Chapter 1. Reframing Your Story About Writing

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize key elements of your story about writing
- Explore threshold concepts that guide advanced writers
- Reflect to consider how both new and familiar ideas about writing can influence your practice as a writer

Stories are powerful forces, particularly the stories closest to home. Recent research demonstrates that the way we describe our world—how we organize events and emotions into stories—influences how we work, play, and interact with others. While we enjoy concrete privileges and face inescapable challenges, we have some control over how we respond: our stories or "mental models" about our world can directly affect our performance, helping us succeed or increasing our struggles. Experts now encourage many professionals, from sports players to actors, and from musicians to surgeons, to visualize their work and their likely successes before they even step onto a stage or into an operating room. Likewise, the way you think about writing can either support or limit you as you try to make progress.

1.1 What's Your Story?

You already have some powerful stories about writing that you tell yourself. Your writing stories may draw on your memories about a range of experiences and emotions:

- A particular piece of writing: a birthday card you made when you were a child, an assignment you completed for school, a text message you sent recently to a friend
- The writing you do each week for your job, for your journal, or for your community
- A strategy, technique, or trick you use that helps you write better
- How you feel when you write, or feel when you're done writing
- What other people have told you about how to write, or what they told you about how you write
- What you have accomplished—or what you dream you can accomplish—with your writing

My own writing story draws on some vivid moments of success and struggle: winning an award for a poem when I was 12 years old, earning a "C" on a high school paper because I didn't follow a teacher's exact rules, laughing to myself as I added bad puns into a travel column I wrote for the school newspaper that almost nobody read, puzzling over a college history professor's critique that my writing was "too graceful," getting direct-messaged by other students saying they enjoyed what I posted to a larger online group, crying on the phone with my mom over a graduate school project that I couldn't figure out how to organize, teaching my first class about writing while completely terrified but enjoying every minute of it, and publishing my first professional article in a tiny journal that doesn't exist anymore. At some of those points, I thought writing was pretty fun and I was pretty good at it; at other points, I thought writing was impossible and I should give up and go learn to herd sheep.

All those parts of my personal writing story affect me when I sit down to write: right now, I'm still smiling from remembering about my bad puns, but there's a small knot in my stomach about that whole "too graceful" comment. Even after many years, these stories are important to who I am as a writer. As I became a writing teacher and a writing researcher, I also learned new stories about writing that I have added to my mental model. Because I know what the research says, I understand more about that history professor's comment; I know more about why I felt so lost with that graduate school paper; and most days, I no longer think that I should look online for jobs that focus on sheep.

The process of recalling our experiences or stories and either accepting or modifying them generally requires *reflection*: the ability to step away from ourselves

a bit, examine what we think or do or feel, and evaluate whether those responses line up with our goals and resources. When we reflect, we gain insight and control; instead of letting our stories and memories unconsciously influence our writing, we deliberately create a mental model of writing that can help us succeed.

In order to become an advanced writer, you may find it helpful to examine your own stories about writing, learn more about what research says about writers and writing, and *reflect on* whether you want to modify your thinking. This chapter is designed to help you consider and reflect on some new stories, so that you can adopt a mental model of writing that best suits your needs and goals.

Explore 1.1

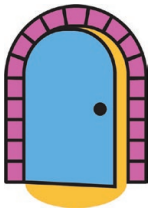
What's your writing story? Would you describe yourself as a "good writer" overall? as a good writer of a particular kind of writing? (Maybe your friends laugh at the snarky jokes you text them, or they think you provide helpful instructions when they're working with a new computer, recipe, or game.) Has your story changed from when you were a child, or from a few years ago? Do you think that some writing, or all writing, is difficult / satisfying / intriguing? What do you feel like when you start to write, finish writing, or share your writing?

1.2 What are Threshold Concepts About Writing?

No two writers have, or need to have, the same mental model of writing—just like no two stage performers or physical therapists use the same combination of techniques to do their jobs. But all professionals should strive to create and use a mental model that blends our own experiences with fundamental concepts of our field: ideas based on the best available research on how experts achieve success.

In this book we focus on nine key concepts, drawing on research in writing studies, that you should consider as you build a mental model to help you succeed as a writer.

- You can become a good writer and a better writer.
- Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts.
- There is no single definition of "good writer."
- Good writers frequently struggle and revise.
- Writing is a social rather than an individual act.
- Writing creates and integrates knowledge.
- Writing involves strategies more talent.
- There are many ways to solve a writing problem.
- Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing.



