZND will have live coverage of the game starting at 1:50."

Figure 1: Example of a news story about a Redbird Women's Basketball game.



Figure 2: Courtside image of the Redbirds warming up at Redbird Arena prior to their game against Loyola.



tune in. Part of the production process comes during our weekly meetings when we schedule who will do which newscast. This is essentially important because then we all know that there will be someone covering the news for that hour so it will be fulfilled. Computers are the main source of production we use to write our newscast. We could use our phones, but given the short amount of time we have to write and the stories we want to write about, a computer is the most effective tool we should utilize.

### *Establishing Credibility as Reporters*

The term **representation** highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it. In our case, this pertains to how the stories are written during a newscast and how we read them. When I'm writing a news story, it's really important to consider how I'm writing it. We don't want to sound biased as reporters. Our primary goal is to inform the public on what's happening by reporting solely on the facts. For example, if the basketball team is struggling because they've lost six straight games, we'll mention that. Just because the radio station is affiliated with ISU doesn't mean everything should be positive. Since WZND is located on the campus of Illinois State University, our target audience is anyone living in Bloomington/Normal. There are certain news stories that pertain to ISU students while other stories affect parents with children in elementary school.

In addition, the tone in which I read the news stories during my newscast has to be consistent with the tone of the story. If the story is about somebody who passed away, I should not be reading the story as if I won the lottery. Instead, I should read the story as if I knew the person who died. If the story I'm reading is positive, my tone of voice should mimic that, and the same thing goes for stories that aren't meant to sound happy.

### *No Radio, No Problem*

The **distribution** of the news considers where the newscasts can be heard around campus or around the world. Locally, WZND can be heard at the Bone Student Center and via 103.3 F.M. on the radio. For those that aren't local but still want to hear the newscast such as my family, it can also be streamed on *wznd.com*. So, if you have a smart phone, computer, or anything else with internet access, you can listen to ISU's campus radio station. The fact that WZND can be streamed online is important because we're always thinking of ways to reach a larger demographic. We are also able to distribute our content throughout our social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

### *Interaction with Our Listeners*

**Socialization** describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. The production of our newscasts involves communicating with a DJ in the studio when it's time to do the news. We also go around campus and pass out fliers for events or organizations that we are promoting, so we interact with students as we make our way through campus. Festival ISU is a chance for us to socialize with students to try and recruit them to join the radio station. For the freshman who might not be aware, Festival ISU is a HUGE festival on the quad with a ton of clubs and organizations on campus as well as local businesses. Did you know that WZND started Festival ISU?! Sadly, it was held virtually in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it's a lot of fun if you get the chance to go in person.

### *Did You Hear?*

According to the ISU Writing Program, **reception** deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. Not only does it take into account who will read the text, but also how they might repurpose it. Like I mentioned before, our newscasts are received either on 103.3 FM, wznd.com, or in the Bone Student Center. Our listeners also receive various content on social media such as news/sports stories, specialty shows, and station promotions/events. In terms of trying to repurpose our content, someone can like, comment, or share anything we post. Although we may not see it, there's a chance people discuss what they heard or saw from us with their friends. They could be sitting on the quad and talking about that one story we wrote, whether it be positive or negative. Maybe they are talking with their roommate about a recent music or sports-talk show that caught their eye. Or they heard a story during the newscast relating to lowering tuition costs.

### *The To-Do List for a Newscast*

There's no question that a lot of **activity** is involved when writing a newscast, which refers to the practices an individual goes through while they're creating text. The first activity is scheduling the newscasts at our meetings, which starts way before our assigned shift. The next activity is walking to the radio station to write your newscast, followed by opening the door, walking down the steps, entering the station, sitting down at the desk, opening up a document, typing words into sentences to make a story, you get the idea. Then once I'm finished, reading through the newscast out loud would be the next activity. Those are just a handful of activities involved in producing a newscast. If I wanted to list them all we'd be here all day, but the fact of the matter is **activity** is *exactly* how it sounds.

### *There's No Place Like Fell Hall*

Each time I'm scheduled to do a newscast, I head down to the basement of Fell Hall, which relates to the **ecology** of my newscast. The ecology of a situation relates to the environmental factors that exist when an individual is writing. They're the physical and biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing. The environment that I am writing in is in a small office at the radio station with three computers and three TV's on silent. Sometimes I'll have to bring a sweatshirt with me because the temperature can get quite cold, especially in the studio. The amount of people at the station during the time of my newscast also relates to the ecology. Sometimes there are dozens of people in the lobby or in their offices, which makes it hard to concentrate given all of the noise. However, that all changes when I enter the studio. It's just the DJ and I sitting across from one another. It's nice once I go on-air because the studio is quiet, and I can take a couple seconds to clear my head before I start to speak.

### *... And We're Clear*

Whew! Much like a newscast, that was a lot of information to go through in a short period of time. Throughout the last few pages, I've discussed the different genres I've encountered at the radio station, the genre analysis involved, and how P-CHAT relates to the preparation of a newscast. When I first began writing this article, I struggled to figure out how the P-CHAT terms relate to my experiences at the radio station. But as I started to unpack what I've learned in my introductory English class, I understood that P-CHAT ironically plays an important role at the radio station where "chatting" is part of the process. Because of cultural-historical activity theory, I have a better understanding about the various elements involved as it relates to the production of something that was right in front of my eyes. They say you learn something new every day. Who would've thought?

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**Anthony Ferretti** is an aspiring sports play-by-play broadcaster who graduated from Illinois State University in May with a degree in journalism. Anthony has always been a big sports fan ever since he stepped onto the ice as a kid. He grew up listening to broadcasters Mike “Doc” Emrick calling NHL games in hopes of being in their shoes one day.

# Is it More Than Morbid Fascination? The Empowering Effect of True Crime Podcasts

Shawna Sheperd

In this article, Shawna Sheperd will explore True Crime as an activity system. Inside this activity system, readers will dive deep into the True Crime podcasts subgenre, addressing issues of ethical communication, civic engagement, and discourse communities. In her exploration, Sheperd will ask, how do True Crime podcasts interact with the real world? What do we gain from listening to sometimes horrific tales? Is it more than just morbid fascination?

## Podcasts as a Genre

When I first was introduced to podcasts, I immediately became attached. In a matter of twenty minutes to an hour of listening, I would be thrown into a whirlwind of stories that emphasized innovation, drama, research, or survival. Inherently, podcasts are designed to be listened to “on the go.” Through my cellphone, computer, tablet, and car radio I can stream a podcast whenever and wherever I please.

Podcasts can be considered a **genre** because they follow genre conventions, such as being serialized audio files that are downloadable or streamed from the Internet. Under the umbrella term “podcasts” many **subgenres** exist. For instance, subgenres of podcasts can include shows that focus specifically on different kinds of goals (entertainment, news, education), topics (sports, history, storytelling, true crime), and audiences (kids, adults, people interested in fashion etc.). No matter what subgenre you are thinking of, podcasts have become an accessible **multimodal** genre that allow listeners to cherry pick what information they receive about the topics that interest them. Podcasts are multimodal because they combine

written research (which is an alphabetical mode), what information they articulate (which is an oral mode), and how they articulate that information for listeners (which is an aural mode). Besides being multimodal, podcasts are developed through many mediums. Podcasts combine text, audio, and sometimes images—as many podcasts will have social media pages where they post images—to create a final **multimedia** product.

## True Crime Podcasts as an Activity System

In this article, I will explore how True Crime functions as an activity system, of which True Crime podcasts are a part of. I will then explore the podcast subgenre, True Crime, more closely to see how their socialization has generated intercultural communities. **Activity Systems** are networks of people, tools, activities and genres. They usually involve one or more people trying to achieve a goal in the world (to change something, to create something, to communicate something, to share something). In some cases, activity systems can work on a really large scale to shape the way **discourse communities** function. That is, large groups of people who are working on similar goals, or interested in similar things, all act within particular activity systems that are interrelated, and that use similar genres.

A True Crime discourse community would be a group of people who share the common goal of researching, listening, and retelling real-life crime stories. Often, people taking part in a True Crime discourse community would use similar genres for their research such as nonfiction books, documentaries, websites, news articles, police reports, court proceedings, magazines, and podcasts. A small-scale example of a True Crime discourse community I am a part of is my Podcast Book Club. We are a group of ten women who were previously strangers until one mutual friend of ours on Facebook connected us. We meet biweekly to discuss a pre-decided podcast episode, centered on True Crime. We share the common goal of confronting our own fears and anxieties while we discuss real cases. Often, group members will bring outside researched information into our meetings if the podcast episode didn't satisfy their questions.

When considering True Crime as an activity system, levels of participation from the discourse community will vary. For instance, a person who is avidly engaged in this activity system would use multiple genres, tools, and interactions to better research certain cases (i.e. listening to a podcast episode, reading a book on that case, or browsing the Internet for more information). Similarly, a person who is moderately engaged can be satisfied with choosing only one or two genres or tools to investigate a particular

case (i.e. listening to only one podcast episode). Regardless of a person's level of interest in the True Crime activity system, looking at True Crime podcasts becomes an interesting case study for how strangers in a discourse community can interact and inspire change.

## Are There Any Genre Conventions Specific to a True Crime Podcast?

True Crime podcasts will have genre conventions that will appear across any subgenre of podcasts. Beyond being a genre that is an audio file that is downloadable or streamed from the Internet, any podcast might have intro music, ads scattered throughout, or announcements and updates targeted to loyal listeners on relevant information such as podcast changes, live tour dates, or any personal anecdotes. When it comes to True Crime, two specific subgenre conventions that stick out to me are the subject material and commentary that refers to mental health, self-care, or justice groups.

When considering subject material, True Crime podcasts report details of real-life crimes and examine the actions of perpetrators. Often, crimes analyzed through podcasts focus on murder, assault, missing persons, or conspiracies. There are many True Crime podcasts that exist within the United States and abroad that use storytelling, dialogues, or panel discussions to dive deeper into cases. Often, the format, style, and tone of each podcast changes to fit the personality of the host. The personality of the podcast will often inform how discussions of mental health, self-care, or advocacy for related justice groups occur. In some True Crime podcasts, the hosts may take on a personal tone—speaking directly to their listeners about their own struggles with mental health and how they encourage therapy. Other podcasts will refer to nonprofit organizations that are doing important justice-oriented work in order to bring public awareness to the forefront of their episodes. Some podcasts will have self-care resources available to their listeners advertised at the beginning or end of their episodes and on their websites.

## True Crime Podcasts and Ethics

For me, I choose to listen to certain True Crime podcasts due to their practice of **ethics** and **ethical communication**. Ethics are moral principles that guide a person's behavior. Ethical communication is the way a person engages with others by being honest, clear, accurate, and open-minded. Listening to True Crime can be tough because you are listening to terrible tragedies individuals have faced and looking into the perpetrators that represent the

most depraved parts of humanity. When I choose a podcast, I look for hosts and production teams sensitive to victims' legacies and families, and that handle the complexities of trauma and mental health with care.



Figure 1: Link to *My Favorite Murder (MFM)*.

The first True Crime podcast I listened to is *My Favorite Murder (MFM)*. *MFM* is a self-declared true-crime comedy podcast. The hosts, former comedian Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark clarify that the “comedy” portion of their podcast isn’t intended to be insensitive to any victim or the victims’ family, but rather the jokes made often target the perpetrators and are used to make processing heavy case details easier. Not only does the MFM team clarify their comedic intentions at each live show, they hold a “corrections corner” at the beginning of their recorded episodes where they address previous inaccurate facts or statements they may have expressed in past episodes. Since *MFM* was my first experience with True Crime podcasts, I felt relieved and encouraged by how they spoke about the cases.



Figure 2: Link to *Case File* podcast.

There are many ethical True Crime podcasts that exist with different stylistic approaches. For instance, an Australian True Crime podcast called *Case File* is dramatically different from *MFM* because instead of having a dialogic storytelling conversation, this podcast relies on a scripted narrative by one host. *Case File* takes on a more serious tone by focusing on narrative reports and facts found within original public or police documents, and excludes any personal information or anecdotes about the host. *Crime Junkie* is another podcast that exists between *MFM* and *Case File*'s stylistic extremes. The host, Ashley Flowers, reports facts on cases while having her co-host Brit Prawat act as a commentator on those cases. *Crime Junkie* includes personal anecdotes and has a dialogic and improvised feel like *MFM*, but also follows a closely scripted narrative that isn’t necessarily comedic. No matter what style a True Crime podcast uses, the subject discussed moves beyond entertainment by interacting with the real-world crimes.



Figure 3: Link to *Crime Junkie*.

## P-CHAT and True Crime Podcasts

To better understand how True Crime podcasts interact within the real world, I will break down the subgenre using terms from an analytical theory



called cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Illinois State University’s Writing Program uses a version of this theory framework (PCHAT, or pedagogical CHAT) to think critically about literate activities, such as listening to a podcast. (To learn more about the seven terms: production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology check out resources on the [isuwriting.com](http://isuwriting.com) website.) The fascinating thing about using P-CHAT is that the term provides a flexible and interactive way to investigate a new genre. That being said, every time you investigate a new genre or new writing situation, you don’t always have to use each of the seven terms to generate or complicate your ideas.

For the purpose of investigating True Crime podcasts, I focused on five P-CHAT terms: production, distribution, reception, socialization, and ecology. I chose these elements of P-CHAT because I am interested in the inherent multimodal research and nature of True Crime podcasts and how they generate intercultural communities. **Intercultural communities** are generated when two (or more) culturally different groups come together to mutually exchange ideas, cultural norms, and develop connections among each other. To begin, it is important to discuss how True Crime podcasts are produced.

**Production** encompasses the tools and practices that go into creating a text. In every podcast I listen to, the hosts mention where they have gotten their source material from. For instance, *MFEM* often jokes about their use of Murderpedia. The interactive site allows users to research particular cases and perpetrators to often find pictures and case details. The website, great for initial case exploration, is just the tip of the iceberg for the research that goes into compiling and producing an informative podcast episode. Often, hosts will mention documentaries, movies, books, news articles that they pull from as source material. For instance, the episode: “Infamous: The Dexter Killer” pulls from the nonfiction book, *The Devil’s Cinema: The Untold Story Behind Mark Twitchell’s Kill Room*, CBC News articles, the *Edmonton Journal*, various YouTube videos, and primary documents. Not only are these informative podcasts multimodal production pieces, but sometimes, cases covered in a True Crime podcast can inspire further multimodal trajectories after its aired, such as a docuseries or an art exhibit. The podcast *Serial* gained so much attention



Figure 4: Link to “Murderpedia.”



Figure 5: Link to “Infamous: The Dexter Killer.”



Figure 6: Link to the podcast “Serial.”



Figure 7: Link to *The Case Against Adnan Syed*.



Figure 8: Link to the David Kordansky Gallery.



Figure 9: Link to *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast*.

and introduced so much new undiscovered evidence, that HBO created a docuseries based on it entitled *The Case Against Adnan Syed*. Not only do True Crime podcasts inspire journalistic genres about the case, but they also can inspire creative genres and mediums. For example, Kathryn Andrews' art exhibit in the David Kordansky Gallery in Frieze Los Angeles centers the 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short (popularly known as the Black Dahlia), pulling from various source material including popular podcast coverage.

Although paying attention to the production and multimodal source material for a True Crime podcast is important, it wouldn't matter without special attention to the distribution tactics. **Distribution** considers how a true crime podcast will get their message out and through what means. Something that a podcast production team may consider is: How will people hear my episodes?

I get most of my True Crime podcasts through apps such as Spotify or Apple Podcasts. However, the same podcasts I listen to are available through iHeartRadio, iTunes, Google Podcasts, or even free online streaming through their websites. There is a wide variety of streaming services that most popular True Crime podcasts have access to. One of the major reasons I became so attached to podcasts was the fact I can listen whenever, wherever, and most episodes are free or inexpensive. . . *MFM*, *Crime Junkie*, *Case File*, and other popular podcasts like *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast* all have home-base websites where they upload each week's episode and announcements.

Other distribution questions are: Who will hear my episodes? How do I expand my audience base? Some popular ways podcasts have advertised their material is through social media accounts including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. *MFM* has a very active Twitter account and *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast* is active on Instagram. Social media is a popular way to advertise a podcasts' content material, and give their listeners a "sneak peek" into the upcoming week's episodes. Given the structure of social media, episodes or podcast information can be easily shared. The way I discovered the less popular podcasts that I love have been through seeing a shared post or review online.

Once a True Crime podcast is distributed, it is helpful to look into its **reception**. Reception is how the podcast is taken up and used by listeners.

Reception is not just about how a listener will respond to a podcast—even though that element is important—it is also how the listeners might re-purpose the podcasts’ episodes. For instance, in the True Crime discourse community, artistic renderings of True Crime podcast hosts are common. Found publicly on *MFM*, *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast*, and *Crime Junkie*’s Instagram account, loyal listeners of each of these podcasts have created fan art. In all three images (Figure 10, 11, 12) listeners have repurposed a common phrase or quote that was said in each respective podcast to inspire the creation of their artwork.

In Figure 10, *MFM*’s quote, “Luminol never lies,” has become a popular reference to the substance that forensic investigators use to detect trace amounts of blood at crime scenes. Not only has this particular quote been used in fan art, but the *MFM* merchandise store sells a travel and traditional mugs with a reference to luminol as well. The mug and travel mug being sold in the *MFM* merchandise store shown in Figure 12 says, “This might be Luminol.” Therefore, “Luminol never lies,” has been repurposed in ways that Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark hadn’t anticipated. Similarly, quotes from *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast* have been repurposed for both artwork and merchandise. See Figure 11 and 12.

Not only has the reception of many True Crime podcasts’ quotes moved beyond the original intention of reporting on a case, but the way



Figure 10: *MFM* fan art on Instagram by @Maddiewiththeglasses.



Figure 11: *MFM* merchandise “This might be Luminol” mugs found on My Favorite Murder website.



Figure 12: *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast* fan art on Instagram by @Emilyrae2015.



Figure 13: *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast* merchandise sweatshirt.



Figure 14: Link to *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast* merchandise sweatshirt.

these podcasts become repurposed facilitates interactions between strangers. The interactions of strangers as True Crime podcasts are listened to and engaged with nationally, internationally and interculturally, are also known as **socialization**. According to ISU Writing, when people engage with a text, they are also consciously and unconsciously representing and transforming different kinds of social or cultural practices. In Figure 15, an artistic rendering of hosts Ashley Flowers and Brit Prawat of *Crime Junkie* includes their popular saying, “Be Weird, Be Rude, Stay Alive!” This saying, often repeated in episodes, has

become a trending hashtag that deconstructs the notion a person must be polite even when feeling uncomfortable. Flowers and Prawat repeatedly claim that it is safer to be weird—like asking the security guard to walk you to your car, and to be rude—like confronting someone who is making you uncomfortable, than to remain silent and adhere to socially constructed politeness. Therefore, their trending hashtag has become an empowering statement for many of their podcast listeners across cultures, especially female identifying persons, to become active defenders of their safety, to stand up for themselves, and to tell others what is making them uncomfortable.

*MFM* also has a trending hashtag, #StaySexyandDon’tGetMurdered. For many listeners, podcasts have connected strangers to virtual support



Figure 15: *Crime Junkie* fan art on Instagram by @Crafty\_creations\_by\_kate\_.

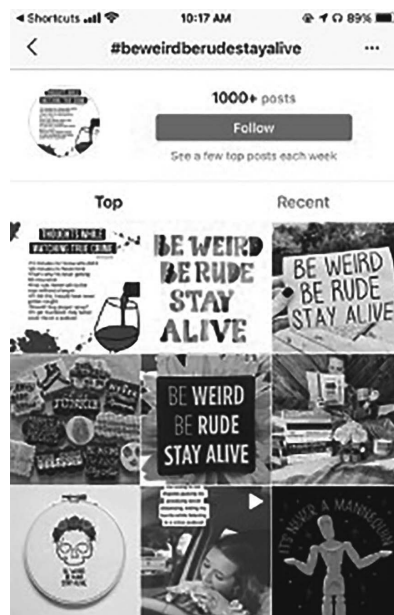


Figure 16: Trending hashtag #BeWeirdBeRudeStayAlive on Instagram.

groups through these hashtags and other purposefully created fan pages, whether that be on Instagram like shown in Figure 6, or the many Facebook groups that have been created. In the article “How a True-Crime Podcast Became a Mental-Health Support Group” in the *Atlantic*, Andrea Marks comments on the fan pages that have been created from *MFJ*. She suggests that since Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark are not shy to discuss their own mental health struggles, their largely female based audience who often refer to themselves as “murderinos,” are exposed to empowering, practical advice about survival and self-care. Listeners like myself, are empowered through hearing about prominent figures’ day-to-day struggles because it normalizes finding professional help, and deconstructs culturally ingrained stereotypes surrounding the statement, “I’m going to see my therapist.” Therefore, listening to a True Crime podcast has become more than an individualized, morbid activity. Instead, listening to the True Crime podcasts have connected me to intercultural communities (like my Podcast Book Club) where we are all empowered by each other to find support, confront, and talk about our anxieties and fears through a healthy outlet.

