

## Gone to the Dogs (and Cats, and Rabbits, and Various Other Small Animals): Writing for Animals at HSCI



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Heidi Bowman

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Heidi Bowman, an animal person who describes herself as “half-cat” and is only half-joking, looks at how human beings can use writing to help other animals. She focuses on the writing surrounding the animals at the Humane Society of Central Illinois (HSCI) in Normal, examining how writing has been used to try to find a forever home for a cat named Laynie and a dog named Clover.

The other night, as my husband Eric and I walked our dogs—Junie chugging ahead like a sled dog and Kit trotting like a show dog beside us—we chatted about their funny and diverse personalities. Eric wondered, not for the first time, “What do you think their lives were like before they lived with us?”

Animals are a huge part of our family’s story, as we have quite a menagerie of rescued cats and dogs. We are continually curious about what their lives were like before they became “ours.” How did our “girls” Junie and Kit ever wind up at the pound? How did Marvin become the little cat crying after the mailman? How did the tiny kitten Vera end up trembling on the edge of traffic? We will never know. The animals can’t tell us, although they can tell us a lot of things through their barks, meows, purrs, tail movements, and head butts. It is my fervent belief that it is up to us, their human friends, to meet animals wherever they’re at in their story and to do what we can to help them.

We humans can use words, specifically written words, to help tell animals’ stories. I decided to research how the people at one local organization, the Humane Society of Central Illinois (HSCI), use writing every day to help homeless animals. What kind of writing is involved in the HSCI’s work to connect stray and unwanted animals with new loving families? In order to


conduct this research, I visited the HSCI's pet adoption center several times. I talked to the manager and explained that I wanted to write an article; although I am a volunteer there, I didn't want the staff to wonder why I was hanging out talking to cats and dogs and scrawling notes in a notebook. I spent time with Clover the dog and Laynie the cat, observing them and also always looking at the writing surrounding them. My heart is always with the underdog (or undercat), and Clover and Laynie had been at the shelter for the longest amount of time. I specifically investigated the genre of the Personality Profile, the form that people who surrender their animals to HSCI fill out, and how the staff takes up this written information and combines it with their own experiences with the animal to help find him or her  a new home. I also visited the HSCI website and Facebook page to look at how they share the animals' stories.



Figure 1: The logo of the Humane Society of Central Illinois.

My experiences in the writing program at ISU have taught me to look closer at the writing that is all around us. I immediately noticed the writing on the sign outside the HSCI building. My eye caught on the little heart at the top of the "I." It's just a little graphic, but it represents quite a bit (see Figure 1). This small heart represents the large amount of love the humans at HSCI have for animals, a love that motivates them to try to make the world a better place for them and, I would find, infuses its way into the writing surrounding the animals there. This love is further captured in the words of the HSCI's mission statement, which is painted on a sign below the front desk when you walk into the lobby: "Our mission: to find loving, forever homes for abused and unwanted pets."

## Incorporating CHAT

Cultural-historical activity theory, or CHAT, is a way of looking deeper at any writing in the world; it "help[s] us look at the how/why/what of writing practices" (Walker 72). CHAT makes use of different categories (or what I like to call "chategories"): production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology. (For a more detailed explanation of these terms, please see Joyce Walker's "Just CHATting" article in the first-ever *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*.) I personally am just not good with boundaries (which is one of the reasons I have so many animals) and sometimes it's hard for me to distinguish whether I am looking at a text through the lens of, say, "representation" or "activity." There is definitely some overlap, as **representation** involves anything people do as they plan a text, including the *activity* they engage in. Let's be honest: CHAT can seem scary and confusing, especially if we're having a hard time understanding the differences between the various lenses through which we can look at any text. But even Walker says

we don't need to freak out over each "chategory" fitting neatly into its own box. She points out that we can consider writing "through *any one or a combination* of these perspectives" (76, emphasis added). And listen to this: "[t]here is no 'right' way to use these categories to consider literate activity" (79). There is no right way, guys. You say representation; I say activity. You say tomato; I say to-mah-to. The point is to look deeper at all the stuff surrounding the creation of a text and realize that any act of writing, no matter how simple it appears on the surface, is complex. CHAT is here to help us; it's a tool to help us "understand more fully the complicated nuances of writing in different situations" (80).

