

# Introduction

I have spent most of my life writing, teaching about writing, talking about writing. If evening comes and I feel I have not done my share of these during the day, I feel a bit empty, as though the day had been wasted. Not everyone feels this way, nor should they. People have other obsessions and other sources of meaning in life. But increasingly most people do need to do some writing to carry out whatever is important in their lives. We all have different paths into writing and goals to accomplish through our writing.

Our lives lead us to write different things, drawing on different experiences and resources. Those differences create different trajectories of writing development. Even those who do similar kinds of writing within relatively static social or organizational worlds write different things creating unique communications, drawing on their different pasts, presents, and projected futures.

After 77 years of constant plugging away at writing, constantly solving the problems that each new writing task poses, I am still only successful with some kinds of writing. Others I may do passably, but I am a rank amateur at others, and there are many, many others that I couldn't even imagine where to begin. Moreover, I am not even aware of an infinity of kinds of writing, some of which may not even yet be born.

So we are all different writers, we all have become different writers within the lives we lead, drawing on the literate experiences and resources that come our way in order to accomplish what we want, should, or need to do. Each of our stories is particular. This book is my experiment in saying what I can from my perspective about my development as a writer. Through this narrative I hope to open up questions about lifespan development of writing and how writing emerges within the conditions, relations, and needs of life. In its uniqueness, as every writer's story is, my story presents no norm or ideal. It is just one story of one person who has spent a lot of time at writing. We need many such stories from many kinds of writers, reflecting on what opportunities, needs, experiences, and resources came their way and how they iteratively solved the problem of what to write and how to write it, as they saw it. Then perhaps we can start to see if there is any larger coherence or commonality in these stories. If there are such commonalities they are likely to be found in the shaping parameters and underlying processes rather than in the particulars of the sort I narrate here.

## What Kind of Book is This? For Whom?

In one sense the answer is simple: It is the story of how I became the writer I am now. And the audiences are writers and writing teachers who are curious about such things in order to reflect on their own writing and that of their students. This book is a bit like the literacy autobiographies we writing teachers ask our students to

do, having them reflect on their writing experiences, beliefs, and values, to prepare them for their next stage of growth and to let us know their orientations, attitudes, and resources. This writing autobiography, however, covers a long trajectory (about seventy-five years since I first could grasp a crayon) and has been inflected by all the teaching, theories, and research I have engaged with along the way. Further, the reflection is not so much to prepare me for future writing, though I hope I do a bit more. I see this more as an experiment in how one can construct a story of a lifespan development of writing to contribute to writing studies' inquiry into writing development—using personal documents, memory, introspection, and self-examination. As I have elsewhere been speculating about the meaning and possibilities of investigating the lifespan development of writing, I thought I might test out the ideas on myself and see what the results are. I hope this narrative can help identify some of the elements that might bear on writing development.

## What Do I Understand an Autoethnography to Be and Why I Use It Here?

I do not intend this to be a memoir, an autobiography, a confession, a story of struggle, nor other genre to recount an interesting life. I exclude most of the interesting events and places of the kind that make John Swales' life story so intriguing (Swales, 2013). While my relationships, emotions, and life experiences are part of the story of my writing growth, they are not the central focus, as they are in Eli Goldblatt's literacy autobiography (Goldblatt, 2012). Nor do I attempt a social commentary through my life, as has been done so effectively by writing scholars like Mike Rose (Rose, 1989) or Victor Villanueva (Villanueva, 1993). I simply want to say everything I can about the experiences and conditions that shaped me as a writer and what I learned through addressing writing tasks throughout my life. I bring in other events and relationships as I see them bearing on my writing, and I try to draw the net as broadly as I can around this theme so as to open up questions and data that future scholars of writing development may want to explore, as I see writing development as multidimensional and heterogeneous.