Scholars refer to crucial concepts like these as *threshold concepts*. They can function like a doorway: one that takes you to a new space but that isn't obvious or easy to enter (you might need a key, a password, or even a crowbar). Once you open a door and go across the threshold of the doorway, you can see much more of the house, garden, or video game world than you could before. Moreover, the open doorway can cast new light into the room or hallway you were in, and once you've seen the new space, you can't unsee it. Threshold concepts are present in many fields and professions: often you can recognize them as "aha!" moments where you find you understand the many ways a *limit* works in calculus, how *opportunity cost* affects a range of economic models, or the full implications of *personhood* for philosophers.

When you understand a threshold concept about writing, it may reinforce what you already knew, change the way you think about writing a little bit, raise questions about a significant experience or story, or even alter your whole mental model.

You shouldn't plan to change your whole story overnight. After all, questioning a long-held experience, practice, or belief, especially if it is rooted in strong emotions or recommendations by other experts, can be uncomfortable, and can initially slow down your progress as you evaluate new options. As you read the concepts in this chapter, you should acknowledge and discuss your disagreements or questions, but you should also give yourself room to consider that each concept *might* be true—and that it might be as true for you as for any other writer you know.

Of course, while you can't un-know a concept once you've seen it, you're still the author of your own story about writing. You have the choice about whether you want to incorporate a new element into your regular reflection about writing, or whether you want to focus on other aspects of your story. And finally, remember that stories are most powerful when we let them adapt and evolve: the mental model you construct for your writing class this month may change as you gain more experience, switch to other situations, or alter your goals. As long as you keep reflecting, your story about writing should help you continue to improve and succeed as an advanced writer.

1.3 Nine Threshold Concepts about Writers and Writing

You can become a good writer and a better writer

You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

Yes, you. You are included even if you have always struggled with writing or if you dislike doing it; even if you're certain you were born as more of a math, arts, or

activities person; and even if someone who seemed knowledgeable has told you that you cannot write well and should do something else with your life.

You may not become the next Suzanne Collins, Langston Hughes, Stephen King, Sandra Cisneros, or National Science Foundation $10 million grant recipient based on your writing. But you can learn to understand the core features—and employ the most useful strategies—for any text you most want or need to create. And here, "any text" means *any kind* of writing: history term papers, limericks, documentary scripts, research reports, tweets, fan fiction, case notes, grant proposals, graphic novels, travel blogs, TikTok videos, memos, or book-length studies of postmodern architecture. Most writing is successful not because something magical happens, but because a writer chose and applied particular strategies specifically relevant to that kind of writing.

Here's the key to the whole concept: we become good writers because we improve via study, practice, feedback, and revision. You may know a few people who seem to have been born with the ability to complete complex math equations in their heads, pick up any song at the piano, or sink a basketball from mid-court. The rest of us, including many professional musicians and athletes, can do tasks like these only with practice and assistance. You probably won't become competent at any kind of writing quickly, and you may have to work harder at it than some of the people in your class. But with attention and persistence, you will improve—and learn how to keep improving over your lifetime.

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

In school, writing is often presented as a clearly defined *noun*, a definable object such as a chunk of rock sitting on a table or a 500-word essay about the causes of the American Civil War. However, advanced writers understand writing better as a *verb*: writing is a form of communicating in which writers are constantly anticipating and inciting responses from our readers, and adapting our moves as the context or goals change.

You may have studied writing as a series of rule-bound assignments: your task was to produce a text that met certain criteria for length or correctness, and so your mental model may contain a clear vision of what "good writing" always is. Outside school, though, writing is usually more about action: writers *perform* writing in order to create a *response* from one or more readers. An object can be all-or-nothing: you have it or you don't. An action is always evolving: each choice you make creates new responses and leads you to other choices. And an *interaction* is most dynamic of all, since one or more real people who are reading or viewing your text can make choices of their own. So the most viable answer to

"What is good writing?" is always "It depends."

If you aim always to *create a better written document*, then each time you write, you are practicing a skill with limited impact. If you aim to *improve your skills at responding to readers and contexts*, then you are always gaining strategies that you can use in many of your future actions as a writer.

There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

If there is no single definition of "good writing," then there can't be a single definition of a "good writer." Instead, when a document accomplishes the writer's goals and satisfies the writer's primary audience—readers whose expectations and tastes are formed by the communities in which they reside—then it is good writing for that situation even if it might not succeed for other writers or readers. Indeed, as you probably already know, a single "good essay" can succeed in one context but fail in another context that requires a "good essay."