I used CHAT to enlarge my understanding of some of the writing HSCI uses to help animals. By the way, "chat" means "cat" in French, although it's pronounced differently than we pronounce the acronym. 🐾 I suppose that's kind of irrelevant, but it's cool since I used CHAT to look at writing surrounding *chats et chiens* (translation: "cats and dogs"). The "chategories" that immediately came to mind as I conducted my writing research include production, representation, and distribution. I also came to realize how much my own reception affected my reading of these texts, and how the mission of the HSCI also colors how these texts are created.

## Looking at the Personality Profile Form

**CAT PERSONALITY PROFILE**

Please **CHECK** all that apply and **PRINT** the information requested.

Cat's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Owned for how long? \_\_\_\_\_

Where did you get your cat? (circle one) Shelter Private Party Found got as kitten  
if a shelter, Name of Shelter \_\_\_\_\_

Why are you giving up this cat (be specific)? \_\_\_\_\_

Name of your cat's veterinarian \_\_\_\_\_

Please list the AGES of household members your cat has lived with:  
Men \_\_\_\_\_ Women \_\_\_\_\_ Children \_\_\_\_\_

*How did your cat react to the men in the household?*  
 Friendly  Playful  Afraid  Ignores  Hisses/growls  Scratches  Bites  No men in household

*How did your cat react to the women in the household?*  
 Friendly  Playful  Afraid  Ignores  Hisses/growls  Scratches  Bites  No women in household

*How did your cat react to the children in the household?*  
 Friendly  Playful  Afraid  Ignores  Hisses/growls  Scratches  Bites  No children in household

What other animals did your cat live with?  No other animals in household  
 Dogs # \_\_\_\_\_ Breed \_\_\_\_\_  Cats #males \_\_\_\_\_ #females \_\_\_\_\_  Other \_\_\_\_\_

*How did your cat get along with the cats in your household?*  Friendly  Playful  Tolerant  Afraid  Ignores  
 Hisses  Growls  Swats

*How did your cat get along with the dogs in your household?*  Friendly  Playful  Tolerant  Afraid  Ignores  
 Hisses  Growls  Scratches

Figure 2: A peek at the Personality Profile form used by the HSCI.

The Personality Profile form asks many detailed questions so the HSCI staff can get a better understanding of an incoming animal's experiences and preferences. Both the Cat and Dog Personality Profile forms are two-page documents. I am first and foremost a cat lady, so I chose to study the Cat Personality Profile closely. As I did so, I thought about the "chategory" of

**production**, which looks at how a text is produced and structured. The form contains some questions with boxes of possible answers you can check and some questions with blank lines where you can write in your answers.

To better suit their needs, the HSCI has one set form where people provide answers to certain questions. They are looking to find out important information, and if they just gave everyone a blank sheet and said, “Tell us about your dog,” they would not necessarily receive the information they need. Some people would jot down a few facts; others (like me) would write small novels. The structure of the form puts parameters on the kind of information people can provide.

Clearly, a person like me would have a hard time finding the right box to capture the quirks of my animals’ personalities. As I read over the questions, I became aware of my own reception of them. For example, where would I put that our cat Vera likes to sleep above our heads on a pillow? How would I explain that when I pick up Dandy, he immediately tilts his head back for a kiss and nuzzle between his ears? How would I mark that we are pretty sure the sweet and spacey Kit has a constant stream of elevator music playing in her head? Maybe most people surrendering their pets are not thinking about all of these little details. But they could be, and this Personality Profile form is an example of how the way a text is produced places limits on what we can say, and on what parts of our stories get told.