Not only have virtual support groups appeared using various True Crime podcasts as the common denominator, but in-person interactions with strangers occur through live shows and conferences. There is an annual

True Crime Podcast Festival that gives listeners the opportunity to meet and interact with various podcast production teams and hosts through something called a Podcast Gallery. At the festival, exclusive episodes, panel discussions, and crossover collaborations are shared. Overall, True Crime is socialized quite a bit. Through artistic renderings of podcast material, social media interaction, support groups, and in-person activities listening to a True Crime podcast becomes only one element of being part of a True Crime discourse community, like *MFM* Fan Club. Furthermore, discourse community members who create artwork or comment and post about the podcasts' material, are given opportunities to use social media platforms to interact with and give feedback to the podcasts' hosts. The open communication between hosts and listeners—seen in the above figures—strengthen the identities of those particular True Crime discourse communities because listeners often feel their wishes, fears, and concerns are being addressed. Secondly, merchandise sold can also work to validate and cultivate feelings of belonging to a True Crime discourse community through tangible means, especially if that community is spread across the globe. The cool thing about True Crime discourse communities is that True Crime is used as a means to have productive conversations with others regardless of race, culture, or background.

Now that we've discussed how popular True Crime podcasts are, seeing that there is a large consumer base, a few questions remain. *Why listen to true crime? What do we gain from listening to horrific tales?* **Ecology** from the P-CHAT framework becomes one of the most important factors to consider when thinking of the greater picture of literate activity. Ecology is how environmental, social, or political factors shape our interaction with a text. True Crime podcasts get into intense details of solved, unsolved, and wrongful conviction cases. A few True Crime podcasts even work closely with local law enforcement, or law enforcement supporting nonprofits such as *Crime Junkie*, who work with the Indiana Crime Stoppers. Podcast audiences have become a tangible avenue for police departments across the world to ask for tips, witnesses, or any information for various cases.

Not only is there often a direct call to justice targeted towards listeners, but True Crime podcasts have brought to light through their coverage previously misunderstood mental illnesses and disorders. When discussing these details, podcasts act as a tool that often sheds light on inequalities within the United States and abroad, bringing issues of race, religion, disability, and socioeconomic class to the forefront. Therefore, True Crime podcasts have gained traction in making substantial change by critically examining past cases and bringing attention to discrepancies within those investigations. For example, a true crime podcast can call attention to questions of bias,

prosecutorial misconduct, circumstantial evidence, or the criminal justice process.

These types of conversations started within a podcast are a form of **civic engagement**, which is how individuals or a group can address issues of public concern to change existing social or political policy. True Crime podcasts can function as a tool that deepens their listeners' awareness of oppressive systems at work within our societies. For example, episodes can cover current or past cases that didn't receive the media coverage it deserved because of race, class, or disability status. The disproportionate amount of national and local media coverage of cases dealing with white upper-middle-class persons is known as white privilege journalism.

A prominent example of aboriginal families not receiving the media coverage they deserved because of their ethnic background would be the disappearances and murders of mostly indigenous women or girls that have occurred along Highway 16, otherwise known as the Highway of Tears. According to Canadian statistics, aboriginal women and girls make up only 4% of the total female population, however, aboriginal women and girls account for around 16% of all female homicides (Levin). To this day, most cases remain unsolved, as Indigenous families cite racial bias and frustrating encounters with law enforcement that didn't take their pleas seriously about their loved ones (Levin).

I, for one, would have never heard of these cases if not for *Crime Junkie's* episode detailing these cases. The attention garnered for the Highway of Tears through familial efforts and podcasts has created enough public outcry in multiple cultures and communities for the provincial government to improve safety along the highway, such as funding traffic cameras and vehicles for Indigenous communities.



Figure 17: *Crime Junkie* podcast.

## Concluding Thoughts

There is more to True Crime than morbid fascination. The storytelling used within True Crime podcasts is an empowering tool that makes audiences more aware of their surroundings, gives them permission to not be polite when uncomfortable, and not be afraid to seek professional help when needed. Moreover, True Crime podcasts have this empowering effect across cultures, allowing people from all walks of life to connect and share their anxieties, hopes, and fears in order to dismantle stereotypes and deconstruct social or political barriers. Although a lot of work still needs to be done to

help ethnic minority groups, such as Indigenous communities in British Columbia, activism spurred through public awareness is an encouraging first step to address disproportionate access to resources and media coverage for persons of color, persons with disabilities, or persons of lower socioeconomic status nationally and internationally. Listening and telling tough stories can also be an effective and healing practice for listeners to cope with fears and anxieties that stem from real-world situations. The podcast genre may have begun as mere entertainment, however, as time has gone on, this genre has become a way for intercultural communities to voice their concerns in a productive way.

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<https://casefilepodcast.com/>

<https://crimejunkiepodcast.com/>

<https://murderpedia.org/>

<https://crimejunkiepodcast.com/infamous-dexter-killer/>

<https://serialpodcast.org/>

<https://www.hbo.com/the-case-against-adnan-syed>

<https://www.davidkordanskygallery.com/fairs/frieze-los-angeles>

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[www.murderapparel.com/collections/morbid-podcast](http://www.murderapparel.com/collections/morbid-podcast)

<https://crimejunkiepodcast.com/serial-killer-highway-tears/>

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## The Magic of Handwritten Letters: Socialization in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas*

Ellen Sundermeier

In this article, Ellen Sundermeier examines how socialization, one of the elements of cultural-historical activity theory, can be used as a tool to better understand the way shared stories are built through handwritten letters. Sundermeier primarily focuses on letters written by J. R. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings* series) to his children, and also reflects on her own letter writing practices.

For me, almost nothing is more thrilling than the arrival of a handwritten letter: the familiar scrawl of your name and address, the slight wrinkles or tears indicative of the miles traveled, and the satisfying sound of tearing open an envelope to reveal the contents inside. I've been lucky to have a number of dedicated pen pals over the past several years, and I've found that the only thing better than receiving a handwritten letter in the mail is writing one yourself.

Writing letters has become a regular practice of mine, full of repeated patterns and many cups of tea. Earlier this morning (it must be in the morning), I replied to one of these lovely pen pals in order to best document my letter-writing rhythms. I always begin by rereading the most recent letter I received to refresh my memory on the questions asked and on my dear friend's latest news. When it comes to my friend Katie's letters, this normally involves reading several notecards full of her thoughtfulness and humor (Figure 1).

Reading completed, I put on the kettle to make a quick cup of tea as I think through the contents of the letter I'm about to write (life updates,



Figure 1: Katie is a great animal lover, so her notecards almost always include animals of some sort.



Figure 2: My usual letter-writing set-up!

stories about my nephews, what I'm currently reading, etc.) and choose a piece of stationery from my rather extensive collection. People know I love letters, so stationery has become a popular and much-appreciated gift. After adding a splash of milk and a spoonful of sugar to my tea, I sit down with a pen in my hand at the kitchen counter to write (Figure 2).

I have found this to be a soothing and familiar way to start my day for many years, but by far the element I love most about my routine is the lasting connection it has given me to my faraway friends. In the age of instant messages and social media, and despite the incredible convenience of these things, handwritten letters have given us a way to build our relationships much more deeply than status updates or quick texts allow. Over the past several years, I have acquired a documented collection of these friends' lives, full of joys, difficulties, and rituals which we have developed together. My friend Robin and I write the date with the day first, for example, since we met while studying abroad in England (Figure 3).

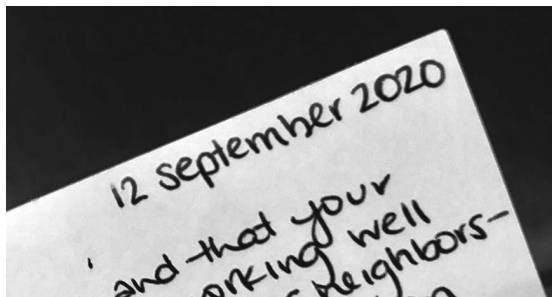


Figure 3: Robin's most recent letter using the British date format.

These letters have not only become a record of our individual histories but a shared history told in our own handwriting and sent to the many homes we've lived in over the years.

## Dear Socialization

Literate activities, like letters, are important, because they give us insight into our own language practices and to the way words and stories connect us to the world. One tool which can be especially useful when exploring literate activity in this way is **cultural-historical activity theory**, or, CHAT. CHAT provides us with several overlapping and delightfully messy concepts that we can use to study writing in all its forms. According to Joyce Walker, CHAT can be useful for, “making a place for the individual writer within a particular framework at a particular time. *This* writer, at *this* particular time and place, trying to learn to write in *this* way, for *these* reasons and hoping for *these* effects” (6). Keeping this usefulness in mind, the ISU Writing Program has developed a version of CHAT that they call P-CHAT (pedagogical-CHAT) that includes a discussion of seven terms, designed to help writers think about the complexity of writing in all its forms. One of the seven terms, **activity**, for instance, refers to all the actions surrounding the creation of a text, much like what was described above in the little rituals and practices I incorporate into my letter writing. When thinking about P-CHAT, handwritten letters are quite special, because they have a specific audience and are influenced by both very small and very large groups of people throughout their creation. The “interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts,” can be described by another P-CHAT term: **socialization** (ISU Writing Program).

To break this down a little, the people on either end of a letter (the sender and the receiver) participate in socialization when they represent cultural and social practices in specific, personal ways through their letters. If I write to Katie about the experience of attending an outdoor concert, for example, I describe a cultural activity through my own lens, which she will then interpret and understand based on her own social and cultural experiences. In addition, both the sender and receiver are influenced, often unconsciously, by the larger communities surrounding them, and these affect the way a letter is both written and read. For instance, if Robin's university community begins to use the word “studenting” in its vernacular, Robin might use this word in her letter to me, even though I understand “studenting” differently based on my own communities. The influence of Robin's community on her vocabulary demonstrates socialization. While P-CHAT terms tend to overlap a good amount, I've found the concept of

socialization particularly interesting as it can be studied at multiple levels of individuals and communities within a single letter. Socialization, when studied deeply, can therefore provide a clearer window into the everyday world of the individuals who write and read handwritten letters.

## **Mysterious, Magical Letters**

When I decided to focus on handwritten letters for this project, I began to research the letter collections of some of my all-time favorite authors. As you might imagine, these are much more difficult to find for contemporary authors since letter writing has been overtaken, in many ways, by the numerous, more immediate forms of communication which technology now allows. Jumping back just a century though, I discovered a collection of letters J. R. R. Tolkien (best known for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series) had written to his four children as Father Christmas. That's right—when the Tolkien children sent their Christmas letters to Santa Claus, they actually received letters in return. What a dad! The first letter was written in 1920, when the Tolkiens' eldest son John was just three years old, and they continued until 1943 when Father Christmas supposed that their youngest daughter, Priscilla, was old enough that she would be hanging up her stocking just once more (Tolkien 110). The letters are written in Father Christmas' tall and shaky handwriting and are often accompanied by beautiful illustrations of his home at the North Pole and his many quirky friends. Over the years, the children also receive some letters from Father Christmas' companions, most often the North Polar Bear who provides small, often snarky margin notes in the Father Christmas letters before he ventures into letter writing himself. The collection's introduction tells us that the letters' arrival at the Tolkien household were filled with magical intrigue: "Sometimes the envelopes, dusted with snow and bearing Polar postage stamps, were found in the house on the morning after his visit; sometimes the postman brought them; and the letters that the children wrote themselves vanished from the fireplace when no one was about" (5).

The mysterious activity surrounding the letters no doubt created numerous stories for the Tolkien children to treasure; stories only overshadowed by the contents of the letters themselves as Tolkien describes the many adventures had in the North Pole from 1920–1943. Tolkien's Father Christmas is very old and sometimes cranky. He is attentive to the Tolkien children's wishes, wears a red hat and coat trimmed in fur (still the most common attire for this figure in Britain and America today), and is also, as we learn, a strong military leader when it comes to attacks on the North

Pole (more on this to come). The Father Christmas in the letters is uniquely Tolkien's, while still containing many features traditional to the Father Christmas of the period. By taking a closer look at Tolkien's Father Christmas, we can see the effects of socialization both within the larger communities of twentieth century Britain and within the Tolkien family. Before moving on to the rest of this article, I want to take a moment to introduce one more key term, which we'll use to describe these communities: **activity systems**. Activity systems are "cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal"; they are historically developed, inherently social, dialogic, collective, and are constantly changing (ISU Writing Program). So, in the Tolkien letters, we'll be discussing activity systems at multiple levels that operated around J. R. R. Tolkien at the time the letters were written.

## So You Think You Know Father Christmas

In my mind, Father Christmas (or Santa Claus as he is more commonly called in the US) has a timeless quality to him, so I would not be at all surprised if essentially the same Santas we see in our malls today were seen shimmying down the chimneys of medieval children's homes. And, in fact, the origins of Father Christmas do date back hundreds of years. Many have argued for Pagan origins, most often because of the figure's resemblance to the Roman god Saturn and the Norse god Odin, and others make connections to the Christian Saint Nicholas who was born over seventeen hundred years ago in what is now Turkey (Crichton 16–26). To get some context for the Santa of Tolkien's society though, we must jump to about the seventeenth or eighteenth century when Father Christmas came into being in Britain with some connections to Saturnalia, the Roman festival of Saturn, celebrated each December. Because of this link, Father Christmas was, at this time, presented as a sort of Lord of Misrule as seen in Figure 4. He was often depicted with an impish grin and a drink in his hand or, on the flip side, as an ancient and gaunt Father Time-type figure (Golby and Purdue 71).



Figure 4: An 1847 depiction of a Saturnalian Father Christmas.

Around the 1870s, the British Father Christmas began to adapt toward an image much closer to the current depiction we see in contemporary society. This was due in part to Thomas Nast's cartoon depiction of Santa Claus in *Harper's Weekly*, beginning in 1863 during the American Civil War. Unlike the previous Father Christmas who wore green (who knew?), Nast's Santa wore red and sported a round belly and rosy cheeks. Around this time, Father Christmas also meshed with other traditional Christmas figures in Europe and America to begin sliding down chimneys and putting gifts in stockings (Simpson and Roud 120).

By the time Tolkien was writing his letters, Father Christmas had begun appearing within many of the activity systems in British society. He could often be seen as the mascot of charitable organizations for those wishing to fundraise during the holiday season with reminders like, "Ethiopian children will be without Santa this Christmas" (Golby and Purdue 88). Commercial industries also took full advantage of the Father Christmas figure during this time as he appeared in everything from greeting cards to alcohol advertisements. The 1920s also began Father Christmas's reign in department stores, giving children the chance to share their wish lists with the holiday figure within easy walking distance of all the toys and goodies they desired. During World War II, Harrod's Father Christmas also became an agent of war safety as he walked around sporting a tin hat in place of his red cap (Golby and Purdue 130). This brief history gives us some understanding of how the activity systems within British society embraced Father Christmas during the time of the Tolkien letters.

The many Santas I have mentioned are especially interesting in the way they illustrate a point about genres. Using the definition of the ISU Writing Program, Father Christmas himself serves as a genre because he is a production that we can easily identify based on certain conventions or features that allow us to recognize him. So, while Father Christmas has some characteristics that remain consistent in almost every depiction (a white beard, for example), each representation of Father Christmas is connected to its time in history, as well as to the particular ways people are using him. This is a great example of how all genres work, in that they are not stable—they change over time—and the changes are all bound up in the ways people use genres to do things in the world. Within different activity systems, people will use a genre differently, depending on what they want to do, the ideas they want to share, or the people they want to reach. Take a look back through the Santas I discussed above, and you'll notice that each activity system adapted the *genre* of Father Christmas to suit their own unique needs.



## A Conversation with Father Christmas

So how did the Tolkien family create their own understanding of the Father Christmas figure that was original to them? I define the entire Tolkien family as an activity system here because, although J. R. R. Tolkien actually composed the letters, a reading of them will show that his children contributed to them in many ways through socialization!

One simple way to see evidence of socialization is that the Father Christmas letters often respond directly to letters written to Santa by the Tolkien children: John, Michael, Christopher, and Priscilla. The way a text is “taken up and used by others” can be described by another P-CHAT term: **reception** (ISU Writing Program). Reception is not just who will read a text but also considers the ways people might use, respond to, or repurpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended). In this case, Tolkien’s reception of the letters his children wrote to Father Christmas can be seen in his references to their news and questions. In his 1928 letter, for instance, he begins, “I am another year older—and so are you. I feel quite well all the same—very nice of Michael to ask—and not quite so shaky” (24), and in 1930 he notes, “Father Christmas has got all your letters! What a lot, especially from Christopher and Michael! Thank you, and also Reddy and your bears, and other animals” (36), referring to their toys.

He also often references their Christmas lists and explains how he has tried to fulfill their wishes. “Well, my dears,” he says in 1928, “I hope you will like the things I am bringing: nearly all you asked for and lots of other little things you didn’t, and which I thought of at the last minute” (26). We learn that the Tolkien children often sent more than one Christmas list to the North Pole from this 1933 letter from the beginning of December: “I have had a good many letters from you. Thank you. I have made notes of what you want so far, but I expect I shall hear more from you yet . . .” (60).

The above examples illustrate how the interactions or socialization between Tolkien and his children have shaped the responses J. R. R. writes as Father Christmas. Together, they create a conversation between Father Christmas and the family with inside information (such as the references to the Tolkien’s toys) and replies that make it clear that Father Christmas has indeed read their letters: “If you think we have not read them” he says in 1931, “you are wrong” (42).

## A Tolkien Father Christmas

Perhaps what makes the Father Christmas of the letters most unique is the stories which, if I can be so bold as to use this term, are quite distinctly “Tolkien-esque.” Those who have read *The Lord of the Rings* books will notice many similarities between the two including battles with goblins, helpful elves, lengthy poems, invented languages, and old men (Father Christmas and Gandalf) who are experts at fireworks. Though the Father Christmas in the letters is quite elderly and shaky and “gets worried when funny things happen” (16), he, like Gandalf, is also quite the military leader when it comes to defending the North Pole. The letters include mention of Father Christmas, “blow(ing) my golden trumpet (which I have not done for many years) to summon all my friends” (62) and a comment from the Polar Bear noting that, “you have no idea what the old man can do! Lightening and fireworks and thunder of guns!” (62).

But what does this feisty, Gandalf-y Father Christmas have to do with socialization within the Tolkien family, you ask? Well, quite a lot! As it turns out J. R. R. Tolkien wrote both the Father Christmas Letters and *The Lord of the Rings* with his children in mind. Referring to *The Lord of the Rings* in a 1968 interview, Tolkien says, “I read to the two elder ones who took a kindly, and on the whole, favorable interest in it” (“Interview with J. R. R. Tolkien in 1968”). Tolkien clearly had his children’s particular interests in mind when he crafted his Father Christmas character, as is evidenced by its similarities to *The Lord of the Rings*, so that his Santa became a figure that they as individuals would enjoy. This is a perfect demonstration of socialization as it illustrates the way people outside the creator of a text can influence the way it is constructed. If Tolkien had not been writing with his children in mind in each of these letters and in *The Lord of the Rings*, we may not have ended up with J. R. R. Tolkien’s unique storytelling style and the exciting and magical tales thus produced—socialization in action!

## All Children Grow Up

When I described this collection of letters to a friend and explained that they were written over the course of twenty-three years, they responded, “So . . . didn’t the kids know their dad was the one writing the letters, not Father Christmas?” The short answer to this is yes, eventually. One by one, the children outgrow the Father Christmas traditions, which is another way socialization can be seen in the letters: when read chronologically, they provide a timeline of the children’s growth and some insight into other events happening in the Tolkien family. In 1931, for example, Father Christmas

(Tolkien) explains: “I am expecting that John, although he is now over 14, will hang up his stocking this last time; but I don’t forget people even when they are past stocking-age, not until they forget me. So I send LOVE to you ALL, and especially little PM, who is beginning her stocking-days and I hope they will be happy” (44).

Evidence of their growth is included in statements like: “Love to Chris: love to Michael: love to John who must be getting very big as he doesn’t write to me anymore . . .” (26), and “I’m especially pleased with Christopher’s card, and his letters, and with his learning to write so I am sending him a fountain pen . . .” (35). We also have allusions to family hardships such as on Christmas 1938 when the letter includes a note that “we have all been very sorry to hear about Christopher. I hope he is better and will have a jolly Christmas” (88).

Tolkien’s concluding letter in 1943 leaves us with a sweet farewell message for Priscilla, the last to outgrow the letters, as she hangs up her stocking for what Tolkien assumes will be the final time: “After this I shall have to say “goodbye,” more or less . . . we always keep the old numbers of our old friends, and their letters; and later on we hope to come back when they are grown up and have houses of their own and children” (110). I found it so endearing that Tolkien references keeping the children’s letters in his closing note. Socialization, I think, brings a deeper value to this collection of letters as they provide us with a unique lens through which to view the lives and stories of the Tolkien family.

## Sincerely

As we have seen, approaching handwritten letters using a P-CHAT perspective allows for a clearer understanding of how letter writers and readers build shared stories through this literate activity. Because of socialization, we now have an inside glimpse into the joys, hardships, likes, and dislikes of the Tolkien children through the stories in the letters. J. R. R. Tolkien’s elderly yet surprisingly gritty depiction of Father Christmas has given us a mini history of the Tolkien family a full century after the letters were written.

As a fairly sentimental person, I have also kept all the letters I’ve been sent over the years by my dedicated pen pals. Over time, writing has allowed us to develop our relationships through scribbled words, stationery suited to our personalities or chosen with the recipient in mind, and updates somewhat slower than the pace of life. Socialization is evident in my own collection



**Figure 5:** A smattering of the lovely letters I have saved.

of letters, as inside jokes are developed and stories are shared in particular ways based on the contents of the previous letters—more deeply here, with reference to a shared hardship there. This project has made me feel lucky to have a record of the specific patterns and history I share with each of these friends, beautifully tangible thanks to the genre of handwritten letters.

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# “What Are These Fuckin’ Iguanas Doing On My Coffee Table?”<sup>1</sup>: Nicolas Cage as Genre

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Jonathan Blake Foster

What is (a/the) Nicolas Cage (movie/genre)? In this article, Foster uses a genre analysis to explore the topic of Nicolas Cage the actor, and Nicolas Cage the genre.