Nonetheless, some parts of my life I do not currently understand as consequential for my writing development, and so I do not discuss them here. For example, though I do discuss some parts of personal relationships that I see as relevant to my writing development, I do not discuss my adolescent clumsiness in dating, nor do I discuss aspects of personal relationships beyond what I can see as relevant for my writing development. Much of the work of a writer is technical, wrestling with words to bring meaning into being, so the story I have to tell is largely technical, though situated within my life conditions and challenges as I describe here.

Ethnography as I understand it is a phenomenological enterprise, reconstructing the view from the inside of what people are perceiving, thinking, and doing. It reveals the meanings they attribute to the social and material worlds and the logic of the consequent actions that take. Ethnography seeks the privileged information

of consciousness and semi-consciousness about sense-making which only the individual subject has direct access to. Ethnography, however, is usually reconstructed by someone other than the subject—using various techniques of observing, questioning, interviewing, participating in life events, interpreting, and the like to get at the state of mind of the subject, which is then narrativized for the reader. But in this autoethnography I am directly presenting how writing looked to me at various moments, and what I did and thought I was doing when writing. Through memory and examination of collected texts, I try to reconstruct what I experienced, how I saw each task, what I worked on and what problems I was solving. As someone who has immersed himself in writing studies, however, I also have many analytic tools and concepts I have since come to understand, which offer an added interpretive layer to the story. This gives me a double vision situated in the past and situated in the present looking backward.

This simultaneously personal and yet professionalized view gets as close to the personal experiences as retrospect will allow, although it also is in danger of self-justifications, personal myth, and biases that might come from any introspection or retrospection. To provide some objectivity for all this self-dealing I attempt to adopt a clinical perspective, at times almost comically so, while still feeling the presence of lived memory. But this double consciousness is also part of who I have become as a writer, feeling the press of meaning but reflective about the how that meaning can be realized, knowing I only having the thin line of words to bring my meanings into the world. Writing I see as a kind of sincere performance, but performance nonetheless. When I started to take voice lessons at age 55, my music teachers told me that singers have warm hearts but cool minds, as they perform with split consciousness, feeling from the inside and simultaneously thinking about sound production, diction, phrasing, and how they appear to the audience. This lesson came easily to me as I had long before learned this as a writer. As a young man I was greatly moved by Wallace Stevens' poem "The Snow Man" that begins "One must have a mind of winter" and ends

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

In retelling my development as a writer from both the remembered inside and the analytical outside, I feel like a doctor who tests a medicine on him or herself, to see what happens. If the experiment works and produces some useful or interesting accounts, it may suggest some lines for future lifespan research to explore. But, of course, it may release the repressed id and narcissism of my inner being—the Mr. Hyde hidden within the respectable Dr. Jekyll. The writer I know best is myself, but it is also the writer about whom I have the most self-protecting myths. Such stories tend to make a hero of oneself, facing challenges and overcoming them. I am further tempted into this bias because a key mechanism I propose for development, and

around which I tell this story, is learning through problem perception and problem-solving. Since I am usually writing about writing (practice, teaching, research, or theory), the intellectual problem-solving feeds back directly into development of my practice as a writer. Or at least I would like to think. How much this story of situated problem-solving discovery and self-making is delusory, a satisfying fiction so I can think well of myself, I leave for others to sort out.

## What Kind of Story Do I Tell?

The narrative and the associated details in this book present writing developing through solving the problems posed by the sequence of writing tasks encountered in life, as understood through the perceptions, motives, and meaning making of the writer. Two people sitting next to each other in the same classroom or business enterprise, addressing the same institutional writing demand, may not only understand the same task differently, but also will bring different histories, resources, and perspectives to the task, will define the task differently, and will feel the need to solve different problems to complete the task. The problem solving and learning while completing the task coalesce in the text produced, but also may result in a changed perception of the world and the writer's rhetorical situation within it, further transforming the writing. I proposed this mechanism in Bazerman (2009c), following Vygotsky's views on development (see Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). This pattern of changing understanding of one's world and one's role as a writer seems to appear in a number of writers I have studied (see chapters 21 and 29). I have since attempted to gather some evidence for this mechanism. (e.g., Bazerman, Simon, Ewing, & Pieng, 2013e). and it also seems to be consistent with some of the causes Pennebaker has proposed for the efficaciousness of trauma writing (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007).

