

Writing is a Social Endeavor

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Hello and welcome to the third vidcast in our Introduction to Graduate Writing Series. I'm Vicki from the Purdue Writing Lab. Today we are going to talk about Writing as a social endeavor.

Sometimes when we think about writing, we picture a solitary person, sitting in front of the computer, painstakingly piecing words together on the page. If you've watched the first vidcast in this series, you already know that writing is a conversation, which presupposes the presence of at least one other person during some stage of the process, but we often divide the act of writing from the conversational aspect of it. The act of writing seems solitary; the conversational aspect, we think, comes later when we share the work.

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If, instead, we think about writing as a social endeavor, a few obvious interactions come to mind. Co-authorship, obviously, results in various forms of interaction throughout the lifetime of a single document. Feedback, regardless of who provides it, has a social component, especially if shared verbally or face-to-face. Writing groups result in a certain amount of interaction, although such interaction may be limited to greetings or logistics, depending on how the group is structured.

The existence of these obvious interactions calls into question our common understanding of writing as a solitary practice. If we accept that writing includes a social component, we can then identify the types of support that writers receive as a result of working with other people **throughout** the writing process.

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Before we go into more detail about how writing is a social endeavor, you should take a few minutes to jot down some thoughts about your own experiences with this topic. What sort of support have you received from other people when you were writing a document? What sort do you **wish** you had received?

Pause the video for 10 minutes to think about these questions and jot down your thoughts.

[pause 15 seconds]

Welcome back. There are three basic ways that other people can participate in your writing process. They can provide document support, knowledge or skill support, or social and emotional support. As we talk about each of these, you may find at least some of them familiar. It is important to note, however, that these forms of support often require the writer to be proactive. You need to be aware of your need for a particular kind of support, **and** you need to determine who might best offer it to you. In order to do this successfully, you'll want to reconfigure that mental image of the solitary writer into one populated with various people. As we go through the 3 topics for this vidcast, we'll consider who

might be best suited to offer each type of support so that you can begin mentally populating your writing process.

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Probably the most well-known aspect of writing as a social endeavor is document support, commonly called “feedback.” Almost any writing class you have taken will have included some amount of peer review, and even outside of class work, writers often identify one or more people with whom they share most of their writing.

It’s a good idea to begin early to identify people you might ask for feedback. And note that you’ll want to be open to giving them feedback in return. Asking for and receiving feedback from others is one of the ways that writers participate in both the conversation of scholarly writing and its process, the topics we talked about in the first two vidcasts of this series.

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Before you ask someone for feedback, you’ll want to decide whether you need or prefer synchronous feedback or asynchronous feedback. In essence, you are deciding whether you want real-time, verbal input from a reader or whether you want them to write comments on your document which you then read at a later time. Note that these are not exclusive: you might have a reader take the document and leave written feedback and then after you read over it, the two of you have a conversation about it.

Whether you choose synchronous or asynchronous might depend on a number of factors related to the document or to you as a writer. For instance, you might consider how long your piece is and how much of it you want feedback on. If you just have a quick question about a convoluted sentence you are struggling to clarify, it makes more sense to ask for in-the-moment, verbal feedback. In contrast, if you want to know whether the overall organization of a 20-page journal article makes sense, you might have pity on your reviewer and allow them to read it and comment in their own time.

Before you decide whether to ask for synchronous or asynchronous feedback, you’ll want to think about how well-equipped you are to accept critique of your writing. If you are easily embarrassed by someone pointing out problems in a text you have written, you may prefer to receive that critique in writing, so you can deal privately with your emotions as you read over the comments. Note, however, that this sort of critique is very common in academia--sometimes given in a more friendly manner than others--so you may wish to dedicate time to learning how to receive in-person feedback with poise and how to respond to it graciously.

Another factor when deciding whether to ask for synchronous or asynchronous feedback is to consider the skills of the person from whom you are requesting feedback. Some people are naturally better orally, some are better in writing.