For me, the most fascinating question is this one: “Why are you giving up this animal (be specific)?” The form provides a little over four inches of a blank line on which to write the answer. It strikes me, as it always does, how much is unwritten, or unsaid, on this line. Some of the reasons people often give include: “allergies,” “new baby,” “adjustment issues,” “moving,” “did not get along with dog,” “too many animals,” and “no time for.” These few words have a big job, as they are supposed to sum up the rupture of what should have been, in my mind, a lifelong commitment. To bring it back to CHAT here, clearly my own strong feelings about animals are affecting how I *receive* the words. The judgmental side of me wants to add on to people’s answers. I think unwritten reasons that people surrender their animals often include: “I didn’t realize adorable kittens grow up into adult cats,” “I care too much about furniture,” “My girlfriend doesn’t like dogs, and I am too infatuated to realize the dog would still love me long after the girlfriend’s gone,” and “The cat is pregnant again because I never took the time to get her spayed, and I don’t want to deal with it.” However, I recognize that even the reasons I would deem cruel or stupid are complicated—people’s upbringings, living situations, and finances shape expectations and may not have prepared them for pet ownership. Many of the stories behind these animals’ arrival at the HSCI are messy, for the people and the animals, and it’s beyond the scope of the Personality Profile form to capture this complexity.

As I think about why the questions on the form are not presented in a way that would allow for emotional or long-winded disclosures, the mission

of the HSCI comes again to my mind. They want “to find loving, forever homes for abused and unwanted pets.” That’s the bottom line. In order to give these pets another chance, they need to provide a place where people can surrender their pets and not feel as if they are being judged harshly. For the HSCI, this form has a job to do—to collect the most pertinent information that they can then use to get the animals into a new, lifelong home. Looking at this form through the lens of representation made me realize how much careful thought was put into the writing of these questions.

This form provides an insider’s “scoop” from the former owner’s perspective and helps the HSCI tailor their care to the animal’s likes and dislikes, even down to preferred toys. The information is funneled to future owners, where it is essential for their decision-making. For example, if a dog has a history of being terrified of men, it would clearly be important for potential adopters to be aware of this fact. The HSCI staff compare the information on the form with their own observations as they spend time with each cat and dog, providing food, water, and lots of affection.

## Naming

As noted above, representation can include any of the activities or thought processes that go on behind the scenes of any actual writing. As I started to look at writing that the HSCI does to represent these animals to the public, to tell their stories on Facebook and on its website, the group’s underlying philosophy that these animals are *individual* beings worthy of our love seems to be reflected in the writing. Each one has a unique personality and a unique story, and the people at HSCI utilize whatever tools they can to represent this individuality to the public. The animals at the shelter are not objects. First and foremost, they have a name.

Many of the animals are surrendered by their families, so sometimes they already have and know their names. But oftentimes when the animal is a stray or abandoned, staff members need to create a name, which is another kind of “writing” they do. Naming hundreds of cats and dogs each year can be quite a challenge, and last summer HSCI staff reached out to the public for help, posting a “Name the Litter of Kittens” contest on Facebook and taking suggestions for “linked” names for a litter of kittens. My kids and I participated, proud of our suggestions of “nut” names (Almond, Cashew, Pistachio, Peanut, Walnut, Pecan, and Macadamia) and US state names (Mama could be America and the kittens could be states such as Minnesota [Minnie], California [Cal], Alabama [Allie or BamBam], Texas, Virginia [Virg or Ginny], etc). We lost out to the “fashion” names suggestion (Ralph Lauren, Versace, Coco Chanel, Yves, Armani, and other names that I don’t remember, as the main fashion concern at our house is how clearly pet fur shows up. We don’t wear a lot of black). The staff works hard

to give the animals names that are original and unique—and also marketable. People with children, for example, would most likely be drawn more to a cat named “Pikachu” than, say, “Fluffy.” This is another blurred boundary between representation and reception—what seems cool to the workers at HSCI might work with other adults, but it may not seem cool to the kids.

