Writing Identities

TOWARD POST-PROCESS THOUGHT

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Writing Identities: Toward Post-Process Thought

Preface

Writing Identities positions students to come to terms with the public, interpretative and situated contexts of writing and reading. They will respond to diverse internal and external print and non-print influences that contribute to the construction of multifaceted identities. Such identity construction might have been implied in previous writing approaches; however, post-process thought focuses on a direct recognition of the fact that identity is a common denominator of good writing.

Five main genres consisting of *life writing, informational writing, analytical writing, semiotic evaluation writing,* and *research writing* emphasize the evolving nature of identity associated with academic writing. Autobiographical, authorial, discoursal, and positional identities that students bring and develop play a pivotal role in gaining the voice necessary to inhabit new space while constructing meaning and composing academic writing. As relations among identity, culture, and power in writing and rhetoric are established, writing identities emerge in relation to cultural constructions of race, class, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, aging, and disability.

Life Writing—autobiographical writing, autoethnographical, and reflections—positions students as authors shaping a complex identity and negotiating among discourses, the events of personal history, and classroom demands. Personal narratives such as these enable students to engage in introspections regarding the self in relation to others. First-person point of view writing allows writers to experience the power of writing from a position of the subject as opposed to being written about from a position of the object. Most personal narratives show writers shaping a complex identity and negotiating among a range of discourses, the events of personal history and academic demands. Therefore, students should be encouraged to read and write narratives with an eye to the complexities, not just the stereotypes. As a result of the critical aspect of this process, students will become less dependent on working under as assigned identity from which they cannot escape and become more liable to shape their own identity stemming from their access to various spaces.

Informative Writing positions students to develop a discoursal identity. The discursive practices of a discourse community affect how well a person can communicate within those disciplinary boundaries. Academic writing, such as summary report writing, requires that students integrate their own ideas and viewpoints with those of recognized experts in a discourse community in order to validate a discoursal identity. This interpretation promotes realization of diverse dimensions of discourse communities they join and inhabit.

Analytical Writing immerses students in study of "The City as Text" to examine the cultural-historical influences of artistic genres, such as art and museum exhibits, graffiti and murals, or architecture, on the construction of a community's identity. One key factor is that through the study of the stylistic features of various periods of design, students can make plausible connections across periods. In addition, as students analyze the interrelations between artists and their works, they may draw parallels between themselves and their writings.

Semiotic Evaluation Writing engages students in an appraisal of ways that meaning is created by or attached to visual images. In a virtual and visual age where images are increasingly used to communicate messages, interpreting these images for ways they reflect or manipulate reality is an important information age skill to possess. Therefore, as criteria are developed and applied to meticulously selected images, mythical characters, and advertisements, students gain experience in separating reality from perception.

Report Writing positions students to incorporate various identities suitable for developing a synthesis argument. Activities expanding the scope of the significant topic begun in informative writing are used to develop a synthesis argument through the information processing stages of data gathering, information processing, knowledge construction, and understanding. In this sense, report writing underscores the relevance of the autobiographical, authorial, discoursal and the positional identities in elucidating voice in the academy.

Students who journey through *Writing Identities* should leave with a firmer realization of how their writing exemplifies the public, interpretive, and situatedness of writing as well as the multifaceted nature of identity. As a result of a post-process approach to writing, diverse voices that have been silenced or misplaced are reflected in the activity system of the composition classroom.

CONTENTS

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter One

COMPOSING THOUGHT

Writing Processes

During the writing process you transform the material you discover—by inspiration, research, accident, or other means—into a message that makes a difference for readers. In short, writing is a process of making deliberate decisions.

For example, consider a Dear John or Jane letter, an essay exam, a job application, a letter to a newspaper, a note to a sick friend, or your written testimony as a witness to a crime. In each of these writing situations, you write because you feel strongly enough to have a definite *viewpoint* and to respond or speak out.