Like most Virgos, I spend a lot of time thinking about Nicolas Cage. I don’t know if this makes me a Nicolas Cage expert, but regardless of competence, I think a lot about Nicolas Cage. Well, OK, maybe not Nicolas Cage, exactly. It’s something more like “Nicolas Cage” or Nicolas Cage™. It’s a/the version of Nicolas Cage that is public facing, or more public than that even. It’s the Nicolas Cage that is *only* ever in public. It’s a/the version of Nicolas Cage that isn’t necessarily even all that connected to a fifty-six-year-old guy named Nicolas Cage anymore. It’s still a sort of object, but it’s not for sure an object made of materials. It doesn’t have a body, doesn’t have an age, doesn’t feel things, or think things at all. It’s not an image exactly; it doesn’t live in any particular location or in any particular movie; this/that version of Nicolas Cage is always moving because new things are always being made, new things or examples or products of the **genre**. By “genre” all I mean is that Nic Cage is a thing in the world that I can recognize; I know a Nic Cage movie when I see it, even if I’ve never seen *this* specific Nic Cage movie

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1. *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call, New Orleans*. USA, 2009.

before. In other words, this Nic Cage genre is always evolving into a new Nic Cage genre, *and at the exact same time* it still keeps being the same, recognizably “Nic Cage” genre. It’s a weird idea and I think about it too much. I guess maybe I think a lot about the idea of Nicolas Cage; Nicolas Cage as an artifact frozen temporarily in the ice for the space aliens to one day thaw and learn all about our trashy ancient civilization. I spend a lot of time asking things like, why do I think so much about Nic Cage? Or, what even is Nic Cage exactly?

I’ve never met Nic Cage, if you hadn’t already guessed. I thought I saw him at a Dunkin’ once, but nobody believes me, so I’ve stopped bringing it up. I’m not talking about Nic Cage. I don’t have much of an interest in him to be honest. I’m sure he’s a nice person and everything, but so what. I guess I just have no opinion one way or another regarding a person called Nic Cage. I don’t think many people do, unless maybe they know Nic Cage or they are Nic Cage. I’m not trying to hurt his feelings; I am just for sure am not going to write an essay about some man I don’t know. To be a little clearer: if Nic Cage is the person, the actor, then Nicolas Cage™ is the cultural idea that has only a see-through dotted line connection to that person. Nicolas Cage™ is maybe a sort of genre all to itself.

But just saying something is sort of a thing doesn’t feel like it proves that it is for real a thing. I really want it to be a thing; it totally *feels* like a thing; but does that make it a thing? To answer, I suppose I could dig for some evidence, do some research, or archeology, something I can actually brush some sand off of. The genre after all has to make itself (or be made) into some sort of object in order for me to be able to interact with it at all.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Nicolas Cage™ makes itself visible *mostly* through Nicolas Cage Movies™ (from here forward referred to as NCMs). Nicolas Cage™ isn’t only present in the space of the cinema through NCMs. Nicolas Cage™ can be found in a bunch of interviews, memes, T-shirt slogans, TMZ clips, social media posts, anecdotes, entire subreddits, myths, think pieces, and other texts. out in the world. However, it’s probably safe to say that movies are the most consistent form through which the genre is broadcast, and for the sake of all of our sanity, are pretty much the only format I’ll have time to focus on today. Stop me in the hall sometime and we can talk Nic Cage conspiracy theories all day, I promise, but sometimes enough Nic Cage is enough.

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2. Rinard, Brenda, and David Masiel. ““A Set of Shared Expectations’: An Interview with Carolyn Miller.” 6–16.



## “I’ll Be Taking These Huggies and Whatever Cash You Got.”<sup>3</sup>

### *What Exactly Counts as a Nicolas Cage Movie™?*

Nic Cage’s filmography is pretty effing extensive, providing some pretty rich evidence of Nicolas Cage™, or at least “Nicolas Cage,” in the wild. Since 1983, Nic Cage has appeared credited as Nicolas Cage in exactly 107 films, many of which I’d say are NCMs. Not every film Nic Cage has acted in needs to be (or can be) classified as an NCM; only the films that share the traits, conventions, and features that constitute the Nicolas Cage™ genre constitute NCMs. That’s how we all decide a thing’s a thing, right? To define the genre features for Nicolas Cage™, we have to actually look at some NCMs. Genres are sort of always moving in circles in this way, the genre informs the artifact, the artifact informs the world and a million other things in the world, and all of that world stuff informs the genre. NCMs are where we *see* and *hear* the features of Nicolas Cage™. To identify an NCM then, we have to look for specific, recognizable aspects of the filmmaking that immediately let us as the audience understand that we are looking at an NCM. Hiding in those patterns, maybe, are the fuzzy shapes outlining Nicolas Cage™, defining what makes it distinctive from other genres. A genre probably should be different from (all) the other genres in order to be a genre.

To start with, here is a chronological listing of Nicolas Cage’s personal film history, including all of his credited (as Nicolas Cage) onscreen appearances: *Valley Girl*, *Rumble Fish*, *Racing with the Moon*, *the Cotton Club*, *the Boy in Blue*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Raising Arizona*, *Moonstruck*, *Vampire’s Kiss*, *Time to Kill*, *Wild at Heart*, *Fire Birds*, *Zandalee*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Amos & Andrew*, *Red Rock West*, *Deadfall*, *Guarding Tess*, *It Could Happen to You*, *Trapped in Paradise*, *Kiss of Death*, *Leaving Las Vegas* (won an Oscar), *the Rock*, *Con Air*, *Face/Off*, *City of Angels*, *8mm*, *Bringing Out the Dead*, *Gone in 60 Seconds*, *The Family Man*, *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*, *a Christmas Carol*, *Windtalkers*, *Sonny*, *Adaptation.*, *Matchstick Men*, *National Treasure*, *Lord of War*, *The Weather Man*, *The Ant Bully*, *World Trade Center*, *the Wicker Man*, *Ghost Rider*, *Next*, *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*, *Bangkok Dangerous*, *Knowing*, *G-Force*, *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, *Astro Boy*, *Kick-Ass*, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, *Season of the Witch*, *Drive Angry*, *Seeking Justice*, *Trespass*, *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*, *Stolen*, *The Frozen Ground*, *The Croods*, *Joe*, *Rage*, *Outcast*, *Left Behind*, *Dying of the Light*, *the Runner*, *Pay the Ghost*, *the Trust*, *Dog Eat Dog*, *Snowden*, *USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage*, *Army of One*, *Arsenal*, *Vengeance: A Love Story*, *Inconceivable*, *Mom and Dad*, *The Humanity Bureau*, *Dark*, *Mandy*, *Looking Glass*, *211*, *Teen Titans Go!* *To the Movies*, *Between Worlds*, *Spider-*

3. *Raising Arizona*. USA, 1987.

*Man: Into the Spider-Verse, A Score to Settle, Color Out of Space, Running with the Devil, Kill Chain, Primal, and Grand Isle.*<sup>4</sup>

If we can all agree that a physical performance from Nic Cage is a requirement for membership to the NCM set of movies, then we can eliminate anything animated or films in which only his voice appears. We're left with about ninety-five movies, and several more listed as forthcoming. That list drops down in size a little if we only include movies where Nic Cage gets top billing, but especially in the later, more productive years of his career, when he generally has top billing, which ends up being unhelpful. We can maybe narrow down the definition of an NCM even more by including something about the *kind* of performance given by Nic Cage. The problem we run into now is with trying to define the type of performance, even though *I* know exactly what I mean. It is difficult to put it into words even if it is easy to recognize. There are some physical traces I can point us towards, at least. It's in the image I think about a lot; Nicolas Cage wide eyed, head back, teeth showing, looking straight into the camera. It's a flail of his limbs at a moment that absolutely doesn't call for flailing. There's an inappropriateness to every role Nic Cage plays. It's a kick and a scream and smashed glass in response to someone's lunch order. It includes pretty much anything in which Cage gets violent with anything, including himself. Two recentish NCMs in the Nic Cage corpus, *Color Out of Space* and *Mandy*, lean hard on the portrait of Nic Cage in neon light, smiling, streaked with simulated blood. His facial expressions range from something like stoic to something like a Dr. Frankenstein, but with more of a smirky, self-awareness. There's a sense in his performance, and often built into the script(s), that Nic Cage knows he's doing "Nicolas Cage." He understands his own Nicolas Cage™-ness, or participates in his understood role at least.

Yeah, I know, that's unfortunately still not hyper-specific. In researching this thing that you're reading, I've been watching a lot of movies with Nic Cage in them, trying to articulate something more quantifiable, or material within the group of films. The problem is that some of these remaining movies with Nicolas Cage doing all those performative things still do not feel like Nicolas Cage™ movies (NCMs) to me. Anything before *Leaving Las Vegas*, including even *Raising Arizona*, doesn't *feel* like an NCM to me, even though Nic Cage is in many cases the lead actor. But if Nic Cage being in the film isn't enough to gain entry into the Nicolas Cage™ genre, then what else am I seeing that feels so "Nicolas Cage"-y about NCMs?

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4. "Nicolas Cage," IMDb, IMDb.com, [www.imdb.com/name/nm0000115/](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000115/)

“Oh No! Not the Bees! Not the Bees! Ah! Oh! They’re in My Eyes!  
My Eyes! Ah! Ahhhhhh ...”<sup>5</sup>

*What Makes a Thing Feel so Nicolas Cage™-y?*

There have to be other things going on in NCMs, things other than “has Nicolas Cage in them” that define the genre. I guess I could start with what Nicolas Cage *does* in the NCMs, his performance, hyperbolic or “over the top.” This performance goes beyond his physical appearance within the film; sure, it includes stuff like gesture, but it also includes tone, it includes intent and motion and gaze. In some ways, Nicolas Cage has also recognized Nicolas Cage™, and the genre is continually reinforced with his amping up of his own performed energy. It feeds itself. Current Nic Cage interacts with early Nic Cage, multiplying the “Nicolas Cage”-ness. And Nicolas Cage™ gets more Nicolas Cage™-y all the time. For example, his performance in the straight-to-streaming *Primal*, in which he plays a big game hunter whose prized white jaguar gets released on a ship by an international fugitive who also happens to be on the same ship, thereby requiring the character played by Cage to hunt both man and beast (and yes, this is what really happens), is going to be more Nicolas Cage™-y by definition than something older, like *The Rock*, which, by comparison, feels weirdly grounded in reality. The genre becomes more of itself over time. Each time there’s a new example, a movie, a book, a meme, or whatever, the genre is expressed in a more clear, more complete sort of way; it’s more of its own thing, separate from all the other stuff out there in the world. Nicolas Cage’s Nicolas Cage™-ness, moving further and further away from real life, has evolved over the filmography. NCMs build on all the NCMs that came before; the audience’s **antecedent knowledge**—the stuff they’re bringing to the party, the information they’re coming in with, their previous experience(s), the relevant stuff they’ve learned before—grows and complicates itself. Just like right now becomes a moment ago, the stuff you’re learning becomes the stuff you’ve learned, and that stuff changes the next stuff you’ll learn and so on and forever.

There is also the generally unnatural dialogue, movie dialogue that feels exactly like movie dialogue, sometimes so much so as to be unsettling, and the accompanying performance, which, with clear exceptions (*Adaptation.*), seems specifically written intentionally with Nic Cage in mind. A part written for Nic Cage, that therefore only Nic Cage can embody.

5. *The Wicker Man*. USA, 2006.

We can't move forward here without pausing for a moment to seriously consider *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*; arguably/maybe the most concentrated distillation of Nicolas Cage™, besides *The Wicker Man* remake, but I refuse to talk about that movie for personal reasons.

Though *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*' director Werner Herzog is pretty adamant that his film was not in fact a remake or sequel to 1992's original *Bad Lieutenant*, even he admits that the dickish protagonist is carried over from the first into his version. The audience is absolutely invited, maybe even instructed, to compare Nic Cage's detective to Harvey Keitel's. In playing the pseudo-protagonist in the original version, Keitel's performance informs Nic Cage's; remakes almost have built into their form the act of retroactively comparing the remake to the earlier version. Nic Cage is *pushed* by the prior performance to play it even bigger this time around. Remakes in some ways have an impossible goal; they're tasked with capturing something difficult to articulate about another movie. Herzog does not interfere in this process, if anything, he also pushes it even further. He is definitely no stranger to eliciting over-the-top performances from his actors, even the difficult ones—he spent years doing similar work with Klaus Kinski—and those learned skills, those experiences, only add to the level of hyperbole present in the film. I don't think it's unfair to assume Nic Cage was aware of Herzog's prior work. I also don't think it's unfair to assume he was aware that Kinski's style of performance grew from his background in theatre; Nic Cage has some of those same exaggerated instincts, in some ways, this connection between actors, between Cage and Keitel and Cage and Kinski, is essential to understanding the movie. Beneath the surface, Herzog's antecedent understanding of Cage, and Cage's antecedent understanding of Herzog, really allows Cage to sink deep into his "Nicolas Cage"-ness. Herzog, as a rule, permits it; he gives space to that sort of performance. Nic Cage isn't the only person creating the "Nicolas Cage"-y tone; it's always a team effort. I suspect even the backup sound guy is somewhat to blame.

But "being on film" is also not enough to define the entire category, since there are things that feel Nicolas Cage™-y that aren't movies. Any of Nicolas Cage's late-night TV interviews since approximately 2002, for example, although I guess those are still performance based. There are static images and memes featuring Nic Cage that often live outside the world of cinema in digital spaces. These extra-cinema Nic Cage references are, however, dependent on our at least peripheral understanding of a "Nicolas Cage"-ish approach to acting.

“I’m a Vampire! I’m a Vampire! I’m a Vampire!”<sup>6</sup>

*But How is Nicolas Cage™ Different From Other (Super Similar) Genres? Is it?*

If the various aspects of “Nicolas Cage”-ness above provide a start, at least an incomplete set of features, that we can use to attempt to define the genre, then Nicolas Cage™ is probably in some small part located in the stuff on that list. These features and their combination should produce something that is distinctive and easily to recognize. The problem is that they sort of don’t, at least not by themselves, and for sure not all the time. Take, for example unnatural dialogue. Cheesy dialogue can be found in all sorts of genres, like rom-coms and comic books and Shakespeare. Maybe no/most single feature(s), tool(s), technique(s) is/are specific to a single genre.

There’s the extra problem that a lot of the time any of these single features can also be true in their inverse. For example, earlier I said that the performance of Nicolas Cage™ is based in hyperbole, in other words, an over-the-top exaggeration. A few paragraphs later, I also said that his delivery of dialogue is unnatural, often flat, or made of wood or whatever. Both these things probably can’t be true at the same time, and yet both these things are exactly true at the same time, so one thing on its own probably isn’t enough for a definition.

So then let’s take two features of the NCM subgenre, like “cheesy dialogue” and “is violent”; maybe two co-occurring features will be specific enough to attach to only a single genre. That’s unfortunately a lot of things as well, and I get the feeling if we took three or four or five or six things, we’d always be describing more than one genre. So maybe a set of things isn’t all we need to define Nicolas Cage™; but then what else is there? I think the sum is totaling more than the value of the combined parts, or whatever the saying is:  $2+2=5$ . If stuff’s not enough, then what about if all that’s left is what that stuff does: its actions, or its activity.

I mean I’m pretty convinced Nicolas Cage™ *does* something in the world. An image of Nic Cage in a meme does more than make us think “Nicolas Cage” when we see the visual. It brings up all the associations of “Nicolas Cage” held by the viewer; it calls up a history of stuff and ideas and feelings and actions. It does something. I’d call the verb for (per)forming the various affects, feelings, jokes, ideas, cultural signification, history, and film corpus attached to the genre Nicolas Cage™, “Nicolas Cage”-ing. Maybe the problem with trying to define the object—in this case, the genre—is that the object isn’t an object at all. It’s active, a verb; it’s an actor, a subject.

6. *Vampire’s Kiss*. USA, 1989.

Genres do things, or they compel other things to do things, even if they aren't things.

Of course, I'm pretty sure if they do things then they must also be things, and for proof we can look at the things that they do. The problem here isn't that I can't see the thing, the problem is that it's still blurry, no matter how much I fiddle with the focus. Sometimes a blur is a smudge on the lens, but what if maybe, and give me a chance here, the thing we are looking at *is* perfectly in focus. What if the thing is just a blurry thing? And we're seeing a blurry thing in super high definition. It may not be super-duper profound, but I think it's important: sometimes shit's blurry. In many ways, the genre, Nicolas Cage™, it seems, exists mostly or maybe only in my head, even if its IRL examples, NCMs, do in fact exist in the world. But what if, since these movies are really real, the genre also always finds its way into other people's heads. If it's in one head then it's probably in two heads and so on; maybe that's why it's a thing I can recognize in the first place.

**“I Did a Bare Ass 360 Triple Back Flip in Front of Twenty-Two Thousand People. It's Kind of Funny, It's On YouTube. Check It Out!”<sup>7</sup>**

***Ok, But How Can a Genre, Like Nicolas Cage™, Change and Stay the Same at the Exact Same Time?***

In my messy memory, Nicolas Cage™ has always been the same thing, but this obviously isn't true, like at all. The moment a genre hits the brakes and stops in a fixed, unchanging, position, it stops being a genre. It was a genre, and you can now read about it on Wikipedia next to “telegraph” and “poetry.” Like we talked about before, new NCMs are coming out all the time, and each new NCM has an effect. The genre is those changes and the repetition; change plus repetition is maybe called evolution. Every version that comes into the world is a little different; each NCM is a new, different thing; and if that's true, the boundaries of the genre must always also be changing, bit by bit, to fit all the new thingies. What Nicolas Cage™ meant before Nic Cage's most recent film, just can't possibly be the same after his most recent film, because there's a new film. The world has changed with the introduction of a new example of the genre. And Nicolas Cage™ today is not the same as Nicolas Cage™ tomorrow. Anytime anything connected in any way to Nicolas Cage™ comes into being, Nicolas Cage™ has to change to accommodate it.

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7. *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*. USA, 2011.

So, maybe it’s more helpful to think of genres being stable things only temporarily, for a second, just for now, an idea that, I know, I know, totally further complicates things.<sup>8</sup> But then asking “what” a genre is might be the wrong question. Maybe “when” or “how” might get us better, more complete answers. Except even the clear answers don’t appear so clear since it gets difficult to be specific in (permanent) text about something temporary; a high-quality picture of a cloud is still cloudy. But everything doesn’t have crisp lines. Ghosts don’t have any.

One quick last thing . . . Nicolas Cage™ gets its “Nicolas Cage”-ness through repetition, through memes and films and other media, and then more memes and films and other media. Nicolas Cage™ is invented by the repetition of Nic Cage and “Nicolas Cage”-ish shit and NCMs. Maybe genre isn’t a container of stuff, but it’s the repeated social interactions between people and texts and stuff and the world. Genre is in our heads, not in the films; genre might basically be the ways we recognize and change and interact with stuff and each other. Nicolas Cage™ is our collective expectations when we see Nic Cage’s name in the opening credits.<sup>9</sup> So Nicolas Cage™ isn’t necessarily in the NCMs where I was looking for it earlier, but its traces are. Nicolas Cage™’s not even located in Nic Cage himself. But Nicolas Cage™ is housed in my brain and your brain and other people we haven’t met’s brains and so on, and it’s in the way those brains all relate, communicate, understand, interact, and create with each other, changing slowly and/or quickly over time. All that brain stuff is what produces the genres in the world; all that brain stuff makes real stuff. All that brain stuff making all that real stuff can maybe be called literate activity; it’s all the reading and writing and speaking and gesturing and hieroglyphics and everything. But the moral of the story is that literate activity is a mess. And even though it’s a headache, I think I’ll probably learn to live with it, and I’m pretty sure you’ll be okay too. And Nicolas Cage will continue to “Nicolas Cage” his “Nicolas Cage”-ness in a stream of updated versions of Nicolas Cage™ forever and ever and so on and so on, or at least until the sun goes out.

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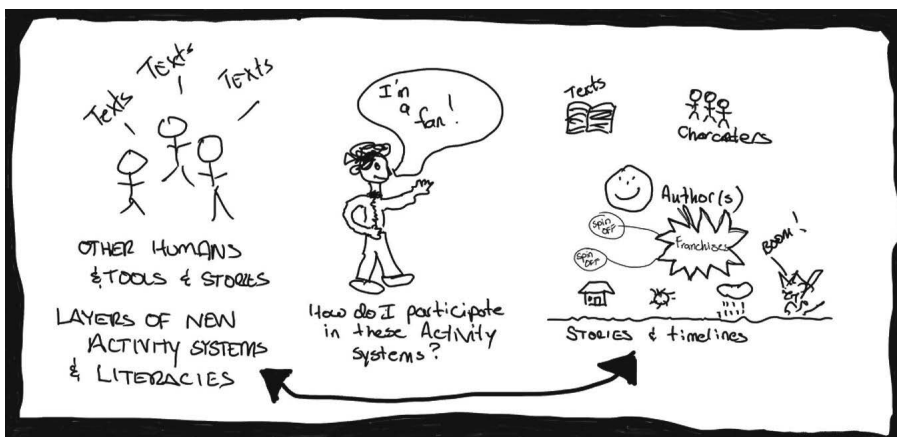
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**Jonathan Blake Fostar** is a big fan of semipro boogie boarding and other sports.



# Notes



## Fan Fiction: Through the Years

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Eleanor Stamer

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In this article, Stamer discusses the history of fan fiction, explores the history of fan-based writing, and its place in the mainstream media today, as well as how it has evolved through other genres.

