Chapter 12. Creating Your Writing Theory

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Explore connections between threshold concepts and your writing practices
- Articulate how specific strategies you have used as a writer connect to these concepts and practices
- Identify key principles that can guide your current and future writing
- Create and share your writing theory

In Chapter 1, you reviewed nine threshold concepts that writing scholars argue are common among advanced, reflective writers.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

You may or may not find that your own writing experiences and preferences align with one or more of these concepts, and you may have other principles and values that guide you as a writer. In this chapter, you will explore how one of those concepts—*advanced writers study and reflect on their writing*—can help you integrate all of these key approaches, values, and principles into a story that you can use to improve your writing overall: your writing theory.

While you may not become a writing scholar, you should still study your own writing: knowing about the challenges and successes of your own performance will help you gauge your best strategies as well as your readers' likely responses. Writers benefit from reflecting throughout our writing process: instead of succumbing to a vague sense of "writer's block," we can investigate our goals or our audience's needs as we consider the rhetorical situation, deepen our research or analysis as we explore our subject-knowledge, change the order of our tasks as we develop new steps and strategies, or consider our own confidence or curiosity as we address disposition problems. (You might have other problems you want to solve that are part of your current writing story: lab-report problems,

roommate distraction problems, culture-crossing problems, or campaign strategy problems.)

In addition to benefiting from ongoing reflective practice, writers also benefit from constructing a *working theory of writing*: a guide to the key beliefs, goals, and strategies that we can apply to multiple writing tasks, even ones we can't imagine right now. Scholars and professionals often rely on models or theories to help them predict how complex systems work: a CEO might rely on behavioral management theory; a physicist might rely on quantum field theory; and a graphic designer might rely on color theory.

To create a writing theory that helps you predict how your writing will go and adapt your writing knowledge to new situations, you will need a larger perspective than you can gain from reflecting on just one or two writing tasks. Your writing theory will be more useful when it aligns with your past experiences as well as your present experiences, connects with how other writers and readers interact, and accounts for the future writing you plan or hope to do. When you have a workable writing theory, you can quickly identify opportunities, challenges, strategies, and goals for any writing task you encounter, and draw on all of your prior successes to support your work.

12.1 Practice by Analyzing a Previous Writing Task

Your writing theory will be more accurate if you examine multiple data points in your writing life, including events from your past. Fortunately, you have been accumulating writing knowledge since you wrote your first thank you letter, your first poem, and your first text message, so you have lots of data to consult. Rather than guessing generally ("Sometimes I use outlines"), you can start to build your writing theory by analyzing an exact writing task you have already completed. When you carefully review the steps you actually took as a writer, you can understand more about your strengths, the challenges you encounter, and the principles you rely on as a writer.

Explore 12.1

Make a list of at least 15 different writing tasks you have completed recently, from common ones like text messages (to whom? about what?), applications, and school projects to less-usual tasks like recipes, lyrics, or role-playing-game plans. For three tasks, describe at least one strategy, challenge, or principle that you used or encountered while writing.

Examine one writing story: Choose and analyze a past task

To start working toward your writing theory, you may analyze any writing task you have completed that is *recent* and *memorable* enough that you can provide

details about how you composed it. You may choose a writing task from another (current or previous) class in school—but you may find that you gain more insight into your preferred writing strategies by choosing or a writing task from your workplace, community, or personal sphere. You should also choose a writing task that:

- Was challenging in some way for you, so that you can analyze how you respond to difficulty
- Had some substance or complication to it (if you choose a single 140-character post, you might have a hard time seeing a range of key writing principles in it)
- Will be at least a little different from tasks that people in your peer group will have worked on, especially if you're going to share your analyses with them later

All kinds of writing "count" here: researched or fictional writing, long projects or short-but-important memos, paper documents or social media posts, and all genres from lyrics to lesson plans, from scrapbooks to financial reports, and from private journals to public videos. If you can find a copy of the document, that's helpful but not necessary. Remember that your goal is to *analyze how* you wrote this document, to *describe your writing process or approach*, rather than to summarize what you actually said.

You can use the questions below to help structure your analysis. You should consider multiple aspects of the process, including what good writing is and what good writers do. In addition, you can identify practices by using your own definitions, beliefs, and goals to help explain your actions.

Analyze the writing task overall

- What is your document and when did you compose it? What did you know about its genre when you started?
- What did you know then about your audience(s) and their discourse community, workplace setting, or academic discipline?
- What were your purposes in composing this document?
- What did you expect from the start would be most difficult?

