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## Chapter 10 - Writing As Inquiry, Writing As Thinking

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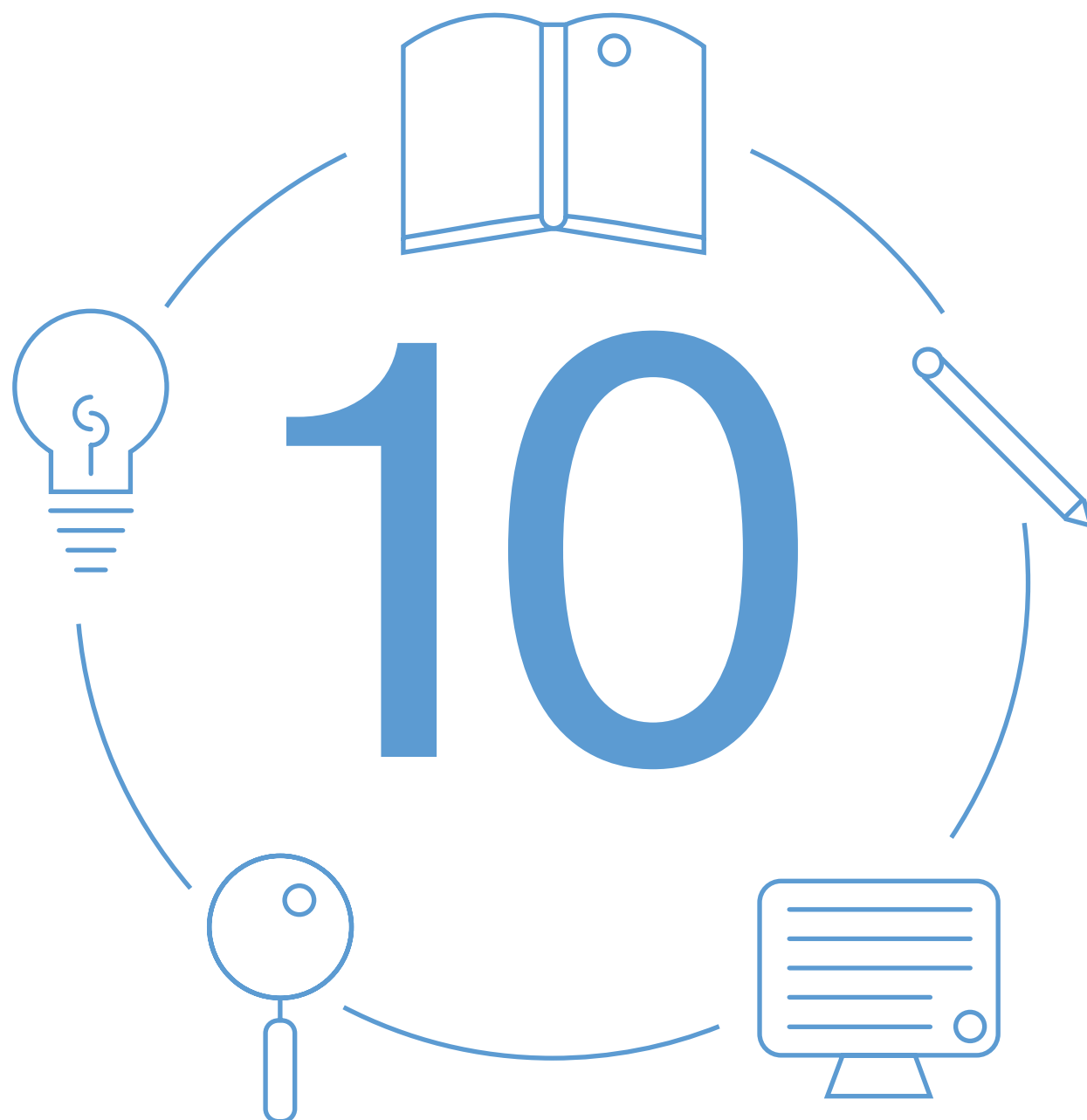
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## Chapter Ten / **Writing as Inquiry, Writing as Thinking**



