Metaphor and Writing

Figurative Thought in the Discourse of Written Communication

PHILIP EUBANKS

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This volume explains how metaphors, metonymies, and other figures
of thought interact cognitively and rhetorically to tell us what writing
is and what it should do. Drawing on interviews with writing
professionals and published commentary about writing, it argues that
our everyday metaphors and metonymies for writing are part of a
figurative rhetoric of writing – a pattern of discourse and thought that
includes ways we categorize writers and writing; stories we tell about
people who write; conceptual metaphors and metonymies used both to
describe and to guide writing; and familiar, yet surprisingly adaptable,
conceptual blends used routinely for imagining writing situations.
The book will give scholars a fresh understanding of concepts such
as "voice," "self," "clarity," "power," and the most basic figure of all:
"the writer."

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Here, Mary Lou, this is what I've been doing.

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Introduction

This book explains how everyday figures in the discourse of writing work with – and against – each other. It may seem that we already know plenty about our everyday figures for writing, that their very familiarity is what allows them to function. Yet the workings of even our most commonplace figures – *to put thoughts onto paper, to find one's voice, to write clearly* or *forcefully* or *gracefully* – can be poorly understood precisely because we make sense of them so automatically.

I suspect that is one reason that current scholarship has proceeded as it has. With only a few exceptions, scholarly work on familiar metaphors for writing, which is mostly in the field of writing studies, is based solely on introspection. Writing scholars have assumed, because they have an intuitive understanding of everyday writing metaphors, that their interpretations of them – and, more troubling, their interpretations of others' interpretations – require no further confirmation.

Typically, scholars have focused on one metaphor at a time, either pointing out a particular metaphor's strengths or shortcomings (e.g., *voice* or the Conduit Metaphor) or proposing a novel metaphor intended to clarify a particular question (e.g., Writing As Travel or Argument As Aikido). Certainly, these critiques and suggestions are valuable. But the introspective, one-metaphor-at-a-time approach does not take into account the ways that metaphors relate to other metaphors and to other figures. As a consequence, no one has examined the everyday metaphors that apply to writing in light of a corpus of texts and primary research with people, nor has anyone examined the connections between everyday writing metaphors and other rhetorical elements such as categories, stories, and metonymies.

To understand our most familiar metaphors well, we have to examine something broader: what I call the *figurative rhetoric of writing*. Metaphors are enmeshed in a constellation of relationships that complicate what people mean by them and how they are likely to influence people's writing. We have to consider how our everyday figures for writing are connected to everyday classifications of writers and writing; everyday theories of writing expertise; everyday stories of writers and writing processes; everyday metonymies associated with writing, and more.

Because our metaphors for writing work in coordination with all of these things, they are more organized, more complex, and more contentious than we have so far recognized. And it is this contentious pattern that, I argue, matters most. While this book analyzes many key metaphors, it does not attempt to catalog or provide analyses of all of them – or even all that might strike us as familiar. Instead, it takes up a more fundamental task: to explain what shapes our everyday figures for writing and how they fit together.

The findings presented here will be of interest to two audiences: people who study or have a keen interest in writing; and people who study metaphor from a variety of perspectives, including linguistics, cognitive science, literary theory, and rhetoric. Let me say briefly what the book offers to each of these audiences.

For those whose interest is writing, it can contribute both to writing scholarship and to writing pedagogy. Understanding what shapes our everyday figures gives writing scholars a stronger basis for suggesting new figures and for commenting on figures that are already influential – a task that writing studies has assigned to itself with some frequency. Indeed, some of writing studies' most important contributions are framed as endorsements and rejections of key metaphors. Scholars in writing studies have vigorously endorsed such metaphors as *discourse community*, *contact zones*, and *rhetorical spaces* and just as vigorously called into question such metaphors as *voice* and the Conduit Metaphor. But it has not based those evaluations on a systematic examination of the broad constellation

of figures that shape people's ideas about writing or the rhetorical patterns that guide their use. Consequently, it has often mischaracterized the metaphors it critiques and, equally problematic, underestimated the potential resonance of its proposed metaphors.

That can have concrete implications for the teaching and practice of writing. If we hope for our students to be more thoughtful about their writing, we cannot ignore ideas about writing that they routinely encounter outside the classroom, ideas that are often embedded in figurative language and thought. Otherwise we risk confusion about the aims of our own pedagogies. Students may be confused about what we are trying to teach them. And we may, ourselves, be unaware of the subtle interplay between what we say in the writing classroom and the discourse of writing at large.

This book also contributes to the study of metaphor and figuration. It is a natural extension of work in cognitive linguistics, which has argued for some time that metaphors function as part of metaphor systems (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1996; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Extending that line of thought, it describes the systematic relationships between everyday figures for writing – including categories, stories, and metonymies. Yet it also does more: It argues that everyday figures for writing are constituted not just by systematic relationships but also by a *rhetoric*: a conversation about writing that is, on the one hand, shaped by the cognitive structure of our figurative language-about-language and, on the other hand, accommodates – indeed, relies on – contradictory points of view. Although our everyday figures for writing are by definition familiar, their workings are often surprising when viewed in the light of a larger rhetoric.

In particular, this book examines (1) the categories *writer* and *to write*; (2) three major stories that "license" our everyday metaphors and metonymies; (3) familiar metonymies such as *voice* and *self*; (4) familiar metaphors such as the Conduit Metaphor and Language Is Power; and (5) imaginative scenarios commonly associated with what I call the "other" Conduit Metaphor. The book's aim

is simple, if broad: Once we understand the rhetorical contours that inform everyday writing metaphors and metonymies, we can better understand all of the figures we use to think about and talk about writing, even those that are not discussed extensively – perhaps even not mentioned.

The chapters that follow describe a patterned, yet flexible, conversation in which individual metaphors and other figures take part. That is, I do not describe the structure of familiar figuration *per se*. "Structure" suggests the relationship among familiar figures is fixed. But the figurative rhetoric of writing is not fixed; rather it is characterized by patterns of disagreement that allow us to shape figures to suit varying viewpoints and purposes.

Part of the book's argument is that we can describe metaphors and other figures better if we use more apt research methods: what we find depends very much on where and how we look. I ground my description of the figurative rhetoric of writing on three kinds of data: popular texts that comment on writing and writing processes; interviews with people whose careers depend significantly on writing; and focus groups with technical writers and teachers of technical writing.

I consider these texts, interviews, and focus groups to be sources of "everyday" language and thought about writing. But I want to be especially clear about what I mean by "everyday" and synonyms such as "ordinary" and "commonplace." This is *not* a study of what linguists sometimes call folk models or folk theories; it focuses neither on uninformed talk from so-called people on the street nor on what cognitive scientist Donald Norman (2002: 36) calls the "everyday misunderstandings" that people rely on when they have no claim to specialized knowledge. It is also *not* a study of expert opinion such as can be found in academic journals and in scholarly monographs. Instead, I have proceeded from the assumption that what matters most crucially in the discourse of writing are the texts and talk of people whose lives and livelihoods depend on writing – people for whom writing makes a difference every day and

who have ideas about writing that we are likely to encounter if we have an everyday, as opposed to a scholarly, interest in writing. That judgment about what counts as everyday discourse about writing underpinned my selection of data throughout.

For textual data, I collected numerous texts, books, articles, and websites that discussed writing from a variety of perspectives, including creative writing, non-fiction writing, technical writing, and academic writing. In particular, I collected texts that discussed the process of writing, described the role or importance of writing, or evaluated written products. Bookstore shelves are lined with how-to books for student writers, professional writers, and aspiring fiction and non-fiction writers. Many of these were helpful resources. I make no claim to have consulted works randomly; indeed, I tried to balance my reading among various kinds of texts. However, I avoided texts directed chiefly at a scholarly audience.

I also interviewed eleven people for whom writing is an important component of professional life. They are as follows: Peter Bohlin, a freelance technical communicator; Russell Friend, a senior technical communicator for Siemens Corporation; Dirk Johnson, a freelance journalist who has written for the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* and is the author of *Biting the Dust: The Wild Ride and Dark Romance of the Rodeo Cowboy and the American West*; Betsy Maaks, a technical writing specialist for Tellabs, Inc.; Sean O'Leary, a web designer and writer of trade-magazine features, advertising copy, and technical material; Cheri Register, a memoirist and writing teacher who is the author of *Packinghouse Daughter* (winner of the American Book Award); Robert Sharoff, a freelance journalist who has written for the *New York Times*, *Chicago Magazine*, and numerous other consumer and trade periodicals; C. Joseph Sprague, a bishop of the United Methodist Church (retired) and the author of *Affirmations of a Dissenter*; Neil Steinberg, a *Chicago Sun Times* columnist and the author of numerous non-fiction books including *Hatless Jack: The President, the Fedora, and the History of American Style*; Christine Worobec, a historian and the author of three books,

including *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (winner of the Heldt Prize); and Eric Zorn, a *Chicago Tribune* columnist.

Finally, in collaboration with Dr. Christine Abbott, I conducted six focus groups (three with practicing technical writers and three with college teachers of technical writing) that explored discussants' ideas about good technical writing (Eubanks and Abbott 2004; Abbott and Eubanks 2005). We supplied discussants with examples of procedural and report writing and asked them to mark up copies in advance of the focus-group meeting. In the groups, we encouraged discussants to explain what they liked about the texts (marked with a plus sign) and what they did not like (marked with a minus sign). The discussants not only used figurative language to explain their assessments of the texts, but they also explained the implications the figures had for them.

Taken together, these three sources of data provided a rich sampling of what writing professionals say and think. Naturally, this data has limitations. Further research may uncover other important figures and additional ways that people use and interpret these figures. But the data used for this study exhibited persistent patterns that, in my estimation, cannot be ignored if we hope to make sense of our everyday way of thinking figuratively about writing.

My examination of the data might best be called rhetorical analysis. The rhetorician Jack Selzer (2003: 283) explains that rhetorical analysis focuses on "particular rhetorical acts as parts of larger communicative chains, or conversations" in an attempt to understand "the conversation that surrounds a specific symbolic performance." In this study, I did not consider a single performance but rather a set of utterances that are related thematically. Moreover, in contrast to many rhetorical analyses, I did not have chiefly in mind means of persuasion such as logos, pathos, ethos, or identification. Instead, I paid close attention to metaphors, metonymies, categorizations, and stories that were prominent and recurrent in the texts and transcripts that I examined. I marked major figures, made notes about persistent ideas that were expressed,

and – in the end – tried to describe the overall picture that emerged from my examination.

I do not suggest that this approach to analyzing figures should be used to the exclusion of other methods of research. Indeed, we will learn the most if we use a variety of methods in order to see what converges and what does not. However, rhetorical analysis has clear benefits for understanding conceptual figuration. Most obviously, it permits a broad and relational view of data that other methods – including experimentation, quantitative analysis of corpus data, and close reading of selected examples – simply cannot. It is especially useful when it comes to noticing patterns across texts and subtle implications of phrasing or argument.

As I have said, much of my analysis is rooted in conceptual metaphor theory and related cognitive-linguistic work on metonymy and conceptual blending. In particular, cognitive-linguistic studies of "metalinguistic" figures have helped me frame questions about the range of categories, metaphors, metonymies, and stories that make up ordinary ideas about language and communication (e.g., Sweetser 1992; Reddy 1993; Goossens 1994; Goossens 1995; Vanparys 1995; Grady 1998; Goossens 1999).

Conceptual metaphor theory and related work has a number of advantages that I fully embrace (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Gibbs 1999; Kövecses 2000). To begin with, it adopts a constructivist view of language. Far from accepting the mechanistic or algorithmic approach often associated with early cognitive science, conceptual metaphor theorists agree that figurative thought arises from experience. And no experience can be more universal or more influential than our brain-limited, embodied perceptions of front-back, in-out, up-down, source-path-goal; of movement, constraint, energy, fatigue; of pain, pleasure, difficulty, ease. Such perceptions motivate our most familiar metaphors: Life Is a Journey, Problems Are Burdens, Words Are Weapons, Ideas Are Sources Of Light, Morality Is Cleanliness, Desire Is Hunger, and many more.

Yet conceptual metaphors are not just a matter of physically motivated mappings. Conceptual metaphor theorists point out that all experience is construed in the context of a particular culture. Although some metaphors such as Knowing Is Seeing (e.g., *I see your point*) are found across the globe, figurative constructions are necessarily informed and sustained by the habits and values of a particular time and place.

Those two aspects of conceptual metaphors – embodiment and cultural entrenchment – provide an important basis for analyzing patterns in all varieties of figurative thought. This cognitive-linguistic perspective accords well, I suggest, with a rhetorical view of figuration. Conceptual figures are profoundly intertwined with the way they are expressed in words: the timing and manner of their expression, the broad allegiances they reveal, and the particular motivations that attend them.

As I have argued elsewhere with respect to metaphors of trade, metaphors are constituted by a rhetorical give-and-take in which speakers' utterances are accented by their political, philosophical, social, and economic commitments (Eubanks 2000). Each time a metaphor (or other conceptual figure) is put into words, that utterance necessarily enters into a rhetorical conversation – a debate within the relevant discourse. Metaphors and other figures are responsive in the way that Bakhtin (1986) claims that all language is responsive. For example, in the early 1990s, the metaphor Trade Is War was persistently used as an epithet by US critics of Japan's trade policies, and it was just as persistently answered by figures such as Trade Is A Journey, Trade Is Friendship, and Trade Is Peace, which were favored by proponents of free trade.

Moreover, the metaphors people claim for themselves or ascribe to others are bound together with broader judgments about the world and its workings. Those assessments are frequently encapsulated in what I have called *licensing stories*. If we believe, for example, that Trade Is War is a "true" metaphor, that it expresses how trade operates or should operate, we do not say that simply because of its

unnoticed pervasiveness or the neatness of the mapping of war onto trade. Rather the metaphor aligns with our stories of *how the world works* or, more specifically, *how trade works.*

Figures in the everyday rhetoric of writing are perhaps not as obviously contentious as those in the discourse of trade. But they are no less rhetorical in character, and they are no less complex. The everyday rhetoric of writing is characterized by a patterned give-and-take among prominent metaphors, metonymies, categories, stories, and other conceptual blends. The broad contours of that rhetoric are not only influenced by the figures; the figures are influenced by the broad contours of the rhetoric.

The chapters are arranged as follows:

Chapter 1 (In search of the figurative rhetoric of writing) argues that though writing studies has contributed valuable commentary on a number of metaphors that apply to writing, it has not fully considered the conversation that our most familiar metaphors enter into. That has led often to mischaracterizations of metaphors that may be more flexible, indeed more useful, than scholars recognize; it has also weakened claims for new metaphors for guiding and conceptualizing writing. We need to understand better the conversation among metaphors and other elements of writing discourse that inform our everyday figures, a conversation that includes everyday categorizations of writers and writing, entrenched stories we tell about writing, metonymies that help to motivate and shape metaphors, and conceptual blends that give our familiar figures additional force and meaning.

Chapter 2 (The double bind of *writer* and *to write*: graded categories) points out the persistent tension between the most basic words associated with writing: *writer* and *to write*. Each word names what would seem to be a straightforward everyday category. But, as cognitive linguists and scientists have shown, categories have a graded structure. Some examples of *writer* are more central than others, and some acts of writing are more central than others. These *prototypes* of *writer* and *to write* do not align well and thus exert a persistent influence on each other.

Chapter 3 (Bind upon bind: the general-ability and specific-expertise views of writing) explains additional complications that vex the categories *writer* and *to write*. Everyday discourse about writing does not negotiate just the contradiction between prototypes, but also must navigate two theories of writing that align imperfectly with the prototype of *writer* and the prototype of *to write*. The *general-ability view* says that a *writer* possesses wide-ranging skills, that someone who can write well can write anything well. The *specific-expertise view* says that the ability to write one kind of text does not imply the ability to write another, that each genre and perhaps each writing situation is singular. For most current writing scholars, the question has been settled in favor of the specific-expertise view. But in everyday discourse the debate is more persistent and is shaped differently.

Chapter 4 (Three licensing stories: the literate inscriber, the good writer, and the author writer) describes three stories of writing that license everyday writing metaphors and metonymies. These stories are related hierarchically: Authors are ordinarily presumed to have all of the writing abilities of good writers (that is, educated people who write correctly and competently); good writers are ordinarily presumed to have all of the writing abilities of literate inscribers (people who read and write and are, thus, employable in a literate society). However, the relationship between the stories is more complicated than mere nesting. The author story tells of people who have exemplary writing capabilities but whose designation as *writer* is as much a matter of social position as it is a matter of writing ability. The good-writer and literate-inscriber stories have to do both with writing abilities and with societal roles and expectations that can be far different from those emphasized in the authorial story.

Chapter 5 (Writing as transcription, talk, and voice: a complex metonymy) demonstrates how conceptual metonymies of writing and speech are complexly and contingently related to their licensing stories and to each other. Indeed, conceptual metonymies are not just matters of convenient substitution (as with "all *hands* on

deck") but rather a way of making sense of the world by recognizing contiguities. The writing–speech metonymy has the capacity to shift flexibly because it is composed of numerous sub-metonymies of speech, body, and *self*. It has three major configurations: Writing As Transcription, Writing As Talk, and the Discovered Voice.

Chapter 6 (The writing self: conceptual blends, multiple selves) argues that, contrary to the prevailing view, the figure of *voice* is not strongly associated with a naïve notion of a singular writing identity. Rather metonymies of writing and speech prompt a variety of conceptual blends that allow us to construct both singular and multiple selves. The notion of singular identity is most strongly associated with the inscriber and good-writer prototypes. Although it is the most literal-seeming conception of *self*, it in fact is an imaginative achievement with distinct rhetorical purposes. By contrast, although the author story often embraces the phrases *authentic voice* and *authentic self*, it nonetheless licenses complex, often metaphorical, constructions of *self*. Ironically, the most thorough immersion into the self for author writers may be self-erasure.

Chapter 7 (Writing to "get ideas across": the role of the Conduit Metaphor) urges a reevaluation of the Conduit Metaphor, a figure deeply entrenched in English usage that tells us that meaning can be *put into* words and *sent* to a reader. Cognitive linguists and writing scholars alike have disparaged the Conduit Metaphor because it can encourage a mistaken view of linguistic communication. However, the Conduit Metaphor is not only inescapable in the figurative rhetoric of writing, but also its implications are far more complex, and far less troubling, than scholars have realized. The far-reaching and flexible role of the Conduit Metaphor becomes particularly apparent when it is examined in relation to other figures, notably Language Is Power – a figure that scholars embrace as strongly as they reject the Conduit Metaphor.

Chapter 8 (Codes and conversations: the other Conduit Metaphor) demonstrates that the Conduit Metaphor produces imaginative scenarios that give this basic metaphor significant breadth and

utility. Indeed, it provides a figurative framework for imagined scenes that coordinate with all three of the prominent licensing stories. A commonly noted scene is telegraphy – what is often called the code model or transfer of meaning. But the Conduit Metaphor gives rise also to stories that go beyond the mechanistic conveyance of meaning, including stories of emotional connection that are conveyed uncertainly and invisibly by magical or telepathic means.

Chapter 9 (Metaphor and choice) provides brief comments about the ways this study resonates with my own experience as a writer and as a writing teacher.

1   In search of the figurative rhetoric of writing

> By examining and extending student metaphors for composing, we gain valuable information not only about how students struggle with themselves to create a text but also how they struggle with their writing teacher over issues of power and authority.
>
> Lad Tobin, "Bridging gaps:
> analyzing student metaphors for composing"

> In this essay, I want to propose a shift away from such metaphors of territory and towards reconceiving rhetoric as something more like travel. What would change if we were to make such a shift? One thing that would change is our general understanding of the social context in which written texts have communicative function.
>
> Gregory Clark, "Writing as travel, or rhetoric on the road"

> Obviously, post-process theories that insist upon the radically situated nature of writing seem to embrace the conceptual metaphor of chaos rather than narrow conceptualizations of orderly writing (sometimes called "academic writing" as though there existed a single model for such artifacts).
>
> Bonnie Lenore Kyburz, "Meaning finds a way:
> chaos (theory) and composition"

> In the face of this negative history of grammatical mechanics in composition studies, therefore, I would like to suggest the mechanic as a figure for thinking about rhetoric and writing.
>
> Jenny Edbauer Rice, "Rhetoric's mechanics:
> retooling the equipment of writing production"

Writing studies has long recognized the essential role of metaphor in shaping what we think about writing. In that sense, what I offer here is an addendum to an uncontroversial conclusion: If we want to think more carefully about who writers are, what writing is, and how writing affects our lives, we should pay attention to our figurative language and thought.

In a more important sense, however, I argue that, though the right general conclusion has been reached, the way metaphors and figures for writing have been treated in writing studies – and elsewhere, too – has perpetuated assumptions that are largely mistaken. To put it plainly, we know what metaphors people typically use when they talk about writing, but we have made little effort to find out how these metaphors are informed by other figures and by other elements of discourse. We have not understood the everyday figures that help to constitute the most fundamental concept in our field: the concept *writing*.

Below I will explain why I believe the treatment of metaphor has missed the mark in writing studies. But let me emphasize first where I think writing studies has moved in the right direction more generally – indeed, in a direction that makes this study possible. Sometime in the late 1980s and early 1990s, writing studies took what has been called a "social turn." Influenced by a long list of poststructuralist theorists, and not least by Mikhail Bakhtin, writing scholars came to see that all discourse is socially constituted and intertextual: No text functions in isolation; therefore, becoming a competent writer requires not a mastery of abstract rules but an initiation into a community of writers and speakers.

Largely because of that change of perspective, writing studies transformed its methods of inquiry. Rather than relying on classroom lore or on experiments far removed from natural settings, it moved into the field, where researchers observed writing practices and inquired about the perspectives of people who write. That inclination informs my study throughout. Therefore, the study does not ask what a metaphor might possibly mean to me or you but asks instead how ordinary metaphors function in everyday discourse about writing – how they converse with one another; how they are informed by categories, stories, and metonymies; and how a negotiation among all of these elements shapes our most familiar ideas about writing.

Indeed, I claim that the patterns of variation among our metaphors, metonymies, and stories matter at least as much as the individual metaphors themselves. When we utter a metaphor for writing – whether the metaphor is an all-but-tacit evocation of the Conduit Metaphor or an extended elaboration of Writing Is A Journey – we cannot help but enter into a conversation. To recast one of Bakhtin's famous phrases: When we utter a metaphor for writing, we are not the first to disturb the universe.

HOW TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTION

Surprisingly, writing studies is a relative newcomer to metaphor analysis. Not very long ago, James Seitz (1991: 288) said of composition's approach to metaphor:

> One might expect that the field of composition, with its close ties to rhetorical studies, would provide a valuable contribution on the subject of metaphor – that figure of speech now widely recognized as a paradigmatic trope, an inescapable gesture of language. If metaphor plays a decisive role in the rhetorical stance and development of texts, then it should surely be an issue of significant concern to those of us involved in the study of writing … What one mostly discovers, however, is that we remain bogged down in the murky waters of legislating a proper place for metaphor, a place where metaphor will not contaminate the supposed purity of literal language.

A decade and a half later, writing studies is still not a major locus of metaphor studies. Linguistics and psychology continue to produce the lion's share of the scholarship on metaphor and figuration.

But we *have* begun to contribute. For example, in recent years, scholars in writing studies have investigated metaphors and figures in complexity theory (Baake 2003), evolutionary biology (Journet 2005), genomic science (Ceccarelli 2004), and economics (Eubanks 2000). Perhaps the lone voice in questioning the preeminence of

metaphor is Jeanne Fahnestock (1999, 2004), who argues that figures such as antithesis have an even greater role than metaphor in scientific discourse – and thus makes an important point about the need to examine the role of figuration more broadly. In short, writing scholars have reached the same conclusion as scholars in other areas: that analyzing important figures is essential to understanding what we say and think.

Yet when it comes to metaphors that shape our thinking about writing, the picture is not as encouraging. Only two book-length studies have been published: Darsie Bowden's *The Mythology of Voice* (1999) and Barbara Tomlinson's *Authors on Writing* (2005). If metaphors and figures are as important as we all seem to agree, that number is quite small. (Compare that with the number of volumes on genre.) Both of these works are quite useful. Bowden provides a thorough history of the figure of *voice*, along with a full accounting of scholarly debate about it. Tomlinson's book examines a corpus of 3,000 published interviews with literary authors. Moreover, it is informed by a cognitive-linguistic theory of metaphor, which is in my estimation the most convincing account of metaphor to date.

Bowden's and Tomlinson's studies differ significantly from the study I present here. Neither takes a comprehensive view of figuration in the discourse of written communication; thus by design they exclude consideration of categorization, metonymy, and conceptual blending. Neither considers a wide-ranging sampling of writing discourse. Bowden focuses only on *voice*. And even though Tomlinson bases her study on an impressively large corpus of published interviews, its design excludes discourse from non-literary writers. Nonetheless, both books give sustained attention to a set of metaphors and concrete data and thus move our understanding of metaphors for writing substantially forward.

The great majority of scholarship related to metaphors for writing is different in character and, perhaps, in aim. Over the past few decades, writing scholars have persistently denounced everyday metaphors that seem naïve or nefarious, while providing only the

sparest explanations of what people mean by them – indeed, with little evidence that people interpret them the way critics claim. The most conspicuous example of that is the widespread condemnation of the Conduit Metaphor, a.k.a. the Code Model, the Transmission Model, and the Windowpane Theory (compare Miller 1979; Bizzell 1982; Slack, Miller, and Doak 1993; Longo 2000). For all the Conduit Metaphor's prominence in a rogues' gallery of metaphors we should *not* live by, no body of scholarship exists that attempts to verify whether or not writers generally have in mind the unhelpful interpretations of the Conduit Metaphor so often ascribed to it.

At the other end of the spectrum, numerous writing scholars have proposed new metaphors meant to set the field (and writers) on a better path. Surely, writing studies and writing students have benefited from the current shift away from metaphors of creativity-in-isolation and mechanistic-communication toward, to my mind, metaphors that better describe what happens when we write. For example, Gregory Clark (1998) has advocated seeing writing as travel; David Kaufer and Brian Butler (1996) have advocated seeing rhetoric as a design art; Barry Kroll has written about argument as aikido; Nedra Reynolds (1998) has written insightfully about composition and geographies; and it would be impossible to trace all of the advocates of the metaphors *discourse community* and *rhetorical space*.

Yet it is one thing to suggest a useful metaphor and something else to adequately describe the figurative conversation into which a new metaphor must inevitably enter. That problem is evident – not egregiously so but rather *representatively* so – in Peter Elbow's "The music of form: rethinking organization in writing" (2006). Elbow's discussion of the music metaphor is intriguing indeed. He argues that the temporal aspect of music has qualities that, when applied to analogous qualities of texts, help us understand better how successful texts are held together. Nonetheless, in spite of impressive effort in explicating his proposed metaphor, he betrays some confusion about the everyday metaphors that his rendering of the music metaphor must either build upon or contradict.

We should be grateful for that confusion, though. Elbow may stand alone in indicating that there is any reason for doubt about our knowledge of everyday writing metaphors. Indeed, in his curiously evolving article, Elbow begins with a firm assertion that his proposed metaphor will correct everyday misunderstandings about what makes for good writing that are rooted in the metaphor of *structure*. But, as he progresses, he becomes less certain that he understands what people ordinarily mean by structure. In turn, he becomes less certain about his initial claim about the metaphor of music. It's an unusual way to proceed. But it is productive – productive because it shines a light on what we do not know.

Consider the care and confidence with which Elbow outlines a new way of seeing the music metaphor. Elbow argues that comparing music and writing can solve a conceptual space–time problem – that because we must experience a text both spatially and chronologically, it is difficult to perceive what makes it cohere. A possible solution, he says, is to think of composing a text as if it were like composing music. He writes:

> Analysts frequently note how music works by setting up expectations that are sometimes fulfilled but often delayed or not satisfied … Music tends to bring us to a state of final satisfaction by way of a *journey* through nonsatisfactions, half satisfactions, and temporary satisfactions: degrees of *yearning* and *relief – itch* and *scratch*. This process is what literally *holds the piece together*.
>
> (2006: 623, emphasis added)

This passage is a soup of metaphors, typical of the way we talk and think metaphorically: yearning and satisfaction, itch and scratch, journeying, holding together. Elbow notes many of these metaphors in the course of his essay.

He focuses especially, though, on the metaphor of music because, he says, composing a piece of writing is not a question of spatial structuring but rather, as with music, a "problem in binding time" (625). That is, he believes that we compose better texts if we

think of coherence as a time problem rather than a space problem. It makes more sense, he believes, to manage expectations – what readers think may happen *later* – than to worry about where and how things should be placed on the page. Elbow also acknowledges that in spite of his proposed metaphor's advantages, its implications only go so far. Writing is not music. There are dissimilarities as well as similarities. For example, music does not have semantic content similar to writing; we cannot summarize it. Elbow is right that metaphors, his included, have limitations. As is often said, metaphors both show and hide: They emphasize important similarities, push into the background both trivial similarities and important dissimilarities, and in the process make something new of both parts of the metaphor.[1]

So far, so good. Elbow uses metaphoric thinking ingeniously and, I think, profitably. But then he turns to questions of the kind that ought to inform all discussions of metaphors and figures. What conversation does Elbow's metaphor enter? Does his use of the music metaphor build on ordinary beliefs about the way texts work? Or does his metaphor break new ground – offering a figurative conception of writing that contradicts what our metaphors ordinarily tell us is so? Or some of both?

At first, Elbow claims that his music metaphor corrects the problems perpetuated by a spatial metaphor that dominates the way most of us think about texts. With a polite nod to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, he says, "Our concept of organization seems hostage to a hidden spatial metaphor – one of Lakoff and Johnson's 'metaphors we live by'" (628). The problem is, Elbow does not build a convincing case that he has stated correctly the implications of the spatial metaphor to which we are held "hostage." Indeed, his account of the metaphor he purports to challenge is very much open to question.

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[1] This creative process was described best, perhaps, by Max Black in his elaboration of I. A. Richards's interaction theory of metaphor.

According to Elbow, when people say that texts should be *well organized* or *well structured*, they mean that they should have "some kind of satisfying visual/spatial relationship among the parts" (625). Well-structured texts should "vary the length of paragraphs, vary the fonts, use bullets, subheads, and charts" (625). In that sense, Elbow claims that we are "tempted to treat the organization of written words as wholly spatial" (625). Elbow's argument is thus *predicated* on the claim that everyday metaphoric discourse conflates textual structure with the physical layout of a text and that *structure* has nothing to do with the rhetorical management of "itches and scratches" that make texts successful. I would offer several reasons that we should doubt that.

For a start, everyday metaphors *often* rely on space as a conceptual template without need of a physical manifestation such as a printed text. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pointed out a long time ago, in English we think of happy as up, states of being as places, and life as a journey – to name just a few of our workaday spatial metaphors. Elbow himself favors the metaphor of *journeying* through texts, even as he insists that his music metaphor is strictly temporal. That is, he seems to have in mind that, as he reads through a physical text, he is making a journey through time, not just a trek through a series of inscribed pages. Elbow's use of the journeying metaphor is entirely conventional. Why should he avoid it? We all think about time via a deeply entrenched *spatial* metaphor.

Because spatial metaphors are routinely used abstractly, it is far from evident that to think of texts spatially is the same as equating their structure with typography and layout. A *well-structured* text is just as likely to be one that presents things in a rhetorically effective order – for instance, a text that tells readers in advance what to expect and that groups information in relation to readers' conventional expectations. Effective paragraphing, headings, and lists can make a text's structure easier to recognize. But they are not the structure itself.

Next, metaphors work together, converse with each other, balance against each other. If the spatial metaphor is an important

one, it is not the only important one. To justify Elbow's claim that the spatial metaphor is misguided, we would have to know not just how people interpret phrases like *well structured* and *well organized* but also what metaphors people ordinarily find compatible with these metaphors. It is not enough to find ways that a metaphor could misguide us given a certain interpretation; we have to find out how people typically interpret the metaphor and whether or not they are really misguided by it.

As it happens, people often group together the structure metaphor that Elbow rejects with the journeying metaphor that he favors. In a focus-group study with technical communicators and teachers of technical communication, Christine Abbott and I noticed just that pattern (Abbott and Eubanks 2005). In six focus groups, we asked participants to critique technical documents and kept track of the metaphors and figures they relied on most. Both the practitioners and the teachers advocated the use of short paragraphs, clear headings, and bulleted lists. They were concerned with the physical arrangement of text. But they also advocated the metaphor of journeying. They wanted to *break up* the text into bullets and lists so that they could better *lead readers through it*. Furthermore, they did not believe that using a good visual design was the same as organizing a text well; rather they advocated placing themselves in the reader's position so that matters would be plain from the reader's point of view.

Another reason we should doubt Elbow's account of the spatial metaphor is this: Metaphors are not one size fits all. In everyday discourse about writing, we typically categorize texts and writers in ways that allow us to adjust our expectations – and our metaphors. We do not expect precisely the same things from a manual as we do from a belletristic essay. When Abbott and I asked technical writers and technical writing teachers to critique a set of instructions, we heard quite a bit about the need for bullet points and short paragraphs. We heard nothing about managing itches and scratches so that a reader's interest might be piqued. Had we asked focus groups to critique, say, an autobiographical essay, we surely would have heard different concerns – and different metaphors. When Elbow contrasts his

music metaphor with metaphors of structure, and defines structure as effective use of lists, bullet points, and paragraphing, we ought to wonder: What kinds of texts are under consideration? Do the metaphors change when we discuss different kinds of texts?

Lastly, Elbow makes an assumption that he does not quite spell out but which is in keeping with a large swath of writing-studies commentary on metaphors for writing: Everyday metaphors surreptitiously lead us to bad conclusions; we are held "hostage" to the spatial metaphor, and we don't even know it. To some degree, that is possible. I would not claim that each of us is fully aware of our metaphoric thought. Conceptual metaphor theorists have certainly drawn our attention to the surprising influence of largely unnoticed metaphors. But metaphors do not silently control our every judgment. We – all of us, not just scholars of language – talk about the relative credibility of important metaphors. We prefer one metaphor over another. We have reasons for our preferences. There is rhetoric involved.

Elbow provides a fine example of that.

He proudly – defiantly! – uses the reviled metaphor I mentioned a while ago: the Conduit Metaphor. The Conduit Metaphor is, according to most who have described it, a model of communication that imagines meaning as something *contained* in a text and *conveyed* intact to a reader. The metaphor is often criticized because it seems to leave out the social dimension of communication and all the negotiation and uncertainty writing and talk involve. But notice how deliberate and contrary Elbow's use of it is.

Disagreeing with Gregory Colomb and June Anne Griffin's emphasis on a reader's comprehension, Elbow writes:

> In effect, I'm claiming that readers can be blind (deaf) to coherence that's actually *in the text*. But Colomb and Griffin would warn me against too much talk about what's "in the text." Their focus is on the role of the reader; they'd probably shrug and say "Of course." When readers bring the wrong expectations or

preparation, or read for the wrong reasons, of course they experience no coherence. What else is new? If we read a poem of fourteen lines and don't find any sonnet organization, we are likely to be put off – or at least distracted.

   As my epigraphs show, I, too, emphasize coherence as an experience in the reader. But I don't want to push that point too far; otherwise we're just blaming the victim/reader for not creating coherence *in every text*. Just because the experience is in the reader, that doesn't remove the need for features *in the text* to help create those experiences. Do we really want to settle for texts that only work for readers who are ideally prepared?

<div align="right">(2006: 632, emphasis added)</div>

Elbow's language is the same as that which has been so roundly condemned: *putting meaning into words*, *putting thoughts onto the page*, *getting ideas across to the reader*. So there we have it. On the one hand, Elbow claims that we are held hostage to everyday metaphors of structure. On the other, he claims to make good use of the Conduit Metaphor – first, by accepting only what he finds useful about it and, second, by balancing it with other metaphors, the music metaphor, in part.

Is Elbow merely fooling himself about the phrase *in the text*? Is he an unwitting hostage? I doubt it. My argument is that all of us negotiate everyday metaphors in a complex way. Metaphors are, in some respects, unconscious and automatic. But they also involve us in conversations that are conscious and well considered: They participate in a rhetorical give and take among metaphors, metonymies, and stories that tells us about the range of things that people ordinarily think *writing* is.

If Elbow had provided nothing more than his harsh critique of the spatial metaphor, his would be, to my mind, an unsatisfying effort. But he does not stop there. He seems to think matters through as his article progresses, to have doubts about his own critique of *structure*. When he turns to the question of signposts and

maps – two very common spatial metaphors – he uses them in a very conventional way, acknowledges their benefits, and combines them with his own preferred metaphor: journeying. "Readers are on a journey to the unknown," he says, "but if they are provided with signposts and maps, they won't feel lost" (630).

Once he says that, he creates a contradiction that would ordinarily cry out for resolution. If both his music metaphor and metaphors of structure combine coherently with the journeying metaphor, they are no longer in direct competition – his earlier claim cannot be entirely right. To his credit, rather than insist on an earlier point, Elbow qualifies his argument accordingly. The music metaphor may not resolve all questions of organization better than spatial metaphors after all, he says. Instead, it resolves the question of "what will make [readers] continue to read" (632). By the end of his essay, Elbow has reconciled spatial metaphors with his proposed music metaphor: "But I am not telling a story about two kinds of organization living on opposite sides of a fence – separate but equal. The two can work together" (646).

Perhaps Elbow is treating us to "the kind of spontaneous writing that turns up in freewriting, journals, letters, and e-mails" (640) – writing that reveals the writer's thought process. As Elbow thinks on the page, he comes to see that the two metaphors he focuses on are not in direct contradiction: As with many other metaphors, the relationship between them is complicated. But in recognizing that complexity, he raises a difficulty that must be grappled with. How do we make sense of the figurative conversation about writing that is already afoot? How can we add new figurative understandings if we have not adequately understood the old?