Analyze the main challenges

- Discuss two or three of the challenges you encountered considering the **rhetorical situation** of by this writing task (involving your goal and expectations about your audience, genre, evidence, or design) and how you worked on solving them.
- Discuss two or three of the challenges you encountered engaging with the **subject-knowledge** required to complete this project (including breadth/

depth choices, assumption-checking, and analysis/synthesis moves) and how you worked on solving them.

- Discuss two or three of the challenges with **steps and strategies** you encountered in this writing task (planning, inquiring, generating, organizing, and/or revising) and how you worked on solving them.
- Discuss two or three of the **disposition** challenges presented by this writing task (managing your confidence, motivation, time, persistence, and/or flexibility) and how you worked on solving them.
- Discuss any other problem you typically encounter, according to your writing story, and how you worked on solving it.

Analyze your own writing beliefs

- What did or do you think a good *writer* should do or be, overall or for this kind of task? Discuss two or three steps, and how you followed them when working on this writing task.
- What did or do you think good *writing* should do or be, overall or for this kind of task? Discuss two or three aspects, and whether you achieved them when working on this writing task.
- What other threshold concepts did you connect with or not connect with while you were working on this writing task?

Analyze the parallels with other writing tasks

- If you had this writing task to do again, how might you do it differently and/or better?
- How is this task similar to another kind of writing task (in or out of school) that you might do in the future, and how could you use similar strategies to successfully approach that task?

Explore 12.2

Answer several of the questions above, including at least one from each category, regarding a writing task you previously completed.

Learn

- To learn more about writers' **dispositions**, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about **rhetorical contexts** and discourse communities, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about identifying writing **difficulties**, see Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project.

Explore multiple stories: Compare your experience to other writers

The story of your past writing task is individual to you and based on your specific writing experiences; to build a broader mental model or a writing theory, however, you should be able to connect your experiences to those of other writers and readers. Moreover, reviewing other writers' stories can help you fine-tune your own, especially if you discover that some writing principles are common across different writers and different tasks.

Your most relevant source of alternate writing stories and models will come from peers who are also analyzing a past or present writing task, but you can also review public articles, videos, or blog posts by successful writers (you might try an online search for "advice to writers"). You might share your own task analysis by presenting on it or exchanging a draft with others during class, or by reviewing the analyses other peers posted online. As you consider other writers' task analyses, you should take some notes about what they wrote, what was easy or challenging for them, and what concepts they focused on.

You might find it helpful to use a table or chart to keep track of common or changing themes:

	Their main challenges	**Their foundational writing principles**	**What was hardest / easiest for them?**
Writer 1 + Task			
Writer 2 + Task			
Writer 3 + Task			

To assess these connections, you can write about several kinds of patterns:

- Did these writers experience common and/or different challenges regarding rhetorical situation, steps and strategies, subject-knowledge, and/or dispositions?
- Did they identify any similar new challenges or goals from their own writing stories?
- What similarities do you see in how these other writers identified principles or threshold concepts that seemed highly significant to them, or writing challenges that seemed most difficult to them?
- Where do their models most overlap and most differ from yours, and what might account for those connections or contrasts?
- Finally, look back at your own task analysis with fresh eyes: can you identify two or three changes or additions you can make, even if they weren't as evident in the writing task you just annotated?

Explore 12.3

Answer several of the questions above for at least two other writers; you may use a chart layout and/or write in paragraph style. Try using a "what-how-why-so" approach to deepen your reflection.

Learn

- To learn more about strategies for **reflective writing**, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.

From story to theory: Identify enduring views and strategies

Not every idea you have about writing is an enduring principle or common goal that belongs in your overall writing theory. Some writing problems are limited to a single task or class, and some solutions worked in the past but might not work in future writing tasks. In order to build an enduring model, you need to focus on the factors that most powerfully influenced your choices as a writer.

As you look back at your notes about your past writing task and other writers' views, try to identify a few kinds of experiences or trends that could help you choose important principles or fundamental concepts:

- What are ideas that you have believed about writers or about writing for a long time, or challenges you face as a writer, that you still think of frequently when you're working on a writing project? (You might have your own language for these, or you might be using new terms or threshold concepts to describe ongoing experiences.)
- What are ideas that you used to think were universal (or challenges you thought couldn't be overcome), but that now you are starting to think might be more variable?
- What are ideas or challenges that you are just learning about that are beginning to seem important, even if you're not 100% sure about them?
- What are ideas, challenges, or strategies that surface in several other writers' stories that you believe are applicable to your ongoing work as a writer?

You should choose the concepts or actions that have seemed or currently seem most important to you as a writer: these can become the foundations for your theory of writing. You might identify four or five of these points; you might choose as many as nine or ten, at least for now.

