

# 2

## More Than You Think

### How Head, Hand, and Heart Make Writing So Hard

“The struggle is inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian . . . The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.”

—Gloria Anzaldúa

**W**hen I ask Pria what bothers her the most about getting stuck, she doesn’t mention her slow progress. What bothers her most is that this behavior—this incessant revising of the same perfect paragraph—seems so unlike her. She’s highly organized and usually manages challenges with hard work and persistence. So she’s confused and frustrated by her inability to overcome this problem. “It just doesn’t make sense,” she says. “That’s not the writer I usually am.”

Pria is like many of my coaching clients—people who have long seen themselves (and been seen by others) as “a good writer,” but are now finding themselves stuck in a way they can’t understand. Perhaps they sailed through undergraduate coursework with a string of all-nighters. Or, they have a long

history of banging out well-received conference papers just hours before they are due. They may have even had a rock-solid record of steady, incremental progress—but now they can barely bring themselves to look in their office, much less sit down and open up the manuscript. They get that writing is challenging. What they don't understand is how “challenging” has turned into “impossible.”

The truth is, though, that having trouble with writing actually makes complete sense. Even for a full professor with decades of experience and an eighty-page CV, scholarly writing is an incredibly demanding task, one whose cognitive, technical, and emotional demands most scholars have never been taught to recognize, much less manage. Even scholars who study writing are challenged by it: “Writing never came easily,” says education professor Mike Sharples. “I still wrestle with words as if they were opponents that must be strangled into submission” (1999, p. xi). In making this admission, Sharples names himself as one of a large group of top scholars who find writing to be arduous (Anzaldúa, 2003; Forester, 1984). Happily, he is also one of a large group of top scholars who have spent their time explaining to us how we get stuck. And what they tell us is that writing isn't just hard—it's filled with difficulty and delay.

It's helpful to think of writing challenges as taking three separate forms—they are Inherent, Institutional, and Interpretive. Inherent difficulties are just part of the writing process. They come with the territory if you want to write. Institutional challenges are those produced or exacerbated by the structure and culture of the academy. They might *seem* natural, or at least inescapable. But they are the result of choices, pressures, and patterns that are communicated and reinforced by the organizations in which many scholars work. Finally, Interpretive challenges are those that arise from how we understand and explain our experience of writing to ourselves. The pattern I've long observed as a coach is supported by anecdotal and empirical evidence: We get stuck in our writing when we misinterpret Inherent and Institutional writing challenges as, not just our fault, but fundamentally indicative of our incapacity as individuals. Interpretive challenges require the inner work of which Anzaldúa speaks in the opening epigraph. If we want to get unstuck, it helps to understand, not just the writing; not just the context in which we do the writing; but also how we interpret both. The way in which we reinterpret *ourselves* in the context of both.

If you're feeling particularly desperate about the state of your writing, you might be tempted to skip a chapter on why we get stuck and move to the ones that are more focused on what to do about it. But our misreading of what's happening when we write is one of the key factors keeping us from being able to successfully negotiate its difficulties. It's precisely our failure to accurately recognize, name, and analyze writing challenges that keeps us from developing effective responses—ones that are suited to our particular circumstances, approaches, and capacity. Gaining this understanding does not magically eliminate the difficulties of writing. Yet the struggle becomes more manageable when we correctly diagnose its sources.

To do so, we'll begin by examining the inherent challenges of writing. Then we'll look at how the structure of academic institutions transforms writing from merely difficult to risky, generating anxiety as well as self-doubt. Next, I'll describe how we respond to that risk by interpreting it in personal instead of in contextual terms. Finally, I conclude by previewing how learning to trust our process can help us get unstuck.

## Actually . . . It /s Hard: The Inherent Challenge of Writing

"Writing is hard for every last one of us" says writer Cheryl Strayed. "Coal mining is harder. Do you think miners stand around all day talking about how hard it is to mine for coal? They do not. They simply dig" (Strayed, 2012, p. 60). With characteristic hard-nosed empathy, Strayed conveys the silent assumption of many academics: writing may be difficult, but it's not hard enough to complain about. And it's certainly not hard enough to justify getting stuck (Black et al. from Antoniou and Moriarty, 2008, p. 208; Silvia, 2007; Barreca, 2011).

True enough: Writing—especially the writing done by scholars—is not dirty, dangerous, poorly paid manual labor foisted on people with few alternatives.<sup>1</sup> It is nevertheless an incredibly demanding task, one whose many dimensions we often cannot see. To better understand what's happening when we can't write, it helps to understand that writing is *inherently* challenging. That is, regardless of how you generally feel about writing, or how well any individual writing session may go, setbacks and uncertainty are part of the writing experience. Most importantly, those challenges aren't just intellectual. To get a fuller picture of how we get stuck, it's helpful to recognize that inherent writing challenges involve the Head, the Hand, and the Heart.

The first set of writing challenges resides in the Head because writing is a cognitive task that is far more demanding than most of us realize. Of course, as scholars, we understand that thinking is hard work. But we don't always appreciate all the mental processing involved—or give ourselves credit for how tiring that work can be. The second set of writing challenges resides in the Hand: in other words, writing "like an academic" is a technical skill, and like any other, it requires constant learning and refinement as we go through our careers.<sup>2</sup> The third set of challenges resides in the Heart: That's because the work of navigating the first two dimensions of writing is emotionally taxing. Trying to express our ideas in the format and voice required by our disciplines can raise our fears, threaten our professional identity, and make us doubt our self-worth. And very few graduate training or mentoring programs explicitly or systematically prepare scholars for the emotional aspect of writing. This way of thinking about writing highlights the fact that writing—and its challenges—are something we experience as a whole human being. So if we want to move past those challenges, we have to see and care for the whole human being as well.