We all have that one show or book series that we love, but the ending was just horrible and needs to be fixed (looking at you *Game of Thrones*), or maybe you're curious as to what would happen if a character had made a different choice, or maybe you want a continuation of events. That's what fanfiction allows us to do, it allows us to write the story we want and bring our thoughts into the world that we have come to love so much.

I'm sure a lot of you are aware of what fanfiction is. Maybe you've read some, written some, or you know what it is because *Fifty Shades of Grey* was created from fanfiction and became a best seller. But what you might not know is that fanfiction has been around for a long time and because of that fact, fanfiction is also a great vehicle for discussing trajectory.

**Trajectory** is a term the ISU Writing Program uses to help us understand how texts move around the world, how they can move through the production of the work, and even more importantly, how texts move between different spaces and amongst different people (ISU Writing). Fanfiction is a great example of the complicated trajectories that texts can have as the same text is taken up by different people and transformed in

so many ways. Each creator has their own approach to a text which means the trajectory can change from person to person. Now, to understand these trajectories a bit more we need to go through the history of the craft, so hold on as I take you on a journey of fanfiction throughout the years.

## What is Fanfiction?

I know, I said I was going to take you through the history of fanfiction but first I want to establish *what* it is for anyone who may not know, or anyone who just needs a refresher. **Fanfiction** is, as the name suggests, fictional writing created by fans; it can span in detail and length from a few sentences of a short scenario, to an entire novel (remember *Fifty Shades?*). However, many consider fanfiction to be a genre (a product with certain conventions), when really, it's more of an **activity system** because this is a literacy that people can actually engage with. It starts with characters or events from movies, books, TV shows, or even leaving fiction behind being about bands or specific actors. There are genres within fanfiction as people can create "imagines" which are short stories, or there can be longer novels, role-playing games, and even some artwork and animation.

Another thing to consider when defining fanfiction is the idea that fanfiction is created by amateurs and that it's not-for-profit. Fan fiction is typically not-for-profit because of the copyright issues that can, and do, arise, but fanfiction writers have created workarounds for both of these genre characteristics. Some have developed professional reputations out of their work in fanfiction and have found ways to profit from writing that started out in that space.

## Dante and Shakespeare

I probably threw you off a bit with that heading, didn't I? Dante and Shakespeare wrote fanfiction? They did! Or at least a version of it. I feel as though many of us tend to associate fanfiction with more current senses of being published in online formatting and that it mostly came with the age of the Internet, but it started long before that.

Beginning with Dante, he was an Italian poet and philosopher who lived in the Middle Ages. His name might sound familiar if you've ever heard (or were forced to read) *Dante's Inferno*, which is the first part of his larger work, *The Divine Comedy*. You'll see that in *The Divine Comedy*, the main character of the entire story is Dante, the writer himself, and the plot follows him through

the underworld, purgatory, and heaven where he is first led by his literary idol Virgil, and then by the dead love of his life, Beatrice. People he despises and those he admires are included in the various books, where he gave them fates that he thought they deserved, and if all of that doesn't *scream* "self-insert fanfiction" I don't know what does. The YouTube channel, Overly Sarcastic Productions, explores who from Dante's life make appearances in *The Divine Comedy*, so I highly recommend that channel if you are interested in learning more.

Moving on to good old William Shakespeare... You might be a little surprised to hear that a lot of Shakespeare's plays could be considered a form of fanfiction. Now Shakespeare was writing in the time before copyright, so it wasn't uncommon for people to copy characters or even entire plots. Shakespeare is one of those people who would draw on other fictional works as he created *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, and *The Winter's Tale* (Brown, et al). Shakespeare also drew inspiration from historical events, real people, and legends like with *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*. Now before the Shakespeare lovers freak because "Shakespeare wrote fanfiction," keep in mind that he still wrote plenty of original content, and with all the changes he made to some of these stories (like with Richard where he makes him the villain), they are still original. So, you can continue to say that Shakespeare is an important and original creative artist. What this does is help show the trajectory that literature has. There are so many texts throughout history, like with Shakespeare's works, that are connected to the themes and characters that have been taken up and mediated by others.

### *Powers of Darkness*

Now this example of fanfiction is one that I recently discovered, and maybe you heard about it from this tweet that showed up (Figure 1).

This story is the Icelandic version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The Icelandic story is entitled *Makt Myrkranna* (Powers of Darkness) and it was "translated" a few years after *Dracula* was published in 1897. The book was translated by Valdimar Ásmundsson, and under his direction it diverged significantly. Scholars knew that the text existed, but what they didn't know was that it was actually a whole separate story. An article from *Smithsonian Magazine* says



Figure 1: Tweet discussing *Powers of Darkness*.

that Hans Corneel de Roos (a Dutch author and historian) was working through the translation and saw that,

... patterns emerged: many of the characters had different names, the text was shorter and had a different structure, and it was markedly sexier than the English version ... “*Dracula* received positive reviews in most newspapers of the day ... the original novel can be tedious and meandering ... *Powers of Darkness*, by contrast, is written in a concise, punchy style; each scene adds to the progress of the plot.” (Eschner)

There is still a lot of mystery surrounding this version of *Dracula* and scholars are still exploring its origins.

## From the 19th to the 20th Century

Moving forward to the 1960s, we are getting closer to the incarnation of fanfiction that many of us are familiar with. But before we get there, we arrive at a time where the fandom interaction was popularized and really defined by the *Star Trek* craze. How did they participate in these fandom interactions? They did this through **fanzines**, which are a kind of magazine created by fans for fans. The first *Star Trek* fanzine was *Spockanalia* (1967) and it contained some fanfiction. After *Spockanalia*'s success, there were many other fanzines that followed suit (Verba 1). These fanzines would be sold at conventions or mailed to fans as a way to help spread and share the love of *Star Trek* with other fans. But this wasn't the end of fanfiction for the *Star Trek* fandom.

In the early 1980s, a publication of *Star Trek* books was started under a subsidiary of Simon & Schuster called Pocket Books. These books are not written by Gene Roddenberry, the original creator of the *Star Trek* series, but they were written by fans who wanted to add content in order to create more explanation for character backgrounds or to continue the adventure. Now, these fan authors couldn't do *whatever* they wanted with the characters. Pocket's novels are required to be consistent with the on-screen canon, and CBS Consumer Products approved the outlines and manuscripts of each novel (“Pocket Books”). The books also aren't allowed to make major character changes, like killing off a character or giving them a promotion that they don't have within the canon. However, they are allowed to give explanations for how, when, why some of these events take place. Once the television series ended though, there was more room for creative liberties to be taken, and Pocket has published ninety-seven novels that follow this formatting (Wikipedia) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A few of the books that have been published under Pocket Books.

### *Fifty Shades, After, and Wattpad*

Finally, we have arrived in the present day, where we find our more common iteration of fanfiction. The Internet made fanfiction more widely known as a genre that is able to spread across the world in an accessible way. It is at this point that we can bring in the term transmedia when discussing fanfiction. **Transmedia** is, “a narrative that extends beyond multiple media forms that also plays to the strength of those forms” (Heick). This explains how it is an activity system as it can be interactive, and it offers opportunities for crowdsourcing (Heick). While the *Star Trek* novels did have this opportunity for crowdsourcing as fans were writing the stories, online fanfiction is able to do this in a much easier way. There are many fanfiction writers who, when they feel like they are running out of ideas to move the plot forward, will ask their readers to suggest ideas and share inspiration. There is a much faster response time and feedback through internet comments than we had with print publication. Here, fellow fans can influence the story as it is being written, which plays into transmedia as this allows quick improvement and fan approval.

This idea of transmedia explains the different ways that fanfiction has evolved past simple text. Fanfiction also functions in the form of role-playing games and chat rooms, artwork or animations, and even small movie projects and TikTok skits. Each of these different forms brings something new to the original text and can heighten the other genres as they may interact with each other.

Transmedia and trajectory also played huge roles in the creation of the E L James novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* started off as a *Twilight* fanfiction called *Master of the Universe*. James wrote this story on the web under the name Snowqueens Icedragon, and for the most part the two stories are very similar save the name changes for Edward and Bella to Christian and Anastasia—this was changed for pulling-to-publish reasons, which just means that any recognizable elements like character names or city names were changed to avoid copyright laws (Eakin). This story was picked up by publishers who saw the success of it in the digital realm and chose to bring it to print.

A similar situation happened with Anna Todd's fanfiction on Wattpad called *After* which is about the boyband One Direction. In 2014 she received a book and movie deal with the changed names of characters. The book was published in 2014 and the movie *After* was released in 2019 with a sequel, *After We Collided* in 2020. The plot follows the story of Tessa and Harry (Hardin in the published version), and many have described the plot as very close to *Fifty Shades*, though it does not have the S&M aspect, just the roller coaster ride of their relationship (Fleming). Wattpad and other fanfiction sites like *Fanfiction.net*, *Quotev*, *Archive of Our Own*, and others have garnered these huge readerships. The former general manager of Wattpad, Candace Factor, has discussed the huge built-in fanbase that the book and movie had thanks to Wattpad readers, and how they expect to see more blockbusters and bestsellers coming from their platform.

### **Where Does This Leave Us? What is the Future?**

If Candace Factor's words are true, I think that we will start seeing more and more fanfiction writers stepping into the greater literary world and becoming professionals who make a profit from their writing. Fanfiction websites have allowed the genre to grow and expand even further than before. The path was formed and paved by many fanfiction writers, and now hopefully we can see more of these authors being acknowledged for their amazing writing. If you've disliked fanfiction, or thought it to be childish, hopefully this has given you pause, and maybe even a reason to give it another try. Not all fanfictions are the same, and some of them might really surprise you. If you do decide you want to give fanfiction a try, I suggest starting with *fanfiction.net* or Wattpad, but don't be afraid to find other sites and other vehicles of fanfiction besides the written kind. Happy reading!



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**Eleanor Stamer** graduated in May 2021 from ISU; she was in the publishing studies sequence and was one of the editor interns for the *GWRJ*. When she isn't reading or writing her own fanfiction, she's probably watching Netflix or reliving her One Direction phase.

## Tools Add Agency in *Mario* 3D Platforms: How F.L.U.D.D. Engages in Activity Theory in *Super Mario Sunshine*

Edcel Javier Cintron Gonzalez

Tools can do things without humans? In this *Grassroots* article, Edcel Cintron is examining the video game *Super Mario Sunshine* where he will explore how F.L.U.D.D., as a tool, adds to Mario's game mechanics. Material rhetoric and activity theory is used to explain how Mario's tools changes his gameplay in *Super Mario Sunshine* compared to other 3D *Mario* platformers.

“Dear Mario: Please come to the castle. I’ve baked a cake for you.  
Yours truly . . . Princess Toadstool” (*Super Mario 64*).

I was born in 1992, which labels me as a “’90s baby.” The ’90s represent a huge shift within American popular culture and the evolution of the videogame industry. I remember how these changes influenced my childhood. During Saturday morning cartoons I would see *Pokémon*, *Digimon*, and my favorite show of all time, *The Super Mario Brothers Super Show*. Many hours of my childhood involved watching Mario and his brother Luigi go on adventures to save Princess Peach, and help her solve problems created by the evil Bowser within the Mushroom Kingdom. The series encouraged me to start playing the *Mario* franchise games. My first *Mario* game was *Super Mario Bros.* for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES).

*Super Mario Bros.* was my first platform game, where you play as a pixelated Mario who has to jump through multiple obstacles and onto enemies, use power-ups (in-game items that temporarily add extra abilities or powers to the player), and repeatedly defeat Bowser until you find and save Princess Peach. When the *Mario* games moved towards more 3D platformer gameplay

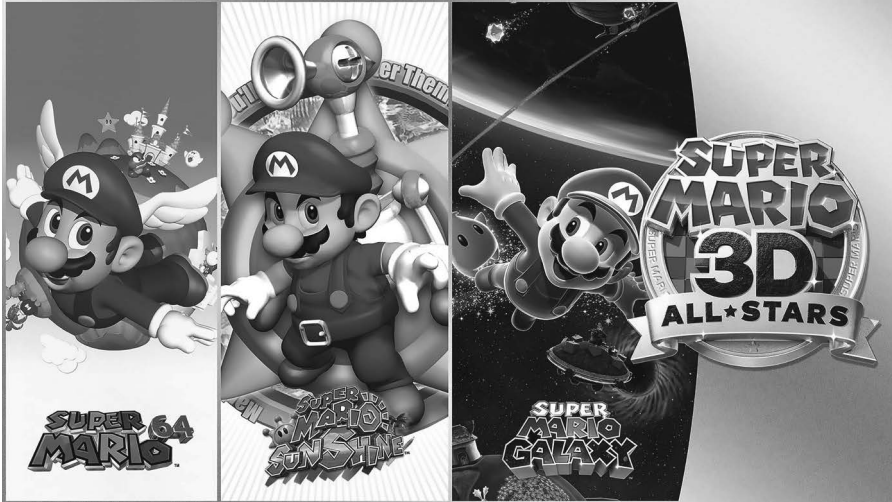


Figure 1: Cover art for *Super Mario 3D All Stars* for the Nintendo Switch

(Figure 1), the franchise evolved into games where the player is free to explore an environment without the worry of passing a stage or level within a time limit. Therefore, games such as *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 64), *Super Mario Sunshine* (GameCube), *Super Mario Galaxy* (Wii), and of course *Super Mario Odyssey* (Nintendo Switch), expanded my interest in video games.

**Agency:** using Abate's perspective on agency, this is the social action when a character uses their own voice and autonomy to call out moments of injustice oppression, and fight against pre-determined structures of power. However, **agency** looks different for tools (non-living agents) because in part, tools are co-actors with the characters and their agency is dependent, in some ways, on whether the character uses them for good or ill.

**Autonomy:** In this article, I'm using the term **personal autonomy**, which is when a character is in a state of self-directing freedom and especially moral independence.

I was always fascinated with the types of **tools** characters would use to get through the different challenges within the video game environment. Tools themselves are made with a purpose, but this doesn't mean that the tool itself is inherently good or bad. Depending how the character uses their **agency** and **autonomy**, video game characters use tools to help them on their journey. Usually, this occurs in a positive way in regard to tool-usage. However, this can also be seen in a negative way depending on the video game mechanics and genre. With my **antecedent knowledge** (which is my prior knowledge of a topic) of the video games that I've played in my lifetime, I can see that the *Mario* franchise represents how tools are taken up differently by the agentic nature of Mario and the other characters within the franchise. Now, with the recent release of *Super Mario 3D All-Stars*

for the Nintendo Switch, I went back to play and reminisce about my favorite games. Playing these games as an adult, I wanted to explore them with a focus on how differently Mario handles the game environment, and how independent Mario is when it comes to using tools. Unlike other popular Nintendo characters, such as Link who uses his iconic sword and shield and his many in-game items, Samus with her power suit and arm cannon, or Kirby with the ability to inhale enemies and attain their powers (including their knowledge to use certain in game weapons and items), Mario stands out by not heavily relying on tools to save the day. However, this was all changed when Mario and his F.L.U.D.D. tool were introduced in *Super Mario Sunshine*.

### A Tropical Paradise: What Is *Super Mario Sunshine*?

*Super Mario Sunshine* is the second 3D platformer in the *Super Mario* series. This game was published back in 2002 for the GameCube gaming system, and most recently the game became available in 2020 with the release of *Super Mario 3D All-Stars* for the Nintendo Switch. Unlike traditional *Mario* games where the player saves Princess Peach and the Mushroom Kingdom, *Super Mario Sunshine* takes place in the beautiful tropical paradise of the Isle Delfino. Mario, Princess Peach, Toadsworth, and a few Toads travel to Isle Delfino in hopes of a relaxing vacation. Unfortunately, as soon as their plane landed they found the airport and the Isle Delfino polluted with a gunky slime-like substance (which the in-game characters also refer to as icky, paint-like goo), as well as plastered with graffiti. As Mario explores the airport, he discovers a tool called F.L.U.D.D., which stands for the Flash Liquidizer Ultra Dousing Device. F.L.U.D.D. is a water cannon that Mario wears like a backpack. With this tool, Mario is able to clean the paint-like goo that is polluting all the areas within Isle Delfino and collect Shine Sprites, which are the source of energy and sunshine on the island. Without Shine Sprites, Isle Delfino has no solar energy because a giant shadow is blanketing the island. Mario also uses F.L.U.D.D. to attack his enemies (Figure 2), move from platform to platform, slide, and perform other actions Mario would not be able to do by himself, without the use of a tool.

When Mario finds F.L.U.D.D. (Figure 3), the player has a moment to learn about the added game mechanics in *Super Mario Sunshine*. With F.L.U.D.D., Mario is able to shoot a powerful stream of water towards the enemies by pressing the R button. Then, the player can use the L button in conjunction with the R button to aim the stream of water. F.L.U.D.D. also has different parts, called nozzles. These are add-ons where Mario is able to use F.L.U.D.D. in other ways to move around the Isle Delfino. For example, by pressing the X button, F.L.U.D.D. can change from the squirt nozzle to



Figure 2: Mario using F.L.U.D.D. to attack Shadow Mario.

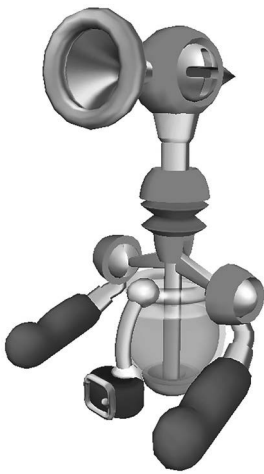


Figure 3: Full picture of F.L.U.D.D.

the hover nozzle which allows Mario to hover in the air for a short time, a rocket nozzle that is used to blast high in the air to reach difficult locations; and a turbo nozzle, which allows Mario to move quickly in the water and on land. One main setback to using F.L.U.D.D. is that it depends on a water tank to function. This means the player is always on the lookout to make sure F.L.U.D.D.'s water tank is full.

Using F.L.U.D.D., Mario is able to defeat an array of enemies composed of the same paint-like pollution that is damaging the weather and environment of Isle Delfino. Figure 4 shows how Mario and F.L.U.U.D. are battling against Phantamanta. Phantamanta is one of few unique bosses in *Super Mario Sunshine* since it only appears in the first episode of "Sirena Beach," one of many levels in the game. Similarly, to most slime and goo creatures in the game, Phantamanta produces electric slime that shocks you when you touch it, and makes the environment and landscape disappear by drowning it in goo. This is the reason why Hotel Delfino disappeared and why Mario needs to clean the environment using F.L.U.D.D. The enemies and the paint-like goo cause environmental damage to the different sections of the island. This pollution can eliminate trees and wildlife, and absorbs people inside it as if it were quicksand. The main antagonist causing this pollution is a shadow figure that looks an awful lot like Mario! He possesses a large paintbrush that is being used to damage the island and its inhabitants. With the combined efforts of F.L.U.D.D. and Mario, this duo works together to restore the environment and solar energy to Isle Delfino.

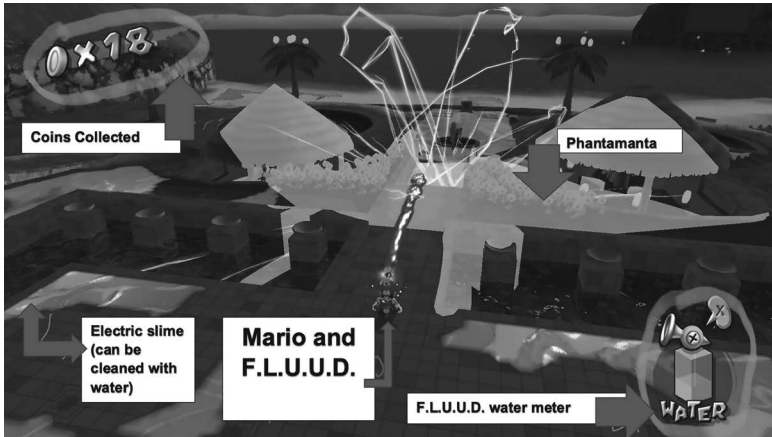


Figure 4: A modified screenshot of *Super Mario Sunshine* gameplay. Arrows and text added.

## Tools Have Their Own Agency? A Brief Discussion on Material Rhetoric

In the introduction of *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, Barnett and Boyle explain how in current rhetoric research, scholars from different disciplines across the humanities and social sciences are drawn to the idea of how nonhuman objects have the ability to create their own action in the world. I know, right? When I first asked myself the question of whether objects can have their own agency, I pondered how an object could create its own action with or without human interaction. Let me explain this further by sharing my frustrations with my Mom’s Roomba, which she named “Robotina” (Figure 5) which is “Rosey” in the Spanish version of *The Jetsons*. Roombas are built to vacuum your home, so us humans don’t have to invest time using a vacuum cleaner. The neat feature of a Roomba is that with a press of a button, you activate the tool and it goes in search of dust and dirt around your house. However, the Roomba itself decides its cleaning trajectory. This means that the Roomba, or in this case “Robotina,” chooses which areas to clean first and then where to go next.

**Material Rhetoric** is when a physical object in the world (perhaps a memorial site, a speech, signs, or even words on paper) has both a physical presence and a rhetorical meaning in the world is released to the public and is no longer in the rhetor’s control.



Figure 5: Robotina sleeping on her charging dock.

However, when I start thinking about objects as **tools** that are created for a specific purpose, and how different people find a new use for the same tools, then here is where “[tools] provoke thought, incite feeling, circulate affects, and arouse in us a sense of wonder” (Barnett & Boyle 1). The fascinating thing about material rhetoric is that scholars acknowledge that tools do things by themselves, and discuss how tools can take up a new meaning and use by how other people engage with them. Therefore, when thinking about tools in a material rhetoric perspective, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Can a person define a tool and therefore give the tool agency?
2. Can the tool have its own agency?
3. Can other people give a new type of agency and use to the tool in a different way once it is accessible to the public?