A related Vygotskian idea central to the narrative is that of leading activity. Vygotsky introduced the idea of leading activity in considering how children in play experiment with ways of being in the world beyond their current ways of thinking and being, thereby engaging in their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1967, 1978). Other psychologists have elaborated the concept with respect to childhood development (e.g., Zaporozhetz, 1997), and a few have applied it to adults (such as Stetsenko & Arievidt, 2004). I see the idea of leading activity as particularly relevant to writers. A writer is recurrently and persistently engaged in writing the next thing, understanding the situation and possibilities, looking for meanings and ideas to be expressed, identifying the resources appropriate to the task and audience, and solving the problems posed by bringing the text into being and achieving its final form. The writer places themselves inside a problem-solving moment, doing the best job they are capable of, playing with possibilities within the semi-private reflective space of mental rehearsal and drafting. Each new piece of writing potentially poses new kinds of problems which may even give rise to considerations the writer never seriously addressed before. Thus as writers develop, they recurrently

engage with leading activities, by which they bootstrap their understanding of what they are doing and of what their situation and goals are.

I am selective in the texts and moments of writing I discuss, based on which tasks I now perceive as most challenging and formative to my writing development, and thus reveal most sharply the leading activities I was working on at the time. In the earliest chapters, moreover, I have only a few artifacts and memories to be discussed. When I get to discussing high school and college, however, I have more to work with and give granular attention to. My high school and college years I also see as broadening my repertoire at the technical level of sentence, organization, stance, and intertextual choices even as I work through major life issues in the writing. But even then, some texts and memories get greater attention than others, depending on the learning I now attribute to them. As I move into my adult and professional life, I discuss less at the granular level as my problem-solving attention focused more on abstract social and intellectual issues. In addressing research or teaching concerns, I am learning new ways of writing. These new approaches to writing may require some new choices at the text production level, to be resolved locally, but tend not to be as transformative for my development. I selectively focus on those texts that I saw as most challenging and consequential for development. Since most of the texts I discuss from my later life are published and are mostly available, they also don't need to be described in as much detail as those texts from my schooling years. At the end of this volume is a list of my published work.

So the enterprise of this book is deeply phenomenological, as it considers development from the inside of the writer, making sense and making choices while addressing new challenges and coming to new kinds of solutions. The data come from the inside looking out in order to bring new texts into the world, thereby changing what I am able to express to others and myself. In doing so, I change my capabilities and understanding as a writer.

In considering relevant contexts in which development occurs, I lean heavily on the socioeconomic analysis of writers in their historical moment, inspired by the work of Deborah Brandt (2001), as such factors formed the conditions of my learning most evidently in my early years. In later chapters socioeconomic factors turn up in the structure of academic work, in the changing conditions of universities and my employment opportunities, and the evolving academic domains I engaged with.

My earliest experiences of writing were about learning writing as a form of play, expression, and communication, which our society encourages in children (discussed in the opening chapters). Writing in my adolescence and early adulthood became directed toward understanding my place in the world and making life choices, associated with making sense of trauma and personal formation. Yet this personal sense-making occurred largely within academic tasks, often associated with liberal education (most of Parts 1 and 2). Once I found my professional calling the leading activities directing my development concerned the needs of others and finding ways to reach them (Part 3). Then as I became a researcher, I focused on

the activities and forms of professional writing, pursuing inquiry and gathering evidence methodically, and arguing persuasively for what I found. The later chapters accordingly take on a more cognitive and activity systems orientation, looking beyond details of text to the social worlds and functions the texts were being created for (Parts 4 and 5). Throughout there are strong connections between my writing development and my personal, social, and intellectual development.

