

Let's CHAT About the Dog Park

Katie Pardun

When Katie Pardun thinks her perfect fall morning will go to waste, it suddenly turns exciting as she decides to try out the dog park for the very first time. Read how genre comes into play as she takes her dog along on this new journey and analyzes how her uptake makes this trip one that she will remember forever.

The Start to My Not-So-Typical Morning

CHIRP! CHIRP! CHIRP! Bright sun. Crisp air. I hear scratching outside my bedroom door. Am I still dreaming? Confused, I hop out of bed to see what is going on. As I open my door, I look straight ahead. Nothing. But then, I look down. A bright, happy face and a wagging tail. In my opinion, there is no better sight. It is only 8:00 a.m., so I decide to crawl back under my covers. This time with my adorable Goldendoodle, Cody, at the foot of my bed.

Fall mornings are my favorite. Aren't they everyone's favorite? Nothing beats a perfect autumn day. But what exactly do people do on a day like today? I could go to the pumpkin patch, pick apples, or go to a corn maze—AHA! I look into the sweet, innocent eyes of my dog, and suddenly I have an epiphany. What better way to spend this wonderful morning than to take a trip to the dog park!

I've decided to run with the idea. My parents are a bit confused because I am usually not one to offer to take Cody for a walk, especially this early. I

guess I'll blame it on the fall weather. There's only one problem: I've never actually been to the dog park before. My dog has! But I'm not so sure I would understand any type of direction he'd be able to give me.

Let's Go Behind the Scenes

Almost too overwhelmed to follow through with this great idea, I take a seat at my kitchen table. Too many thoughts and ideas race through my mind and suddenly I cannot think straight. I decide to use this opportunity to tap into my inner scholar and expand my writer researcher identity. The Illinois State University writing program defines your **writer researcher identity** as how you grow as a writer in more than just one situation. This involves thinking beyond using your skills but being able to understand how your skills affect what you can do as a writer.

Heading to the dog park will allow me to investigate multiple **genres** (any kind of text that is produced). Now, some of you may be thinking genre is limited to fiction, nonfiction, drama, or whatever the case may be. If you happen to be reading this article while standing, you might want to take a seat because I've got some news for you. Aside from any topic you are reading about, genre includes any form of writing, whether menus, billboards, sidewalk chalk, or countless others. With all of this in mind, I came up with two questions regarding my spontaneous trip:

1. How did the various genres around me aid in my successful trip to the dog park?
2. Did my uptake and/or learning process lead me to make better use of the resources I had access to in order to make my trip successful?

After I thought all of this through, I was ready to take on the morning. Although this was going to be a new experience for me, I was ready to use the questions I brewed up in order for all the aspects of this trip to run smoothly (or so I hoped). Thus, in order for me and my pup to have a successful trip to the dog park, I not only had to investigate the different genres around me, but I also had to analyze how my uptake process would make this trip possible.

My Dog and I Start to ... CHAT

In order to answer my first question, I was going to have to analyze every step in this process. I know what you're all thinking—how time consuming!

Actually, it's not! I have the ISU Writing Program's version of **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)** here to help me. In Joyce Walker's article, "Just CHATting," she defines ISU's version of CHAT as "how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts" (Walker 71–2). In the version of CHAT that the ISU Writing Program uses, the goal is to investigate how different kinds of literacies and texts are produced and used in the world. To all my fellow dog owners out there, you know how much preparation goes into heading to the dog park. It's not as glorious as one might think. However, this preparation does come with a label. Here, I am using **activity**: "the actual practices that people engage in as they create a text" (Walker 76). In efforts to get ready, I gathered the leash, the collar, and some water. I threw on my tennis shoes and was ready to go. Even though I was not specifically creating a text, I was preparing myself to analyze those texts that affect my trip to the park. Activity includes, but is definitely not limited to, actions such as writing, drawing, or even calling someone on the phone to acquire their input. In simpler terms, I like to think of activity as preparing myself to achieve my bigger goal: successfully taking Cody to the dog park.

