

Unraveling “Writing”: Interweaving Maverick Literacies Throughout a Literate Life

Kevin Roozen

In this article, writing researcher Kevin Roozen argues that the notion of “literate activity” can substantially broaden and enrich our understanding of writing and what it entails. He offers some glimpses into the literate activity of one man’s involvement with automotive repair to illustrate what it looks like when we work to unravel the rich complexity of writing and its functions in people’s lives.

I think that writing, as an activity that people do for a variety of purposes, is fascinating. Truly fascinating. As someone who both researches and teaches writing, over the past twenty-five years I’ve had the chance to talk with many people about the wealth of different texts they produce and use across the expansive literate landscape of their lives. Based on what I’ve learned from those conversations, I’ve grown increasingly curious about, and come to greatly appreciate, the many forms writing can take, the many ways it comes to be entwined in people’s lives, and the complex pathways along which people develop their abilities to use it.

I’ve also come to realize that seeing writing, really seeing it, in terms of all that it entails and all that it does, is quite challenging. In part, this is because our typical ideas about writing invite us to picture it as a fairly straightforward process of transcribing ideas onto a screen or page rather than as a complex and far-reaching network built from interactions too numerous to count. In this sense, it can be difficult, and perhaps a bit intimidating, for us to wrestle with all that we don’t know about writing. It’s also a challenge to really see writing because we’ve looked at it from the same

Unraveling Writing

Looking at writing with an eye toward understanding its complexity threatens to disrupt the tidy notions we have about what writing is, what it entails, the work it accomplishes, and how it develops throughout our lives.

keep us from paying close attention to its complexity and fascinating features. Seeing writing, really seeing it, demands a way of looking that can illuminate its complexity and the work it does across our lives.

In this article, I outline a way of looking at writing that allows us to unravel what it is and what it does so that we can examine it more closely

Semiotic Signs

“Semiotic signs” are anything that stands for something else. The letters “d-o-g,” for example, are a semiotic sign that stands for a specific kind of animal. But semiotic signs can also be various kinds of images (like drawings, pictures, photographs, icons) and numbers, maps, and shapes and symbols, and they can be inscribed on all kinds of media. Think, for example, of a hop-scotch grid drawn on the concrete, or graffiti on the side of a bus.

Literate Activity

Developed by Paul Prior (1998, p. 138), the term “literate activity” is meant to address 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.

perspective for so long that we can’t imagine that there are other ways of seeing it. It’s also challenging to really pay attention to writing because the writing we do tends to be invisible to us. It often fades into the background of whatever we are doing, and at least as long as it accomplishes what it needs to accomplish, we tend to forget all about it and the work it is doing. These orientations toward writing

and carefully, and, ultimately, understand it in ways we’ve not previously considered. The perspective I describe is grounded in the notion that we need to view writing in terms of what scholars like Paul Prior (1998, 2015; see also Prior & Shipka, 2003; Prior, Walker, & Riggert-Keiffer, 2019) and Jody Shipka (2011) refer to as **literate activity**, activity that involves people producing or using some type of text, broadly conceived. Their use of the term “literate” helps illuminate that human action involves not only words written on a screen or page, but also a wealth of other kinds of semiotic signs inscribed on a variety of other media and the processes and practices involved in making and using those signs. The term “activity” helps to foreground that people make and use texts to act in the world, not merely for the sake of creating the texts themselves. The term “literate activity,” then, helps us to broaden our typical ideas about “writing” to encompass what Paul Prior (1998) describes as “cultural forms of life saturated with textuality, that [are] strongly motivated and mediated by texts” (p. 138).

In this article, I briefly explain some of the key features of literate activity and try to share with you some of the ways that I use this concept in my work as a writing researcher. I’ll also be using some glimpses into the literate life of a gentleman I will refer to as Dan to illustrate what it looks like to unravel the complex ways that different literate activities can overlap and impact each other. Dan’s literate practices surrounding the work he does repairing and restoring automobiles are also evidence of how activities that we don’t typically consider writing can be important to understanding literate activity.

Taking an Interest in People’s Literate Lives

The glimpses into Dan’s literate life I offer below emerged from multiple interviews with Dan over the past few years and from looking through the various texts he has shared with me. My deep interest in people’s writing is what fuels my work as a **writing researcher** at a large university. To do this kind of inquiry, I undergo a good deal of training for how to interact with people and the information they share. I also ask for permission from my university to reach out to people who might want to talk about the activities they are involved in, and then get people’s permission to record our conversations and to publicly share what emerges from them. Over the course of multiple interviews, which often extend over multiple years, we work together as **co-researchers** (Ivanic, 1998, p. 14) inquiring into whichever of their activities they wish to explore and whichever texts they wish to discuss. We use the term “co-researchers” to signal that both of us are involved in shaping where the inquiry goes and what it considers.