## Watch Your Head: The Cognitive Demands of Writing

To get a clear sense of how cognitively demanding writing is, it's helpful to remember the research of psychologists Torrance and Galbraith. They remind us that to accomplish even the simplest of writing exercises, your brain must complete and switch between a dizzying array of complex tasks, including:

monitoring the thematic coherence of the text; searching for and retrieving relevant content; identifying lexical terms associated with this content; formulating syntactic structure; inflecting words to give them the necessary morphology; monitoring for the appropriate register; ensuring that intended new text is tied into the immediately preceding text in a way that maintains cohesion; formulating and executing motor plans for the keystrokes that will form the text on the screen; establishing the extent to which the just generated clause or sentence moves the text as a whole nearer to the intended goal, and revising goals in the light of new ideas cued by the just performed text. (2008, p. 67)

Put more plainly, even when we have a fairly clear idea of where we are going with our argument, the act of “figuring it out” involves (to name a few things) remembering and hunting for the idea itself, either in our memory or in some recorded document, selecting the words required to express that idea, and placing those words in an order that makes sense internally, as well as in relation to the words that come before and after them. Our brain must also direct our fingers, hands, and arms to move in whatever way will make letters appear on our screens and pages. And of course, we have to make sure the idea fits with the overall message of the work and change it if it doesn't. In other words, the task we think of as simply “figuring out what we want to say” is anything but simple.

To make matters even more complex, figuring out *what* we want to say is just one of two major cognitive tasks we are engaged in while writing. A second major task is figuring out *how* we want to say it—that is, how the point we are making should be organized so that our audience will accept, understand, and be convinced by it (Hyland, 2008). I say more about this in the next section, but for now, it's important to note that, because of this cognitive task, we're constantly moving back and forth between those two considerations (what to say and how to say it) to make sure we're on the right track. Sharples refers to this back and forth activity as a “cycle of engagement and reflection” (Sharples, 1999, p. 7). When we're absorbed in our writing, Sharples explains, we are

[d]evoting full mental resources to transforming a chain of associated ideas into written text. At some point, the writer will stop and bring the current state of the task into conscious attention, as a mental representation to be explored and transformed. Often this transition comes about because of a breakdown in the flow of ideas into words. It might be due

to some outside interruption, a noise, or reaching the end of a sheet of paper, or it might be because the mental process falters: the ideas fail to materialise or the words stop in mid-sentence. The result is a period of reflection. (Sharples, 1999, pp. 7–8)

The Cycle of Engagement and Reflection neatly captures the fact that we do not plow relentlessly ahead when writing, a torrent of words cascading from mind to fingers to page in a steady flow. Instead, we turn on the faucet and then turn it off to see what lies in our sink. Nothing. So we swish around the contents. We decide we need more warm water, then turn the corresponding spigot. We do this over and over, whether we're writing an email to a colleague or crafting the discussion section of an article. In other words, stopping and starting, writing and checking, confidence, then questioning—these disruptions are all a natural part of the process.<sup>3</sup>

What this means is that writing is not merely challenging. Rather, writing, by its very nature, involves breakdown, detour, delay, and failure. When we question whether we've clearly expressed ourselves; when we return to what we've written to ensure we said what we meant to; when we agonize over our failure to neatly capture and convey the essence of a finding or interpretation; when we get off track, cannot remember our point, or find that we have landed in a place that is neither what we actually think nor the logical extension of the beginning of our argument—all these twists and turns are in fact *what writing* is. This process of trying, questioning, hesitating, rejecting, and starting over—none of it reflects our inadequacy as writers. Rather, going through these moments is an indication that we're doing exactly the right thing. The stops and sputters are inherent to the act of writing itself.

### **Take Me by the Hand: The Mastery That Never Comes**

In addition to being cognitively demanding, writing is also a technically challenging task, one that puts us repeatedly in the role of a novice writer, even as we move forward in our careers. The term “novice writer” isn't my euphemism for a graduate student. Rather, I use the term to describe anyone who is actively learning the conventions of whatever writing genre they are attempting at the moment, regardless of their rank or experience.

As a profession, we have a strange relationship with the notion of academic writing genres. On the one hand, we implicitly acknowledge their existence, since we understand that the structure of scholarly writing differs from that of other forms of writing. On the other hand, we rarely use the word genre when discussing our work. Worse still, we are not always given explicit training in the genre we are expected to master. Instead, graduate students often feel that professors assume their understanding of their field's genre conventions (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019). They characterize the process of writing a dissertation as “an independent adventure” and describe having to read other dissertations, “to gain a deeper and greater perspective of what this chapter is supposed to look

and sound like in the end” (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019, p. 93). As one scholar put it, it feels as though “you’re supposed to know all about it, you’re supposed to achieve a standard that’s not discussed but expected” (Fergie et al., 2011).

Mastering academic genres involves learning at least two things. The first is what the relevant structure is; the second is how to use that structure so well that we can achieve the required logical or analytical task. A novelist who writes about a young mother’s suicide, for example, might need to master the conventional story structure of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. But they must also write in a way that draws the reader in emotionally and convinces them to suspend disbelief.

Likewise, a sociology student writing a dissertation proposal to examine the causes of suicide among young mothers will need to write an introduction, literature review, methods, findings, and discussion section. But they must do so in a way that convinces their committee that the study adds something to the vast storehouse of knowledge that already exists on the question at hand. This is why the skillful use of genre is important: our correct use of genre improves our ability to convince our reader of our argument. How? Hyland asserts that in correctly using genre, we are sending an unspoken message that we understand and are adept at the techniques that other scholars find compelling. In other words, the heart of academic persuasion is

writers’ attempts to anticipate possible negative reactions to their claims. To do this they must display familiarity with the persuasive practices of their disciplines, encoding ideas, employing warrants, and framing arguments in ways that their potential audience will find most convincing. (2008, pp. 3–4)

Such familiarity does not happen overnight. Instead, like a sophisticated research method or a deft hand at teaching, writing “is a craft, a skill that needs to be learned. There is nothing innate about writing, there is no gift and so it has to be worked at” (Carnell et al., 2008, p. 12).

Although I have dwelled here on the example of graduate students, they are not alone in facing this problem: the same process of slow mastery of new writing forms exists throughout a scholar’s career and is part of the process of professional growth. As Carnell et al. (2008) learn from their interviews of scholarly writers, the developmental process “is continual. Although they have ‘arrived’ as successful published authors, the writers describe a lasting state of thinking about writing and learning about writing” (2008, p. 14).

Consider, for example, that after you have finally had a proposal accepted by your committee, you may then be required to write a dissertation, which, depending on your discipline, may be the first draft of a book of several hundred pages, with a strong, well-supported argument that is carried through each chapter, something entirely different from the seminar and conference papers you have written up to this point.<sup>4</sup> If you are lucky, someone will expect, at some point, that you convert that dissertation into a job talk, and

then into either a series of articles or a book. Once you have figured out what is supposed to go in the book proposal (and how to modify that template proposal to fit the sometimes widely varying requirements of each press), you revise the dissertation and publish a book. From there, you will need to write a “book talk,” which is similar to, but distinct from a dissertation-based job talk. The kind of writing that can follow these key genres varies by discipline and rank but may include work as widely varying as meta-reviews, keynote addresses, roundtables, TED talks, and media appearances. And if you are a practitioner or activist, you may also want to learn how to better visualize your data and convert your findings into formats that are accessible to those not mired in the jargon of academia. So that, throughout your career as an academic, you can expect to *continually* encounter, misunderstand, screw up, fumble through, and then—very slowly—understand and master new writing genres.