Most good writing will follow a recognizable *pattern* (or genre) with common features of success. But one pattern won't serve all of your writing needs—you probably shouldn't submit a poem when readers expect a résumé—and very little excellent writing follows a precise formula. You know that a "good job application letter" will have some predictable elements you can anticipate. But to be successful, you will need to adapt your document according to whether you write to ask a family friend for a babysitting job or apply to ask a Fortune 500 corporate human resources officer for an accounting job.

As a result, you cannot be a "good writer" or a "bad writer" based on one or two characteristics of writing. You cannot be a good writer *only* because you can write organized short essays about literature, or a bad writer *only* because you struggle to do this. You cannot be a good writer *only* because you make no spelling or verb tense errors, or a bad writer *only* because you make many. Every new writing task gives you an opportunity to redefine "good writing" and to become a better writer.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

There are many ways for a writing task to be difficult, but four are common:

- the writer and/or the audience care about getting it right;
- the subject matter is complicated or emotionally charged;

- the audience is particularly uninformed or resistant; and
- the task, audience, and/or context is unfamiliar.

So if you find yourself struggling, it is often a sign that you care, that you're writing about a complex idea, that you're sharing your ideas with readers who don't already understand them, and/or that you're learning to adapt to a new writing situation. The difficulty thus shows you're making good use of your time rather than working on something you don't care about, that is simple or boring, or that tells readers what they already know.

You may also find a writing task hard because of your disposition: you may have low confidence or difficulty managing your time. Yet these challenges are also common among writers, and you can learn to handle intimidating or work-intensive writing tasks just as you would handle challenges in juggling, analyzing statistical data, or reading a foreign language.

Finally, because writing often works as a recursive process wherein you learn and improve as you go, you (like most advanced writers) will nearly always need to revise after you complete an initial draft. (I've added this sentence to keep track, and changed it as this book evolved: what you are reading is from the *sixth* major revision that this section went through, whew!) Your inability to create a perfect document on the first try doesn't mean you should give up and go herd sheep for a living; it means you need to learn from your current failure so that you can improve the next time. The best news is that learning to be an advanced reviser can help you feel less pressure to be perfect in your first draft, which may actually make that draft easier to complete.

Explore 1.2

Think of a document (a thing) you wrote recently that took you some time. Now list 5-7 activities you were *doing* as a writer who was *writing* (a verb) that document. What composing, adapting, or revising actions were easiest or most natural for you? What actions were more difficult or made you feel stuck? Describe a strategy you could suggest to another writer—or a specific writing challenge you wish you had a good strategy for.

Learn

- To learn more about **audiences** and **contexts**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about **dispositions**, see Chapter 2, Practice Productive Habits of Mind, and Attend to Failure to Grow as a Writer.
- To learn more about **revising**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

Although you might feel alone as you sit at your desk or computer drafting a document, you actually always write in the company of other readers and writers, past, present, and future. First, all the choices that writers make are influenced by the writers that came before us. These writers may have inspired you to try an approach in your writing, or they may make you cautious or anxious about a particular style of writing. Since the writers that inspire (or frustrate) you were in turn inspired or frustrated by writers that came before them, the community of past writers with whom we connect is vast and crosses many borders.

Second, the choices writers make are influenced by the people around us now. Just as your family has expectations for how people will interact at a holiday dinner, people in your community today have expectations about the values you should represent as a writer, the ideas that are relevant for you to consider as a writer, and the situations in which you will share your writing. Writers participate in local communities and broader cultures just as other artists, designers, politicians, and scientists do.

Third, the choices that writers make are influenced by our future readers, from the friend across the room waiting for your message once you press "Send" in a minute, to the on-site engineers who will need to follow your design specs next month, to your grandchild who may read your blog posts about water conservation when they grow up. Writers imagine and respond to the needs of future readers in order to have the most powerful impact.

It can be exciting to imagine writing within a vibrant community rather than feeling isolated on an individual island. It can also be discouraging: communities can have restrictions and arbitrary expectations that increase writers' difficulties. Racism and other forms of discrimination can permeate communities which then limit or punish writers who don't "fit the mold." (See "Good Writing Is Not Neutral" later in this chapter.) When you encounter restrictions, unexpected criticism, or bias as a writer, it might seem best just to adapt your approach so that you succeed by the expectations already in place—but you know that writers can *affect* audiences as well as *adapt* to them, and so you can consider whether you have the energy and resources to resist, to protest, or to recruit others to help change the community. And remember: No single community can define "good writing" or a "good writer" once and for all!