## Website/Facebook Posts

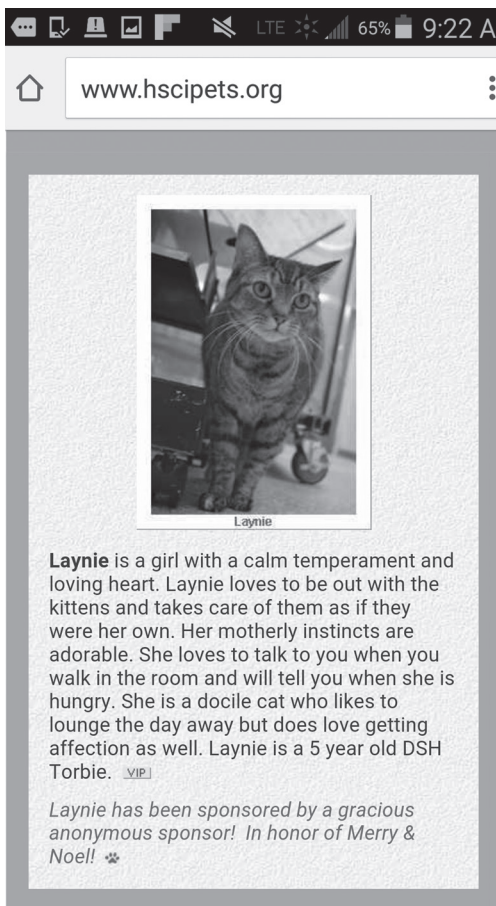


Figure 3: A screenshot of Laynie’s description on the HSCI website in November 2015.

Writing used *within* the HSCI isn’t the only type of writing that is used to help the animals find a home, which brings me back to CHAT. The “chategory” of **distribution** looks at how writing is spread. The HSCI uses the Internet to disperse written information about the animals in their care. HSCI posts pictures of adoptable cats and dogs on their website and on their Facebook page. The writing here again reflects the HSCI’s attention and care for each individual animal. They don’t say, “Come see our cats and dogs!” Rather, they introduce you, with a picture, to each individual animal. Potential adopters can scroll through the available animals. Sometimes people who are not in a position to adopt are still moved by the picture and story of an animal, and they can choose to “sponsor” the cat or dog’s care. I have included screenshots of Laynie and Clover’s online descriptions (see Figures 3 and 4). Clover was the “Featured Dog!” at this time, with her picture at the top of the Adoptable Dogs tab.

## Talking to Laynie and Clover

I’ve focused this article on writing in the real world that has real life consequences for these animals. Now, I want to spend a little bit of time here introducing you more to the real cat Laynie and the real dog Clover.