We can also expect this learning process to be bumpy each time we go through it. That is, once we have mastered one writing genre, we cannot expect to swiftly and easily become experts in another. I, for example, have a half-written article of which I am quite fond that has never been published because as a junior faculty member, I did not understand how to fit it into the template of academic writing. As a result, I abandoned it, assuming that my idea was not fleshed out enough, or significant enough (read, not good enough) to be worth writing. It was only several years later, after the analysis was no longer relevant, that I realized that the problem was not the material, but my own inability to figure out a genre and venue more appropriate to it.

Most importantly, this article abandonment took place after I had experienced several apparent successes in my career. By the time the idea for the piece came to me, I looked on paper like an expert, someone who had “mastered” her genres. And in person, I tried mightily to live up to that impression. Yet the fact is, I was still very much a novice writer, both of conventional academic writing, and certainly of any form of writing that took an alternative format. But because I misunderstood the problem as one of quality as opposed to fit, I lost out on the opportunity to publish a novel piece on a topic I was excited about. My point is that, no matter who we are or what our relationship to the academy, it is natural that in our attempt to master new forms of writing, we will run into trouble.

## Be Still My Heart: The Emotional Toll of Writing

The cognitive and technical dimensions of writing each illustrate the third challenge inherent to writing—it often generates strong emotions that are unpleasant and uncomfortable. When I ask scholars, at the beginning of a retreat, to name the part of writing they love the most, there’s often a bit of shuffling. Then an awkward silence. Then one of them admits (to a chorus of murmured agreement) that they’re having trouble thinking of anything they like about writing at all. When they do come up with something, one of the

answers I hear most often is that their favorite part of writing is . . . finishing. Not necessarily because doing so fills them with a great sense of pride—but because the act of getting a manuscript off their plate and “into the pipeline” gives them temporary relief from the strain they felt while scrambling to get it out.

Fear that we will never finish. Shame when we reach a breaking point. Rage when someone plagiarizes our work. Guilt when we take an hour or a day off. Desperation when we realize we can’t meet the deadline. Loneliness as we try to muscle through. All of these and more are what I hear scholars dealing with when writing.<sup>5</sup> Publicly, we tend to talk about these feelings as “writing anxiety”—a sense of impending dread when we think about having to write.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes these uncomfortable feelings are what keep us from writing, as we see from museum studies scholar Pam Meecham:

I was so concerned about the process and so in awe of writers and writing that I was afraid to read my own writing. Many of the things that I wrote were not edited well enough because I didn’t want to be confronted with my own work. (Carnell et al., 2008, p. 12)

Even when these feelings don’t prevent us from writing, we still have to contend with them while trying to get the writing done. This is the case even for well-established professors who themselves study writing anxiety. For example, writing scholar, Mike Rose says:

I wish I could tell you that writing is pure pleasure, that I sit down at the desk at 8 in the morning, and the next thing I know it’s 5 in the evening and I’ve had this blissful day lost in thought. But no, it’s not at all like that. If somebody had a little camera on me, and they traced out the patterns of my writing day, there would be dozens upon dozens of times when I’m getting up from the chair and going to the refrigerator, and getting up from the chair and going up for a walk, and getting up from the chair and trying desperately to think of anybody I can call. (Mike Rose from Arora, 2010)

Rose’s self-deprecating description of his physical agitation is more than a lighthearted rendering of his writing troubles. It’s also an apt illustration of one of the most important facts about our feelings—they are a physical phenomenon. Although we may name them in our minds and express them with our tongues, our emotions are felt in the body.

Perhaps you’ve sometimes felt like music education scholar, Lucy Green does when sitting down to write:

I go to my desk in the morning and I actually feel nervous, as if I was going to go on stage and sing a song or play the piano or give a lecture. I think, “So ridiculous, Lucy, I mean nobody’s going to read what you



write in this room today.” . . . And yet I actually feel dry in the mouth, my heart’s beating a little bit fast. It’s crazy and I don’t understand it. (Carnell et al., 2008, p. 37)

What Lucy describes are the classic symptoms of stress. When we encounter a threat, our bodies go through a set of neurological and physiological shifts designed to help us manage the threats. Her pounding heart and dry mouth are a response to all the chemicals being released into her system (Bane, 2012; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020). What makes this emotional response so significant for writing isn’t just that it’s unpleasant. But that it can actually make it difficult to think. As sophisticated as it is, our brain doesn’t distinguish well between physical threats (say, a car careening toward you as you cross the street) and social threats (the worry about “looking stupid” when you have to give a talk based on this argument you can’t figure out). So when we feel fear about writing, our body goes through the same response it would if we were staring at a snarling dog: The part of the brain that takes care of writing (the cortex) sits down and the part that manages threat (the limbic system) stands up and takes charge. And “with the limbic system driving the bus . . . we are not capable of innovative, nuanced thinking. . . . None of the higher thinking functions—the frontal cortex’s ‘executive functions’—are available” (Bane, 2012, p. 21). In other words, just at the moment we most desperately need our brain to get us out of a jamb, the feelings we’re having about the jamb itself make it difficult for our brain to perform.

I’m not suggesting that all the feelings we have about writing are negative. There is much pleasure to be found in writing and thinking—we know this, or we would never have become academics in the first place (Hitz, 2020; Sword, 2017, 2023). What I am saying is that uncomfortable, unpleasant feelings are an unavoidable part of being a writer. And you are mistaken if you believe that the writing struggles you face are proof that you are “just not cut out” for this work. Instead, quite the opposite is true. The research tells us that, when you have those feelings, “you are not being weak-willed, thin-skinned, oversensitive, underdisciplined, or lazy. You are reacting to a subconscious awareness of a potential threat” (Bane, 2012, p. 27).