Dan’s lifelong passion involves working on cars. He has been “turning wrenches” since he got his very first vehicle, a used Chevrolet Spectrum, at seventeen. “I had it about a week,” he told me,

and I decided, I need a stereo. Gotta have some music. You know, you’re a teenager, seventeen. You gotta have some music. So, the first thing I did with one of my pay checks was I went to Western Auto and I got a Spark-o-Matic stereo and I installed it in the dash. And I’ve been working on cars since then.

Notes On My Research Practices

Dan’s Real Name: Often in my research I use pseudonyms (an invented name) to help protect the privacy of the people I interview.

Writing Researcher: I work in a Department of Writing and Rhetoric, but *writing researcher* is how I think of what I do as a scholar.

Co-Researchers: Rather than thinking of Dan and others as research *subjects*, I like to think that we’re collaborating to uncover what is interesting about the writing in their lives.

Throughout his life, Dan's abiding interest in automobiles as a hobby has also guided him toward a number of part- and full-time jobs, including working as automotive service technician at several automobile dealerships, an assistant wholesale automobile buyer, a sales clerk in an automobile parts store, and even managing his own mobile auto repair business.

In each of the three sections below, I briefly explain some key facets of literate activity: people acting with cultural tools, the histories of people and tools that flow into activity, and the histories of people using tools that extend from activity. In each section, I offer glimpses of Dan's life to show what attending to those aspects reveals about the rich textuality saturating his experiences with automobile repair.

Literate Activity as People Acting with Cultural Tools

One of the central ideas to keep in mind is that activity is always accomplished by people acting with **cultural tools** (Scollon, 2001; Wertsch, 1998). When it comes to thinking about the kinds of cultural tools being used in literate activity, the ones people act with often take the form of some kind of **text**. It is common to think about texts comprised of written language. And, indeed, those are important, but they are certainly not the only ones to consider. In addition to alphabetic prose, scholars have offered examples of a wealth of other kinds of cultural tools. For example, here is a list offered by Lev Vygotsky (1981, p. 137):

- systems of counting
- mnemonic techniques
- algebraic symbol systems
- works of art
- schemes, diagrams, [and] maps
- mechanical drawings

As a way of extending our thinking about the various texts used in literate activity, researchers often use the term **inscription** (Latour, 1987, 1990; Latour & Woolgar, 1986) to reference these kinds of tools. When it comes to thinking about literate activity, then, it helps to direct our attention to people and particular cultural tools they are using. Paul Prior (2006) uses the term **act-with** as a way of keeping the focus on the pairing of people and tools (p. 55). It is also important to realize that people's use of particular cultural tools is oriented toward **multiple purposes** (Scollon, 2001; Wertsch, 1998).

Some of those purposes might be fairly obvious, but others might be less easy to recognize, so it is important to be on the lookout for the multiple purposes that tools allow people to accomplish. In short, in thinking about writing, being alert to people acting with cultural tools and their purposes for using them invites us to look beyond the text that people are producing to inquire about the multiple cultural tools employed in people’s actions and the multiple functions those tools might be serving.

During our talks about his work on the Maverick, Dan mentioned numerous tools he used, from inscribed marks on metal to notes and hastily drawn diagrams to posts on car forums to forms for purchasing parts online. One particular comment that piqued my interest was Dan’s mention of a text he referred to as “the book,” and in particular a comment about “taking pictures for ‘the book.’” When I asked if he could tell me more, Dan described a two-inch, three-ring binder that consists of more than 200 pages documenting the work he and other members of his family had done on the car. The book includes more than 13,000 words and 265 color photographs, taken by various members of the family (see Figure 1). The book also