## A Secondary Motive, but Other Motives to Be Disappointed

Beyond the impulse to see what I could reveal about my development as a writer, I have become aware of a secondary motive that may be of interest to some writers. Given some of the idiosyncratic paths I have taken, I like to think I have learned a few less common things about writing, which I would like to share with others to help them along their own particular paths and to add to the common store of resources. Of course, some of the things I have learned are quite common—I am not the first to pass through the now well-known discoveries of emergent literacy or to successfully complete curricula resembling that of my 1950s New York suburbs. Nor am I the first to learn lessons most department chairs learn in carrying out their responsibility to their colleagues and their institutions. Yet I believe we each learn these lessons in our own ways, making our own sense of them, drawing on all we have experienced within the complex mix of our lives.

This sharing motive is largely consistent with unpacking the conditions influencing my writing development and my motivated response to those situations, so it shouldn't conflict with my primary purpose of telling as complete a story as I could of this one writer's development. Indeed, as our approach to writing grows as part of our changing understanding of what writing can do in the world, that understanding frames the problems we solve in writing. Thus, unpacking how I have come to study and understand writing is also part of the story of my development as a writer.

Since writing is an invention, actually a historically continuing series of inventions, what we can learn to do is endless and infinitely varied. While the basic inventions of written scripts have gotten the most attention, that is just the beginning of the story that sets the stage for all the interesting things we have learned to do with writing since and will continue to learn to do in the changing conditions, technologies, and needs of the future. We have a lot to learn in seeing each other's tricks of the trade which we have learned in our different paths. As I will discuss in the pages below, I have learned much from mentors who have helped me on my way, and some writers long gone that I have studied, both in their practice and their understanding of what writing does. In my account, I honor by name mentors that have had a substantial positive effect on my development as a writer, but I largely (though not totally) leave nameless those I found less helpful in my path, even as I do discuss the effects of my encounters with them.

In general, however, I have left out all the colorful anecdotes and personalities that may make the arcane autobiographies of academics a bit more amusing. I report the most boring parts, though those boring bits are a large part of a life spent mostly at a desk, in coffee shops, or in archives, scribbling away or staring into space. Writers tend to be nerds, at least once they settle down to their crafts—often belying the exotic personalities they may project to their audiences. Practice, practice, practice. Every day engaged in the minutiae of what to write, gathering materials to write about, designing projects and texts, crafting words and sentences, communicating with editors, but always at work, moving projects forward. This narrative of what was going through my head and fingers onto my keyboard would make a very boring movie. While some readers may be interested in me as a person and while of course this book will present some biographical details, they may be disappointed in all the things I leave out, like places I have visited, people I have met, emotions and relations that have moved me deeply. In others of my writings, I have given somewhat more personal accounts of my experiences, (e.g., Bazerman, 1998i, 2006b, 2011f) and I have given a number of interviews (see listing in the bibliographic appendix).

Another group of readers may also be disappointed. Since my writer's journey has taken me through important transitions in the field of writing studies and my own writing has participated in those transitions, this account may provide some details relevant to the story of the growth of the field in the last fifty years. However, the narrative here is neither centrally nor coherently an account of the growth of the field or of what I perceive as my contribution to the field. Nor do I offer here a sense of the trajectory of where the field might be going. Because writing now is so central to so much of modern life, the interests of writing studies have been highly inflected by externalities, from the government changing curricular policies and funding priorities, to the structure of the workplaces where our students would be employed, to changing national and international economies, to changing technology and communicative platforms, to cultural movements and equity concerns, to changes in the climate and ensuing international crises. The forces that will change the direction of writing research in the future are thus hard to foresee, as this entails predictions about the future of our society. The story of the development of the field I present here is only a backdrop or a set of conditions within which I address writing problems in order to contribute effectively to the field in those changing conditions, and it is told only through how things appeared to me at the time and thus how it inflected my writing development. The last few chapters of this book do lay out unfinished research agendas I have recently been trying to move forward and some of the writing problems I addressed in trying to see how the issues could be studied. I do hope others might find these issues of interest and will pursue them, but this is a hope and not a prediction. Readers interested in the history or future of the field might find more directly what they are looking for in the reference works I have edited (such as 2008b) or my accounts of my research programs (such as 2008d and 2017c) or my guesses

at futurology (such as 2016d and 2017d). Yet these are based only on what I am coming to see and hope others will see. I have no idea of what others are coming to see that will change the course of the field.

