

## The Role of Belief in the Material Techniques of Invention

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Bringing together two related frames of reference, new materialism and post-techne, this discussion considers how writers' beliefs inform what material techniques they employ in service of rhetorical invention. Through a case example of one writer's use of a Lily Pulitzer planner, a set of social media platforms, a table, and a handwritten list, this discussion shows that the beliefs about writing that writers develop over the course of their lives powerfully influence the writing process. Specifically, writers' beliefs inform what possibilities they see in the materials involved in their writing process and the techniques they employ in service to invention.

Recent studies have examined the role of mundane and ubiquitous tools and their associated practices in writers' lives. In her materialist account of writing, Laura Micciche (2014) argued for an examination of writing that shifts focus from the individual writer in the act of producing texts to “a merging of various forms of matter—objects, pets, sounds, tools, books, bodies, spaces, feelings, and so on—in an activity not solely dependent on one's control but made possible by elements that codetermine writing's possibility” (p. 498). Operating from another theoretical perspective and also calling attention to the relationships between writers and entities entailed in the writing situation, Byron Hawk (2009) developed the concept of post-techne to name the techniques of invention writers employ by “enacting ambient elements” of the rhetorical situation “in service to invention” (p. 383). Like materialist views, Hawk's post-techne invited examination of writing practices that are dependent on and enabled by human and non-human entities entailed in the writing situation.

My purpose in bringing these two frames of reference together, materialism and post-techne, is to examine the relationships between writers' material techniques of invention and how writers come to understand writing as they respond to rhetorical situations over the course of their lives. As research like Kevin Roozen's (2009) has shown, over time, writers develop a model or conception of what writing is, and as writers enter into new rhetorical situations, their gradually developed conception informs their responses. Put differently, the contexts and situations in a writers' lives are linked in their trajectories of literate development (Prior and Shipka, 2003, p. 228). In terms of techniques, the practices that writers employ to address rhetorical situations have a history, originating in one context and adapted later for subsequent writing situations. This research shows that throughout moments of origination and adaption writers develop beliefs about writing through the practices and materials employed in service to addressing rhetorical situations.

To examine how writers gradually come to believe notions about writing—to conceptualize writing—through their interactions with materials, this discussion comes in two parts. First, I draw on definitions of a kind of knowledge, techne, to define beliefs in relation to the writing process, focusing on how beliefs form through the use of materials in the writing process and later inform processes. Second, I provide a case example of a writer whose beliefs about her process informed her understanding of what writing does and what mundane and material practices best supported her writing process.

### The Role of Belief in the Act of Writing

In Kelly Pender's (2011) account of techne in classical rhetoric, she defined techne as knowledge of an activity that removes a producer “from dependence on habit and chance” (p. 22). In other words, a writer—or any kind of creator—in possession of techne has knowledge that a practitioner “who possesses only a knack, that is, an unreflective (or unreflected-upon) habit attained through practice” does not have (p. 22). James Porter (2008) demonstrated the value of techne—here, a combination of technical procedure and rhetorical knowledge—as a frame to reconstruct the canon of delivery for digital environments (p. 211). To critique classical views of techne, Pender argued that classical conceptions of techne assume “writers are autonomous subjects who work through the power of their own agency to act *on* nature,” and

in contrast, the concept of post-techne brings attention to the situatedness of writers as one of many “embedded elements” within a rhetorical situation (p. 99, emphasis hers). Like materialist accounts of writing, post-techne emphasizes relationships between the writer and other entities—both human and non-human—entailed in the rhetorical situation, redefining invention as the act of situating the writer within a constellation of materials to enact the possibilities for invention (Hawk, 2007 p. 206). Paul Prior and Jody Shipka's (2003) analysis of writers' processes through their framework of “environment-selecting and -structuring practices” demonstrated the breadth of materials entailed in rhetorical situations: sounds from the dryer, furnishings, televisions, research notebooks, and monk chants on CD. Their account of the relations between writers, technologies, spaces, and other materials as constitutive with the act of writing show that writing is enmeshed with the people, places, and things of everyday life, and these materials aid in invention and make the act of writing possible.

My claim is that writers' past engagements with materials and the “environmental and bodily” techniques that writers employ (Hawk, 2009 p. 384) result in a set of beliefs that structure writers' processes. Existing accounts of process like Prior and Shipka's and Roozen's have shown that writing is codependent with past experiences and materials, but beliefs have not yet been examined as part of the constellation of elements that codetermine writing's possibility. In *Understanding Belief*, Nils Nilsson (2014) described beliefs as operating ideas that guide daily life “in perceiving a current situation, in identifying appropriate actions, and in predicting the effects of those actions” (p. 14). In this sense, beliefs about writing function much like writing knowledge: a conceptual framework or “mental model” useful for approaching writing tasks (Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014, p. 41); however, beliefs and knowledge differ in how they are developed. Beliefs are developed as part of lived experience and always in relation to already-held beliefs, or as Nils Nilsson (2014) put it: “All of our beliefs are mental constructions. Some are consequences of other beliefs, and some are explanations built to explain existing beliefs and experiences” (p. 27). Put baldly: beliefs are often self-reinforcing, “influenced mainly by neighboring beliefs in the network” of existing beliefs (p. 58). In contrast, as Kathleen Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (2014) showed, new knowledge interacts with prior knowledge differently. Rather than reinforcing prior knowledge, new knowledge requires transformation of prior knowledge for successful learning, what they called remix: “prior knowledge revised synthetically to *incorporate* new concepts and practices into the prior model of writing” (p. 116, emphasis theirs). Thus, while beliefs encourage the lamination of a model of writing and its accompanying practices, knowledge-making entails bringing together competing or otherwise incongruent sources of evidence.