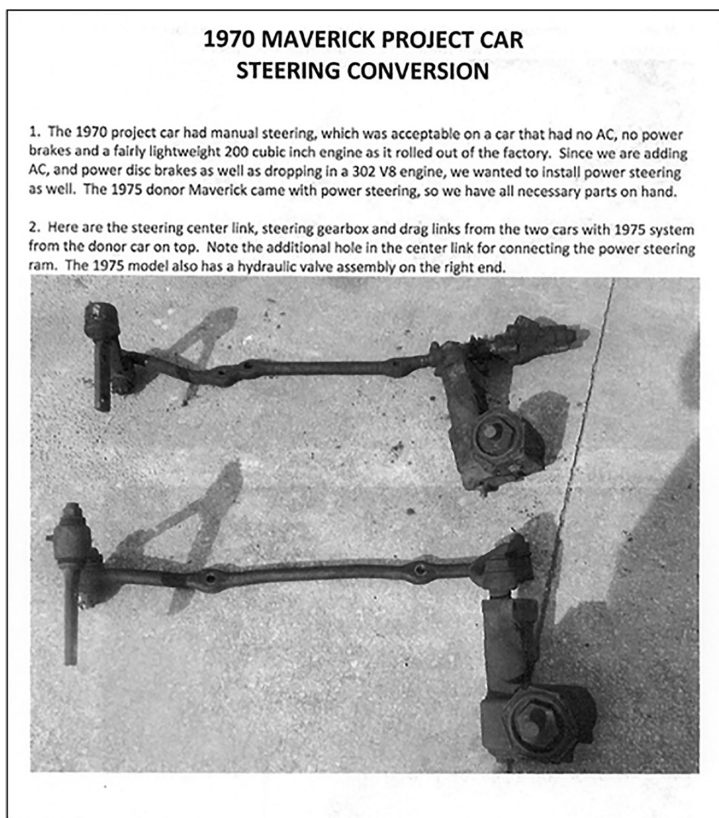


Figure 1: A representative page from Dan’s “Maverick book” showing how he combines written language and images.

contains seventy pages of receipts, records of parts and work completed, directions, and specifications and diagrams.

I was struck by the *Maverick* book itself, especially with Dan's extensive use of images. When I asked Dan to estimate how many pictures he and other members of his family had taken while working on the *Maverick*, he stated "Oh, thousands. Thousands of pictures easily." As we talked further about the book, Dan described the practices he and his dad used to incorporate the pictures into it. For example, Dan stated,

We keep it [the book] in the house, by the computer and the printer, and we add to it after each session [of working on the *Maverick*]. [Our additions to the book] usually come from ideas we think of or pictures we take. We'll put them in the computer and pull up the pictures and we're looking through the pictures and you go "Oh, what I was thinking when I took that picture was that I wanted to explain why this was blah, blah, blah." . . . More often than not, I'll take a picture, I'll take twenty or thirty pictures during three or four hours of working over there, and then get home and stick the card in the computer and look at those pictures and go "Oh yeah, when I was doing this, I was blah, blah, blah blah," and then type out the whole context to go with it [the picture].

For Dan and his father, the pictures play a prominent role in determining what kinds of information gets included in the *Maverick* book. I initially anticipated that Dan and his father would first generate a prose description of what they did and then just select which of their pictures might best illustrate that description. But, according to Dan, the pictures serve a vital role in the book's invention and production.

Key Functions of Dan's Use of Pictures in the *Maverick* Book

In the opening portion of this section, I noted that people's use of cultural tools is aimed toward multiple purposes. Below, I discuss three key functions that Dan's use of pictures allow the *Maverick* book to serve:

- as a customized how-to manual
- as a means of making hidden repairs visible
- as a "reference" document for specific information associated with the work

A Custom Manual

Using images allows the book to function as a kind of repair manual, a guide for showing how to do certain kinds of work similar to the generic manuals

available for factory versions of automobiles. During our interviews, though, Dan indicated how incorporating pictures of his work into the book allowed it to become much more than a “factory manual.” Those manuals, Dave mentioned, are “not sufficient for custom work.” Because Dan provides pictures of the work done on his particular Maverick, pictures of which parts were replaced or modified and of how that work was done, he saw his book more as a “custom manual” that offered readers insights on how to repair this specific car. Elaborating, Dan stated,

If you’re going to put it back together the way the factory had it, then the factory manual is fine. But if you’re not going to do it the way the factory did it, then some other mechanic who comes behind you isn’t going to know what they’ve got. “Well, wait, what is this? This isn’t what the factory did. This is a Ford Explorer motor. This motor doesn’t go in a Maverick. What is going on here?” You know. So that’s kind of, I guess I’m thinking ahead to after me. I want this [book] to survive way past me, and someone’s got to be able to know how to deal with it.

I find it so interesting how Dan uses pictures in the book as a way of providing potential future owners of the car with the detailed information they will need to understand how the work was done and the specific kinds of parts that were used.

Making Work Visible

Another function Dan saw the book’s pictures serving was providing a way for his work on the Maverick to be seen by car enthusiasts or potential buyers, especially work that would not be readily visible, like the work he and his father did inside the engine, for example, or on other portions of the car that cannot be seen. For Dan, making sure that people could see all of his work was important. “Especially,” he noted, “if you’re going to sell something and some of the custom work is hidden from view. You’d have to remove the seats and the carpet, for example, to find out that I replaced the floor.” As he elaborated,

Nobody is going to see ninety-nine percent of what I’ve done to it. So, this [pointing to the Maverick book], anybody that ever gets to see this will go “Oh wow. Look what you did. Look what you did!”

Providing plenty of pictures and detailed descriptions of the work they had done to the car was one way that Dan could attain the level of visibility he wanted.

A Reference Text

Dan also commented that using the pictures allowed the book to function like “kind of a reference book. I don’t really sit and read it, but if something comes up, we’ll refer to it.” Including pictures of the part numbers for parts they used, the information on warranty cards, and the specialized tools they had purchased just for the Maverick offered Dan a way of keeping track of the cascade of information involved in the project. To Dan, having this kind of information in the book was particularly important because it allowed him to carefully chart his expenses, and, often, to save some money. As he stated,

Part of [the role of the book] is to keep track of the cost, and part of it, um, is you need some receipts for warranty. You buy a starter, it has a lifetime warranty, and you don’t think about it. Then four years go by, your starter goes out, and you look in the book, and “Man, this thing’s got a lifetime warranty. I’m on it. I’m going back to the store and I’m not going to pay anything.” So, that’s always a cool part.