I have focused a good deal of attention on Peter Elbow's essay but not because I think his essay should be dismissed. To the contrary, even if he has not fully answered them, I believe Elbow leads us to ask the right questions. He raises an important problem – a problem that vexes discussions of metaphors throughout writing studies.

Indeed, our arguments about metaphors will be stronger if we recognize – and cannot be stronger if we do not recognize – how claims about metaphors for writing articulate with the larger figurative rhetoric of writing: a rhetoric that includes categorizing, thinking metonymically, theorizing, and constructing everyday stories. If that figurative rhetoric is described well, we will be able to see more clearly that we need not refute all that people already believe about composing texts in order to come up with better ideas about the writing process. If, on the other hand, we fail to describe that rhetoric properly, all of our proposals for new metaphors and all of our rejections of old ones will be far less convincing than they ought to be.

SUMMARY

Nearly all of the existing commentary on everyday metaphors for writing has been in the field of writing studies; however, that work so far has relied almost entirely on introspection. Yet more troubling, it has often neglected to consider the conversation among metaphors and figures that informs everyday metaphors for writing. That has led to mistaken accounts of some commonplace metaphors and, thus, weakened proposals for new metaphors. This chapter has demonstrated that point by examining an article by Peter Elbow.

2 The double bind of *writer* and *to write*
Graded categories

> First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age – say, 14.
>
> <div align="right">Lorrie Moore, "How to become a writer"</div>

> Dear Mr. Blue,
> I always imagined that I would be a writer. Unfortunately, I just don't write and can't even seem to begin. This past winter the idea of becoming an architect jumped into my head. I want to believe that I have some great artistic calling and that when I hear the call it will be unmistakable. I do think architecture is fascinating, and I have passionate feelings about how things should be built, but it doesn't seem to fit my heart like the idea of writing a story does. What do you think? Do only great people get called?
>
> <div align="right">Hearing Voices</div>

> Dear Hearing,
> It strikes me that, more than enjoying the process, you may desire the outcome. You don't want to write, you want to have written. That isn't a calling; it's just plain covetousness. Get over it.
>
> <div align="right">Garrison Keillor, *Mr. Blue*</div>

Turn to almost any page in any book about writing, or listen to any conversation between people who care about writing, and you are likely to come across a metaphor that is familiar or striking – or both. In a single paragraph of the time-honored *The Elements of Style*, we encounter words that "ignite" and "explode in the mind," prose that is like "music … capable of stirring the listener deeply," writing that is done "clearly," and writers who "steer by the stars" (Strunk and White 2008: 66). Any one of those metaphors might provide us a workable place to begin an examination of figurative thought in the discourse of writing. But a better place to begin, I suggest, is with

two words that could hardly be more central in the discourse of writing: *writer* and *to write*.

This may seem backwards. The usual approach is to begin with a single figure, usually a metaphor, one that is deeply entrenched (such as *voice* or *power*) or one that is being proposed (such as *text as music* or *argument as aikido*), and to examine the effect the figure may have, for better or worse, on how people write. And, of course, it does make good sense to weed out misleading figures and to suggest better ones.

But if we are to make sense of a broad array of everyday figures for writing – how they work together, converse with each other, shape each other – we need to pay attention to key assumptions and controversies. It is impossible to avoid *writer* and *to write* if we have any exposure at all to books of advice on writing or writing workshops or college composition courses. They tell us something fundamental about what we think writing is and what it should do.

Moreover, all of our everyday metaphors and metonymies are informed by the ways we construct who is and who is not a *writer* and by the ways we define what it means *to write*. To put it another way, the figurative rhetoric of writing is influenced throughout by the way we construct these crucial everyday categories.

Writer and *to write* are both logically and rhetorically complex. Categories always embed rhetorical judgments about the world around us. When we categorize people who write and acts of writing, we do not simply place these things into natural or convenient classifications: They do not "fall into" obvious pigeon holes. Rather we navigate contradictory perceptions and opinions about writing that have far-reaching implications. The categories *writer* and *to write* exert an opposing pull on each other that makes it all but impossible to think of writing in a simple or straightforward way. At the very heart of our everyday discourse of writing, we are placed in a double bind. But before I turn to that double bind, let me say a word about the way everyday categorization works.

Categories have traditionally been considered anything but rhetorical. Rather they have been said to be factual, uncontroversial classifications that reflect the world as it is. George Lakoff (1987) calls this the "classical" or "folk" theory of categorization and points out its failures – which are many. The classical theory assumes that categories reflect an objective world. It assumes that the boundaries of categories are clear. It assumes that all category members are equal. Ultimately, however, the classical theory fails – I would suggest – not just because it makes so many wrong assumptions but because it treats categorization too narrowly, as if we go about the world creating careful taxonomies the way scientists do – as if categorization were entirely deliberate.

When scientists categorize, they determine empirically what should be grouped together and what should not. For scientists, birds are birds because they lay eggs, have feathers, and have other physical attributes that are necessary and sufficient properties of birdness. This taxonomic method of classification is a matter of calculated fact-gathering, and when we are thinking taxonomically we adjust our categories to fit the data: Different species are often distinguished because they cannot interbreed, and that is a fact that we cannot ignore if we are thinking scientifically.

But that is not how categorization *usually* works. In everyday categorizing, we put different levels of categorization to different uses, and we privilege some category members over others. Everyday categories have a graded structure. Thus when we construct a category such as *writer*, we do not rationally calculate what counts as a writer so much as we tap into a model of writing in which some levels of categorization are more prominent than others and some examples are more acceptable than others.

In other words, as researchers in cognitive science have shown, categories have a prominent middle. On the vertical dimension, we give cognitive and rhetorical prominence to a mid-level category called the *basic level*. Basic-level categories are readily accessible: We

recognize them easily, recall them easily, and name them easily. In English, we often give them one- or two-syllable names: *bird*, *house*, *mother*, *chair*, *book* (Lakoff 1987: 33). *Dog* is a basic-level category. *Mammal* is above the basic level (superordinate), and *shar pei* well below it (subordinate). Basic-level categories are so salient in everyday discourse that they simply must be reckoned with. For example, it's hard to imagine a discussion of writing that does not respond to ordinary basic-level terms such as *writer* and *to write*.[1]

Categories also have a horizontal structure with a prominent middle or center. That is, category members at the "same level" are not equally salient. As a matter of zoology, penguins may be just as much birds as robins. But penguins are not the birdiest of birds – they're "odd ducks." Robins are at the center of the category. Cognitive science calls the most bird-like birds *prototypes* and considers the odd ducks to be peripheral category members.[2] The basic-level category

[1] Evidence for basic-level categories is found mainly in people's ordinary language use. In the 1970s, the anthropologist Brent Berlin, the first to notice a basic level of categorization, studied classification in ordinary speech among the Tzeltal speakers in Mexico and found, for example, that when asked to identify what plants were visible in the jungle, his native consultant named plants by genus (oak, maple) but not higher (tree) and not lower (white oak, sugar maple). In other words, it seemed that the consultant found middle-level categories more readily at hand – more cognitively accessible – than categories higher up and lower down (Lakoff 1987: 31–39). Cognitive linguists have generally agreed that basic-level categories are both biologically and culturally influenced. The Tzeltal speaker probably named plants according to genus because that "basic level" was cognitively accessible to him. But it was cognitively accessible to him largely because of his culture – his local knowledge and his ingrained ways of interacting with his environment. Thus there is probably nothing fixed about the genus *per se*. As Berlin suggests, in urban cultures *tree* – not *oak*, *maple*, or *pine* – may function as the basic level (Lakoff 1987: 37).

[2] In the 1970s and 1980s, Eleanor Rosch demonstrated the "prototype effect" in series of experiments with categories such as *circle*, *bird*, and *furniture*. Rosch (1973) found that most salient category members – the prototypes – were identified more quickly and called to mind more readily than other category members. For instance, when people were asked to make a list of birds, they included birds of all kinds; some even listed *bat*. But the best examples were listed most often. *Robin* was listed 377 times, *eagle* 161 times, and *ostrich* only 3. This free-response data was confirmed by recognition experiments. On a computer screen, participants were shown sentences such as *a robin is a bird*, *a duck is a bird*, or *a robin is a fruit* and asked to respond true or false as quickly as possible. Prototypes were identified more quickly and with fewer errors than peripheral examples.

writer is graded in that way. Some writers are what we sometimes call *real writers*, and other people may write but are *not really writers*. The same graded structure exists for the verb *to write*. Some acts exemplify writing particularly well, such as to write a letter – others less well, such as to write computer code or to write a song (which may not, strictly speaking, involve writing at all).

If we want to make sense of the figurative rhetoric of writing, we have no choice but to think through its most prominent basic-level categories and their horizontally graded structure. Recognizing these graded structures can help us to see what is, in an everyday sense, rhetorically important. The influence of rhetoric is especially evident for categories such as *writer* and *to write*, but is also an important part of everyday categories, generally speaking. Even the apparently biological category *robin* – cited by innumerable cognitive linguists as the prototypical bird (e.g., Aitchison 1994; Croft and Cruse 2004) – has a rhetorical dimension that contributes to its prominence. The first robin of spring has a rhetorical presence. In my childhood, I listened to Bobby Day's (and later Michael Jackson's) hit single "Rockin' Robin." I can't imagine a song called "Rockin' Sparrow" or "Rockin' Starling." What is typical and what is rhetorically significant cannot be easily separated.[3]

Ordinary categories such as *writer* and *to write* are, in that respect, no different. But unlike *robin*, they invite discussion and debate. They draw us into a discussion about conflicting values and theories. Thus when we look at what might seem to be the simplest, most perfunctorily applied categories in the discourse of writing, we are faced immediately not just with biases that are part of everyday categories' cognitive structure, but often with controversies about

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[3] Kenneth Burke discusses how rhetorically fraught categories can be, especially when rational or scientific categories collide with what he calls "emotional" categories. Burke points out that when Darwin moved "man from the category of the divine to the category of the apes," he provided "the supreme instance of the tendency to construct rational categories which are at variance with the categories of linkage formed in emotional experience." Burke adds, "It is even recorded that women fainted when first being told of his conclusions (possibly because of the disturbing implication that they had been sleeping with apes)" (1984: 98).

the categories themselves and even disruptions of the nested struc-
ture of categories that we usually take for granted. We encounter a
persistent – perhaps inevitable – double bind.

WHY YOU MAY NOT BE A *WRITER*, EVEN THOUGH YOU *WRITE*

Writer is, of course, an exclusive term. I recall struggling awkwardly
with it some years ago. Shortly after accepting my first university
job, I learned that an old high-school friend – a writer – lived near me,
and we met for lunch. As we caught up on each other's lives, I tried to
describe the job of an English professor at my institution. My friend
seemed befuddled by the idea that publication was so important to
my future success. *But what is it you publish?* he asked. *Research*, I
said. He became increasingly perplexed. I became increasingly ill at
ease. And I know that I am not the first to have experienced that dis-
comfort; Gerald Graff, for one, fumbles "painfully to explain what
I do to nonacademic relatives and friends" (2003: 4). At some point,
though, my friend said, *So you're really a writer*. I said that was
right – though it had never occurred to me before. Using the word
felt somewhat fraudulent. And, in a way, it is. I wrote the words you
are now reading. But I am not *really* a writer, am I?

L. M. Hayes describes the same situation in an essay included
in *Writing a Professional Life*. Hayes, who writes technical copy for
advertising and marketing, tells of being asked by a friend what she
does for a living:

> "I'm a writer," I answered.
>
> Her response was the same as everyone else's always is. "Oh.
> What do you write? Books?"
>
> As a matter of fact, I'm a technical writer, but if I had said that,
> Julie would have asked one of two questions: "What's that?" Or
> "So you write software manuals, or something?"
>
> Not that I mind explaining what technical writing is, but
> I prefer to save time when I can. So instead I gave Julie my

> standard response. "No, right now I work for a marketing firm as a copywriter." Most people have a basic enough understanding of the term copywriter to let it go with that.
>
> (2001: 149)

Hayes's problem is perfectly understandable. We do not have a term that suits her job well – and her job is to write. But is she *really* a writer?

If she wrote novels, she could have answered straightforwardly, "I'm a writer." Of course, her friend would certainly have asked what kinds of novels she writes, but not because the word *writer* doesn't fit. If she wrote technical manuals or engineering reports, Hayes could have answered "I'm a technical writer" and encountered only the problem of explaining what technical writers do. Hayes ultimately calls herself a technical writer, but much of her essay wrestles with justifying that job title, which suits her work only somewhat better than copywriter. Without a fitting subordinate category to offer, she is caught in a rhetorical quandary. She knows at the outset that whatever job description she offers will be unsatisfying. But the course of the conversation with her friend seems almost beyond her control. She must respond with *writer* because she does, after all, write for a living. Yet the graded structure of the category all but guarantees that the word will mislead.

Hayes's quandary is not unusual. In a purely logical sense, *writer* refers to all kinds of writers. Technical writers, copywriters, grant writers, songwriters – all of these are peripheral members of the category. They are the grouses and ostriches and penguins. But the word Writer – capital W – also names a prototype: a writer of certain kinds of texts who has a certain place in the literate world. Because of the rhetorical power of the prototype *Writer*, the generic term *writer* inevitably, it seems, invites questions about legitimacy. So, strangely, Hayes cannot claim unproblematically the basic-level categorization that – logically – must subsume her job description whatever that may be. A shar pei is as much a dog as any other.

An ostrich is a bird. Yet it is possible to say that Hayes really isn't a *writer*.

Margaret Atwood illustrates this predicament very well. In her memoir of writing, *Negotiating with the Dead*, she relates a story from Kobo Abé about a man who, while undertaking a futile task, considers writing down his experiences. Immediately, the man begins fantasizing about becoming a writer – already thinking of titles for his yet unwritten work. Atwood quips that he'd soon be conjuring up cover designs. But he is quickly discouraged with the idea: Becoming a writer seems impossible to him. When a voice in his head reassures him that writers are nothing special – "If you write, you're a writer, aren't you?" – the man insists that the role of writer encompasses much more than having written something and that it is of greater value than the act of writing itself. He argues back, "If I couldn't be a writer, there would be no particular need to write!" (2002: 3–4).

The man in the story takes to an extreme what all of us plainly understand. As Atwood explains, being a writer is "a socially acknowledged role, and one that carries some sort of weight or impressive significance" (4). Indeed, to be a writer – not just someone who writes very well – is as much about identity as it is about describing a job or someone's skill in writing.

In that respect, *writer* is different from other professional job titles. A lawyer's relationship to the law is a matter of skill and professional classification (whereupon respect or ridicule follows). The same is true of an accountant or a dentist. But although a writer may have special skills and may be paid to exercise them, that is not all that justifies the title. In fact, the title can apply *without* those things. Atwood, for example, tells of becoming a writer after a transformative experience that made her realize that being a writer was her essence:

> I wrote a poem in my head and then I wrote it down, and after
> that writing was the only thing I wanted to do … My transition

> from not being a writer to being one was instantaneous, like the
> change from docile bank clerk to fanged monster in "B" movies.
>
> (14)

Once that transformation took place, all of Atwood's writing would
be the work of a writer – no matter what.

Of course, *writer* is used in other ways. It has become a con-
vention of composition studies to refer to first-year composition
students as writers. *Writer* is sometimes applied to students in very
early grades, where many "writers" cannot yet spell simple words.
But, as Mikhail Bakhtin would surely point out, no matter what use
we make of the term, it always carries traces of exaltation.

Hence my own reticence in calling myself a writer (even
though I spend an awful lot of my time writing). Hence L. M. Hayes's
hesitance to call herself a writer without further explanation (even
though she gets paid to write every day). It is a problem of polysemy –
multiple, related meanings – rather than homonymy. If writer were
homonymous – had two distinct meanings such as *anyone who
writes* and *someone who "writes books or something"* – we would
be able to select the appropriate meaning depending on context. But
writer is negotiated within a single discourse.

I will explain further in Chapter 4 what the prototype *writer*
entails. But, for the moment, let me turn to the core of the double
bind: the incompatibility of the prototypes for *writer* and *to write*
and the way they constrain each other.

WHY TYPICAL WRITERS MAY NOT WRITE PROTOTYPICALLY

The verb *to write* is no less central to the rhetoric of writing than the
noun *writer*. Like *writer*, *to write* is a basic-level category and is una-
voidable. Like *writer*, it has a graded structure: There are prototypi-
cal examples of *to write*. That is easy to see when we think of acts
of writing that are not prototypical. Composers write music, math-
ematicians write equations, computer programmers write code, and

computers write data to digital storage media. All of these actions are full-fledged members of the category *to write*; yet they are on the outer edge.

It is more difficult, however, to say precisely what lies at the center of the category. It may be tempting to see the question as relatively uncomplicated. The prototype of *to write* is the most literal meaning of the verb: to inscribe words on paper – what I call the *pen-to-paper prototype*. But complications arise when we consider the relative prototypicality of various senses of *to write*. That is because what we take to be a typical act of writing is not just the literal meaning of *to write*, but also acts of writing that are typical of prototypical writers. Thus two prototypes are in tension.

Indeed, the prototypes intersect only in a very limited way. Prototypical writers do, indeed, inscribe words onto paper, and we often do associate physical inscription with the work of a writer. Imagine the most clichéd depiction of writer's block, the kind you see in old movies. The author scribbles with a pen or types at a typewriter. There is a large pile of crumpled paper nearby, in a wastebasket or on the floor, where the writer has cast it in a fit of frustration. This scene is familiar enough to be the subject of parody. In the opening sequence of the movie *Throw Momma from the Train*, Billy Crystal, a blocked fiction writer, rolls a blank piece of paper into his typewriter then rips it out and crumples it – before typing a word.

But being a writer is hardly the same thing as being someone who inscribes words on paper. To put it glibly, when blocked writers fail to write, it is not because they cannot type. Rather the act of inscribing is associated by metonymy (that is, by contiguity) with the mental act of writing. When Margaret Atwood first became a writer, she "wrote a poem in [her] head and then … wrote it down" (2002: 14). The first act is the prototypical act of a *writer*, the second is the prototypical act of someone who literally *writes*. There is a relationship between the two things. Yet they do not align with each other perfectly.

That makes for a complex pattern in the gradation of the category *to write*. If the pattern were simple, it might move from prototypical to peripheral along these lines:

Prototypical: putting pen to paper in order to form letters or words.

Metonymic: thinking of what is later to be written in letters or words.

Metaphoric: non-inscriptive acts such as *making a mental note*.

But that is not the logic we usually follow – at least, not the whole of it.

We can see that in the way definitions are sequenced in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition* – which is at least suggestive evidence. After all, definitions are deliberately arranged so that prototypical meanings take priority. As *AHD* editor Steve Kleinedler explained it to me,

The *AHD* generally puts either the most common or the most central sense first. (Often a sense is both the most common and the most central, but not always.) By most central, I mean the basic concept, which other senses are subsets of, or subordinate to. Obviously, for entries with a large number of senses, we would attempt to clump the senses in groups, and ideally the first clump would be the most basic.

(2008)

"Prototypical" is, of course a technical term that may not match Kleinedler's description perfectly, but "common," "central," and "basic" all come very close.

Consider, then, the arrangement of intransitive definitions of *write*:

1. To trace or form letters, words, or symbols on paper or another surface.
2. To produce written material, such as articles or books.

3. To compose a letter; communicate by mail.

(*American Heritage Dictionary* 2006: 1986)

There is a clear, though intricate, progression from prototypical to peripheral. The first movement occurs within the first definition. It lists three things that are traced or formed in writing: letters, words, or symbols. Forming letters or words is prototypical, forming symbols less so. In the same way, writing on paper is prototypical; writing on other surfaces is not.

The second shift away from the prototypical is slightly more complicated. The first definition is about literal inscription (that is, tracing and forming letters). The second and third emphasize the contiguity of inscription and thought: People may write articles, books, and letters without ever touching a pen or a keyboard. In fact, we often say that people are writing when actually they are dictating for later transcription or perhaps just thinking of what they plan to inscribe at another time. Overall, then, the arrangement of definitions seems predictable enough – from pen-to-paper prototype to metonymic definitions.

But definitions two and three do not move from most common to least common. More people write letters or e-mails than articles or books. Indeed, almost everyone writes letters and e-mails. Most people will never write an article or a book. So what earns writing articles and books priority over less writerly acts such as letter and e-mail writing? It is the intrusion of a second prototype, derived from the noun *writer*. Writing e-mails and letters are common examples of *to write*. But writing articles and books are typical of what a *writer* does. The two prototypes are at odds, but must nonetheless reach some kind of accommodation. In the arrangement of the intransitive definitions above, the accommodation is to give general priority to the pen-to-paper prototype over metonymic examples of writing, but then to give article and book writing priority over less writerly acts such as letter and e-mail writing.

A similar accommodation is made in the arrangement of the transitive definitions. In one respect, the definitions honor a

straightforward arrangement: The pen-to-paper prototype is mentioned first, the metaphoric ones last. But, in the middle, things are complicated. For example, "to compose and set down, especially in literary or musical form" appears before more commonplace instances of writing such as writing a check or simply writing five pages. Indeed, "to compose or set down [in] … literary or musical form" appears before four items (definitions four through seven) that are more commonly done and witnessed – three of which are associated with the pen-to-paper prototype:

1. a. To form (letters, words, or symbols) on a surface such as paper with an instrument such as a pen. [*Pen-to-paper prototype.*] b. To spell: *How do you write your name?* [*Pen-to-paper prototype.*]

2. To form (letters or words) in cursive style. [*Pen-to-paper prototype.*]

3. To compose and set down, especially in literary or musical form: *write a poem; write a prelude.* [*Metonymic.*]

4. To draw up in legal form; draft: *write a will.* [*Metonymic.*]

5. To fill in or cover with writing: *write a check; wrote five pages in an hour.* [*Pen- to-paper prototype.*]

6. To express in writing; set down: *write one's thoughts.* [*Pen-to-paper prototype.*]

7. To communicate by correspondence: *wrote that she was planning to visit.* [*Pen-to-paper prototype.*]

8. To underwrite, as an insurance policy. [*Metaphorical. Guarantee is metaphorized as writing, though the guarantee is inscribed.*]

9. To indicate; mark: "Utter dejection was written on every face" (Winston S. Churchill). [*Metaphorical. Facial expressions are metaphorized as text.*]

10. To ordain or prophesy: *It was written that the empire would fall.* [*Metaphorical. Foreknowledge or authority is metaphorized as text.*]

11. Computer science. To transfer or copy (information) from
     memory to a storage device or output device. [*Metaphorical.
     No visible inscription. Symbols.*]

<div align="right">(American Heritage Dictionary 2006: 1986; emphasis added.)</div>

Why does definition three receive priority? Composing a poem
or a prelude is not more common than writing a check or writing a
letter (or, perhaps, an e-mail message). But, for people whom we call
writers, writing a poem *is* more common, or at least more impor-
tant, than writing checks and letters. Since prototypical writers are
grouped with artists – including composers of music – definition
three even mentions the peripheral act of composing music.

Definition four seems, in a sense, out of order also. "To draw
up in legal form" is surely a more specialized act than "to write five
pages" or "to communicate by correspondence." On the other hand,
it is very much the act of a literate writer, someone whose relation-
ship with the written word is especially important and whose writ-
ten words carry weight. That person may not be a writer *per se*. But,
as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, someone who draws up
a will would no doubt be what is often called "a good writer."

Of course, other dictionaries present definitions of *to write* in
various orders. But not just any arrangement is possible. Imagine a
dictionary that lists *to prophesy* as the first definition of *to write*.
Imagine a dictionary that begins with *to compose computer code*,
lists after that *to inscribe letters on paper*, and only then mentions
to compose in literary form. There is a limit to how flexible the rela-
tionship between the prototypes for *writer* and *to write* can be. Put
simply: It is possible to put things in the wrong order.

The double bind of competing prototypes is not determinis-
tic. If the discourse "writes us," we are nonetheless not inert texts.
Indeed, the figurative rhetoric of writing is as much about contra-
dicting typical ideas as it is about recognizing them. After all, at
my friend's urging, I called myself a *writer*; I made the assertion in
spite of my misgivings. L.M. Hayes did not deny that she can be

called a *writer* or a copywriter or a technical writer; she made an argument that justified one choice over another. Furthermore, as we will see in the next chapter, the question of what is typical or what terms fit is complicated by fundamental notions about writing expertise. We cannot navigate words like *writer* and *to write* without in some measure coming to terms with what it means to know how to write.

SUMMARY

The figurative rhetoric of writing is fundamentally shaped by the relationship between two mid-level or *basic* categories: *writer* and *to write*. Each of these categories is graded so that *prototypical* category members are cognitively and rhetorically prominent. The prototype of *writer* is incompatible with and yet inseparable from the prototype of *to write*. Although it may seem that the prototype of *to write* is the simply the act of physical inscription, and that judgments about typicality can be made only in relation to that central example, we actually have to make more complex judgments because the complementary prototype of *writer* influences the verb *to write*. In the figurative rhetoric of writing, all of our everyday metaphors and metonymies are shaped fundamentally by persistent negotiation between the two prototypes.

3 Bind upon bind

The general-ability and the specific-expertise views of writing

> Knowing how to express yourself in clear, concise, and correct written English is a key factor for success in the twenty-first century. Writing with confidence and skill allows you to communicate your feelings, ideas, hopes, and fears. In this chapter, you'll explore why writing is so important, no matter who you are or what you do.
>
> Laurie Rozakis, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing*

Each time we categorize writing at the basic level rather than above or below it, we have to ask ourselves fundamental questions about what it means to able to write: If you are a *writer*, does that mean you are an expert at writing everything – novels, biographies, product manuals, press releases? If you know how *to write*, does that mean you are equally competent to write term papers and screenplays? Or do *writer* and *to write* refer to something narrower?

We encounter the same kinds of questions when we categorize texts. Some of us think that it is not possible, really, to write a *book*; it is only possible to write something more specific: a *novel* or a *crime novel* or, perhaps, a *police procedural*. Generally speaking, the more subordinate the category, the more specific – that is, nontransferable – the knowledge and skills. I have seen best-selling author Harlan Coben described as the "master of the *soft-centered suburban thriller*" (Wiegand 2007). A subordinate category indeed. And a very particular sort of writing expertise.

I call these conflicting theories the *general-ability view* and the *specific-expertise view*. The tension between them is a persistent rhetorical problem in everyday discourse about writing. We simply cannot categorize writers and writing without calling these two views into conflict. Moreover, as we will see over the course of this book, we cannot make use of everyday metaphors and metonymies for writing without encountering them.

In the field of rhetoric and composition, proponents of "genre as social action" have made a point of embracing the specific-expertise view (e.g., Miller 1984; Swales 1990; Devitt 1993; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). For them, learning to write competently is a matter of developing genre knowledge in context, at the level of the sub-genre. They point out that writing cannot, in fact, occur at a general level; action is always fine-grained. Thus what matters are very particular kinds of texts and writing situations – particular genre knowledge. In keeping with that concern, genre theorists have studied particular kinds of texts in areas such as science (Bazerman 1988; Varghese and Abraham 2004), health care (Schryer 1993; Dunmire 2000; Berkenkotter 2001), engineering (Winsor 1999), tax accounting (Devitt 1991), higher education (Russell 1997; S. Smith 1997; Hyland 2003; Tardy 2003), city management (Wegner 2004), and the blogosphere (Miller and Shepherd 2004), to name just a few.

The always-cited genre theorist Carolyn Miller is emphatic about what level of classification matters. Her approach to genre

> insists that the "de facto" genres, *the types we have names for in everyday language*, tell us something theoretically important about discourse. To consider as potential genres such homely discourse as the *letter of recommendation*, the *user manual*, the *progress report*, the *ransom note*, the *lecture*, and the *white paper*, as well as the *eulogy*, the *apologia*, the *inaugural*, the *public proceeding*, and the *sermon*, is not to trivialize the study of genres; it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed in the situations in which we find ourselves.
>
> (1984: 155, emphasis added)

Writing competently, she points out, is a matter of calling on our experience: To write expertly means to understand the recurring rhetorical situations in which ordinary genres are embedded. It follows that these situations and texts must be categorized somewhere below the basic level.

By contrast, basic-level genres – the book, essay, letter, memo, paper – are insufficient for a genre-based theory of writing expertise. We have everyday names for them, but they are neither modified ("letter of recommendation," "user manual," "progress report") nor esoteric (" eulogy," "apologia," "inaugural"). When basic-level genres are given prominence in popular textbooks, advocates of genre-as-social-action see that as problematic. Teaching the business letter or the business report – or even the "good news letter" or the "progress report" – misleads us, they say, about the very nature of competent writing. Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin claim that

> traditional generic classifications are pitched at such a broad
> level of generality that they can describe only superficial param-
> eters of form or content. For example, "the business letter," as
> discussed in traditional writing textbooks, is depicted in largely
> formal terms with only vague comments about content.
>
> (1995: 14)

Which is to say that the basic level is *too* basic to be useful to expert writers and to theories of expertise. Berkenkotter and Huckin would prefer to shift the focus to more "localized genres" such as a "letter from a Utah bank promoting a new savings program" (14). Perhaps they exaggerate to make a point.

Of course, genre theory is part of a specialized discussion among writing researchers. But everyday discourse about writing is concerned with a similar conflict between the general-ability and specific-expertise views. Like the scholarly discussion, it is concerned with how one learns to write better: Is a general knowledge of writing the key? Or is learning to write better a matter of focusing on specific kinds of texts? In contrast to the scholarly discussion, though, every-day discourse is also concerned about status: Am I a *writer* or not? When I claim that I can *write*, how far-reaching is that claim?

Everyday discourse about writing persistently struggles with these conflicting theories of writing and thus creates bind upon bind each time it encounters *writer*, *to write*, and a constellation of

related categories. To illustrate that multiplication of binds, I will focus below on the prototype for *writer* and the breadth of skill that the prototype does, or does not, imply.

EVERYDAY TENSION BETWEEN THE GENERAL-ABILITY VIEW AND THE SPECIFIC-EXPERTISE VIEW

We might expect relationships among categories to be logical. Most of us rely on the classical or folk theory of categorization to some degree. But everyday categories do not form a tidy system. For example, it might seem logical for writers, their products, and their activities to operate on one level at a time, in matched sets. Yet that is often not the case.

Instead, our ordinary word choices draw us into the ongoing debate about writing expertise. When category terms match by level, the specific-expertise view seems to win out. These matched sets are familiar: *Novels* are written by *novelists*. *Poems* by *poets*. *Grants* by *grant writers*. *Ad copy* by *copywriters*. *Newspapers* and *magazines* by *reporters* and *journalists*. On the other hand, when different levels of categorization intermingle, the general-ability view seems to dominate. People who write for newspapers and magazines are often named by the basic-level term *writer*. So are people who write novels. And so are people who write poems, grants, and ads. Similarly, we may pair a subordinate-level noun with the basic-level verb *to write* simply because there is no subordinate-level verb available. Novelists *write* novels. Journalists *write* articles. Grant writers *write* grant proposals. At other times, we may pair subordinate-level nouns with superordinate verbs. Technical writers usually *produce* technical documents, and poets often *compose* poems.

It is possible, of course, that some word choices are motivated merely by convenience. But ordinary discourse about writing nonetheless builds in complications and contradictions that are useful to us when we want to assert one or another view about ourselves and about writing. Even if we do not always pause to reflect on the ways we mix and match categorical levels, our word choices have

implications that are of a piece with a debate that is well elaborated and explicit.

That debate is especially evident in the way advice books for writers vary from each other and, at times, equivocate internally. In *Words Fail Me*, Patricia O'Conner admonishes, "Contrary to popular opinion, there's no mystery to writing well … whether your work ends up in a history professor's e-mail, a marketing report, a community newsletter, or a best-selling novel, the pitfalls are the same" (1999: 3). She insists again and again that writing is all one thing. For her, writing a magazine article about biker gangs is not appreciably different from writing a memo to a new marketing manager about muffler sales in Toledo (18); you face similar demands when you write a shopping list, a Ph.D. thesis, and an e-mail giving directions to your house (35–36); and writing a play is not so different from writing a magazine article on dry-cleaning methods or a speech on exotic pets (166). Of course, she does not deny that there is such a thing as a real writer – a Tolstoy, a Melville, a Balzac, and a few Brontës. But, she insists, they have to know the same things that you do, even if you're just a beginning writer (5).

O'Conner is not simply describing the world as she sees it. She is taking a stand against a well-known contrary view, such as the one expressed by John Gardner in *On Becoming a Novelist*. Although the title of his book uses the word novelist, he uses *writer* as an interchangeable term – for example, in chapter titles such as "The Writer's Nature" and "The Writer's Training and Education." Gardner makes it clear that to be a writer, by which he means an artistic writer of good fiction, is to achieve something very particular. It is always in doubt whether or not, even by dint of hard work, an aspiring writer can succeed in becoming an actual writer. "The honest answer is almost always, 'God only knows,'" he says (1999: 1).

In Gardner's view, novelists are different from other kinds of writers because they have a special kind of linguistic sensitivity and unusual psychological characteristics. "The true artist's verbal sensitivity may well be different … " he explains, "from

the usual 'writer of good English'"; the novelist is observant in ways that others are not observant, is intelligent but not in the way of the mathematician or philosopher, and is daemonically compulsive – which distinguishes the novelist from the short-story writer and the poet (3, 19–20, 62–63). Gardner is squarely in the specific-expertise camp.

But I do not want to characterize the conflict between the general-ability and specific-expertise views as simplistically polarized, with contending sides that can never find common ground. Advice books frequently accommodate both the general-ability and the specific-expertise view. William Zinsser in his perennial best-seller *On Writing Well*, advises only about writing non-fiction. But he begins with a broad assertion that all non-fiction is alike: "My purpose is not to teach good nonfiction or good journalism, but to teach good English that can be put to those uses, or to any uses … good English is your passport to wherever you need to go in your writing, your work and your life" (1998: xi). Nonetheless, he gives advice specifically applicable to the interview, the travel article, the memoir, science and technology writing, business writing, sports writing, arts writing, and humor. He often distinguishes between kinds of writers, too. He refers to "a journalist friend" (134), "the memoir writer" (136), "a technical writer" (149), "the best sports writers" (180), and so on – an implicit acknowledgement that not all writers have identical skills and good English is not all you need to produce good texts. Yet the theme of his book is what a "writer" needs to know. A typical statement: "Of all the subjects available to you as a *writer*, the one you know best is yourself" (133, emphasis added).

For all the tension between them, the general-ability and the specific-expertise views both assume that writing ability has – more or less – a nested structure. People who can produce good texts in highly regarded genres such as novels and newspaper columns are assumed to be capable of writing less exalted texts. Indeed, as I learned in the course of my interviews, newspaper columnists and magazine writers are often asked to write procedural manuals "on

the side," but no one asks technical writers to write newspaper columns or novels (though some do that on their own initiative). Yet claims to broad expertise are not automatic, and neither are the reverse. The relationships between typicality of writers' prototypes and views of writing expertise are summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Summary of prototypes' intersections with theories of writing expertise.

Prototypical Writer General-Ability View	Prototypical writers such as novelists and journalists usually claim the title *writer*. For some, the title implies an ability to write at a professional level in a wide variety of genres.
Prototypical Writer Specific-Expertise View	Some prototypical writers call themselves *writers* but claim only to be able to write at a professional level in a specific genre or grouping of genres such as newspaper columns and articles or memoirs and fiction.
Non-Prototypical Writer General-Ability View	Some non-prototypical writing professionals such as technical writers and academics call themselves *writers*. For them, *writer* implies an ability to write at a professional level in a wide variety of genres. It is a bid upward both in level of categorization and in prestige.
Non-Prototypical Writer Specific-Expertise View	Some writing professionals may reject the title *writer*. For them, *writer* implies broad writing abilities that they do not wish to claim.

WRITING PROFESSIONALS' NEGOTIATIONS OF WRITER

When I interviewed writers for this project, I did not ask them which view they favored – general-ability or specific-expertise. Rather I asked open-ended questions about when they first considered themselves, if ever, to be a writer, how they prefer to describe the work they do, and what words they use to describe themselves – writer, technical writer, journalist, memoirist, and so on. Just as L. M Hayes (2001) struggled with the word *writer* – just as I faced my own ambivalence about being called a *writer* – the people I interviewed took seriously the issue of what to call themselves. Not only did they have well-considered opinions about how to categorize themselves, but their choice of titles and descriptors also seemed to *matter* to them.

The responses to my questions were as various as the writing professionals themselves. But all seemed to face the same rhetorical bind. The question of what to call themselves hinged, in part, on whether or not they perceived themselves as prototypical. At the same time, they often weighed carefully the question of how much or what kind of expertise to claim. Interestingly – and unexpectedly, from my perspective – the pattern of responses did not closely align with job descriptions. For instance, technical writers did not uniformly eschew the title *writer*. Instead, what my interviewees had in common was a patterned set of rhetorical concerns.

The writing professionals most comfortable calling themselves a *writer* were, as might be expected, the journalists and the memoirists. These people evinced a belief that they had a general ability to write. But it would be a mistake to draw lines too sharply. Claims to the title *writer* were sometimes qualified, as were claims to a general writing expertise.

The person who drew the firmest connection between being a writer and the generality of a writer's expertise was Dirk Johnson, an experienced journalist who has written for the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* and has published two non-fiction books. He often used

phrases such as "when I first became a writer" and "as a writer." Yet when asked a direct question about whether he calls himself a *writer*, he hesitated: "Well, I'm still kind of waiting for that in some ways."