But merely expressing a viewpoint doesn't tell readers very much. To understand your ideas, readers need *explanations* that have been shaped so that readers can follow them. In any useful writing, whether in the form of a book, a news article, a memo, a report, or an essay, writers decide on a sensible line of thinking, often in a shape like this:

Much of your writing will have this basic shape.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction attracts attention, announces the viewpoint, and previews what will follow. All good introductions invite readers in.

BODY

The body explains and supports the viewpoint, achieving *unity* by remaining focused on the viewpoint. It achieves *coherence* by carrying a line of thinking from sentence to sentence in logical order. Bodies come in all different sizes, depending on how much readers need and expect.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion sums up the meaning of the piece, or points toward other meanings to be explored. Good conclusions give readers a clear perspective on what they have just read.

Writers also make decisions about who they're writing to (their *audience*) and what they want to sound like: whether they want to sound formal, friendly, angry, or amused.

DECISION MAKING AND THE WRITING PROCESS

Composing words on paper or your computer screen is only one small part of the writing process. Your real challenge lies in making decisions like those in Figure 1.1:

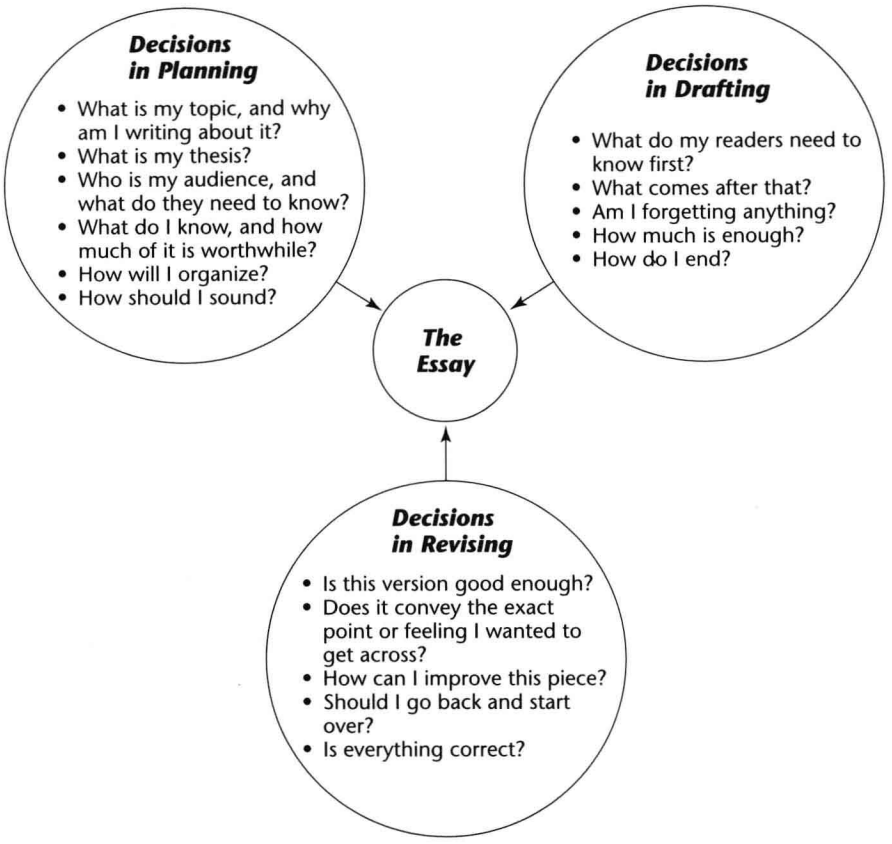


FIGURE 1.1
Typical decisions during the writing process

CASE STUDY

ONE WRITER'S DECISION MAKING PROCESS

To appreciate writing as a deliberate process, let's follow one student through two approaches to the same writing situation. We'll see how decisions about planning, drafting, and revising like those shown in Figure 1.1 distinguish this writer's quickest effort from her best effort.