In what follows, I present a case example of a writer, Rosemary, who has developed a belief about writing-as-connecting based on her past experiences. Her belief emphasizes using texts and technologies to connect with others, and this belief organizes her writing process: influencing the materials she employs when writing. As I will also show, Rosemary's beliefs entail a set of material techniques that she employs in service to rhetorical invention, always shaping what she invents and her goals for writing.

## Methods

This case example was developed as part of IRB-approved research examining the relationship between material writing practices and writers' past experiences. Throughout the fall 2015 semester, I collected three sets of data over a period of two months—a retrospective interview, a direct observation, and a culminating interview—from a convenience sample of eight informants recruited from two different sections of an upper-level digital writing course. The study's first phase of research, the retrospective interview, was informed by Prior and Shipka's (2003) drawings of environment-selecting and -structuring practices and Kevin Roozen's (2009) process-tracing interviews to construct a broad overview of composers' past and current experiences. The second phase, the direct observation, involved recording the informants' writing practices by recording their screen in Quicktime while documenting their off-screen activities in field notes. Finally, the culminating interview was an adaptation of Roozen's (2010) text-based interviews; like Roozen's interviews, this study's culminating interview was “focused on texts and

materials” specific to a “textual activit[y]”—in this case, the screen recording made during the direct observation (p. 322). The data were then coded and code-checked by a senior colleague through a deductive coding scheme that identified distinct aspects of writing practices: technology, prior practice, environment, affect, and sociality. In what follows, I provide an overview of Rosemary’s writing development and the formation of her beliefs about writing-as-connecting. Then, I discuss how that belief informs her writing practices once she had come to college.

## Rosemary’s Background and Writing Beliefs

As a child, Rosemary was diagnosed with dyslexia, and to cope with her dyslexia, she attended an after-school tutoring program where she learned “tricks” to help her manage the effects of her dyslexia. Rosemary learned to read with a clear purple ruler over the words to “make the words pop a little more” and to write with a pencil inside “a ball that had holes in it” that forced her to write more slowly to avoid “making any mistakes.” In addition to attending the after-school program, she received support at home from her father, who took time each night to read books like *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Hobbit* with her—a scene of reading that Deborah Brandt (2001) found to be common in American households (p. 150). Later in her childhood, Rosemary began reading on her own, and the support she received at home and at school worked. By the time Rosemary transitioned from elementary school to middle school, she read at a grade level above her classmates.

When Rosemary began middle school, she entered into a new school system because her parents moved from Philadelphia to Boston. The difficulties of moving to a different city were exacerbated by transitioning from a self-contained classroom in elementary school to a period-based school day in middle school. To help her make the transition to her new school structure, Rosemary began keeping a planner—a practice that she kept up through high school and during college: “I’ve always used an agenda. In middle school, they gave [agendas] to us. And it’s just something that has helped me—having the dates and stuff like that.” Rosemary also began writing poetry and posting to social networks in middle school, often using her social networking accounts—MySpace and a Blogger site—to share her poems with her friends. Invigorated by ability to connect with people through sharing her poetry, Rosemary continued to write and share poems throughout high school. Her interest in poetry was motivated—at least in part—by encouragement and support from her teachers, friends, and parents. The wealth of support Rosemary received was instrumental in her winning an NCTE award for her poetry in high school.

Through these early experiences of reading with her father and sharing her writing poetry, Rosemary gradually developed a belief about writing as connecting with others:

I feel like writing is language no matter what. Everything is communication, and I’m definitely very into talking and expressing my feelings to others. And that’s where—I express my feelings that way. I’m definitely a type of person who’s extroverted I would say, so I’m driven by relationships in my life, and I feel like writing is just another way of communicating my feelings be it online, texting, or through social media.

Rosemary’s past experiences reading and writing resulted in the development of this belief, because throughout her life Rosemary received support and encouragement for her reading and writing throughout her life from a variety of sources: her tutors, her parents, her teachers, her friends, and her sorority sisters. Although her parents, tutors, teachers, and friends were not formal collaborators nor were they necessarily audiences for her writing, these ongoing interactions informed the genres and purpose of Rosemary’s writing, and as I will show in section that follows, Rosemary’s belief about writing-as-connecting also informed the techniques she employed in college, particularly her use of a Lily Pulitzer planner to organize; of public and private online platforms like Instagram and messaging apps; and of a technique called *table day* to prioritize her schoolwork above her other responsibilities. Through the materials that she used in each of these activities, Rosemary’s goal of connecting with others shaped how and what she invented—including her own identity.