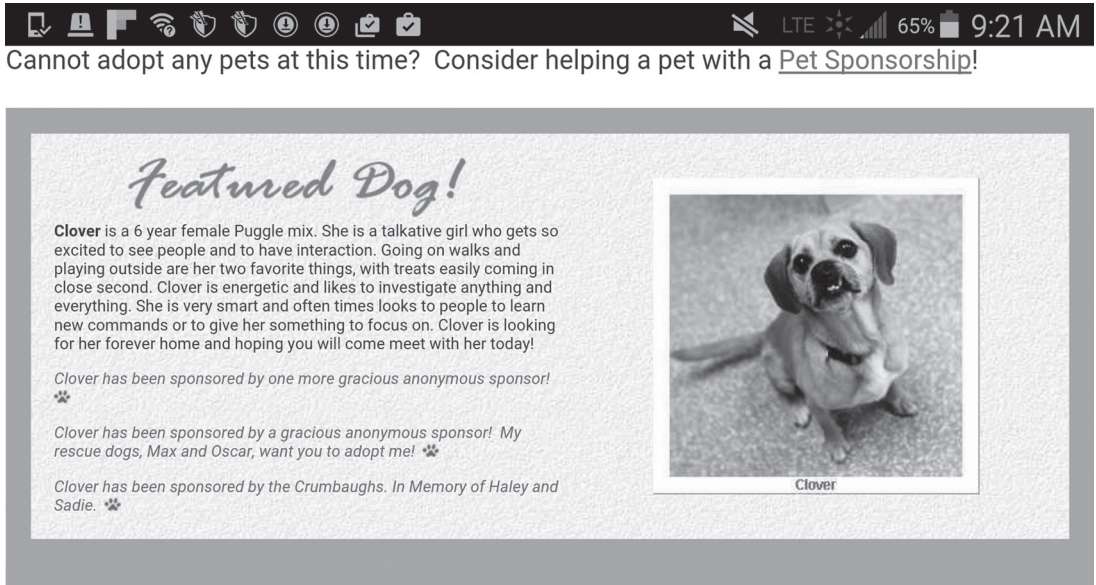


Figure 4: A screenshot of Clover’s description on the HSCI website in November 2015.

Laynie lives with a couple of feline roommates in one of the prime “showrooms” right by the entrance of the adoption center. This room is called the “Cat Flats” and the cats inside are all free to stroll around. The big window lets in plenty of sun and Laynie and the others can sit on the structure made for them out of PVC pipes and buckets and watch the birds outside. She was lounging on a cat bed when I entered her room, and she looked up at me as if to say, “Oh, you’re here for our interview?” I told her yes, I was. I plopped down a few feet away from her with my notebook and pen.

“So you’ve been here a while, huh, Laynie?” I made a clicking sound to her and held out my hand in her direction.

Laynie came over to me and brushed against my fingers. As I made a note of this, she rubbed her face on my pen. The sun lit up her fur, and she was happy—until one of her roommates jumped off the room’s play structure and came over to investigate. Tucker is a young light orange and white male, with a long nose and big, innocent eyes. He sat a few feet away from me while Laynie squinted her eyes at him and quietly growled her displeasure.

“Tucker, I am here to interview Laynie. Maybe some other time, OK?”

Tucker looked at me, his eyes wide.

Laynie, her tail switching slightly, walked away, and I stood up and followed her. As I flipped through the forms in her folder and tried to make sense of her story, she came over and brushed against my knee. There are clear

plastic folders hanging on the wall for each animal in the room. The folder contains the animal's records, including the Personality Profile. It appeared Laynie had originally been brought there by someone who had adopted her from another shelter. Her Personality Profile revealed she had recently been adopted from HSCI only to be quickly returned after her adopter and landlord had a misunderstanding. I shook my head, overwhelmed, as I wish all cats' and dogs' stories went more like: "Born, adopted by loving humans, and lived with them until death."

"You've been in and out of shelters your whole life, huh?" I asked.

Laynie gave a short mew, as if she was curtly nodding her head.

Her folder contained a laminated card with the words "Very Important Pet" and an image of a cat on it. Her VIP status is also flagged on her website description. The VIP designation slashes Laynie's adoption fee from \$100 to \$30.

"You are a very important pet, Laynie," I told her. She was looking out the window, but I could tell she was listening. "People should appreciate great older cats who have personality and intelligence."

She offered another mew of assent. She knows I realize \$30 is a heck of a bargain for a fully vetted, quirky, lifelong friend. She knows I realize that underneath the positive spin of the words "Very Important Pet" is a sad truth: potential adopters overlook Laynie in favor of younger, friskier cats such as Tucker, who had indeed been adopted the next time I visited. By giving Laynie that title, HSCI is using representation to highlight her. They further use the tools at their disposal (their production) to even the playing field by lowering Laynie's adoption fee. I'd encountered all sorts of writing the HSCI had done to help Laynie—the carefully crafted questions on the Personality Profile, her feature on their website, and now the "marketing" of her as a VIP. It's clear to me that writing is a critical component in their efforts to find this cat a forever home. If I didn't already have so many awesome cats in my life, I would adopt her in a heartbeat.