So I reiterate, this is most properly an experimental phenomenological inquiry into what can be said about writing development, from my insider's position about my particular path of development, distinctive from others' paths of development. Some experienced and reflective writers may be drawn down their own hallways of memories to be reminded of their own paths, but they will see their paths, I hope, as much as through contrasts and differences as through similarities, and even those similarities are likely to be only resonances. While there may be some seeds of generalities in this story, we are all different writers and write different things. Those who are viewed as most accomplished are most distinctive, and their paths become increasingly distinctive as they develop what we call their voice: the distinctive things they say and the way they go about saying them. This autobiographical narrative, if it is successful, will not be a final word on development, but rather needs to stand alongside many different accounts of many different writers before we see what commonalities might underlie the pervasive distinctiveness and variability.

## The Methods of This Account

This writing autoethnography will rely heavily on the collection of texts that I have retained throughout my life. Starting with the last year or so of high school I kept almost all my school assignments and college papers, as well as much of my personal and creative writing. Since entering professional life I have a full file of publications, kept both for sake of ego and job considerations. These publications are listed in an appendix, but only some are discussed, indicated in the asterisked chapter references at the end of some of the entries. I selected the ones to discuss in large part because I remember them as posing the largest writing problems and thus being the sites for my greatest developments. Each, nonetheless, is indicative of the kinds of writing I was doing in other works at the time and thus can be seen to stand in for a larger group of texts. Also, the issues I focus on are those that appeared most salient as I examined the texts and remembered writing them, and thus indicate leading activities for me at the time. No doubt there were other aspects that have gotten lost in my selective memory and attention, which at other moments might make other texts and episodes salient for the narrative. Thus while I can vouch for what I positively attend to in this account, I can only (quixotically) hope I did not omit much important.

In a fit of garage cleaning a few years ago, I got rid of many drafts, but I still have all the major products. From recent years I have whatever computer files remain readable. Much of what I report in the following chapters depends on systematic reading and analysis of this extensive corpus. While others reading through this corpus using different analytical methods would likely come up with different, and quite likely, more objective, consistent and replicable conclusions, I can offer a



different and more personal perspective that draws on my memory of the process of writing, my perception of the situation it arose in, my purposes at the time, the problems I was trying to solve, and the role the text took in my life and trajectory.

Organizing and examining these files, I remembered many other earlier or more incidental pieces of writing, some of which enter into the narrative, allowing me to discuss my early years of schooling as well as writing in some other parts of my life. Memory also serves another and more pervasive function. Artifacts from the past, especially those we worked on, can bring us back to the place and time we worked on them—a common interview technique. As I reexamined my pieces of writing I was flooded with memories of the time and context of many of them. Even more I remembered the feelings, thoughts, and moods engaged in writing many of them—this sense memory was often quite visceral. From early childhood I had a strong recall, and over the years I have engaged in a number of activities that helped build the capacity for revery, memory, recall of events, and accompanying moods and thoughts. Memory turned out to be a rich resource to locate what was on my mind as I wrote. Of course, many details and readily made choices will have dropped from my memory, but what was most on my mind, the leading activity, remains vivid in my memory and manifest in the resulting text.

At the same time as the collection of texts served as prods to memory, they also exist outside of myself and can be examined as objects in themselves. I try to do so with the eye of someone who has taught and commented on writing for over fifty years and who has been a reviewer for journals for at least forty years. I have examined the archives of my writing for purpose, structure, audience, and style. On some of the papers from my school years, teacher comments also provide additional perspectives on how they saw the papers and in bringing back memories of how I reacted to their response.

