

Praise for this book

“This book is an attempt to acknowledge the struggles of academic writing and propel confidence through the development of sound habits. It offers a friendly and intimate companion to the varying emotional and circumstantial challenges inherent in the writing process and provides a specific process by which to develop more competence and confidence as a writer.”

—Raymond Blanton, *University of the Incarnate Word*

“If you are struggling with academic writing, you’ve already read the other books, and you still can’t figure out how to ‘fix’ your problem, this book may help you understand.”

—Christine Colwell, *Shenandoah University*

“I recommend this book to doctoral students and colleagues who are dedicated to writing and scholarship as an addition to their reading on the craft of writing for publication, and as an extension of their efforts to constantly enhance their research and writing productivity.”

—Marilyn L. Grady, *University of Nebraska–Lincoln*

“This is a book on the academic writing process that helps to demystify that process and provides concrete strategies for dealing with the emotional side as well as the practical side of writing.”

—Kevin P. Lyness, *Antioch University New England*

“This book helps the reader understand that writer’s block happens to all of us and that it is not something to pathologize or internalize in a negative sense. It moves the reader to an appreciation of their vulnerabilities, but also understanding that those personality quirks can be transformed into strength when faced head on.”

—Barbara L. Pazey, *University of North Texas*

“Wisdom and kindness emanate from every page of this revelatory new guidebook, where renowned academic writing coach Michelle Boyd shows us how to find our own unique approach to living the messy, rewarding process of creating scholarship. I can’t recommend this book highly enough!”

—Margy Thomas, founder of *ScholarShape*

“A helpful guide to brainstorming and conquering the blank writing screen. I love the examples and the conversational writing style.”

—Robert Dennis Watkins, *Idaho State University*

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Becoming the Writer You Already Are

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Becoming the Writer You Already Are

Michelle R. Boyd

InkWell Academic Writing Retreats



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• Preface •

At the time, I didn't appreciate how powerful it was—that first little sliver of doubt. How quietly it slipped into my head, that first day on Northwestern's campus, just before the start of classes. I'd gotten into several graduate programs, all of which offered me funding, and should have been feeling invincible. But as I walked beneath the canopy of trees toward the library, the only brown-skinned person around, a thought wormed its way into my head that had never before occurred to me—not once in all the time I'd been in school: What if my high school teachers were right? What if going to an HBCU hadn't prepared me? What if I wasn't good enough?

That doubt sat silently inside, biding its time. It didn't bother to announce itself—it didn't need to. Instead, it waited and grew. Every time I fumbled through a department reception, bungling an interaction with a faculty member. Every time I sat in a seminar, fumbling for something smart to say, but not understanding what everyone was talking about (and too embarrassed to ask). Every time I sat down to write a paper, struggled with what to say, and wondered why no one else in my cohort had this problem. By the time I got to prelims, the doubt had grown larger than me and converted itself from a question into an assertion. *Oh no honey*, it said, with every word I wrote. *I don't know what you were thinking. But you're definitely not good enough.*

This book is for any scholar who's ever felt that way about themselves and their writing. It's for students who began graduate school brimming with a confidence that somehow leached out over the years. It's for faculty who are filled with dread when they think of writing—but have to hide it from both their students and their colleagues. It is especially for women of color and other marginalized scholars whose struggles with writing have prompted them to internalize the bias that others have about their ability to do exemplary research. What *Becoming* offers all of you is something I wish I'd had that first day of graduate school. It offers an explanation of why writing is so hard—for all of us. It offers an analysis of the conditions that make it harder for some than for others. And it offers a strategy for uncovering a hidden bank of knowledge you already have that can help make writing easier.

*

I wrote this book, not because there was nothing written on the topic of emotional writing blocks, but because there was quite a lot written, but very little in usable form. It was after earning tenure, exhausted from the effort, and wondering why I'd become a professor at all, that I realized this. I'd been

looking at my journals from graduate school, trying to understand where things had gone awry. What caught my attention was an entry about writing. I'd been a runner-up in a writing contest, a small, insignificant one sponsored by a public radio show. And I was thrilled by it. I was thrumming with pride and delight, even though I'd won no prize and the recognition meant nothing for my life as a scholar. Reading the entry ten years later, I was shocked to realize there'd been a time in my life when I'd loved writing. And I was dismayed to realize that, in the course of achieving "success" as a scholar, I had forgotten a pleasure that had once been so essential to who I was.