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

You may have heard people recommend that you "write about what you know about." Writing from knowledge can increase your motivation as well as your accuracy, whether you're inviting friends to dinner at a new Salvadoran restaurant or explaining to colleagues how to use the accelerometer in your lab. Writers do sometimes just *report* on what we already know.

However, since the pace of change in our world and in your professional field has sped up in recent decades, you will need to be a lifelong learner, and so you will also need to be ready to write about things you don't yet know about. It's crucial that you learn the research skills to fill in gaps in your knowledge with credible and complete information, and also that you continue to hone your curiosity so that you don't miss out on exciting developments that may not immediately be obvious. Writers often *integrate* new ideas or information from alternate fields or perspectives with more common or established knowledge.

What you may not know is that the act of writing nearly always *creates new knowledge*. If you've ever finished working on an essay's conclusion or an exam answer and thought, "Huh, I didn't know that I knew that, or felt that strongly!" you have noticed this phenomenon. *Thinking* something, even when you think carefully, isn't the same as *writing it*. As your brain selects precise words and puts them in order, it creates new neural pathways and associations, and so a writer's sentence is often new even to the writer. This helps explain why even when you think you know something, writing about it can be difficult—but it also explains how writers can benefit from exercises like freewriting, mapping, or reflective writing both to get un-stuck and to actually create new knowledge.

Learn

- To learn more about **reflective practice**, see Chapter 4, Build a Reflective Writing Process.

Practice

- To practice **freewriting** or **mapping**, see Seven Generations.

  NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

Although writing is an active state like running or cycling, the best writers don't "just do it!" the way a popular advertising campaign suggested. At least, they don't just do it perfectly the first time because they were born to be superstars. You can improve in your writing—as you would in your running—by practicing repeatedly, by adapting your goals and actions to each specific situation, and by learning to choose strategies that compensate for specific challenges.

You already have strategies that you've learned through years of practice: you have strategies for generating arguments and making sentences precise, for locating information and arranging ideas, for motivating yourself when you're tired and revising to improve your concluding paragraphs, for adding humor or style to your sentences. When a writing task is straightforward and matches your skills, you don't have to actively think about using these strategies, so it can feel as though you are writing "naturally."

When (not "if"!) writers get stuck, we need to stop and reflect so that we can deliberately choose other strategies, ones that might not feel "natural" at first. Even if you don't often feel stuck now, your writing tasks may become more complicated and more diverse, so you would need to try new approaches. (In a single week soon, you may be writing for your organic chemistry lab, your environmental history seminar, and your job as an event coordinator.) In addition to having specific strategies that you use for each setting, you should actively practice strategies that will serve you in multiple situations.

There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

The phrase "writer's block" is commonly used to describe the feeling of getting stuck as a writer, but it's not a very helpful concept for advanced writers. Imagine someone saying "I've got plumber's block" or "I've got nurse's block" or "I've got lawyer's block"! In these and most other professions, experts face problems, get stuck, explore their resources and constraints, and create a solution, just as you can do with your writing.

If you get stuck, it can help to start by define your type of problem, the way doctors ask patients to specify their symptoms. For instance, writers commonly face

- *rhetoric problems*, or challenges in establishing our goals and ascertaining

our readers' needs, and balancing them against each other,

- *knowledge and inquiry problems*, or challenges in determining what we know or need to learn, and how we communicate it to others,
- *steps-and-strategies problems*, or challenges in choosing how we move from one writing action to another and what approach we use, and
- *disposition problems*, or challenges in finding ways to manage our attitudes and habits of mind.

These categories overlap, since selecting reliable and relevant evidence about California wildfires (*knowledge problem*) will depend on whether you're writing to fourth-grade students or forestry experts (*rhetoric problem*). And you may have other names or categories of problems that appear in your own story about writing: deadline problems, long-paper problems, rambling problems, getting-started problems. The goal with naming a problem is not to get the name precisely right, but to make the problem more solvable: doesn't "deadline problem" seem much more concrete and ordinary a challenge than a mysterious "writer's block"?