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# Writing as Inquiry, Writing as Thinking

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Ask any faculty member or administrator if they think writing is important in college, and they will answer with a resounding, “Yes!” For that matter, students will also likely affirm its crucial role in the academy. In his study of *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light (2001) recounts how hundreds of Harvard students interviewed by other students emphasized writing as one of the most significant factors contributing to their success in college. Whether at Harvard or Western Washington University, students usually recognize that they need to be proficient in academic writing if they are to do well at the university. Why is there such broad-based agreement about the importance of writing? The answer is really pretty simple: Writing is a code word for being an inquiring scholar and a thinking person.

But how are students to traverse the tricky terrain of the university curriculum where they are likely to encounter so many different expectations from multiple instructors in multiple courses? Unfortunately, no single generic model exists for writing successfully in all contexts. Instead, student writers need to understand certain key concepts about writing that can then open up specific composing practices and strategies that can work in tandem with other academic literacies such as the researching processes and strategies (discussed in chapters 1 and 3). So what pray tell are those wondrous concepts to know?

In 2012-2014, a cohort of writing teachers and administrators convened over the course of three summers as part of the Elon University Seminar on Writing Transfer. We were engaged with the overarching question: What gets in the way of students being able to repurpose what they know about writing from one context to another? In other words, what keeps students from being able to write proficiently across classes and situations? Out of that seminar came a new understanding of what Land and Meyer (2003) termed *threshold concepts* – certain ideas that once learned completely transform our understanding of a disciplinary field.

**Figure**  
**1.1** *The*  
*image of a*  
*threshold.*



So what are those certain ideas that student writers need to know that will completely transform their understanding of writing for the academy? What are the threshold concepts for writing? In *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, Kassner-Adler and Wardle (2015) compile 37 of them! However, I would like to share three that I think are of special value for your work in this course: 1) *Writing is a knowledge-making activity* (Estrem 2015), 2) *Writing is (also always) a cognitive activity* (Dryer 2015), and 3) *Writing is not natural* (Dryer 2015). In the process of discussing these three threshold concepts, I will also suggest some related Promising Practices for composing academic writing to aid in actually getting words on the page.

### Threshold Concept #1: Writing is a Knowledge-making activity.

*I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.* ~Albert Einstein

Einstein was wrong. Being “passionately curious” *is* a special talent perhaps because sustaining our desire to learn new things seems to dissipate as we get older unless we deliberately work to keep wondering. Unfortunately, too often in school, teachers tend to assign almost exclusively high stakes writing where too much depends on having all the answers ahead of time – before inquiring into the real questions behind them – and then presenting those already-known answers in correct, edited English. The risk of only writing for display – without discovering new insights along the way – is that we might begin to perceive that writing is only a conduit for what we already know, rather than an opportunity to come to know. Ironically, faculty themselves often write not only because they have to in order to keep their positions, but because they are passionately engaged with their subjects and want to learn more about them. Even though assignments may not always seem like invitations to create new ideas, rest assured that faculty readers want students to come to new understandings. If we understand that writing is a way to create new knowledge, we are less likely to see it as a tedious task of simply getting commas in the right place and having the requisite number of sources and pages. If we truly believe that it is *in* the process of writing itself that we create new knowledge, we are more likely to think of academic writing as creative writing - a way to develop new ideas, not simply to restate what others have already said.

Understanding this threshold concept – that writing represents a way to make new meaning (even if only for ourselves) - points to Promising Practice #1: Begin writing with an inquiry question in mind and on paper. As soon as possible, articulate what big question about the topic you *genuinely* want to answer. Note the word *genuinely*. Sure, it’s possible to generate 10-12 pages (or more) of academic writing without responding to a specific inquiry question, but the result often comes in the form of what John Bean (2011) terms a “data dump” – a lot of unconnected stuff about a topic – without any real point (needs page number). This kind of writing is boring, especially to academic readers who truly care about the topic. Simply getting all the commas in the right place and using correct citation styles – without any substance – enacts what one writer describes as “How to say Nothing Correctly in 500 Words.” This kind of written product is also boring to write. Lacking any real motivating inquiry question, composing becomes a tedious process of squeezing out words and sentences that simply have something to do with a given topic, but do not move out a genuine sense of discovery, to understand more deeply.