Like all of the people I spoke with, Johnson was pleasantly humble about the breadth of his skills. (In fact, no one said, "I can write anything! Just try me!") However, he was resolute in claiming that all writing is the same, from writing a feature article for a national magazine to writing a letter. Johnson is currently teaching writing for the first time in his life. I asked him if he really wants his students to believe that all writing is alike – that writing a non-fiction book is the same as writing a letter or an e-mail message. "Absolutely," he said. "I tell my students that, other than me, nobody is required to read what they write, and therefore it needs to be engaging and entertaining and accessible." He went on, "Every piece of writing in my view is a story of some sort. It has an opening scene, it has a voice, a compelling voice early on, it has a protagonist, it has some sense of drama either in the form of conflict or a challenge, a problem to be overcome."

Likewise, Neil Steinberg, a columnist for the *Chicago Sun Times* and author of several non-fiction books, called himself a "commercial writer," pointing out that he expects everything he writes to be published somewhere, though not necessarily in a newspaper or a book. He takes on projects ranging from stories for *Brides Magazine* and *Catholic Chicago* to ads for steel alloys, technical manuals, and websites. Plainly, for Steinberg, writing is writing.

Other journalists also referred to themselves as writers in the course of conversation. Although all of them seemed comfortable having substantial writing ability attributed to them, they did not agree uniformly that all writing is the same. Eric Zorn, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, was drawn as a young person to all kinds of writing, but has left fiction behind. He emphasized the differences in audiences and expectations for "a newspaper guy," where the pace is fast and the product ephemeral. He also emphasized the differences

in skills required for newspaper writing versus fiction writing, for which he claims not to have "the gift."

Freelance journalist Robert Sharoff was drawn in his early years to all varieties of writing: "It was just writing, you know. It was sitting in front of a piece of paper or in front of a typewriter and writing, and I don't think I distinguished between fiction and non-fiction at that point. It was just the act of getting thoughts down on paper." But these days, he sees important distinctions between different kinds of writing.

For him, writing in-house newsletters for a consulting firm "was a horrible way to live" because "if you're a journalist, you're used to really kind of getting to the bottom of a problem and researching something." In writing about complex situations, he pointed out that "being a reporter gets in the way" because once you get "above reporting traffic accidents or something, it's very tough to get at the truth of something." When he was asked to write a personal reflection for a newsletter about his work running a food pantry for the homeless, he found that "once you get out of the habit of writing personally, it's a hard voice to get back." Certainly, Sharoff's working life attests to a general writing expertise: He has sought and accepted work from writing for a consulting firm to writing feature stories for the *New York Times*. But he sees major differences in each writing situation; for him, each presents distinct challenges.

The memoirist Cheri Register handled the expertise question by making distinctions among her own expertises. Like others who routinely referred to themselves as a writer, she was drawn to all kinds of writing early in her life. Indeed, when Register was in grade school and was asked to share her hobby, she brought pieces of her writing. She laughed about it in our interview, saying that people wanted to know: "Did I have the people I wrote letters to send the letters back? And that's what writing was – was writing letters. Nobody anticipated that it was the kind of writing that you do in books." That distinction remains for her. She thinks of her early journal and letter writing as "free" and thus different from "when you're writing

as a writer. You know, this is my work; I want something to come of this."

Among the other writing professionals I interviewed – three technical writers, a freelance website developer and trade magazine writer, a historian, and a United Methodist bishop – there was more variety about claiming the title *writer*. That is not wholly surprising, because everyday discourse provides them with alternative titles. Perhaps for that reason, the conflict between the writerly prototype and breadth of skill was especially difficult for them. It was not obvious that any of them would identify with prototypical writers (though three of them did). And it was not obvious that their writing expertise went beyond the requirements of their job (though, again, three of them did claim a general writing expertise). When they did claim the title *writer*, they seemed to be bidding upward – in two senses: First, they bid upward from subordinate category to the basic level, such as from *technical writer* to *writer*. Second, they bid upward in prestige, from a job title to a title that connotes admiration.

Russell Friend is a longtime technical writer and a past president of the Chicago Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. He demurred when I asked him whether he calls himself a writer as, say, a journalist would. He explained that technical writing is a certain type of writing, different from other types. He firmly took the specific-expertise view – at least until he reached the very end of his response:

> If [people] say, "I'm a journalist," immediately in my mind I go to, "Oh, they write for a newspaper or a magazine, and they write feature articles or some such thing or write trade magazine articles. So that kind of writing is totally different from when somebody says, "I'm a technical writer or technical communicator." Just something totally different comes to mind. A person who says, "I write novels" – that brings something else to mind. But I don't associate what I do with journalists, and I don't put what I do with novelists. I think those are vastly different

kinds of writing which I have almost no educational background in and nearly no experience trying to do. Never tried to write a novel. Never tried to write a short story. Yet I suppose you could say I'm writing short stories and novels in a certain way.

It is hard to imagine someone being more reluctant to group himself with those who are typically called writers, unmodified. Although he took evident pride in his work, Friend refused to bid upward. And for well-articulated reasons. He distinguished his knowledge and skills from those of journalists and writers of fiction. At the same time, he offset his well-elaborated specific-expertise viewpoint with an acknowledgement of the general-ability view – that we might say he does write short stories and novels "in a certain way." That small gesture is another kind of bid – a highly qualified recognition that the general-ability view is a possibility.

Another experienced technical writer, Peter Bohlin, took a contrasting approach, claiming the title *writer* and then backing off just slightly. Unlike Friend, who studied technical writing in college, Bohlin studied psychology and, after graduating, worked to become a novelist. Although he did not achieve commercial success writing fiction, a feeling of association with prototypical writers remains with him – both because he sees his current work as a continuation of his original intent to work as a writer and because he endorses the general-ability view.

He observed during our interview that when he began his technical writing career he "had real writing skills to bring to the business world." "If I had gone right out of college and tried to do the same thing," he said, "I don't think I would have had those writing skills, because [as a novelist] I was working at improving my writing." His novel writing, in other words, prepared him for a technical writing career because, as he sees it, writing is a transferable skill. Partly because Bohlin had been an admirer of Ernest Hemingway, he was able to write without "all kinds of fun adjectives, stories, and descriptions" – to be concise.

When I asked him what he calls himself professionally, the general-ability view was evident: "Even now I still think of myself as a writer. If somebody asks me what I do, and they give me a small little spot to write it down, I'm going to say *writer*." I followed up, "You don't put down *technical* writer?" That elicited only a reluctant hedge, one that reinforced his connection to the prototype: "I'll put technical writer if there's a long enough line, but I won't say instructional designer, I won't say consultant, I won't say all the other things I could say." Bohlin calls himself a writer – even though he complements his writing with a variety of other skills, such as interviewing and managing information technology – because for him writing is his main skill, the one without which his work would be impossible.

That upward bid may be motivated partly by a desire to be associated with a widely respected title. But it cannot be made without endorsing the general-ability view. The columnist Eric Zorn calls himself a writer, yet claims only to know how to write one genre especially well. He is comfortably prototypical. But for Bohlin, all kinds of writing must be subsumed under an encompassing ability so that he can closely associate himself – as a technical writer – with the center of the category.

Others make a similar bid. Sean O'Leary began with the aim of writing novels and has turned to writing other things. He now develops websites, writes for trade magazines, and occasionally takes on technical manuals. His skills are varied, he explains. But what he has is a collection of skills that amount to a general ability to write. His magazine writing has been successful because of a persona that he developed for trade articles. His technical writing has been successful because of his ability to be "a prose-producing machine." Yet he could imagine, given the time, that he could one day write another novel. He commented that making "a living as a writer has [not] diminished that skill and in some ways it's made it better because I've learned to write a lot of different styles. I've

learned to write more cleanly." One kind of writing feeds the ability to do another kind of writing.

Betsy Maaks, who began as a technical writer in the 1980s after completing a BA in French, sees little difference between her work and the work of other kinds of writers: "I think the technical part is strictly a matter of vocabulary and maybe some structure. It's a little different than just general writing but I mean good English is good English." She commented that she enjoys reading and discussing historical novels, and I asked whether or not she feels she is in the same business as the people who write those books. "Definitely. Definitely," she answered.

The writing professionals who most vigorously rejected the word *writer* and, likewise, rejected the general-ability view were the historian Christine Worobec and the United Methodist bishop, Joseph Sprague.

Worobec refused to call herself a writer, even though her books on Russia's common people have won her such honors as the Heldt Prize. In our interview, her conversation was punctuated with the phrase "as an historian." Although she did not underestimate the role of writing in her work – certainly, no professor at a research university fails to recognize the importance of scholarly publication – what seemed to her more central to her work was investigation. As she put it, what drew her to history was "the detective work, but not so much putting it down." Of course, most writers, even writers of fiction, must be researchers as well as writers, I pointed out. Worobec did not budge.

Bishop Sprague's book *Affirmations of a Dissenter* may well constitute the defining moment of his career. He told me that he wrote it because of a growing conviction that progressive voices in the church needed to be heard, and it exposed him to charges of heresy (ultimately dropped). Yet he would never call himself a writer and does not claim writing expertise beyond the limits of his vocation. He confirmed that his work has always required him to do substantial writing every week, including sermons, newsletter articles,

and more. But, for all his writing experience, and even given many colleagues' encouraging him to write more, he found the idea of his writing a book to be "audacious."

For Sprague and Worobec, then, the quandary usually presented by *writer* seemed to be no quandary at all. They neither claimed to be writers, nor claimed a general writing ability. Yet I would suggest the following: Sprague and Worobec may have escaped the rub between the title *writer* and its implied claim to broad writing ability, but they also confirmed the power of the rhetorical bind that talking about writers and writing places us in. Neither was indifferent about the word *writer* or about the extent of their writing abilities. Indeed, precisely because of the writerly prototype and the general ability it often implies, they were especially careful not be ensnared.

students as "writers"

Current composition theory leans strongly toward the specific-expertise view. Yet that theoretical leaning does not govern much of the public rhetoric of writing that is aimed at students, particularly at college students. That may be partly because not everyone who hopes to have the ear of students is committed to writing researchers' prevailing conclusions. Perhaps more to the point, however, the general-ability view seems to be especially useful in selling the idea of writing to students.

Consider, for instance, the College Board's (2005a, 2005b) shifting rhetoric. The College Board administers the most widely taken college entrance examination in the United States, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). When the College Board addresses parents and writing teachers, it emphasizes qualities of writing that pertain most directly to academic writing and thus academic success – correctness, sophisticated vocabulary and thought, argumentative soundness, and logical presentation. But when it addresses students, it emphasizes the writerly prototype and, along with that, the general-ability view. Students are encouraged persistently – insistently – to bid upward.

Posted for student consumption are testimonials from capital-W writers, there to convince students that school writing is not an end in itself. Novelist Ben Marcus testifies that to become a writer is to develop a special relationship with the big truths – to experience and question the essence of life. As a young person, he aspired to be a writer because

> writing was for me the truest way to be complete as a person, and more than that it was a chance to discover what I did not yet know … [to] grapple with the hardest questions: Why are we alive? What sort of people should we be? What will happen to us now?
>
> (2004: 39).

Although his enthusiasm for writing draws strongly on the writerly prototype, Marcus refuses to differentiate prototypical writers from other people who write. Indeed, his endorsement of the general-ability view is elaborate and forceful. He says of the childhood books that awakened him to the power of language:

> I saw no categorical difference then between a theory of allergies and a book of creation myths, between the story of a failed steam engine designer and a fairy tale about a blind acrobat. Each was fascinating, and each kept my light on late into the night.
>
> (38)

These books, he says, provided him with something interesting to say at his parents' dinner table, where good conversation had the same qualities – not coincidentally, I would observe – as a strong thesis statement: "If I took the floor to speak, I had better have something good to say, something engaging, surprising, insightful. In short, I had better be like a good book" (38).

For Marcus, not only is writing all one thing, but dinner-time conversation is part and parcel of the writing enterprise. Nonetheless, Marcus recognizes and responds to the specific-expertise view. Why

else would he bother to assert so explicitly that there is no difference "between a theory of allergies and a book of creation myths, between the story of a failed steam engine designer and a fairy tale about a blind acrobat"?

Also posted on the College Board site, Veronica Chambers recalls a childhood love of books that led to writing journalism, memoirs, and novels. Bursting with enthusiasm, she elevates the idea of becoming a writer. She refers to her "bubbling writerly hopes" and "the desire to be a writer – a desire that keeps you up at night and makes you wake, panting" (2004: 12, 13). When she began writing professionally, she realized "that my dream of becoming a writer was not going to be placed on my head like a crown: 'You are now a writer!' But rather, it is something you must decide for yourself, then present it to the world: 'I am a writer!' As scary as that may be" (11–12). Yet, though she speaks of *writer* in breathlessly exalted terms, she credits her success to her workaday college writing experiences. In college, she wrote and rewrote twenty papers monthly, and "at the end of four years, I was a writer" (12).

At the end of her essay, after offering several anecdotes about the way professional experience dramatically changed her and her writing, she claims to be "still the same writer I was as a student: simple, no fireworks or literary wordplay" (13). As she works to conflate her experience as a writer with her student experience, Chambers's awareness of audience is palpable. She reassures students that, though they may find all of those college writing assignments mere drudgery, they lead to a prototypical writer's sensibility – a sensibility founded on skills that are taught in school. Writing is all one thing. That is a far cry from the dominant claim in composition research: that all writing is connected to particular genres and distinct discourse communities.

But we should not see composition studies as entirely univocal. True, a large body of research has shown rather persuasively that writing is fundamentally a situated act: to write as an engineer or a professor or a lawyer requires that one become, through

apprenticeship, an engineer, a professor, or a lawyer. But the broad discourse of composition studies makes room for the general-ability view also.

Consider, for instance, Patricia Dunn and Kenneth Lindblom's argument against hyper-traditional, picayune grammar instruction in the college writing classroom:

> Published contemporary writers do all sorts of things students are taught to avoid. Pulitzer Prize-winning writer E. Annie Proulx's novel *The Shipping News* is chock full of what any grammar handbook would label as "fragments," and Booker Prize winner Roddy Doyle never uses quotations around his characters' dialogue.
>
> (2003: 45)

Of course, most English teachers, even the dreariest pedants, would probably allow sentence fragments in a work of fiction. They might even permit a stylistic absence of quotation marks (well, maybe not the pedants). But what's at issue in most college writing classrooms are genres such as the research paper. To say, as Dunn and Lindblom do, that students should be held to the same (lax) standards as prize-winning authors only makes sense if we have in mind, at least with respect to grammar and mechanics, the general-ability view.

Also beholden to the general-ability view are the words compositionists often use to describe students of writing: *student writers*, *young writers*, *adult writers*, and, indeed, simply *writers*. The modified terms may have difficulty bidding up to the term *writer*, in the same way the term *technical writer* does not comfortably bid upward. But *writer*, even if we consider it a polysemous term, distinct from yet related to the capitalized title of Writer, cannot escape its resonance. It suggests that there is a continuum from *student writer* to *Writer*. Other areas of study do not usually emphasize the similarity between students and professionals. Terms such as student geographer, student historian, student violinist are nearly unheard of – we call these people geography students, history students, and

violin students. Consider, then, the rhetorical assertion implied by the titles of writing guides such as *Writer's Repertoire* (Longman), *A Writer's Reference* (Bedford/St. Martins), *Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction* (Allyn and Bacon), *The Writer's World: Paragraphs and Essays* (Prentice Hall), Simon & Schuster's *Handbook for Writers*.

SUMMARY

In addition to having competing prototypes, the category terms *writer* and *to write* are complicated by competing theories of writing expertise: the general-ability view and the specific-expertise view. In general, writing expertise is seen as nested: prototypical writers are assumed to have all of the abilities of non-prototypical writers and more. In that sense, *writer* usually implies the general-ability view. However, when non-prototypical writers (such as technical writers) adopt the general-ability view, they can bid up to the unmodified title *writer*.

The way we treat *writer* and *to write* informs the way we make sense of all of our everyday figures for writing. Figures are licensed by the ways we conceptualize the world. If someone says that a writer is *clear* or *colorful* or *musical* – that expression is a product of the utterer's accumulated judgments about who is and is not a writer (or a certain kind of writer), about the limits of that writer's expertise, and about ordinary expectations that are satisfied or thwarted.

4 **Three licensing stories**

The literate inscriber, the good writer, and the author writer

> Dysgraphia is a form of agraphia, the total inability to write. It is seen in children who are slow to develop writing skills and in adults who acquire the syndrome due to brain injury.
>
> <div align="right">Diane Walton Cavey,
Dysgraphia: Why Johnny Can't Write</div>

> America's universities don't teach college kids how to write – at least, not how to write very well.
>
> <div align="right">Stanley K. Ridgley, *National Review Online*</div>

> While it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.
>
> <div align="right">Stephen King, *On Writing*</div>

If we hope to understand our important metaphors and metonymies for writing, we also have to understand the stories that license these figures. As I found in my earlier research on metaphors in the discourse of trade and business, metaphors are integrally associated with stories that provide rhetorical support – that make a given metaphor seem either true or false. When I asked a series of focus-group participants to discuss whether or not certain metaphors seemed true to them (e.g., Trade Is War, Trade Is A Game, Markets Are Containers, Trade Is A Journey), they persistently justified their responses by supplying stories of how trade works or how the world works. For instance, one participant believed Markets Are Containers to be a credible metaphor and justified his judgment this way:

> I'll give you a, a good example. Philip Morris. Fifty-percent
> of their business is not cigarette related business because they
> discovered that their market can no longer expand. And they are

> trying to get away from the businesses that are more lean. So they are trying to get away from it. You will find many, many companies who are expanding into other areas – I don't know, hundreds of them.
>
> (Eubanks 2000: 117–18)

For him, that story presented a generalizable example of how markets had fixed boundaries, and thus it made the container metaphor seem not just possible to imagine but factually right. Such narrative reasoning commonly supports metaphors of trade, including current metaphors of globalization. For instance, people who favor the metaphor Corporations Are (Tyrannical) Governments support that choice of figures with a now-conventional story of approaching economic dystopia (Eubanks 2005, 2008).

Licensing stories take more than one form. Some may be personal and idiosyncratic. Others are widely shared as conventional wisdom, akin to what Jean-François Lyotard (1979) calls "grand narratives." Either can justify a choice of figures. But the conventional or "grand" narrative is particularly important because conventional narratives can exert immense rhetorical influence. Indeed, they can be so well known and commonly believed that they can operate tacitly – hardly noticed at all, yet indispensable to crucial judgments we make about the world.

I argue here that three conventional stories of *how writing works* license our most common writing metaphors and metonymies. These stories are told in different ways. But they are familiar, nonetheless. They surely operate tacitly, even though they are often made explicit. Moreover, when we examine them closely, they have many features that might seem illogical. Logic might tell us, for example, that the people we call writers are simply those who have the most skill at writing – the best command of vocabulary, sentence structure, textual arrangement, originality. In fact, though, the story that attaches to *writer* includes many elements that have nothing whatsoever to do with writing.

The stories are as follows: the *literate-inscriber story*– the story of basic written literacy; the *good-writer story* – the story of writing as an educated person; and the *author-writer story* – the story we associate with the prototypical writer. The three stories are related in the following ways:

(1)   They are hierarchical and largely nested. We usually assume that abilities possessed by a literate inscriber (someone who reads and writes at a basic level) are also possessed by a good writer (an educated person who reads and writes correctly and logically). We usually assume further that an author writer possesses all of the abilities expected of an inscriber and a good writer.

 These assumptions are not disconnected factual propositions; they shape our narrative expectations. Imagine this: You have a teenaged daughter who writes well in school – who gets As on most high-school essays. That suggests a path that your daughter's life might follow. She might score well on her college entrance examinations and then make good grades at a good college. After that, she might pursue a challenging career, where her ability with words is an advantage. None of this would be surprising. But imagine your surprise if your daughter were to write a well-regarded experimental novel or an award-winning screenplay. Having done well on school essays does not preclude such a narrative twist. But it does not strongly suggest it either.

 Imagine another scenario: You have a son who at the age of 17 wins a fiction contest and has a short story published in a magazine. But on school essays, he gets at best Bs – and often Cs! Something must be wrong. Our stories of writing tell us that writing abilities are hierarchically related so that higher-level ability subsumes lower-level ability.

(2)   Even though the stories are largely nested, some elements of the inscriber and good-writer stories attenuate at the

highest level. For instance, good writing is a story of mastering logical thought and clear and correct expression, whereas author writing is often a story of expressing (or even channeling) non-logical intuition. The familiar authorial story does not say that author writers cannot reason logically, but it does permit logic to be at times a less prominent story element for author writers than for mere good writers.

(3) Stories do license metaphors and metonymies, but they also are themselves motivated by figures. In particular, they rely on two fundamental metonymies: Writing Is Thought and Writing Is Identity. Each story emphasizes a different aspect of, and makes different use of, these metonymies.

It is fair to ask whether more than three stories of writing are worth considering. *Three* stories does sound awfully convenient – I cannot deny it. There are, of course, other familiar stories of writing, and they may also license metaphors and metonymies. Nonetheless, stories of the literate inscriber, the good writer, and the author writer do seem to be especially notable in everyday discourse about writing. If we neglected to consider these three stories in one way or another, we would miss a great deal.

One way that we can identify these stories of writing with some certainty is to borrow an idea from Kenneth Burke. Burke points out that the negative is particularly revealing: It is a unique function of symbolic thought because there are no absences in nature, only presences. He argues that we should pay attention to *thou shalt not* rather than *it is not* because it makes us notice action – or, to use the Burkean word, drama (1966: 9–13, 419–75). In a similar way, we can discover what makes up the inscriber, good-writer, and author-writer stories by examining instances of *cannot* – that is, *cannot write*. Indeed, we might think of the three stories as three "cannots" that imply what is most valued in positive form, as *cans*.

THE LITERATE-INSCRIBER STORY

Stories of *can't write* are at least as familiar as stories of *can write*. In fact, we have conventional ways of telling *can't* stories in abbreviated form. If we tell them in unconventional ways, we risk confusing their meaning or implications. That is certainly true of the *can't* story applied to someone who is *un*able to write well enough to be called more than minimally literate, to be what I call a *literate inscriber*. If we spoke like Martians, we could say of people who are not literate inscribers that *they are not writers*. We could also say, without sounding terribly non-idiomatic, that *they cannot write*. But that phrase can suggest a broader notion of *to write*. If someone *cannot write*, does that mean that they cannot fill out a form or write an application letter – or just that they cannot do it well? If they cannot do it well, does that mean that they cannot punctuate correctly or that they have no particular gift for elegant phrases? Or does it mean that they can write a simple letter well enough but not acceptable copy for a website? *Cannot write* leaves open all of those questions and more.

More typically, we say of people who are not literate inscribers that they *do not know how to write*. And even that misses the mark somewhat. In US English, someone who cannot perform acts of literate inscription *does not know how to read or write*. We pair *read* and *write* because, in the literate-inscriber story, if someone cannot write that does not mean merely that the person cannot physically put words, letters, or symbols on a substrate. More importantly, it means that the person does not have underlying knowledge about writing. The inscriber story comprises not just the literal act of inscribing but also the metonymy Writing Is Thought.

Even the most spare definitions of what it means to write rely on the Writing Is Thought metonymy. For example, scholarly definitions of *writing systems* make the metonymy clear. In *The World's Writing Systems*, Peter T. Daniels says that writing is "a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the

intervention of the utterer" (1996: 3). Geoffrey Sampson, in *Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction*, prefaces his theoretical discussion with, "To 'write' might be defined, at a first approximation, as: to communicate relatively specific ideas by means of permanent visible marks" (1996: 26). Somewhat more expansively, Florian Coulmas, in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*, offers: "a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks which relate in a systematic way to units of speech, for example alphabetic vs. logographic writing" (1996: 555).

Like the most basic dictionary definition of *to write*, these definitions focus on physical inscription and representation of language in certain units (such as letters or words). But, unlike dictionary definitions, they emphasize further that inscribers and readers share a language and a system of inscription, which together make written symbols sufficient without the inscriber's verbal interpretation. Writing entails not just the ability to inscribe letters and words but also that the writer understands what those words mean in a social context. Inscribing is a metonymy for knowledge. Our ordinary language acknowledges that metonymy whenever we say that someone does not *know how* to read or write.

But spare definitions of writing systems do not do justice to the wide-ranging implications of the Writing Is Thought metonymy. Consider the way the National Institute for Literacy website (2006) describes literacy. Quoting "The Workforce Investment Act of 1998," it calls literacy "an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society." To emphasize the point, it adds, "This is a broader view of literacy than just an individual's ability to read, the more traditional concept of literacy" (National Institute for Literacy 2006). The distinction is not trivial. Reading has historically been considered the sole key to literacy – even the basis of morality (for example, reading the Bible). Writing has historically been the junior partner in *reading and writing*, junior because reading has been more

crucial to functioning well. That relationship is rapidly changing, though.

As writing technologies proliferate and the so-called knowledge economy takes hold, writing well enough to fill out forms is hardly sufficient for making a comfortable life. People now need to understand how the written word shapes all aspects of life from instructions, to contracts, to law, to news media. As Deborah Brandt (1995, 2005) points out, "This is what is so politically disenfranchising about present-day illiteracy: one's world is almost totally organized by a system in which one can have no real say" (1995: 652). To be literate in such a world means not just reading insightfully but also producing rhetorically sophisticated texts that take part in a text-driven world (2005).

For all of these reasons, the literate-inscriber story exceeds what is often meant by functional literacy. It suggests a reading-and-writing literacy possessed by those who read at so-called grade level; who can produce more or less correct texts; who can record in writing items, events, and thoughts; who understand, at least in a rudimentary way, where writing fits into society. More specifically, a literate inscriber can claim at least the following:

- To produce texts that are perhaps not flawless but that are not socially embarrassing.
- To be able to write things down – make lists, fill out forms, compose texts such as personal letters or e-mail messages. This ability indicates that the inscriber has acquired a basic education.
- To be able to record his or her thoughts, though not necessarily eloquently. Inventing ideas to be inscribed may be largely irrelevant to the inscriber's public writing life.
- To be entitled to the self-respect that derives, partly, from the ability to secure employment that requires the ability to read and write.

Yet the literate-inscriber story extends beyond a list of skills or abilities. Having the skills I have listed means living a certain kind

of life – one that includes the possibility of avoiding poverty, rising socially and economically, and raising social and economic expectations for one's children.

To put it another way, the *can't read and write* story evokes a far-reaching mapping of the Writing Is Knowledge metonymy. And that mapping triggers yet another metonymy: Writing Is Identity. Together, Writing Is Thought and Writing Is Identity indicate a range of activities that flow from literacy, activities that are part and parcel of phrases such as *can read and write* and *does not know how to read and write*. Knowing how to read and write is a success story, if only a certain kind of success. Its opposite suggests failure far beyond failing to learn how to decipher or inscribe words on a page. The phrase *does not know how to read and write* suggests a story of a deficiency that keeps a non-inscriber from fully participating in economic and social life. Part of that story is, of course, concealment and shame.

THE GOOD-WRITER STORY

The *good-writer story* is, perhaps, more self-evidently rhetorical than the *literate-inscriber story* because good writing is so often a matter of open debate – what counts as good writing, whether or not high schools and colleges teach writing well enough, whether or not good writing is on the decline in the white-collar workplace and in society, and whether or not good writing will continue to matter in an increasingly oral and electronic world.

The good-writer story is distinguished from the literate-inscriber story because of a difference in the way it configures the Writing Is Thought and Writing Is Identity metonymies. For the inscriber writer, the writing–thought metonymy is about knowledge that the inscriber either possesses or does not. A literate person possesses linguistic, orthographic, and textual-cultural knowledge. All of this knowledge is assumed for the good writer, and it therefore has little salience in the story. For the good writer, Writing Is Thought has to do with matters of judgment. Good writers not only record their thoughts in writing, they demonstrate in writing their ability

to think. In turn, the Writing Is Identity metonymy demands a different self-image and societal place.

Usually, good writing is supposed to be a byproduct of college-preparatory and undergraduate education, and it becomes an issue for debate chiefly in its absence. Someone can, of course, be a good writer without going to college. But someone who goes to college is expected to be a good writer. A college graduate who is a poor writer is an educational failure and a cause for complaint, if not alarm. We say of these failures *she is not a good writer*, *he is not a* very *good writer*, and in egregious cases *he or she cannot write* or *does not know how to write*. We do not say *does not know how to* read *and* write.

Cannot write is more than an incidental phrase in the discussion of college writing. Nowhere has it been said more memorably than by *Newsweek*, which famously published a cover article titled "Why Johnny can't write" (Sheils 1975). Critics of writing instruction in high school and college echo the phrase again and again. Of course, *cannot write* might seem to allow for a good deal of definitional leeway. But when it comes to expectations of college and college-educated writers, it has a well-understood meaning.

Consider the response to recent worries about the poor quality of writing among entering college students, in the essay section of the College Board's SAT. The SAT defines good writing narrowly, as the ability to write a grammatically correct, logical, and somewhat original argumentative essay (College Board 2005a). Whereas literate inscribers are expected only to be able to record thoughts, good writers are expected to have thoughts worthy of inscription. It is a double-edged sword. College students who *cannot think* have nothing to write about: Hence they *cannot write*. Conversely, college students who cannot produce clear, logical, and original essays *cannot write*: Hence there is a strong suspicion that they *cannot think*.

Part of this *cannot write* story is about dedication to learning. Little or no blame is put on a poor college writer's inability to find inspiration or want of innate ability. To the contrary, the College

Board's (2005a) story casts good writing as a matter of academic effort – the mastery of particular knowledge that can be taught, learned, and tested. Consider its description of why the SAT essay section is important and what it measures:

> The addition of the writing section reinforces the importance of *writing skills* throughout a student's education and supports the academic *achievement* of all students, bolstering their chances for academic *success* in college. The multiple-choice questions reveal how well students use standard written English. The multiple-choice questions will test students' ability to *identify sentence errors, improve sentences, and improve paragraphs*. The essay measures the student's *skill in developing a point of view on an issue.*
>
> (2005a, emphasis added)

In other words, the SAT supports the objective of improving student writing, and that improvement has two components: better mechanics and better thought.

Some find the SAT's conception of good writing too limited and its standards too lax, but they do not substantially disagree with the SAT's definition of what the aim of college writing should be. For example, author and magazine editor Ann Hulbert (2005) questions the SAT's reductive either-or essay prompts (e.g., "What is more important to success, persistence or ability?"). But she does not challenge the SAT's general parameters. The question, for her, is whether or not the SAT sufficiently measures good thinking. Hulbert writes:

> But if the goal of "better writing" is "improved thinking," as the College Board's National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges has pronounced, perhaps it's worth asking whether practice in reflexively taking a position on any potentially polarizing issue is what aspiring college students – or the rest of us – need most.
>
> (sec. 6, 15)

From a slightly different perspective, MIT testing expert Les Perelman points out the uncanny correlation between length and score on the SAT's 2005 scoring samples, noting that longer essays usually score high and yet may contain howlingly absurd factual errors (Winerip 2005). Still, he does not challenge what should constitute good college writing. He simply believes that speedy writing and speedy scoring fail to show who writes well and who doesn't. He says in a National Public Radio interview that "the main factor that differentiates *good writers* from *bad writers* is the ability to go back and revise" (2005, emphasis added). In a similar vein, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) says that "*good writing* is rewriting" (2005, emphasis added). Presumably, revision would give students the chance to strengthen their thesis statement, add relevant and convincing support, correct factual errors, and so on – all things far more valuable than superficial features such as length, vocabulary, and a vapid emulation of an authentic argument. The College Board's response leaves the question of what makes for good writing untouched: "In writing, as we are all aware, quantity does not necessarily mean quality. In fact, the ability *to communicate a complex idea clearly in as few words as possible* is, for some, the essence of *good writing*" (2005b, emphasis added). Clear expression. Complex thought.

Indeed, all sides seem to have a common definition of good writing – the writing expected of a well-educated person – that involves some combination of grammatical-mechanical correctness, textual sophistication, and worthwhile, possibly original, thought. The College Board's rubric is nothing if not familiar:

> Students must first *think critically* about the issue presented in the essay assignment, forming their *own individual perspective* on the topic. Then they must *develop that point of view*, using *reasoning* and *evidence* based on their own experiences, readings, or observations to *support their ideas*.
>
> (2005a, emphasis added)

Thousands upon thousands of high-school and college papers are graded according to similar standards every school year: Evidence of critical thinking; clear, strong thesis; ample support; well-constructed sentences and paragraphs; few grammatical, usage, or mechanical errors.

Jasper Neel sums it up well. He writes that, despite a nearly complete absence of instruction in the freshman English course he took in 1964, when it was all said and done he "felt comfortable formulating a thesis, marshalling evidence, crafting sentences, conducting and incorporating research into my writing, reading and interpreting obscure and allusive texts, and even arguing a point of view with a certain amount of eloquence" (2000: 44). With the possible exception of "interpreting obscure and allusive texts," when critics demand to know "why Johnny can't write," these are the things that they believe Johnny cannot do.

Many students, luckily for them, seem to understand what the standard is and what it is called. One high-school senior remarks of the SAT essay section, "If anything, [the essay is] probably going to help me. I'm a pretty *good writer*" (Holmes 2005: 1, emphasis added). I doubt he means that he can merely inscribe with some measure of correctness; nor does he mean that he can create texts that are the work of an author writer.

The good-writer story depends on the Writing Is Thought metonymy, but it limits its scope to a certain kind of thought. According to the good-writer story, people who think clearly also write clearly; people who have complex ideas also write complex texts; and people whose minds are disciplined by education – which teaches them to be logical, to know and respect facts, and to attend to details – also display those qualities in their writing. Other kinds of thinking are less important. Like literate inscribers, good writers must think in order to write (how else can someone put meaningful marks on a page?), but that sort of operational thinking is assumed – relegated to the background – in the good-writer story. At the other end of the spectrum, author writers may have exceptionally creative,

even chaotic, thoughts. But that kind of thinking is not required of good writers.

Indeed, creative thought can be, to put it mildly, unappreciated. For some, too much emphasis on creativity and self-expression is the very reason that Johnny cannot write. In her jeremiad against contemporary writing pedagogy – unoriginally titled "Why Johnny can't write" – Heather MacDonald berates process, deconstructionist, and multiculturalist writing teachers for not insisting on "clear, logical prose" (1995: 3). She is not surprised that students who are encouraged "to let their deepest selves loose on the page and not to worry about syntax, logic, or form have trouble adjusting to their other classes," where professors may "insist on numerous references to the text and correct English prose" (7). On the one hand, MacDonald fears that many college students are simply not good writers and, on the other, finds loftier writing goals beside the point.

Contemptuous as MacDonald's style may be, she is not wrong about what is ordinarily expected of good writers. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 2003 that many professors in Ivy League universities "cite a host of writing-related shortcomings among students, most often their inability to construct the sort of lengthy, sophisticated research papers required in upper-division courses" because, as a writing specialist at Princeton explains, many can gather information in the library but are not "capable of turning that into a real paper with a thesis and an argument" (Bartlett 2003: A39). It is a safe bet that Princeton prefers standard edited English, too.

The good-writer story has an important economic dimension. Many discussions of college writing instruction assume that instruction fails when it does not lead to skills that employers find acceptable. MacDonald snipes that writing professors may overlook grammar and usage errors "but employers are clearly not as generous" (1995: 13). Plainly enough, correct grammar is commonly seen as a threshold requirement for acceptable workplace writing (Beason 2001). Patricia Dunn and Kenneth Lindblom (2003) note

the grammar–jobs connection and observe that seemingly all non-English teachers believe that grammar should be a major portion of the writing curriculum. If people *cannot write*, they *cannot get good jobs*.

The usual reason given for valuing grammatical correctness in the workplace – in addition to presentability – is that it promotes logic and clarity. When I asked Betsy Maaks, who majored in French as an undergraduate, about her main ability as a technical writer, she said, "I bring really clear thinking. Really logical thinking, and I think the French background I have lends itself to that. I think, in particular, French grammar is very logical." Similarly, technical writer Pete Bohlin links grammar, mechanics, and other basic linguistic knowledge with the ability to create a usable, logical text. I asked him what it is people who cannot write cannot do:

> They're lacking some basic use of the language – the vocabulary, sentence structure, some of those things. If you don't have some of those basic tools, you can't put yourself in the head of the user when running a software procedure. They don't seem to be able to envision what their completed work will look like. What's your target? What do you want this thing to look like? … If you've got a screen, and you're in a process, and then the screen shows up, and you want to tell the user something about this screen or the prompt on the screen, you have to be thinking about what came before, what's going to happen next for the user.

When I asked Bohlin his main advice for aspiring technical writers, he did not elaborate on imagining what might be an appropriate text or the user's situation; rather he strongly recommended using the active voice – which he says forces the writer to clearly understand the subject at hand and, therefore, to write clearly about it. Naturally, employers do need people who can think clearly and thus express themselves clearly – and perhaps the other way around, too.

Such good writers are what colleges are expected to produce: People who can think well (Writing Is Thought), and people who are well educated (Writing Is Identity).

To sum up, the good writers that critics wish for should be able to claim at least the following:

- To be able to produce not just grammatical sentences and texts but also reflexive knowledge of grammatical, mechanical, and stylistic correctness.
- To be able to compose clear, sophisticated sentences and paragraphs. Some good writers may produce graceful prose but that is less important to being a good writer than clarity and accuracy.
- To have a respectably large vocabulary and not misuse words.
- To have strong learning and analytical skills.
- To be able to present complicated ideas in a logical order and make sound, somewhat original, arguments about them.

Just as important as the specific skills and knowledge that good writers possess is a host of things associated with good writing by metonymy. Good writers pursue careers (rather than merely have jobs); they achieve high social status that only highly literate people can achieve; they have social influence that proceeds from good writing, both directly and indirectly; and they have cultural sophistication that goes hand-in-hand with good writing and its corollary, good thinking.