Shirley Haley has been assigned an essay on this topic: How do you want your life to be different from (or similar to) that of your parents? Haley's twofold goal is to explore her feelings about this topic and to share that exploration with us. Her first response, a random piece of freewriting, took about 30 minutes:

Haley's freewriting

When my mother was my age, life was simple. Women really didn't have to study in college. They came primarily to find a husband, and they majored

> in liberal arts or teaching. They knew they were going to be wives and mothers. My mother says she got an education so she would have "something to fall back on" in case something ever happened to my father—which was a good thing, I suppose. Maybe it was her attitude about "family first, me second" that made our home life so stable.
>
> I appreciate the fact that my parents have given me a stable home life, and I want parts of my life to turn out like theirs. But my parents are slaves to their house; they never go anywhere or do anything with their spare time. They just work on the house and yard. They never seem to do anything they want to do—only what other people expect of them.
>
> I wish my parents would allow themselves to enjoy life, have more adventure. They go to the same place every year for their vacation. They've never even seen a country outside the United States.
>
> I'll have a family some day, and I'll have responsibilities, but I never want to have a boring life. When I'm on my own, I want my life to be full of surprises. And even though I want to provide a stable home life for my children and husband someday, I hope I never forget my responsibility to myself as well.

Discussion of Haley's freewriting

Freewriting is a valuable invention tool—but only a first step. Haley's draft has potential, but she hints at lots of things in general and points at nothing in particular. Without a thesis to assert a controlling viewpoint, neither writer nor reader ever finds an orientation. Lacking a definite thesis, Haley never decided which material didn't belong, which was the most important, and which deserved careful development.

At first, the essay seems to be about a change in women's roles, but the end of the first paragraph and the beginning of the second suggest that Haley's topic has shifted to ways in which she wants her life to resemble her parents'. But the second, third, and fourth paragraphs discuss what Haley dislikes about her parents' lives. The final sentence adds confusion by looking back to a now-defunct topic in the first paragraph: stable family life.

The lack of an introduction and conclusion deprives us of a way of narrowing the possible meanings of the piece and of finding a clear perspective on what we have just read. The paragraphs also either lack development or fail to focus on one specific point. And some sentences (like the last two in paragraph 1) lack logical connections.

Finally, we get almost no sense of a real person speaking to real people. Haley has written only for herself—as if she were writing a journal or diary.

A quick effort (as in a journal or diary) offers a good way to get started. But when writers go no further, they bypass the essential stages of *planning* and *revising*. In fact, putting something on the page or screen is relatively easy. But in order to get the piece to *succeed*, to make a difference for readers, tougher decisions need to be made.

Now let's follow Haley's thinking as she struggles through her planning decisions.

Haley's planning decisions

What exactly is my topic, and why am I writing about it? *My intended topic was "How I Want My Life to Be Different from That of My Parents," but my first draft got off track. I need to focus on the specific differences!*

I'm writing this essay to discover my own feelings and to help readers understand these feelings by showing them specific parts of my parents' lifestyle that I hope will be different for me.

What is my thesis? *After countless tries, I think I've finally settled on my thesis: "As I look at my parents' life, I hope my own will be less ordinary, less duty-bound, and less predictable."*

Who is my audience, and what do they need to know? *My audience consists of my teacher and classmates. (This essay will be discussed in class.) Each reader already is familiar with this topic; everyone, after all, is someone's son or daughter! But I want my audience to understand specifically the differences I envision.*

What do I know about this topic? *A better question might be, "What don't I know?" I've spent my life with this topic, and so I certainly don't have to do any research.*

Of all the material I've discovered on this topic, how much of it is worthwhile (considering my purpose and audience)? *Because I could write volumes here, I'll have to resist getting carried away. I've already decided to focus on the feeling that my parents' lives are too ordinary, duty-bound, and predictable. One paragraph explaining each of these supporting points (and illustrating them with well-chosen examples) should do. How will I organize? I guess I've already made this decision by settling on my thesis: moving from "ordinary" to "duty-bound" to "predictable." Predictability is what I want to emphasize, and so I will save it for last.*

How do I want my writing to sound? *I'm sharing something intimate with my classmates, so my tone should be relaxed and personal, as when people talk to people they trust.*

In completing her essay, Haley went on to make similar decisions for drafting and revising. Here is her final draft.