Therefore, our work as writers is not to hide our fears, nor to eliminate them. Instead, our work is to accept the fact that

writing brings with it a whole herd of psychological obstacles—rather like a woolly mass of obdurate sheep settled on the road blocking your car. For you to move forward, these creatures must be outwitted, dispersed, befriended, or herded, their impending genius somehow overcome or co-opted. (Malamud Smith, 2012, p. 5)

So far, we have thought about the three challenges of Head, Hand, and Heart separately. But, of course, what’s difficult about writing is how they interact with one another, in ways that diminish our confidence.

## The Whole You: Head, Hand, and Heart in Writing

We can clearly see how the three dimensions of writing interact when graduate students embark upon one of the great hurdles of graduate training: writing their dissertation literature review. As with any writing task, this one is seated in the Head, requiring the brain to search for, remember, monitor, and organize content as well as to manipulate the physical body in order to produce it. The work of the Head is complicated by the challenges of the Hand: that is, the literature review requires students to illustrate, not just subject matter expertise but mastery of the literature review genre as well.

Mastering this genre is particularly difficult, given that graduate coursework often does not clearly explain what a literature review is, or provide systematic training in how to write a strong one. In fact, it tends to do the opposite: assign seminar papers that require completely different skills than those needed to complete a lit review (Hayot, 2014, pp. 7–16). It's not surprising then, when students are understandably bamboozled into thinking that the purpose of the literature review is—as the name suggests—to survey the studies that have been done and describe their conclusions. However, a literature review isn't just a survey. It's a synthesis. One in which “diverse and sometimes conflicting ideas and findings in the literature need to be evaluated and combined to create a new, original work that provides an organized overview of the state of knowledge on a topic” (Pang, 2016, p. 1). A review that fails to do so, while it may be well organized and exhaustive, would be heavily criticized by a dissertation committee since it typically does little more than recount the studies in excruciating and inconclusive detail.

Not only do students often receive little training in how to create a literature review, but as a faculty member, I often observed in myself and my colleagues a distressing inability to clearly convey exactly what the problem was with the review before us.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, having long ago gleaned, mastered, and naturalized the skill of writing literature reviews, professors may inadvertently use vague language to explain what the problem is. I can remember times when, as a dissertation committee member, I worried (never aloud, but often in my head) that the student's literature review indicated that they “didn't get it,” or “couldn't grasp” the nature of the intellectual enterprise. Notice how this language suggests the fault lies with the student's ability rather than their place in the learning process, or—heaven forbid—my failure as an instructor or advisor.

Once a student receives this feedback, their next draft may successfully identify the main themes in the research, as well as the stances that various groups of researchers take relative to those themes. In this instance, we inarticulate committee members may admit that the graduate student is showing a capacity to “do something with” the extant literature, as we like to say, with a vague wave of the hand. Yet even at this point, the student will be told that their review fails to make an argument about what is missing from the literature and what contribution their proposed research will make to that body of work.

It's easy to imagine what is happening with the Heart at this point, as students navigate the difficulties of the Head and the Hand. Easy to imagine how, even in the best of circumstances, they might feel frustrated, discouraged, or apprehensive. What's less easy to see is Kamler and Thomson's point that the limitations we notice in a graduate student's work often reflect, not the quality of their thinking, but their reasonably undeveloped sense of authority. Specifically, a graduate student's initial attempts at the literature review are

frequently misunderstood as *poor writing* when what is at stake is the difficulty of writing as an authority when one does not feel authoritative. So, for example, when students write the literature review, they may describe, rather than evaluate, the work of expert scholars; they mask their own opinions and arguments with layers of *who said what about what and with what effects*, because they lack confidence and are afraid of taking a stand. (2014, p. 508)

In other words, successfully managing the cognitive, technical, and emotional challenges of the lit review depends on a graduate student feeling confident enough, not just to synthesize existing arguments or develop arguments of their own. Navigating those challenges also requires them to take up the role of expert; to judge the strength of senior scholars' research and assess the state of the field as though they have the knowledge and right to do so. As David Bartholomae points out, "all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being 'insiders'—that is, the privilege both of being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak" (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 143).<sup>8</sup> Yet, because junior scholars are still in the learning phase, they lack the expertise and confidence of their advisors and other more senior scholars and are therefore unable to insert that authority into their writing.

For a graduate student, performing a subject authority and community membership they neither feel nor have is difficult, even under the best of circumstances. For marginalized graduate students, it's even harder, since they are likely to have their authority stripped of them regularly. If you, like me, have had someone walk into your campus office while you're seated at your desk, stop short and say, "Oh! Do you know where Professor Boyd is?" then you understand in a visceral way what an avalanche of research has confirmed: that the authority and belonging of immigrants, women, people of color, working class, differently abled, and gender-nonconforming scholars are constantly challenged in the university. That their authority is denied in classrooms, where students assume that scholars of color are sharing their opinions rather than research findings. It is denied in evaluations where "factors including an instructor's gender, race, ethnicity, accent, sexual orientation or disability status negatively impact student ratings" (Flaherty, 2021). That authority is denied during office hours, when students demand friendship behavior from

women professors, then lash out when their requests are rejected (El-Alayli et al., 2018). That authority is denied in the hiring process, which defines scholarship on marginalized bodies as irrelevant to the main concerns of the discipline. In other words, the authority that's a requirement for the successful execution of the *technical* aspects of writing is not a given. It's a privilege that is unevenly granted.

My point here is not that we should forgo multiple rounds of review or pull back on honest, constructive feedback to graduate students. My point is that we mistakenly regard writing as a relatively straightforward and doable task—as the mere transfer of our thoughts to the page. When in fact, writing is a cognitively, technically, and emotionally harrowing feat, one that requires a strong sense of professional authority and belonging that's often still under development and, for some, under attack. So if you've ever felt embarrassed for being tired after a writing session; if you've ever struggled to figure out what your editor or advisor wants your manuscript to “do” differently; if you've ever felt too timid to face another day wrangling with your manuscript, it wasn't because you were doing anything wrong. It's because you were writing. And what Cheryl Strayed said is true—writing isn't coal mining. But it *is* its own, wearying process of hacking away in the dark and cold. Of hitting dead ends and doubling back and tunneling toward an uncertain prize.

### Focus Point

How does this depiction of writing problems line up with your experience? Of the three inherent challenges of writing, which has been more troubling for you: Head, Hand, or Heart?