My next step was to successfully get me and my dog to the forest preserve. An easy task, or so I thought. Another key term of ISU CHAT, **ecology**, starts to impede my attempt at a perfect morning. Ecology is "the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing" ("Key Terms"). I lean down to attach the leash to my dog's collar and BAM—he's aware of what's going to happen next. The thought of going to the dog park for my pup is equivalent to a kid in a candy store. Pure chaos. This uncontrollable event almost stopped me from swiftly boarding him into the car. After an extremely tiring ten minutes, I'm sitting in the driver's seat accompanied by Cody as my copilot. On a more serious note, ecology could be an event as horrible as a hurricane, power outage, or any other environmental factor that hinders the production of a text or action (Walker 76). In my case, I was lucky enough that it was just my silly dog filled with too much excitement. I plug the address into Google Maps, and we're off.

The Road to Success

My tires screech as I make the final right turn into the parking lot. I can't help but wonder if I'm more excited than Cody! Although I've never been to a park specifically made for dogs, this is not my first rodeo. Because I already have an idea of what comes into play as I take in this new project,

my **antecedent knowledge** is in action. I've previously brought Cody to the local forest preserve near my house, so I am well aware that I need to keep his leash on as we excitedly hop out of our car. Since I have been to a forest preserve before and I am at a semi-similar, but new, forest preserve now, I am able to use some antecedent knowledge to decide how to act.

The leash is on, and the car is locked. Check. But now I approach an unfamiliar scene. A double gate. I take a breath and gaze at the not-so-empty slabs of wood in front of me. Fortunately, there are multiple genres staring me in the face. I'm able to recognize that the sign in front of me is, in fact, an example of genre, and it is there to aid to my success on this trip. Written on a white rectangle before my eyes read, "Please lock the first gate before opening the second gate." Easy. I am barely standing in the enclosed box when Cody goes to take a leap of faith over the second gate, pulling us both into the park in a way that could lead to us getting kicked out.

To my amazement, I spot yet another sign that would save me any other sort of embarrassment that might result in my ejection from this park. My action of taking up these different texts and using them for my own good results in another ISU CHAT term. **Reception** "takes into account the ways people might re-use or re-purpose a text" (Walker 75). Bold, red letters exhibit the words "Park Rules and Regulations." Jackpot! Word after word, line after line, I feel fully informed about how to act in this (almost) foreign place. Additionally, after reading that I need to "keep [my] dog leashed while in parking lots, walkways and unfenced areas" (LCFPD), I gain more knowledge of how to follow the rules of the park. In my opinion, this policy is extremely necessary; however, someone else could come into this park thinking that rule is not fair to the freedom of their furry friend. (I know, who would think that?)

On the other hand, I can take into consideration "who a text is given to, for what purposes, using what kinds of distribution tools" by using **distribution** (Walker 75). Hence, a good example would be to take this information and message my dog-owner friends, informing them of how to stay safe if they decide to make the same spontaneous trip as me. From there, my friends could post that rule to their Facebook wall, sharing it with multiple followers at once. A text can be distributed in forms that include printed texts, instant messages, or even word of mouth. However, one should be careful in how they distribute texts and to who they're distributing the texts, because they run the risk of having someone else alter the original information into something different.

Making Comparisons

Finally, we're on our way! I unclip the leash, setting Cody free—the moment he's been waiting for since before we hopped in the car. I'm seeing examples of genre everywhere I turn: "Place Poop Bags Here," "End of Fenced in Area," and "Start of Trail." I can't help but think about how this park compares to the suddenly lousy forest preserve I've been taking Cody to for months. I come to the realization of how much genre actually does matter for what someone is trying to accomplish.

The biggest difference between these two places that pops into my racing mind is that everyone at this dog park has something in common: the possession of—you guessed it!—a dog. Because the interactions of these people are awfully similar, it is an example of our final ISU CHAT term, **socialization**. Socialization includes creating texts based on a set of ideas or beliefs about known activities. At the dog park, we are all here for basically one thing: to get our pups some exercise and hopefully tire them out. Adversely, at our local forest preserve, some might be out for personal exercise, while others might just want to take in a beautiful sunset on the bridge. I conclude that this is why I have not previously seen as many helpful signs or rules that allow me and Cody to gain the full experience when we are closer to our house.