While there are limits to this phenomenological mode of analysis, I am the only one who has access to my remembered dynamics of problem-solving, attention, and growth. My presentation resides at this odd cusp of the personal and the textual, of remembered process and resulting project, trying to reconstruct what I saw then, yet also looking at the text from my current perspective.

Introspection and personal memory have many well-known limitations, including a constant re-narration of our past through the lens of our present, a present that wants to find a logic in our past, and wants to maintain a positive story about who we are and how we have faced the adversities of life. Further, both the original experience and our later re-narrations are from the inside looking out, not seeing how we look to others, nor seeing the objects of our creation as they appear in the world. We want to see our writing as we imagine it to be, as instantiating the meanings we intend (or even exceeding our intentions), rather than how we and our products look to others and what meanings and evaluations they might attribute to them. On the other hand, only we have any clue into what we were thinking and what we were trying to accomplish as we were writing. We write from the inside out, no matter how many external resources we may draw on, represent,

and deploy in our writing. In composing fresh statements we re-orchestrate all we draw on and re-present it in sending it back out to others. If we think of writing as not just the texts we are producing, but the processes we are engaged in, we are the only deep source of crucial data. Further, if our research interest is in how we grow and develop through our writing experiences, then what we carry from prior problem-solving to our next encounters with writing, is precisely where the action is.

The notes and drafts of this book were produced and revised during the pandemic in 2020-2022, which afforded me time to travel through my memories and reveries, prompted by the texts of each period of my life. I went through that history sequentially as does this book, for some weeks dwelling on each period, viscerally reliving the past, while still maintaining the second eye of the writing teacher and researcher who has a more distant take on what he sees in the texts and in the younger person being remembered.

Another layer in the story is in a reconstruction of the times and locations I experienced. My memory of the neighborhoods, social groups, institutions, political and economic events has been enriched by historical sources and other internet resources, even from Google Maps and street views of buildings I lived or worked in.

So the recollections and narrative here have a multiple vision: the remembered experience and the persistent aura of past states of being; the critical lens of a teacher who has commented on papers over the years and experienced many different writers at different moments in their trajectories of development; the emotional distance and personal understanding that comes through time; the secondary reports and artifacts that place events in their locales; an understanding of multiple cases and findings uncovered by research; and the theoretical frameworks built from the experiences, findings, and collected research of others.

The retrospective vision I now have on my writing experiences at this point in life is of course informed by all the literature in writing studies I have read; all the discussions and seminars I have had with colleagues; all the practice, research, and theory courses I have taught; and all the positions I have taken in my own writing. Readers familiar with writing studies will no doubt see in the narrative the impact of studies on process, genre, activity systems, transfer, writing as discovery and epistemic, writing as identity-forming, socio-cultural studies, institutional and academic writing, economic class, as well as more traditional studies of argument, metaphor, imagination, literary form, and historical studies of creative writers. But I will leave these for the most part implicit, as they are embedded in my experience and knowledge of the time and my vision now looking back on the texts. People knowledgeable in the field should also be able to see the stance I am taking at different moments and I have given an extensive account of the theories and findings that have informed my vision of writing in my two volumes on literate action (Bazerman, 2013c, 2013d). But here I want to keep this study truly ethnographic in the sense of being phenomenological—how things looked to me then and how they look now.

The narrative here will be basically chronological, and will fall into several sections that correspond to periods in my life, typically marked by changes in

life conditions. Chapters, nonetheless, may overlap as I follow multiple threads of early conditions and challenges of later professional life. Some chapters will hint forward to later consequences, and others will harken back to previous events. The story will be ragged not only by the messiness of chronology, but because life itself is filled with accidents and randomness, at the whim of forces and events beyond our ability to make sense of them. But I will try at least to show how they seem to have affected my writing and what I wrote within those conditions, given who I was, where I was located, and how I was motivated. I will talk a lot about luck, because despite challenges, I was offered enough resources and opportunities to find my way. With just a few differences things could have been much worse, and not just my writing would have suffered, but fortunately I could work my way through challenges to successes.