## Institutional Challenges: Running the Risk of Writing

If the inherent difficulties of writing were the only things that got in our way, we'd almost be in luck. Unfortunately, the inherent challenges of writing are exacerbated by the conditions in which scholarly work takes place. These conditions transform writing into a risky performance and test of one's worth as a scholar. Whether we write. How much we write. Whether people perceive us to be writing. And what we say when we do write. All of these influence our material welfare, our standing among our peers, and our personal well-being. We feel these risks in the classroom, at job talks, during receptions—and we feel them when we write. Therefore, it can seem like every time we sit down to write, we are risking the loss of that standing and its attendant damage to our well-being.

The concept of Writing-as-Risk is brilliantly explained by sociologist Pamela Richards in Howard Becker's classic book, *Writing for Social Scientists*. While the chapter takes the form of an informal letter from Richards to Becker, it nevertheless lays out a basic theory of risk in academic writing. Richards explains that writing is risky for scholars because it requires us to expose ourselves to scrutiny in three key ways. First, we're exposing the quality of our *writing*—that is, how well we have mastered the academic writing genres. Second, we're exposing the quality of our *ideas*: not the format in which we write, but the content of what we say. Third and most importantly, we're exposing *our identity as academics*. "If you give someone a working draft to read," Richards asserts, "what you're asking them to do is pass judgment on your ability to think sociologically. You're asking them to decide whether you are smart or not and whether or not you are a real sociologist" (Becker, 1986, p. 114).

In making this point, Richards echoes a strand of writing scholarship that asserts that writing is even more than the cognitive, technical, and emotional experience I describe in the previous sections. Rather, writing is a social practice. It is an act we engage in as part of a community and in order to gain rights to that community. Therefore, writing is risky because each time we develop an idea, make an assertion, support it with evidence, draw conclusions, and suggest implications, we are not just constructing an argument: we are asserting our "right" to enter the community of scholars, and are therefore faced with the possibility that someone might deny our entrance.

Other scholars have discussed how academia's environment of risk impacts the writer's voice (Thesen & Cooper, 2014) as well as writing productivity and practice (Hjortshoj, 2001; Berg & Seeber, 2016; Sword, 2017). It's also the case that these risky conditions impact the *process* of writing—that is, what scholars do in the moment of our writing session to get our ideas out on the page. That happens because these risks are not merely something we experience during presentation or publication. Instead, we experience the risk in the act of writing itself. As one scholar puts it,

Ultimately you know that you're writing for something for publication. Therefore people are going to read it and you don't know who they are or where they'll be and what they'll say about it or what they'll think about it and so you are exposing yourself. Even though you're sitting in your room, now you're deferring the public appearance which will be only, not your face, but a black-and-white version of you. So I suppose that's what makes you nervous. (Carnell et al., 2008, p. 12)

In other words, worries about what our colleagues will think don't arise only when we're presenting, or even submitting our work. These worries also arise when we're deciding which word to use, what article to cite, how to frame a problem, and even what problem to consider. The "black-and-white version of you" is a specter that can haunt even the most senior scholars.

## Sources of Risk

There are three key features of scholars' professional context that can make writing feel particularly risky. The first is a hypercompetitive job market, which, as Richards explains, positions graduate students and colleagues as competitors during and after the job search process. Specifically, "the discipline is organized in a way that undermines . . . trust at every turn. Your peers are competing with you psychologically . . . and structurally. Tenure, grants, goodies are becoming more and more part of a zero-sum game, as the academic world feels the current academic crunch" (Becker, 1986, p. 115). While Richards is speaking specifically about the field of sociology more than thirty years ago, her words ring true for academia as a whole, and the trends she notes have become even more exacerbated since she first wrote these words.

The clearest example of this hypercompetition is the severe gap between the number of PhDs and the number of tenure-track jobs available. In 2018, only 27 percent of faculty positions were tenure track (AAUP, 2018). This means that 73 percent of the faculty jobs held by PhDs were adjunct positions without adequate pay, security, benefits, protections, and long-term prospects (American Federation of Teachers, 2020). Given the limited number of secure positions available, it's not surprising then, that the National Science Foundation's Biennial survey showed that from 1997 to 2017, the percentage of PhDs holding a tenured or tenure-track position decreased in the engineering, math, computer, health, physical, earth, and life sciences, as well as in psychology and the social sciences (Langin, 2019). And in a 2014 analysis, Larson et al. estimated that of the few tenure-track positions available in the United States, only 12.8 percent of PhD graduates could expect to earn one (Larson, Ghaffarzadegan, & Xue, 2013).

Not only are you competing for fewer positions, but once you do earn one, you'll likely be expected to publish both earlier in your career and at higher rates than scholars who came before you. Universities have doubled down on a business model that measures productivity almost exclusively in terms of the number of manuscripts a scholar publishes<sup>9</sup> (Mountz et al., 2015; Berg & Seeber, 2016). As a result, you are likely experiencing what is essentially a work speed up—a demand that you produce more, sometimes without increased pay. In 2019 for example, sociologist John Robert Warren examined the top programs in his field and found that new assistant professors today have published twice as much as their counterparts did twenty years ago. His study also showed that associate professors who focused on articles "published almost twice as many articles as their counterparts in the 1990s." Even scholars who focused on books increased their article output—publishing as many articles now as article-focused scholars produced in the 1990s (Warren, 2019, p. 182). Similar findings have been reported in other disciplines (Pennycook & Thompson, 2018). And there's some evidence that the demand for increased publication has also increased at liberal arts colleges (Reinero, 2019). This situation—where jobs are few and uncertain and the work required is

enormous—is often seen as new and a function of the recent corporatization of academia. Yet as Nzinga and others point out, scholars whose work challenges the traditional notion of the canon have long labored under a subtler form of job scarcity—because they do not fit racialized and gendered notions of “real” scholarship (Nzinga, 2020, p. 57).

These conditions make writing especially risky because they change the stakes of writing. Job scarcity means that writing isn’t just the way we express complicated ideas to ourselves and others. Job scarcity means that writing is *also* the activity we engage in to establish and defend our financial stability in a profession that has secure jobs for fewer than 30 percent of those who are trained for them. Few scholars I work with talk about loose labor markets or work intensification. Instead, they say “If I don’t finish this book I’m not going to get tenure.” They say “What if I missed something and somebody notices during the job talk?” In other words, they name the concrete moment during the job acquisition and tenure process when the quality of their writing will weaken or destroy their job prospects.