Explore 12.4

Write a couple of sentences each to answer the questions above. Recall our "what-how-why-so" reflective writing strategy, and be as specific as possible in your writing. Try to write for an audience that includes yourself and your peers, and to explain how these concepts connect to one another to provide a good mental model for writing and for improving as a writer. You can also use illustrations, charts, or diagrams to help explain your model.

12.2 Develop Your Writing Theory

Your mental model of writing can operate like a digital map of your writing world. You can zoom in to recall or identify specific attributes, experiences, or strategies that can help you respond to a specific writing problem. Eventually, though, you will want to zoom out to see the big picture, to identify the major principles and patterns that help you succeed as an advanced writer, and to create your theory of writing. From this perspective, you can see how writing challenges exist in clusters or neighborhoods: some problems are more likely to reside in your knowledge or assumptions, while others are more likely to have their roots in your purposes, or in your dispositions. Instead of having to actively recall every house on a block or every bush on a hill, you can remember a few important zones or routes and a few strategies that work for you in each one.

A generic map of Everytown USA won't help you find the best local pizza, and a generic model of writing won't always help you compose the business plan, website, or menu for the restaurant you want to open next year. If your goal is not just to survive a single writing class but to improve—and continue improving—as an advanced writer for all your writing tasks, you need to create your own map. Your new writing theory will help you identify the challenges, select the strategies, and adapt to the new contexts that are most relevant to you as a writer.

Select your writing principles

Like a city planner or architect, your first step is to design the major features of your theory. In writing as in life, *principles* are foundational values and practices that we rely on across multiple situations. Some of your major principles about writing may draw on the threshold concepts presented in this book, but some should be adaptations or creations of your own.

Identify key principles

If you've already taken steps to model your past writing, or reflect on and predict your present writing, you can refer to some of the writing principles you generated in those projects. If you are just getting started, you might respond to one

or more of these questions, thinking specifically of how they apply to your own work as a writer:

- **What is successful *writing* (noun)?** What one or two elements or features of your own written products (essays, messages, websites) make them successful, even as you move among different situations and genres?
- **What is successful *writing* (verb)?** What one or two approaches do you take when you are writing which help make your process successful?
- **What is a successful writer?** Which one or two of your values, habits, actions, or attributes most contribute to your success as a writer?
- **How does successful writing evolve?** What one or two elements of your writing have improved recently, or might change or improve in the future as you move into new writing contexts?

For your writing theory, you will probably want at least three or four core principles to help you cover a range of writing tasks, and you probably won't be able to regularly remember more than seven or eight principles. As you start to articulate these key concepts, you might want to make a simple list. On the other hand, you might prefer to represent your principles using another approach:

- **Sketch a visual map**, make a collage, or design another representation of your principles, using color, size, location, and/or images to show the importance of and relationships among different factors.
- Organize your principles in an **outline, chart, or columns**, to represent different categories or stages of your work as a writer.
- Create a **dialogue or script** to explain your principles to another writer—perhaps an expert writer or perhaps a less-experienced writer.

Your principles form the foundation of your writing theory. They may evolve over time but remain central to your own work as an advanced writer. If a principle stops being relevant or crucial, then it's no longer a foundational principle, and so your theory might need adjusting.

Explore 12.5

Use any of the questions or structures above to identify at least 4-6 of your major writing principles.

Explain your principles

Your writing theory is your very own. If you build it but don't know how it actually works or what the terms mean, it's like owning a sophisticated phone but not understanding how to use any of its systems or applications. You need to be able to explain what your principles mean and how they work in your real life as a writer.

You can explain the principles you selected in many ways. The questions below may help you explain how each concept or principle functions, what your reasons are for choosing these principles, or your plans to use them to guide your writing. You can answer the same questions for each principle, or provide different information for separate principles.

- **Trace the ARC (Adopt, Revise, Create)**: Did you adopt this principle from something you were taught or read about? Did you revise someone else's principle to meet your needs? Or did you create this version of the principle based on your own experiences and values? Why did you make this choice?
- **Writing vs. Writing**: is this principle about writing-as-a-thing (a successful document) or about writing-as-a-verb (a successful approach or strategy) or both?
- **Expert vs. Novice**: what's one sentence you'd use to explain this principle to an advanced writer? How might you explain it to a novice or less experienced writer?
- **General vs. Contextual**: is this principle widely applicable to all the writing you'll do, or most relevant to particular contexts, audiences, goals, or genres? Does the principle apply to all of your writing steps, or mostly to one stage or approach you encounter as a writer?
- **Principles in Practice**: give an exact example from one of your own recent writing projects where you needed or relied on this principle. Can you quote a sentence or two that you wrote to show what happened, or describe the exact choice you made?

