

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

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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.

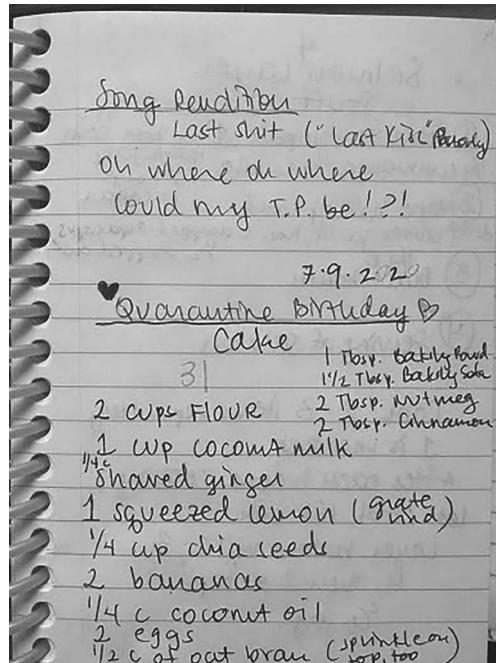


Figure 2: Two entries of “Quarantine Creations”: top, a silly idea for a song-lyrics rendition; bottom: a very bland quarantine thirty-first birthday cake recipe I made out of leftover ingredients, because I couldn't justify running to the grocery store for only a few items.

## 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

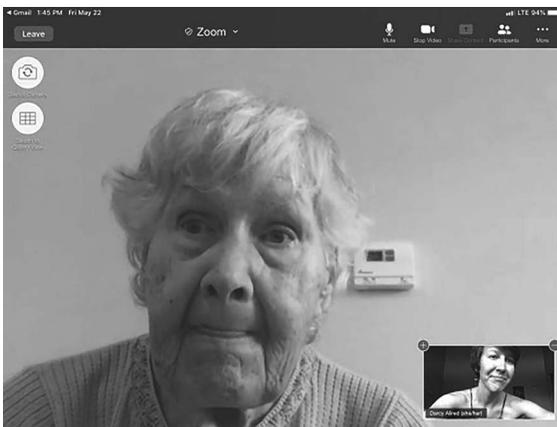


Figure 6: Grandma Betty and me on her ninety-fourth birthday. Zoom call May 22nd, 2020.

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.

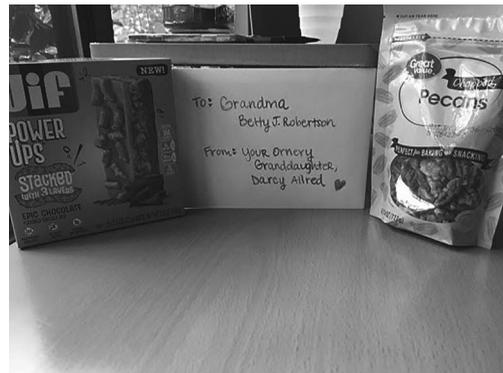


Figure 8: Multimodal birthday treats.

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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