



THE WRITING CENTER

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What is Writing?

At the Writing Center, we're often challenged with the question, "what makes good writing?" or "what makes someone a good writer?" People come to writing with a variety of assumptions--everything from "Can anyone really be taught to write?" to "Why haven't my students learned to write yet? To "Shouldn't they know how to write by now?" Some see these as easy questions; others think they are unanswerable, but "they know good writing when they see it." What makes writing "good" needs to be situated in the larger question, "what is writing?" From here, we can begin to explore both what makes good writing and how we can encourage our students to develop into good writers.

We share common definitions of the term "writing" if we limit it to something like "putting pen to paper" or "typing ideas into a computer." However, if we more closely define elements of the writing act, the definition comes to life. The following paragraphs might prompt your thinking about elements of the writing process. The list is not definitive, but it may serve as a starting place where you might begin to think about how writing happens for your students and for you.

Writing is a response. We write because we are reacting to something, someone, or some other piece of language. While writing feels like an isolating, individual act—just you and the computer or pad of paper—it is really a social act, a way in which we can respond to the people and world around us. Writing always happens in a specific, often prescribed context. We are not just writing, we are always writing to an audience(s) for some particular purpose. Our writing is always governed by a particular context. When we write, we do so because we want, need, or have been required to create a fixed space for someone to receive and react to our ideas. Understanding this social or rhetorical context—who the readers may be, why they want to read your ideas, when and where they are going to read your writing, how they might view us as a writers--governs some of the choices we make and the structures we assume are part of the writing we do. The writing context requires writers to have a sense of the reader's expectations and an awareness of appropriate conventions for a particular piece of writing. The context of the piece further governs the structures of appropriate tone, level of vocabulary, kind and placement of evidence, genre, and sometimes even what constitutes acceptable punctuation in a given circumstance.

Writing is linear. In order to communicate reasonably and effectively, we need to order our words and ideas up on the page in ways that make sense to a reader. We name this process in various ways, "grammar," "logic," or "flow." Again, while we would all agree that this statement is true, the process of "lining up ideas" is far from simple and

not often imagined as “writing.” We assume that if a person “has ideas,” putting them on the page is a simple matter of recording them, when, in fact, the process is usually more complicated. As we’ve all experienced, when we “have” ideas, they do not necessarily come immediately in a linear form. We may have a scattering of related ideas, a hunch that something feels true, or some other sense that an idea is “right” before we have worked out exactly how the idea works. It is often through the act of writing that we make connections and begin to sort ideas in order to create the logical relationships that actually develop the idea into something that someone else may receive and, potentially, believe to be a good idea. Seeing, creating, and exploring the relationship between ideas come *through* both language and the process of arranging the ideas for a reader that is writing. So not only does a writer need to “have” ideas, but the writer has to put them in linear form, to “write” them for a reader in order for them to be meaningful or to communicate. So, as we make choices about our words and ideas when we write, we immediately try to fit our choices into linear structures (which may or may not suit our habits of mind) that work in a particular context.

Writing is recursive. As we write, we constantly rewrite. Sometimes we do this unconsciously, mid-mindstream, as we juggle words, then choose, delete, then choose again. Sometimes we do this rewriting very consciously and conscientiously as we reread a paragraph or page to critique for clarity, coherence, or simply to see what we’ve just said and to see if we like it. Having read, we rewrite the same phrases or ideas to make a closer match or refine our discovery through language. The process of writing and then reviewing, changing, rewriting is a natural and an important part of shaping expression for an anticipated audience. So while we are trying to put our words and ideas into a logical line, we are circling round and back and over again by way of creating that line.

Writing is both subject and object. We value writing because it reveals the personal choices a writer has made and thereby reveals something of her habits of mind, her ability to connect and therefore shape ideas, and her ability to transform or change us as readers. We take writing as evidence of a subject or subjective position. Especially in an academic environment, we read written language as *individual* expression (whether or not multiple voices have informed the one voice we privilege on the page), as a volley from one individual mind to another. That said, writing also serves as an object for us, a “piece” or a “paper” that has known shapes, sizes, and functions determined by genre and conventions. While we don’t think of writing as technology, it is just that; it is a means to remove and fix a person’s ideas in another place, a place that is treated with standards and a sense of objectivity. Here’s where our sense of what counts as “good” writing develops. We have created objective (although highly contextualized) ideals of writing that include measures of appropriate voice, vocabulary, evidence, and arrangement of ideas. So while writing is very personal, or subjective, it creates an object space, a place apart from the individual and we measure it against objective standards derived from the context. It creates space both for the individual (subject) and the idea (the object) to coexist so that we can both judge the merits of the individual voicing the idea and contend with the idea on the objective form of a page.

Writing is decision-making. It may seem obvious, but in order to get something on the page, a writer *chooses* the words, the order of the words in the sentence, the grouping of sentences into paragraphs, the order of the paragraphs within a piece. While there is an ordinariness about this process—we make choices or decisions almost unconsciously about many things all day long--with writing, as we have all experienced, such decision-making can be a complex process, full of discovery, despair, and determination, and deadlines. Making decisions about words and ideas can be a messy, fascinating, perplexing experience that often results in something mysterious, something the writer may not be sure “works” until he has auditioned it for a real reader.

Writing is a process. Contending with the decision-making, linearity, social context, subjectivity and objectivity that constitute writing is a process that takes place over time and through language. When producing a piece of writing for an audience, experienced writers use developed systems, usually an idiosyncratic combination of thinking, planning, drafting and revising that, for them, means “writing” something. No matter how an individual describes her process (e.g., “First I think about my idea then dump ideas onto the computer,” or “I make an outline then work out topic sentences...”) each person (usually unconsciously) negotiates the series of choices required in her individual context and produces a draft that begins to capture a representation of his or her “idea.” For most people, this negotiation includes trial and error (this word or that?), false starts (beginning with an example that later proves misleading), contradictions (I can’t say X because it may throw Y into a question), sorting (how much do I need to say about this?), doubt about how the idea will be received, and satisfaction when they think they have cleared these hurdles successfully. For most people, this process happens *through* language. In other words, we use words to discover what, how, and why we believe. Research supports the adage “I don’t know what I think until I read what I’ve said.” We use language to test, imagine, and create ideas during the process of articulation, whether in speech or writing. We don’t just “have” ideas, we really have language that we call ideas.

Altogether these elements make writing both an interesting and challenging act. These qualities function together and make writing the rich, complex, valuable thing that it is. What else is writing for you? Think about what this definition misses and how you might complete the sentence, “Writing is...” From your experience as a writer, what else about it seems essential to the act as you experience it? How is that connected to what you value about the act of writing and the final products that you produce?

For more information about student writing or to talk with someone about your writing assignments, contact Kimberly Abels kabels@email.unc.edu at the Writing Center or Lynne Degitz degitz@email.unc.edu at the Center for Teaching and Learning.