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During your time in graduate school, you’ll likely be part of a cohort of students--others who entered in your same year or whose academic focus is on a similar topic. Along with your advisor and other faculty mentors in your field, these form a group that we might call disciplinary insiders. They are the

people who write in your field, who are familiar with the literature of your field, who conduct similar research, work with data in similar ways, and have (or may soon have) experience presenting or publishing in your field.

In contrast, friends who are in graduate school but in other fields of study, especially if those fields differ significantly from yours, are disciplinary outsiders. They are educated and are familiar with how graduate school works, they are becoming scholars in their own field, but they may or may not know, for example, how your field requires writers to handle and analyze data or to what extent writers in your field should hedge when presenting their research findings.

You'll want to consider requesting feedback from BOTH groups because they can offer you different types of document-level support. Disciplinary insiders can catch egregious errors in how you handle or analyze data, for instance, while disciplinary outsiders can point out areas that are unclear or sentences that don't seem to make sense. An educated reader serves as an "intelligent reader" and, as such, should be able to follow the gist of what you are saying even if they are not in your field and are not knowledgeable about your topic. If such a reader tells you they got lost in one section of your paper, chances are you'll want to work on revising that section for clarity.

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I want to leave you with one final thought about document support before we move on to knowledge and skill support.

Whatever feedback you request will have to be dealt with in some way. It's easy to assume that feedback should just be accepted and applied, especially if that feedback came from your advisor or from a journal's reviewers. Rather than having you just apply all feedback unconditionally, I would like to propose three steps you'll want to take when you receive feedback from anyone:

First, read it carefully & think critically. If the feedback is taking the project in a different direction or is changing the meaning of a sentence, you'll need to start by thinking about what the reviewer misunderstood and then decide how to clarify that point while still maintaining your own direction and meaning. Use the feedback as a window into the reviewer's mind and then revise your work to resolve the problem the reviewer had while preserving the integrity of your project.

Second, create a plan of revision. Because large-scale revision such as removing whole paragraphs might eradicate smaller sentence-level problems, I suggest that you address major issues first and save minor issues for the end stages of the process. If you watched the Writing is a Process vidcast, you may remember that we talked about varying your work according to the stage of the writing process. You may want to address the feedback you receive according to the stage of the writing process as well.

Third, Initiate conversations. Use the feedback as a stepping stone to a conversation with the reviewer where you can clarify the reviewer's thought processes. You might ask questions to see whether you are understanding their suggestions or talk with them about how you propose to address their feedback.

One final note before we move on: if you get feedback from multiple sources at once, you may want to Identify areas of similarity among all of the suggestions and then rank problems from most to least significant & address the most significant first. If two or more reviewers contradict each other, you'll definitely want to solicit more input on that particular problem; in other words, have a conversation.

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Including others in your writing process means that you gain a source of knowledge or skill support. In particular, I am referring to what happens when you talk about writing **as writing**, as opposed to just talking about the content of what you are writing. There are a number of different ways to do this.

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You might talk specifically about disciplinary conventions in your field. For instance, do you currently know what verb tense you should use for a literature review? Is it the same as the one you'd use for the discussion section? Is the use of passive voice tolerated, encouraged, or reviled? Are you allowed to use first person? Do you know whether or not causal language is acceptable? We'll talk more about disciplinary conventions in the 4th vidcast in this series, Writing is discipline-specific. In the meantime, be aware that even if you majored in the same field as an undergrad, unless you did a significant amount of professional writing in that field, there's a good chance you know few of the specific conventions of your field. And there's also a good chance that no one will think to teach you those conventions explicitly, so you'll want to ask.

Talking about this with disciplinary insiders is a good way to gain the information you need. You might even begin by asking one or more disciplinary insiders what they think you need to learn in order to write successfully for the field. Talking about it with disciplinary outsiders--for instance, comparing how the two fields do things in a similar or different manner--can be a good way to consolidate your grasp of the material.

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In addition to writing-specific disciplinary conventions, you'll want to talk about writing conventions more generally. For instance, how should individual paragraphs be organized? What sort of sentence structures will convey your meaning most clearly--simple, complex, or compound? You'll notice that there is a fair amount of overlap between disciplinary conventions and writing conventions. I've separated them here primarily to make the point that in order to acquire knowledge and skill support as part of the social aspect of writing, you'll want to talk about writing **as writing**.