The pictures also helped make visible the complicated and extended processes he and his father came up with for repairing parts that could not easily be replaced, processes which they might easily forget with the passage of time and which other car enthusiasts would be impressed with. In this sense, Dan saw the images as serving a documentary function, a way of accessing what he referred to as “the history and the detail” of the work. Elaborating, he stated that it was important to be able to save

every bit of documentation you put together and have. People come and look at this and go “He’s got everything, every nut and bolt listed.” And it gives people an idea of the level of attention to detail we have. “Okay, he replaced this, this, and this. I’m not going to worry about that because he addressed it. Look at the work he does!” It’s a reflection on the work. So it’s a combination of motivating factors.

For Dan, working on his Maverick is clearly a literate activity. Although automotive work is not readily associated with writing, examining Dan’s experiences with working on cars from a literate activity perspective illuminates the wealth and variety of texts and tools he and others use. Unraveling Dan’s creation and use of the Maverick book also reveals the rich complexity of writing and the multiple functions it plays in his life, many of which might go unnoticed unless we look closely and carefully.

Identifying the Histories that Flow into Literate Activity

It is also important to keep in mind that the cultural tools people use, just like people themselves, have histories (Roozen, 2010; Roozen & Erickson, 2017; Shipka, 2011; Wertsch, 1998). They don’t just drop into a particular activity out of nowhere. Researcher Ron Scollon (2001) states that each cultural tool has two histories, “a history in the world, . . . and a history in the life of the person who appropriated it” (p. 120). In other words, the tools we use have existed long before we appeared on the scene and have been produced through their use for particular purposes for specific social worlds. Still, each person encounters those tools in their life through using them for particular purposes. Further, people’s histories of using tools extend back through their near and distant pasts into other kinds of activities, and those histories flow into people’s present action. Paul Prior (1998) uses the term **laminated** to describe how people’s use of a tool is entangled with traces from its multiple uses throughout their lives (p. 24). Paying attention to the histories of people’s use of particular tools invites us to view the literate activity people are involved in at present as a part of lengthier historical pathways, and thus to consider how activity is being shaped by those histories. Attending to histories also pushes us to inquire about how people and their tools have developed, how they have come to be, and to be on the lookout for the historical pathways of their emergent **becoming** (Prior, 2018).

Laminated

The term “laminated” foregrounds the ways that the cultural tools we use, and our reasons for using them, come to be entangled with multiple purposes, practices, and motivations through our concrete actions with them throughout our lives. In this sense, the term “laminated” signals the complex ways that our use of a particular tool in the present here-and-now is entwined with and informed by our uses of that tool in other times and places.

As Dan and I talked about his use of pictures for the Maverick project, and about his history of other experiences that also involved acting with images, I began to see complex connections between what seemed at first to be quite unrelated activities. Below, I discuss some of these experiences from oldest to most recent throughout Dan’s life, focusing on:

- Creating family photo albums
- Reading car magazines
- Using automobile repair manuals
- Encountering his father’s “boat book”
- Participating with online car forums

Creating Family Photo Albums

Dan's use of images in *Maverick* book is informed by his family's long-standing practice of taking lots of pictures and assembling them into photo albums. At one point, while talking about the many pictures he took of his automobile projects and later used in the *Maverick* book, Dan mentioned that taking pictures was "just something that my family does." When I asked if he could tell me more, he stated,

My mom has always had photo albums, and we've always taken lots and lots of pictures. . . . I remember being eight or nine years old, and him letting me take pictures occasionally with his camera. It wasn't like the little Kodak 110s, where it was like "Oh yeah, here, you can take a picture. Whatever." Like a little piece of plastic and you couldn't hurt it. But this [his dad's camera] was like, a Minolta camera was a really expensive camera. But, I remember him letting me, even when I was eight years old, you know, hold the camera and take pictures. We've always just taken lots and lots of pictures.

In addition to taking a wealth of pictures, his family was also invested in arranging them into photo albums as a record of their travels. Describing one particularly memorable instance where he helped his mother organize some of their family pictures into a series of bound albums, Dan recalled,

I was just nine. She had all these boxes, shoeboxes, boxes and boxes of pictures, that were developed, and they were still in the little envelope you got back from the film lab with the pictures in the back and the negatives in the front in the little pocket. . . . And she was like, "I have to do something with all these pictures." And she went to the PX and she got these photo albums and started putting them together by year and by where we lived, and kind of in a chronological order.