The best way to test your explanations, of course, is to ask for another writer's feedback: which principles do they understand? which do they have questions about? what principles might they suggest adding or modifying, based on their own writing experiences?

When you can explain your principles in your own words, and show how they connect to your own writing in real life, your mental model becomes more useful and adaptable.

Explore 12.6

Write a sentence or two to define or explain each of your principles: you might indicate where the principle comes from or give an example to show how and why it is important to you as an advanced writer.

Focus on equity: Balance adaptation and aspiration

If you struggle with writing—and particularly if you struggle because you face discrimination based on one or more aspects of your identity—you may be tempted

to create or continue operating with two writing theories: one that explains how you will cope with writing when you believe you have to match powerful people's expectations, and one that explains how you write, or how you would like to write, when you believe that your readers will judge you only based on the power of your writing. Or worse, you might decide to create only the first "fake" theory, and never get around to creating the second one that is true to who you are as a person and a writer.

Like keeping two sets of financial records, keeping up with two (or more) separate writing theories could be confusing, exhausting, and even counterproductive. When you have to invest energy simply in deciding which theory applies, you increase your cognitive load. If one of your theories is a false front, the writing that it guides will likely suffer because it is separated from your values, and your confidence and growth as a writer will be similarly eroded. Novelist and civil rights advocate W.E.B. DuBois discussed this kind of "double-consciousness" as a drain on the energies of Black Americans, and dreamed of a day when people could merge all their identities without losing or suppressing any parts of themselves.

To be sure, articulating your writing theory won't by itself dismantle systemic racism or other discrimination, or force readers to treat you with respect. But the goal of creating this theory is to strengthen your own writing (verb and noun). You can lower your cognitive load and increase connections to your core values when you create a theory that deliberately accounts for what you need to and are willing to *adapt* to in some circumstances, as well as what kinds of writing strategies or approaches you *aspire* to use as often as possible. Every time you claim agency, deciding up front how you will write and what will help you choose your strategies, you gain power as a writer and a person—and you model for others how to use that power for their own writing.

There are multiple places along a continuum from "always adapt whatever the consequences" to "always follow my aspirations whatever the consequences" where you might currently anchor your writing theory. For instance, you might distinguish among the content, structure, and/or words that you will be willing—or unwilling—to adapt as you write. You might identify a few very high stakes rhetorical situations in which you plan to adapt your writing, and also identify some other kinds or scenes of writing where you want to strive to represent and/or not suppress your personal, cultural, or linguistic identity. Or you could set out a growth plan, with a specific and realistic timeline, for how you will explore your writing opportunities so that more and more of your writing aligns with your core identity and values, and explain who you will enlist to assist and support you.

Finally, you might seek to compose your writing theory so that you foreground your role as a supporter of and ally to those writers around you who have been marginalized or whose voices and approaches to writing have been suppressed. There may be room in your theory to express your principles about checking your

own assumptions, about increasing the range of "good writing" that you are aware of and value, and/or about challenging "rules" and expectations around writing that may unfairly limit the opportunities of groups of writers. As you continue to seek and advocate for linguistic justice, gaining confidence and skill, your writing theory can evolve in this area just as it does in others.

A writing theory is not a place to resist all reader demands simply because they are difficult to meet; part of being a writer is adapting to the expectations of reasonable readers. However, identifying some reader demands as unreasonable—as unrelated to the constraints and opportunities of the rhetorical situation, or as ignorantly or maliciously suppressive of some writers' access to a rhetorical situation or other advantages of power and influence—is also part of being an advanced, reflective writer, so all writers benefit from considering inclusion and equity as part of our writing theory.

Complete your writing theory

A theory about how writing functions (for you) is more than a to-do list or a collection of random principles: it's a model you can use to explain how writing usually works and how an advanced writer like you usually succeeds. You may currently have a theory about why your favorite sports team or political candidate is winning (or losing), a theory about why some actors become famous and others don't, or a theory about how to succeed as a baker, a biker, or a broker. In each case, you base your theory on key facts and principles—but you tell your theory to others as a story. The same is true for writing: you want to create a theory of successful writers and writing that becomes a memorable and persuasive story.