Not only are there are many kinds of problems writers can face as we compose, but most problems have multiple solutions. If you have a deadline problem—too much to write in too short a time—you could adjust the writing (write less, write about an issue/angle that's not so difficult, lower your expectations for perfection) or adjust the time (skip your racquetball game, find someone to help supervise the children, request an extension). Likewise, if you have a getting-started problem, and your usual step of outlining isn't working, you could try freewriting, writing from the end backwards, or storyboarding with pictures and icons.

It might seem overwhelming to start listing all the problems and solutions writers have; writing scholar Ann Berthoff called this the "allatonceness" of practicing writing. But it can also be comforting: instead of thinking that there's one simple strategy everyone else knows that you can't seem to master, or feeling incompetent because a strategy you were successful with last year doesn't work with your current situation, you can just take a deep breath, name the problem, and *try some solution* that seems reasonable.

Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing

Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

On a really good day when you are "in the flow" of writing, you might think that the key to becoming a good writer is to "just do it." You don't want anything to interrupt the flow, and you may resist looking back at what you've written afterwards or trying a strategy that feels uncertain. Still, you probably shouldn't stay in

the flow if it's not taking you to the right outcome: that would be like continuing to run westward because it's downhill and easier, when actually you need to head north in order to get home for dinner.

It's true that repeated practice helps writers improve, but advanced writers aim to practice only strategies that we can verify as successful, and we are always studying strategies that could be even more successful. Managers study successful businesses to understand key principles for improving the bottom line, and they examine their own shop's quarterly performance to see where they need to adjust their actions. Writers likewise study others' work: how other writers compose and revise, how different genres function in professional or community settings, and how readers respond to texts.

Writers also improve when we study—and write about—our own work as writers. Often this is called "reflective writing," since it serves as a mirror to let you see more about yourself, or "metacognitive writing," since it helps us think about our thinking and think about our learning. If you want to improve as a writer, you need to develop a consistent *reflective practice*. You may already have tried reflection at the end of a project, if you wrote or talked about what was difficult and what strategies you used. Reflection is also helpful in the middle of a writing project if you get stuck, the way a coach can call a "time out" in the middle of a game to help players find a new strategy to boost the team's score. Finally, reflection can be surprisingly useful at the beginning of a project, to help predict all of the variables and opportunities that are part of a writing project. As you gain practice in pausing to reflect and adapt your strategies, you'll find that this approach speeds your progress rather than holding you back.

1.4 Focus on Equity: "Good Writing" Is Not a Neutral Judgment

We might usefully consider a tenth principle, though it's not one we should try to sustain: Not all writers, and not all writing, have been or will be treated equitably in our schools, communities, and workplaces.

Throughout this book, you will find sections inviting you to "focus on equity": to examine how writing and writers have been and can be judged in ways that unfairly include and valorize some communities, perspectives, and people, and exclude or penalize others. Writing is both a tool of powerful people—many if not most of our laws, policies, histories, and plans are shared through written documents—and a practice that can allow all of us to be heard (think of the latest social media star who has risen to fame based on their communication skills). So it is crucial that writers pay attention to how writing tasks, writing assessments, and our stories about writing are being used to promote or limit access, inclusion, and equity.

Three of the principles offered earlier in this chapter are particularly helpful as we seek to understand how the definitions of "good writing" are not neutral, and as we look for opportunities to increase equitable access to success in written communication.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act.

When communities and their social structures deliberately provide access, writing and writers can be included equitably. However, when societies operate in systems of discrimination—as has been the case through the history of the US generally, and the history of US educational systems more specifically—writers feel the burden of inequitable and exclusive practices.

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts.

Ideally, when readers are open-minded, and when contexts are created specifically to encourage wide participation from writers who hail from diverse communities and experiences, all writers flourish. In such a case, all writers would be asked to adapt their writing in similar amounts and degrees. However, communities that hold power and set standards can build prejudice into their expectations and standards for "good writing." When that happens, writers who are more like the "in-group" don't have to adapt much at all, and writers who are from different backgrounds have to adapt a lot—even to the point of suppressing their views, silencing their home language, or compromising on their fundamental values.

There is no single definition of a good writer.

In an equitable world, all writers who connect with and affect the audiences they care the most about would be acknowledged as successful, whether they're writing reggaeton lyrics or journal articles about mRNA vaccines. However, the people who developed schools, governments, and high-status professions—in the US, these have historically been people who are White, male, straight, cisgender, Christian, able-bodied, neurotypical, and wealthy—have typically narrowed the definition of "good writer" to match their own preferences and thus limited or excluded millions of writers who are different from them.

