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Writing is a Knowledge-Making Activity

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on. Understanding the rhetorical work of writing is essential if writers are to make informed, productive decisions about which genres to employ, which languages to act with, which texts to reference, and so on. Recognizing the deeply social and rhetorical dimensions of writing can help administrators and other stakeholders make better decisions about curricula and assessment.

1.1

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Writing is often defined by what it *is*: a text, a product; less visible is what it can *do*: generate new thinking (see 1.5, “Writing Mediates Activity”). As an activity undertaken to bring new understandings, writing in this sense is not about crafting a sentence or perfecting a text but about mulling over a problem, thinking with others, and exploring new ideas or bringing disparate ideas together (see “Metaconcept: Writing Is an Activity and a Subject of Study”). Writers of all kinds—from self-identified writers to bloggers to workplace teams to academic researchers—have had the experience of coming upon new ideas as a result of writing. Individually or in a richly interactive environment, in the classroom or workplace or at home, writers use writing to generate knowledge that they didn’t have before.

Common cultural conceptions of the act of writing often emphasize magic and discovery, as though ideas are buried and the writer uncovers them, rather than recognizing that “the act of *creating* ideas, not finding them, is at the heart of significant writing” (Flower and Hayes 1980, 22; see also 1.9, “Writing Is a Technology through Which Writers Create and Recreate Meaning”). Understanding and identifying how writing is in itself an act of thinking can help people more intentionally recognize and engage with writing as a creative activity, inextricably linked to thought. We don’t simply think first and then write (see 1.6, “Writing Is Not Natural”). We write *to* think.

Texts where this kind of knowledge making takes place can be formal or informal, and they are sometimes ephemeral: journals (digital and otherwise), collaborative whiteboard diagrams, and complex doodles and marginalia, for example. These texts are generative and central to meaning making even though we often don’t identify them as such. Recognizing these kinds of texts for their productive value then broadens our understanding of literacy to include a rich range of everyday

and workplace-based genres far beyond more traditionally recognized ones. Naming these as writing usefully makes visible the roles and purposes of writing (e.g., Barton and Hamilton 1998; Heath 2012).

Understanding the knowledge-making potential of writing can help people engage more purposefully with writing for varying purposes. In higher education, for example, faculty from across the curriculum now often include a wider range of writing strategies in their courses. That is, beyond teaching the more visible disciplinary conventions of writing in their fields, faculty also integrate writing assignments that highlight what is less visible but highly generative about writing in many contexts: writing's capacity for deeper understandings and new insights (see Anson 2010 for one historical account of the shift in how faculty from across campus teach writing). Beyond the classroom, people can employ exploratory, inquiry-based writing tasks like freewriting, planning, and mapping—sometimes individual and often collaborative. These strategies can help all writers increase their comprehension of subject material while also practicing with textual conventions in new genres. Through making the knowledge-making role of writing more visible, people gain experience with understanding how these sometimes-ephemeral and often-informal aspects of writing are critical to their development and growth.

1.2

WRITING ADDRESSES, INVOKES, AND/OR CREATES AUDIENCES

Andrea A. Lunsford

Writing is both relational and responsive, always in some way part of an ongoing conversation with others. This characteristic of writing is captured in what is referred to as the classic *rhetorical triangle*, which has at each of its points a key element in the creation and interpretation of meaning: writer (speaker, rhetor), audience (receiver, listener, reader), and text (message), all dynamically related in a particular context. Walter Ong (1975) referred to this history in his 1975 “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,” connecting the audience in oral performances with readers of written performances and exploring the ways in which the two differ. For Ong, the audience for a speech is immediately present, right in front of the speaker, while readers are absent, removed. Thus the need, he argues, for writers to fictionalize their audiences and, in turn, for audiences to fictionalize themselves—that is, to adopt the role set out for them by the writer.