To be a good writer is also to be *not* just a literate inscriber. The literate inscriber is seen as deficient by comparison and is encouraged to aspire to being a good writer – in fact, may be ridiculed if he or she does not aspire to be a good writer. Good writing – a metonymy for academic, social, and economically useful knowledge – is the *way up*.

The good-writer story is related to the author-writer story in the opposite way. For author writers, good writing is both assumed and can be, in a sense, repellant. That is, author writers are presumed to

be good writers if they so choose. But some of the attractions of the good-writer story can become pejoratives in the author-writer story – plodding prose qualities such as clarity (at the expense of inventiveness), linear logic, obsessive fact-spouting, and in *bad* good writing a preference for polysyllabic utterances over short words.

The relationship between good writers and author writers is illustrated well in an *Atlantic Monthly* article called "Would Shakespeare get into Swarthmore?" (Katzman *et al*. 2004). In the article, three executives of the *Princeton Review* purport to grade possible responses to typical SAT essay prompts from three canonical authors – and the Unabomber. Hemingway scores an embarrassing 3 out of 6; Shakespeare – even worse: 2 out of 6; and Gertrude Stein a dismal 1 out 6. But Ted Kaczynski scores a perfect 6. So much for good writing.

But even as the *Princeton Review* executives distance the author-writer story from the good-writer story, they reinforce their nested relationship. Of course, Shakespeare could produce a perfect 6 if he wanted to! He could do it in his sleep. (He could probably do it dead.) But why would he want to? It is Shakespeare who sets the highest standards of writing, not Swarthmore – let alone the College Board.

THE AUTHOR-WRITER STORY

Author writers are associated with perhaps the strongest negations of all. One is the familiar carping phrase *terrible writer*, which is applied at least as often to commercial and critical successes as it is to so-called *failed writers*. I have heard it said about John Grisham and Stephen King. About E. Annie Proulx, Don DeLillo, and Susan Sontag. About Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer. This disparagement does not mean, usually, that the author in question is not a *good writer*. Most often, it means that the author is not capable of achieving an ineffable quality – of grace or mood or insight – that makes his or her writing truly admirable. In that sense, *can't write* is the perennial negative.

Yet the *cannot write* that is applied to established writers may be less revealing than the *cannot* that aspiring writers often experience: the part of the author-writer story that tells us that people cannot simply choose to become a writer, that some kind of calling or talent or life experience is required. A scene from a mystery I happened to read encapsulates this point well: An established writer signs an autograph for a young girl who aspires to write and calls her "the writer I've heard so much about," to which the embarrassed girl replies with the negation "just poems mostly." The established author nonetheless encourages the dream, writing next to her autograph, "Someday you'll be signing a book for me" (Krueger 2001: 113–14). We are supposed to understand, of course, that this must sound impossible to the young girl – just as it sounded impossible once to Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones*.

Goldberg describes her early self as "a goody two shoes" who "learned commas, colons, semicolons" and "wrote compositions with clear sentences that were dull and boring" (1986: 1). She was a *good writer*. But *real writing* seemed to Goldberg "not within my ken" (1). It only became possible for her when her Zen master encouraged her to make writing her Zen practice because "if you go deep enough in writing, it will take you everyplace" (3). Goldberg says that "learning to write is not a linear process. There is no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer … To do writing practice means to deal ultimately with your whole life" (3). To become a writer, for her, is to overcome the *cannot* that places the possibility of writing beyond one's wildest dreams. This splendid kind of writing always remains difficult to achieve because to write well is to explore oneself deeply.

Perhaps Goldberg is especially inclined toward mysticism and mystery and that affects the way she discusses what it means to become a writer. But her narrative of writing is nonetheless conventional. In the standard narrative, author writers ask of themselves more than mastery of a set of skills. To write as an author means to

develop a range of professional habits and personal characteristics that lead one to produce high-quality writing.

To put it another way, the author-writer story recasts Writing Is Thought and Writing Is Identity so that the skills and knowledge associated with the inscriber and the good writer are placed far in the background. For example, author writers are, generally speaking, expected to be able to spell and punctuate, but those skills are not *sine qua non* as they are with good writers. In fact, author writers are given the familiar *poetic license* that permits them to break all of the rules good writers, and to a less rigorous standard literate inscribers, are expected to follow. Placed in the foreground is a complex of writerly traits – perhaps quirks – that are associated with authorial writing.

Indeed, in the author-writer story, writing is profoundly figurative. Actual inscription is not writing itself but rather a metonymy for the mental activity that is actual writing – a kind of thinking performed only by author writers. Author writers are often depicted with pen in hand, typewriter on table, or laptop on lap, but the means of inscription is irrelevant, as is even the ability to inscribe. Joseph Heller dictated *Something Happened* into a small tape recorder, Henry James his later books to an amanuensis. In some imaginative genres, an author can be said to have written something even if he or she did not compose any of the words that make up the text. The author may just envision a plot or a concept – as with the film credit *story by*.

More often, though, the author writer does inscribe, and the writing–thought metonymy juxtaposes the author's physically inscribed words with the writer's ideas. Many times, those ideas are imaginative – story plots, poetic themes, dramatic scenes. But the author-writer story is marked not so much by the imaginative quality of the writer's thoughts as by the kind of person the writer imagines him- or herself to be. The literate-inscriber and good-writer identities are available to most diligent and relatively intelligent people. The author-writer identity, though it can be nurtured, is more complex and is often said to be mysterious in origin.

No hard-and-fast set of characteristics defines the author writer. Rather author writers are related by what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls family resemblance, so that some but not all of a collection of elements, qualities, and relations are present in varying degrees. Perhaps the best sense we can get of the author-writer story comes from what author writers say about themselves and from the advice some of them give to aspiring writers. Author writers' self-descriptions include commonplaces about writers and writing that are notably absent from those of the good writers that I interviewed.

These commonplaces are many and familiar. Margaret Atwood has compiled an impressive list of them – in answer to the question *What causes you to write?* Here is a highly abridged version:

> To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is all forgotten … To satisfy my desire for revenge. Because I knew I had to keep writing or else I would die … To reward the virtuous and punish the guilty; or – the Marquis de Sade defense, used by ironists – vice versa … To thumb my nose at Death. To make money so my children could have shoes. To make money so I could sneer at those who formerly sneered at me. To show the bastards. Because to create is human. Because to create is Godlike. Because I hated the idea of having a job … To justify my failures in school. To justify my own view of myself in my life, because I couldn't be "a writer" unless I actually did some writing. To make myself appear more interesting than I actually was. To attract the love of a beautiful woman. To attract the love of any woman at all. To attract the love of a beautiful man … Graphomania. Compulsive logorrhea. Because I was driven to do it by some force outside my control. Because I was possessed. Because an angel dictated to me … To act out antisocial behavior for which I would have been punished in real life … To experiment with new forms of perception. To create a recreational boudoir so the reader could go into it and have fun (translated from a Czech newspaper). Because the story took hold

of me and wouldn't let me go (the Ancient Mariner defense) ... To speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. To expose appalling wrongs or atrocities ... To speak for the dead.

<div align="right">(2002: xx–xxii)</div>

Atwood's collection, though pithier, and funnier, is very similar to mine. Like Atwood, I collected commonplaces from both print sources and conversations. Some of those cited by Atwood did not show up persistently in my sampling – for instance, praise of the universe or to win a lover (though one of my interviewees did mention that writing seemed a good way to "get girls"). I classify the commonplace elements of the author-writer story as follows: a moment of becoming; a strong desire to express thoughts in writing; powerful, automatic, non-logical writing experiences; a commitment to truth-telling; and an exceptional love of reading and words.

A MOMENT OF BECOMING

The author writer often has little doubt that he or she either was always meant to become a writer or reached a clear turning point at which *writer* became his or her primary identity. Not all moments of becoming are so magical as the one Margaret Atwood describes – as a child, writing a poem in her head and knowing because of the electricity of the experience that she'd become a writer (2002: 14). Norman Mailer's turning point, for instance, came relatively late. While in a Harvard writing class, he won a *Story* magazine contest, and the significance of that was unmistakable for him: "That fortified me, and I sat down and wrote a novel ... It was just terrible. But I never questioned any longer whether I was started as a writer" (2003: 7). (Notice the *cannot* buried in "any longer.") Anne Lamott's calling came early:

Throughout my childhood I believed that what I thought about was different from what other kids thought about. It was not necessarily more profound, but there was a struggle going on inside me to find some sort of creative or spiritual or aesthetic

> way of seeing the world and organizing it in my head … And
> there was a moment during my junior year in high school when
> I began to believe that I could do what other writers were doing.
> I came to believe that I might be able to put a pencil in my hand
> and make something magical happen.
>
> (1994: xx)

The force of that moment may have grown in her memory, reinforced
by later success. But even *post hoc* certainty is part of the author
writer's sense of calling or becoming.

Such callings are not the exclusive province of fiction writers,
playwrights, and poets. Robert Sharoff, a journalist who has written
about music, real estate, architecture, and other subjects for the *New
York Times*, *Chicago Magazine*, and numerous other publications,
told me that he understood very early that he was and would always
be a writer. He recalled, with some perplexity, in our interview:

> Well, I knew I was going to be a writer back in, like, fourth grade.
> It's a little spooky really … I don't feel like I wandered around in
> the wilderness trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I knew
> what I wanted to do from a very early age. But again, I have no
> idea where that comes from because it's not like I come from
> a family of artists and writers. Those people didn't exist in the
> town I grew up in. About the artsiest thing you could be was a
> teacher so … I still don't exactly know why.

What he describes is part impulse, part attraction, part career
direction. But it is not a considered decision to attain a skill or to
write a particular thing – not the self-discipline and school-based
study expected of good writers.

Memoirist Cheri Register's moment of becoming arrived late,
after she earned a Ph.D. in Scandinavian languages, though she
acknowledges having been a writer in the making for many years.
In her childhood, she and a friend exchanged letters and wondered
whether they would one day become great authors because it seemed
odd for two working-class girls to be so interested in writing. But

Register made a decision to become a writer in earnest after she left a teaching position. She planned to write a biography and then to base a novel on that work. However, she became seriously ill part-way into the project. When she recovered, she felt a strong sense of mission:

> The feeling of health was so powerful because I had just been so debilitated that I thought this is it, I've got to do my work now. I got this sense of mortality – that time was going to run out, and what I did was write a book about the chronic illness that I had just come through … That's when I became to the rest of the world a writer.

The moment of becoming, for her, was a matter of going public with what, at least in some measure, had always been. Of course, the sense of always having been a writer comes with certain inclinations and experiences. Those who become writers often describe early writing experiences that struck them as significant or, perhaps, harbingers of a future vocation.

A STRONG DESIRE TO EXPRESS THOUGHTS IN WRITING

Author writers, in sharp contrast to good writers, describe unexplained moments of creativity, a strong need to record their thoughts, and a desire to be heard. That expressive impulse does not always lead to fiction writing. Cheri Register, for example, satisfies that impulse by speaking for others who are not likely to write their own memoirs. As a young girl she wrote frequently in diaries and journals. As she described it, "There would be times when I would have to just sit down and write something because it was on my mind." When she became a columnist for her high-school newspaper, she found an "outlet" for the writing impulse and enjoyed the fact that it "won me both a lot of approval and a lot of disapproval."

Eric Zorn spoke to me about the kind of impact a columnist may have, versus the impact a writer of books may have. Zorn began

with the aim of writing novels and learned along the way that he was more interested in writing about reality. As a columnist, he is able to speak to an attentive and sometimes large audience, but it does not satisfy a desire to leave a body of work behind, something he sees as a fundamental desire of any writer:

> On any given day, your impact is huge, compared to what, say, a novelist might expect. I may write a column that's being talked about on the WGN radio and WLS radio. And Channel 11 will have me on to do *Chicago Tonight*, and it'll be right in the center of what's going on, and I'll know that all over the city people will be saying "that jerk wrote this" or "did you see that" or "it's high time someone said that." But I also know that the next day it's gone and there's something new. It's like poking at a rubber surface. You make the impression, and you move on, and then it comes back out again. With someone who writes books, there is something that people will be referring to in a year, five years, in ten years, in a hundred years. There's a saying that writers will trade a thousand readers today for a hundred readers in a year and ten readers in ten years for one reader in a hundred years. So there's that desire to leave something behind. To do something that means something, that makes a difference.

Freelancer Sean O'Leary turned to writing at Cornell, where he romanticized Richard Farina and Thomas Pynchon. But these college-age attractions came on the heels of childhood experiences of spontaneous creativity and an accompanying desire to record his creations. "I don't recall anyone ever saying 'You should be a writer.' But I learned to read very early, and I liked stories," O'Leary told me, "so it was natural, I think, that I began to write stories. They certainly always popped into my mind. The story itself or the idea of the story popped into my mind and I felt compelled to put it on paper." He described his college experience in similar terms: "There was a need to share my thoughts with other people, and I mean there is the compulsion to write a story once you think of a story."

The desire to express things in writing manifests itself in different ways. But author writers persistently tell the story of ideas that come to them with force, that can be worthy of recording and worthy of being heard. As Neil Steinberg put it to me, sometimes *not* to write "feels like drowning."

POWERFUL, AUTOMATIC, NON-LOGICAL WRITING EXPERIENCES

It makes sense that someone who identifies him- or herself as a writer would describe the experience of writing differently from someone whose writing is ancillary to another activity. Indeed, author writers sometimes report a strong, almost physical, experience of writing – something akin to what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has called "flow" (1990).

Sean O'Leary says, "If I'm writing creatively or sometimes even if I'm not writing creatively, there almost is an emotional high that comes over you when you're hitting the right words and you get a good metaphor and you can go with it … It's almost a physical thing. It's like a rush … I feel it in my chest." Cheri Register described it as "a euphoric rush" when her writing is going well. "Especially when I would have those experiences of essays just writing themselves … There is this language that is sort of independent of my effort talking to me inside my head. And yet it's my language that is producing this but with its own force." She added, in keeping with O'Leary's emphasis on physicality, that she believes that such exhilarating writing produces endorphins – so that after a good day of writing she sometimes dances around the house. Natalie Goldberg can tell when her writing students "break through" because "their teeth are rattling around in their mouth, no longer tied to their gums; their hearts might be pounding hard or aching. They are breathing deeply. Their handwriting is looser, more generous, and their bodies are relaxed enough to run for miles" (1986: 50).

Related to this physical exhilaration is a feeling of being guided by an unconscious force or an inner voice for which the

writer is merely a transcriber. Norman Mailer describes writing the last draft of *The Deer Park* in a kind of ecstasy steered by "the navigator of my unconscious" so that "the work became exhilarating in its clarity" (2003: 36). He remarks, "It would be close to say the book had come alive, and was invading my brain" (36). This kind of exhilaration is anti-logical. During the final stages of *The Deer Park*, says Mailer, "My powers of logic became weaker each day, but the book had its own logic, and so I did not need close reason" (38). Somewhat less dramatically, Anne Lamott urges aspiring writers to "stop the chattering of the rational mind" so that they can trust intuition, which "wafts up from the soul or unconscious" (1994: 112).

This near-automatic writing has a familiar corollary: the author writer's block. Others may have difficulty writing, but the author writer's block is heroic – a badge of honor worn until, at last, it subsides and allows the automatic writing to begin again. Some – such as Garrison Keillor – find stories of the writerly struggle a bit much. Writes Keillor:

> Okay, let me say this once and get it off my chest and never mention it again. I have had it with writers who talk about how painful and harrowing and exhausting and almost impossible it is for them to put words on paper and how they pace a hole in the carpet, anguish writ large on their marshmallow faces, and feel lucky to have written an entire sentence or two by the end of the day. It's the purest form of arrogance: Lest you don't notice what a brilliant artist I am, let me tell you how I agonize over my work. To which I say: Get a job. Try teaching 8th-grade English, five classes a day, 35 kids a class, from September to June, and then tell us about suffering. The fact of the matter is that the people who struggle the most with writing are drunks. They get hammered at night and in the morning their heads are full of pain and adverbs. Writing is hard for them, but so would golf be, or planting alfalfa, or assembling parts in a factory.
>
> (2006: sec. 1, 5)

Some parts of the author-writer story are easier to listen to than others.

A COMMITMENT TO TRUTH-TELLING

If author writers tell the story of an unconscious sense or an inner voice that guides their writing, that may be because it seems to them that the inner voice is more truthful than more conscious, more rational sources. Lamott advocates breaking "that habit of doubting the voice that was telling quite clearly what was really going on" (1994: 111). For her, real writing is "writing from a place of insight and simplicity and caring about the truth" (225). Lamott speaks most often about fiction. But she and others link writing to truth of both emotional and literal varieties.

This does not come without irony. Writers of fiction tell the truth by making up falsehoods. And though good manners prevents me from saying who and when, I have more than once heard magazine and newspaper writers chuckle about stories for which they made up incidental "quotes" or "facts," represented themselves as more involved than they actually were, and left out important contextual information or slanted their view of it – all in the name of good storytelling. Of course, this is supposed to be kept within certain bounds. The egregious example of Rick Bragg comes to mind: a Pulitzer-Prize winner who pretended in stories for the *New York Times* to be a first-hand witness to events actually seen only by part-time stringers (J. Steinberg 2003: A20). One indication of the author writer's commitment to truth-telling is the widespread condemnation that Bragg received. Certain inconsequential fudges may well be common, but there is nonetheless a serious commitment among writers to "get at" the truth.

Sean O'Leary sees truth-telling as an integral part of his magazine writing, especially when someone he's interviewing is less than straightforward:

> I occasionally get on my high horse enough where I don't mind considering myself an instrument of justice. And you know

what? Some of it's just self-righteousness. Some of it is that I just clearly think that the readers have a right to not be lied to. And I mean there's some good old Presbyterian sense of fair play here, too. There's a fair amount of ego. There's my perverse pleasure in making the assholes pay, and I've made some pretty good enemies over the years.

Neil Steinberg thinks that what separates worthwhile writing from failed attempts is that ability to be unsparingly truthful, which he describes as a sort of courage. In a memoir about his father, he was especially candid and admits to having some regrets – yet insists that the candidness was essential. He explained:

Oh this book was a disaster, and my father hated it. He loathed it … He would say, "Why did you have to have that story about me sending you the bill for the cab to the airport?" I said, "Well, Dad, you did send me the bill. You sent me a bill." He'd say, "Yes, but that's so petty." And I'd say, "But, Dad, it's such a moment." You see, if you're trying to look good, you can't write.

Eric Zorn emphasizes that all good writing is well informed. He cites extensive research he does for his column, research that may never show up in the final written product. But he also aims for more consequential truth-telling. On matters such as the death penalty and gay rights, he speaks of "opening people's eyes" and "making the world a better place." He aims not just to have all the facts but to make a truthful argument.

AN EXCEPTIONAL IDENTIFICATION WITH WRITING AND WRITERS

It almost goes without saying that those whose identity is intertwined with literate activity would express a love of books, authors, and language, as indeed my interviewees did and writers who publish about writing do. Some recalled in childhood needing to apologize for their large vocabularies. Some talked about favorite writers and books. Some remember reading extensively and attentively.

But identification with writing and writers entails more than just admiration for a writer's superior abilities to think and to arrange words – in fact, the identification can be nearly perverse. Anne Lamott's description of her early life, in *Bird by Bird*, illustrates that possibility. When Lamott was young, one of her friends thought she had "the coolest possible father: a writer" (1994: xvii). That aligned well with the reverence Lamott's family placed on books and great writers. Lamott wanted "to be a writer when I grew up – to be artistic, a free spirit" (xv). At the same time, she worried that "my father [a writer] was going to turn into a bum like some of his writer friends," partly because of her dismay when her father wrote a magazine article about an afternoon he had spent "with a bunch of other writers" during which "they had all been drinking lots of red wine and smoking marijuana" (xv). Later on, she noticed that her father's writer friends had begun to commit suicide at an alarming rate (xxii).

"Coolest possible father," "artistic, a free spirit," "drinking lots of red wine and smoking marijuana," and a tendency to be depressed, perhaps suicidal – these things do not indicate an especially "ideal" ideal. Yet they all have something to do with the author-writer story. None of them have directly to do with the ability to write a particular kind of text or, for that matter, the ability to write at all. They portray writers in a particular societal and psychological posture. Writers are different from the rest of us. That's the way writers *are*. Sean O'Leary joked about the reason he'd become a freelance writer rather than sticking with writing novels:

> I'm a very good writer but not a great writer. And that's because I'm only kind of depressed. I drink too much but I'm not an alcoholic. I just don't have all those terrible characteristics. I'm not an extreme enough case to make me a great writer. On the other hand, I'm able to survive fairly well in society and have a great family. So I guess I can give up a bestseller for that.

Most people who care about writing can name favorite writers whose work is a key to their love of reading and writing. People

who call themselves writers have especially intense feelings about their literary heroes.[1] In my interviews, people who claimed the title *writer* had no difficulty naming important writers who had influenced them and explaining the texture of that influence.

Peter Bohlin, the technical communicator who prefers the unmodified title of writer, admired the risk-taking and commitment to art of writers like Hemingway, Samuel Beckett, and Henry Miller. The newspaper columnist Neil Steinberg told me that when he was young he intended to be F. Scott Fitzgerald. When he grew older, he became enamored with the Roman satirist Juvenal, so much so that he sometimes imagines himself as a latter-day version:

> He's this bitter 40ish guy in Rome. He's walking
> around … kvetching about the crowds in Rome, and centurions
> are stepping on his feet, and he's getting hit in the head with
> casts and stuff, and you just see him trying to get through his
> day and complaining his complaints … I've thought maybe that
> will be me. Maybe 500 years from now I'll live on some database,
> and they'll print a really nice book with some picture of me on
> the cover, and there'll be some poor schlub suffering through his
> life, and people will read it and take heart.

Sean O'Leary has an equally intense feeling about his literary heroes. He recalled deciding to become a writer while he was

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[1] In ordinary parlance, we might call these writers "cultural icons." Yet, lately, we use the word "icon" almost as loosely as we use "famous" or "genius." Vico's term "imaginative universal" suggests what is missing in the word icon but may exceed what is needed. John Schaeffer defines Vico's imaginative universal as a means by which the primitive mind conceptualizes sensory experience: "The giants [primitive people] make noises, hear thunder, and experience emotions. But Jove is created when the Giants transfer (*metapherein*) those human qualities to the sky and see it as a vast body making angry noises" (1990: 88). The metaphor constructs a figure that embodies primal experience, gives it recognizable form, and returns those qualities to humans because of their association with the mythic figure. Schaeffer explains that, according to Vico, "All attributes of Divinity were identified with Jove. Likewise, Achilles became the imaginative universal of bravery. Men who were brave were Achilles, not like Achilles, but actually him. Clever men were Odysseus" (89).

But even iconic writers are not quite gods or even demigods. We do, of course,

an undergraduate English major at Cornell, a decision that hinged generally on his admiration for what he called the "Cornellian" writers:

> I was at the age where all the romantic visions of the writers' lives were very compelling, and it seemed like a good way to get women. I'm not really being facetious … I think the idea of being a solitary figure in a loft, with the requisite amount of suffering that accompanies it, is very compelling to a teenager, really. You sense the tragedy of your own life, and that tragedy is very compelling because you don't realize how tragic it can be … Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut had just been thrown out of Cornell when I got there, and Richard Farina had written *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* and had just died on his motorcycle. You can't get any more romantic than that. He died on the way home from the party celebrating the publication of his book – which, of course, made a best seller out of a damn average novel.

O'Leary ultimately outgrew these enthusiasms and, in fact, came to believe that they hindered his own writing (especially the influence of Pynchon). Yet, even though he came to reject his early idealization of writers, he said without hesitation that these literary heroes had shaped his attitude toward writing – shaped his life.

Cheri Register said she has a particular interest in how writers describe their processes and illustrated that with a story about a chance encounter with Joyce Carol Oates:

> I know I've read that Joyce Carol Oates writes whole novels in her head before she puts them down. She knows what's coming

make selected writers into universal metaphors. We say that an up-and-coming writer is *the new* or *heir to* Dickens, Fitzgerald, Faulkner; for humorists, the metaphor is nearly always Mark Twain. Metaphorizing works in the negative, also. *He's no Shakespeare* is a stock phrase. But the iconic writer still is not quite a case of a Vichian imaginative universal because the writer is not beyond judgment – not an unchallenged Jove who casts lightning across the sky but a revered Hemingway or Shakespeare whose work is read and criticized.

Table 4.1 Summary of the three major narratives of writing.

Literate inscriber	Good writer	Author writer
Produces minimally correct grammar and mechanics.	Produces correct grammar mechanics, with sophisticated style.	Produces usually correct grammar and mechanics, but with poetic license and with exceptional style.
Produces lists, forms, notes, letters, e-mail messages.	Produces essays and workplace genres with clear, sophisticated prose and factual accuracy.	Produces complex, compelling texts with exemplary style, mood, or insight; factual accuracy depends on genre.
	Has strong learning and analytical skills.	Usually has strong research and analytical skills; often experiences automatic, non-logical composition.
Can record his or her thoughts, though not always eloquently.	Produces sound arguments, with logical presentation.	Sometimes produces logical texts and sound arguments but may produce non-standard texts.
		Experiences a transformation into a *writer*.
		Has a strong desire for written expression.
		Has a powerful commitment to truth-telling in writing.

Literate inscriber	Good writer	Author writer
Is entitled to self-respect in a literate society.	Meets the standards of degree holders and is acceptable to employers.	Has an exceptional love of reading and words.

on the paper. One time at the Modern Language Association, I was going to go on the elevator and Joyce Carol Oates walked off the elevator and smacked right into me and had this glazed look in her eyes and didn't say a word – just walked on. And I thought, "She's writing now."

For Register, it seems, Oates is more than just a good example of a writer, more than just a metonymy for a social system in which writers operate, and more than an embodiment of cultural expectations. Something almost supernatural pervades the story of this encounter. In my own judgment, Oates could not possibly write a book in her head, though she may think about her books in excruciating detail before writing them. But what seemed to fascinate Register was not so much the impossible myth itself but the firsthand glimpse of a *writer* in the moment of creating. And why not. Any of us might be fascinated – transfixed – if we could catch a glimpse of Beethoven composing or da Vinci painting.

SUMMARY

Everyday discourse includes three major stories of writing: the literate-inscriber, the good-writer, and the author-writer stories (as summarized in Table 4.1). Together with persistent tension between prototypes of *writer* and *to write* and an ongoing debate between the *general-ability* and *specific-expertise views* of writing, these narratives influence what metaphors and metonymies we use to think about writing and what we make of the metaphors we use. The stories have a largely nested relationship. We expect author

writers to have all of the capabilities of good writers and literate inscribers. We expect good writers to have all of the capabilities of literate inscribers. That nesting is imperfect, however. Some elements attenuate at higher levels. For example, the author-writer narrative does not emphasize logic to the same degree as the good-writer narrative does.

5 Writing as transcription, talk, and voice
A complex metonymy

The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, "What is the content of speech?," it is necessary to say, "It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal."

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

Dear 'Owells –
I've struck it! And I will give it away – to you. You will never know how much enjoyment you have lost until you get to dictating your autobiography; then you will realize, with a pang, that you might have been doing it all your life if you had only had the luck to think of it. And you'll be astonished (& charmed) to see how like *talk* it is, & how real it sounds, & how well & compactly & sequentially it constructs itself, & what a dewy & breezy & woodsy freshness it has, & what a darling & and worshipful absence of the signs of starch, & flat iron, & labor & fuss & the other artificialities! Mrs. Clemens is an exacting critic, but I have not talked a sentence yet that she has wanted altered. There are little slips here & there, little inexactnesses, & many desertions of a thought before the end of it has been reached, but these are not blemishes, they are merits, their removal would take away the naturalness of the flow & banish the very thing – the nameless something – which differentiates real narrative from artificial narrative & makes the one so vastly better than the other – the subtle something which makes good talk so much better than the best imitation of it that can be done with a pen.

Mark Twain, in a letter to William Dean Howells

Writing scholarship is on the horns of a dilemma with respect to the figure of *voice*. As the field turns increasingly away from the idea of the *romantic individual* and works to complicate notions of the *authentic voice*, many writing scholars now take issue with expressivists who – quite reasonably, it has seemed – encourage students to find their *voices* and express *themselves*. Indeed, the very idea of a *core self* that underlies an *authentic voice* has come to be seen,

by many, as naïve or even deceptive. Darsie Bowden calls a *voice* a "mythology" that flies in the face of the multiple and contingent ways that voices and selves are actually constructed. She reasons that a unitary voice is not possible, given the intersecting, interacting profusion of discourses to which Bakhtin alerted us:

> Given the stronger centrifugal or disruptive forces [stronger than unifying forces] that proliferate meaning and sense, could there still be such a thing as a consistent voice? Writers certainly have some control in their selection of linguistic patterns, such as preponderance of latinate vocabulary, colloquialisms, or periodic sentences. But these patterns themselves are collocations of other patterns (of words or discourses), and even if we accord the writer the power of language selection, supervision, and management – assuming that a person is ever entirely free to select the language she wants – ultimately writing down words and sentences cannot free written language from the influence of previous uses and histories.
>
> (1999: 71)

She goes on to explain that writing is subject to further disruption as readers interpret texts and that those interpretations are inevitably influenced by "the social aspect of linguistic interaction" (71).

Arguments of that kind are compelling indeed – so compelling that even the best-known academic proponent of *voice*, Peter Elbow (1994, 2007), acknowledges that we cannot operate well with too simple an understanding of *voice* and *self*. But, for Elbow, multiple and dynamic discourses do not create theoretical problems that make the figure of *voice* unsustainable but rather create psychological problems for the writer to resolve. He argues:

> When it comes to our own writing, then, we can scarcely avoid noticing whether the words we put down on the page feel like our words – whether they sound like our voice or one of our owned voices. Yet even here … we write best if we learn to move flexibly back and forth between on the one hand using and

> celebrating something we feel as our own voice, and on the other hand operating as though we are nothing but ventriloquists playfully using and adapting and working against an array of voices we find around us.
>
> (1994: 30)

Though he acknowledges the range and fluidity of discourses, he contends that writers can nonetheless express themselves authentically and powerfully: "Of course most of us have more than one voice that feels like us: we may feel just as natural with a sports team, intimate casual talk with family, and fairly formal talk at colloquia. But just because we have multiple voices that sound like ourselves … " (27).

People who do a lot of writing surely understand what Elbow is talking about. We speak of it in the ordinary discourse of writing. *That was my academic voice*, we say, *not the real me*. Elbow's line of reasoning appeals to common sense – but without really refuting postmodern critiques of *voice*. If we only "feel" that something is our voice, and if we temper that by writing as "ventriloquists," isn't it misleading to talk about finding *your voice*?

But the problem is just as thorny on the other side of the question. If we reject authentic voices and selves, how do we encourage socially responsible writing? Doesn't that make even the writing most of us want to encourage seem self-deluding? Randall Freisinger has grappled with that paradox as well as anyone. He notes that few terms are more "problematic, definitionally complex, and ideologically loaded than *voice*, *self*, *postmodernism*, and *resistance*" (1994: 242). He argues that "teachers of writing need to reexamine and revise lessons of … Authentic Voice pedagogy and seek to incorporate them into the increasingly influential assumptions of postmodernism" so that students can understand "how to locate themselves within the complex network of surrounding institutions and culture." In other words, we need to help students develop voices without making them choose between two dubious ideas: that their voices either spring whole from *deep inside themselves* or that their

voices are mere artifacts of roiling, power-packed discourses that entirely subsume them.[1]

Freisinger's synthesis does seem to resolve a difficulty. But while it may be a useful redefinition of *voice*, it also preserves a rather singular idea of what *voice* means in ordinary discourse. In fact, it exhibits the problem I raised in the introduction to this book. Proposing a nuanced and useful version of *authentic voice* is a productive thing to do. But does the proposal respond to *voice* as it functions in everyday discourse? I argue not, and here is why.

Everyday figures have multiple shapes. They are not inserted as fixed ideas into discourse, where they unilaterally exert their influence; they function interactively – both shaping discourse and being shaped by it. Thus v*oice* is not a unitary figure that is open to a single critique, no matter how subtle that critique may be. To address the problem of *voice*, we need to ask different questions. Rather than begin by questioning whether or not there is such a thing as an authentic voice, it would be better to ask questions such as these: When people evoke the figure of *voice*, what stories license their use of that figure? When people license *voice* with different stories, how does the figure change?

In this chapter, I want to reconsider *voice* in those two ways. Like all of our everyday figures for writing, *voice* is associated with the three major narratives – the literate inscriber, the good writer, and the author writer. And it is always complicated by the conflicting prototypes and contending everyday theories (see Chapters 2 and 3). Second, *voice* varies more and in different ways than has been evident to current commentators because it is not the kind of figure it is assumed to be. *Voice* is virtually always called a metaphor. But it is better seen first as a metonymy – a metonymy that may

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[1] Elbow (2007) arrives at a similar conclusion, though not quite a synthesis. He suggests finding some measure of comfort with *voice* not by resolving the question but by embracing contrary notions. On the one hand, we can recognize that *voice* is never really the expression of an individual speaker or writer; yet it is something crucial that every writer ought to nurture, a tool a writer can bring to bear as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of effective written expression.

ultimately motivate metaphors, but nonetheless a metonymy at root. Especially in light of cognitive linguists' recent contributions to the understanding of conceptual metonymy, seeing *voice* as mainly a matter of contiguity, rather than metaphoric projection, reveals a far more complicated set of meanings than is generally recognized.

Before discussing variations of the *voice* metonymy, let me first explain how the notion of conceptual metonymy differs from the traditional account. Next, I will discuss the relationship between figures for writing and figures for speech. Finally, I will describe three varieties of Writing Is Speech that correlate, though complexly, with the three major stories of writing discussed earlier. By examining these sub-metonymies, I hope to show that Writing Is Speech has a paradoxical structure that is not sufficiently acknowledged in academic critiques – that, in fact, the idea of discovering one's *voice* is the least singular, and most metaphorical, of the familiar configurations of the concept.

HOW CONCEPTUAL METONYMY WORKS

Until recently, metonymy has been treated as less puzzling and perhaps less important than metaphor. But recent work has begun to show that claims about the pervasiveness and complexity of metonymy have been too small. Traditional accounts say that metonymy (and synecdoche) are matters of relatively inconsequential word substitutions such as the part for the whole, the whole for the part, the end for the beginning, the effect for the cause, and the like. Typically, these definitions provide examples of lively expressions: *the sword* for military power, *the power of the purse* for control of the budget, *the crown* for the king. In the traditional view, these substitutions supply elegant variation without seeming to alter meaning very much. But colorful examples are almost always misleading when it comes to noticing how basic figuration is to language and thought.

Most noun-for-noun metonymies are not especially colorful and are, therefore, hardly noticed. We say that the *other driver* hit *me*, not that his car hit my car. We read *Shakespeare*, not one of

Shakespeare's plays. When we do read a *Shakespearean play*, we mean that we've read the non-physical linguistic entity that is contiguous with one of many physical inscriptions – inscriptions that may vary in a thousand ways and still represent the same work (Reddy 1993: 178–80). Adjectival metonymies also go unnoticed: *mouse-trap*, *sports drink*, *desk drawer*, *lawn mower*, *bird feeder*, *hat rack*, and many more. Verb metonymies abound: *to book* (for writing into an appointment book), *to bike* (for riding a bike), *to ground out* in baseball (associated with the adjectival metonymy *ground ball* or *grounder*). In short, relying just on the traditional definition, we can see that metonymy is everywhere in everyday language.

But simply noticing that metonymy is a common device does not explain its conceptual importance. Metonymy does not just pervade the way we talk, it also shapes the way we think about nearly everything – including speech and writing. Consider Gilles Fauconnier's cautionary example of a metonymy that misleads us about language: the metonymic dimension of the information-processing metaphor.

An often-criticized weakness of the information-processing metaphor is that it seems to assume a fixed relationship between meaning and language. But the source of the problem is not the metaphor *per se* but instead a metonymy that makes the metaphor possible. Fauconnier explains:

> What we are conscious of determines our folk-theories of what is going on. In the case of perception, the folk theory, an extremely useful one for us as living organisms, is that everything we perceive is indeed directly the very essence of the object perceived, out there in the world and independent of us. *The effect is contained entirely in the cause.* In the same way, our folk theory of language is that the meanings are contained directly in the words and their combinations, since that is all that we are ever consciously aware of. *The effect (meaning) is attributed essentially to the visible cause (language).* And again, this

folk theory is extremely useful to us as human organisms in everyday life. It makes sense. At another level, the level of scientific inquiry, this folk theory, like other folk theories, is wrong, and the information processing model of language breaks down … The … illusion that meaning is in the language forms is both hard to repress and hard to acknowledge. And for that reason, it has made its way into many scientific accounts of language. In such accounts, the notion that forms have meaning is unproblematic, and the "only" problem becomes to give a formal characterization of such meanings associated with forms.

(2000: 99–100, emphasis added; compare Radden 2000)

I want to emphasize that Fauconnier attributes the stubbornness of the folk theory to the contiguity of the effect (meaning) and the cause (words and phrases) – a conceptual metonymy. Moreover, metonymy is powerful not because it seems mysterious or extraordinary, which is how metaphor is often described, but because it seems so literal. Indeed, the contiguity of words and meaning is there for all to see, but the causal relationship between language and meaning is, to use Fauconnier's word, an illusion. Or, to put it in a positive light, it is an imaginative accomplishment based on metonymy.

This cognitive view significantly enlarges our understanding of metonymy's ordinariness and reach. Not just a word substitution or pairing, conceptual metonymy is a point of access to a broader context (compare Fass 1997; Radden and Kövecses 1999; Barcelona 2000; Dirven and Pörings 2002; Panther and Thornburg 2003). For instance, when we substitute *hand* for sailor, it is not simply a matter of wordplay; the metonymy (or synecdoche) opens the way to all we know about sailors – the social role a sailor fills, where he (or she) fits into a command hierarchy, and all of the implications of maritime service. Likewise, each time we name a category member, we gain access to the way it is metonymically related to other category members. *Farm hand* is meaningful because of its contiguous

relationship with other *workers* – to a cognitive model of *worker* (see Lakoff 1987).

