

Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity

Kevin Roozen

This reading and the two that follow come from Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's edited collection *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies* (Utah State University

Press, 2015), which introduces key ideas for college students who are new to the field of writing studies. Many different scholars contributed to the book. Kevin Roozen, the author of the piece below, is associate professor of writing and rhetoric and director of First-Year Composition at the University of Central Florida. In this selection, he encourages us to think about how our writing incorporates the influences and participation of other people — much more than we might realize when sitting alone at the computer.

It is common for us to talk about writing in terms of the particular text we are working on. Consider, for example, how often writers describe what they are doing by saying “I am writing an email” or “I’m writing a report” or “I’m writing a note.” These shorthand descriptions tend to collapse the activity of writing into the act of a single writer inscribing a text. In doing so, they obscure two foundational and closely related notions of writing: writers are engaged in the work of making meaning for particular audiences and purposes, and writers are always connected to other people.

Writers are always doing the rhetorical work of addressing the needs and interests of a particular audience, even if unconsciously. The technical writers at a pharmaceutical company work to provide consumers of medications with information they need about dosages and potential side effects. The father writing a few comments on a birthday card to his daughter crafts statements intended to communicate his love for her. Sometimes, the audience for an act of writing might be the writer himself. A young man jotting in his diary, for example, might be documenting life events in order to better understand his feelings about them. A child scribbling a phrase on the palm of her hand might do so as a way of reminding herself to feed the family pets, clean her room, or finish her homework. Writing, then, is always an attempt to address the needs of an audience.

In working to accomplish their purposes and address an audience’s needs, writers draw upon many other people. No matter how isolated a writer may seem as she sits at her computer, types on the touchpad of her smartphone, or makes notes on a legal pad, she is always drawing upon

the ideas and experiences of countless others. The technical writers at a pharmaceutical company draw collaboratively upon the ideas of others they work with as they read their colleagues’ earlier versions of the information that will appear on the label. They also connect themselves to others as they engage with the laws about their products written by legislatures and the decisions of lawsuits associated with medications that have been settled or may be pending. The father crafting birthday wishes to his daughter might recall and consciously or unconsciously restate comments that his own parents included on the birthday cards he received as a child. As I work to craft this explanation of writing as a social and rhetorical activity, I am implicitly and explicitly responding to and being influenced by the many people involved in this project, those with whom I have shared earlier drafts, and even those whose scholarship I have read over the past thirteen years.

Writing puts the writer in contact with other people, but the social nature of writing goes beyond the people writers draw upon and think about. It also encompasses the countless people who have shaped the genres, tools, artifacts, technologies, and places writers act with as they address the needs of their audiences. The genres of medication labels, birthday wishes, and diary entries writers use have undergone countless changes as they have been shaped by writers in various times and places. The technologies with which writers act—including computer hardware and software; the QWERTY keyboard; ballpoint pens and lead pencils; and legal pads, journals, and Post-It notes—have also been shaped by many people across time and place. All of these available means of persuasion we take up when we write have been shaped by and through the use of many others who have left their traces on and inform our uses of those tools, even if we are not aware of it.

Because it conflicts with the shorthand descriptions we use to talk and think about writing, understanding writing as a social and rhetorical activity can be troublesome in its complexity. We say “I am writing an email” or “I am writing a note,” suggesting that we are composing alone and with complete autonomy, when, in fact, writing can never be anything but a social and rhetorical act, connecting us to other people across time and space in an attempt to respond adequately to the needs of an audience.