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The strongest inquiry questions seek complexity, focus on a particular area, and use specific disciplinary terms. To elaborate on Promising Practice #1: Write out several possible inquiry questions and (unless your discipline/instructor says otherwise), avoid using questions that are closed-ended (can be answered with a yes or no). Instead, try using a frame such as "To what extent is ....? That way, the answer (what will become a thesis) can offer some nuanced possibilities rather than a simplistic view that does not accommodate all the evidence you find. For example, in writing this chapter, I began with this genuine question: *What main concepts and strategies do students need to know in becoming proficient academic writers?* That umbrella inquiry question also led to smaller sub-questions that aided in my developing the content of the chapter. The big question, though, led the way and provided a pathway for developing the overall thesis for this chapter regarding the three threshold concepts and the related promising practices.

Of course, articulating a big inquiry question is personal and takes some courage. Yes, courage. It means working to tap into what we really want to know. And sometimes although we might feel that school writing is not about pursuing our own interests, if we dare to pose the questions that really matter – to us – we might surprise ourselves with how satisfying writing – even academic writing – can be. Asking the primary audience for the writing – usually faculty readers- for their responses to the questions we pose represents a related strategy. Professors have a responsibility to provide their expertise, so it is wise to secure their judgment of an overarching inquiry question before getting to far into the research-composing process. Of course, part of writing and researching means that sometimes our central question evolves/changes entirely. More courage.

Threshold Concept #2: Writing is (also always) a cognitive activity.

*How do I know what I think until I see what I say?* ~E.M. Forster

This second threshold concept relies on a belief that it is only through the act of composing that can get to certain ideas. Only talking about them or trying to hold them in our minds just will not take us to these deeper understandings. In this way, composing is a kind of magical way of creating new knowledge for ourselves and others as we participate in a scholarly conversation. While it is seductive to think that we just need to figure out what we want to say *before* writing, the risk is great because we simply cannot unravel the nuances of our thinking until we can see them in print. Making our ideas visible enables us to see an emergent line of reasoning that we can then develop and refine.

Understanding, and accepting, this concept that writing equals thinking also means that it is only in the act of writing that we can make sense of the evidence that we gather from our research. In fact, information gathered does not serve as evidence until we do something with it in the process of writing. What seems to be a fairly well-kept secret is that thesis ideas emerge from the meaning-making process of examining evidence, not the other way around. Real scholars don't begin with full-blown thesis claims and then try to find the supporting evidence.

Being a good scholar means that we begin with the strong inquiry questions and find the best sources of evidence to answer them. It means taking into account all the evidence we discover, not just what might have served our initial thoughts. More courage involved here. The pay-off, though, is that trusting in the process of composing in answer to genuine inquiry questions means stronger, more worthwhile thesis claims as a result.

Understanding that writing equals thinking points to Promising Practice #2: Generate a draft as soon as possible and then listen to what the writing tells you. This practice also takes considerable courage. We must be willing to write garbage in order to get to the good stuff. We must be willing to simply write down what others have said along with our questions, our musings, and our half-baked ideas. If we can trust the composing process enough to get down words and sentences, we can then look for some overarching idea which typically comes towards the end of the draft. Why? Because usually we write ourselves into some new understanding so paying attention to the ends of drafts can help us discover what we are thinking.