In trying to understand how that could happen, I did what many of us do. I went looking for help in a book. What I found first was a vast research literature, mostly from cognitive psychologists. I eventually discovered that, as is often the case, this research confirmed what creative writers had long understood: that the frustrations with writing are not our fault but are part of a shared experience inherent to the process of writing. What I did not find was a writing guide for scholars that translated those findings into a simple summary. I did not find the stories of other scholars through which I could normalize my experience. Nor could I find an appealing, actionable strategy for facing my fears (although I found many for boosting productivity). And while I was comforted by this individual-level analysis of writing problems, it was clear that it formed only part of the picture. So I turned to academic labor studies and my training on structural inequality to better understand how writing fears are shaped by the structure and culture of the academy.

Yet it wasn't until I began my work as an academic writing coach and retreat leader that these ideas came together in the current version of the Writing Metaphor—the tool this book offers to help you understand and move through your writing challenges. Based on an assignment my writing group gave me in 2003, an article I published in 2012, and a workshop I first delivered when I founded InkWell Retreats in 2015, the Writing Metaphor can help you overcome your writing fears by helping you better understand who you are as a writer. This tool, like all of my coaching work, relies heavily on reflection; if coaching has taught me anything it's that each writer experiences the same thing differently. That is, we all struggle with the same general problems, but each of us responds to that problem in our own particular way. As a result, it's not enough for coaches and professors to offer general advice based on best practices or our personal experience—even if that experience includes publishing extensively or coaching thousands of writers. Instead, it's more useful to help scholars raise their own awareness of their writing process: to turn inward to see what's already working well for them. Therefore, *Becoming* does not provide a single model of the writing process that fits all needs; rather, it offers a single reflective tool with which you can deepen your understanding of *your* writing process. And it offers an experimental approach to trying out any new writing strategies—so you can test all writing advice (including that you find here) and begin to trust your capacity for overcoming the natural and structural challenges of writing.

*

Becoming will therefore be attractive to humanities, social science, and natural science scholars in several different scenarios. First, it will be helpful to faculty members who are teaching dissertation writing seminars. This includes advanced seminars in graduate writing, proposal writing, and dissertation preparation and completion. It also includes courses that combine methods training and writing. Second, because this book focuses on the writing process (rather than any one disciplinary genre), it is also helpful for discipline-specific courses such as “Writing for Anthropologists” or “Writing for Health Scientists.” *Becoming* would also be an excellent resource for anyone advising a dissertating graduate student: It’s an actionable resource, especially for those grad students not formally enrolled in dissertation writing classes but still struggling with the transition from coursework to dissertation work. Key moments when *Becoming* would help these students make progress would be after passing their prelims, while writing and defending the dissertation proposal, and while writing the dissertation. Third, this book would be especially useful for faculty members, faculty developers, and graduate students who facilitate or are members of writing support groups—especially those who are focused on helping scholars work through their emotional writing barriers. Finally, this book will be helpful for people of color, women, and any other scholar who is marked and marginalized in the academy. I wrote this book especially for you, to help you remember the writer inside you and what they’re capable of. My goal was to make the book accessible, affirming, and actionable, regardless of whether it’s used alone, in groups, or courses. To help with that, it includes the following features:

Narrative style: the purpose of this book is to heighten your awareness of your writing process, so you can recover and expand on solutions you already have at your fingertips. Therefore, it’s written in a narrative rather than an instructional tone, to foster engagement, empathy, and reflection. Do you see yourself in the material? Can you imagine how the proposed solutions might fit your circumstances? In addition to being more fun to write, this storytelling style invites you to interrogate the material before following it.

Real scholars’ stories: throughout the book, I include detailed descriptions of how scholars have experienced, struggled with, interpreted, and overcome their writing barriers. This includes published accounts, as well as conversations with private coaching clients and scholars who’ve attended InkWell writing retreats. I draw on these stories, not only to provide empirical and anecdotal support for the assertion that writing troubles are shared, but also because hearing others’ stories is one way that we develop our own identity as writers.

Focus points: each chapter contains at least one callout box that highlights important ideas, questions, or techniques. They’re offered with the recognition that you are the person who knows best how you write. And that even when you’re unsure of how to move ahead, you are equipped to figure it out.

Scholars who are new to my coaching will find a problem-solving approach that combines critical intersectional analysis, interior reflection, and collective

support. Scholars who have already attended InkWell workshops or retreats, especially the Unstuck workshop, will already be familiar with the Writing Metaphor. Yet you will also find a more extensive explanation of the causes of emotional writing problems, an expanded analysis of the writing process model, and a deep well of strategies you can try on your own. I hope all readers will find *Becoming* to be a comrade you can turn to, throughout your writing life. I offer it as a compass when you are starting on a new project or facing a particularly thorny phase; a friend who reminds you that you've already solved problems just like the one you're facing; and a companion who neither dismisses nor destroys your doubts, but instead walks alongside you as you remember how to face them and move forward.