Haley's final draft
Introductory paragraph (leads into the thesis)

Life in Full Color

I'm probably the only person I know who still has the same two parents she was born with. We have a traditional American family: we go to church and football games; we watch the Olympics on television and argue about politics; and we have Thanksgiving dinner at my grandmother Clancy's and Christmas dinner with my father's sister Jess, who used to let us kids put pitted olives on our fingertips when we were little. Most of my friends are

Thesis statement

struggling with the problems of broken homes; I'll always be grateful to my parents for giving me a loving and stable background. *But sometimes I look at my parents' life and hope my life will be less ordinary, less duty-bound, and less predictable.*

Topic sentence and first support paragraph

I want my life to be imaginative, not ordinary. Instead of honeymooning at Niagara Falls, I want to go to Paris. In my parents' neighborhood, all the houses were built alike about twenty years ago. Different owners have added on or shingled or painted, but the houses basically all look the same. The first thing we did when we moved into our house was plant trees; everyone did. Now the neighborhood is full of family homes on tree-lined streets, which is nice; but I'd prefer a condo in a renovated brick building in Boston. I'd have dozens of plants, and I'd buy great furniture one piece at a time at auctions and dusty shops and not by the roomful from the local furniture store. Instead of spending my time trying to be similar to everyone else, I'd like to explore ways of being different.

Topic sentence and second support paragraph

My parents have so many obligations, they barely have time for themselves; I don't want to live like that. I'm never quite sure whether they own the house or the house owns them. They worry constantly about taxes, or the old furnace, or the new deck, or mowing the lawn, or weeding the garden. After spending every weekend slaving over their beautiful yard, they have no time left to enjoy it. And when they're not buried in household chores, other people are making endless demands on their time. My mother will stay up past midnight because she promised some telephone voice 3 cakes for the church bazaar, or 5 dozen cookies for the Girl Scout meeting, or 76 little sandwiches for the women's club Christmas party. My father coaches Little League, wears a clown suit for the Lions' flea markets, and both he and my mother are volunteer firefighters. In fact, both my parents get talked into volunteering for everything. I hate to sound selfish, but my first duty is to myself. I'd rather live in a tent than be owned by my house. And I don't want my life to end up being measured out in endless chores.

Topic statement and third support paragraph

Although it's nice to take things such as regular meals and paychecks for granted, many other events in my parents' life are too predictable for me. Every Sunday at two o'clock we dine on overdone roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, a faded green vegetable, and sometimes that mushy orange squash that comes frozen in bricks. It's not that either of my parents is a bad cook, but Sunday dinner isn't food anymore; it's a habit. Mom and Dad have become so predictable that they can order each other's food in restaurants. Just once I'd like to see them pack up and go away for a weekend, without telling anybody; they couldn't do it. They can't even go crazy and try a new place for their summer vacation. They've been spending the first two weeks in August on Cape Cod since I was two years old. I want variety in my life. I want to travel, see this country and see Europe, do things spontaneously. No one will ever be able to predict my order in a restaurant.

Concluding paragraph

Before long, Christmas will be here, and we'll be going to Aunt Jess's. Mom will bake a walnut pie, and Grandpa Frank will say, "Michelle, you sure

> know how to spoil an old man." It's nice to know that some things never change. In fact, some of the ordinary, obligatory, predictable things in life are the most comfortable. But too much of any routine can make life seem dull and gray. I hope my choices lead to a life in full color.
>
> —*Shirley Haley*

Discussion of Haley's final draft

Here are some of Haley's major improvements:

- The distinct shape (introduction, body, conclusion) enables us to organize our understanding and follow the writer's thinking.
- The essay no longer confuses us. We know where Haley stands because she tells us, with a definite thesis; and we know why because she shows us, with plenty of examples.
- She wastes nothing; everything seems to belong and everything fits together.
- Now each paragraph has its own design, and each paragraph enhances the whole.
- We now see real variety in the ways in which sentences begin and words are put together. We hear a genuine voice.