Moreover, the function of metonymy is more than a matter of comprehension, however encyclopedic that comprehension may be. To use Charles Fillmore's term, metonymies act as "frames": they give some elements of a conceptual system greater attention than others and thus impose a certain perspective.

That framing can operate subtly – even tacitly. For instance, Günter Radden and Zoltán Kövecses (1999) demonstrate the tacit influence of the familiar part-for-whole metonymy *pretty face*. When we say s*he's not just a pretty face*, we typically mean that the woman is pretty in other ways, too. Similarly, s*he is pretty* usually presumes that the woman has a pretty face – because to say that she is pretty except for her face is, culturally speaking, nonsense. In that way, *pretty face* is the chief metonymy for prettiness. We do not need to mention the face expressly for it to operate as a principal feature of prettiness. (I do not favor gender stereotyping, but it *is* part of every-day talk.)

Once you encounter a concretely expressed metonymy, things are never simple. Radden and Kövecses might have mentioned also how *pretty face* responds to subtle shifts in phrasing and context. *She is just a pretty face* derides a woman's intelligence; by empha-sizing the presence of one thing, it asserts the absence of something else. Contrastingly, *she has a pretty face* often indicates that the woman in question has only a pretty face, not the usual complement of beautiful physical characteristics. It says nothing at all about her intelligence. In each case, the metonymy recruits a commonly understood conceptual system but makes a distinct comment about it. It frames.

VOICE, CONCEPTUAL METONYMY, AND OTHER METALINGUISTIC FIGURES

In the everyday discourse of writing, metonymies exert considerable conceptual and rhetorical influence. We use a few key metonymies

to provide access to the main elements of writing: writer, thought, language, speech, text, and reader. These metonymies give one or more of these elements greater presence relative to the others. This framing is complicated because, as we have seen, even deeply entrenched metonymies such as Writing Is Thought and Writing Is Identity are configured differently in relation to various stories of writing – which are themselves related to each other in complicated ways. Among the metonymies that shape our thinking about writing, none is more far-reaching than the metonymy of voice and text. Indeed, when we consider the voice–text metonymy, we have to consider virtually all metalinguistic figures – not just those that pertain directly to writing, but those that pertain to orality, too. (See de Beaugrande 2006 for a discussion of the vexed relationship between speech and writing as linguistic data.)

Consider the different ways the words *to speak*, *to read*, and *to write* work as metonymies for language competency. When we say that we learn to speak a foreign language, *to speak* usually stands for all of the language knowledge we acquire. A non-native who *speaks* French ordinarily reads and writes it also. A non-native who *reads* French may not *speak* it. In that sense, *speaking* is the chief metonymy for foreign language skill (Radden and Kövecses 1999: 2–3). Writing works in the opposite way. We assume that natives can speak and consider them more proficient if they can read – and more proficient yet if they can write. Writing, in the standard hierarchy, is the chief metonymy for high-functioning native language skill, though a fairly complicated and variable one.

That we can identify a chief metonymy for native language skill underscores the fundamental rhetoricity of metonymy. *Writing* does not merely substitute for native language competence as a matter of elegant variation; it draws attention to what we typically value most for native language use. As the metonymy brings written literacy into the foreground, it also pushes oral ability into the background. In other words, like metaphor, metonymy both shows and hides. And it is inevitably colored by social, cultural, philosophical,

and political influences – influences that are always set concretely in a time and place. Indeed, the status of writing has evolved dramatically over the centuries (Ong 1988).

Of course, we cannot say just that orality is privileged in one instance and writing in another – that orality is the chief metonymy for competence in second language use and writing for competence in native language use. There is an additional catch. To be especially competent in one's native tongue means that one can write well. But to write well often means to write voicefully, a figure of orality. Indeed, those who are most admired as writers can claim to have found a voice. That makes metaphors and other figures for speech relevant to writing, at least to voiceful writing.

Louis Goossens (1995) has cataloged numerous metalinguistic metonymies and metaphors, paying special attention to their interrelationships. They overwhelmingly have to do with speech. Goossens places metalinguistic figures into three classifications: body-part figures, sound figures, and figures of violent action. Body-part metonymies include *tongue* for language, *tête à tête* for a one-on-one conversation, getting something *off one's chest* for a spoken confession, and so on. Body-part metonymies can motivate related metaphors. For instance, *close lipped* (or more idiomatically in the United States, *tight lipped* or *close mouthed*) evokes a metonymic image of someone not speaking. But often the phrase is used metaphorically for people who speak yet do not reveal certain information. Sound figures tended to be metaphoric in Goossens's corpus, but he does note that *she giggled* instead of *she spoke* is at least as metonymic as it is metaphoric because it suggests the act of speaking and giggling at the same time. Similarly, figures of violent action often seemed primarily metaphoric but had plausible metonymic motivations. To *throw mud* is metaphorically to defame, but it is easy to imagine verbal defamation being accompanied by similar violent action such as spitting or striking. I would add that violence is not the only kind of physical act associated with language. Surely, *stroking someone's ego* is a metalinguistic metaphor with a

metonymic motivation. Speaking kindly is often accompanied by touching.

Although the metalinguistic figures cited by Goossens apply primarily to speech, many can be extended to writing. It is possible to get something off your chest in writing as well as speech. Mud-slinging is done in the print press, not just in speeches. On the other hand, a *tête à tête* cannot usually occur in writing. Likewise, whereas we can say that a speaker *giggled*, *growled*, or *barked* a phrase, we would not be likely to say that of a writer. Even where a figure seems to apply more aptly to either speech or writing, we need to recognize that it inhabits a figurative landscape that applies to language use generally. (See also Semino.)

METONYMIES OF TRANSCRIPTION, TALK, AND THE *DISCOVERED VOICE*

We might think of *voice* in this way: *Voice* is the most familiar word used to express the conceptual metonymy Writing Is Speech. Each time we use the word *voice* to talk about writing – including in modified forms such as *personal voice*, *passive voice*, and *authentic voice* – we draw upon the entailments of that metonymy: We accept a framework that tells that we *have in mind* words that *could be spoken* but are instead *put in writing*. Hence the metonymy emphasizes the contiguity of thought, (potentially) spoken words, and written inscriptions.

But the metonymy does not end there. It brings into relation all of the ways we conceptualize writing and all of the ways we conceptualize speech: It makes it possible, for instance, to apply select metaphors for speech in the domain of writing. Furthermore, it spreads from written and spoken word to thought and, ultimately, to the *self*. As it extends its reach, it interacts with a broad constellation of metaphors. Thus the metaphors we use to describe personal character interact with Writing Is Speech. It is perfectly comprehensible to say that someone writes in a *voice* that is both *musical* (which describes the writer's linguistic style) and *resolute* (which describes the writer's character).

The best way to make sense of the patterns of variation within Writing Is Speech is to think of it as three related figures rather than just one. Each figure corresponds to the three major stories of writing (literate inscriber, good writer, and author writer). The three stories have a complex nested relationship, as we have seen, and these relationships are reflected in the metonymies they license. I call the three (sub-)metonymies Writing As Transcription, Writing As Talk, and the Discovered Voice.

WRITING AS TRANSCRIPTION

Writing As Transcription is the most basic way we have of understanding the relationship of writing and speech. It is not as obviously figurative as the figure suggested by a *musical* or *resolute voice*, but Writing As Transcription is no less figurative at root and is pervasive in the way we think about writing. We recruit Writing As Transcription each time we use ordinary phrases such as the *text says*, *he or she says* (in a text), *the text makes it sound like*, *we talked on e-mail*, *I told them in a letter*, or even the ubiquitous *write it down*. As I have mentioned, the entailments of the metonymy are familiar enough. The metonymy tells us that to write is to express with symbols what would otherwise be spoken. Thus writing and speech are contiguous. Written words *stand for* spoken words.

That association between writing and speech may seem quite literal – not figurative at all. But remember: Writing is not usually a transcription of spoken words. In practice, writing almost always records mentally conceived words, and though it can record spoken words, it typically varies from what would be spoken if it weren't for the influence of a written record. Indeed, written compositions always differ from speech – from e-mails to novels. Even a dictated text – captured by a secretary or voice-recognition software – ultimately omits errors, repairs, and hesitations. It's possible, of course, to transcribe speech with utmost fidelity. But when people dictate for transcription, they do not say the same things, in the same way, that they would say in purely oral situation. The closest thing to a

transcription of natural speech that I can think of is a candid transcript – such as a transcript of a broadcast or a wiretap. In those cases, speech is diligently *written down*, but the transcript can never capture the nuances of cadence, timbre, pitch, and more.

In the conceptual metonymy, though, we idealize the relationship between writing and speech – imagining them in an uncomplicated relationship, even though that relationship almost never occurs. In fact, places such as the United States have become so thoroughly literate that it is difficult to imagine speech that is not thoroughly influenced by writing. As John McWhorter points out, most of us cannot think without the interference of written language: Who among us can say the word *dog* without spelling it out in our heads (2003: 3)? The idea that speech exists separately from writing and can, therefore, be transformed sequentially, from oral form to written form, is a near impossibility. And, yet, some writing does seem to be more transcriptive than others.

This transcriptive writing does not attempt the writerly transformations that separate ordinary speech from written language. In that respect, Writing As Transcription is licensed most directly by the literate-inscriber story. As I pointed out in the last chapter, we expect more from literate inscribers than the mere ability to inscribe letters and numbers. Literacy encompasses a rich gamut of cultural knowledge and expectations. But we do not expect writerly transformations of language in the writing of literate inscribers. That is, people can be called literate even if their writing does not exhibit the craft and revision that we associate with good writers and, even more so, author writers. Basic literacy is conceptualized as something very close to orality. Basic literacy is also seen as a matter of step-wise progress from living only by the spoken word (illiteracy) to being able to write down what previously someone could only say (literacy). We all know how to talk before we learn how to write. Thus speech is a precondition of literacy.

One way of ridiculing people who have only basic literacy is to point out the ways that their writing mirrors their own, often

colloquial, speech. This kind of ridicule has long been part of the discourse of language and race. But it is not limited to racial politics. As far back as Mark Twain (and surely much farther), marginally literate writing has been associated with colloquial speech. In his autobiography, Twain remarks of the writing of an old friend, "He is utterly simple-minded and straightforward and his spelling and punctuations are as simple and honest as he is himself" (1990: 141). But the friend's writing is not just marked by phonetic spellings, which themselves indicate a close relationship between speech and writing, but also by a distinctly colloquial style.

The letter he writes to Twain seems to be a transcription of what he would otherwise say:

> Two or three parties have ben after me to write up my
> recollections of Our associations in Nevada, in the early 60's
> and have com to the conclusion to do so, and have ben jocting
> down incidents that came to mind, for several years. What I am
> in dout is, the date you came to Aurora, Nevada – allso, the first
> trip you made over thee Sieras to California, after coming to
> Nev. also as near as possible date, you tended sick man, on, or
> near Walker River, when our mine was jumped, don't think for a
> moment that I intend to steal any of your Thunder, but onely …
>
> (141)

And so on. Twain treats this writing affectionately, of course. But when he calls it as "straightforward" and "honest" as the man who wrote it, he also acknowledges that it is not crafted in the way a more sophisticated writer would do it. Twain's view of transcriptive writing survives today. Writing that does not transform itself from spoken style to written style is, first, unskilled or unrefined and, second, is what all writing would be if we did not make it into something more.

Of course, even the most basic forms of writing do more than just transcribe speech. Writing situations call for utterances different from those of oral situations. When a job application calls for

us to write our name and address, we perhaps write something like what we would say in response to a spoken question, but we are usually more concise in writing than in speech. In response to *What is your name?* someone might write "Donald Smith." But no one would add, "Just call me Don." My grocery lists are not identical with what I tell my wife that I plan to buy; the lists are elliptical and full of abbreviations and include no explanations or asides. But such transformations are less a matter of writerly skill than of convenience.

Writing As Transcription assumes certain things about writing and writers that are different from the assumptions suggested by other parts of the Writing Is Speech figure. To begin, at least when it comes to minimum expectations, it assumes a literal and singular voice – the actual vocal emanations of the literate inscriber or a close approximation in the literate inscriber's mind. If literate inscribers' writing often mirrors their own speech, it is because they have not developed the ability to express themselves in various registers, especially not registers that are appropriate for written genres. There is only one voice to transcribe – their own physical voice. In turn, the metonymy assumes no craft or revision. Once conceived, actual speech or mentally imagined speech need only be recorded. Furthermore, the skill of transcribing speech is mechanical. Literate inscribers have not developed skills as writers, but rather as spellers, users of punctuation, and perhaps as typists or pen-wielders.

Writing As Transcription evokes a limited notion of writing, indeed. But we should not think of it as applying exclusively to literate inscribers. The three major stories of writing are, as I have said, nested. What applies to a literate inscriber also applies to a good writer and an author writer.

Certainly, it was a part of my interviews with writing professionals. For example, the journalist Robert Sharoff spoke of "getting my thoughts down on paper"; the historian Christine Worobec spoke of the need to "put things on paper"; and the memoirist Cheri Register thinks of writing as "mind and finger work" – and values

most work that seems to be entirely formulated in her mind and "just has to be written down."

Yet, for good writers and author writers, the metonymy of thought, spoken language, and writing is not limited to Writing As Transcription. Their thoughts and potentially spoken words are in some sense transcribed, but that transcription has implications that go further. Certainly, no one would say that a literate inscriber who competently transcribes his or her thoughts, even if that transcription transforms those thoughts to some degree, has achieved a conversational prose style, let alone discovered his or her authentic voice.

WRITING AS TALK

The metonymy among writing, thought, and speech is fickle. Although we sometimes assert that writing is transcribed speech (*Let me put my thoughts in writing*), we also recognize that speech and writing should not be identical in sophisticated texts. That prompts a second metonymy closely associated with the good-writer story: Writing As Talk. In that metonymy, we imagine we can write conversationally without, in fact, transcribing our conversational style. Conversational writing is not the exclusive property of good writers, but it is often recommended for people who write letters, memos, reports, and papers rather than memoirs, novels, columns, and feature stories.

For good writers, there is no assumed connection between speech and writing. In fact, the problem for good writers is that the connection is often severed. Good writing becomes abstract, impersonal, bloodless. *Write like you talk* urges good writers not to preserve but to recover the connection between speech and writing. For one thing, it tends to correct the good writer's greatest sin: lack of clarity.

Write like you talk is good advice that requires qualifications. For example, in his advice on writing business correspondence,

David Lewis acknowledges the limitations of the standard advice under the heading "Writing (More) the Way You Talk":

> Naturally, you're not being asked to write exactly the way you talk. Rather, you're being asked to bridge the gap between the spoken and the written word – to narrow the difference in the way that you would give an order verbally and the way you would write that same order in a memo … but you can do these things and still capture the tone and cadence of spoken English.
>
> (1999: 119)

The expression *write like you talk* probably does not convince us that we are naturally adept at constructing sentences fit for transcription (the very thought of dictating a letter makes me quake), but it does evoke our relative comfort with face-to-face communication, where we can use social cues to guide what we say. It evokes our social selves.

Indeed, Writing As Talk's chief practical advantage is that it recognizes how prose can go horribly awry when we do not have social cues to help us communicate. We can become abstruse, convoluted, dull. Thus it calls on writers to make use of pragmatic cues that get lost when writing becomes a matter of disembodied craft and composition. *Write like you talk* helps us imagine – sometimes vividly – a context for communication. Consider this online advice for potential contributors to *Amateur Astronomy Magazine*:

> Write like you talk! Imagine that 30 of you have pulled your lounge chairs up into a circle in the dark at a star party, while waiting for some clouds to pass. You all take turns telling stories about your experiences that have taken place since you were last together. These stories are good. No one stops to look up big words in his dictionary or thesaurus; they just excitedly tell of some of the experiences that have happened to them as they have lived the life of amateur astronomers.
>
> (*Amateur Astronomy Magazine* 2009)

What is evoked here is not at all a word-for-word correspondence between spoken and written language but instead a scene of comfortable, spontaneous communication. The editors of *Amateur Astronomy Magazine* do not think that an actual transcription of what people say on lounge chairs in the dark would make a good piece of writing. But they do know that when people write, they often cast aside their ordinary instincts about communication, suddenly preferring big words over small and stilted language over a more conversational style.

Some of the best advice on good writing teases out the fuller implications of Writing As Talk. In some ordinary conceptions, even when writing is called conversational, it can seem to flow from writer to reader, leaving the reader merely to react, not to contribute substantively to the writer's thought process. By contrast, Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb tell students that making a written argument is much like having an ordinary problem-solving conversation – discussing with a friend what kind of food to eat, with a teacher whether or not apes can count, with a boss what software to buy (2002: 4). They ask students to imagine an interlocutor so that that they can anticipate weaknesses in their own reasoning: "Even if you spent the day reading, you probably had silent arguments with writers. You read, *Cloning has no moral implications*, and think, *Wait a minute. Every action has a moral dimension. I wonder how he would explain …* " (4). Their presentation of the metonymy, thus, brings into focus not just the role of the audience as receiver, as the astronomy example does, but also the active contribution of a reader as an interlocutor, someone who creates the text along with the writer.

This insistence on conversational writing is supposed to do more than just help you to write better. It is supposed to fend off bad writing. The metonymy Writing As Talk contrasts with figures that deny or minimize the orality of written language, figures such as *objectivity*, *detachment*, *impersonality* – writing that is described metaphorically as *turgid*, *impenetrable*, *wooden*, *dry*. Can *objective*

prose be read appropriately in anything other than a *dry*, *wooden* monotone?

In an essay called "Technical Texts/Personal Voice," Nancy Allen and Deborah Bosley make the case for the importance of *personal voice* – and thus reject *objective* or *impersonal* voice – in technical writing. They interviewed several technical writers who confirmed that personal voice is often discouraged in technical and professional writing "because of the constraints imposed by traditional epistemology, corporations, discourse conventions, and the value structures of powerful corporate communities" (1994: 88). When the technical writers did claim to have inserted their own voice into their technical writing, it was in the limited sense that their professional writing was somewhat individuated – a departure from the *corporate voice* that effaces the personality of the writer.

But *personal voice* in a corporate setting is not usually so much a matter of projecting personal values as a matter of linguistic choices, of eschewing abstract and passive prose in favor of language more akin to the spoken word, in which the pronouns "I" and "you" appear frequently.

At times, Allen and Bosley's interviewees seem to be aiming for more than writing conversationally. One of their interviewees, Cliff Stoll, wrote a non-fiction book about tracking a computer spy that included both personal narrative and more "objective" prose. What Allen and Bosley call "the overriding voice" in the book is personal in the sense that it is in the first person and non-fictional. But the passage they quote sounds very much like fiction that we are all familiar with: "By 12:29, most of my clothes had dried off, though my sneakers still squished. I was partway into a soggy bagel, and most of the way through an astronomy article" (quoted in Allen and Bosley 1994: 89). Would Cliff Stoll endorse the general-ability view of writing? Would he claim the title *writer* for himself? We can only guess – but I suspect he would. Indeed, I suspect that Stoll is not merely *writing the way I talk*, but hopes to have found his *voice*.

Typically, Writing As Talk is configured positively – as something to be achieved. But Writing As Talk can be viewed in the opposite way. We associate certain "sounds" with organizations, ideologies, personalities, and behaviors that are not viewed favorably. In our focus groups, Christine Abbott and I came across many of these voice–personality metonymies. As participants commented on technical documents, they criticized, among other things, writing that was *arrogant*, *bureaucratic*, *formal*, *highfalutin*, *literary*, *marketing blather*, *ostentatious*, *patronizing*, *preachy*, and *stuffy* (Abbott and Eubanks 2005).

The human voice is never far away in these assessments. Referring to a poorly edited, highly nominalized passage, one professor in our focus groups complained, "It's bureaucratic language. It's stuffy *talk*." One technical writer objected to the "marketing blather" in one set of instructions because "I don't want to be bothered with *listening* to someone tell me how good they think their product is." Another technical writer imagined things that the "arrogant" writer of a set of instructions might say or think: "I'm so much more educated than you are, I'm going to put these big words in here" (187–88, 93).

These pejorative metonymies do not rely on a notion of Writing As Talk as especially stable or unitary. Indeed, in our focus groups, people understood the sample writing to be student work and could not believe that bureaucratic writing was produced by an arrogant bureaucrat. What mattered was a metonymic association. Writing of a certain kind is ordinarily associated with bureaucracy or arrogance. To write in these ways is to be influenced by undesirable models. The metonymies assume a *social self*. However, in the framework of the good-writer story, the remedy for negative influences is not to *find* one's voice – not in the sense that author writers *find* their voices; it is to evoke language from desirable social situations – to be *conversational*, *friendly*, *direct*, *gracious*, *personal*.

Finally, not everyone thinks "writing like you talk" is particularly good advice. The linguist John McWhorter argues that

the ideal of writing like you talk has become an all-too-pervasive view of what makes for good writing. He argues that, in the United States, we are leaving behind, mostly to our detriment, a long tradition in which the standard for good English was written English; in nineteenth-century America, excellent oral performances emulated writing, not the other way around. He observes that in most world languages, writing is actually a transcription of speech: "The oral toolkit is ontologically primary. Writing is just a method for engraving on paper what comes out of the mouth" (2003: 3).

McWhorter argues that we need to draw a clear line between writing and talk. As he sees it:

> The issue … is that in earlier America it was assumed that a certain space in society required that English be dressed in its Sunday best, complete with carnation and big hats … Talking was for conversation; in public or on paper, one used a different kind of language, just as we use forks and knives instead of eating with our hands.
>
> (xvi)

That view remains alive in our discourse today. That is no doubt why in its "Author's Guidelines" *Amateur Astronomer Magazine* (2005) bothers to warn its contributors not to reach for a Sunday-best diction that, in the wrong hands, fails to communicate and, ultimately, irritates.

Write like you talk seems, perhaps, like a simple metonymy. But it suggests a writing goal that is sometimes difficult to achieve – not a transcription of all of the words that reside in our heads or come out of our mouths, not a distillation of an idealized manner of speech to which we can only aspire, but something in the middle: conversational writing, unpretentious writing, rhetorically sensitive writing, a particular sort of good writing. Certainly, author writers – whose work is admired and who have achieved a special societal status – do not merely *write the way they talk*, although

some may adopt a conversational style. Rather they can lay claim to something more elusive: *voice*.

THE DISCOVERED VOICE

Writing As Transcription and Writing As Talk assume that the relationship between writing and speech is ordinary. The Discovered Voice assumes the relationship is an extraordinary one. It is a conceptually elusive version of Writing Is Speech that is strongly associated with the prototype for *writer* and, in turn, the author-writer story. The idea that developing as a writer means to *find one's voice* is not just remarkable for its ubiquity, but also for its complexity.

The Discovered Voice metonymy embeds the same assumptions as Writing As Transcription and Writing As Talk – that we think in words, that those words might be spoken, and that they are written instead – but it also hedges significantly on those assumptions. In books on how to become a writer (capital W), *voice* is contiguous not so much with the speaking voice as with an internal mental voice that is distinct from ordinary speech. This internal writerly voice is an unimpeded expression of memory or knowledge or – and this is the word that matters most – truth. Because the writer is the only person who can gain access to true memories or knowledge, the writer's truth can only be expressed in the writer's voice. But that voice may have little to do with the writer's way of speaking. *Voice* is not – at least not primarily – a matter of oral style.

The critic, essayist, and scholar Louis Menand makes plain the complex metonymic quality of *voice* – though he often uses the word metaphor. Menand explains that *voice* is not a transcription of actual speech or even of the "yakking away" that goes on inside a writer's head. Such a transcription would be "depressing" (2004: xvii). Moreover, he says that speech is "a bad metaphor for writing" because:

> For 99% of people who do it, [writing] is the opposite of
> spontaneous … [C]hattiness, slanginess, in-your-face-ness, and

any other feature of writing that is conventionally
characterized as "like speech" are all usually the results of
intense experimentation, revision, calibrating, walks around
the block, unnecessary phone calls, and recalibrating.

<div align="right">(xvi)</div>

In short, *voice* is "an artificial construction of language" that "feels
personal" (xvii). Yet, as energetically as Menand insists that *voice* is
not transcribed speech, he nonetheless associates *voice* in writing
with embodied sound – specifically singing. Singing is what writers
hear internally and, Menand tells us, the thing they worry they may
fail to find or, once they've found it, suddenly lose.

Such an account of *voice* underscores the imaginative qual-
ity of the metonymy. If the Discovered Voice were a metonymy as
metonymy is traditionally defined – if it were merely a matter of sub-
stituting one contiguous literal entity with another – there would be
no confusion about what *voice* might mean. It would mean simply
that the text accurately transcribes the writer's speech or potential
speech.

But the Discovered Voice takes much more than that into
account by placing a series of elements side-by-side-by-side. For
author writers, *voice* is a metonymy of text and thought, which is
mediated by an imagined mental voice – which is, in turn, adja-
cent to but not identical with the author's bodily voice or, some-
times, an imagined bodily voice different from the author's actual
voice. Because writers hear what is in their minds via this imag-
ined mental voice, the Discovered Voice is a metonymy for truth or
experience – the memories and interpretations of memories that are
stored in the mind. In that way, the Discovered Voice is a metonymy
for the *self* – an *authentic self* that has access to the often elusive
remembered self.

Indeed, the Discovered Voice is really a complex of metonymies
that are associated almost always with the kind of writing that ambi-
tiously literate people aim to produce. To *find one's voice* usually

means to succeed as an author writer – which is in part to have, as we saw in the last chapter, a special relationship with the truth and with truth-telling. Yet not everyone reserves the pursuit of *voice* for author writers, especially not those who subscribe to the general-ability view of writing. According to that view, all people who write – even beginners – can have the same aims as prototypical writers.

Anne Lamott, a general-ability advocate, writes of finding "your own true voice," a voice that does not imitate your speaking style but expresses "the truth of your experience that can only come through in your own voice" (1994: 198–99). Similarly, Natalie Goldberg describes voice as a matter of fidelity to yourself and being open to your own experience. For her, trusting your own voice applies to all kinds of writing because, following the general-ability view, even everyday writing is practice for greater achievements, for writing freely about the experiences that are stored within you:

> The trust you learn in your own voice can be directed … into a business letter, a novel, a Ph.D. dissertation, a play, a memoir. But it is something you must come back to again and again. Don't think, "I got it! I trust my voice. I'm off to write the great American novel."
>
> (1986:13)

In *Crafting an Authentic Voice*, Tom Romano makes a case for the general-ability view with respect to *voice*. He calls *voice* "the writer's presence on the page"; yet he insists that *voice* – in fact, "authentic voice" – can be a part of any kind of writing. For example, he writes of good-writer genres: "Assigned topics and authentic voice are not mutually exclusive … a fair amount of my writing is directed by others. I can get passionate and voiceful about the damnedest things" (2004: 27). These include committee reports for his department and tenure-and-promotion letters – which are surely not prototypical "voiceful" genres. Yet Romano's bid upward – urging good writers to aspire to achievements usually associated with prototypical author writers – is not uncommon.

Of course, Romano would not have to assert that "assigned topics and authentic voice are not mutually exclusive" were the ordinary assumption squarely on his side. When good writers are exhorted to write voicefully, they are being encouraged to aim high, to do what the most admired writers do – to expect from oneself what authors expect: truthfulness, elegance, emotional connection, a point of view that is associated with themselves alone.

As one who teaches writing to very young people, Ralph Fletcher argues that the *voice* has to do with an open and passionate connection to experience that is natural to childhood. Under the heading "Finding a Writing Voice," he recalls a colleague saying that *voice* in writing has much to do with "an *intimacy* between … the author and what is being written about" (1993: 72). Writers must work to retain this intimacy, Fletcher says, because childlike honesty usually disappears with age – making for "upper grade classrooms populated by writers who have lost their voice" (73). That is, upper grade writers – good writers, to be sure – may have lost their writerly voices, but that is not because they are not entitled to *voice*. It's just that they are no longer open to having it.

The journalist Dirk Johnson thinks of *voice* as "a combination of technique and sensibility." He explained, "In my own case, the technique is to try to be very spare, simple, less is more, a three-word sentence that stands as a paragraph on its own occasionally if I can manage it. And the sensibility is very often to try to get to the emotional core of something." It is a way of crafting words, but in the service of truth-telling. Johnson said he hoped that his own voice was recognizable as his and no one else's:

> I always felt best when people would say, "I began to read this article and I hadn't seen the byline and I thought, 'This is Dirk Johnson's story.'" They may not have meant it as a compliment, but I took it as one because it suggested that there was something about the way I was communicating that stood out.

For Johnson, achieving that aim – that voicefulness – has partly to do with capturing his own, physical voice. Like many a successful writer, he checks his style by reading out loud. But what he listens for is not the sound of ordinary talk or conversation, but a certain musicality:

> I often will read out loud what I've written to see not only if it sounds good, but also if it has a certain cadence and melody because I think that it needs to have a boom, boom, boom, sort of rhythm to it. Even after a piece comes out, I will read it sometimes fifteen or eighteen times, and each time I read it, I will see something, sometimes little and sometimes not so little, that I could have done differently to make it better.

It is not by accident that Johnson turns to the music metaphor. It is the same one that attracts Louis Menand, who equates a writer's *voice* with singing. The Discovered Voice – licensed by the author-writer story – goes hand-in-hand with metaphors of music, color, and intensity that are not generally applicable to good writing. Author writing may be clear, concise, and well structured in the same way that good writing should be. But the reverse is not true. To call good writing symphonic or colorful or stirring is to say that it exceeds expectations.

Menand provides us a small catalog of metaphors that are associated with the Discovered Voice:

> You cannot taste a work of prose. It has no color and it makes no sound. Its shape is without significance. When people talk about writing, though, they often use adjectives borrowed from activities whose products make a more direct appeal to the senses – painting, sculpture, music, cuisine. People say, "the writing is colorful," or "pungent," or "shapeless," or "lyrical," and no one asks them where, exactly, they perceive those qualities. Discussions of "tone" and "texture" are carried on in the complete ontological absence of such things.

(2004: xiv)

WRITING AS TRANSCRIPTION	WRITING AS TALK	DISCOVERED VOICE
Written record	"Conversational" style	Style that "works"
↑	↑	↑
Potentially spoken words	Social self: writer's way of speaking	Writer's craft: author's unique personal speech or persona
↑	↑	↑
Thoughts/ internal speech	Thoughts/ unedited internal speech	Thoughts/ uninhibited internal speech
↑	↑	↑
	Logical mind	Truthful self
	↑	↑
Experience	Experience	Experience

Figure 5.1 Overview of the three versions of Writing Is Speech.

All of these metaphors add up to "voice," he says. And they do. Such metaphors are part and parcel of the Discovered Voice because *finding one's voice* leads a writer to produce work that deserves to be described as colorful, pungent, lyrical, and the like. Indeed, Menand's commentary reveals one way that metonymy and metaphor combine. He begins by denying that *voice* is a matter of transcribed words, yet insists on the metonymic relationship between mental or embodied singing voice. If we imagine that that's what the writer has in his or her head, it makes sense to call writing a form of singing. Or painting. Or something else.

SUMMARY

Writing scholars have criticized the figure of *voice* on the grounds that it naïvely suggests a stable *authentic self*, whereas voices are always an unstable product of multiple and contingent influences. But the figure of *voice* is itself the product of complex discourse. Thus *voice* is better understood as the overarching conceptual figure Writing Is Speech. That figure can be divided into three distinct sub-figures, each of which combines metonymy and metaphor: Writing As Transcription, Writing As Talk, and the Discovered Voice. These versions of *voice* differ from each other because they are licensed by different stories of writing: the literate-inscriber, good-writer, and author-writer stories. An overview of the three versions of Writing Is Speech is provided in Figure 5.1.

6 **The writing self**
Conceptual blends, multiple selves

> Your job as a writer is much more than just selling your books, believe
> it or not. Your job – if you want to make a living at this, anyway – is to
> sell yourself.
>
> <div align="right">Holly Lisle, Ten Steps to Finding Your Writing Voice</div>

> There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and
> open a vein.
>
> <div align="right">Red Smith, Red: A Biography of Red Smith</div>

The figure of *self* is closely related to *voice* and presents many of
the same problems. As we have seen already, writing–speech–self
metonymies operate pervasively and complexly. The voice is con-
tiguous with language, which is contiguous with thought. The brain
is part of the body, which is contiguous with the *self* – the mind, the
soul, the spirit, the character, the personality. But even noticing this
abundance of metonymies does not give us a rich enough sense of
how we ordinarily bring together *voice* and *self*.

As with *voice*, recent scholarship on writing and the *self* rests
on a strong assumption that most of us hold onto the naïve concept of
a unitary, stable, independent *core self*. Such a *self*, writing scholars
(and others) point out, is a fiction – if a convenient one – that ignores
the multiple, fluid, and permeable discourses we actually use to con-
struct our so-called "selves." As Candace Spigelman explains, much
of this critique has been directed at expressivist pedagogies:

> To many composition theorists, expressive rhetoric's insistence
> on students' private voices, visions, and ultimate authority over
> their texts creates an inaccurate and ingenuous conception of the
> composing process. It seems to suggest that language is a trans-
> parent vehicle for exposing the thought processes of a unified

> and consistent mind at work, a mind that, if adequately investi-
> gated, will reveal the truths about itself and about life.
>
> (2001: 70)

Spigelman states the case fairly, I believe. And the argument against a "unified and consistent mind at work" is a strong one.

Along those same lines, in her essay on autobiographical writing and voice, Jane Danielewicz cautions that she does not subscribe to the everyday belief in "a stable, unchanging self" (2008: 423). Drawing on Paul John Eakin, she explains that "the story of the self cannot be told outside of a cultural context" (437). The *self* is "relational" – related to "communities in and around which our individual identities are formed and embodied," communities that are "multilayered, interconnected, and stretch backward and forward in time" (437–38).

In short, many composition theorists have come to see that the everyday notion of *the real me*, a notion that has been a staple of some writing pedagogy, just does not stand up under scrutiny: Hence a veritable avalanche of research has endeavored to demonstrate that writing identities are shaped by multiple and contending discursive forces. So well established and pervasive is this line of research that I could not begin to do it justice here (e.g., LeFevre 1987; Faigley 1989; Bartholomae 1995; Newkirk 1997; Ivanič 1998; Bazerman and Russell 2003; Flower 2008).

In one sense, I do not dispute the point that has been made. Everyday discourse about writing *does* sometimes propagate the idea that, to use Spigelman's words, "language is a transparent vehicle for exposing the thought processes" of a "unified and consistent mind at work." People who write do talk sometimes about *expressing who I am, deep inside*. And when they do, they're mistaken about the way identities really are formed. But that is only part of the picture.

What I argue is this: Writing studies has paid little attention to the figurative landscape within which the figure of the *core self* operates. Too little attention has been paid to how figures of the *self* are constructed; to the rhetorical import of claims to a *singular self*;

and to the broader constellation of figures of *self*. The sampling of writing discourse that I examined suggests that the *core self* – the *real me* – is far from the only conception of *self* at work, at least for people who write professionally. When the idea of a *core self* did emerge in my study, it did not exhibit the naïve quality that writing scholars have rather insistently ascribed to it.

Three things seem to be at work: First, claims about the *self* are shaped by a range of conceptual blends that allow multiple constructions of *self* to operate simultaneously. Second, when writing professionals lay claim to a *singular writing self*, that claim is more rhetorical than ontological. That is, *core self* or *professional identity* may not be so much an unexamined belief as an ethical requirement. Finally, for both good writers and author writers, the *core self* is largely displaced by more complex imaginative constructions. Indeed, author writers commonly deny that they have a *core self* – even as they claim to have found their individual *voice*.

To put it another way: It was difficult for me to find examples of the naïve pairing of *voice* and *self* that writing scholars feel the greatest urgency to refute – specifically, the notion that finding one's *voice* implies a belief in a singular *core self*. Those whose conception of *self* was closest to a *singular writing self* did not speak of digging deeply in order to discover their *voice*. Those who did speak of finding their *voice* did not speak of a singular *core self* – indeed, were inclined to speak about multiple *voices* and *selves*. In short, writing professionals often use *voice* and *self* in ways that contradict predominant accounts of these figures. What I offer here is an alternative account of writing and self that considers the variety of conceptual blends, both simple and complex, that people use to construct "themselves" when they write.

HOW CONCEPTUAL BLENDING WORKS

Writing "selves" are constructed through what Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner call *conceptual blending* (Turner 2001; Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Conceptual blends are formed by combining "input

spaces" – mental packets of information – to form new, cognitively integrated spaces. This process involves more than just adding one thing to another. We combine qualities, settings, and events so that new elements emerge in the blend: new relationships, new events, new emotions, new judgments.

Think of the way Dr. Seuss famously combined color information with what we eat for breakfast in the phrase "I do not like green eggs and ham." Even a small child can imagine the blend and, more importantly, grasp the fresh inference that green breakfast food does not sound appetizing. By itself green is appealing; by themselves eggs and ham are appealing; all blended together, they are not. Conceptual blending is a wide-ranging process that underlies imaginative constructions of all sorts, some as routine as attributing qualities to objects (for example, green eggs), some as complex as constructing elaborate counterfactual scenarios (e.g., Philip K. Dick's novel *The Man in the High Castle* about the world after Hitler's victory in World War II).

Consider this relatively elaborate blend described by Fauconnier and Turner: The clipper ship *Northern Light* sailed in 1853 from San Francisco to Boston in 76 days, 8 hours. That time was still the fastest on record in 1993, when a modern catamaran, *Great American II*, set out on the same course. A few days before the catamaran reached Boston, observers were able to say: "At this point *Great American II* is 4.5 days ahead of *Northern Light*" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 63). It seems straightforward enough because we comprehend the blend so easily.