These conditions are worrying enough for scholars working from the relative comfort of a tenure-track position in their country of birth. But consider the situation of immigrant faculty members who may depend on their jobs, not just for economic security, but as an escape from political persecution or instability (Barakat & Rodríguez, 2021).<sup>10</sup> And contingent faculty, whose positions and income are constantly shifting, uncertain, and poorly paid face a kind of double bind: because they are often traveling long distances to multiple low-paying jobs, they often do not have the time to write, to say nothing of the office space or institutional support needed to do so. Yet, if they don’t write, they are unable to extract themselves from that situation.<sup>11</sup>

Another feature of the academic context that makes writing feel risky is the fact that it takes place within, not just a job market, but a “reputation market,” in which a scholar’s value and status are determined by their standing among their colleagues and advisors. In this reputation market, formal assessments of writing are rare and inconsistent, so graduate students and junior faculty members frequently find themselves unsure how to ask for and receive useful feedback from senior scholars. Then, when formal evaluations do take place, they are

often attached to an abrupt and potentially career-altering decision: articles are accepted or rejected for publication, grant proposals are funded or denied, and job applications may be not only unsuccessful but even unacknowledged. When the evaluation is relatively rare, the possibility of rejection becomes more intimidating. (Houston, 2015, p. 76)

This combination—of long periods without feedback, peppered with occasional moments of high-stakes feedback—heightens the stakes of writing because they turn specific projects into proving grounds. That means the stress of evaluation is not just a general condition of the job. Instead, it’s a stress that

becomes concentrated on particular writing projects throughout the life of a scholar. So, for example, the literature review we discussed previously involves not just the inherent difficulties of writing. It's also what Houston refers to as a "ritual of evaluation," one that distills the risks to one's professional success down to one's performance on a particular writing project.

Within this unstable and uncertain structure of evaluation, scholars must rely heavily on impression management strategies to maintain their reputations with their peers and senior colleagues, constantly working to influence how they are perceived by others. This process of impression management begins at the first stages of the academic career, as Ferrales and Fine argue when graduate students

must learn to recognize how each exchange with a faculty member has the potential to shape a student's budding professional reputation. Faculty assessments depend on several factors including students' presentation of self; the quality of the comments and questions posed in course discussions; the caliber of papers written during coursework; a student's publication record; obtaining outside recognition such as prestigious grants, fellowships, and awards; endorsements by other faculty members; and information gleaned from the graduate school application. (2005, p. 59)

In other words, scholars don't only need to successfully create high-quality research. We also need to actively manage more powerful scholars' awareness of our having done so by communicating and performing the quality of our thinking in the reputation market. And our success at doing so has significant impact. As Ferrales and Fine point out, "being told that one is a poor writer may discourage a student from continuing in school, considering the emphasis on publication as a necessity for career building. . . . Students come to define themselves in the eyes of others" (2005, p. 63).

What is particularly difficult about this process is that the working of this system is not made explicit, which means that scholars aren't always aware of the rules governing their interactions with those tasked with evaluating them. And "even when they do, they do not know how to play the game. Moreover, the uncertainty of not knowing one's standing in a cohort can be paralyzing to professional development" (Ferrales & Fine, 2005, p. 72). While they are talking about students, the same applies to junior faculty. We can think of graduate school and the tenure track as a boxing gym, in which competitors must learn how to make a fist, protect their bodies, and punch with power—all while in the middle of the fight. Now imagine that some competitors are taught these things, while others are not—they must pick up the skills by watching while amid the competition. This is what it's like for junior scholars who lack the mentoring and cultural capital to understand that they are not just studying a topic; rather, they are being socialized into a



profession, and need to explicitly perform mastery if they want to thrive in the reputation market.

Nor does this work end once the degree is in hand, since junior faculty often have even fewer opportunities for evaluation. Instead, they may be broadly understood by their colleagues as having successfully passed through the formal apprenticeship period, and therefore no longer be in need of mentoring. At that point, criteria for evaluation become especially opaque. Standards for earning tenure are often implied, rather than expressly articulated, and they are very rarely written down. Thus, rather than operating with a clear sense of the standards against which they will be regularly and transparently evaluated, junior scholars operate in an environment where they are constantly managing others' impressions of them through words (written and spoken) and deeds.

To recap, job scarcity *changes the stakes* of writing by defining it as the mechanism by which we retain financial security. While the evaluation process *heightens the stakes* of writing, by converting specific writing projects into proving grounds that brook no error. What this means is that the projects that should be learning experiences, sites of innovation, and creativity for scholars of *all* ranks, instead become, as Houston refers to them, “rituals of evaluation,” that amplify our anxiety and make us less willing to risk making mistakes.

A third feature of the academic professional context that makes writing risky is the way that social hierarchies change scholars' chances of successfully navigating the job and reputation markets mentioned earlier.<sup>12</sup> Social hierarchies are ranking systems that divide group members by social characteristics (e.g., race, gender, class, disability, immigration status, sexual preference, and gender expression). Scholars who are ranked higher in a social hierarchy receive more access to resources important to their success—for example, mentorship, training, and second chances—resources that in turn lead to greater opportunities for advancement in the profession. The reverse is true for scholars who are ranked lower on the social hierarchy: because of their lower status, they are subject to multiple forms of bias that make them more vulnerable to the job scarcity and evaluation process that mark academic life—even once they've earned tenure.

To see how this works, and how it can affect a scholar's writing, let's think back to the example of the literature review and how it might play out for different scholars. Dalia's program is in the US, and English is her second language. So she will be more likely to be judged harshly *for making the same errors* as someone who speaks English as their first language (Lindsey & Crusan, 2011). Or, consider the fact that as a woman, when Ana coauthors a manuscript, she will likely be seen as less qualified than Darnell if he does the same thing (Gërkhani et al., 2021). In her analysis of black women scholars' tenure denials, Patricia Matthew describes how social hierarchy impedes professional outcomes for women of color by interacting with the unspoken workings of the reputation market:

While there certainly can be malice at work when faculty of color are assessed and evaluated, formally and informally, it is also the haphazard nature of these different processes that they are more structurally complicated for faculty of color than for their white counterparts. . . . I wouldn't try to argue that there was explicit bias. But what I've found is that there are codes and habits that faculty of color often don't know about because those unwritten practices are so subtle as to seem unimportant until something goes wrong, and then the assumption is that the person of color is incompetent, lazy, or lying. (Matthew, 2016, p. xv)

In an environment of economic uncertainty, hyper-competitiveness, uneven power, and lack of transparency, writing is far more than the work we engage in to communicate our ideas. Rather, writing is *also* the primary mechanism through which scholars establish security and a sense of personal worth in an ambiguous, unstable, uncertain, and unequal environment. We don't just write to convey what we know. We also (and at times primarily) write to bolster our reputation, prove our worth, counter racist and sexist assumptions, outshine our colleagues, and secure an increasingly finite set of resources. Graduate students write, not just to learn how to do a literature review, but to *prove* that they know how to do a literature review. Adjuncts, assistant professors, and postdocs write, present, and publish, not only because they want to join the conversation and share their work with the world, but because they are seeking to distinguish themselves in the job market.