All good writing has these qualities

Because she made careful decisions, Haley produced a final draft that displays the qualities of all good writing: *content* that makes it worth reading; *organization* that reveals the line of thinking and emphasizes what is most important; and *style* that is economical and convincingly human.

Writers rarely struggle with these decisions about planning, drafting, and revising in a predictable sequence. Instead, writers choose sequences that work best for them. Figure 1.2 diagrams this looping ("recursive") structure of the writing process.

NOTE

Rarely is any piece of writing ever strictly "finished." Even famous writers have returned to a successful published work years later in order to revise it once again.

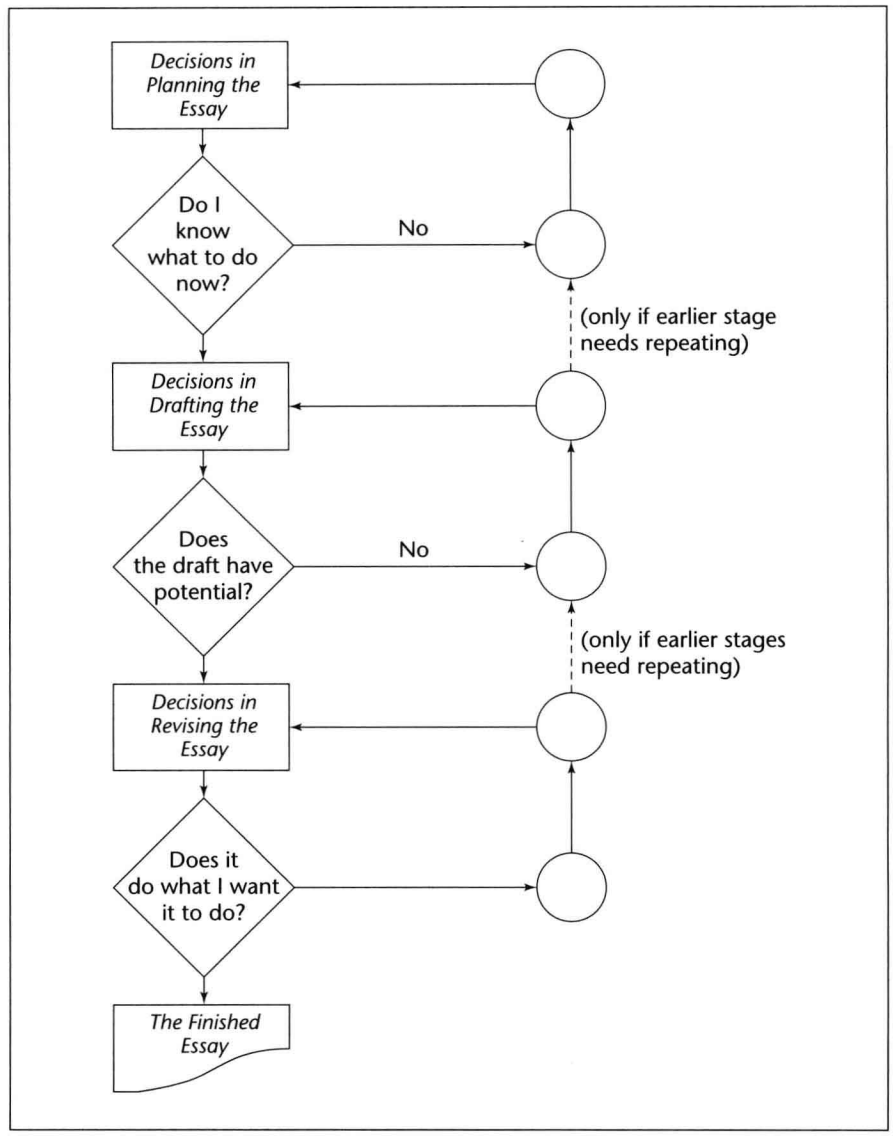
APPLICATION 1-1

The essay that follows (a third draft) was written in response to this assignment:

> Identify a personal trait that is so strong you cannot control it (a quick temper, the need for acceptance, a fear of failure, shyness, a bad habit, a phobia, an obsession, or the like). In a serious or humorous essay, show how this trait affects your behavior. Provide enough details for readers to understand clearly this part of your personality.