But Fauconnier and Turner point out the numerous imaginative elements that make the blend work. Most obviously, in the blend the 1853 event is contemporaneous with the 1993 event. To imagine that, we have to merge generic similarities such as the topography of the ocean, the relationship of ships to the ocean's surface, and, of course, the routes the ships sailed. At the same time, we have to leave out things that are not similar, such as dissimilar weather conditions and the fact that one ship was carrying cargo and the other not.

Once we've sorted out the similarities and dissimilarities, we can then conjure up elements that are found in neither the 1853 nor the 1993 scene. In the blend, we compare the relative progress of the ships. In the blend, we add the element of competition. And in the blend, we can imagine sailors driven by competitive emotion – in fact, we can experience that emotion ourselves. None of that is possible without an elaborate conceptual blend. Yet we do it automatically. It's how we think.

We also construct our "selves" in this complex but automatic way. For example, we use conceptual blending to meld our different stages of life into a single identity. We all change over time. I once weighed 8 pounds and did not know how to talk; I was once a college student who had not declared a major; I was once a new father. Over time, I have experienced innumerable changes in my roles, my appearance, my outlook. Yet I think of myself as a single person – with an overarching identity that accommodates almost any imaginable change in particulars. As Fauconnier and Turner point out, "It is a central aspect of human understanding to think that people have characters that manifest themselves as circumstances change" (2002: 249). So as we grow and change, we may insist that our spirit or personality remains constant: *I'm still the same old me.*

It is also common, of course, for us to imagine ourselves as a series of distinct people. We talk about *the person I used to be* and *the person I am now* – sometimes insist that *that's not me any more.* When we say those things, we surely haven't forgotten about our continuous identity. Rather we juxtapose it with a contrasting conceptualization. Think of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, which uses both the stable-identity and series-of-people blends. An aging, embittered Krapp listens to tapes that he has recorded throughout his life, and he is often repulsed by what he hears. He can't believe he was ever "that young whelp" – as if the young whelp on the tape were another person (1960: 13). But Krapp would not be repulsed by just any young whelp. He is especially repulsed because he and the

young whelp share the same identity. The young whelp is a different person; yet Krapp is the young whelp at a later stage in life.

The same process of conceptual blending is at work as we construct writing identities. Some of these constructions seem more straightforward or literal than others; yet all "selves" are constructed by means of conceptual blending. What distinguishes the seemingly literal blends from the obviously figurative ones is mainly what writing professionals expect of themselves and, more generally, what is expected of various kinds of writers.

LITERATE INSCRIBERS' AND GOOD WRITERS' CLAIMS TO A SINGULAR SELF

More than other stories of writing, the literate-inscriber story licenses the figure of the singular self. For literate inscribers to fill out a job application, they do not need to think consciously of themselves as anything other than themselves. People do not need to construct their own identity in complex ways in order to write notes, lists, short letters, or e-mail messages. Sometimes people can write simply as the person they are. Apparently.

Yet even the simplest construction of *self* is an imaginative achievement. Fauconnier and Turner point out that seemingly uncomplicated identities are formed by blending well-established cultural frames with people's unique identities (2002: 119–22). They call these *simplex blends*. They argue that if we say that Paul is the father of Sally, "we have to create a blend in which some of the structure of the family frame is integrated with the elements Paul and Sally" (122). That is, we do not conceive of Paul as the father of Sally until we think of Paul and Sally as part of a cultural model of the family in which Paul and Sally are assigned roles. We cannot do this without multiple input spaces: the family frame and the individuals Paul and Sally. Yet the blend seems entirely natural – not "intuitively like a blend at all" – because "there is no clash between the inputs, such as competing frames or incompatible counterpart elements" (122).

In the same way, to think of yourself as the one who fills out a form or who writes a simple letter is a simplex blend that may seem not to involve much, or any, imagination. Yet we must map onto ourselves certain frames (e.g., job applicant or friend); otherwise we have no way of understanding who we are or what we are doing. The relative invisibility of such simplex blends is a result of what Fauconnier and Turner call *compression*: The role of applicant is associated so closely with the application writer that they seem to be one and the same. Nothing about the individual is likely to contradict the person-as-applicant or person-as-friend frame, so we have no need to make a distinction. It's no surprise that we are often unaware of any mental work: Most cognition is quick, easy, unconscious.

At the same time, we can never fully switch off our conscious minds. We do not need to be aware of the blending process in order to form a blend, but we can be aware of blends when they are brought to our attention. Depending on the role we adopt, we may find it rhetorically necessary to underscore even a simplex blend – to maintain a conceptual distance between role and *self*. For instance, when I write in my role as an administrator in my English department, I take on a relatively familiar role, familiar enough that I could adopt a "naturalized" rhetorical stance: I could say that when writing as an administrator, I am fully myself – I bring all that I am to the task.

In point of fact, though, because what I write tends to involve subtle choices about tone and content, I am often well aware that I am writing in a role that requires me to cordon off part of who I am. At times, I feel it is important to speak in the formal voice of an administrator; at other times I let a little of "me" sneak in. Affirming or ignoring the imaginative quality of roles is a matter of rhetoric. The more comfortable the cultural frame, the more likely we are to claim that we are writing *as ourselves*.

What matters in the figurative rhetoric of writing is not just that writers must always rely on conceptual blends, but that writers must alter their conscious perceptions of *self* in order to write competently. The *self* called upon in filling out an ordinary form is

usually not a conscious writerly masquerade: since there is no ethical alternative but to write as our "actual" selves, that's what we do. But sometimes the claim to write *just as ourselves* is rhetorical – a claim to sincerity. If I were asked who composed the e-mails I sent on a given morning, I might well answer that *I* did – even though my writing was surely complicated by institutional or professional frames. I might not want anyone to think that I held part of my*self* back and thus composed my text craftily or artificially. In other words, I might call upon the figure of the *core self*, a *self* that does not change according to circumstances. That may not describe reality well, but it fills a rhetorical need. (The three possible versions of this simplex blend are illustrated in Figure 6.1.)

In my interviews with writing professionals, it was striking how seldom that kind of claim was made. The only example I noted – a vivid one, however – came from United Methodist bishop Joseph Sprague. Sprague is a *good writer*. In spite of many years' experience in writing sermons and more, he said in our interview, "I'm surely not a person whose career has been focused on writing for publication. But a little bit." He associates his writing not with any desire to be a writer *per se*, but rather with a call to serve his faith and to speak out for social justice. What confidence he has in his own writing comes from the early encouragement he received from professors who praised his academic papers.

Sprague's view of writing is far from simple. Although he insisted on the idea of a *core self*, he also expressed sophisticated conceptual blends of voices and selves. When I asked him what motivated him to write *Affirmations of a Dissenter*, he spoke of the need for a "progressive voice" in the United Methodist Church. That, of course, is a complex blend in which various speakers and writers are melded into a single figurative voice. He also discussed how he found the "passion" to write so near his retirement:

> If I had been a bishop in the church, and I was retiring in [19] 64, rather than 2004, I doubt very much that I would have written

Naturalized simplex blend

Compatible
administrator frame

Everyday self
frame
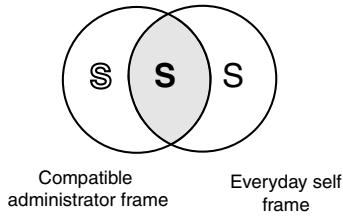
Conscious simplex blend

Administrator
frame

Everyday self
frame
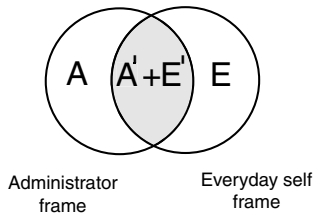
Rhetorical assertion of a naturalized simplex blend

Administrator
frame

Everyday self
frame
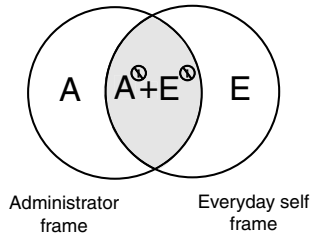
' = fresh inference   ⓘ = denial of inference

Figure 6.1 Writing as an administrator: three possible versions of a sim-
plex blend.

[the book]. There were a myriad of voices then, saying the same
kinds of things that I would have said. Pike. Bultmann. King,
clearly.

That, too, is a complex blend in which Sprague transports himself
from the current time (one input space) to an earlier time (another
input space). In the blend, he preserves his current age, experience,

and philosophy and imagines himself a contemporary of people who are now long deceased – which leads him to conclusions that can exist only in the blend. He expressed yet another blend of selves when I asked him whether the angry response to his book arose not because of what it said but because people "hadn't heard it from you." He responded, "Or from a bishop in the United Methodist Church." He was fully cognizant of the cultural frame into which he fit as a writer of theological commentary.

But, for him, that role cannot be separated from his larger identity. Thus his most adamant declaration about himself as a writer was a simplex blend in which he asserted a complete correspondence between himself as a writer and all of the other ways he might frame his identity: "If you think the book is angry, it is because I'm angry. It doesn't mean I have all the answers, but there's some anger in me that the nice little Quaker boy doesn't always want to put forth." Even his evoking "the nice little Quaker boy" was a way of emphasizing the continuity of his character, which has not changed as his role and status have changed. I asked him if it were possible that, in writing, he was not quite himself – that he wrote in the role of bishop or theological provocateur. He responded rather adamantly: "No, I could not say that. I am writing as me, no question about that." Sprague's preceding rhetoric was, in a way, more nuanced and rhetorically aware. But not entirely so. There was no mistaking the rhetorical importance of his claim to write as *me*. His tone of voice made it clear that this point was non-negotiable.

Sprague was unequivocal, but the story he told was not, to borrow Jane Danielewicz's phrase, a "story of the self" that was "told outside of a cultural context" (2008: 437). Just the opposite: Sprague was acutely aware of the institutional and cultural dimensions of his story, and that awareness made it impossible for him to write merely in the role of bishop or social activist. To bring to his writing anything less than his whole *core self* would be a fraud. To write as a provocateur would be disingenuous – wrong.

Other writing professionals' claims to singularity were more akin to a job applicant who writes as a *singular self*. These claims were made by good writers who closely identified themselves with their professional roles – so closely that competing identities were irrelevant to their writing. The historian Christine Worobec, for example, implied a *unitary self* by largely ignoring the question of self-definition. She noted that she brings to her writing a "historian's sensibility," and embraced the title of historian throughout our conversation. But when she talked about her writing, she explicitly set aside discussion of her professional role – as a given – and described the way she thinks through her argument until she develops "self-confidence" that she has begun "the proper way." Writing well, for her, is not a matter of discovering her *voice* or *self* but rather a matter of being clear about what she, the historian, wants to say. Who else?

At the same time, she well understood that it was possible for the *writing self* to be blended with other identities. I asked her about her relationship, for instance, to the Russian peasant women she has written about, people she came to know largely through psychiatric reports. I wondered whether she identified with the women or wanted to speak for them. She observed that the psychiatrists who reported on the women were to some degree "channeling their [the peasant women's] comments by asking certain kinds of questions." But her position is that of a perhaps "sympathetic" reporter, but one whose obligation is to report accurately, not to identify with those whom she studies.

The technical writers that I interviewed also identified closely with their professional role. For them, emphasizing *technical communication* as a frame for writing may be especially important because of the field's relative newness and often-lamented invisibility. Even though technical communication frequently has been listed as one of the most promising careers in the United States, technical writers nonetheless have to explain what they do and, in fact, demonstrate their value in organizations. Betsy Maaks, for example,

gave me her "seven-second blurb" to explain her job: "I translate highly technical information into communication that is readable and usable for end users." She added humorously, "My parents had the hardest time figuring out what I did until I went to the VCR and pulled out the instructions."

All of the technical communicators I spoke with recounted stories about entering the field that revealed a strong affinity with their work. Maaks was introduced to the field in a college course and, shortly afterward, sought out technical writing jobs. In her early career, when "there weren't many technical writers," she documented applications for the IBM PC – "all kinds of cool topics." But, like the historian Worobec, when she described her writing process, the question of identity receded into the background. Maaks focused not on individual recognition but instead on the quality of the technical document: "My coworkers and I are interested in the satisfaction that comes from knowing we did our best. 'This is my effort here. I know users are going to be able to use this really well and fly through this stuff like butter. No problems. It's going to help them out.'"

Russell Friend and Pete Bohlin spoke in the same way. Friend was the third person to graduate from the technical writing program at the University of Minnesota and has had a long career in a field where it is the norm for the writer to go unrecognized. He described his work not in terms of identity but rather in terms of task. He works to "document products carefully." He enjoys "investigating and interacting and overcoming obstacles of various kinds that you encounter in learning about the product and learning more about the product than you really need to convey." Pete Bohlin took the same approach. When he discussed the writing process, there was no mention of his own identity but instead a strong focus on the work of a technical writer. To be a good technical writer, you have to "envision what the completed work will look like" and "put yourself in the head of the user."

For technical writers, such self-effacement may even be a requirement of the field. Much technical writing is done

collaboratively, and that places an unusual burden on writers to subordinate themselves to the organization, the company, or the team – a merging of individual *voice* or *self* with groups that are themselves merged collections of individuals. Technical writing textbooks sometimes emphasize the risk that a collaborative team may fail to reach such harmony. For example: "Collaboration can yield a disunified document … [because] the more people involved in the collaboration, the greater the variation of style, in everything from design to spelling" (Markel 1997: 52). Or: "The user manual is perceived to be the product of the organization, not of the individuals who developed it … [because] that manual is likely to be developed cooperatively" (Rude 2002: 33).

As technical writers have put it to me from time to time, they work together so that a collaborative document *seems as if it is all one voice* or *was written by one person*. Betsy Maaks said to me that, as a supervisor, she makes sure collaborating technical writers are "clear in their writing and present it in a way that's not going to stick out like a sore thumb." Pete Bohlin lamented that a poor writer on a collaborative team is like a "flat tire." The point is to write smoothly together.

A close affinity between personal and professional identity is quite common. We notice that most in the breach. When students begin to write academic papers, they can be at a loss: They are required to write in a role that does not always fit well or does not fit yet. Indeed, professional frames are not likely to fit snugly – until one *becomes* an academic, *becomes* an engineer, *becomes* a technical writer. The exception to this seems to be becoming an author writer – someone who claims the capitalized title Writer. In my interviews and in books on writing, the author-writer frame seems to *require* conscious attention to complex self-creating blends.

AUTHOR WRITERS' CLAIMS TO A COMPLEX SELF

For author writers to write well, they *must* conceive of themselves complexly. That complexity can take a number of forms. Author

writers speak of professional roles – writing as a journalist, writing as a novelist. They speak also about writing as parts of themselves (*the sarcastic part of me*), as invented selves (*a character or voice I have developed*), or writing as someone else (*the Hemingway or Royko in me*). They even renounce their own presence so that they can get out of their own way and let the writing come to them (*I let the words flow through me*). None of these conceptions precludes more ordinary ways of constructing the *self*. Surely, if an author writer speaks of constructing an alternative *self* for writing purposes, it is an alternative to – sometimes an extension of – a more conventionally conceived personal *self*. But author writers persistently go beyond ordinary constructions of *self*. They ask, *Who am I when I write?* And the answers involve complicated conceptual blends.

Anna Quindlen provides us with a good example of this in a short piece called "The eye of the reporter, the heart of the novelist." She writes, "Before I was a novelist, I was a columnist; and before I was a columnist, I was a reporter; and the reporter is always there, amid the Altoids, the keys and the lipstick, there forever in the notebook" (2002: B1). In other words, she has a writing identity that has multiple yet inseparable components. And the whole is not the mere sum of the parts. She is able to meld her identities together, in part, because she believes that "good writing is good writing wherever you find it" (B1). So, for her, writing a novel is not entirely different from writing a newspaper story. Yet being a reporter and being a novelist are not precisely the same thing.

It is Quindlen's training as a reporter that makes her the kind of novelist she is. As a reporter, she learned to "distinguish between those details that simply existed and those that revealed," and "from decades of writing down their words verbatim in notebooks" she learned "how real people talk" (B1). Her ear for fiction is, at root, a reporter's ear:

> All of us in journalism know of the times we've read a neat little quotation … and we thought, almost reflexively, "It's piped,"

> reporter's jargon for "It's invented." It's just too pat, too flat, too
> homogenized, too perfect at one level, too impersonal at another.
> That happens in fiction, too, the line of dialogue that sounds like
> a speech or a stage direction or a maxim instead of a sentence.
> You can hear the fake with a reporter's ear.
>
> (B1).

The reporter in her helps her "to make every word count" because,
unlike many novelists, she learned to write "where cutting is com-
monplace, swift and draconian" (B1). She continues to use her report-
er's shorthand notes to keep facts straight; the only difference is that
the scene is all in her head, "not, as in my past life, in Flatbush or on
Fifth Avenue" (B1).

She takes this blending of identities a step further, also. She
looks back to an earlier self and confesses, "I always wanted to write
fiction. It said in my high-school prophecy, 'Ambition: To write the
great American novel'" (B1). That earlier self was "a Catholic girl
with napkin-on-the-lap manners," who had to learn to "go places
I was not welcome and ask questions that were intrusive and even
rude" (B1). Through a recursive process Quindlen becomes a blend of
prospective novelist, competent but rude reporter, and rude reporter
turned novelist. And there is more. Her identity as a reporter is not
just a matter of her lived experience but a blend of herself as reporter
and other people as reporters. For Quindlen, reporterly identity isn't
just what she learned as a reporter but what "all of us in journalism
know" (B1). Quindlen's blend of selves is illustrated in Figure 6.2.

The complexity of Quindlen's self-construction is more typ-
ical than not. The *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Neil Steinberg
remarked to me that when he writes as a columnist, it really is not
the whole of himself speaking: "Obviously, you don't have the com-
plexity of your soul when there are only 900 words. So maybe it's *in*
you. It's the Robert Benchley in me. It's the H. L. Mencken in me.
The acerbic me." Indeed, he considers changes in identity or voice to
be necessary for the job of commercial writing. He once wrote under
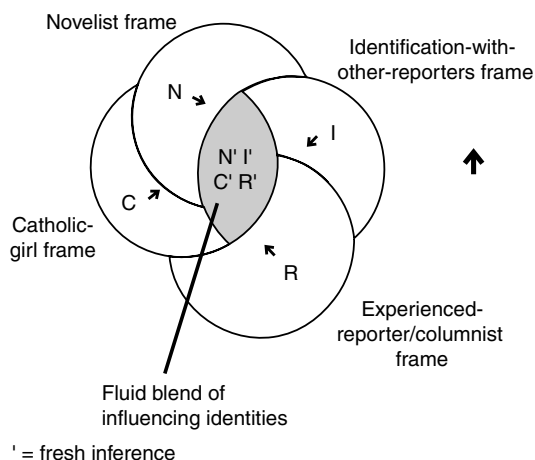
Figure 6.2 Anna Quindlen's blend of selves.

a pseudonym, calling it "a tool for the job." He observed that he has changed voices or selves in order to write articles for *Bride*, *Catholic Chicago*, a senior citizen publication, and even an advertisement for a steel alloy. While enumerating the various voices he adopts, he commented, "I wrote … tomorrow's editorial, and it's not my voice; it's an editorial voice, and that is like the craftsman in me."

As we saw in an earlier chapter, Steinberg also identifies strongly with the Roman satirist Juvenal and wonders if "maybe that [Juvenal] will be me 500 years from now." Such close identifications with other writers can be a source of unease for some. But, as Natalie Goldberg explains, it is part and parcel of most writers' development: Writers "fall in love with other writers … They take on a writer, read everything by him or her, read it over again until they understand how the writer moves, pauses, and sees. That's what being a lover is: stepping out of yourself; stepping into someone else's skin" (1986: 79).

It may be tempting to think of these blends as casual self-descriptions, tossed out with little thought, not to be given serious weight. But they are usually rhetorically pointed. Consider the difference between Quindlen's and Steinberg's self-constructions. Their

method of self-construction has some similarity. Both Quindlen and Steinberg embrace the idea that writers can have components to their identities: Quindlen says that "The reporter is always there"; Steinberg says that when he writes a column "It's the H. L. Mencken in me." But their points are at odds.

Steinberg claims that compartmentalizing identities is the key tool that allows him to use different voices for a newspaper editorial and an article for *Bride* – that each genre is different and requires him to write in a different voice, with a different part of himself. Quindlen says that no matter what she writes, the reporter in her always exerts its influence because good writing is good writing: Her novel writing is better because she uses a reporter's eye and ear. Steinberg takes the specific-expertise view, Quindlen the general-ability view. Perhaps in a face-to-face conversation Steinberg and Quindlen might reconcile their perspectives. But, of course, that would also be a matter of rhetoric.

Complex blends can be a key to a writer's critical examination of his or her craft. The memoirist Cheri Register faces the special problem of being both the writer and the subject of her writing – she must closely examine her younger self and yet maintain critical distance. That affects not just the story told in her memoir but the way she sees herself as a writer. In telling me about her early experiences with writing, she talked about having written letters back-and-forth with a teenage friend, only to discover, many years later, that the friend had saved the letters. I asked her how she felt about that, and she said:

> I'm not going to say it was a thrill because some of the stuff we wrote about was so stupid. But it saved me in *Packinghouse Daughter*. You know, something that I think is just endemic to memoir writing is that you remember yourself as smarter and more sophisticated than you were. Your adult voice kind of imposes itself on your child's. And this was a very real reminder that I was just a stupid, naïve kid, caught up in trivial

stuff, and that I wasn't as politically aware as I had imagined
myself to be in retrospect. So I'm really glad she did that [saved
the letters] – because it was just the check I needed. I read
memoirs now that kind of strain my credulity. I read something
and think, you didn't really think that when you were 5 years
old; you just thought of that a few weeks ago when you were
writing it down.

Register takes apart the blend of her adult writerly self and her child-
hood self. In so doing, she reconstructs herself as a writer, a writer
who is able to separate imaginary former selves from actual former
selves, and who is – in keeping with the author-writer story – com-
mitted to the truth.

As pervasive as ordinary conceptual blending is, constructing
writing selves is not just routine. Author writers worry about leav-
ing poor constructions of self behind, and they worry about holding
on to selves and voices that have worked well for them.

Sean O'Leary talked about his successes and failures in con-
structing appropriate selves and voices. He recalls having identified
with Thomas Pynchon and Richard Farina in his early development,
so that as a young writer he did not write quite as himself. He now
sees that as excessive hero worship that kept him from writing as
well as he could have. At the same time, though, his ability to adopt
others' styles or to draw upon aspects of himself remains an import-
ant part of his craft – and not an easy one to sustain. He told me that
in his magazine writing he adopts a "character I created to write
technical trade articles":

It really does matter what the magazine is and what the
assignment is, but it also matters whether I'm in my sardonic
attack-the-vendors mode, which is a strong brand I've sort of
established. That person is fairly close to the actual me, but I
find it extremely tiring to write those. It's very challenging to
maintain that sort of angry voice, especially when I'm not
particularly angry.

That angry voice is close to the "real" O'Leary, but he also explained it metaphorically – as religious justice. He takes pleasure in exposing corporations' lies in his trade articles, acting as "an instrument of justice," something he says is motivated by a "good old Presbyterian sense of fair play." He added, "I've found out that some people like instruments of justice … but you may find yourself nailed to a cross, too."

For O'Leary, these are powerful metaphors – to be an instrument of justice or a Christ figure – that have at least as much force as more literal understandings of himself as novelist, trade magazine writer, technical writer, and web developer. Even so, he keeps in his writerly toolkit a tactic that is typical of technical writers: self-effacement. "When I'm writing an instruction manual, there is no one writing it," he said. "That's the objective. It's being written by a prose machine whose objective is only clarity." Of course, even self-erasure is an imaginative blend. To imagine that you are not writing, you must first imagine that you *are* writing and blend together the two scenes. Outside of our formal interview, O'Leary has said to me with comparable conviction that he is fully aware of himself and fully in control when writing manuals. That contradiction may be less than meets the eye. Because self-effacement is not just an unconscious blend but also a conscious rhetorical claim, he must have an awareness of both his own erasure and his controlling presence. Indeed, what O'Leary controls most of all when writing manuals is the potential interference of alternative writing selves who might not share the objective of "only clarity."

The journalist Robert Sharoff also discussed his concern about sustaining a professional persona: the "mean" voice he once relied upon to make his living, back when he was more of a "stylist" than a "reporter." After an important upheaval in his life and after gaining experience in "straight reporting" for the *New York Times*, he began to wonder if he had lost this journalistic voice forever. At one point he wrote a letter to Garrison Keillor, who was then writing an advice column for writers at Salon.com:

> I felt myself losing this persona, but I hadn't found a new
> persona, and I wondered what was going to happen to me. Am I
> going to wind up writing a pet column or something? [Keillor]
> wrote back a very nice, reassuring letter saying that my former
> manner or style had been an act and a very effective one because
> it had paid the bills for many years, but that life had overtaken
> this and that I was now going to have to learn to write and live
> in a different kind of way, which was kind of nice.

At the same time that Sharoff called his "meaner" writing voice a "persona," he saw his move away from it in relation to his private development – perhaps his *real self*. Explaining why he writes now in a kinder way, he observed simply, "It's odd, but personally I'm at a much better place than I've probably ever been in, and so that makes me a mellower person." And a mellower writer, personas aside.

Finally, popular self-help books for writers emphasize, much more so than the writers I interviewed, a truthful voice that is there to be found, somewhere inside of the writer. The *core self* the self-help books have in mind, however, is far different from the actual self that we typically associate with the literate-inscriber story. Paradoxically, in self-help books, the ultimate strategy for self-discovery is self-effacement.

Natalie Goldberg emphasizes the importance of learning to "trust your own voice" (1986: 60) but also urges listening to the external world to the point of disappearance: "You listen so deeply to the space around you that it fills you, and when you write, it pours out of you" (52–53). She says that "by listening in this way you become a clear mirror to reflect your reality and the reality around you" (53). She distills this approach into the exhortation, "Forget yourself. Disappear into everything you look at" (82). Anne Lamott urges writers to hear a "small inner voice" (1994: 113) that is so often stifled by the influence of others or by one's own ego. The voice is usually not clear: "More often you will hear subterranean murmur. It may sound like one of the many separate voices that make the sound

of a creek. Or it may come in code, oblique and sneaky, creeping in from around the corner" (114). The murmur is a kind of intuition that can only be understood metaphorically, she claims. A friend of Lamott's calls it "his animal" (114) – which leads Lamott to advise that when you're lost as a writer, you must let the horse lead without your direction because "you will only get in the way" (114).

SUMMARY

The figure of the *self* has been criticized on the same ground as *voice*. Writing scholars have become increasingly dubious about the notion of an *authentic self* that is stable and singular. Ironically, however, in everyday writing discourse, the phrases *authentic self* and *core self* are associated most closely with author writers, who are most likely to construct complex conceptual blends that allow them to write as multiple or contingent selves. But even when writing is based on the notion of a *singular self*, the *self* is a matter of figurative thought – that is, conceptual blending. Moreover, all constructions of *self* potentially have sophisticated rhetorical motivations.

7 Writing to "get ideas across"
The role of the Conduit Metaphor

> What we've got here is a failure to communicate.
>
> Captain, *Cool Hand Luke*

I believe I can say, without overstating the case, that no element of our figurative rhetoric of writing is more important than the Conduit Metaphor. It is known by various names such as "the container metaphor," "the transmission model," "the code model," and in Carolyn Miller's well-known formulation the "windowpane theory of communication." According to the Conduit Metaphor, language *contains* meaning; speakers and writers use linguistic containers to *send* meaning to audiences; and, at the end of the line, audiences *remove* the unaltered meaning from its container. Many language scholars, including writing specialists, have raised objections to the Conduit Metaphor, objections that vary in motivation and rationale. What is most striking to me, however, is not the variety of analysis applied to the Conduit Metaphor but the nearly unanimous condemnation the metaphor elicits.

Almost universally, current language scholars object that language is fundamentally indirect, imprecise, contingent, and unstable; thus we never transmit a perfect representation of the "external" world through a secure pipeline leading from giver to receiver (e.g., Miller 1979; Bizzell 1982; Slack, Miller, and Doak 1993; Axley 1996; Weiss 1997; Prior 1998; Bowden 1999; Longo 2000; Evans 2003; Cowley and Love 2006; Krzeszowski 2006). In short, most of us have said that the Conduit Metaphor is wrong because language does not work the way the metaphor assumes. I want to argue the opposite point: Prevalent objections to the Conduit Metaphor are wrong because metaphors do not work the way the objections assume.

Two main mistakes need to be corrected. First, the standard objection fails to consider metaphor systems and the rhetorical constitution of those systems. Most commentators carry on the Aristotelian habit of analyzing metaphors one at a time, as if a metaphor amounts simply to a projection of one or more features from one discrete domain onto another. But metaphors do not work alone. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have demonstrated well, conceptual metaphors operate most commonly as part of larger conceptual systems (M. Johnson 1993; Lakoff 1996; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). We cannot, therefore, gain important insight into a single metaphor without also considering the metaphors that support it and to which it responds. Accordingly, the Conduit Metaphor is part of an inter-related, dynamic conceptual system that includes the metaphor/metonymies Writing Is Speech, Ideas Are Objects, Argument Is War, Truth Is Light, Understanding Is A Journey, and surely others. I want to consider, in particular, the relationship between the Conduit Metaphor and Language Is Power, a metaphor at least as prevalent as the Conduit Metaphor.

Second, the standard objection fails to consider the Conduit Metaphor as anything other than a flat ontological assertion. In other words, the Conduit Metaphor is taken to assert that language or communication is essentially or always a process of packaging, sending, and unpackaging pre-existent meanings. But metaphors, including the Conduit Metaphor, are usually rhetorical, asserting both a description of the world and an ethical ideal, often combining the two fluidly. For example, in previous work, I asked focus groups whether or not the conceptual metaphor Trade Is War is "true." Persistently, even insistently, discussants vacillated between *does* and *should* (or *does not* and *should not*) in discussing the accuracy of commercial war metaphors. Since this kind of vacillation is associated with most important metaphors, we have to consider both aspects of the Conduit Metaphor: the way it purports to tell us how communication really works and how it exhorts us to follow an ethical form of communication.

THE CONDUIT METAPHOR AND ITS CRITICS

More than two decades ago, Michael Reddy alerted students of language to the Conduit Metaphor, and in so doing he planted some early theoretical seeds of what is now called the "conceptual metaphor." Reddy points out that the Conduit Metaphor is not a specific expression; rather, it names the metaphoric assumptions that enable a range of common expressions such as *getting the message across*, *putting thoughts into words*, and *getting a lot out of a text*. According to Reddy, in order to speak about language in this way, we have to assume four metaphorical things: First, language *conveys* meaning from person to person; second, people put meaning *inside of* words; third, words *contain* meaning *in transit*; and fourth, people take meaning *out of* words at the end of the process (1993: 170). In sum, the concrete expressions that reveal the Conduit Metaphor follow a definable logic. Conceptual metaphor theorists such as George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner would say that the logic accords with the metaphor's image schema and entailments. In other words, the Conduit Metaphor is made up of an abstract or skeletal shape: Conveyance implies a source-path-goal image schema, an event shape that applies to all conveyances. That event shape entails other elements. In order to convey meaning via language, meaning must be imagined as tangible, containable, and movable. Without these entailments, the metaphoric conveyance is all but incomprehensible.

Below, I will offer some refinements – in some respects, a challenge – to Reddy's description of the Conduit Metaphor. But for the moment let me just note one irony: On the one hand, Reddy sees the Conduit Metaphor as built into English-speakers' way of thinking about language. On the other hand, he sees it as counterintuitive. He calls the idea that words can carry meanings – and, therefore, have insides and outsides – a "bizarre assertion" (168). But recent scholarship argues that everyday metaphors represent not bizarre assertions but fundamental cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Turner 1991; Gibbs 1994).

Given the direction that metaphor theory has taken, we might have expected a growing recognition that language operates as it does in our culture largely because we use the Conduit Metaphor to structure our concept of it. Instead, we have seen an expansion of Reddy's critique. In part, that is because Reddy and his adherents criticize the metaphor primarily on ontological grounds. The critique is, in that respect, not entirely foolish. Reddy's argument is complex and sometimes overly radical, but at bottom he only argues that meaning is not something that we passively receive, intact, but something we must actively construct. Fancifully, he imagines an "evil magician" who hypnotizes us so that we forget the work we do in constructing meaning from others' words. This work forgotten, we place all responsibility for successful communication on the originator (Reddy 1993: 185). I disagree with Reddy's practical conclusion, but – if we take the Conduit Metaphor to be a sweeping ontological assertion – his root objection is solidly reasoned.

Writing scholars' objections to the Conduit Metaphor are generally compatible with Reddy's, especially with respect to the constructedness of meaning. For example, in her classic essay, "Cognition, convention, and certainty: what we need to know about writing," Patricia Bizzell refutes cognitivism by accusing Linda Flower and John Hayes of grounding their theory on the Conduit Metaphor. Focusing on the metaphor's container entailment, Bizzell argues:

> [Flower and Hayes] treat written English as a set of containers
> into which we pour meaning, regardless of how meaning
> exists before the pouring. The containers may not seem to be
> in convenient sizes at first – we have to struggle with their
> "constraints" or "special demands" – but once we internalize these,
> written language as a factor in the process essentially disappears.
>
> (1982: 85)

According to Bizzell, the cognitivists' language-as-container metaphor ignores "the connection to social context afforded by recognition

of the dialectical relationship between thought and language" (85). It ignores language's "generative force" (85).

Similarly, Carolyn Miller objects to the "windowpane theory of communication," a theory that assumes the best scientific and technical writing is that which "most accurately and directly *transmits* reality" (1979: 610, emphasis added). Miller points out that the windowpane theory is part and parcel of scientific and logical positivism, a long-dominant epistemology based on "the conviction that sensory data are the only permissible basis for knowledge; consequently, the only meaningful statements are those which can be empirically verified" (612). As Miller recounts, positivism began in the Enlightenment, continued into the twentieth century, and has all along been characterized by a desire for bias-free language – a language through which sensory data can be communicated without linguistic distortion.

In current writing studies, of course, positivism has been largely supplanted by postmodernism, which emphasizes the "always already" constructedness of experience and the inherent instability, situatedness, and multiplicity of language. Urging a postmodern perspective, Miller rejects the notion that language can ever be sufficient to represent "external" reality, arguing that even so-called objective scientific and technical writing does not constitute a clear window on reality but rather a "persuasive version of experience" that is constructed and endorsed by communities (616). And since a persuasive version of experience is the best writers can hope for, Miller takes exception to standard textbook exhortations that technical communicators should write objectively, impartially, unemotionally, accurately, and efficiently. Ultimately, she contends that "we can improve the teaching and study of technical writing by trading our covert acceptance of positivism for an overt consensualist perspective" – by casting off positivism's "intellectual tyranny" (616).

Miller's criticism of the windowpane theory of communication has been remarkably influential. Elizabeth Overman Smith (1997)

reports that Miller's critique was cited sixty-eight times between 1979 and 1995, not counting mentions in textbooks. Indeed, it continues to be influential: Google Scholar™ lists eighty-six citations of the article from 1997 to 2009.

In her cultural history of technical writing, Bernadette Longo cites Miller and attaches an even broader consequence to the conduit framework. She points out that the "view of technical writing as an invisible conduit transmitting reality through clear language has a venerable history in the writing of [Francis] Bacon, the Royal Society, John Locke, T. A. Rickard, and any number of 20th-century technical writing textbook authors" (Longo 2000: 165, compare de Man 1979). The history of technical writing, she tells us, is not merely about the systematic recording and conveyance of facts, but, more importantly, about an economy of knowledge in which technical language is used as a means of social control. Technical language – the purported invisible conduit – has been the legitimated coin of that economy. Of more recent times, Longo observes:

> At the end of the 20th century, many people in Western cultures are beginning to realize that positivist science – and its knowledge/power system – do not allow us to adequately address complex social issues that seem to defy remedy: environmental degradation, homelessness, teenage unwed parents, breakdown of family units, hate speech and actions, arms control, to name but a few of the more apparent issues. In a culture based on dominant scientific knowledge, these social problems are seen as problems for science (just as all problems are seen as nails to the person who only has a hammer).
>
> (2000: 165)

In Longo's view, the trouble is not just that positivism and its conduit metaphor are intellectually misguided, but that the language and beliefs of positivism are inordinately powerful: Not only is language never neutral, it is always a social force that must be reckoned with.

In my view, Miller (1979), Bizzell (1982), Reddy (1993), and Longo (2000) are representative opponents of the Conduit Metaphor, not just because they argue that the conduit fails as a metalinguistic concept but because they claim, in addition, that its failure has negative implications for the teaching and practice of writing. I want to mention, however, one objection that differs in an important way.

While Miller and many other writing scholars promote a consensualist or "discourse community" perspective in order to counter the Conduit Metaphor, Paul Prior disputes what he terms a "structuralist" view of discourse communities, a view that assumes communities share knowledge so fully that the Conduit Metaphor is, by itself, sufficient to explain successful communication. In his study of writing and disciplinarity in graduate school, he contends:

> The conduit metaphor's account for how meanings are transmitted offers a very persuasive image of mutual understanding (intersubjectivity). Indeed, it seems like common sense. How else could we account for communication? It provides a powerful ground for structuralist theories such as Saussure's, making many of their claims and entailments appear natural. In this view, then, a novice graduate student's task is essentially to make a cognitive journey to the center of a discipline, to internalize the discipline's language, rules, and knowledge. That image fits well with dominant cultural representations of academic work as rational, asocial, impersonal, and disembodied. Working from different communicative premises, sociohistoric theories point to a different conceptual ensemble.
>
> (1998: 19)

He goes on to argue that communities and contexts are not discrete spaces but dynamic, interpenetrated, and dialogic activities:

> In other words, I am suggesting that activity is laminated, that multiple activities co-exist, are immanent, in any situation. Whereas one or more of these activity footings (e.g., school

learning) may be relatively foregrounded at any one time, the
backgrounded activities (e.g., of home, neighborhood, work)
do not disappear. Moreover, activity is perspectival as well as
laminated, with co-participants holding differently configured
activity footings … Viewing activity as laminated and
perspectival makes it clear that neither situated activity nor
systems of activity can occur in autonomous spaces.