Looking at Car Magazines

Dan's history of acting with images for the *Maverick* book also includes his experiences with car magazines starting in his adolescence. Dan indicated that his family has had a subscription to some of the major automobile magazines—*Car and Driver*, *Road and Track*—reaching back to the mid-1970s. They were always in reach around his house. In talking about his experiences with these publications, Dan mentioned a number of specific encounters with images. He described, for example, an image he saw in a *Car and Driver* article when he was eleven or twelve, stating,

I came into the house one day from riding my bike around the neighborhood, and my dad was sitting on the couch and he was laughing really hard. And I was like "What's so funny?" And he

was like, “This article in *Car and Driver* magazine.” . . . The first page of the article had this little cartoon image of a Rubiks Cube with [the writer’s] face sticking out of it with a motorcycle helmet, and the title of the article was “A 700 horsepower Rubiks Cube.” . . . It stuck in my head. It grabbed me, and I’ve been reading car magazines ever since, even if they are not funny, and then I got more into cars.

Other encounters involved his use of magazine images to decorate the walls of his room and his school lockers. Recalling one particular image he pasted in his high school locker, Dan stated, “When all the other kids had pictures of movie stars or people from TV shows taped up in their locker, mine had pictures of the cars in *Road and Track*.”

Using Automobile Repair Manuals

Dan’s history of acting with images also includes his use of automobile manuals to fix his own cars, which he always purchased used and often needed significant work. The first thing he did after every purchase was buy a repair manual for the vehicle, which provided him with prose descriptions and accompanying images for how to do typical repairs. Recounting his experiences with the images offered in those manuals, Dan stated,

I remember back in the eighties, when I first started working on cars, you know, the pictures and the drawings in the Chilton manuals and the Haynes manuals weren’t that good. Even though the Haynes’ [pictures and drawings] were better than the Chilton, there was just so much information missing. “Well, I need to see what’s over here. What does this thing do? Where does this go to?” And it just doesn’t show up in the drawing, or the picture they have isn’t the angle you need. And, as I’m taking pictures of different [automobile] projects I’m doing, with [Dan’s son’s name] or, you know, with the Maverick, it doesn’t matter, I’m thinking “Alright, if I was looking at this later, what would I really want to see?”

Encountering the Boat Book

Dan’s history of acting with images for the Maverick book also includes watching his father create and use a book of prose and pictures that documented the extensive work he did on a thirty-six-foot boat the family owned when Dan was in his late teens. His dad’s “boat book,” as he referred to it, “was a three-inch binder, and it was full. [The Maverick book] would be a footnote in his binder [for the boat].” Explaining his sense of what prompted his father to start keeping a book to document the boat work, Dan stated,

I think the big thing, the main reason for it was that just making little notes on loose-leaf paper just wasn’t sufficient for the degree

of work he did. I mean, he replaced the headliner [the material covering the inside of the boat's cabin], motors, the V-drive, a lot of stuff in the interior, the wiring, the air conditioning. All by himself. It [the boat book] was the absolute, ultimate owner's manual, and you really don't have anything like a Chilton or Haynes manual for boats. It went with the boat when my Dad sold it.

Using Car Forums

Dan's history of acting with images also includes his participation on a number of online automobile forums. These forums offered Dan a space where he could ask specific questions about what he was fixing, which often required posting pictures of his truck. Those responding to his questions would often include pictures in their posts as well. While Dan and I were talking, he mentioned that he saw his use of pictures while working on the Maverick as being informed by what he saw on the car forums he frequented, stating,

When I am taking the pictures [while working on the Maverick], I'm thinking of myself reading a post [on a forum] and going through it and going "Well, I've got to do the same job. I need to know about this part. So I want a picture of that." So when I am doing the job, I'll go, "Okay, here's my picture" and then it fits in and it's like, almost like I am working backwards through it from the audience standpoint of reading my post. "What is the audience going to want to see a picture of, along with this text that I am typing about putting heavy-duty shocks on?"

I find it fascinating how all of these different uses of images from Dan's near and distant past pour into his use of pictures for the Maverick project. While Dan's use of pictures for the work on the Maverick might seem at first glance to be specific to that activity, paying attention to Dan's history of acting with images illuminates how many of his other experiences throughout his life have involved using that particular tool. Every time I listen back through my conversations with Dan, I'm struck by how much of Dan's literate life is at play as he and his father take pictures of their work and incorporate them into the book, and how Dan's ability to use pictures has been developing across many different activities reaching all the way back to his early childhood.