Once you have a draft (and even before) is a good time to consult with a Research-Writing Studio Assistant. This staff is eager and trained to give you sound response on your writing and research at any stage in the composing process and also since you're paying for this service, be sure to take advantage of their expertise. You can visit the Hacherl Research-Writing Studio both in person in Haggard Hall 2 as well as submit a draft/question online at <https://library.wvu.edu/rws/connect>. You can also find a wealth of resources on a range of writing topics from getting started to citing sources on its Resources page <https://library.wvu.edu/rws/resources>. Note: The Research-Writing Studio Assistants can also assist you with strategies for reading academic texts. Since practically always, you will be writing in response to some written or visual text, you can also take advantage of their assistance in making sure you are reading assigned texts accurately and critically. Many students report that they didn't really have to read assigned reading until they arrived at university and writing about these often densely written texts can be a real challenge. Be a smart academic writer by ensuring that you are being a smart academic reader, too.

Threshold Concept #3: Writing is not natural.

*I hate writing. But I love having written.* ~anonymous

While professional writers and faculty writers may seem to write effortlessly, the truth is that writing – for practically everyone – represents hard labor and often anguish. Why is writing so demanding? Because it is not a natural human act like speaking. Human beings have been talking to one another for nearly 200,000 years, but the same is not true for writing, which does not come automatically. Not all languages even have written versions, so when we write, we are going against our inherent human mechanisms. We have to develop practices that deliberately enable composing because it does not just happen spontaneously.

Why is this third threshold concept so important? Because if we understand that writing is unnatural, we are less likely to relentlessly self-critique what we produce. The perception that some people (like professors) are simply born writers and can always easily produce clear, cogent, correct prose just does not match up with reality. I think of a time when I was first studying linguistics and every sentence I tried to write was painful because I had not yet learned the conventions of that specialized kind of writing. Every new writing context requires new rhetorical knowledge. Once we believe that premise, we recognize that writing is not only a cognitive activity, it also requires meta-cognition. We have to be able to understand our choices as writers and be able to explain why we choose to do certain things in writing. We also need to believe that writing well means being willing to rewrite - relentlessly. Even this fairly short chapter went through several drafts.



Understanding that writing is an unnatural activity points to Promising Practice #3: Work to revise content, reasoning, and structure *before* trying to edit sentence-level issues such as punctuation and grammar. Fixing the surface concerns like misspellings before determining if we are saying what we want is very seductive. Resist doing so. Otherwise, the end result will be that vacuous kind of writing that says nothing. *Revision* means re-seeing our writing first in terms of its overall argument (claim and evidence) as well as the arrangement of the ideas. Readers actually need a lot of help in following our line of reasoning so presenting our ideas clearly and in a logical order must be our first priority. Once the argument is there, and only then, attend to surface issues. Also, make a distinction between proofreading and editing. In other words, find the patterns of error first (proofreading) and then work to fix them (editing). If you do not know your own personal patterns of error (the ones you tend to make), find them out pronto. A faculty reader or a Research-Writing Studio Assistant can help with identifying these patterns, and then you can be a more efficient proofreader and editor of your own work.

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For many more specific practical techniques such as developing a strong thesis and constructing a clear idea path, see the WWU Library Information Tutorial (LIT) section on “Drafting and Revising.” The subsequent section on “Proofreading and Editing” also includes many helpful tips on topics such as differentiating various kinds of error patterns. See <https://www.library.wwu.edu/lit/drafting-revising>.

## Chapter Conclusion: Why is this important to you?

Based on my experience working with students from first-year through graduate school, I firmly believe that students value good writing and are more eager to improve their writing skills than most instructors realize. So I doubt that you need any more convincing that continuing to build your writing proficiency represents a worthy goal. Sometimes, though, it might seem overwhelming to consider what you need to do in a particular writing situation. In fact, you may have already experienced great writing success in one context and then have found yourself unable to figure out how to write successfully in another one. Not to worry. The majority of your faculty have experienced that same quandary.

I trust that you already believe that the more you gain specific concepts and strategies for composing academic writing, the more successful you will be as a university student. I also hope that you will try working with these three threshold concepts and promising practices, and find that academic writing may even become enjoyable. Not labor-free, mind you, but more enjoyable. Here's to your crossing the threshold into becoming an even more proficient writer and scholar.



Figure 1.2 *Crossing a threshold.*

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