These are the types of questions that we engage with when we are thinking about both tools and agency. These questions can also be adapted and modified depending on the environment the tool is interacting with and how the tool is being used by the person. Therefore, the tool can both have a level of agency, while also add or take away agency from a person depending how the person interacts with and uses the tool.

To take a step back, let me first talk about agency. **Agency**, as used in children’s and young adult’s literature, is how a fictional character goes through life changing experiences when the story provides a call to action, and they find their own voice and autonomy. Usually, you will find characters who participate in different acts of agency depending on the situation they are facing and their social-cultural environment. For example, Howard and Ryan’s article titled “Black Tween Girls with Black Girl Power: Reading Models of Agency in Rita Williams-Garcia’s *One Crazy Summer*” explains how young children can be trapped in space where even though they are still children, they have no choice but to become agentic characters and take action to challenge oppressive circumstances. In *One Crazy Summer*, Delphine has to negotiate different types of identity and agency as a way to take care of her younger sisters by cleaning, cooking, and even going without an adult to the supermarket to buy healthier foods for herself and her sisters.

With *Super Mario Sunshine*, players experience two types of agency. We see an example of **character agency** when Mario acts as the agent who ventures through the various levels in the game, and **tool agency** where F.L.U.D.D. aids Mario on his adventures and speaks to Mario when they have conversations on how they will save Isle Delphino.



## Mario 3D Platforms Is Where It's A.T.: How *Mario* 3D Platformer Games Work from an Activity System Perspective

**Activity theory** is a framework of concepts that explain what human interaction and activity does within a system. This theory focuses on the idea that humans are “socio-culturally embedded actors” (learningtheories.com) who form part of a process to explain how certain actions are connected. The Writing Program at Illinois State University further describes this concept by talking about **activity systems**. This helps us understand how these different systems can change and develop over time. This change depends on how we socialize and interact with people, and how activity systems require participation from tools and humans in order to work. In other words, you can say that activity systems involve “all the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together to achieve a particular objective” (Sheets 134). So far, all of this theory makes sense when applied to creating a genre, such as working to make a music video on YouTube. One would need to find out how to make a music video by exploring the **genre** and its conventions, find out the rules and restrictions of YouTube as an online video platform, write lyrics, select music, and have people help with the recording and editing process. In my own research, I’m not interested in using activity theory to talk about producing a game. Instead, I’m interested in both thinking about the game *as a player* and thinking as a writing researcher about how the characters act within the game. From the viewpoint of a player, the activity system includes the player’s goals, but it also involves the discourse communities and social interactions involved in play. Basically, in my research I am thinking about the activity involved in playing the game. The player, as our subject within the activity system, is highly involved with the **discourse community** and social interaction involving a video game. The Writing Program at Illinois State explain discourse communities as groups of people who share certain language-using norms and practices.” This is true for online video games where the player is involved with, “the network of the game’s people, texts, tools, and rules” (Hancock 20). The player has to talk to other players, read and understand the game mechanics, and become part of the larger activity system surrounding a video game.

For the purpose of this article, I want to focus more on how activity systems can connect by focusing on the in-game characters and the different actions they take. In the case of other 3D *Mario* platformers, such as *Super Mario 64* and *Super Mario Galaxy*, Mario is the main subject/character the player uses in the game. Mario has different jumping abilities that help him get through the many obstacles he faces in different stages of the game. He also relies on different power-ups to help him progress past certain situations

in the game, such how the fire flower helps Mario blast enemies, and how the metal box transforms Mario into Metal Mario, which makes him heavy enough to walk on the bottom of the ocean and become briefly invincible. In other *Mario* games, the player will recognize how Mario is able to master superhuman stunts with his different abilities. In the next section, we are going to take a look at how a tool adds to Mario's abilities and changes the dynamic of a traditional 3D *Mario* game.

### **Why *Super Mario Sunshine* Again? F.L.U.D.D. and Mario's Activity System**

Now that we talked about agency, material rhetoric, tools, and the in-game mechanics of F.L.U.D.D. and Mario, let's discuss how tools do many things in the world. In this case, we are looking at how F.L.U.D.D. helps Mario in *Super Mario Sunshine*. As I explained above, my interest is in using activity theory to look at how an in-game tool can alter the gameplay. For a better understanding on how I am applying activity systems in *Super Mario Sunshine*, here is a breakdown of how F.L.U.D.D. modifies Mario's movement and mechanics in this game:

#### **Subject**

Mario is the main character of *Super Mario Sunshine*, and the only playable character the player uses through the game. However, F.L.U.D.D. is introduced specifically for the environment and mechanics of this game. This means that Mario cannot complete most, if not all the stages in *Super Mario Sunshine* without using F.L.U.D.D. as his main tool.



Figure 6: A stage where Mario has to complete an obstacle course without F.L.U.D.D.

**Objective**

Mario and F.L.U.D.D. have many objectives to complete in Super Mario Sunshine. They have to discover the true identity of shadow Mario and the reason why he is polluting Isle Delfino. They also have to collect Shine Sprites to restore the island’s source of solar energy. Without the sun, Isle Delfino’s natural resources, lifestyle, and economy will be highly affected by this phenomenon. Lastly, we can’t have a Mario game without Mario having a battle with Bowser at the end. What is interesting is that F.L.U.D.D. is required for Mario to be able to complete all these objectives.



Figure 7: Noki Bay’s polluted waters.

**Tools**

F.L.U.D.D. is the main tool Mario requires to be able to complete each stage in *Super Mario Sunshine*. Furthermore, some stages require Mario to change F.L.U.D.D.’s nozzles in order to perform different tasks, such as using the rocket nozzle to climb higher buildings, or the turbo nozzle to complete time-limit missions. Although there are no traditional power-ups in this game, such as the fire flower or the metal box, Mario is able to complete incredible feats using his main tool, F.L.U.D.D.



Figure 8: From left to right, the squirt, hover, rocket, and turbo nozzles.

**Rules**

For the player (real person playing the game), the rules would be to learn the new in-game mechanics of using Mario with F.L.U.D.D. In turn, the player will have to adapt to not having power-ups, and to keep an eye out for the water supply that F.L.U.D.D. needs in order to work.



Figure 9: Mario using the hover nozzle and water supply to clean the area from the electric slime/goop.

**Community**

Since this is a single player game, there is not a “community” to actively participate in gameplay with. There are fandom and online forums where players can have conversations about *Super Mario Sunshine*. In the case of Mario and F.L.U.D.D., there are certain missions where Mario needs to talk to the other characters in the game. This would be an example of how the community is involved with Mario’s success, even if that community is within the game itself!



Figure 10: An Isle Delfino resident helping Mario by throwing him up in the hill.

### Division of Labor

Other characters in the game help Mario solve particular in-game objectives. Another aspect is that in order for Mario to change F.L.U.D.D.'s nozzles, he has to jump on a nozzle box and obtain the tool. Someone had to place these nozzle boxes in the different locations for Mario to be able to access them. In addition, the fruit merchants in the game provide fruit for Mario to pick up and wake up Yoshi. Yoshi is needed to complete specific missions within the game, so in a way, other characters in *Super Mario Sunshine* do help Mario.



Figure 11: Mario and Yoshi obtaining a Shine Sprite at Sirena Beach.

Activity systems work differently in *Super Mario Sunshine*, and the in-game mechanics and interaction with other characters allow this type of activity system to function in the unique environment Mario is placed.

### Cappy Is Not a Tool, But F.L.U.D.D. Is: Final Thoughts on *Super Mario Sunshine*

Many Mario fans are probably wondering why I didn't talk about Cappy in *Super Mario Odyssey*. Unlike F.L.U.D.D., Cappy is presented as a living character with the ability to transform into Mario's iconic hat, and helps Mario take over different enemies in the game. Therefore, Cappy is seen as more of an ally towards Mario, and not a tool Mario can manipulate and use in-game. Despite this, F.L.U.D.D. proves that tools can have the ability to make a change in the world. Therefore, "[tools] are more than what they mean or do for us. They are also vibrant actors, enacting effects that exceed (and sometimes are in direct conflict with) human agency and intentionality" (Barnett & Boyle 1). Thanks to F.L.U.D.D.'s functionalities as an in-game tool, Mario is able to perform different abilities that ultimately save Isle Delfino's lifestyle and source of sun energy. As I leave you with this, it is important to keep in mind how tools can have different effects in the world depending on how humans interact with them.

## Image Sources

Figure 1: Retrieved from Nintendo's website. 18 Jan. 2021, <https://www.nintendo.com/games/detail/super-mario-3d-all-stars-switch/>.

Figure 2: Screenshot taken by Edcel Cintron during *Super Mario Sunshine* gameplay. 15 Jan. 2021. Copyrights reserved by Nintendo.

Figure 3: Retrieved from Mario Wiki. 18 Jan. 2021, <https://www.mariowiki.com/FL.U.D.D.>

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# Emojis Across Humanity

Steven Lazaroff

Communication is always changing, and that change presents newly, emerging methods as a site of tension. In this article, Steven Lazaroff explores the development and use of the emoji to interrogate who uses emojis and why—specifically as it relates to questions of translanguality across gender and age. “Emojis Across Humanity” presents the emoji as a radical literate practice that is capable of making connection in the most surprising spaces.

I sat outside, drinking some tea on my porch, 🤔<sup>1</sup> about the outline of this paper. A neighbor kid drove by on a 🚲<sup>2</sup>, and though I was at some distance, I extended my 🖐️<sup>3</sup> and 🙌<sup>4</sup>. He responded with a 🙌<sup>5</sup>. I could not see his face, but his hand gave me an image in my head of a smiling face attached to that same body of the waving hand.

As I write today, I’m reminded of the other day, a memory came up on Facebook’s On-this-Day feature. My sister had posted in July 2012 that my dad was beginning to text. Then, a year or so later, I remember her texting me “Dad is using emojis now.” As a first-generation Millennial, my sister and I were always engaging in the new use of technology, from home 🖨️<sup>6</sup> to dial-up internet, to the AOL instant messenger (AIM) days—and on. AIM, a product of America Online (AOL), a dial-up internet service, was

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1. Thinking emoji.  
2. Bicyclist emoji.  
3. Right-hand emoji.  
4. Waving emoji.  
5. Waving emoji.  
6. Computer emoji.

**Discourse Community:**

a grouping of people who share a certain language using norms and practices.

the first real-time internet messaging platform that became popular and widely used. AIM formed the basis of many late '90s and early '00s teens' social interactions with their privacy, screen names, and away messages. The *away message* especially looms

large in my own memory as a site of cryptic allusions, what we would now call **vaguebooking**, or **subtweeting**: the ability to communicate with people based on **discourse community**.

Often, we use the generational term *Millennial* to blanket over anyone with birth years from 1981 to 1996, or sometimes only focusing on the latter end, which masks the fact there are Millennial waves. I am a first-wave Millennial which I understood to mean that I “came of age” around the turn of the millennium. This also coincided with the mainstreaming of 🖥️<sup>7</sup> and the internet across the social and educational environments. We not only had crappy 📠<sup>8</sup> to get dysentery on the Oregon Trail, but we had shiny new 📠<sup>9</sup> (the now-defunct brand Compaq rings in my head) and the first hi-speed internet access. This technology heralded a new age and high hopes of possibility for education.



Figure 1: Image of the Yahoo!igans Website.

Now, two decades later, the internet and computers are everywhere in ways we could not imagine then. Sure, I remember my dad trumpeting the idea of Yahoo!igans, but we had no idea we would be carrying around miniature 📠<sup>10</sup>- 📠<sup>11</sup> hybrids. 📠<sup>12</sup> and 📠<sup>13</sup> existed, of course, but separately. Like so much of history, it seems both unimaginable and completely imaginable that things shook out the

way they did. In the late 90s, for instance, it was considered rude to have an on the street 📠<sup>14</sup> call—now it is considered odd or strange to even initiate a voice-to-voice 📠<sup>15</sup> call. Often we can communicate effectively to each other in terms that would not have even been recognizably language in the 90s. I am, of course, referencing the all-powerful emergence of the emoji. Beyond

7. Computer emoji.

8. Computer emoji.

9. Computer emoji.

10. Cellphone emoji.

11. Computer emoji.

12. Cellphone emoji.

13. Computer emoji.

14. Cellphone emoji.

15. Cellphone emoji.

the brevity of the text message, the emoji, in a single image, can communicate a burst of concepts, as well as often bringing a face to a faceless conversation, across and within discourse communities and languages. In this way, emojis are fundamentally **translingual**.

Translingual, Latin, *trans*, “across,” and lingual, “language”) writing is the concept of bringing various languages into the same space and in communication with one another.

A problem in thinking about writing is that so much of what has been presented as writing is only one narrow form of it: the academic paper. We are opening up a world where sending a friend an emoji is a writing composition as valid as the five-paragraph essay. Continuing that work, I’m going to present some research on the different ways emojis represent experiences of laughter, shock, and delight across the example of the alphabetic texts “I’m screaming” and “screaming rn,” the emoji 😂<sup>16</sup>, and the emoji 💀<sup>17</sup>. What options do we make possible when we make choices about how we communicate our feelings to each other?

Emojis as translingual expressions are everywhere, used by all discourse communities, ages and genders and races and languages, by all people and yet there is still a deep association with emojis as gendered, “female” by some, most recently in a Tweet by a prominent conservative writer, Matt Walsh. Due to this link between emojis and emotion, not only are emojis seen as gendered but as age-specific, too, as though the communication of emotional states is only appropriate for some people. I did some research via my Facebook page to try to complicate this picture, and see how people were feeling about this representation. Far from a niche, narrow state, emojis unite us across language and discourse community differences and push against our idea of what it is to think and to communicate to one another. Beyond (or better: inside) emojis is a **literate activity system**. According to David Russell, activity systems are cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal. As a lens, the activity system helps us to analyze the psychological and social processes of achieving that goal. Each system has a goal(s), which is achieved through the work of people and the tools they use). My research centered around the **representation**. The term representation highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it,) as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this with emojis: how do we think about & plan to deploy emojis? And how do these choices make connections across language—linguaging in different methods of communication and sites of translingualism—to make different kinds of experiences in the world through socialization?

16. Laughing-crying emoji.

17. Skull emoji.

## Brief, Brief, All Too Brief History of Emojis

Emojis emerged out of the emoticon, a text-based attempt to bring emotion out of what can seem distant or cold and as a response to how language was evolving. Emojis and emoticons are **ideograms**, graphic symbols that are outside of any specific language, and in this way are translanguaging as they move across languages to make communication possible where it was not before. In 2003, the textbook company McGraw-Hill defined the emoticon as, “An acronym for emotion icon, a small icon composed of punctuation characters that indicate how an e-mail message should be interpreted.” The emoticon used characters one could find on any keyboard to produce a cue or a signal of how the sender wants the recipient to feel about how the sender is feeling. Fundamentally, it comes from the fact that communication is happening without faces or voices—without the present body to let us know how we should feel. In this gap of meaning, the emoticon came in to build trust between people, and produce a face where there wasn’t a one. Someone could receive a message of bad news from a friend, and respond with “I’m sorry to hear that” followed by a : ( or a : ). The power of the expression allows for the insertion of either frown or smile acknowledging the bad news. On the one hand, : ( “I am sad to hear that you, my friend, can’t hang out today because you’re not feeling well.” On the other hand, : ), “I am your friend and here for you.” The emoticon joins with the alphabetic text to communicate that friendship in a more meaningful way than the simple letters accomplish and strengthens the relations between people that make them possible, not the borders of the discourse community.

The emoji emerged as a development out of this need for more expression of tone, to render the emoticon even more warmly: in the form of a color image with greater detail. This detail is seen in the faces, the range of emotions from different kinds of frowns and smiles, to the representation of 🐷<sup>18</sup>, 🌱<sup>19</sup>, ✈️<sup>20</sup>, almost all things. But of particular interest are the different deployments of what I will call “crying laughing,” 😂<sup>21</sup>.

### Screaming m, 😱<sup>22</sup>, 💀<sup>23</sup>

One of the major absences the emoji stands in for is laughter. Sometimes we don’t know if we should laugh at something. Sometimes we want to show

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18. Pig emoji.

19. Seedling emoji.

20. Airplane emoji.

21. Laughing-crying emoji.

22. Laughing-crying emoji.

23. Skull emoji.

we are laughing as we are saying something. Sometimes we want to laugh at something we might be uncomfortable to laugh at. There is a range of social conventions that govern these decisions we make about laughter and the emojis that we summon up to help contextualize how we'd like to represent our tones to someone else in the absence of our laughing body.

First, we have common text-based laughing simulations, like “lol,” “haha,” “lmao,” These are helpful and many of us cushion our communications with them in order to let the receiver know we are laughing, but we still have the problem of: where are our faces?! We want to see a face. I find it comforting to read the acronyms, but also we know that we send these acronyms often when we are not laughing, too! How to support the idea that someone is actually laughing? Some exaggerations have stepped in to try to 🗡️<sup>24</sup> that gap: “I’m screaming” or “screaming rn” (rn: right now) do some of that work by turning up the volume on the laughter into a scream. It is an apex-level laughter, but questions of representation emerge: what distinguishes the deployment? What are the different contextualizations that produce each?

“I’m screaming” or “screaming rn” brings a sound right off the bat. To read the word “screaming” is to produce a scream inside our brains, but we also don’t really believe the person is literally screaming wherever they are in the world. The emojis allow us to feel like the person is there laughing with us. The crying laughing emoji is more of a direct translation of the lol, haha, lmao, whereas “I’m screaming” and the dead symbol are escalations of laughter. What are the situations across discourse communities in which one might represent their laughter as the dead symbol? What is the implication?

To see the skull emoji all by itself does not immediately bring to mind laughter. Emojipedia defines the skull as a “whitish-gray, cartoon-styled human skull with large, black eye sockets.

Commonly expresses figurative death, e.g., dying from extreme laughter, frustration, or affection.” Of particular note here is the joining of laughter, frustration, and affection. There are many reasons we laugh or want to indicate to someone else that we are laughing. In fact, the two emotions, frustration and affection, are often never far from each other. But the skull or “dead” emoji escalates laughter from a simple “haha” to an “I am laughing so much this laughter might kill me—or the thing that I’m laughing about will kill me.”

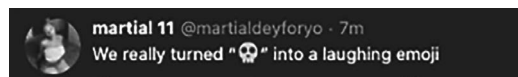


Figure 2: Tweet by martial 11 that reads “We really turned ‘skull emoji’ into a laughing emoji.”

24. Bridge emoji.

In this way, we can see how emojis are imaginative and translingual, going past the limits of distance in a discourse community. No one believes that someone is actually going to die from the laughter, but it is the creation of a fictitious world where we are representing the laughter with the possibility that one could, *that's how funny the thing is*. This inquiry is important because we can see how universal the emoji is through how we navigate different escalations of laughter. On the one hand, from alphabetic *haha, lol, lmao* to crying laughing, and on another hand from these simple laugh expressions into the apex of laughter, the dead symbol.

## Emojis & Gender

There are some, however, who do not conceive emojis as a universal communication method. The writer, Matt Walsh, believes there are some communication methods prescribed for gender, and calls up the image of



Figure 3: Tweet from writer Matt Walsh that reads “Every day I see more grown adult men use emojis. There is no excuse for this. Emojis are for children and women. Do you think your great grandfather would have been caught dead using emojis if the internet existed back then? Have some self-respect for God’s sake.”

our male ancestors in order to evoke some gender shame by using the genre of emoji. And Walsh’s sexism regard emojis isn’t just a niche view. As recently as 2015, the *Washington Post* ominously wrote, “Some Rules for Grown Men Who Dare to Use Emoji.” There is a tension between emojis as emotional communication, and the constructed gender roles of who should communicate emotionally of who gets to use what language, dialect, emoji. However, in response to the Matt Walsh tweet, I posted this rebuttal on Facebook to try to intervene on the construction, and found out some interesting news: all kinds of people use emojis, even, 🧟<sup>25</sup>, veterans of combat.

I’m going to break down the choices of representation and how these rhetorical choices were made to disrupt the ideas we have about the conventions of emojis and gender. I began the sequence with the “hearts all around” to flip the 🖕<sup>26</sup> (aka the 🐦<sup>27</sup>) right off the bat to the idea that I

25. Shock emoji.

26. Middle-finger emoji.

27. Bird head emoji.

as a “man” should not be emotional. I followed with a stream of 🇺🇸<sup>28</sup>, 💣<sup>29</sup>, and 🌶️<sup>30</sup> to reinforce that these are explosive, incendiary ideas that are spicy. The 😄<sup>31</sup> is just plain funny to me, which is often enough for emojis, but also the drooling is self-reflective, indicating I am infatuated with this emoji sequence in progress. I deploy 🤠<sup>32</sup> to bring even more affirmation to the mix, which I read as “let’s go!” or “I’m ready” in the spirit of “saddle up!” The 😈<sup>33</sup> is playful and expands the spunk of the 🤠<sup>34</sup> with the spicy of the 🌶️<sup>35</sup> to turn up the volume of the critique on Walsh. I ended with the 🙌<sup>36</sup> and 🧐<sup>37</sup> because these are two of my favorite emojis, and I wanted to communicate solidarity, we are in this together, and I am smiling cutely while saying all this.