Attending to the Histories that Extend from Literate Activity

In the same way that histories of people's previous uses of specific tools flow into a particular activity, those **histories also extend from it into later**

activities further downstream, typically in unpredictable directions. After all, the pathways of people and their tools do not simply end with their use in a present activity. Rather, those pathways continue as tools are put to use in other activities, often for quite different purposes. My colleagues Paul Prior, Julie Hengst, Jody Shipka, and I (2006) refer to the re-use of tools as “**semiotic remediation**” a term for “the diverse ways that humans’ and nonhumans’ semiotic performances (historical or imagined) are re-represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity” (p. 734). Our use of the term “semiotic performances” is meant to signal people’s use of all kinds of semiotic tools, and the term “remediation” foregrounds how people’s re-use of such tools into new activities routinely involves re-working them across different media. Paying attention to the histories that extend from literate activity invites us to notice that people and tools are never finalized. Instead, they are continually being re-fashioned as people put them to use for new activities. And, in the process of re-working their tools for new purposes, people are continually re-fashioning new identities for themselves. It also alerts us to be on the lookout for how people are always actively transforming the tools they act with, that we are never simply using tools that we have inherited in exactly the same way and for exactly the same functions.

Semiotic Remediation

“Semiotic remediation” is a term that captures how people’s use of a particular cultural tool is never limited to any single setting, but rather is continuously repurposed across multiple activities. In the process of repurposing tools, people transform them across semiotic media. The spoken language used in one setting, for example, might be semiotically remediated as written text in another, as a gesture in another, and as a visual image in yet another.

From talking with Dan, one thing that emerged was the many ways that his use of pictures for the Maverick book extended into a number of other engagements. In this section below, I partially trace the history of Dan’s use of pictures into a number of more recent activities, including

- his participation in an online car forum
- an online car magazine Dan created
- writing assignments for his college coursework
- his recent job as a technical support associate

Using Car Forums

Dan’s acting with images for the Maverick project also shapes his experiences with posting on car forums devoted specifically to that vehicle. In crafting

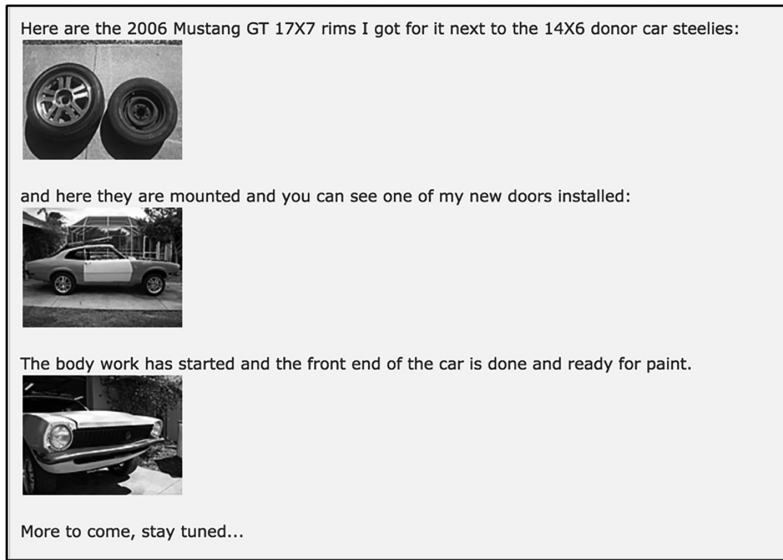


Figure 2: An excerpt from one of Dan's posts to one of the online car forums he uses, showing Dan's use of images related to his work on his 1970 Maverick.

his frequent posts (see Figure 2) to the Maverick forum, for example, Dan indicated that he consciously incorporates a wealth of images. As he stated,

Some people will post, you know, start an entire thread, and go through responses and they'll be four or five pages of posts and there won't be a single picture. And I'll have three or four pictures for every post, every response. It seems like someone will ask a question, and my response will have a picture in it because I've got so many pictures [of the work on the Maverick].

According to Dan, his practice of using a wealth of images in his forum posts stems from his ready store of pictures of his work on the Maverick. As he stated,

Any of the forums, the moderators and regular users encourage people to post a lot of pictures. And I do myself a lot because I take so many. And I get lots of compliments on "Hey, great pictures," "I'm glad you posted so many pictures." It's really easy for me because of my set-up, my digital camera and an SD card and my computer has a slot, and all I have to do is open it up, and it's right there. It's really easy that way, to transfer things over and insert them.

Creating an Online Car Magazine

Dan's acting with images for the Maverick project also informs his work on the online car magazine he started. According to Dan, soon after he started

his work on the Maverick, he was attending an introductory course at a state college near his home. He found himself talking with the professor about cars before and after class and often showing him pictures of how his work on the Maverick was progressing. In response to Dan’s enthusiasm for cars, and his knowledge and experience working on them, the professor suggested that Dan start his own blog about cars. That comment urged Dan toward creating an online car magazine. Recounting how he got started, Dan stated,

When [the professor] said “You should start a blog,” I had already been a member of a car forum for the little white Chevy [Chevrolet] S-10 I had. . . . I was like, okay, I can take this and all these decades I’ve been reading *MotorTrend*, *Road and Track*, *Hot Rod*, and all these different car magazines. You know, I can do that. I can go out and do a project on a car, take a bunch of pictures, write up a really cool story, and then put it together in an article that would look just like what’s in the magazines.