FIGURE 1.2
The looping structure of the writing process

Decisions in the writing process are recursive; no one stage is complete until all stages are complete.



A writer might even revisit the "finished" essay for additional revision.

Our writer, Wendy Gianacoples, decided to explore a personal obsession: food.

Read Wendy's essay once or twice. Then read it again, using the questions that follow the essay for your analysis.

Essay for analysis

CONFESSIONS OF A FOOD ADDICT

Like many compulsive eaters, I eat to fill a void—an emptiness within. I feed my feelings. Food can be my best friend, always there when I need it. This friend, however, actually is a tyrant that dominates my life through endless cycles of need, indulgence, and guilt.

Thanks to my food obsession, I seem to have two personalities: the respected, self-controlled Wendy who eats properly all day, and the fat Wendy who emerges after dark to gobble everything in sight. Lying in bed, I wait for the house to be silent. Feeling excited and giddy, I sneak to the kitchen and head straight for the freezer to begin my search. My initial prize is an unopened pint of Ben and Jerry's chocolate chip ice cream. I break the container's seal, dig in with my spoon, and shovel down massive gobs. (I have a love/hate relationship with food: I want all or nothing.) Next thing I know the container is empty.

Stashing the empty container deeply in the trash, I continue my rampage. From the cookie drawer, I snatch a nearly full package of Fig Newtons. As I tiptoe toward the milk, I ask myself what the folks at Weight Watchers would say if they could see me standing half-awake in my ice cream splattered Lanz nightgown, popping down Fig Newtons and swigging milk from the carton. After pushing the few remaining cookies to the front of the package so it looks fuller, I rummage around for my next "fix."

Beneath a bag of frozen Bird's Eye vegetables, I find a frozen pizza—the ultimate midnight snack. The oven will take too long but the microwave is too noisy—all that beeping could get me busted. Feeling daring, I turn on the kitchen faucet to drown out the beeps, place the pizza in the microwave, set the timer, grab the last handful of Fig Newtons, and wait.

By the time I polish off the pizza, it's 1:00 a.m. and I crave Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. Standing on a chair I reach for a box from the overhead cabinet. Trying to be quiet, I dig out a spaghetti pot from a pile of pots and pans. Grabbing the handle, I hold my breath as I pull the pan from the clutter. While the water boils and the macaroni cooks, I fix a bowl of Rice Krispies. Just as I finish chowing down "Snap, Crackle, and Pop," the macaroni is ready. After eating the whole package, I bury the box in the trash.

After a binge, I panic: "What have I done?" Setting a hand on my bulging stomach, I think of the weight I'll gain this week. Climbing the stairs to my bed, I feel drained, like a person on drugs who is now "coming down." In my bedroom, I study myself in the full-length mirror, looking for visible signs of my sins. Lying in bed, I feel fat and uncomfortable. Although I usually sleep on my stomach, on "binge" nights, I assume the fetal position, cradling my full belly, feeling ashamed and alone, as if I were the only person who overeats and uses food as a crutch. When the sugar I've consumed keeps me awake, I plead with God to help me overcome this weakness.

The next morning I kick myself and feel guilty. I want to block out last night's memories, but my tight clothes offer a painful reminder. My stomach is sick all day and I have heartburn. During the following week, I'll eat next to nothing and exercise constantly, hoping to break even on the scale at Weight Watchers.

Most people don't consider compulsive eating an addiction. Substance abusers can be easy to spot, but food addicts are less obvious. Unlike drugs, one can't live without food. People would never encourage a drug addict or alcoholic to "have another hit" or "fall off the wagon." However, people