Putting All the Pieces Together

With it being my first time in this magical area, I wanted to partake in everything we possibly could. From walking the trail to playing fetch in the "Dog Exercise Area" (yes, another example of a genre), I came to the conclusion that this park just might have to become part of my Saturday morning routine.

I sit on one of the many benches provided and take in my surroundings. Before I know it, Cody's lying down right at my ankles. With him panting at my side, there is no doubt in my mind that I have done the job right. I knew my parents were going to be so thrilled when I walked into the house with a tired, ready-to-nap ball of fluff. Giving Cody a second to rest and a large bowl of water, I reattach his leash and approach the double gate, this time not so foreign. Stepping into the middle of the gate this time feels normal. Making sure both sides around me are closed, we slowly but surely make our way back into the car, both of us a little more exhausted than the last time we sat in these seats. As we pulled out of the parking lot, I'm comforted to see my copilot calm, cool, and collected. So, was the trip a success?

It's All About the Uptake

Walking back into the house, I feel empowered. This time, I was the one bringing back a tired dog that was once so energetic and, I hate to say it, sometimes annoying. (This might just be the only time I admit that Cody can get on my nerves. But, if you own a year-old Goldendoodle, you just might understand how crazy they get.)

While Cody snuggled in for his nap, it was time for me to do the same. Before falling completely asleep, I analyzed my uptake. This is where the answer to my second question above comes into play. According to Angela Sheets, a fellow *Grassroots* writer, “**Uptake** is the process we go through to ‘take up’ a new idea and think about it until it makes sense” (Sheets 136, emphasis added). Don’t be fooled: the uptake process is different for everyone. While I could go on and tell you how multiple people could have experienced this trip, I’ll keep it short and stick with my own.

Conclusion

I won’t bore you by explaining every aspect of this trip—I think there’s enough story above; however, I will inform you of the knowledge I gained. I like to think of uptake as my learning process or what I did to gain a greater understanding of a certain matter.

On this specific morning, I decided to look at the objects I read in more detail. By looking at the various signs around me at the dog park, I was clearly instructed about how to follow the rules and use the park to my advantage. I stepped out of my comfort zone as I took this trip by myself, not knowing if we’d both come out in one piece.

My uptake process started the second I grabbed Cody’s leash and became aware that CHAT terms did not necessarily pertain to only writing. However, I had multiple experiences where CHAT did connect to objects that contained text. During the start of this new adventure, I was able to pull previous knowledge out of thin air, which aided to my success. I used more antecedent knowledge than I was expecting to. At first, I believed this previous wisdom would conflict with my new experience; yet, it ended up making me a stronger writer researcher. Since my goal for the morning was to have a successful trip to the dog park, I was able to accurately analyze this process which aided greatly to my uptake.

My Final Advice to You

As I chose my topic for writing this article, I feared there would not be enough information to fully inform my readers about ISU CHAT and all the greatness it has to offer. I was completely wrong. I'd like to challenge each and every one of you to go about your daily activities in a "chatty" way. As you prepare yourselves for any new experience, take a step back and look at all the genres around you. Hey, there is no harm in doing so! You might even gain a new understanding in how to build up your uptake. As I incorporate a few ISU CHAT terms into my everyday life, I feel myself becoming a stronger writer researcher. With every new activity comes a new opportunity to expand your learning process. Hey, you might even want to try to take your dog to the park! I'm sure your parents will be happy with that idea, and, as you gain new uptake, so will you!

Resources

"Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program." *ISU Writing*, <http://isuwriting.com/key-terms/>.

"Lakewood Dog Park—Recreation | Lake County Forest Preserves." *Lake County Forest Preserves | Preservation, Restoration, Education and Recreation*, 2018.

Sheets, Angela. "Angela Rides the Bus: A High Stakes Adventure Involving Riveting Research, Amazing Activity Systems, and a Stylish Metacognitive Thinking Cap." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2014, pp. 131–138.

Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 71–80.



Katie Pardun is an undergraduate student at Illinois State University. Due to her love for kids, she is majoring in Elementary Education. Katie absolutely adores her dog and loves spending time with him. She loves hanging out with friends and going to different ice cream places around her hometown. She is also a big runner and has run the Chicago half marathon two years in a row!