The image in Figure 3 is an excerpt from one of the articles Dan wrote for what he refers to as the “car mag,” a piece which describes a road trip to Illinois that Dan and his father took to purchase and pick up some replacement doors.

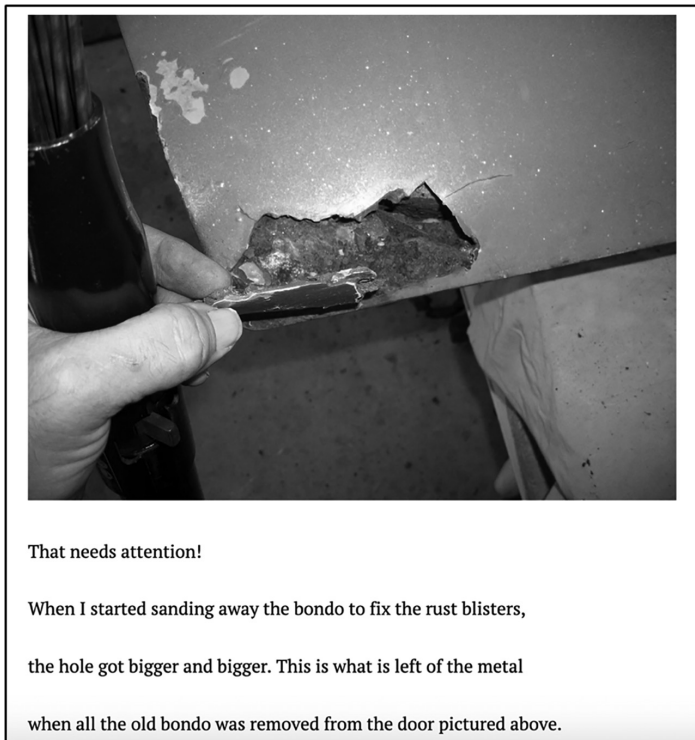


Figure 3: An excerpt from an article Dan wrote for his online car magazine describing a lengthy road trip to obtain some replacement doors for his 1970 Maverick.

Doing College Writing


Dan's acting with images for the Maverick project also informed his college coursework. During the timespan of our conversations, Dan was enrolled in a number of upper-division courses for his double major in history and writing and rhetoric, and we frequently talked about and looked at the papers he was working on. For many of those assignments, Dan addressed topics directly related to vehicles (typically cars, but also boats). It was fairly common for Dan to incorporate pictures into his papers, whether the assignments asked for them or not. Figure 4 (below) is an excerpt from one of Dan's papers for a rhetoric course in which he analyzed his strategies for finding information on online car forums.

Providing Technical Support

Dan's acting with images for the Maverick project also informs the literate activities related to his current job with a large automobile parts distributor. During his final year of college, Dan applied for a part-time position as a parts clerk at an automobile parts distributor near his home. According to Dan, during the interview the parts manager was so impressed with Dan's extensive knowledge and experience working on cars that he called the

What is the best way to understand how this literacy practice helps people learn? Get yourself a classic car that needs some work, join the forum for that car, get yourself a service manual, get out your tools, camera and laptop, and start posting. You will understand this unique learning process best by living it.

Every time I work on a car, or go on a road trip, I want to write about it and every time I'm writing about cars, I want to work on them and drive them, and then I'll have to write about



it some more. This is my Maverick now, with a 99 Explorer V8, power disc brakes, new doors, and 2006 Mustang GT wheels, waiting for Doctor Frankenstein to wrap up the experiment...evil laugh, lightning, thunder....IT'S ALIVE!

Figure 4: An excerpt from a page of Dan's essay for an upper-division course in his major. The picture in the excerpt above (just one of seven pictures of his automobile work that he included in the paper) is one Dan took after he had installed one of the replacement doors on his Maverick, the same door featured in the pictures he posted to the car forum devoted to Ford Mavericks (see Figure 2) and the same doors that he discussed on his article for his online car magazine (see Figure 3).

online technical support manager into the interview to meet Dan. Based on a quick conversation, the company offered Dan a full-time job as an online technical support associate, a position that involved providing information for online sales associates working to provide customers with the correct parts. Much of his work entails emailing sales associates the information they need, and he routinely includes images in his emails, typically screenshots from the company’s many online catalogs that indicate specific parts and the accompanying part number, cost and availability (see Figure 5 below).

Talking with me about what he does on a typical shift, Dan stated,

I feel like a big brother looking out for my sales people. Sometimes it is a three-way call and I talk directly to the customer. “Tech support this is Dan.” . . . And then I listen to the problem. Then I do some crazy twenty-first century college student digging at turbo-speed on our website, on competitor websites, on *Autozone.com*, on *Rockauto*, *Google*, and I even find info or pictures on *Automobile Catalog* or *Ebay* that solves problems sometimes, and I come up with a part number from our catalogs that the sales person can put in a form and make the customer happy.