Think, for example, of how you have made your own decisions about whether to accept an invitation to give a talk or present on a panel. What proportion of the time have you said yes merely because you enjoy the experience of sharing your work with a group of scholars from your field? And what proportion of the time has your mind leapt to how "good" the talk would look on your CV or how rare an opportunity it is to be able to establish a relationship with a leader in your discipline?<sup>13</sup> When writing is *also* the activity we engage in to establish and defend our professional identity and financial stability, it means the act itself becomes about other things because failing at that task can potentially weaken our chances of professional success.

These considerations are not shallow or inappropriate. They are necessary. And they illuminate the fact that while "the main task of academic writing is to *present* intellectual ideas, the *production* of academic writing is not solely an intellectual activity" (Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008, p. 160).

### Focus Point

Think about a time when one of the three risks of writing has affected your writing session. What did that look like? How did you respond?

## Interpretive Challenges: The Impact of Risk on Writing

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While these conditions are certainly challenging, they do not describe the steps by which we become stuck. As I've defined it in Chapter 1, "stuck" is more than the frustration of not knowing clearly what you mean to say or moving slowly in the production of the work. Scholars become stuck when we deliberately or unintentionally respond to that frustration in ways that are designed to shield us from the risks of writing rather than move us through them. You'll remember also that being stuck is not necessarily a permanent condition. Writers can get stuck selectively—that is, we can be stuck in one project while another moves merrily along. It's also possible to have long been a steady, productive, even happy writer; then to suddenly look up to find we're no longer the writer we once were. The question remains then: how do we get to the point where it's more important to protect ourselves from the risks of writing rather than take them?

The basic pattern I see most often among stuck scholars is that, when we encounter a challenge in our writing, we personalize instead of contextualize the problem. That is, rather than understand the challenge as endemic to writing (an aspect of Head, Hand, or Heart), or examine how the university setting makes the challenge especially difficult to manage, the stuck scholar will interpret *the challenge itself* as a function of their flawed character or limited ability. This happens even when we understand the pressures of academic life, or are adept at analyzing how context shapes and constrains the lives of community members that are part of our research. Instead, we lose the ability to understand the individual in context that comes so easily in our scholarship. As a result, we develop a limited view of why we are struggling with writing—one that names our incapacity as the primary explanation.

In addition to seeing ourselves as the source of our writing problems, scholars who are stuck in their writing often go one step beyond personalization to pathologize our challenges as somehow abnormal. We cast ourselves as suffering from flaws that are starkly deeper than or different from those of the rest of our cohort. Because the act of writing is often completed in solitude, it's easy to see how scholars can so easily lose perspective. In the words of one graduate student, "you're on your own, and it requires a great deal of diligence and discipline, and it's a lonely walk" (Fergie et al., 2011, p. 236). Without a community of support that reflects on your own experience, it's easy to rely instead on explanations of individual inadequacy (de Novais, 2018).

Scholars who are stuck often compare their performance to that of other (read: better, smarter, faster) imagined scholars, whom they believe have some secret knowledge of which they are unaware, something that eliminates that tortured process of writing and turns it into a smooth, even, unimpeded experience. Writing psychologists Flower and Hayes put it this way: "One of our

subjects had just finished a writing session that looked like a wrestle with the devil; yet when we asked her to describe the normal process of a good writer, she replied that this mythical writer would ‘just know exactly what she wants to say. She should just know what she wants to do . . . and *just write it!*’” (Flower & Hayes, 2016, p. 32). Pathologizing is a crucial step on the road to being stuck because it is through pathologizing that writers shift from thinking of our *work* as the problem to thinking of *ourselves* as the problem. That is, we take our writing struggles as a sign that we are unworthy—that we’re so inferior to our peers and senior colleagues that we’re fundamentally incapable of the kind of thinking and communication that is the bread and butter of our profession. And therefore, we’re “just not cut out” for academia.

Once a scholar becomes convinced that their writing problems are caused by unfixable personal flaws, it becomes easier and easier to manage the risk by avoiding the work completely. Pria isn’t just worried about what her advisor will think—she’s worried that he hasn’t yet figured out that she’s not smart enough to meet his expectations. So she Side Writes, day after day, with mounting frustration. Darnell, on the other hand, can’t stand the discomfort of his messy, unclear thoughts on a page. He *knows* none of his colleagues can ever be as confused by their thinking. So he spends most of his writing time Not Writing so he can avoid having to face his weakness, day after day. This pattern is what psychologists refer to as the cycle of self-efficacy (Zumbrunn, 2021): First, we doubt our ability to do something. Then we avoid or engage minimally with the activity. Then because of that minimal engagement, we find that we’re not as successful as we’d wanted to be. While it’s useful to think about the habits of mind that lead to getting stuck, it’s equally important to note that this pattern flourishes in exactly the conditions that are present in the academic reputation market and the social hierarchies that mark it: When we compare ourselves to others whose struggle we cannot see; when we receive negative feedback that’s highly consequential; and when we experience the physiological responses that come with the stress of writing, we are much more likely to interpret ourselves as individually incapable (Zumbrunn, 2020, pp. 45–51). As education scholar, Janine de Novais explains in her poignant, trenchant analysis of her own experience of imposterism,

I saw the experience of graduate school as one where I was often in close contact with the threat that I was flawed, unsuited for the task before me, and unworthy of being there. Shame and self-loathing were exacerbated in graduate school because, as a processual matter, graduate school connected my self-worth to my work. And then it proceeded to evaluate that work—and therefore evaluate me—relentlessly. (2018, p. 173)

This pattern of self-doubt can afflict any scholar. One common form it takes is the Imposter Phenomenon, in which high achievers feel unworthy of their successes despite significant and multiple achievements (Clance and Imes,

1978; Young, 2011). Perhaps you've felt it yourself—that terrible feeling that, despite the wealth of evidence to the contrary, you're not as competent or accomplished as other people seem to think you are, and therefore do not deserve and cannot trust your success (Clance & Imes, 1978). While researchers are divided over the gendered dimension of Imposterism (Bravata et al., 2020), the feeling is especially common among women as well as people of color, particularly in disciplines that treat “genius” as more significant than training (Muradoglu et al., 2021).