Since you are an advanced writer who is interested in creating an accurate and empowering story about writing, you should be ready to ask questions about some key ways that social structures, readers' prejudices, and institutional rules and regulations can affect writers. For instance, writers might usefully ask questions about these and other aspects of writing:

- *Expectations that writers will use "correct grammar," or what is sometimes called Standard Edited American English*. It is important that writers use

language structures that enable people to communicate; if we always selected random spellings or word orders, we would limit readers' ability to comprehend our messages. And yet nearly all of us compose in and comprehend multiple styles or languages, even if all we do is shift from formal textbook sentences to the abbreviations, slang, and specialized terms used in various social media communities. So we know we should be skeptical about claims that only one style or grammatical structure is always correct.

- *Expectations that common genres and structures for writing are universally valued and effective*. Genres of writing, like genres of music, are defined by the communities that use them—and by the communities that control how they are published and paid for—and so they are not neutral. If we can have lively discussions about what counts as "real country" music or "authentic rap," and about who has the power to decide those questions, we should be able to have fascinating conversations about what counts as an "essay," a "proposal," or a "research paper," and who is excluded or disempowered by those definitions.
- *Expectations that standardized, published criteria for evaluating writing are necessarily fair.* Generally it is better for people or communities that are evaluating writing to state their expectations and apply them consistently. However, it can be difficult to achieve a high level of transparency and consistency about what "good writing" is even when the designers of the criteria intend to be clear. Experts tend to have assumptions about high-quality writing that they don't know or forget how to describe. Moreover, even thorough, public standards or rubrics can replicate a community's biases about writing and writers. Communities have a right to set criteria and judge performances, so you probably shouldn't invest your time challenging every grade you get in college as being inherently unfair. But as an advanced writer you can ask specific questions about why one writing approach is deemed more effective than another, and you can suggest other criteria that could be used to identify successful writing in a particular field, context, or situation.

The multiple ways that "good writing" has been—and continues to be— inequitably limited, restricted, and defined is a testament to exactly how powerful writing is. When we discourage, disallow, or destroy a particular kind of writing, we limit whole cultures and communities; conversely, a writer or community who discovers how to "go viral" and connect with their readers can have tremendous influence. Writers can surely benefit from learning and practicing particular skills that help us connect to specific audiences—but we need to balance accommodating those readers' stated needs with our work as advocates for flexible, inclusive communities that value diverse approaches to "good writing."

Learn

- To learn more about **readers' expectations**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about "**correctness**," see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.
- To learn more about **genres**, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.

1.5 Your New Story About Writing

Since stories are so powerful, you want to be sure that the story you use today to guide how you think and work as a writer draws on the most relevant, most useful concepts you know. Because writers change, and what we write changes, and what we learn about writing changes, we are always updating our story. Certainly, the story you used five years ago or even last year may have worked well for you then, but it probably needs at least some new paint, and maybe even a full reframing. You may also find that you want to revise your story to make it more inclusive and equitable.

Your story doesn't have to account for every possible writing task or situation; instead, you want to focus on core values and common goals. You can compose your writing story in a few sentences, as a list or table of ideas and plans, or as couple of paragraphs or short video: whatever helps you communicate to yourself in a memorable, accessible way. An updated story could:

- Address the many kinds of writing you do in and beyond school: what does "writing" mean to you?
- Draw on beliefs and practices that have contributed strongly to your success in the past: what do you try to always do or think that helps you as you write?
- Include elements that reflect what researchers know about how writers work and learn, and connect those to your experiences.
- Consider "intangibles" that help form a context for writing, like your long-term goals, your attitudes and emotions, whether you have generally been included or excluded from common definitions of a "good writer," and/or your roles in your workplace or community.

You probably will need to tinker with your story in the coming weeks as you learn more, experiment more, and receive feedback. And a year or two from now, you'll be ready to write your *next* story about writing. But for now it's good just to have a working draft: a story you can tell yourself about writing, your work as a writer, and your pathways to success.

Explore 1.3

Draft an updated writing story—write at least three or four sentences or list 3-4 elements. Include beliefs, strategies, or habits that have helped you be a confident, successful writer in the past, or that help you generally be a successful student or community member. Then consider what you're learning: which of the threshold concepts listed in this section might you add to your story about writing? How can you use your story to foster inclusion and equity for diverse writers? What other aspects or elements of writing do you want to pay attention to in the upcoming months?