Even though I have read and listened to the interviews with Dan a number of times, I am still struck by how Dan’s use of pictures for his work on his *Maverick* comes to be entangled with these activities and how its history stretches across personal, academic, and professional worlds. I’m also fascinated with how deeply laminated all of these activities are. They are so



Figure 5: An image Dan provided me as an example of the kinds of visuals he routinely includes in his emails as a technical support associate.

interwoven that it's impossible to tell where one use of pictures ends and the others begin.

Pretty Cool, huh?

As a writing researcher, I find it fascinating how much a perspective oriented toward literate activity reveals about Dan's automotive work. From my own experiences trying to keep cars and household appliances running, I knew that those kinds of physical activities tend to involve using some texts, but I am just thrilled by how viewing Dan's work through the lens of literate activity allows me to see the rich textuality that saturates what he does and how he does it. Approaching his restoration of his Maverick as an activity accomplished through his use of cultural tools helped me see the host of texts Dan uses, particularly the Maverick book, the central role that acting

A Note from the *GWRJ* Editors

The staff of the *GWRJ* often says that "anyone who writes can be a writing researcher, if they're willing to look carefully at literate activities and be flexible and research-oriented in their approach to new writing situations." In some ways, we think that, while the kind of writing research work that Dr. Roozen does involves differences (in expertise, research methods, professionalization, and career focus, for example), there are perhaps more similarities than differences between Dr. Roozen's work and "everyday writing research."

with pictures plays in its production and use, and the multiple functions those images allow that text to serve. Attending to Dan's history of acting with images allowed me to see connections to activities in Dan's near and distant past that I never would have imagined: his family's practice of taking pictures and assembling them into photo albums, his father's production and use of his "boat book," and Dan's own engagements with car manuals and online car forums. And attending to the continual emergence of Dan's history of acting with pictures allowed me to see linkages to activities that I could never have predicted: his online car magazine, his undergraduate courses, and his job as a technical support associate.

And as a writing researcher, I continually find myself asking many more questions about Dan's tools and literate practices. I've focused here on Dan's acting with pictures, but I also want to know more about his use of other cultural tools: technical discourses in spoken and written discussions of automotive work; technologies including WordPress and social media platforms; and inscriptions including markings scribed on car parts, diagrams, drawings, readouts from the digital devices he used, and maps (a tool Dan used frequently in the articles for his online magazine). I am also interested in how Dan's engagement with automobiles contributes to transnational and

translingual flows of language and literacy. At one point during our talks, Dan mentioned that one of his FB friends who lives in Argentina is creating an online catalog in Spanish for hard-to-find Maverick parts. I’m also deeply curious about how Dan actually uses cultural tools in the moment-to-moment flow of activity. It would be fascinating, I think, to be able to examine Dan and his family members in action as they use texts and tools in action as they plan for and accomplish their work on the Maverick, to explore how texts and tools shape their embodied activity, and, in turn, how their bodies interact with texts and tools. I also want to know more about Dan’s family members’ histories as well. At one point, Dan mentioned that his father’s military service included a number of years working in a legal department, and I’ve been wondering how the textual practices valued there might shape his father’s use of texts for working on boats and cars. Dan also mentioned that one of his sons is an automotive technician at a local car dealership, and that makes me curious about how his choice of vocation has been shaped by his family’s long history of automotive work across multiple generations.

Most writers might not necessarily enjoy getting into this kind of detail when they think about their literate practices, but it can be worthwhile to do, especially when we’re trying to understand how our own literate practices are impacting the texts we create and use and ourselves as literate persons in the world. Unraveling writing stands to reveal a great deal about the wealth of texts and tools that we inherit from others, and from the other times and places of our lives, and how we creatively and continually reshape them for our own purposes, passing them along to others as we do. Tracing the multiple threads that are entwined in our literate lives can help us understand the many different purposes that texts and tools accomplish for us as we use them, from the obvious to those we might not even be consciously aware of, and can help us recognize the rich histories of acting with texts and tools that each of us is continually building, and building from. Perhaps more importantly, unraveling writing can help us to be more consciously aware of the emergent identities as literate persons in the world that we are continually making and remaking for ourselves and making possible for others.

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Kevin Roozen is professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of Central Florida. In addition to his co-authored book with Joe Erickson, *Expanding Literate Landscapes: Persons, Practices, and Sociohistoric Perspectives of Disciplinary Development* (CC Digital Press/Utah State University Press, 2017), Kevin's work has been published in a number of journals and edited collections. Kevin's current research explores the role and function of acting with semiotic inscriptions—material traces including diagrams, drawings, charts, graphs, lists, tables, photographs, mathematical notation, and other entextualized and embodied representations—in shaping the continually emergent becoming of people, their embodied practices, and their social worlds.