I also would adopt Clover. OK, I am cat-centric and always will be, but I love dogs too. The same day I talked to Laynie, I visited Clover, who was lying on a dog bed at the back of her cage, radiating sweetness, her tail wagging slowly. Cecil, a little rat terrier in the next cage over, was much more energetic, jumping up and down repeatedly the entire time I talked to Clover. He was so excited he reminded me, somewhat ridiculously, of Donkey in *Shrek*, hopping up and down, saying, "Pick me! Pick me!" (Someone did pick him; the next time I visited, Cecil had been adopted.)




Clover was first transferred to HSCI from another shelter. Her Personality Profile showed that, like Laynie, she too had recently been adopted out and returned. The reason? “Owner’s health.” (Again, my own reception of these words is tinged with skeptical curiosity. What *kind* of health problems? Is that just an excuse?) I have taken Clover on walks on previous visits and she wiggles with enthusiasm as she smells all the wonderful smells all over the ground, but it was the end of the day, and she was tired.

“Somebody should have realized by now that you’re a good luck charm, Miss Clover,” I told her. “Someday, some family is going to be very lucky to have you.” (I was thinking again of my own reception—I see the name “Clover” written on the cage of a sweet dog, and it brings to mind happy images of fields full of four-leafed fortune. I can only hope that other potential adopters (ones who don’t already have two dogs and more cats than you can respectably claim in polite society) feel the same positive pull toward this dog named Clover who needs a home.)

Clover lifted her head off her paws and looked at me. She wagged her tail. She seemed to appreciate me stopping by. I think she would also appreciate how the HSCI is using writing to help animals like Laynie and Clover have their best shot at getting what they deserve: a happy ending.

**Update:** Writing is an ongoing, continual process. At the time of my third revision, I was thrilled to report in an update that Laynie and Clover had both been adopted into loving homes. Laynie had been adopted by a woman who came into the shelter and asked, “OK, what cat has been here the longest?” Unfortunately, that home did not work out and Laynie is back at the Cat Flats. Her adopter had adored her, but Laynie was just too crabby with the other elderly cat in the home. Laynie’s description on the HSCI website now reads, “This girl has been bounced around a lot, and is just looking for a soft place to land.” I am happy to report that Clover is still living it up with her new family and enjoying all the belly rubs.

<sup>1</sup> I call them “ours” because they live with us and they are domesticated, but I wholeheartedly agree with these words of Alice Walker: “The animals of the world exist for their own reasons.”


<sup>2</sup> It is because of this belief that the little kitten Nell is curled up, purring on my lap, while I write these words. Recently, when Eric and I were walking the dogs, she busted out from underneath a pine tree, cried out at us in what I can *only* call recognition, and ran across the road to us, her tail high in the air. I swear, she knew us, and she knew we would help her. None of the nearby humans knew anything about her, and they weren’t particularly interested. She is super-smart and can even say her own name. “Say Nell,” I’ll say. “Nell,” she’ll meow back.



Figure 5: Nellie, our newest little punk, helped with the writing of this article by purring her encouragement.

🐾<sup>3</sup> I always try not to refer to an animal as an “it.” I could write another article about how language often objectifies the animals with whom we are so fortunate to share this world.

🐾<sup>4</sup> I even named a cat Chat once. He started showing up in our yard to eat a year or so ago. A neighborhood boy then told me that the cat’s name was actually Cheeto and that he used to be his family’s outside cat. Cheeto, for whatever reason, had decided he needed to move on with his life. The separation was amicable, and Cheeto, at the time of this writing, is eating his breakfast in our garage.

## Works Cited

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**Heidi Bowman** has a Master's degree in English from Illinois State University and is an adjunct professor of English at ISU and Lincoln College. In her free time she enjoys snuggling with her cats and dogs. Junie is the dog across from Dandy, the toddler-sized cat. Kit is going to town on a bone while listening to the elevator music playing in her head.