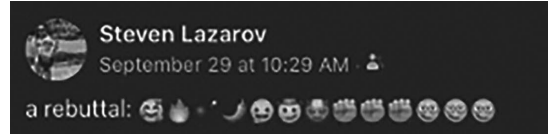


Figure 4: Tweet from Steven Lazaroff that reads: “a rebuttal” followed by a string of emojis.

The responses I received to the rebuttal confirmed and expanded on the convention that emojis are for everyone, and in fact disturb our ideas of who can express emotions and how, expanding the boundaries we typically engage that tells us what language we are speaking and to whom, who is in our discourse community. Two examples stick out to me, both involving friends, and their parents or grandparents.

Here we see an excellent example not only countering the gender and age barrier Walsh tries to present, but also giving us a reason for the representation. On the sending end, the dad is able to communicate his emotional state. This is good for him, in sending that emotion outside his body so it’s not held captive, while also 🌉<sup>38</sup> the gap with his daughter, to where she can have a more precise idea of *exactly* how happy or sad he is, based on the emojis he uses.

Figure 5: Post from Annette Hutto that reads: “I love that my dad, a 65 year old lawyer uses emojis and even updates his bitmoji regularly. I read an article once that emojis allow men to use feelings in a world where they often have feelings suppressed or discouraged. My dad will send whole paragraphs of emojis and I love that I have a better idea how happy to sad he is based on what he uses.”

28. Fire emoji.

29. Bomb emoji.

30. Chili pepper emoji.

31. Drooling emoji.

32. Cowboy emoji.

33. Purple devil emoji.

34. Cowboy emoji.

35. Pepper emoji.

36. Raised fist emoji.

37. Emoji wearing glasses.

38. Bridge emoji.

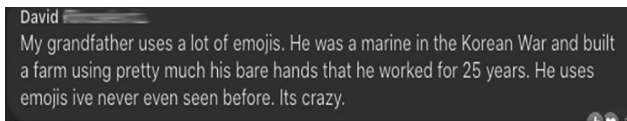


Figure 6: Screenshot of Facebook post that reads “My grandfather uses a lot of emojis. He was a marine in the Korean War and built a farm using pretty much his bare hands that he worked for 25 years. He uses emojis I’ve never even seen before. It’s crazy.”

discourse communities enforcing different genre rules of who and who cannot take part in the genre. Language moves and changes boundaries. Emojis were created because of the new possibilities for communication presented by technological development.

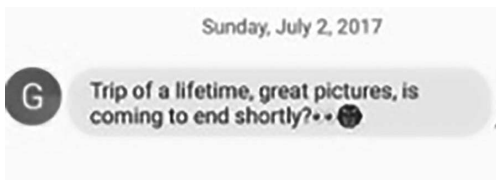


Figure 7: Screenshot of a text that reads “Trip of a lifetime, great pictures, is coming to end shortly?” Followed by two emojis.

grandfather said he chose the 👁️<sup>41</sup> to indicate an openness, an expansion on “the coming to an end shortly,” while the 🖱️<sup>42</sup> was supposed to be playful while also strong.

## Emojis for Humanity

The genre of emoji has tremendous power as a method of translanguaging, and can be deployed in such diverse situations by every type of person within and across language, within and across communities. There is no barrier for gender or age, except those imposed by people. In looking at the different ways emojis behave in the world, we can see that they allow us to be places where we are not, to have our laugh echo in a room we aren’t in, and to speak to people who have different experiences in the world, whether due to culture, gender, or age. Emojis are a radical act, and help us better understand each other—even more to the point, they help us better understand how important emotional communication is. What would motivate a person like Matt Walsh to say that only 🚫<sup>43</sup> and 🚺<sup>44</sup> can use emojis? What does it do

39. Hand emoji.

40. Keyboard emoji.

41. Eyes emoji.

42. Ogre emoji.

43. Crossing sign emoji.

44. Women’s room emoji.

Another great example emerged which explicitly confronted Walsh’s dire image of our ashamed ancestors unable to deal with our emotional communications across constructed, gendered

Here is a grandfather, a veteran of the Korean War, a man whose 🖱️<sup>39</sup> built a farm but also 🗂️<sup>40</sup> text messages involving emotional communication. And not only does he use emojis, but he uses emojis his grandson has never seen before! And what an interesting pairing he made! Upon asking, David’s



to 🚺<sup>45</sup> to take up this kind of communication? What identity privileges is Walsh exhibiting in drawing lines about who can and cannot emoji? How can we view Walsh's actions as an expression patriarchal power?

We can see in the examples given that emojis do not divide us, but in fact unite us across physical distances, and also make up for the inability of words to accurately communicate what we want words to communicate. The choices we make to represent our experiences reflect care both for ourselves and attending to our own emotional state, but also the desire to communicate that emotional state to another person who cares about us. There is an ongoing surprise of the emoji because we are using them to communicate experiences that don't fit into language, or if they do fit, they lose much of the intimacy we are hoping to extend. In this extension of intimacy, there is the opportunity for imagination and creativity, not simply in sending, but in receiving. In receiving these communiques, we see often we do not understand, and in not understanding we use our imagination to fill the gap.

The other day a friend came by my house to watch a movie. She brought her 🐶<sup>46</sup>, Addie, who located some vomit my 🐱<sup>47</sup> hid from me in a tucked-away corner. A few days later, we were planning to hang out and she said "come over to my house, I'm scarred by Addie licking the 🐱<sup>48</sup> vomit." I said "I'll make it up to you," and she said "I'm not sure that's possible, that'll take a while." In reply, I simply said 🐛<sup>49</sup>.

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**Steven Lazaroff** is a PhD student in creative writing (poetry) at Illinois State University. He will usually take the pancakes instead of the toast.



# Notes



## Do You Remember What You're Supposed to be Doing Right Now?

Anya Gregg

In this article, Anya Gregg discusses the processes of remembering, and the tools we use to remember. She argues that the tools we choose to help us remember are part of our "multimodal homeplaces," and as such, are part of our writing researcher identities.

I sit down, in a great mood having just sung my favorite song in choir. I'm tapping my feet and humming, but then tragedy descends upon my innocent mind. Once again I hear the teacher say those four dreaded words: "Take out your homework!" Oh dear. Homework? I didn't think there was homework. What excuse will I use this time? How much will this impact my grade? I did all of my other homework, I know it. Here, let me dig through my bag and shrug a little. That usually works just fine.

This situation made up about 75% of my high school experience. The number one thing my parents suggested? Something they know I do very well in my English class: write it down. I took up this idea just as I would any other genre and started cheating off of other people and using what methods they'd already developed. I put my events on the family calendar, I tied some ribbon around my finger and did most other things I could think of that might help. Unfortunately, as I would eventually discover, notes to aid memory are a very personal genre. It goes against the weird conventions of these personal genres to steal other people's way of writing them. One person's planner is vastly different compared to another's chicken scratch. It

took me four long years to develop my own way of writing things down and it still isn't perfect. Everyone has that moment of "oh, shoot." Whether it be missing an anniversary, an assignment, leaving your child at the mall or even just brushing your teeth; everyone has forgotten something. The number one solution for this problem is, you guessed it, writing it down. Since you are reading a writing-research journal, you can probably guess what this article is about: How remembering things intertwines with literary activity is the main focus here. Memory and literate activity do actually intertwine, believe it or not, using tools one is probably not even aware of most times. For example, what are you reading this on? A tablet that has a Zoom meeting on another tab? A paperback copy with your handwriting dancing around the meticulous printing? Like I said, tools are everywhere, those are just some examples. You may actually be surprised at how personal this genre is, too.

In this article, I'd like to explore how memory aids differ from person to person and to attempt to understand some of the literate activity going on in this highly personal genre.

### Who Is Doing What, Now?

In order to understand this genre at all, we first need to figure out what is going on. I can picture my English teacher peering down onto my desk with a judgmental stare and asking what, exactly, the purpose of all this is? Well, Mrs. I-think-all-my-students-are-silly, I happen to care about that test

#### Genre

The ISU Writing Program defines genre as "a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.

coming up, and I think the people reading this might, too. Excuse my burning hatred for high school English teachers, but it's human nature to forget and it's also human nature to invent tools to solve problems.

Think about your first job. It's the first day and everyone has high expectations, but so much information is being thrown at you in such

a short amount of time. Were you smart enough to write some notes down? Did you repeat instructions back to the trainer? Did you just suck it up and stumble through what you thought you were supposed to do? All of these solutions were created out of necessity and would (to some degree) do the job. Let's just focus on the first solution: writing it down. Did you write down steps in a tiny notebook? Did you go home and write out a plan for the next day? Did you draft a wikiHow article on how to do your job, complete with custom illustrations, but never uploaded it because you didn't want someone stealing your job? (Don't laugh at that last one, wikiHow legitimately helped

my anxious self.) There are many more examples than just these, but this should give you a rough idea of why this genre even exists.

Speaking of examples, wouldn't some from other people be nice? The following examples can help us to extract the conventions and formatting of note-taking. I have collected some different examples from a professor of writing studies at University of Central Florida, Kevin Roozen; my brother and local organization CEO Ian Gregg; my talented ringleader soccer-mom; and finally, myself. These four examples come from very different sources and are unique in and of themselves, so I think they should prove to be a good indicator of the general public's use of this genre.

## My Beloved Brother

To start out, my brother has always been annoyingly perfect. Every time I happened to get a C on any assignment my parents gave me the “don't you want to be successful like Ian” lecture. I mean, look at his cabinets, for goodness sakes! So, when I had the idea of writing this article I sent him a text and he wrote me right back. Basically, what I could glean from his impeccable routine is this: Ian does not use any specific form of memory aid. He is more of a jack-of-all-trades kind of person, although most of his remembering is done through the notes app on his phone. Ian detailed to me the specifics of how he uses which apps.

Basically he uses four different apps, a calendar, and his own brain. The apps include the Notes app, which he uses to scribble down things



Figure 1: My sibling's cabinets. Look at how neat and organized!)

really quick. The Alarm app and the Reminders app serve to help him remember specific times, and the Calendar app helps him remember specific dates. Meanwhile, his physical calendar serves the purpose of noting extra important dates, like a meeting with a client for his job at a music studio. These dates are more critical to his life and if he forgets them, they will have a larger impact than say events like playing a game with his brother online.

### Cruisin' for a Roozen

On the other hand, we have Dr. Roozen's method, which is much more tangible than the former example. We recently had a co-interview together ("Everyday Writing Researchers: A Collaborative Co-Interview Dialogue" in this same issue!). I found out through that interview that Dr. Roozen carries a small notebook. He writes down all the information he has to remember in this notebook and seems to cross items off once he completes the associated task. He picked it up when he worked as an outdoor power equipment salesman. During an interview meant for a different piece featured in this journal, he showed me this notebook and explained how it functions: "I've written articles on these little pads of paper. I've kept dates of birthdays and stuff."

"It's just a neat little text." He said. You can specifically see how he dates each page and draws a scribble through things that are done.

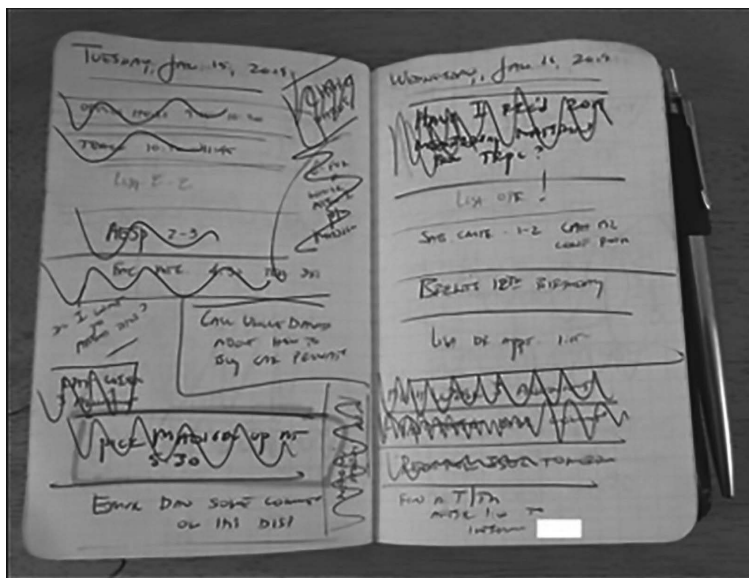


Figure 2: A picture of Kevin Roozen's pocket notebooks.



Dr. Roozen and I also spoke about how some genres dictate that the individual creates the genre from scratch, such as memory aids. The memory aid genre usually fills a more functional role than anything else, and if it fails at any step of the way, it could cause something terrible to happen. I have had that terrible thing happen more times than I would like to admit.

## **Oh Mother, Mother Dear**

Finally, we have my dear, sweet, hardworking Mother, Mama G (yes, I asked her and that is how she wanted to be addressed here). I would like to point out that my Mom is so impeccably on time that she does not use any form of alarm and can wake up at a very specific time in the morning. You will not believe how this woman remembers stuff. She just does! She doesn't write it down anywhere. It's all in her brain and somehow that works. I asked her why she never considered writing it down and she said, "Life moves too quickly as a mom." I find this incredible. Of course, she writes birthdays and things like that on the calendar, but other than that, she relies on her sharp memory. Baffled, I asked how she remembered it all and she cited her fifty-eight years of experience (sorry for giving away your age, mom.) She mentioned she also was very nervous about missing things, so that definitely helps her remember the things she's worried about missing. The interesting thing about that is that sometimes, the best ways of remembering certain items is not to write them down but instead make a mental list or use a mnemonic. A mnemonic is a technique that helps you remember something. Please Excuse my Dear Aunt Sally is a mnemonic for the order of operations. For example, if you have a test in an hour would you copy your notes? Not at all! You would figure out tools to remember key ideas, like my Mom does with her schedule.

## **This Part Is About Me**

As mentioned, I almost never remembered homework and due dates, which is why this memory technique is so extraordinary. I tried many genres including a calendar, a planner, a bullet journal, and many, many more. Finally, however, around senior year of high school I got my shit together and found out that I remember things best by using electronics. My phone is my most helpful asset. Any time I make an appointment or plan an outing with my friends, it goes on my virtual calendar. This calendar then alerts me ten minutes, twenty minutes, or an hour before the event. I can also set more custom alarms using my clock app, as well as set recurring events and color code. This routine gives me no extra room to forget anything.

If there's anything special I need to remember that doesn't pertain to a date or time, it will always be in my notes app. My notes app is comparable to Dr. Roozen's notebook scribbles. Sometimes it contains brilliant ideas, other times a shopping list, and still others I word vomit onto the page and use it as a place to contain my writing that is less annoying than Google Docs. My notes are truly a mess, but the thing is, everything is on one app. Oftentimes during a Zoom meeting I will actually be looking at my calendar and notes app rather than the other participant's faces in order to organize my thoughts and find times for questions.

These apps contain all different kinds of features and literary elements to them, and I'm almost positive it would take my Mom an hour or more to understand how I use it. It is simply that I am around my phone a lot and had quite some time to figure it all out. If I were given a different phone with an app that does the same thing but looks different, I would be just as confused as my Mom.

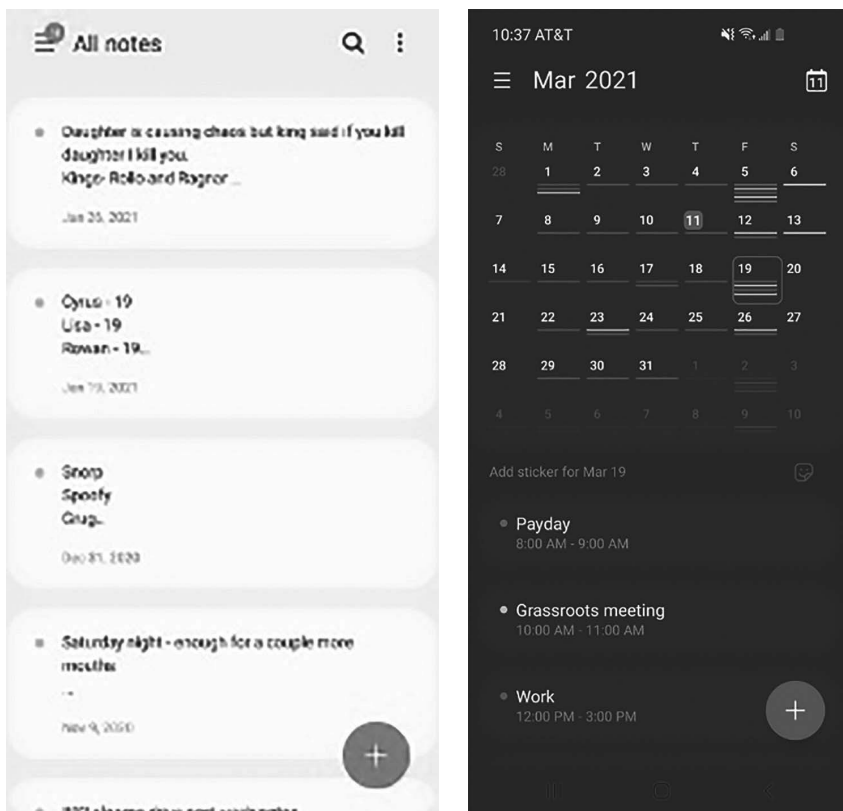


Figure 3: An example of the apps Anya uses to organize her life.

## Ugh, Highschool Teachers

The reason I found this method of memory so late in my life was simple. One stupid rule: my teachers forbade phones in class. We could have them during the time between classes, but not in class. This took away that immediate response of putting the date away, so if a teacher mentioned a due date towards the beginning of class, I was screwed. My teachers clearly didn't understand that different students have different multimodal homeplaces. Mine happened to be my phone.

**Multimodal homeplaces** are the genres or methods that a person is comfortable and familiar with. Let's go back to the example of Dr. Roozen and his notebook. When he showed me a picture of his notes they did not make any sense to me. His wording and grammar were just plain weird.

This kind of notebook just wasn't something I felt comfortable interpreting, and I don't think I'd be comfortable writing it. It's not that I don't have the ability to read it (literally), but I have no clue as to how it's organized. Are there more recent things closer to the end? Won't he forget stuff if he just continues to write stuff down and it gets buried? Does he have different sections for different parts of his life, like work stuff, family stuff, personal stuff? Does he use different colors to describe different ideas?

But even though I find this method of reminders confusing, it seems to work for Dr. Roozen. It's his homeplace—not just a tool that he uses but a part of his identity, his way of being a writer in the world. And if someone forced him to use another genre or even different conventions while still using a notebook, they would be completely bypassing his multimodal homeplace. If he had to write things out in full sentences, would the notebook still be an effective way to keep reminders? What if he was forced to use a bigger notebook? One that he couldn't keep in his pocket?

My point is that the grammars used, the format, the artifacts (small notebook, colored pens), the order of contents, and plenty more things are all tools used to create one strategy: keeping track. Those tools are all a part of a person's multimodal homeplace—the literate activities that help them find their way through the world. As scholar Christina Cedillo notes, “A ‘home place’ is more than a physical space. It is a complex of personal ties, cultural and communal values, and linguistic conventions that make existence a life—plus the established modalities and technologies needed to express and maintain those relations. People do not leave their home places as they navigate the world.” So it's not just the actual tools (digital or physical) that we use, it's also interesting to look at the ways we think about these tools, and

the language resources and strategies we use for specific kinds of goals—like remembering when that math assignment is due.

At this point in my research, I thought back to my psychology teacher in high school. He was a very interesting person and his class was so memorable that I was able to get a high score on the AP test at the end of a year filled with COVID-19 junk. In fact, I can still tell you the major parts of the brain and what purpose they are associated with. It all stuck with me due to the way he taught. Instead of lecturing, this teacher would tell stories. If he didn't have a story, there was a mnemonic device in its place. These two tools quickly became a more prominent feature in my multimodal homeplace throughout the year.

Eventually, one individual who was used to a more “normal” method of teaching, got angry enough to ask him why he didn't teach the class in a “normal” way. Turns out, the teacher had been asked that question every year and he put our current unit at the time on pause to talk about memory. He explained to us why stories and mnemonics stuck in our brain. He also gave us strategies for studying including things like listening to a certain song while studying, studying in different places for each class every time and making our notes as unique to us as we possibly could.

Indeed, these techniques were all centered in the biological process of the brain. I can now say that I am (kind of) a master of studying, too. That leads me to my next point. If I used notes to remember school subjects, why didn't I use them to remember dates and times? Cue a new section header!

## **Why Some Work for Some and Some Work for Others**

Let's start off with my mom as an example. If we switched methods of remembering information I would forget almost everything and she would be much less productive than usual. So why is this method not a more stable genre (like a resume), that generally remains stagnant as different people use it in different settings? This is because these other genres *are* different from person to person.

I'd like to transition to one of my least favorite topics here and talk about essays. In school, every student had a different way of writing an essay. Some would make an outline and research stuff first, and others (me) would sit down and just go. Of course teachers always tried to help us find our best way to write, usually by forcing an outline on us. I hated outlines. They slowed me down, much like notes slow my Mom down.

This is sort of the way it is with memory aids. While Dr. Roozen pulls out a pen and physically writes, my Mom just hears the information and remembers. These are the strategies and tools that work best for them. The difference between these memory aids and more public genres is that the memory aid only has to help you remember; that is its only requirement. Unless someone else is going to need to use your personal reminders, you can use whatever works best for you. Just like how an essay outline needs to help you write the essay, a memory aide has one purpose. Therefore, this offers a lot more freedom to the author in the way of production.