• Acknowledgments •

This book was born as an assignment, given to me by my writing group nearly twenty years ago. It then blossomed into an article, which gave me my first, partial glimpse of how useful a Writing Metaphor could be for scholars struggling to write. At the encouragement of SAGE editor, Helen Salmon, it grew into a book draft. And then, it languished: from two cross-country moves in five years; from a bereavement that turned my life into before/after; from the slow, painful realization that, in going from a faculty member to a writing coach, I had inadvertently turned writing into the least pressing part of my job. But while the manuscript was flailing, the ideas themselves were growing out of control. Thanks mostly to the many scholars I worked with in workshops, retreats, and private coaching. They reminded me, over and over, that there was more to this idea than could ever be contained in a ninety-minute workshop. In short, they told me that there was a book waiting to be written *if only someone would get off their butt and write it*.

Having received the message that so many scholars believed in what *Becoming* had to say, I then relied on many, many people to finish it. That includes Heather Radke, who never let me forget that no matter my day job, I am a writer. It also includes members of my original writing group turned supper club: after I left Chicago, Badia Ahad, Lorena Garcia, and Helen Jun held my spot open for almost five years, till I had the good sense to return to them and take up my place at the dinner table. In the intervening years, I relied on the Women of Color Writing Group in Portland, Oregon: Ayako Takamori, Kim Cameron Dominguez, Maude Hines, Nadxieli Toledo Bustamante, Shirley Jackson, and Marie Lo wove a magical web of support that didn't just help me prioritize writing; it helped me navigate the delights and frustrations of being black in Portland. Nick Montgomery gave me funny, surgically precise feedback on late-stage drafts. And Erica Meiners did what she always does: helped me untie an intellectual knot, acknowledge its political implications, and find the courage to speak those implications aloud. Through it all, Margy Thomas's friendship, generosity, and sparkling insight sharpened my thinking and eased the isolation of solopreneur life. And along with my Business Buddies Adeline Koh and Helen Sword she assured, encouraged, and modeled for me that it's possible to write a book and run a business at the same time—and be proud of both.

Neither the business nor the book would have happened without the amazing women of Team InkWell—Sonya Williams, Aushlie Coles, Alex Fry, and Nuala Conneely—who kept everything running smoothly, so I could steal time to write. When I needed a break from coaching or writing, I had long, winding, revelatory conversations with Aimee Wooda to keep me laughing and

grounded and hopeful about the world. Then I crossed into the /after, and Deborah Paredez saw me and my writing through in a thousand ways, including inviting me to Study Hall with Liz Emens and Georgia Lee. Every week, these three women create a container that has room for every side of me. And they feed me poetry that winds its way into my writing and my life.

I can't thank my family enough: everything I've ever done is because of what they've done for me. My mom and dad read my books! David Stevens tolerates my mood swings while I write them. And my brother Marc made sure I didn't give up on them when the writing got hard. I wish he were here to see this one.

I'm indebted to everyone at SAGE who made this process as smooth and seamless as possible and to the Metcalf Internship Program at the University of Chicago which made it possible for me to work with research assistant Bella Constantino. I am especially grateful to the reviewers who saw what this book was trying to do, far more clearly than I did. Their feedback—intimidating in number but incisive in substance—pushed me to pull out what is unique and useful about this book and carry that thread throughout the text. In doing so, they helped turn *Becoming* from an awkward teen into a young manuscript comfy in its skin. My thanks go to:

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Nothing in this book would be half as useful were it not for the hundreds of scholars who have participated in InkWell's retreats and workshops. In sharing their Writing Metaphors with me, they shared, not lifeless mental constructions, but frailties, secrets, and hidden strengths. Raphaëlle Rabanes was especially generous in this respect, and this book is better because of them. They are among the many scholars, almost all women, and mostly women of color, who've shown me what it means to face your writing fears. I'm a better coach and writer because of you, and you have my unending thanks.

• About the Author •



Michelle Boyd, PhD, is the founder of InkWell Academic Writing Retreats, a transformative, retreat-based coaching company that teaches scholars to overcome their writing fears. She is also a self-described “struggling writer” whose success as an award-winning, former tenured faculty member belied the challenges she faced throughout her career as an academic. Scholars who work with Michelle call her coaching “magical,” but it’s not magic—it’s science. Her coaching programs are rooted in research showing that each scholar has their

own natural writing process and that many of their struggles come from external barriers that prevent them from recognizing, accessing, or trusting that process when they need it. Michelle has been leading retreats since 2012 when she co-founded and coached her first retreat as a faculty member. The only thing she loves more than writing is helping scholars who dread writing develop a calm, confident, sustainable writing practice.