You've had a theory of writing for years already: every time you chose one word over another you did so because you had reasons to believe that step would contribute to your success. You might not have articulated it to yourself very clearly, and you might have relied on an incomplete or one-size-fits-all theory. In order to improve as an advanced writer, your goal is to create an advanced theory that is:

- **Integrated**: It addresses several stages or aspects of writing as connected to one another
- **Dynamic**: It can adapt to multiple writing situations now and in the future
- **Productive**: It helps you get unstuck and solve writing problems that you encounter

By these standards, you can see that "I just can't write very well!" isn't a very useful theory of writing. It treats "writing" as a single, static event (as if you are equally terrible at every single step or genre of writing), and it tells a story of surrendering to writing challenges rather than reflecting on ways to solve them. Even a cheerful story, such as "Writing's easy: I just wait for inspiration and then

I write it all down!" is useful only until the first time you get stranded with no inspiration; then it stops being true or useful.

To create your theory of writing, you want to consider all the relevant facts and experiences:

- How you have succeeded in the past as a writer
- What steps or tasks most frustrate you when you're writing
- What you are learning right now about succeeding as a writer
- What factors seem most important to you as you define good writing (noun and verb)
- What—and how—you imagine your own writing in the future

When you have all your information, you're almost ready to write your theory. All that's missing is a rhetorical situation: a purpose and an audience for your writing theory. Think for a minute how your theory might change if you were writing to one or more of the following readers:

- Yourself right now
- Your past or future self
- A peer in your classroom
- Another classroom full of writers, perhaps very young writers or more experienced ones
- Writers in your community or at your workplace
- Subscribers to your blog, podcast, or video channel

And consider how you might change or adapt your writing theory if you were aiming for one or more of these purposes:

- To help a writer who is stuck right now in a project
- To encourage a writer who feels stuck in all writing projects
- To support a writer who is facing new or more challenging writing tasks
- To assist writers in a particular field, discipline, profession, or community
- To remind yourself of what you have been learning
- To persuade another writer to adopt some or all of your theory

A writing theory isn't just a collection of words to sit on a table: it's a guide for how a real person, a writer, can think and act. As your rhetorical situation changes, the information, explanations, connections, emphases, and/or presentation of your theory of writing might change, even if just by a little.

Finally, consider *how* you want to tell your story. Which of the genres below might best match the rhetorical situation in which you're imagining sharing your writing theory, and how would your presentation change from one to the next?

- An essay of several paragraphs
- A letter to yourself, a friend, or a colleague
- A diagram, infographic, or flowchart
- A narrated slide presentation
- A report with sections, lists, and graphs
- An animated or live video
- A sequence of posts to share on social media
- A script for a dialogue or dramatic scene
- A song, recipe, user's manual, annotated map, or collage

As you compose your writing theory, finally, remember that your goal is to get beyond a list to a story. Stories *make meaning* out of facts. To make your theory of writing *meaningful*, you need to include your principles, of course; you might want to think about what order to put them in (chronological? most-to-least important? oldest to newest-learned? separate categories?). You also need to explain and give very specific examples to show how you understand the principles, particularly examples that show how integrated or flexible your theory is. And you should provide some of your reasoning for why these principles are so important to you as a reflective, evolving writer: that helps provide the plot and motivation of your story.

Explore 12.7

Briefly describe a purpose, an audience, and an appropriate genre for your writing theory. Consider the principles or fundamental concepts you listed earlier, and write out two or three exact examples from your experience that can help make your story about one of those principles vivid. Finally, explain one or two reasons you have for including one of the principles you chose, to help readers see the plot or motivation of your story and draw connections among its parts.

12.3 Apply and Adapt Your Writing Theory to Transfer Your Learning

The point of creating your own theory about writing is not to frame it and put it on a wall (or file it away with your other school assignments): the goal is to use it to engage every day with writing tasks and to improve as a reflective writer. If your new mental model is integrated, dynamic, and productive, you should be able to apply it to a range of writing tasks and writing challenges. Yet just as you shouldn't rely on a mental model that some other writer gives you, you shouldn't rely too long on a personal theory of writing without updating it. At any point

that some or all of your model stops working for you, you should adjust it: provide different explanations, add or change some principles, or shift your emphasis to principles that best match your current writing situation.

When your model works, you should be able to successfully complete the main problem-solving tasks writers face: to predict and plan for writing problems even in a brand new task, to solve or work around writing problems as they occur, to transfer your understanding about writing from one situation to another, and to continue to improve as a writer long after you complete a major writing project or take your final writing course.

Explore 12.8

Describe the strangest, hardest, and/or weirdest writing task you can imagine coming your way in the next ten years. Pick a tough subject, an unfamiliar or resistant audience, and/or a new or complicated genre (maybe you can invent one that doesn't exist yet!). Given what you know about this task and yourself as a writer, list two or three challenges you can imagine that might push you toward "writer's block" or feeling stuck. Finally, explain how one or two parts of your theory of writing might help you get unstuck and succeed at this writing task.