In the universe of writers' stories, I hope this might take a particular place. Our society tends to glorify people who have achieved literary fame and look to their stories for clues to the secrets of writing. But most of the writing most people do is of different sorts, and we also need accounts of the writing lives of scholars, lawyers, doctors, business people, union organizers, office clerks, and all the many others who make the textual world we live in, the built symbolic environment.

Even for literary writers our knowledge of their development is much less than we might hope for. The hundreds of *Paris Review* interviews have gone furthest in asking about how poets, novelists, screenwriters and memoirists write, and how they got to be the writers they are. But even here in these interrogations of prominent literary figures, the stories are limited. Writers tend to be shy about how they actually think and work. Perhaps the acts of creation are hard to recall or analyze outside the heat of engagement, perhaps so much happens beyond the reach of conscious awareness or monitoring, or perhaps they fear the constraining power of awareness that might infect their creative zone. Or perhaps they want to maintain a mystique. For whatever reasons, we rarely get detailed insight into the nerdy daily work that takes up most of writers' lives—there seems to be little interesting to tell there, but that is indeed where the real development of writers happens, as they work at the mine face of bringing meaningful texts out from the obduracy of experience, research, and language.

## A Note on Being Homo Scribens

All those of you reading this book are those strange semiotic creatures called humans. Our capacity to communicate through human invented symbols emerged at the conjunction of a number of biologically evolved capacities and impulses—including high degrees of social orientation, extended childhoods under the watch and guidance of adults, specific brain capacities developed for other functions, a suite of features supporting joint gaze and attention, and a consequent capacity to evaluate the knowledge, attention, and states of mind of others—leading to complex

and flexible collaboration. Some of these features are shared with other animals, but some are either unique or more highly developed in humans (Tomasello, 2019).

In particular, a number of animals (as well as some plants) have various means of attending to each other and more particularly communicating states of being, attention, and action with each other. Such means, fitting with the evolved biological capacities of each form of life, extend each individual's awareness beyond its own sensory information of the ambient world and internal neurological processing of that information, to gain from the experience of others and potentially collaborate with them in joint endeavors. But this communication also comes at a cost of diminished information and complexity of processing, as the interindividual channels are reduced and simpler than internal neural processing.

Human language relies on humans' evolved biological capacities and tendencies, and humans specifically invented languages to fit in conjunction with those capacities and tendencies. While the capacity for language may be a surprising wonder, it is not a surprise that language fits humans and humans fit language—no more surprising than a hammer fits the human hand and relies on the leveraged strength of our arms. We made hammers to be so. Human languages, nonetheless, are more complex, creative and evolving than communicative means of other creatures, allowing us high degrees of joint attention, action, knowledge, calculation, and coordination built through these diminished channels of communication. That is, while human language supports extensive communication and formations of complex social coordination beyond the skin barrier, it is in some ways reduced from the richness of the internal sensation of each individual. Yet language also reduces some of the loneliness and limitations we experience within our purely private sensations.

On top of all these capacities that support human language, about five thousand years ago (a short time within human history, and a minuscule one in biological evolution) some humans invented written language, which has rapidly evolved and spread widely, transforming the nature of human life and our means of social organization, culture, and accumulating knowledge. My particular pathway in learning to write is predicated on all these strange capacities as well as the five thousand years of inventions and uses of written language which have created the resources and conditions within which I have developed as a writer to meet challenges of the literate life. Indeed, much of education is to make available and intelligible these extensive resources from across five millennia and the planet's cultures. In the chapters to follow, I will specify some of the more immediate conditions that helped define the particular resources familiar to me and the pathways of development open to me, but it is hard to overstate how odd the whole human enterprise of writing is and how odd that I find myself one of those so enabled creatures.

As I have come to teach this unusual but very useful art, it has made me wonder what it is, how we learn to do it, and what kind of creatures we become as we learn to do it. As I have come to understand better what is this thing we do, I hope I have learned to do it better. That, I think, is the plot of this book.