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From the very start of any writing task, you might consider talking over options for approaching that particular task. For instance, if you have never written anything in the particular genre you are now

assigned, what are your options for getting started? This is a great place for disciplinary insiders to weigh in--they've likely written the same types of documents--but it can also be a good place for disciplinary outsiders to contribute. They may not have had to write the particular document you are currently facing, but they likely have had the experience of being asked to write an unfamiliar genre. They might share with you the strategies they used in order to get started.

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A final way to talk about writing as writing is to discuss strategies for overcoming problems related to a writing task. This is another area where both disciplinary insiders and outsiders can help. If you talk with several people about a problem you are having--such as determining the best way to motivate yourself to make progress on a writing project--you may end up with several different strategies to try.

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The final topic I want to cover today is the social and emotional support that we access when we view writing as a social endeavor. Including other people in our writing process lends a certain amount of accountability to our work. If we get feedback from someone, for instance, they may check in with us later to see how useful it was or to find out how we applied it.

Accountability can also be a more formal arrangement. Writing groups, for instance, often require the writers to set goals and then share whether or not--or to what extent--they met those goals. For many writers, the knowledge that they will have to account for their use of time is enough to spur them to make progress. A less formal arrangement might involve a shared document where everyone logs their goals and their progress in meeting those goals. Again, such an arrangement provides impetus to keep working when you feel disinclined to do so.

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A second form of social and emotional support when writing is commiseration. Many writers struggle with writing or at least with some aspects of it. It can be helpful for writers to talk with others who are in the same boat--to share the struggles and difficulties and moods of, for instance, dissertation writing. Knowing that you are not the only one experiencing these struggles can boost confidence, which, in turn, can boost productivity.

You'll want to be careful that not all of your social support time is spent commiserating on how terrible or difficult writing is. As you speak, so will you think, so the more you talk about how difficult writing is, the more likely you are to experience it as difficult. You'll want to balance commiseration with other forms of talk about writing.

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In order to avoid letting the negative subsume all else, be sure to build in some celebration for a job well done as writing successes occur. A verbal pat on the back from fellow graduate students when an article is accepted for publication, a party when a dissertation is successfully defended, a congratulatory

email--all of these help celebrate a writer's wins and all contribute to the writer's confidence to continue as a writer and scholar.

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At this point, you might be wondering how to go about tapping into the social nature of writing. There are several things you can do no matter where you are in your graduate years.

First, identify your writing social circle. Who do you know among co-authors, faculty, peers, lab mates, friends, etc. and which of the three kinds of support might they best offer you?

Second, set up a writing group. With whom might you meet on a regular basis just to write together? If you make this a habit now, you'll be in a good position to make progress with a thesis or dissertation several years down the road.

Third, visit the writing center. If you are a student at the West Lafayette campus of Purdue University, you'll be using the Purdue Writing Lab. If you are at another institution, check out the writing center where you are. You'll want to go to the writing center early and often. This is a good way to get disciplinary outsider perspectives on your work and also a good place to talk about writing as writing and about writing conventions.

Before we move on, pause the video for 10 minutes, to take these steps: identify your writing social circle for the 3 types of support; identify who you might form a writing group with; and investigate how to set up appointments at the writing center. [pause 10 seconds]

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As you move forward in your graduate career, remember that writing is a social endeavor. You are not the solitary writer painstakingly putting words on the page. Make use of the people around you for document level support in the form of feedback, for knowledge & skill support in the form of conversations about writing as writing, and for social & emotional support for accountability, commiseration, and celebration--especially celebration. You are a writer. Remember to celebrate that fact.

Thank you for joining me today. If you are interested in more information about graduate writing, check out the other vidcasts in the Introduction to Graduate Writing Series. If you are further along in your program, you might find our Intensive Writing Experience for thesis and dissertation writers of use. All materials for that program are available on the Purdue OWL. [link]

Happy Writing, Everyone!