Just as the production of the text or lack thereof is unique to each individual, the items we need to remember are unique as well. For me, I work at the same time every day except Saturday and Sunday. I do not need to remember this as much as other things because at this point it has just become routine. Other things, like what time I have a horseback riding lesson, which are fairly irregular, need to be noted more than work. *What* individuals write down is just as important as *how* they write it down.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I'd like to pose a few questions to you, the reader. How do you remember things? What about the people around you? Is that how you have always done it? Why do you use that particular method? How much physical writing does it involve? How did you remember the fine details of this article? Did you take notes, or just simply remember? All these questions serve as doorways into not only investigating yourself as a writer, but also to help keep you organized, which in this day and age, is essential.

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**Anya Gregg** is an 18-year-old trying to (and sometimes even succeeding in) being an adult. She is planning on fostering her love of writing next year when she ends her gap year and goes to school for a psychology and writing double major. When she isn't asking weird questions like "how do you remember stuff?" to her mom, Anya enjoys horseback riding and playing board games or video games with her friends. She lives at home with her two dogs and cat and hopes to one day become an animal assisted therapist.

## Mindfulness Meditation as a Form of Uptake for the Mind and Body

Roy Rowan

In this article, Rowan shares his experiences with mindfulness meditation to help the reader better understand the often-understated bodily experiences necessary for uptake. He also shows how meditation as uptake works in the same way as uptake in other literacy activities.

Uptake was one of the more puzzling of the concepts about writing I've learned about. When I was first learning about uptake the first words out of my instructor's mouth were something to the tune of, "uptake is one of those things that you understand perfectly until you try to explain it to someone else." Angela Sheets' definition of uptake is the foundation for my understanding of uptake. In her article entitled "Angela Rides the Bus: A High Stakes Adventure Involving Riveting Research, Amazing Activity Systems, and a Stylish Metacognitive Thinking Cap" defines uptake as:

"The process we go through to "take up" a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (if we get that far with it—sometimes we don't!). Our uptakes are highly individual because we all have different past experiences that impact the way we see the world. Say your instructor comes in and says, "There will be an ice cream social for our class on Friday afternoon." One student thinks, "I bet there will be waffle cones!" Another thinks, "Awesome! Class must be cancelled." Still another laments, "Ugh, forced socialization!" Notice that the instructor didn't say any of those things, but because of each students' past experiences or beliefs about ice cream socials, they take up the news to mean very different things (136).

While this definition helped me tease out the basic principles of uptake, it fails to account for the bodily experience of uptake. In my quest to better understand uptake I turned to mindfulness meditation.

I have been practicing mindfulness meditation for a little over fifteen years now. This form of meditation is designed to help practitioners identify and accept the pressures and stresses of everyday life in order to have a more peaceful existence. For me, mindfulness meditation is a form of emotional uptake that I do intentionally to better understand my mental and physical state. Uptake, in short, is the way in which we take in new information and process it in terms of our prior knowledge and experiences.

Uptake also has an element of interruption built-in. When it comes to writing, these interruptions help us understand why we write in certain ways; with mindfulness meditation, the interruption helps you understand your mental and physical state. In both cases, this interruption helps you identify things that can be changed, and things that you may need to let go of because they are interfering with your processing, and may be something you cannot change. While acknowledging experience is a part of the meditation, it also requires an acknowledgment of the practitioner's current physical and mental state. Mindfulness meditation may not be the perfect representation of every form of uptake, but it does provide a reference point for this somewhat obscure concept.

### **Guided Meditation**

My first experience with mindful meditation was through a guided meditation at the beginning of a religion class I was taking to meet my school's general education requirements. Myself and about twenty-nine of my closest strangers were asked to sit with our feet flat on the floor and relax our bodies. We were then told to take normal breaths and concentrate on the inhale and exhale. If we found our minds wandering, we were told not to get upset and gently bring our attention back to our breathing.

I will not lie and say that this was the hardest thing I had ever done, but it was extremely difficult the first time around. I had trouble stopping my mind from thinking about the next class, the readings the night before, even if I was doing it correctly. Looking back, part of the difficulty was my ignorance of how distracted I was by all the pressures and influences in my life. With practice and repetition, I got to a point where I could keep my mind focused on my breathing for longer periods of time, and when I did stray into other thoughts, I was able to bring myself back and not become upset and blame myself.



The guided meditations were designed to help us work on our focus and concentration. One key to understanding uptake is to think of it as a way of focusing on what you are learning and how you are learning. Many of the uptake genres, activities created to help articulate uptake that are used in the writing classroom, function as a tool to help us focus on our uptake. In the same way that the emotions and pressures made it difficult to focus during meditation, the influences and prior knowledge within you can interfere with how you process new information.

## **Mental Scan of the Body**

After several sessions of trying to concentrate on our breathing, the instructor introduced us to full-body scans. Instead of simply focusing on our breathing, we would consciously focus on sections of our body, starting at our heads and working our way down to our feet. During these sessions, we acknowledged the tensions, aches, and other physical manifestations of our mental state.

I was a non-traditional student as an undergraduate. Before going to college, I served in the military and had several civilian jobs that were very taxing on my body. To compound these things, I did not have the best home life as a child and was going through a divorce when I took this class. So, when I began to explore my body in this way, I discovered the tensions I was holding and the tiredness I had been ignoring. Just being present in the moment and acknowledging these things helped me feel more in control of my wellbeing.

We were discovering that our bodies were physical manifestations of the things we were taking up like stress, anxiety, nerviness, and other mental and emotional bombardments. Learning in the writing classroom happens in much the same way. When we learn, we are not just receiving the information in a simple transfer, but instead that information is interacting with everything that makes us who we are. We mostly go along, ignorant of the effect it has on our own learning and knowledge acquisition. Hannah Rule's book, *Situated Writing Process*, offers an interesting look at student's writing processes. In chapter four of the book, Rule examines the spaces that students write in. Alice's story in this chapter stuck out to me because she maintained a writing desk where she never wrote. I have a similar desk that I maintain for writing but have come to realize that this space represents a learned ideal that I was trying to live up to. My writing uptake, like my meditation, made me aware of the effect my environment had on me, like when I was trying to write a paper sitting on the couch with my laptop while my son was rocking in the chair beside me. By acknowledging all the things

that interact with our taking up of information, we can begin to feel more in control of our learning.

## Identifying Thoughts and Feelings

After we had really honed our focus through many meditation sessions, we opened our minds and let them wander wherever they wanted to go. When something came to us, we shifted our focus and worked through trying to understand what we were feeling, why we were feeling it, if we felt like we could change what was causing those feelings, how we might change the things we felt we could, and finally trying to put aside and let go of the stresses that came from the things we could not change.

After the struggle of learning to focus past the distractions and concentrate on my breathing, I thought I had mastered the hard part of mindfulness meditation; needless to say, I was very wrong. The true purpose of mindfulness meditation is to get to where you can acknowledge the stresses and distractions that are coming from your past, your current situation, and the worries of the future. Then, after you acknowledge these things the real work begins, you have to start processing the stressors.

I discovered a lot about myself during these sessions. Coming from the South, I had several competing ideologies—some from my family back home, and newer ones that I had taken up as a result of my exposure to a more diverse culture through both my time in the military and multiple colleges. I realized that I could not change my family, but I could be aware of their influence on how I think and not let it shape the person I was working to become. I also realized that I was letting the stress from my schoolwork cause physical tension in my body. This was something I could work on and change to improve my well-being. Facing some of the pressures and influences was painful and took time. Other elements of my past were hard to face, only because I was in denial about their existence and did not want to be honest with myself. The key I found, was to take my time and really examine what was causing me to lose my peace. The lessons from the breathing practice really paid off during this phase because I was able to let myself fail and not become angry about that failure, but gently bring my focus back to the task and continue working.

Like the uptake occurring in my mindfulness meditation journey, the first time you attempt uptake in a writing class you may feel silly or have trouble identifying everything that is influencing your taking up of new information—I know I did. Like the emotions and stressors that I discovered

in my meditations, your prior knowledge and current circumstances are going to shape your taking up of new ideas. Some of these influences will be helpful and will aid in your understanding of the new material, and others may not. The important thing to remember is not to judge yourself during the process, but to acknowledge what you can. None of these elements are static, and we can never fully identify everything that influences us because we live in a dynamic world and we are dynamic individuals.

## The Interruption

After we had taken the time to identify and acknowledge the stressors that were influencing us, the instructor moved on to dealing with these pressures. Once we knew what we were facing, we could begin to work through the problems and make changes to better our mental and physical states. The instructor made it clear going in that we would not be able to work through every problem and that it would be hard to let go of the pain that some of them caused, but that it was important to not cause new pain by becoming annoyed with our inability to be perfect.

My own barrage of mental pressures was extensive, and I had my share of difficulty dealing with them. The main idea was to interrupt the interference that comes from these pressures. Some things causing me stress were easier than others to work through. I was always the student who waited until the last minute to do the reading for class and homework almost never got done. This procrastination caused me unbelievable amounts of anxiety and stress. Once I had identified the problem and acknowledged that it was something that I had the power to change, I could take steps to create a schedule and eliminate that source of stress in my life. Other stressors were more complex and did not have a simple solution. My Southern upbringing and family caused me a lot of stress once my values changed due to my surroundings. I had begun to understand the value of diversity and equality, and to question the prejudices that had been taught to me. I wish I could jump into a time machine and rewrite the past, but as others have realized, we cannot. I also could not remove my family from my life because I love them, and they are a part of me. Luckily, I did not have to eliminate all the stresses to alleviate the pain they caused. By acknowledging the influence my upbringing was having on my mentality, I could choose not to let them shape the way I think. That is not to say the thoughts never happen, instead, I was able to have the thoughts and evolve them into something more in line with what I had learned about the larger world. This thought process not only helped me become a better person, it also allowed me to bring a unique

perspective to the communities I chose to be a part of. When things like my family and the entrenched beliefs they held came up and I had no power to change them, it was easier to set them aside and disregard their influence with less pressure from my past and a deeper understanding of how I got where I am.

The act of interruption is also an important part of uptake in the writing classroom. Everyone comes from a different background and lives in different conditions. So, it is only logical that the way another person process information would be different. Our past experiences shape how we view the world, and our current situation can change how we receive information and how we process it. In the same way, you can acknowledge emotional influence and you can choose how these outside influences shape your learning once you acknowledge that they are influencing you. Sadly, we cannot always control our world and our situations, but if we are aware, we can minimize negative influences and seek help in the areas that we are deficient. It is also not all bad, many of the influences from our lives help shape our learning in unique ways and allow us to see the world differently.

## **Metacognition**

While the seated breathing focused meditation that we practiced in class is what I used to think of when I thought about meditation, it does not have to take place only in that setting. Near the end of the section on meditation, we explored some cultural origins of mindfulness meditation. This form of meditation has its roots in Buddhism. Buddhist monks practice a form of mindfulness meditation that encompasses every moment of the day. One of the most common adaptations of this practice involves taking slow, deliberate steps and focusing on the feel of your entire foot against the earth. While this is interesting, it also serves as a transition to mindfulness meditation as a metacognitive practice. By being aware of stimuli as they happen, you can start the process of dealing with the new pressure on your mental health as they come and prevent them from building up.

I practice this form of mindfulness meditation more than I do the guided breathing these days. I can stop for a moment when I get overwhelmed and identify what is causing my stress and shift my focus to alleviate that pressure on my life. It took a good bit of practice and repetition to get to where I am today, but I think it was well worth it. I am able to maintain a better standard of mental health, and I have the tools to cope with my ever-changing environment. Meditation is not a one and done solution to the

world's problems, but it does acknowledge the dynamic nature of the world and helps me acknowledge how it is affecting my thinking and wellbeing.

A similar idea can be applied to the writing classroom. Uptake does not have to be something you do when prompted. Anytime we write, we should consider what is influencing our writing. We should think about how we process new information differently so we can better engage with what we are learning and bring our own unique perspectives to the classroom. Uptake allows us to gain more control of the world around us and lets us shape our destiny.

## Conclusion

Okay, so maybe shaping our destiny is a bit dramatic, but uptake both as meditation and in the writing classroom helps us to improve. This improvement comes from an awareness of the factors involved in the taking up of new information and processing it. Meditation serves as a form of uptake that deals with emotions but still involves coping with some of the same elements we face in the writing classroom. Life is dynamic and requires dynamic tools to help us process the ever-changing conditions we will face. So, the next time you are asked to describe your uptake, meditate on it.

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## Everyday Writing Researchers: A Collaborative Co-Interview Dialogue

Anya Gregg and Kevin Roozen

Anya Gregg and Kevin Roozen conducted a *GWRJ* co-interview where they asked each other questions about their perspectives on everyday literate activity and writing research. The following transcript excerpts selected portions of their co-interview, and includes Kevin's and Anya's thoughts as they reflected on their exchange.

### Touring a “Hidden World” of Writing

If you've ever wondered what every day writing researchers—people who are always looking for, examining, and trying to understand more about writing and how it works in the world—talk about when they get together, this collaborative co-interview dialogue should offer some insight. *The Grassroots Writing Research Journal* staff introduced two everyday writing researchers, Anya Gregg and Kevin Roozen, and got them talking about writing. Anya Gregg is a self-identified writing researcher who is currently taking a gap year but plans on attending ISU in the fall of 2021 and double majoring in psychology and writing. Kevin Roozen is a writing researcher who works at the University of Central Florida and examines the various kinds of writing people do in their lives and how it functions across their lifespans. In this collaborative co-interview and dialogue, we've woven together some selected excerpts from the dialogue between Anya and Kevin during their hour-long Zoom exchange as they talked about writing, what tools they use to do it, and how it functions in their lives.

The central theme of Anya and Kevin's conversation about writing might best be captured in this brief exchange, which emerged as they were talking about all the different kinds of writing they do in their everyday lives that rarely gets noticed:

**Anya:** (laughs). That's really interesting. I get so excited about this stuff, because it really is a hidden world.

**Kevin:** I love that phrase. A hidden world.

Anya's comment about the "hidden world" of writing provided a telling touchstone for their conversation. Their dialogue moved in many different directions, but Anya and Kevin's talk always seemed to circle back to the densely textured worlds of writing people are continually immersed in, and yet that too often remain fairly invisible. Across the pages that follow, we've threaded together portions of their conversation to offer a brief tour of the topics they explored, including the many different kinds of writing that texture their lives, their encounters with "writing gone wrong," their musings on what counts as "real" writing, and the possibilities they imagine for writing instruction in school.

## Welcome to Our Hidden Worlds of Writing

It's probably no surprise that two people really interested in continually learning more about the hidden world of writing around us would talk about their own writing. As everyday writing researchers, we both spend a lot of time looking at and thinking about writing, and also doing a lot of writing ourselves. But as we read back through our conversation, we were both pretty interested to see the particular kinds of writing each of us discussed. One of the first kinds of writing that Kevin mentioned was the writing he does in the little notebooks that he has carried in his back pocket for a long time. In response, Anya brought up the digital writing she does using different apps on her phone, and reflected on some of the new genres of writing she sees emerging from people's use of digital writing technologies.

**Kevin:** So, one of my favorite texts to think about, when I think about writing, are these notebooks that I keep (see Figure 1 on the facing page). I've kept them for about twenty-seven years.

**Anya:** Oh my goodness.

**Kevin:** I carry these in my back pocket. I've been doing this since I took a job selling outdoor power equipment. I used to sell lawn mowers and stuff. And I've kept these little books for twenty-seven years. And this is what I



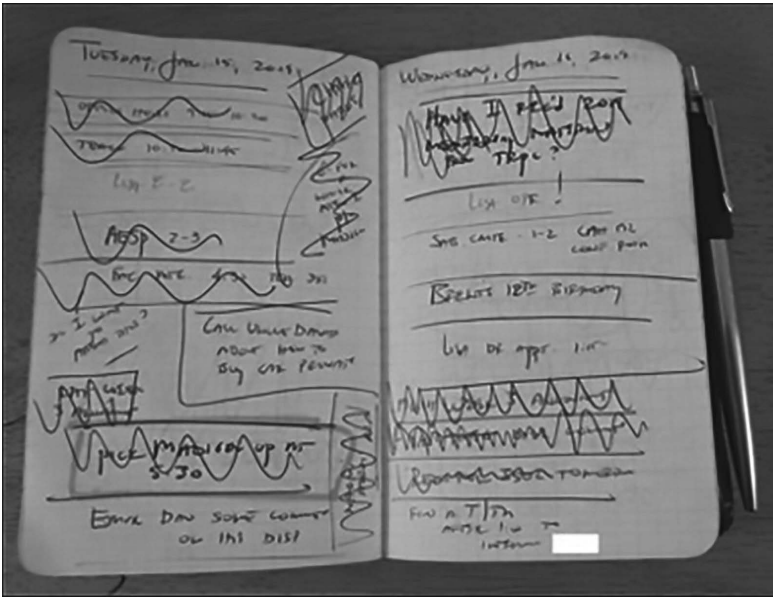


Figure 1: Pages from the notebook that Kevin keeps in his wallet.

think of, like, this is probably the writing I use the most, every day of my life. And it's just kind of funny how I look at these sort of things, little highlighted notes I write to myself. I've written articles on these little pads of paper. I've kept dates of birthdays and stuff. It's just a neat little text, and most people probably don't even notice it, but for me, everything is right there. And I think it's kind of a neat thing.

[...]

**Anya:** ... Your notes. I would never be able to do that. I've tried keeping planners, I've tried keeping notebooks, I've tried keeping diaries, I've tried everything. I just cannot do it. The one thing that I can do, I've figured out, is use my phone. So I put all of my schedules and all of my appointments, and all of my important reminders and everything on the apps on my phone (see Figure 2 on the next page). Which, actually, is a different form of writing. So, I feel like it's sort of this nebulous thing, that everyone is kind of unique at. You know. Everyone has a different way of remembering things or of going about writing something.

**Kevin:** I love that point, how both of us are taking notes and remembering things, but I'm doing it using a notepad and a black pen, you're doing it with using apps on your phone. In a way, we're doing very different kinds of writing, but in a way we're doing very similar kinds of writing.

[...]

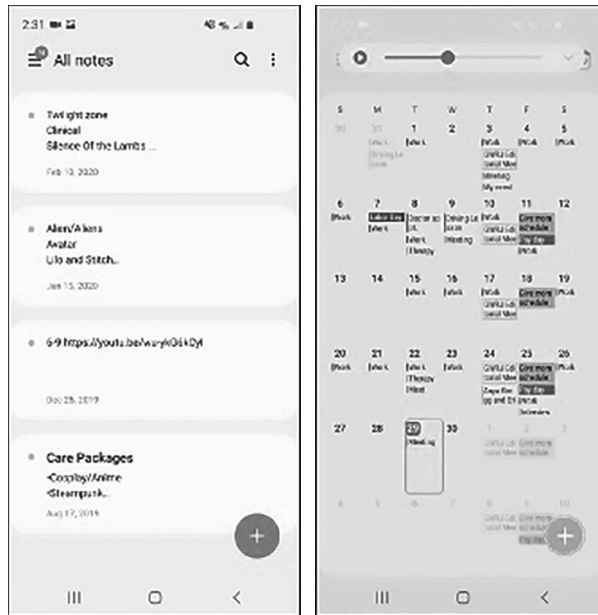


Figure 2. Screen captures of the apps Anya uses on her phone.

**Anya:** I’m a typical teenager: I’m on my phone for, like, many hours a day. I’ve actually found that there’s some really weird, upcoming new genres of writing. Like Instagram captions. Like, the little caption you put under your picture in order to gain more followers and stuff . . . like, what do you do to do that? And I’ve found that hashtags are one of the conventions there, and you want to keep it really short, and . . . it’s stuff like that going into it, I would have never have known [to look at], unless I was a writing researcher and really looked into it.

### “Different Things That Are Kind of Smashed Together”

And from that early exchange about our notebooks and phone apps, our conversation about our writing branched out in some interesting directions. Pretty soon, we were talking about the different kinds of writing involved in people’s hobbies. Anya brought up the online “co-writing” she does with other people about a web series she enjoys and all of the inventive ways they smash and blend different genres together, and she later mentioned some of the texts involved in her horseback riding. Kevin described the wealth and variety of different kinds of writing done by his neighbor, a retired highway engineer who is building a model train set in his house.

**Anya:** Another one of my hobbies. I say that I like to write, but when I'm writing I oftentimes like to write with other people. So, like, they'll write for one character of the narrative and I'll write for another character of the narrative, and it'll kind of intertwine. And I've found that really fascinating. It's actually very common online.

**Kevin:** What kind of characters, like fan fiction kind of writing?

**Anya:** Yeah. Mhmm.

**Kevin:** What's your fandom?

**Anya:** (Laughs). I have a couple. I really like certain anime. *My Hero Academia* is one of them.

[**Anya's Note:** This fandom I write for is a group of web series called the slenderverse]

**Kevin:** Wow. Do you write with just one other person, or are there even more?

**Anya:** Oh, oftentimes there are even more.

**Kevin:** Wow.

**Anya:** So, yeah. It's really cool. I'm even, right now, I'm in an entire server just dedicated to these people writing out these characters, albeit, they are made up by the people writing, but it's just solely for these characters to interact. And I find that a really fascinating mix of narrative and playwriting and all these different things that are kind of smashed together to make this fun, new hobby.

**Kevin:** So you and all these other people, and you're just making it as you go. That's so exciting.

**Anya:** Yeah. Because very often I feel like when I write it's sort of, me writing, and then other people seeing it and reading it. But I feel like this is sort of a weird kind of co-writing. Where two, three, and four people are writing the same thing at once.

[...]

**Anya:** How about you? What is the most interesting sort of writing that you've come across lately?

**Kevin:** So, the most interesting. There's just so many. But one of the most interesting ones was that I have a neighbor who is setting up a model train set in his house. And I was talking to him the other day, and he started showing

me, like, all these maps and schematics and engineering drawings, to lay out the model train set, and build it and everything. And he could spend hours just telling me about it, showing me all these little drawings he's done and taking pictures, cutting pictures out of a magazine, and pasting it up to see what it looks like.