(24)

This revisionist view of how communities are constituted –
although it is offered in support of a new objection to the Conduit
Metaphor – should make us rethink *standard* objections to the
Conduit Metaphor.

That is, Prior de-emphasizes intersubjectivity in discourse
communities, pointing out that the "overt consensualist perspec-
tive" or the "structuralist" view of discourse communities can be
taken too far. At the same time, his "laminated and perspectival"
view of communities is helpfully distinct from Reddy's "radical sub-
jectivism." Reddy imagines that we are like a mythical people who
live in similar but nonetheless discrete spaces, unable to gain access
to other spaces except by sending symbolic messages (language)
through a central hub (1993: 171–76). Under these circumstances,
successful communication involves a laborious process of trial and
error, guesswork, and interpretation. Reddy's radical subjectivism
suggests that others' meanings are, if not unknowable, only knowable
through considerable effort. This view leads to such glib refutations
of the Conduit Metaphor as Stephen Pinker's joke: Two psychoana-
lysts meet on the street. One says, "Good morning." And the other
thinks, "I wonder what he meant by that" (Pinker 1994: 230). Prior's
view is neither radically subjective nor radically consensualist; it is
radically complex. Communities and contexts are not essentially
separate but fundamentally *and dynamically* interwoven. In Prior's
view, the Conduit Metaphor is still too simple ontologically. But his
problematized view of communities gives us a basis for reevaluating
the logic of the Conduit Metaphor.

Although the Conduit Metaphor may fail to describe all that transpires in typical writing situations, it does not impose an erroneously reductive structure upon complex activity but rather grows out of a complex of embodied activity, situated experience, and rhetorical human relationships. It is a rhetorical metaphor that, in certain instances, asserts a description of communication or an ethical standard. Without it, for example, we would have little basis for ethical objections to lying, concealment, failure to warn, failure to be responsive, and so on. It is crucial that we recognize, however, that when the Conduit Metaphor is treated as credible, it is combined with other concepts whose implications support its credibility. Most saliently, it combines with Language Is Power, a concept that has both evident ontological *and* ethical ramifications.

LANGUAGE IS POWER AND ITS SUPPORTERS

In rhetoric and composition, the status of Language Is Power could not be more different from the status of the Conduit Metaphor. Seemingly, it is central to what most of us believe, no matter what we believe. Peter Elbow (1981) promotes expressive writing in a book he titles *Writing with Power*. Other important writing scholars, whose theoretical stances differ significantly from Elbow's, have also used Language Is Power for their book titles. In a micro-rhetorical study of words strings, Kaufer *et al.* (2004) claim to reveal *The Power of Words*; in an ethnographic study of engineers' writing, Dorothy Winsor gives us a situated view of *Writing Power*. She elaborates on the relationship between writing and power with substantial emphasis:

> What we see at Pacific Equipment, then, is that knowledge, texts, and power are all deeply intertwined. It is hard to imagine how any one of them might function without drawing upon and leading to the presence of the other two. Our contemporary scholarly examinations of the relation between rhetoric and power have tended to move directly into questions of ethics. And

in those examinations of ethics, we have tended to be deeply
suspicious of power, to see power solely as dangerous and open to
abuse. Thus, for instance, we caution researchers to set limits
on their own power over study participants, and we worry that
writing can be so effective that it can empower the writer to
trample on the rights of others. I share these concerns because it
is obvious to me that writing "well" means writing powerfully.
In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, I know that I can use writing to
generate a powerful position for myself in my own field, and I try
to be careful to use that power well.

(2003: 155)

I can hardly conceive of a stronger endorsement of a figure from more
diverse perspectives than those of Elbow, Kaufer, and Winsor. This
widespread and diverse acceptance of Language Is Power is possible
because it is a complicated figure that operates in various forms and
with various underlying assumptions.

To analyze Language Is Power well, we must begin by recog-
nizing its simultaneous operation as metaphor and metonymy. As
I have discussed in previous chapters, as distinct as metaphor and
metonymy may be, there is nothing uncommon about a single figure
doubling as metaphor and metonymy – and, indeed, nothing uncom-
mon at all about a metonymic motivation for metaphor.

LANGUAGE IS POWER AS METONYMY

Although Language Is Power is both metaphor and metonymy, we
usually do not emphasize equally its metaphoric and metonymic
dimensions. For example, objecting to a book that favors the exclu-
sive teaching of standard English, Douglas Kibbee writes, "Language
IS power, and no one would deny it" (1998: 530, emphasis original).
Kibbee does not mean that the conceptual domain of language is
structured by the conceptual domain of power. Instead, he explains
that "the status of standard English has everything to do with the
power of the groups that come the closest to speaking it as a native

language" (530). In other words, because standard English is proximate to those who exercise power, we can all agree there is such a thing as linguistic power. Kibbee's use of Language Is Power is metonymic, and this metonymy bears upon our categorization of language as power. Power is a superordinate category that subsumes various kinds of power that are proximate to powerful social groups: linguistic power, economic power, legal power, and so on. Currently, it is commonplace to acknowledge the metonymy of language and power, and thus to categorize language as a kind of power. This conceptualization has important consequences for the ethics of writing.

If language is a form of power, then we have to examine what we do with it. Not surprisingly, since many writing researchers are concerned with writers who are relatively powerless, there is a growing body of evidence that the metonymy Language Is Power reveals political, economic, and social inequities. The word "discourse," under the influence of Foucault and others, has come to mean not language in particular but a fusion of language and institutional practices that establish or perpetuate power relations.

Some scholars insist that all discourses are fraught with ethical implications. In a book now nearly two decades old, one of the most emphatic, James Paul Gee, exhorts us that his work:

> provides good reason to believe that mainstream dominant Discourses in our society and, in particular, school-based Discourses, privilege us who have mastered them and do significant harm to others. They involve us in foolish views about other human beings and their Discourses. They foreshorten our view of human nature, human diversity and the capacities for human change and development. They render us complicit with a denial of "goods," including full human worth, to other humans, including many children. They imply that some children – including many black, Chicano, native American and other children who disproportionately fail in school – *mean* less than other children. Thus, if you … agree with me, you have

> contracted a moral obligation to reflect on, gain meta-knowledge
> about these Discourses and Discourses in general.
>
> (1990: 191, emphasis original)

One does not have to accept Gee's view of policy in order to accept
that Language Is Power is something more than a decorative way of
talking about language.

That metonymy remains an important part of commen-
tary on composition today. Consider, for example, John Trimbur's
reassessment of composition studies' famous Dartmouth confer-
ence at which the question of standard English was a topic. Trimbur
challenges, as one of the Dartmouth speakers did, the importance of
"love of English," which can amount to "a kind of loyalty oath" that
speakers of non-standard English are coerced into taking (2008: 166).
This uneasy relationship between standard and non-standard English
"goes beyond the observation that English is the language of power"
to a systematic depiction of non-English speakers as "outside the
speech community of the school and other domains of power" (156).

Indeed, in its metonymic dimension, Language Is Power makes
it imperative that we examine the material effects of language use.
That is the point at which the *metonymy* Language Is Power folds
into the *metaphor* Language Is Power.

LANGUAGE IS POWER AS METAPHOR

It is one thing to see that powerful people are proximate to certain
varieties of language, another to conceptually structure the domain
of language in terms of the domain of power. The metaphoric dimen-
sion of Language Is Power has been most prominently discussed in
speech act theory, which proposes that linguistic utterances in vari-
ous ways change circumstances in the world: Speech acts have an
effect or exert a *force*. According to speech act theory, if I say to you,
"I promise to keep an open mind," I have, by the power of those
words, promised. Or, if you say to me, "You are a very perceptive the-
orist," those words have the power to make me feel complimented.

No doubt, speech act theorists mean to describe literal phenomena; speech accomplishes what they say it accomplishes. But their description of that process is metaphorical for a couple of reasons. Words such as *force* suggest a structuring of the domain of language in terms of the domain of power. Moreover, even though a speech act may be seen as a type of act, acts and their effects are typically physical. To chop wood is more typical of an act than, say, to change one's mind. Thus the phrase *speech act* is itself metaphorical.

That we can easily comprehend the metaphor underlying speech act theory is not mysterious. The speech act metaphor recruits Language Is Power, a conceptual metaphor that we express in everyday writing and talk. Language Is Power says that words can, in various ways, alter circumstances outside of themselves. For example, we often call language *incendiary* or *bellicose*. These expressions can mean that certain kinds of language resemble fire or war, but more often they suggest that under certain conditions language can cause metaphorical fires or wars. Similarly, we call language *seductive*. Seductive language has the metaphorical sexual power to change someone's responsive emotions and actions. In a more general way, we often call language *forceful*, *powerful*, or *effective*. All of these expressions adhere to the entailments of Language Is Power, which I discuss in detail below.

THE CONDUIT–POWER COMBINATION

Language Is Power and the Conduit Metaphor are linked in numerous ways. This linkage may seem at first to be paradoxical. Especially as a metonymy, Language Is Power often characterizes communication as politically and socially invested. The Conduit Metaphor, as it has been described by many academics, characterizes communication as inert. But the truth is the metaphors do not contradict one another, and neither functions without the other, ontologically or ethically.

In order to understand the alignments of the Conduit–Power Combination, we must do two things: First, we must recognize the systematic relationship between the Conduit Metaphor and

Language Is Power. Just as conceptual metaphors have certain internal entailments, the entailments of complementary conceptual metaphors can align and overlap. In other words, one metaphor can imply, even entail, another. Second, we need to recognize the rhetorical environment that helps to constitute the two metaphors. Conceptual metaphors are not rhetorically neutral. Because they align with political and philosophical interests, they necessarily respond to other metaphors, both supporting and competing. We cannot evaluate the significance of the Conduit Metaphor or Language Is Power until we consider the rhetorical give and take in which it takes part.

THE SYSTEMATICITY OF THE CONDUIT–POWER COMBINATION

Metaphors combine systematically largely through image-schematic compatibility – commonalities among abstract shapes of physical entities and events. For example, if a target domain has the image schema of a linear path with a distinct beginning and end, we do not project onto it an image schema of circularity or infinity. This constraint has been expressed in "the invariance principle," which states that for successful metaphors we map as much of a source domain's image schema as is compatible with the target domain's image schema (Turner 1992; Lakoff 1993). In blending theory, it is called "generic similarity" (Turner 2001; Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

Image-schematic systematicity is easy enough to comprehend, yet it is not trivial. Indeed, the operation of image schemas is seen by conceptual metaphor theorists as crucial evidence that metaphors are not mere decoration, but fundamental to thought. Moreover, as Todd Oakley (1999) points out, it is basic to the "human rhetorical potential" that we are able to perform mental simulations out of place and time, to imagine various perspectives of those simulations, and to comprehend others' symbolic imaginings as well. Metaphoric mapping and systematic combination is but one example of this capacity.

Let us consider, then, the image schemas and entailments of the two metaphors, beginning with the Conduit Metaphor.

THE IMAGE SCHEMA AND ENTAILMENTS
OF THE CONDUIT METAPHOR

In Reddy's description, the logic of the Conduit Metaphor says that an originator puts meaning into words, that the words convey the meaning from originator to receiver, and that the receiver takes the meaning out of the words. This source-path-goal image schema has at least three entailments. Meaning is a physical entity of some sort, words are containers, and word-containers travel along a path from origin to destination. So far, so good. But this still leaves out much that is important. We can see this best when we consider Reddy's examples.

Reddy provides us with an impressive seventy-nine examples of expressions that recruit the main logic of the Conduit Metaphor, what he calls "the major framework" (1993: 189–94). Of those seventy-nine, however, forty-four – more than half – suggest that the Conduit Metaphor is problematic or that it only describes a certain kind of successful communication. Here are just a few: "You'll have to get your ideas across to her better"; "Your thoughts here don't quite make it across"; "You cannot simply stuff ideas into a sentence any old way"; "Don't force your meaning into the wrong words"; "His lines may rhyme, but they are empty of either meaning or feeling"; "I have to struggle to get any meaning at all out of the sentence" (189–94). Far from indicating that English incorporates an unduly simplified concept of communication, these expressions reveal an ordinary awareness that, as a conduit, language often fails.

That awareness suggests some further entailments of the Conduit Metaphor. First, the meaning we put "into" words is not easily contained and does not exhibit an obvious one-to-one relationship with words. We worry about *capturing* meanings. Sometimes we *lose things in translation*. Second, there is a gap or space between originator and receiver that can impede communication, and language

moves through that space in various patterns that can hinder our ability to receive meanings. When words fail to convey meaning, it is often *lost* or *goes over our heads* or *wanders*. Reddy mentions instances in which words or ideas float around rather than reaching their destination, but he sees this as part of a minor model of the Conduit Metaphor. I suggest, though, it is an entailed constraint of the major model: Without open space, there would be no need for a conduit. (See Vanparys [1995] for a discussion of the Conduit Metaphor and gaps; see Rudzka-Ostyn [1988] for a discussion of meta-linguistic expressions and spatial motion.) Third, our sensorimotor capacities are entailed. When language fails, we cannot *grab onto* or *catch* meaning as we would an object. We cannot *see* the meaning as we would an object or a representation of an object.

Of course, the conditions of failure imply the conditions of success – the flipside of the entailments I've just enumerated. First, success requires that we work – exercise our volition – to find a good fit between meaning and words. Successful words are *well chosen*. Likewise, if our words are well chosen, other people will have no trouble – will be able to exercise their volition – in receiving our meaning. Our language is *accessible*. Second, well-chosen words and accessible language cross the space between originator and receiver in an optimal way. Successful communication is *direct*, *straightforward*, and *pointed*. Third, successful communication is *clear*. We can *see* the meaning – accurate representations of things we can *grip*, *weigh*, *toss around*. Most obviously, we picture concrete things and activities referred to by prototypical nouns and verbs, and we picture them in the relations that are indicated by other words and by word order. Less obviously, we often – some would say always – make abstract meaning visible through metaphor and metonymy.

These additional entailments – the need for volition, the need for directness through space, and the need for tactile or visual understanding – support various metaphors that are related to the Conduit Metaphor by what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblance." For example, although the windowpane theory of communication does

not obviously involve putting meaning into a container, it depends upon our ability to access meaning through direct sight lines, which are made possible by the volitional choices of a successful communicator. Similarly, our everyday language speaks of words as representations: Successful language *reflects* reality or *paints an accurate picture*. These representations depict images of things we can touch or otherwise experience through senses other than sight.

The more we elaborate upon the entailments of the Conduit Metaphor, the more we must recognize it as beholden to the objectivist model of meaning that many language scholars find in error. As I noted earlier, that is a major reason for objections to the Conduit Metaphor. But the standard objection does not take into account either how basic the metaphor is or how limited its application is. The Conduit Metaphor combines what Joseph Grady (1998) calls "primary" metaphors: deeply entrenched metaphors that index sensorimotor, perceptual, and social experience. That is, the Conduit Metaphor is a composite of basic touching, giving, and seeing experience applied to communication. For example, it incorporates the primary metaphor Knowing Is Seeing, which allows us to *see* another's point, to *look at* problems carefully, and to take a different *view* of things (compare Grady 1997). It stands to reason that so basic a concept would help us to define success in communication. Yet a reliance on basic experience need not make us naïve: We apply basic concepts in limited ways. We do not imagine that the Knowing Is Seeing component of the Conduit Metaphor unproblematically describes every act of communication. In fact, we are forever *reading between the lines*, *getting lost in conversations and texts*, observing that people *say one thing and mean another*, and *getting the message* even when it is not delivered *in so many words*.

THE IMAGE SCHEMA AND ENTAILMENTS OF LANGUAGE IS POWER

One of the ways we limit our application of the Conduit Metaphor is to combine it systematically with Language Is Power, whose image

schema overlaps with the conduit image schema. Like the Conduit Metaphor, Language Is Power is a complex metaphor that incorporates several primary metaphors. Important among these is A Cause Is A Force (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 170–234). We typically metaphorize things that bring about change as physical powers. Thus language brings about change through manipulation, magnetism, invigoration, and so on. Moreover, causality – and thus power – has numerous models (compare Turner 1987: 139–83; Talmy 1988; Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 170–234).

Language Is Power uses two models. The first is the Direct Force Model in which power impels specific movement in another object. In this model, power is invisible, linear, and is usually mediated by an object, as in the well-known billiard ball analogy. Direct Force thus produces a localized effect. The second is the General Conditions Model in which power restrains or moves any object in its field. In this model, power is invisible, dispersed, and does not need a mediating object to produce an effect. When an object is in the power's environment, either the power acts directly upon the object or it animates the object itself. For example, just as an object pulled downward by gravity seems to be dropping, people who use powerful language seem themselves to be powerful. In both models, power can potentially be regulated or resisted.

Language Is Power and the Conduit Metaphor align in different ways, depending on the power model recruited. When we recruit the Direct Force Model, we align mediating and directness entailments. Just as words convey power from originator to receiver in order to achieve responsive action, words convey meaning in a direct line from originator to receiver in order to achieve communication. When we recruit the General Conditions Model, we align diffuse force or animation. That is, we are not concerned with the containable meaning of words, sentences, or texts but rather with the invisible suffusing of communicative space with biasing energy.

Perhaps the most obvious instance of the Direct Force Model of Language Is Power would be any English sentence in the imperative

voice. If I say to you, *Jump!*, I say it in order to change something – namely, your position in relation to whatever is under your feet. Whether that imperative utterance turns out to be effective may depend upon my social power and our relationship, but when such an utterance works, it works according to the Direct Force Model. I convey my desire to you via mediating language in order to produce a predictable, localized effect.

Of course, there may be less direct ways of expressing my desire. I might say, "It would be nice for you to propel yourself upward by means of the muscles in your legs." I might use the word *jump* metaphorically, another form of indirection. But if certain pragmatic conditions are present, and it is important and ethically justified for me to cause you to jump, optimal directness matters. If you are standing on the edge of a burning roof, with flames licking your heels, and the only way for you to escape is to leap beyond the flames, the command *Jump!* is an ethical thing for me to say. Other circumlocutions probably are not. And the word "circumlocution" comports with the metaphoric reason why not: We use the Conduit Metaphor, combined with Language Is Power, as an ontological and ethical measure of what makes desirable communication.

The General Conditions Model of Language Is Power applies well to condemnations of sexist language. Sexist language, we reason, creates an atmosphere in which all women are harmed. Its pejorative force is as invisible – and thus as insidious – as it is diffuse. Sexist language may have local effects, but it nonetheless operates generally: One apple may fall to the ground, but gravity is still everywhere. The General Conditions Model of Language Is Power does not recruit the conduit itself as part of an ethical imperative but rather emphasizes the Conduit Metaphor's space-between-people entailment. It assumes that although a conduit may be able to contain and convey some meaning, other meaning – and thus power – disperses. Diffuse linguistic power constrains action and beliefs.

THE RHETORICAL CONSTITUTION OF THE
CONDUIT–POWER COMBINATION

So far, I have discussed only the image schemas and entailments of the Conduit–Power Combination. Such a discussion, I realize, may seem mechanistic – a matter of aligning the square source with the square target. But while image-schematic compatibility is important, it would nonetheless be mistaken to view conceptual metaphors as simply exercises in feature- or shape-matching. Let me touch briefly, then, on the larger discursive environment in which conceptual metaphors, including the Conduit–Power Combination, must operate.

Conceptual metaphors are not only systematically related but are also rhetorically constituted. This rhetorical constitution takes three forms: (1) *rhetorical inferences*, culturally and historically contingent reasoning we apply to concrete situations; (2) *ideologically motivated mappings*, the configuring of metaphors in accordance with cultural and ideological assumptions; and (3) *rhetorical responsiveness*, politically and philosophically motivated patterns of response among conceptual metaphors.

Rhetorical inferences

Philosophers have spent much effort in trying to apprehend disembodied, ahistorical logic, but most of our reasoning, perhaps all of it, is biased by social and cultural knowledge. As Edwin Hutchins has shown so elegantly, even maritime navigation – which would seem to apply universal, Cartesian reasoning – is filtered through representations that are at once culturally pervasive and largely invisible to us. It follows, then, that when we reason in more probabilistic arenas, we depend on social, cultural knowledge to guide our inferences.

For example, when Lakoff (1996) points out the systematic relationship between the Nation As Family and Moral Accounting metaphors, he notes the inference that leads people to combine metaphors. We might formulate that inference in a standard logical form: Families usually regulate people's moral lives; we typically

metaphorize morality as accounting; therefore, when we metaphorize a nation as a family, we imply that the nation-family regulates moral accounting. But this logic makes no sense without our knowledge of cultural regularities – what we know of families, nations, commerce, and morality, as well as what we know of the values that attach to cultural institutions and activities. It is, therefore, probabilistic. It is rhetorical logic.

The Conduit Metaphor and Language Is Power are likewise related by rhetorical inferences. We know that most people in our culture consider certain ends good – notably personal well-being and maintenance of property rights (compare Markel 1997). In turn, we know that most people in our culture believe that good ends should be pursued by means that work well and that are, in and of themselves, ethical. Only in extreme or special circumstances do people say that good ends justify bad means.

Accordingly, the rhetorical logic applying to conduit and power metaphors is partly as follows: Language Is Power (Direct Force Model) tells us that language brings about specific ends, good or bad. If language is to bring about good ends, we also want the means to be efficient and ethical. The Conduit Metaphor promises linguistic accuracy and directness, thus efficiency. It also promises truth-telling in its most basic experiential form, thus ethical acceptability. On the other hand, if the power of language causes specific bad ends, we often suspect the Conduit Metaphor has been subverted. When people lie, they pretend to convey representations of reality, but they do not. A similar rhetorical logic applies to Language Is Power (General Conditions Model). When language creates good general conditions, we assume an efficiency and ethical acceptability of diffuse energy in the linguistic space entailed by the Conduit Metaphor. That is, we assume that connotations, implications, and atmospherics – whatever is not containable in words – do not support bad ends.

In sum, the Conduit–Power Combination cannot operate without appeal to rhetorical logic. If we accept Language Is Power, we

create a socially generated ethical need for the Conduit Metaphor. Conversely, if we accept the logic of the Conduit Metaphor, we cannot ignore the socially generated ethical imperatives of Language Is Power.

Ideologically motivated mappings

The Conduit–Power Combination does indeed map neatly onto certain communicative situations, but the ideological construction of those situations *precedes* the mapping and is then *reinforced* by it. Consider perhaps the most obvious application of the Conduit–Power Combination, the instruction manual. It is hardly controversial to say that the instruction manual prompts action for which the author is ethically responsible. It is equally uncontroversial to say that a manual writer has an ethical duty to try to communicate unambiguously, accurately, straightforwardly, and so on.

But that uncontroversial view of the instruction manual situation is deeply ideological and thus open to rhetorical dispute. It assumes, for instance, that a unified *corporate voice* is more important than the *personal voices* of the individual writers who actually compose the language of the manual. It assumes that the protection of the consumer is more important than the protection of the corporation. It assumes that the needs of a secondary audience do not determine fundamental ethical questions, the complications of addressing audiences notwithstanding (e.g., Barabas [Abbott] 1993; Winsor 1999). It assumes that once an imaginatively unified *corporate voice* has made its meaning adequately accessible to an imaginatively unified primary audience, a member of that audience has a responsibility to take it. When ethical and legal disputes arise, all sides typically work within this culturally specific, ideologically imagined framework, and that shared framework permits an unproblematic mapping of the Conduit–Power Combination onto the rhetorical situation. But the mapping nonetheless depends on challengeable assumptions and is thus rhetorically constituted.

Rhetorical responsiveness

Conceptual metaphors are made up of concrete utterances, and thus they are always sociohistorically situated. To utter any instance of a conceptual metaphor is inevitably to engage in an ongoing conversation that is culturally informed. For example, I have previously found that the metaphor Trade Is War is implicated in a complex of responsive metaphors and concepts (Eubanks 2000). We cannot concretely instantiate Trade Is War without responding to and anticipating responses from relevant concepts such as Trade Is A Game, Markets Are Containers, Trade Is Friendship, Trade Is A Journey, and Trade Is Peace.

Since conceptual metaphors are responsive in nature, they are both enabled by standard patterns of response and potentially in tension with these patterns. While dialogue among metaphors is in some ways systematic – for instance, war and game metaphors have significantly overlapping entailments – it is also deeply ideological. That is, important metaphors involve political, philosophical, economic, professional, and social commitments, and these commitments have rhetorical consequences. To manage these consequences, we deploy conceptual metaphors in particular ways: We claim metaphors whose commitments are agreeable to us, ascribe to other people metaphors whose commitments we reject, and invent attenuated or intensified concrete expressions that align with our rhetorical interests. Since Trade Is War is a controversial metaphor in the United States, many of us utter it in ascribed, sometimes intensified, forms. In the United States, we might have said, especially in the early 1990s, *Japanese corporations are engaged in a relentless battle to conquer our markets*. But we would seldom have said, *The United States wants to occupy foreign markets like a conquering army*.

Similarly, the Conduit–Power Combination is always part of an ongoing conversation among English metalinguistic concepts. We cannot describe some language as *direct* and *forceful* without inviting the already existent response that other language is *indirect* and *weak*. Moreover, we cannot proceed far into a discussion

of direct, forceful language without engaging metaphors of aggression, playfulness, attraction, acceptability, inadequacy, tastefulness, repugnance, and so on. At various moments, one or more metalinguistic metaphors will become salient. If we happen at a given moment not to raise a given concept explicitly, that does not mean the concept has disappeared or is irrelevant. Rather, it merely slips into an accessible background, ready at hand.

The conversation among metalinguistic metaphors is rhetorical, as any conversation about a subject so fundamentally human as language must be. We cannot utter an instance of the Conduit Metaphor or Language Is Power without involving ourselves in questions of value that, in turn, raise issues of politics, philosophy, economics, and the like. This involvement is apparent in the particular ways we employ the Conduit–Power Combination. For example, few of us would proudly claim (that is, apply to ourselves) an intensified instance of the Conduit–Power Combination such as this one: The language in my work *wanders* widely and, therefore, *has little effect* on readers. At the same time, the rhetorical operation of the Conduit–Power Combination is highly nuanced, depending on cultural, ethical values. A description of conversational tact, for example, might well employ a claimed, even intensified, instance of conduit and power metaphors, mapped in ways that do not emphasize directness or force: *She has a way of getting her point across without hitting you in the face with it.*

Complex as it may be, the Conduit–Power Combination is nonetheless constituted by a rhetorical dialogue that is informed by widely held ethical values. On the other hand, the Conduit–Power Combination is rhetorically constituted precisely because the potential for disagreement is always there.

ETHICAL USE OF THE CONDUIT–POWER COMBINATION

I speculate that the Conduit Metaphor is sometimes regarded with suspicion because of the very prevalence of metaphor studies itself.

In chorus, metaphor researchers have admonished us that metaphor is not mere decoration but the very essence of much human cognition. One effect of this refrain has been to transform time-honored suspicions of metaphor as decorative obfuscation into fresh suspicions of metaphor as thought. If we think with metaphors, the logic goes, then we had better be careful what metaphors we think with.

A measure of skepticism when it comes to our entrenched metaphors is, of course, sensible. The trouble with that skepticism arises not because we are more than ever aware of our metaphors, but because we are not aware enough of the way metaphors function in concrete discourse. I cannot deny that commentators have used critiques of the Conduit Metaphor to point out, insightfully, the limitations of language communication. As Chaim Perelman (1982) observes, metaphors are flexible, and, with sufficient care, one aspect or another can be emphasized in order to make a point. Critics of the Conduit Metaphor have done just that: They have emphasized the metaphor's containment and conveyance entailments as a means of describing a naïve or false ontology of language. But they also make an additional and problematic claim: that the Conduit Metaphor, as used in ordinary English and in writing pedagogy, is fundamentally flawed, that it treats language in a flatly mistaken way. More than one commentator has criticized the Conduit Metaphor for its containment entailment and, accordingly, recommended against phrases such as putting ideas *in* words (e.g., Reddy 1993; Bowden 1993). These criticisms rely on a hyper-literal interpretation of the metaphor, as if *in* means literally *inside of*. But, as the next chapter will further show, people use the conduit framework far more flexibly than that.

The Conduit Metaphor is a complicated figure that functions as part of a capacious and figurative rhetoric. Both in its ordinary and pedagogical use the Conduit Metaphor combined with Language Is Power supports rhetorical claims, ontological and ethical, about what is possible in language communication. Most importantly, perhaps, the Conduit Metaphor provides a basis for ethical objectives such as

clarity, directness, and accessibility. The importance of these object-
ives shifts depending on social or communicative context; thus, the
Conduit–Power Combination is applied differently in different situ-
ations. In general, the more applicable Language Is Power (Direct Force
Model), the more ethically important the Conduit Metaphor's com-
patible entailments. As I have already suggested, since we typically
apply the Language Is Power (Direct Force Model) to the operator's
manual, we also want the manual to be clear, direct, and accessible.

But the obvious example of procedural discourse does not fully
illuminate the way the Conduit–Power Combination is or should be
applied. For example, scientific discourse may not require the same
degree of clarity, directness, and accessibility as procedural dis-
course, but it does require some measure of these qualities because,
as Kenneth Burke has observed, science is "a preparation for action"
(1969: 42). Even literary genres may call for clarity, directness, and
accessibility from time to time, depending on the text's relation to
ultimate action or desired reaction. Just as often, however, literari-
ness is associated with indirectness, such as a strategic holding back
of explanation or a judicious use of implicature. Although its clarity
and directness entailments are not ethically paramount in that case,
the Conduit Metaphor is not denied. We still have to imagine clarity,
directness, and accessibility in order to avoid an excess of them. We
also call upon the Conduit Metaphor's space-between-people entail-
ment, in combination with Language Is Power (General Conditions
Model), to help us imagine how indirectness has its effect.

The Conduit–Power Combination is malleable and, there-
fore, fits and is fitting for a variety of discourses and situations. We
should be cautious, of course, to avoid over-generalizing about any
discourse or text type, literary or non-literary. As we have seen in
earlier chapters, genre is closely tied to stories of writing, stories that
are rhetorically constructed and can be associated with contradict-
ory claims. We also need to be especially cautious when we consider
specific texts and situations. No discourse type, no situation, and no
text is fully homogeneous; rather, all acts of communication, even

if we can perceive them as unified wholes, function concretely as heterogeneous compilations of practices, interests, and tactics. Thus we cannot ethically apply the Conduit–Power Combination without analyzing closely the particulars of text and context.

Consider, for example, Steven Katz's example of abhorrent technical language: a memo detailing "technical improvements to the vans being used in the early Nazi program of exterminating the Jews and other 'undesirables'" (1992: 256). Obviously, any document that furthers genocide is ethically indefensible, no matter what its specific characteristics. But Katz objects to the memo not just on the grounds of its heinous aim but also because its writing style attests to an ethic of expediency that makes it "by any formal criteria in technical communication … an almost perfect document" (256). No doubt, we are repelled by the memo's consistent focus on concrete, technical objectives:

> The van's normal load is usually nine per square yard. In Saurer vehicles, which are very spacious, maximum use of space is impossible, not because of a possible overload, but because loading to full capacity would affect the vehicle's stability.
> So a reduction of the load space seems necessary.
>
> (255)

Such writing, in Katz's view, should be seen as part of a larger phenomenon, a tendency, all too evident in the twentieth century, to view science, technology, and its functional language as things worthy in and of themselves, whether or not their consequences may finally be destructive to humanity.

Katz is right that the memo's style is typical of much technical writing. But its depravity does not easily escape our attention either – in part, because we can apply the Conduit–Power Combination. First, where the memo is direct, that directness implies the Direct Force Model, making us face squarely the memo's heinous aim. Yet the memo is not always direct. For example, it speaks of transporting a "load" of "merchandise" (255). The Nazi writer saw no need

for clarity, directness, and accessibility when it came to using words such as *people*. The memo's moments of indirectness – such as the nominalized "screaming always occurs when the doors are closed" (255) – can only be seen as a refusal to be direct when direct language would be most self-implicating. The memo is abhorrent not just because its aim is evil but also because its style is, at crucial moments, equivocal. Direct language would not make the memo acceptable; nothing could. But the Conduit–Power Combination provides a basis for determining why its indirect style is so extraordinarily craven.

The Nazi memo brings into relief two important points: First, we cannot apply the Conduit Metaphor simply or without appeal to other ethical values. Second, we cannot easily, or ethically, dispense with it. As should be clear by now, I agree with the Conduit Metaphor's critics that it matters what metaphors we use to describe language. But the Conduit Metaphor supports more claims about writing than just the discredited Enlightenment canard that using language in a careful and scientific way can promote pure objectivity – an expression of unadulterated truth. Indeed, in the figurative rhetoric of writing, the Conduit Metaphor is the basis of a wide range of ethical claims and a full complement of imaginings of the writing situation.

SUMMARY

The Conduit Metaphor has been persistently condemned by language scholars, including scholars in writing studies, but it is a key part of the figurative rhetoric of writing. Rather than simply asserting a mistaken view of linguistic communication, the Conduit Metaphor combines with the metaphor Language Is Power to form an ethical measure of discourses, genres, and texts.

8 **Codes and conversations**
The other Conduit Metaphor

> In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;
> And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
> If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
> And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
> Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.
>
> <div align="right">Anne Bradstreet, "The author to her book"</div>

I argued in the previous chapter that we cannot make sense of the Conduit Metaphor unless we consider the metaphors that are closely related to it, most evidently Language Is Power. But that is only the beginning. We also need to ask: What stories license the Conduit Metaphor? And – just as important – what imaginative achievements would we sacrifice if we did not have the Conduit Metaphor?

The Conduit Metaphor has been denounced by scholars, in large part, because it has been associated with a story of writing and communication that certainly deserves to be criticized. It is a story of "good writing" in its narrowest conception: writing that flows in one direction only, from writer to readership, and is associated predominantly with values such as factual and grammatical correctness, precision, detachment, and objectivity. That narrow good-writer story ignores what makes many of us value most about writing: the possibility that writing can engage a reader – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. In short, it is a story of impersonal skill rather than of rhetorical sensitivity.

If the narrow story were the only one to license the Conduit Metaphor, it would be an impoverished metaphor indeed. But the Conduit Metaphor is not so limited. Depending on the rhetorical accent the user gives to it, the Conduit Metaphor is also licensed by more appealing stories: in particular, good-writer stories that

emphasize empathy with readers and author-writer stories that emphasize emotional and spiritual connection.

Indeed, the Conduit Metaphor can be the sort of metaphor that Aristotle praised most highly. He tells us that the best metaphors are those that "bring before the eyes" (1991: 247–48). The Conduit Metaphor helps us to generate vivid and expansive scenarios that tell us what successful writing should do. It is well suited for that imaginative work because it calls into play the main elements of any writing situation – writers, texts, and readers. In that sense, it helps us to make concrete sense of what is often banal writing advice: "consider your audience" – a phrase that too often leaves writers wondering how precisely one does that (Porter 1992). Conduit-inspired scenarios help us to grapple with that advice, but seldom straightforwardly. As often as not, what I want to call the *other Conduit Metaphor* operates paradoxically, at once embracing and denying the implications of the Conduit's logic.

CONDUIT STORIES AND GOOD TECHNICAL WRITING

The stories that license the Conduit Metaphor are at least as important, perhaps more so, than the particulars of the metaphor itself. In his seminal article, Michael Reddy insists that the entailments of the Conduit Metaphor themselves are at the root of its problems. Reddy worries that people unconsciously take to heart the notion that ideas can be packed into containers and transported unaltered to a reader (who opens the package to find – voilà! – ideas).[1] He is much happier with an alternative version of the Conduit Metaphor – the Transmission Model – which emphasizes encoding and decoding.

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[1] Joseph Grady questions whether or not the Conduit Metaphor functions as a unified figure that entails both packing and unpacking ideas. In his analysis, the "unpacking" of meaning may operate independently. That is, readers may get something out of texts that writers did not put into them.

In fact, he praises Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, authors of the Transmission Model of technical communication, for describing the workings of linguistic communication so well. In Shannon and Weaver's model, writers *encode* a *message* – as if they were using Morse Code. If readers have the right code book, so to speak, they can figure out what writers mean. Well-encoded writing succeeds. When writing does fail, it is because of "noise" that occurs in this telegraphic system of communication.

Here is the story Reddy uses to license Shannon and Weaver's transmission model in more technical terms:

> Information is defined as the ability to make nonrandom selections from some set of alternatives. Communication, which is the transfer of this ability from one place to another, is envisioned as occurring in the following manner. The set of alternatives and a *code* relating these alternatives to physical signals are established, and a copy of each is placed at both the sending and receiving ends of the system. This act creates what is known as an "a priori shared context," a prerequisite for achieving any communication whatsoever. At the transmitting end, a sequence of the alternatives, called the *message*, is chosen for communication to the other end. But this sequence of alternatives is not sent. Rather, the chosen alternatives are related systematically by the code to some form of energy patterns which can travel quickly and retain their shape while they do travel – that is, to the signals … If all goes well, the signals, when they arrive at the receiving end, are used to duplicate the original selection process and recreate the message.
>
> (1993: 181)

Reddy sees the Transmission Model as distinct from the Conduit Metaphor, which has, in his account, words or sentences *containing* a desired meaning rather than corresponding to it. So he takes Shannon and Weaver to task for using conduit expressions such as "conveying" a message – rather than stating that a signal is conveyed from which a message can be reconstructed.