## **Rosemary's Lily Pulitzer Planner**

Although planners had been an important part of Rosemary's writing since middle school, Rosemary found another possibility for her planner in college when she began using the same kind of planner her sorority sisters used: a monogrammed planner made by Lily Pulitzer:

But a lot of the sorority girls have the Lily Pulitzer ones, and you can go to the Greek stop and get a free monogram, and I didn't even know what a monogram was until I moved here. But I think they're cool, so – It's a neat way to put everything down for sorority events, for school events, for dates I have to remember. And it's small enough so that I can carry it around wherever. It's a hard cover, so it never gets damaged. I fold back the pages to make it easier to find stuff in the future.

Rosemary's use of a planner afforded her the opportunity to express her identity as part of a community, enabling her to discuss the Lily Pulitzer brand and Lily Pulitzer planners with her sorority sisters. Thus, while her planner was a tool she used to organize the events, deadlines, and commitments in her life, the planner itself—its brand and the status of that brand—provided Rosemary a way to connect with her fellow sisters.

## **Rosemary's Professional and Private Selves**

Since coming to college, Rosemary re-focused her goals as a writer, shifting from creative writing to technical writing. This change was prompted by joining her sorority—a community that valued professionalization and paid little attention to arts like poetry. To shape her new identity, Rosemary deleted her poetry blog: “I took down my blog last year, so right now I'm focusing on developing my professional self versus my private self. So having something be so public—I wasn't proud of it.” Additionally, she replicated this split between the professional and the private in her social media accounts, often opting to use private messaging apps and closed groups to communicate private information. To communicate publically—usually on behalf of her sorority—she joined Instagram:

I got Instagram the week I came to college. My best friend kept telling me that I need to get it. It's more popular here than up north. I know that for a fact, because I have friends in both places. And my friends up north barely post pictures or like pictures. And then here a lot more people use it. I get a lot more feedback from people who are here. So that probably fueled it a little bit—a lot of likes and stuff like that. I'm very social, and even on Facebook, a lot of my posts are pictures of what I'm doing. I love manipulating with the filters. So, I think that it's really fun, and the short, witty captions, I really like doing that. With all my sorority sisters, it's a race to see who can get the best caption the quickest in different situations. So, we will do themed things like 80s rollerblading themed parties. We went to Harry Potter world, so we would post witty things about the situation that we're in.

Thus, although Rosemary no longer wrote creatively—a kind of writing in which she had a wealth of experience and success—the current state of her creative writing and her new interest in Instagram reinforce the idea that regardless of genre, Rosemary wrote to connect, to create and sustain relationships with others.

## **Rosemary's Table Day**

Although Rosemary began projects long before the deadline—sometimes beginning to draft weeks in advance—she occasionally fell behind in her schoolwork. When she needed to focus in order to meet deadline, she employed a practice that she called table day:

If I'm falling behind a little bit—One of my sorority sisters calls it table day where you sit down and write down everything you need to do and then you go through it like a list

and complete everything. I think that's fun. She'll put everything out on the table and put it away slowly, but I'll do it more by the paper.

A version of a strategy that one of her sorority sisters used, Rosemary's table day involved a list written on "a [paper] sticky note" in her planner to get caught up when falling behind in her coursework. Although the primary function of table day was to give her opportunity and motivation to meet deadlines, it had a second function of allowing her to invent herself as a member of her sorority. Like her agenda and her social networking, table day was another way that Rosemary connected with others. By employing a version of a practice modeled by one of her sorority sisters, Rosemary engaged in a shared practice that allowed her to bond with her sorority sister, and it had the added benefit of motivating her to complete her coursework.

## Conclusion

This case example of one writer's belief and associated practices indicates that beliefs influence writers in profound ways. They inform the materials writers cull to address writing situations, their goals for writing, and their identities as writers. Unlike the other informants in this study, Rosemary had always experienced literacy as a social activity that began for her at a young age during her tutoring sessions after school. In college, that belief served her well because through her belief of writing as a means of connecting, Rosemary readily identified how she might employ texts and technologies to foster relationships with people around her. Because beliefs orient writers to materials, practices, and possibilities, understanding how beliefs and knowledge interact in the lives of writers is consequential in the teaching of writing. As is the case with writing knowledge, the beliefs that writers develop and draw from can be more or less helpful (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, 2014, p. 23) to writers, particularly in cases where writers' beliefs may compete with established writing knowledge. Because Rosemary's beliefs about writing emphasized writing's capacity to connect with others, the techniques that she developed to help her respond to rhetorical situations were productive. In short, because of the richness of Rosemary's experiences, she happened to develop a set of useful beliefs about writing that enabled her to develop productive practices with materials she had culled to include in her writing process. A different set of experiences may have resulted in a less helpful set of beliefs: particularly if those experiences were limited to demonstrating content knowledge in service to preparation for high-stakes tests. Providing students room to articulate what they believe about writing and opportunities to synthesize those beliefs with writing knowledge is one place to start recognizing how their past experience influence how they write and why they write.

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