**Anya:** Mhmm, yeah.

**Kevin:** But it's just so interesting. He's making notes to himself, and he's doing these drawings, he's taking these measurements. He's taking pictures of other people's train sets. It's just so amazing to me, the amount of effort that he puts into it. I think it's just incredible, what people do with texts. On their own, inside of school or outside of school. It really is remarkable.

**Anya:** And I feel like, I don't think there is a hobby that doesn't involve some sort of text. Like, I know that football has plays that they have to write, and memorize. I do horseback riding, and we have certain patterns that we have to memorize. And there's text even, on signs during some shows and things, and there's rules you have to read, and directions you have to read, and everything. So I feel like there really isn't a hobby where you don't have to read something. Or write something.

### **"Writing Gone Wrong"**

In addition to talking about some of the different kinds of writing we've encountered and that fascinate us, we also touched on some examples of writing we had experienced that had gone "wrong" in some way. One of the things that allows writing to remain hidden is that we don't tend to notice it when it works the way it should. It's when writing goes wrong in some manner that it becomes really visible to us, and all of a sudden we pay attention to it. Kevin discussed his personal experience with writing some comments on an anniversary card that didn't produce the result he imagined. Anya talked about the writing on an aspirin bottle that she'd seen on a TV commercial that had caught her attention. Later, she recounted her experience of bringing her published *GWRJ* article to her English teacher, which prompted an unexpected reaction.

**Kevin:** The one that sticks out to me, though it's going to sound a little strange. I was newly married. And it came time to celebrate my anniversary, my first anniversary with my wife, and so, I was very proud of myself. I'd gone out, like a week before, I'd found the perfect card, I'd hidden it away, and then I had written something in it, and so I gave it to her. We had a

dinner, our anniversary dinner, and I gave her my card, and she read it, and just said, “eh.”

**Anya:** Oh!

**Kevin:** So, it wasn’t the reaction I was expecting, so I waited til the next day, and, nothing.

**Anya:** Aww.

**Kevin:** So after about three days, I just asked her. I was like, “You know, like, did you not like my card, or something?” She said, “Well,” and she went and got it. She’d saved it. And she opened it up, and she showed me, that I had basically just rewritten the words that were already on the card

**Anya:** Oh!

**Kevin:** You know, I had just kind of rephrased it in my own handwriting. So I was probably thirty-one years old. I may have been thirty. I was old, anyway. And that really hit me so powerfully. That, you know, this has consequences! It’s not just what you write, but it’s also all that stuff wrapped into it, and how obvious it may have looked to her, seeing basically my rephrasing, on the other side of the card. So, that was one of the first moments where I think it really hit me that, “wow, it’s not just as simple as jotting something down in your anniversary card.” So, I mean you talk about a powerful, every day, moment. [...] It had consequences. I could feel the palpable weirdness of, “Hey, how come you’re not saying ‘Awesome’ about this card?”

[...]

**Anya:** I was noticing the other day as I was just idly watching TV, I noticed how on some pharmaceutical commercials and other commercials, their texts that they really don’t want you to see but they still have to be there by law, and I thought it was kind of ironic how there are certain texts that the way to write them correctly is to write them wrong. So I feel like that, along with our experiences with stumbling (laughs), is kind of funny, actually. Because we could have been writing this completely different thing, and gotten one thing wrong, and it could have been fantastic, and we wouldn’t have even known it. But, because we were writing this certain genre, you know, we got something wrong.

**Kevin:** Anya, I can’t tell you how many aspirin bottles I’ve looked at, but probably never really seen, in my life.

**Anya:** Oh yeah.

**Kevin:** Until you said that. So, like, what do you think made you notice that, because people look at aspirin bottles, like all the time, and they would never get attuned to that. What do you think made you focus on that?

**Anya:** Well, it was a really boring commercial. (Laughs).

**Kevin:** (Laughs).

**Anya:** And, I don't know, I was watching the commercial and there was a dog on the screen and whatever, and I was following it along with my eyes and I noticed this white blob, right, like, halfway through the screen and I was trying to read it, and I just couldn't, and I was like, "why have this here if you can't read it?" But, then it occurred to me, "Duh, lawsuits."

**Kevin:** It's funny. It's writing, but it's almost made, purposefully, not to be read easily.

**Anya:** Exactly. Or like, those bottles of pills where you have to peel back the label to read all about it. Or it makes it purposefully inaccessible.

**Anya:** Oh my gosh. That was one of the things that I was really, not impressed with, but I guess astounded by, when I first figured this all out. I was spying it everywhere, and I was like, "There's writing there! That's writing!" So ...

**Kevin:** I love how excited you get about it, like, I feel the same excitement. And when you're smiling, I must be smiling too, because I just think that's pretty cool.

**Anya:** Oh yeah. I don't know why I think it's cool. I think it's one of those things where, if you know, you know, and, it's kind of a niche topic. I tried explaining it to my boyfriend last night, because he was asking, "What are you preparing for? What are you doing?" And I was like, "Oh, I'm preparing for a writing research thing," and he's like, "Why do you research writing? It's just words." And I'm like, "Nononono!" And I tried explaining all this stuff to him, and he was kind of getting it, but I feel like it's very special, I guess, to be able to recognize that what you're doing isn't exactly what you're doing.

[...]

**Anya:** I actually brought my *Grassroots* [journal] article to [my teacher]. And I was like, "Oh, you can read through this. This is all about what I learned last year. I'm really excited to write more." You know, stuff like that, and I came back a couple of days later and he gave it back to me with the *grammar corrected*.

**Kevin:** (Exclaims) Oh, No!

**Anya:** (Laughs). So, that was a little bit disappointing. But it taught me very fast that different people have very different expectations, and clearly ours weren't lining up.

**Kevin:** Yeah. That had to be heartbreaking, you know. To have published a piece in *Grassroots*, which is something that [a lot people] haven't done.

**Anya:** Mhmm.

**Kevin:** And you give it to this gentleman, and he gives it back with some red ink on it, with some grammar ... (groans)

**Anya:** Oh my gosh. And he sat there. Bless his heart, he was trying so hard to explain to me, but he sat there with me for like, ten to twenty minutes, just, oh, you know, "You did this wrong; it's supposed to be like this," and I was like, "yeah, thanks." (Laughs).

[...]

**Kevin:** What did it feel like to be published in the *Grassroots* journal?

**Anya:** Well, first of all it was amazing. Because I could, you know, little Freshman me could walk up to people and be like, "I'm a published author." (laughs). I could show my teachers this article that I have that is, you know, college Freshman/Sophomores read, and, you know, do homework on! And, you know, it felt cool to me, but then again, it wasn't really that interesting to my teachers, especially the one that handed my article back with red ink all over it. (Laughs).

## What Counts as "Real" Writing

In addition to describing the many different kinds of writing that each of us is involved in and what we use them for, we also mused about the kinds of texts and textual practices that people associate with "real" writing. At one point in our conversation, we started talking and thinking about what kinds of texts we use that might not even be recognized as "writing." Anya talked about her experiences with menus while ordering food at a restaurant, which prompted Kevin to talk about the sheet music his children routinely use and write on as they play the flute and the saxophone. Later, Anya mentioned some sewing patterns she used, and the kinds of texts she uses as an employee at a doggie daycare.

**Anya:** From the time I was in kindergarten, and I was learning how to read, I would, you know, read a menu at a restaurant, and I'd be like, "Oh, that counts for my pages for the week! Whoo-hoo, I read. Look at me, I'm smart!"

**Kevin:** (Laughs).

**Anya:** And my mom and my teacher would be like, "No, no, that's not how we read. We read like *this*." So.

**Kevin:** Isn't it funny, how, like, people have very definite notions about what reading is. What kind of materials would be valuable, and what it means to read them, whereas, like reading a menu for some people, it's like, "enhh. That's not really reading."

**Anya:** Yeah, exactly. But if you were trying to order something from a restaurant you don't know, probably that would be the most essential reading you could do at that moment in time.

**Kevin:** Yep. I have two kids. I have a son who's thirteen and my daughter is seventeen, and just watching them grow up, and paying attention to all of the things they were doing with, like, the texts around the house. Like my daughter loves to draw. And, both of my kids play musical instruments, and so, this kind of writing (see Figure 3 below) is constantly around my house. I do not know how to read music, but both of my children do. And, I don't know if you can see it but, they make these annotations on there? So they'll be taking their music lessons, but they're actually spending a lot of time writing.

Figure 3: An excerpt from a page of Kevin's daughter's flute sheet music with her annotations.



**Anya:** Mhmm.

**Kevin:** Just seeing all these different texts around, and them using them, has really kind of helped me think hard about, like, “Well, what do I think writing is? What do other people think writing is?” I better pay attention to what *they think* writing is, rather than what *I think* writing should be.

[...]

**Anya:** Well, actually right now I’m taking a semester off from school. I work a full-time job. I have this internship with the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, and I have hobbies I like doing. I ride horses, I write, I sew. All these different things, and so a lot of my time has been spent more in the “not writing” realm. (laughs).

**Kevin:** When you do sewing, do you use patterns?

**Anya:** Oh, yeah.

**Kevin:** Would you call those writing? Would you call those texts?

**Anya:** See, that is interesting because patterns don’t really have any words on them, but they do have a way that you’re supposed to read them, you know? Like when a pattern says, “this is the measurement here,” you’re supposed to add on like a ¼ of an inch for the seam allowance. And most people that read the pattern would just know that, but people who didn’t know how to

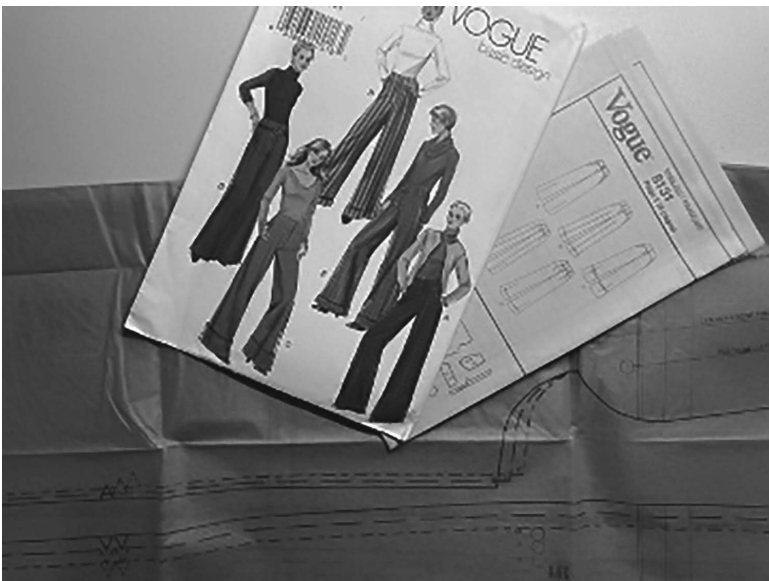


Figure 4: A sewing pattern. Additional inches need to be added when the fabric is cut.

read patterns wouldn't know that. That's actually really interesting, now that you bring that up.

**Kevin:** Isn't that neat, how you can look at a pattern, a simple thing about the measurement, and, you know how to read it like that, whereas I would just look at a pattern and see, the pattern, you know. That's kind of neat.

**Anya:** Mhmm.

**Kevin:** What do you do, what is your job?

**Anya:** I work as a doggie daycare attendant (laughs). So, even that, now that I think about it, I'm surrounded by writing even there. A lot of the stuff that we do. Like, we write down when we take the dogs out to go potty, and then we have to initial next to it. And so I've actually become really used to initialing and signing my name, and everything. And that's an unexpected sort of outcome of beginning this job.

**Kevin:** Like, even taking care of the dogs, keeping track of them, when they do things, requires some sort of text to keep track of it. Your initials on there to verify it. I mean, talk about being saturated with textuality. You know, from sewing to taking care of the animals, to co-writing with your friends. Your life is just like, saturated with it. It's everywhere. And, if you think about the variety of it, it's just amazing. And, as a writing researcher, I just think that the neatest thing in the world, to pay attention to those things.

## Possibilities for Writing Instruction

Late in our conversation, we spent some time talking about the kinds of writing instruction that people experience in school, and some of the ways we would like it to be different. Kevin talked about his desire for people to maintain really broad notions about what writing is and what it does throughout their lives, and to continually be thinking about writing in new and different ways. Anya mused about the potential for inviting people to examine their everyday kinds of writing in school as a way to make classroom writing instruction engaging and exciting instead of drop dead boring.

**Kevin:** I would like it very much if people [...] could kind of think about writing in all kinds of different ways. And I think ultimately maybe the point is that there's no one way to think about writing. The whole point is just like you said. Just continually keep thinking about it in different ways, seeing it in different ways. Because, like you said, the writing is always changing, our perspectives always have to change, and I think there's something about this sense of wonder that you and I have, that we've been talking about? That's

what'll keep it going for the next generation. And I think *Grassroots* is such an exciting space, because it's a place for people to kind of think like this . . .

**Anya:** Yeah.

**Kevin:** And let other people think like this, so in your internship I hope you get to encounter all kinds of fun people thinking about writing in all kinds of fun ways.

**Anya:** Oh, I'm sure I will. I'm sure I'll get to read a bunch of different articles, from a bunch of different points of view. And I'm really excited for that, actually.

**Kevin:** Well, if you ever want to read some published writing researcher articles, about people who write fan fiction . . .

**Anya:** (Laughs).

**Kevin:** I've actually published a number of them.

**Anya:** Really?!

**Kevin:** So, yeah, some of my early case studies of a young woman who wrote fan fiction and then did fan art, and how it intertwined with her school writing.

**Anya:** Yeah. Interesting . . . That sounds really cool.

**Kevin:** I think fan fiction is so fascinating. I mean, like, really. I'm just very enamored of people who do it.

**Anya:** And just thinking back, in middle school, if I could write fan fiction when I was in this class talking about, you know, "Pronoun goes here" and stuff like that. I would have been so much more engaged. But, like I've mentioned before, I'm sure you've picked it up, that I'm not really pleased with the way that school teaches writing. And so I'm very hopeful that this does become more commonplace, and that this does become the new way of learning writing, too. Because I just, you know, it's like I said before, as a kid I was never like, "whoo-hoo! Writing!" I was just kind of "whatever" about it.

**Kevin:** (Laughs). And isn't it funny that you can do it [write in ways valued in school], but you don't get excited about it. But you get excited about other kinds of writing. I get that too. As a teacher I think about that every day. How to keep writing exciting. In fact, in my classes, students actually bring all their different kinds of writing into class, and we work on that. So, like, if they're writing fan fiction, we read and study some of their fan fiction, and their writing processes. Like, in my class right now, I've got somebody who

helps his dad do mechanical work on the weekends. And so he brings in all these drawings and these notebooks that they keep for working on cars. So, that's pretty cool.

**Anya:** That's amazing. Oh my gosh. I wish I was in a class like that. That sounds like the perfect class to me. Where I bring in all this writing I'm doing.

**Kevin:** Wouldn't it be cool, in a writing class, for your teacher to invite you to analyze and write about your use of your note apps?

**Anya:** Oh my gosh. That would be really cool. But, it never happened before. Still waiting for it to happen.

### Reflections and Possibilities for the Future

For me (Kevin), reading back through our conversation a number of times really made me realize that being an everyday writing researcher is a very different endeavor than, say, looking for one "perfect" or "best" way of writing or form of writing. Instead, much of what Anya and I talked about helps me to recognize that everyday writing research is really more about being alert to all of the many different ways that writing, all sorts of writing for all sorts of reasons, gets entangled into people's lives and turned to their own purposes. At heart, being an everyday writing researcher is really just about a willingness and a curiosity to look closely, and differently, at writing, and what it does, and how people come to use it, even if that might carry us to texts we didn't readily consider or settings we didn't think we'd go. What I take away from the discussion Anya and I had about our hidden textual worlds is that every day writing is a fascinating place to begin looking at, and thinking and talking and researching and writing about, the richly literate lives we lead.

For me (Anya), speaking to Dr. Roozen absolutely made my day (more like my month), to begin with but I have found now that mundane, trivial tasks like keeping a schedule can be fun and exciting if viewed through a researcher's lens. Our conversation has further assured me that this is what I want to do all through college and perhaps even the rest of my life. Writing is such a personal thing that everyone can relate to. Everyone has their own unique personal experience with it and I am excited to not only continue growing in the field, but also expanding it even the smallest bit by contributing my own literary world.

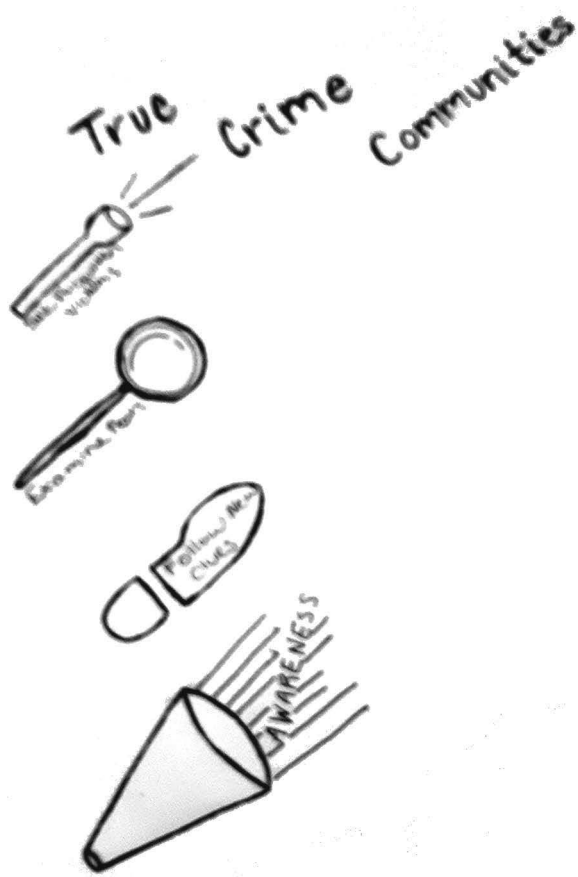
**Kevin Roozen** is a professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of Central Florida. His research examines people's literate activities and the historical pathways of their literate development throughout their lives. In addition to *Expanding Literate Landscapes* (2017), Kevin's scholarship has appeared in a number of journals and edited collections.



**Anya Gregg** is an eighteen-year-old trying to (and sometimes even succeeding in) being an adult. She is planning on fostering her love of writing next year when she ends her gap year and goes to school for a psychology and writing double major. When she isn't asking weird questions like "how do you remember stuff?" to her mom, Anya enjoys horseback riding and playing board games or video games with her friends. She lives at home with her two dogs and cat and hopes to one day become an animal assisted therapist.



# Notes



## Our Mission Statement

The *GWRJ* is dedicated to publishing articles **and other compositions** by writers and scholars whose work investigates the practices of people writing (and acting) in different writing situations using a variety of different genres. **As we enter our second decade of publication, we expect to develop and put out calls for new genres for the journal that are multimodal in nature or shorter than an average article. If you have a genre or project you'd like to propose, please email us with your suggestion.** 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 in which writing happens.

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, which means 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. Accepted articles will be informed by either primary research into writing behaviors and activities and/or 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, it may take time and a couple of rounds of revision before an article is ready to be published. Please contact the Managing Editor at [grassrootswriting@gmail.com](mailto:grassrootswriting@gmail.com) with queries about possible submissions.

### ***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 \$50.00 for each article published in a print issue of the *GWRJ*.

### **Style and Tone**

1. 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:
2. 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.
3. “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.
4. Language and style that is overly formal or “academic” may be unappealing to our readers.
5. 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. While writers (especially of first-person narratives) may write about successes, they need to complicate the genres with which they are working.
6. Tone or content that situates the reader as a certain kind of writer (whether as a master or novice) with shared experiences can be



problematic because the readership of the journal constitutes a wide variety of writers with different writing abilities and experiences.

7. 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.
8. 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,” 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, as well as 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 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, such as by 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 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 in which 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 in order 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 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, people might assume that composing practices work in similar ways across all kinds of genres and writing situations. While it is possible to trace similar kinds of literate activities or composing 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 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 as well as 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*

Previous work that exists in the journal in this area tended to focus specifically on grammar conventions or on the usage of particular kinds of stylistic or punctuation devices. However, we have noted our desire 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). In the last several issues we have seen authors take up this call in interesting ways. Issues 7.1 and 7.2, for example, include articles featuring research into the role of language variation and its effects on both meaning-making and composing practices. See Agathe Lancrenon’s article “Everything You Need to Know About Transferring Metaphorical Ducks” and Cristina Sanchez-Martín’s article “Language Variation Across Genres: Translingualism Here and There” in Issue 7.1. And, in issue 7.2, see Su Yin Khor’s article “Multilingual Notes as a Tool to Understand Super Dense Readings.” We look forward to continuing to publish additional studies that investigate these concepts in innovative ways.

### ***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 3.2 ("The Little Genre that Could: CHAT Mapping the Slogan of the Big Communist Propaganda"), Summer Qabazard's article in issue 3.2 ("From Religion to Chicken Cannibalism: American Fast Food Ads in Kuwait"), Wesley Jacques' article in issue 7.1 ("The E-Cat's Meow: Exploring Activity Translingual in Mobile Gaming") or Sanam Shahmiri's article in issue 7.2 ("Translating the Untranslatable: Making Meaning of Idiomatic Expressions Across Languages"). 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 add interest and information to a text, but copyright issues will need to be considered. Charts, graphs, and 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 them 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, 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. Because 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](mailto: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

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

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