Ironically, most scholars agree with Reddy's denunciation of the Conduit Metaphor, yet they do not join him in praising the Transmission Model. That is because they tell a different story about it. They see the Transmission Model as merely another version of the Conduit Metaphor that assumes that readers are merely passive recipients of information. Slack, Miller, and Doak, for example, tell this story – which is as much about Language Is Power as it is about conveyance – in condemnation of Shannon and Weaver's Transmission Model:

> In the transmission view of communication, meaning is a fixed entity; it moves in space "whole cloth" from origin to destination. Communication is successful when the meaning intended by the sender is received accurately, where accuracy is measured by comparing the desired response to the message with the actual response. Communication fails when these responses diverge. In the case of failure, the communicator must locate and correct the source of the failure in the process of encoding or in the noise of the transmission. Power is simply that which is exercised when the communication is successful. The sender has power when the receiver behaves in the intended manner. Power, like meaning, is something that can be processed and measured; its measure is to be found in the response of the receiver.
>
> (1993: 164)

There is no particular disagreement between Reddy and Slack *et al.* about the entailments of the Transmission Model. But the stories they tell are quite different. Nor is there any disagreement about what makes for good communication: Both Reddy and Slack *et al.* believe that communication is enhanced when we recognize that readers play an active role. The difference is in the story that they attach to the metaphor. Reddy considers decoding to be active participation in the communication process. Slack *et al.*, along with a host of writing scholars, tell a story that casts encoding as an exercise of power over the reader, whose role in communication is merely rote

and thus insignificant (compare Coney [1992]; Henry [1994]; Cooper [1996]; Bushneil [1999]; Johnson-Eilola and Selber [2001]).

If the story of passive reception were the only way to license the Transmission Model, there would be good reason for us to wish the metaphor would vanish. If readers were merely passive recipients, writers would not have to be concerned about readers' knowledge or attitudes. Readers would not have to interpret what they read because there would be no interpretive work to do. But the Conduit Metaphor, and by extension the Transmission Model, is licensed by other stories also – stories that acknowledge readers' crucial role. In fact, in the examples of writing discourse that I examined, the passive-reader transmission story appeared only rarely.

More common was a story of inventive empathy, a story that is a product of an elaborate conceptual blend: the Imagined Conversation. Fauconnier and Turner provide a good example of the Imagined Conversation: a debate between a contemporary philosopher and Immanuel Kant. In this blend, we envision a modern writer arguing a point with Kant, which of course requires that we bring together scenes that are separated by distance and time. The only way we can do that is to pile blend upon blend.

We have to blend what we know of Kant's personality, ideas, and historical setting, and place them in a contemporary setting that Kant never experienced. Thus the imagined Kant addresses questions that the "actual" Kant (that is, the one we construct from what little we know) would never have been called on to address. We have to give Kant and the modern philosopher a common language (such as English). We have to place Kant and the modern philosopher in the same space so that they can respond to each other's assertions. We can even imagine their emotional responses to what the other says. All of this is enormously complicated, yet easily done. We do it all the time when we imagine that good writers join a conversation with knowledgeable people – either previous writers or contemporary readers.

The Imagined Conversation may seem quite different from what is ordinarily associated with the Conduit Metaphor. But, in fact, it is associated closely with the very language that Michael Reddy and others condemn: phrases such as putting thought *into* words, being *clear* and *direct*, *getting a point across*.

In our focus-group study, Christine Abbott and I (Abbott and Eubanks 2005) found that the major metaphors that technical writers and teachers associated with good technical writing were *clarity*, *directness*, *efficiency* (such as rejecting *wordiness* and promoting *tight phrasing*), and *linearity* (such as *leading readers through the text*). Working technical writers, in particular, used expressions that would make Reddy cringe. One technical writer said of a set of instructions, "The grammar was a little *loose*. It's not bad writing, but it wasn't a nice *tight* feel." Another said, "I put a minus because there were just a few ideas that were *running together* that should have been *broken out* and maybe *tighten up* the language a little bit so that it is not as wordy – so that it *speaks to the point*." Garden-variety conduit language.

But even as the technical writers relied on the Conduit Metaphor, they described scenes more akin to the imagined conversation with Kant than to scenes of one-directional communication. The technical writer who wanted the text to "speak to the point" thought the best way to create a better text would be to "step into the user's shoes," to imagine: "When you are trying to use this [tape recorder] for the first time, and you have never seen it before, how would you do this?"

Of course, stepping into the user's shoes requires a complex blend that elaborates significantly on the main elements of the Conduit Metaphor: sender, text, meaning, and receiver. It requires, for instance, that the writer blend his or her own identity with a likely reader's identity. The generic similarities between writer-as-reader and user-as-reader are obvious enough – knowledge of English, ability to read, and so on. But to see a text the way a reader would see

it, the writer must contrast the user's knowledge, goals, preferences, and frustrations with his or her own. Only then can the differences between the actual writer and an imagined writer-as-reader become noticeable.

One technical writer praised a writing exercise that called for an extensively detailed blend:

> One of the exercises we did when I was in school was … to think back to your own personal experiences when you opened something out of the box and how you felt about the instructions that you saw. What did you like, what didn't you like? You know, whether it's assembling a crib or using a blender, or whatever. If you try to get [new writers] not just to think about putting themselves in somebody else's shoes but in their own shoes at a different time, I think it would be extremely useful in trying to get that point of remembering what it was like when you tried to do this.

The blend of scenes and perspectives is almost too complex to tease out. The elements include the expert technical writer speaking in the focus group, the expert writer recalling himself as an inexperienced technical writer in the recalled class, that inexperienced technical writer in "a different time" (when he or she tried to assemble an item), the expert technical writer as imagined speaking to "new writers" (who are, of course, composites of new technical writers the expert writer has actually known), and the person whose shoes the expert technical writer and the new technical writer must imagine they fill. All of these people and scenes are blended so that each person and perspective has a say. These elaborate imaginings contrast sharply with impoverished conduit stories in which writers ignore readers' perspectives. In this example, consideration of readers' perspectives is deep and wide.

The following story came from the focus-group discussion of "loose grammar," "tight feel," and "to the point." The technical

writer is commenting on what she considers a rather wordy and ill-arranged introduction to a set of instructions:

> In all probability, coming from the user perspective, the introductory "congratulations" [is a problem] – once I saw "congratulations," I wouldn't read the rest of the paragraph. What I would expect to see out of that paragraph is basically "follow the instructions so you don't hurt yourself or the machine." Then I would go and look at the next section and say, "Okay, I know how to put batteries in. I have been doing it for a long time." If I'm 15 or 35, I know how to put batteries in something. I'm not going to sit down when I open the box and look through the manual unless I'm looking for a specific feature I've never seen on something else before. That is where formatting comes into play for me – being able to thumb through something and find it quickly. This isn't an operations manual in the sense that I'm going to be using it every day. So I want numbers, and I want bullets, and that's what I want. I don't want paragraphs … I'm looking at it from my perspective as a user as opposed to my perspective as a writer. I don't want to have to think when I look for information. I don't want to have to wonder if I see a series of steps 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. I want to know that getting from 1 to 5 will get the job done, not that by the time I get to 5 it's telling me to go store my batteries … Trying to look at it from the perspective of not just who your audience is but under what circumstances they are going to use the document is a big part of [good technical writing] I think.

Far different from impoverished transmission stories, this imagined scene evinces confidence that the text will convey what is needed, but only if the writer can imagine what the user knows, feels, and intends. To know the user is to know herself. Indeed, in the blend, the writer's identity is so fully elided with that of the imagined user that she switches back and forth with ease from "the user perspective" to "my perspective as a user" to "who your audience is." Even

her user's perspective is multiple, at age 15 or age 35. What is at play here is a *radically intersubjective* interpretation of the Conduit Metaphor. The text still sends a message, but the message is only worthwhile if the writer can sufficiently imagine how the reader will understand or fail to understand it.

These imagined conversations do not remove one theoretical weakness that is inherent in the Conduit Metaphor – the notion that we can choose words carefully enough that misunderstanding can be eliminated. But they also richly imagine the misunderstandings that are inherent in writing. When the Conduit Metaphor is licensed by the Imagined Conversation, writers put themselves in readers' shoes so that they can guess what the reader knows – so that we can hypothesize about a reader's ability to make sense of a text.

The Conduit Metaphor is often used less insightfully than we have seen above. We all know poor writers who insist, against all evidence, that if an uncomprehending reader would just read more carefully all would be well – because *it's all right there on the page*. Indeed, *it's-all-right-there-on-the-page* is the mapping of the Conduit Metaphor to which Reddy and others have correctly objected. But what critics have not noted is that *it's-all-right-there-on-the-page* does not represent the whole of the Conduit Metaphor. Far from it.

THE CONDUIT METAPHOR AS LICENSED BY THE AUTHOR-WRITER STORY

Author writers also find the Conduit Metaphor credible – but paradoxically so. They do not see it as a communicative ideal in the way that Shannon and Weaver would have it. Rather, for author writers, the Conduit Metaphor describes a constraint that writers must inevitably overcome: Writing may be a matter of encoding, but the model is not a simple transmission in which meanings are unproblematically conveyed. Instead, the conduit logic raises questions about the nearly unfathomable operation of written communication.

As I've noted, the metaphor is used as an admonition as often as not: Poor writers fail *to get their point across* because they have

not *put their thoughts into the right words*. Therefore, they ought *to keep their readers in mind*. For author writers, though, successful writing is not a matter of conscientiously or mechanistically matching thoughts and words. When writing overcomes the impediment of the conduit nature of written communication, the event is inexplicable – nearly magical – and cannot be brought about merely by choosing words carefully or even by imagining a conversation with a reader. To the contrary, successful writing is sometimes only possible when the writer is not conversing with anyone – when thoughts of possible audiences are partly or entirely suppressed.

When licensed in that way, the Conduit Metaphor exhibits these three qualities: First, it embraces the same conduit expressions as other evocations of the metaphor. In fact, the conduit logic is sometimes expressly spelled out. Second, although conveyance remains a key entailment of the metaphor, the author-writer configuration of the metaphor tells us not just that denotative meaning is conveyed (though it may be) but also that emotional content or ineffable qualities are what writing aims to transmit to readers. There is a *reflection of feeling*. Finally, in the author-writer configuration, the imperatives of the Conduit Metaphor are not met by carefully "keeping the audience in mind" but rather by, on the one hand, constructing possible audiences and, on the other, ignoring the audience altogether.

Margaret Atwood tells a story that outlines the basic elements of the Transmission Model of communication from an authorial perspective, and she could hardly be more explicit about it:

> I would like to begin by talking about messengers. Messengers always exist in a triangular situation – the one who sends the message, the message-bearer, whether human or inorganic, and the one who receives the message. Picture, therefore, a triangle, but not a complete triangle: something more like an upside-down V. The writer and the reader are at the two lateral corners, but there's no line joining them. Between them – whether above

> or below – is a third point, which is the written word, or the
> text, or the book, or the poem, or the letter, or whatever you
> would like to call it. The third point is the only point of contact
> between the other two. As I used to say to my writing students
> in the distant days when I had some, "Respect the page. It's all
> you've got."
>
> <div align="right">(2002: 125)</div>

In this passage, Atwood seems to be contributing to Reddy's night-
mare that the English language has built into it the notion that
meaning is conveyed by the text and the text alone – that meaning
resides *in* the words.

But, a few sentences later, Atwood makes clear that what she
has in mind is not that words contain meaning but rather a subtle
version of the Transmission Model, the model that has to do with
encoding and decoding: "what goes on between you, the reader,
and the page you're reading, where an invisible hand has previously
left some marks for you to decipher, much as one of John le Carré's
dead spies has left a waterlogged shoe with a small packet in it for
George Smiley" (125–26). Atwood has in mind decoders – readers –
who must crack the code of the text without help from the writer
and, thus, must inevitably fail. They make of the text and the
writer what their own experience and inclinations suggest. Indeed,
the writer and the reader are highly unlikely to be working from
the same code book. She remarks humorously, "Once I had begun
to publish books, and to see them reviewed, [I found that] several
people I didn't much recognize were running around out there with
my name on them" (138–39).

If decoding text is so precarious an operation, how then is the
writer supposed to take audience into consideration? Atwood's para-
doxical answer is similar to that of other author writers. The writer
both imagines a likely audience and imagines that the audience does
not exist. Atwood ticks off a number of possibilities for doing this. As
they choose, writers can have in mind themselves as the reader, con-
crete readers, metonymic stand-ins for readers, imaginary idealized

readers, the public at large – and one more – a reader so abstract that He or She can hardly be said to be a reader at all: God. By which Atwood means, taking the idea from Isak Dinesen, the great higher being who demands that writers write (129–33, 151).

Although conjuring up a multitude of possible readers is enormously complex, the impetus for such feats of imagination – and the chief constraint upon them – is the Conduit Metaphor. But in Atwood's and similar views, the Conduit Metaphor does not align with particularly straightforward ideas about written communication. The stories that license the *other Conduit Metaphor* are about struggle, imprecision, risk of failure, likely failure, and even when success is achieved, inevitable misunderstanding.

There is also the question of what happens when writing succeeds. What does it convey? Atwood's account of conveyance has none of the mechanistic implications that scholars claim are always attached to the Conduit Metaphor – that is, that encoders convey intact packages of meaning to decoders. She accepts the conduit framework – especially its limitations – and marvels at how uncertain decoding must be. The text, she says, is like a "megaphone" that amplifies the "voice," while "obliterating the human individual who gives rise to it" (52). For her, as texts are passed across space and time, all that survives is the voice – or, better, the illusion of voice. The text, then, is something like a musical score that is simultaneously listened to and played by readers – each reader "interpreting" the score his or her own way. It is a reflection – though not a precise duplication – of the ineffable quality embodied in a text. An illusion of voice over which the author has no control once the text is sent into the world. Once the text is placed in the hands of *decoders*.

Thus Atwood sums up the other Conduit Metaphor – a figure that has little or nothing to do, it seems, with simplistic writing situations or with preserving meaning in a text. Of course, Atwood's version of the Conduit Metaphor might seem idiosyncratic, the invention of a fertile writerly mind. But it is not. Though artfully

put, it is ordinary. It is part of the everyday discourse of writing –
which encompasses many ideas that are, if not mundane, then at
least notably persistent.

Reflection of feeling

Although writers may not all accept the autonomy of the text as
wholeheartedly as Atwood does, few author writers would be satis-
fied just with accurate, denotative decoding of their words. Good
writers may aim for readers to comprehend texts in an objective
sense, so that a literal argument is accurately *transmitted* or instruc-
tions are *clear*. But, for author writers, a desire for *reflection of feel-
ing* is often quite strong.

Michael Reddy acknowledges this aspect of the metaphor, but
places little emphasis on it. For instance, he provides the example,
"None of Mary's *feelings came through* to me with any clarity"
(1993: 166, emphasis original). We have many ordinary expressions
that draw on that part of the Conduit Metaphor: *the feeling I get
from reading this*, *she writes with a lot of emotion*, *it was a really
sad book*, and so on. For author writers – writers who have *discovered
their voice* – reflection of feeling is not a remote possibility but an
aspiration, a requirement of successful writing. That is, the author-
writer story tells us that when writing is good, readers mirror the
writer's feelings – mirror it in one of two senses. In the weaker sense,
readers should at least evaluate the emotional content of the writing
in the same way that the writer does. In the stronger sense, readers
should feel the way the writer felt during the composition process.

Common metalinguistic adjectives rely at least on the weaker
sense. Here are a few metalinguistic adjectives taken from a page
of book reviews and book ads in the *New York Times*: *wry*, *sharp*,
mordantly funny, *rueful*, and *intimate*. It would be odd, indeed, if
the writer of wry, sharp, mordantly funny, rueful or intimate prose
did not find it so. In an everyday situation, we expect the writer's
and reader's emotional response to be coordinated – otherwise the
writing has failed. The humorous book was not funny; the touching

essay fell flat; the thriller was dull. We assume, in other words, that writers and readers share emotional responses to words and texts – that they work from the same code book.

The stronger version of reflection-of-feeling involves not just shared responses to a text but also a mirroring of the way the writer felt when composing the text. To put it another way, readers reproduce the writer's emotional state. Consider this comment from a college junior, Meg McKinnon, who is striving to discover her writing voice:

> What do I mean when I want my writing to be effective? I want the reader to feel what I feel as I write. The problem arises when I am not sure how I feel, when I have not taken the stand. This was often the case in high school. Writing was so formal and rigid that it was hard to develop emotions towards it … when the writer is not passionate about his or her writing, the reader will surely not be passionate about it.
>
> (Romano 2004: 58)

The conduit logic is not explicitly stated here – that is, she does not say, I want to put my feeling into words. But without the Conduit Metaphor, her comment would not make any sense. She wants somehow to imbue her words with feeling, for those words to be conveyed to readers, and for the words to prompt specified feelings in her readers. She expects that her language will act as a conveyance so that readers will *feel what she feels*.

Meg McKinnon is not mouthing a naïve undergraduate wish, either. Norman Mailer uses the conduit logic with the same goal in mind. His is a magical version of the Conduit Metaphor, to be sure. But it is the Conduit Metaphor just the same. He says, "The artist seeks to create a spell … his central impulse is to create a spell equivalent to the spell a primitive felt when he passed a great oak and knew something deeper than his normal comprehension was reaching him" (2004: 148–49). This spell-making is done via an invisible conduit: "telepathy rather than telephony" (149).

Being able to cast this spell is, for Mailer, a matter of achieving the right frame of mind. Indeed, the frame of mind is more important than choosing words – what Mailer dismisses as "craft." He describes his composing process as a struggle to achieve the right emotional state – a wide oscillation of emotion that ultimately affects what he puts on the page:

> I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high, clear manic impressions of a drunk that has made one electrically alert all the way down to the soberest reaches of a low mood where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little, finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it is in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent, that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness.
>
> (105)

That struggle to stay in "this peculiar kind of shape" may not seem to be an example of the conduit logic at all. But it is the crucial step to casting the telepathic spell. Writing is surely not a simple matching of meaning to words, but it does aim to transmit something via language – to achieve a reflection of feeling that happens when a writer can successfully "communicate a vision of experience" (105).

Similarly, writer and teacher Ralph Fletcher is direct about the conduit logic, but rejects mechanistic notions of writing. In particular, he rejects the idea that "writing … [is] merely a matter of transcribing onto paper what already exists in the mind" (1993: 20). He ridicules a writing teacher who insisted during one of Fletcher's classroom visits that all students write from outlines because, as the teacher put it, you wouldn't get on a bus without knowing its

destination. And he counters with an extended instance of Writing Is A Journey: "Many times in Dublin, in Paris, or in the Caribbean, I boarded buses without knowing their exact destination. I simply rode around until I found a neighborhood that struck my fancy. A slice of the city was what I hungered for – that was the only there I was after" (21–22). Discovery, as opposed to "writing logic," is for Fletcher the key to writing that has "power," as opposed to writing that is "stiff, lifeless," indeed "stillborn" (23, 26).

Such journeying metaphors may seem to reject the conduit logic. But Fletcher uses both Writing Is A Journey and the Conduit Metaphor in service of a concept he believes deserves to be capitalized: "ART IS THE TRANSMISSION OF DISCOVERY" (21). "DISCOVERY" triggers the emotions that should imbue successful writing; it is the act and the elation he would hope for readers to see reflected in a writer's words. Getting that feeling of discovery requires that writers must risk "never knowing exactly what's going to turn up on the page" (24); writing that way, with "real honesty," requires "tremendous courage" (25).

But it is worth it because it allows readers to take part in the writer's gratification in his or her discovery: "this is the fine print in the reader–writer agreement: when we read, we expect to learn about the writer and, through the writer, about ourselves" (25). Fletcher makes the underlying conduit logic implicitly clear:

> The writer goes out into the world (or descends into the inner world) and returns with both fists clutching a mass of words, ideas, characters, places, stories, insights, possibly poisonous, hopefully not, and waves them, still squirming, still alive, before the startled reader.
>
> (161)

The writer struggles to make startling discoveries, creates an amalgam of "words, ideas, characters, places, stories, insights," and conveys them – "waves them, still squirming, still alive" – before a reader who is, like the writer, startled by a new discovery.

Anne Lamott describes the same difficult but gratifying process of discovery and couples it with the Conduit Metaphor. To write, "you hold an imaginary gun to your head and make yourself stay at the desk" (1994: 7). But when you begin to write you are like

> a fine painter attempting to capture an inner vision, beginning with one corner of the canvas, painting what he thinks should be there, not quite pulling it off, covering it over with white paint, and trying again, each time finding out what his painting isn't, until finally he finds out what it is.
>
> (9)

Just as Fletcher tells us, all of this is worth it because both writers and readers share in the same process of discovery – the text transmits the writer's discovery to the reader via a textual conduit.

Notice in this passage the way Lamott attributes to books the ability *to contain* and *to transmit* emotions such as comfort, quietude, excitement, and more:

> Because for some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that *out of* these small, flat, rigid squares of paper *unfolds* world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet or excite you. Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They *show* us what community and friendship mean; they *show* us how to live and die. They're *full of* all the things that you don't get in real life – wonderful, lyrical language, for instance right off the bat. And quality attention: we may notice amazing details during the course of the day but we rarely let ourselves stop and really pay attention. An author makes you notice, makes you pay attention, and this is a great gift. My gratitude for good writing is unbounded; I'm grateful for it the way I'm grateful for the ocean.
>
> (15, emphasis added)

Or, to put it more succinctly, writers make readers see what they see and feel what they feel.

Imagining and erasing the audience

This other Conduit Metaphor – the one that is less about words and clarity than about discovery and feeling – has a paradoxical effect on author writers' view of audience. They wish fervently to move an audience. But in order to do so, they must make the audience go away.

That hardly seems logical. In fact, because the author-writer ideal nests within it most aspects of the literate-inscriber and good-writer stories, it might make more sense for author writers to have the greatest sensitivity of all to the audience – to be at least as capable as good writers are of considering the knowledge, attitudes, and preferences of likely readers. But not all aspects of inscribing and good writing are carried over intact to the author-writer story. For instance, in the author-writer story, being able to set logic aside is an important aspect of writing effectively – contrary to what is expected of good writers. A similar paradox is at work with respect to audience. Rather than vividly imagining a conversation with a reader or an audience, author writers work with a variety of methods, including ignoring audience altogether.

Of course, I have said the Conduit Metaphor is especially well suited for complex imaginings of writing because it entails the main elements of writing situations: writer, text, and reader. It might seem, then, that ignoring audience would run counter to the conduit logic. But the opposite seems to be true. The more emphasis there is on the role of the text, the more it becomes a conduit between writer and audience. Writers know, as Atwood points out, that readers will decipher the code of the text without the help of the writer. That knowledge can become a distraction during composing, so it can sometimes seem essential for author writers to put the audience – *or* an audience – out of their mind.

How much author writers simultaneously imagine and erase audience surely varies. But some degree of ambivalence about audience seems to be widespread. The columnist Eric Zorn often has some kind of audience in mind as he composes:

There is that sense of a reader over your shoulder. I try to invoke that person, that internal editor, when I'm writing, when I've got a sentence – actually at the molecular level – a sentence or a word. I imagine someone reading it on a bus or at a breakfast table. Is the sentence itself tracking? Is the thought tracking? Am I explaining what needs to be explained? Am I assuming too much about what people know?

In fact, Zorn craves a concrete sense of audience and works to cultivate that sense by corresponding with readers by e-mail and through electronic chats that he promotes in his online column. But he also willfully blocks out other audiences that he thinks may harm his writing: "But too often I've got the news room cynics in my mind, who are looking for more edge, more attitude, more originality." For Zorn, then, imagining audience is a matter of conjuring up a readership that is often in actuality distant from him and simultaneously blocking out an audience that is well known to him.

This conscious sorting-out of audiences may sound more literal or concrete than it is. Zorn clearly knows colleagues in the news room well, but when writing he can only imagine what they might say about the column at hand. Zorn's readers do exist, but his image of them can only be a typification – a blend. In fact, according to Zorn, he imagines them as a demographic abstraction that, by more than coincidence, resembles Zorn himself: "My imagined audience [is] someone in my demographic group, a husband and a wife with a couple kids and a middle-class lifestyle, somewhere in Chicago, who would take the *Tribune*, follow the news, and enjoy being provoked in some way."

Other author writers also expressed a version of writing-to-myself, taking it much further than Eric Zorn. Although Sean O'Leary referred to what his trade-magazine readership has come to expect from him, he described the actual composition process – when it goes well – as a matter of physical exhilaration, a high that does not permit him to think about audience. In those moments, he writes for himself, but that self is a role that he plays when writing, a role

that overrides considerations of audience. "Once I get into that high, I don't think about who I'm writing to because I'm only writing to myself then. But I'm in character. When I'm on that roll, I'm in character." Even more imaginatively complex, sometimes that mode of composing is so exhilarating that "I'm not writing to myself any more. I'm not writing to anyone. It can be sort of a spiritual experience when it's really going well."

This ability to erase the audience (and even the *self*, at times) is a tool that many author writers consider essential. I asked Neil Steinberg if he thought about readers as he composed, and he responded with a description that echoed O'Leary's physical–spiritual state of composing:

> No, no absolutely not. It's very odd because when I write, it's – I don't say it's physical. There used to be a game called Moon Mission where you had two long sticks and a big ball bearing and you'd have to open the metal rods, and the ball bearing would start to roll forward, and you have a certain point where you push them together, and the ball bearing would be projected up, and you would go up this slope and try to get it in one of the many holes, and you had to get to that little point where the ball would be pushed forward. That's sort of what writing is. Sometimes you open it up, and it slides down, and you get nowhere. To me you're trying to get that sort of momentum where you have something, and you kind of get into it.

That description is not just an avoidance or an irrelevance. For Steinberg, writing is not an activity in which audience consideration should be foremost – especially not the audience composed of people he writes about: "I could sit and write hagiography about you, and there would be something that you wouldn't like. You might feel betrayed no matter what I do." The necessity of ignoring audience, for Steinberg, as it is for other author writers, has to do with being able to tell the truth. At the same time, Steinberg in other parts of the interview referred to possible audiences for his work frequently.

Similarly, Robert Sharoff commented that readership is import-ant in his work and also acknowledged that editors can be quite help-ful. Yet he described an optimal writing process that included no mention of audience:

> For most writers, writing is like talking. I mean you don't think
> about talking when you're talking, and I don't think writers
> think about writing when they're writing. It's more like music
> than anything else. I hear if the word is wrong like a musician
> hears that a note is wrong. It sounds wrong to me, but I don't
> know why it sounds wrong to me.

When the writing goes well – Sharoff is not alone in noting that it sometimes does not – it comes to him in an automatic, unimpeded way that has nothing to do with considering what an audience might want to be told: "Sometimes you do get an article or a piece that just kind of flows – for whatever reason. I refer to them as articles that are given to you. I mean for whatever reason, they come pretty naturally."

Cheri Register discussed the same ambivalence and a similar strategy for dealing with it. I asked her who, if anyone, she imagines she is addressing when she writes a book, and she said that imagin-ing audience is, for her, both a burden and source of inspiration:

> Now that I've had some books out, I think it's easier for me to
> imagine that potential audience because I have gotten responses,
> and the responses that empower me – I get back to power as a
> writer – are the ones from people who say, "This is my story.
> You've told my story."

At the same time, though, she told a remarkable story of her pro-cess of writing *Packinghouse Daughter*. When she was working on the book, she struggled with what she called "the censors," who were

> people in Albert Lea who [she imagined] would say things like,
> "What do you know? You don't even live here any more." Or,

"That's not what happened." Or, "What makes you think you're so special?" For that group, I finally latched onto a way to just set them aside and just let them wait there while I wrote. It was one day as they were just talking to me too much. I saw this flock of crows outside because my neighbor puts out her old moldy bread for the squirrels, but the crows always get there first. I remembered that I had read a little filler item in the newspaper about crows flocking to Albert Lea in the winter, that that's the gathering place for Minnesota's crows … So I thought what I would do is just take the time out, sit down and sketch out a whole flock of crows, and then in little cartoon bubbles write in all the things that these people – these anonymous people in Albert Lea – were saying to me to stop my writing. Not actual people. Just generic. So I did that, and I hung it up on a wall in my study, and they didn't bother me again.

The conceptual blend here is striking, to say the least. First, Register imagines an audience of generic censors in Albert Lea who say discouraging things to her and interfere with her writing. Next, she imagines them not in her head but on the grass, transformed into crows. Then she transforms the crows into drawings of crows, who are metaphorical people, complete with cartoon-bubble comments, confined to the wall of her study, unable to enter her head. Such an elaborate narrative blend underscores dramatically the importance of erasing the audience – at least the portions of it that impede writing.

But such a silencing of audience is selective and does not negate the influence of the Conduit Metaphor. Register used many conduit expressions, and they seemed to be more than mere expressions of convenience. She spoke of what she hoped readers would "get out of" her writing, the difficulty of "putting into words" the experiences of her life, the "content" and "emotional content" of her work, and more. She even described herself as a "conduit" for moving experiences – observing that things she's written have the power to move others, or even herself, regardless of her own ability as a writer.

Indeed, she referred frequently to the powerful way that writing can affect readers. As we saw in the previous chapter, Language Is Power subsumes and entails the conduit framework. So when Register referred to "the power on the page – once you get it down and it works," she indirectly invoked the Conduit Metaphor. And her interest in the power of writing had much to do with her wish for reflection of feeling. She spoke about "experiences that I share with some smaller group of people" and said:

> What I want to do is testify to those and make people feel. So that's another aspect of power that I want to have that effect. I want people to understand this experience, to sympathize with it, to be provoked by it, to have to think about, to have to alter their values even after they've heard about it.

That may not sound like the Conduit Metaphor to many because it is not licensed by an impoverished story of clear and direct communication. But it is the Conduit Metaphor nonetheless – explicitly invoked at times, entailed by other metaphors at times, but at work in any case.

It is fair to wonder whether or not all of the writers who display ambivalence about the role of audience have in mind the Conduit Metaphor, whether mapped as the Transmission Model or any other way. It was not in the design of my interviews to ask questions that would lead writers to talk specifically about the Conduit Metaphor. Sean O'Leary did ask me, once the tape recorder was turned off, what it was I was studying, and I explained that I was interested in metaphors for writing and language use. I described the Conduit Metaphor and its mappings to him, and he said, *Yes, that's right. That's how language works*. When I said that most language scholars today believe that the Conduit Metaphor is quite mistaken, he was puzzled. *How could language work any other way?* he wondered.

The Conduit Metaphor does seem to make intuitive sense. It is, as many have observed, a deeply entrenched everyday explanation for the way linguistic communication functions. Language scholars

of many kinds have given us good reason to doubt that the conduit framework is sufficient to explain how linguistic communication *really* works. Certainly, nothing I found in researching this book removes those doubts.

We should doubt, however, that the Conduit Metaphor has a single set of implications that obtain no matter what the rhetorical context. Scholars have all too often made such a blanket assumption. It is true, the Conduit Metaphor can, in some contexts, align with too narrow a view of communication, especially written communication. But when we take into account the various ways that it works together with other metaphors, and the various stories that license it, we have good reason to take a broader view of the Conduit Metaphor – to see it in light of the many rhetorical contingencies that run throughout the figurative rhetoric of writing.

SUMMARY

The Conduit Metaphor has been criticized by numerous scholars largely because it has been associated with a particularly impoverished story of good writing, a story that places all responsibility for communication on the writer, who conveys prepackaged or carefully encoded messages to disempowered readers. However, the Conduit Metaphor is licensed by other stories that depict a richer and more problematic process of communication, in particular stories of the Imagined Conversation and *reflection of feeling*. When licensed in that way, the Conduit Metaphor often forms the basis of well-elaborated conceptual blends that explain and attempt to address the difficult problem of "considering your audience."

9　Metaphor and choice

> Everyone communicates, and a lot of people write, but few people dare to call themselves "writers." If you feel like an impostor, take a deep breath and remind yourself of your unique purpose and how important it is. Or take on a fictional persona and write through that mask.
>
> Eight ways to conjure your writing genie,
> *Maximizing Meaning in Your Text* (web tutorial)

What I have offered in the preceding chapters is not an exhaustive account of all of the figures we use to talk about and think about writing. Other figures come easily to mind. For instance, when we write arguments, we are sure to encounter Argument Is War – a metaphor brought to our attention by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their ground-breaking book, *Metaphors We Live By*. The metaphor of Flow is just as common, as is its corollary, Writer's Block. We often encounter metaphors of cooking, tasting, chewing, and swallowing. Metaphors of birth and nurturing abound. So do many, many more.

But my objective has not been to catalog all of the everyday figures that populate the discourse of writing. Instead, I hope to have described the conversation that shapes our ordinary figurative discourse about writing. All of the figures we use in order to think about writing operate in relation to that conversation. Once we understand the patterned way that conversation proceeds, we stand a good chance, I believe, of making sense of the countless metaphors and metonymies we use to describe writers and writing.

The conversational pattern is not rigid or unchanging. It is a framework for debate. Indeed, as much as any activity I can think of, writing is about asking questions that are difficult to answer. What kind of writer do I want to be? What kind of text should I write? Is

this draft any good? Am I finished? Who will read this? Will *anyone* read this? All of these questions are reflected in the figurative rhetoric of writing. And they are answered, to the degree that they *can* be answered, by the figures we select.

Of course, if we have learned anything in the past few decades about conceptual figures, it is that they operate unconsciously. We live by them largely because we do not think about them. But figures in writing discourse persistently belie that characterization. It is true that we don't pause to think about our choice of metaphors each time we speak and think about writing. But everyday figures for writing are at least as much a product of conscious deliberation as they are about entrenched, unconscious ideas. Writing invites reflection. We often choose our metaphors carefully.

Thus the figurative rhetoric of writing is constituted by an *interplay* of unconscious and conscious thought. The unconscious portion is what cognitive theorists Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier call "backstage" cognition: the part of our thinking that takes place so quickly and so routinely that we are usually not aware of it (Fauconnier 2000; Turner 2000). We may not recognize it as thinking at all.

The developmental psychologist Jean Mandler (2004) illustrates this unconscious thinking by asking her students to describe how they type. Naturally, they are aware of hitting keys and stringing letters together. But they are not aware, for example, that when typing the "h" in "horse" they raise their ring finger in anticipation of hitting the "o." Striking keys and choosing letters is conscious thinking; raising the fourth finger in anticipation of striking the next key is unconscious thinking.

We think about writing in similarly unconscious ways: We make figurative assumptions so deeply ingrained in us, and in the discourse of writing, that we ordinarily don't notice them at all, assumptions such as those associated with the Conduit Metaphor and Writing Is Speech. Yet unconscious assumptions do not govern autocratically. Even the most automatic assumptions about writing

are saturated with values and are, therefore, given careful consideration. Technical writers, for example, may unconsciously use the metaphor of *clarity*, but they also consciously place a value on it. They talk about the ethical obligation to be clear, how clarity is best achieved, and how writers can miss the mark, even when they think they have been clear. Clarity is, for them, a well-considered metaphor.

Some choices are forever in the making because writing situations are not always well defined and writers have not always reached firm conclusions. My own experience may serve as a good illustration. It does not escape my attention that this book is an instance of what I have called "good writing." In a way, I have been preparing to write it since the early grades, going back to my first book report. I can trace a firm connection from the writing I do today to my classroom training as a freshman at Millikin University, where Luanne Kruse, a good-natured stickler barely older than I was, taught me – at 8 o'clock in the morning – how to introduce a quotation and document a source. I learned from her the same things Jasper Neel learned in his freshman writing class: the basics of "formulating a thesis, marshalling evidence, crafting sentences," and "reading and interpreting obscure and allusive texts."

But that is only part of the story. Although I have a long history with "good writing," I have done other kinds of writing also, and I have benefited from other kinds of mentoring. I wouldn't doubt it a bit if my academic writing has been shaped as much by those writing experiences as by my training in school and in academe.

Early in life, I had the idea that I could be a songwriter in Nashville. That ambition, for better or worse, and for precious little monetary gain, was encouraged by a couple of song publishers on 16th Avenue South, Nashville's equivalent of Tin Pan Alley. The writing instruction I received there was often informal, sometimes picturesque, and occasionally brutal. I recall playing a new tune for one of the publishers, only to hear him say, "That stinks." When I protested that the words might be a little weak but the melody

was good, he countered without a moment's hesitation: "Yeah, it's the good half of a bad song. It *all* has to be good." The same publisher taught me a great deal about the order in which information should be revealed in a commercial country tune and the difference between "talking about ideas" and "making it personal."

I think of a moment I had with a songwriter who had many impressive songwriting credits to his name. We were sitting in a studio control booth, waiting for something or someone, and he said, "It's a funny thing about songwriting." He started juggling some invisible balls, pronouncing a word for each ball, "Love. Heartache. Dreams. Failure. Whiskey. God. Put them all together" – he gathered up all the invisible balls and pressed them together between his palms – "and there you have it," hands spread, "a country song."

It seems to me that all of what I learned from my "teachers" on Music Row – indeed, from every writing experience I have ever had – finds its way, somehow, into my academic writing. It is a quandary that permeates the discourse of writing. Are different kinds of writing fundamentally distinct from each other? Or is all writing, at root, the same? Does an "author writer" who composes in a "goodwriter" genre use a separate faculty? Or is all writing part of the same general ability?

Eventually, it comes to a choice of figures. Should I seek only to be *clear* or *conversational*? Should I seek – as Peter Elbow has urged all writers – to be *voiceful*? Or *powerful*? Or seek – as a songwriter would – to write something that will *blow you away*?

That is the predicament. When you write, what figures should guide you? It makes a difference.

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