For scholars of color—or any marginalized groups—the pattern of pathologizing can take the specific form of stereotype threat, in which members of marginalized groups internalize negative stereotypes about themselves to the detriment of their performance. In her essay “The Making of a Token,” Yolanda Flores Niemann provides a harrowing and insightful analysis of how stereotype threat changed her sense of professional competence. She explains how her colleagues' treatment transformed her from someone who had “strong feelings of self-efficacy in the academy to wondering why I had the arrogance to think I could succeed in an academic career” (2012, pp. 336–337).

A stunning piece that should be read in its entirety, Niemann's essay provides a powerful example of how Inherent and Institutional challenges can affect, not just a scholar's identity, but their practice of *writing* specifically. She explains that, as a result of a years-long experience of stigmatization and tokenism, she

had begun to have difficulty focusing on my writing, something that had previously come easily to me. My lack of confidence had become such a problem that—in a couple of cases where editors had recommended that I revise and resubmit a manuscript—I convinced myself that the quality of my work was not good enough to rewrite. All of this was symptomatic of the effects of tokenism, stigmatization, racism, and stereotype threat. It was also an example of the way attributed ambiguity made me question whether I had ever deserved to be hired or published. Thus, my state of mind resulted from the negative attitudes and beliefs I had internalized as well as the behavior and attitudes of others. (2012, pp. 349–350)

Flores Niemann's analysis illustrates that scholars' personalization of their writing problems is not just a faulty individual response or a bad “mindset.” Rather, getting stuck involves an interaction between the external environment of racialized risk and the internal interpretations she began to have of herself. Most importantly, Flores Niemann's piece shows how scholars who are stuck do not invent these interpretations out of thin air. Instead, the repeated instances of racial bias she encounters become the *ingredients* of her self-doubt. It's her negative experiences in the reputation market that make

her question the worth of her ideas and eventually keep her from writing. Niemann's analysis also illuminates the close relationship between the act of writing and the development of our professional identity. It's not just that writing is the way we establish professional status and security. It's also the way we establish a sense of who we are as knowledge makers; it's the way scholars "make their findings known to the public and develop a sense of themselves as authorized scholars in their fields of practice" (Kamler & Thomson, 2008, p. 507). Feeling stuck then causes problems, not just for our ability to get our writing done. Feeling stuck often means we are also struggling with bigger questions about who we are and whether we even have the right to make certain intellectual claims.

The most significant impact of this pattern—of personalizing writing challenges—isn't its effect on writing productivity. As activist writing instructor Louise Dunlap points out (2007), the more meaningful aspect of this pattern is that it is a form of silencing. And it happens in at least two ways: One way is through the suppression of our ideas. In Flores Niemann's case, she lapsed into Not Writing—she merely stopped working on the manuscript, convinced that neither she nor it were good enough. We may also suppress our ideas through Side Writing. Take, for example, the activity of untamed literature searches, otherwise known as the Lit Review Rabbit Hole. When faced with an ill-formed, unproven idea they're unsure of, it's not unusual for scholars to look for reassurance by "double checking" to see if what anyone else has said affirms the idea. In essence, when we go down the Lit Review Rabbit Hole, we often ask ourselves "Am I allowed to say that?" and search for the answer in other people's thinking. In doing so, we are "checking in" to see if what we're saying is OK, instead of taking the risk of even speaking aloud to ourselves an idea that is half-formed and unconfirmed by others. This messy, risky work is exactly what we must be able to do to bring our nascent ideas to life. Yet, we are too fearful to do it when we are stuck.

Sarah Burton describes another example of this "double checking" pattern through which stuck scholars silence themselves. In her analysis of how women try to legitimize themselves and their work in the academic reputation market, she introduces us to Johanna, a working-class PhD student who describes her writing practice

in terms of shame and stigma—this included constant checks on aspects such as spelling and grammar, Johanna feeling that slipping on these parts of writing showed her as lacking the cultural or educational capital of her peers. To not use correct grammar or spelling would mark her out as unsophisticated, crude, and not grounded in high-quality prestigious education. (Burton, 2018)

What's important about both these examples is that they illustrate how Not Writing and Side Writing are more than the standard form of quality assurance

in which every scholar must engage. Instead, these responses express scholars' fears and hesitations about how they will be perceived and interpreted in what they know is a classed and gendered reputation market. They experience these fears not abstractly, but in the moment of writing and so respond to them through the act of writing. As Dunlap puts it, "Most of us expect our writing to be criticized, so we protect ourselves by not writing what we mean. This is how silencing works: we develop our own internal judge. The blocks to freedom are right inside us" (2007, p. 32).

Another way we can silence ourselves—the one with which this book is most concerned—is by doubting or ignoring our writing process. One of the questions I receive most often from scholars is whether their writing strategy is "right" to use. Scholars will often lay out an involved process that they like to follow, one that makes sense to them given where they are in the manuscript and what they're struggling with: "I love to mind map," Georgia tells me, "I really can't make sense of things without it." Another retreat, Foster, explained to me that she had to make tables first, or else she couldn't even begin the data analysis paragraphs. When editing, Darnell and I are similar: there comes a point in writing when we can't move forward—we *actually can't see the argument we're making*—unless we print out the manuscript and lay it out on the floor. Time after time, scholars explain to me what makes sense in their heads, and what they have done in the past, with great animation and detail. After providing a description which, to me, is exactly what they need to do to write, they shyly ask, "Is that OK?"

When I ask scholars why it might *not* be OK for them to follow their process, their responses reveal how deeply silencing is connected to issues of trust. They say that they don't know if they're just "resisting" what they really need to be doing. Perhaps what they've just explained is just an elaborate Side Writing technique, they say. And besides, it takes such a long time— isn't there a faster way? These questions are fundamentally about whether they believe that what they are doing is the *real work* of writing, or whether it is a sneaky form of stuck. They do not trust themselves or their process. So, like Ana, who clings to an early morning writing schedule that doubles her work, they don't trust themselves to modify and experiment with their approach to writing.

Understanding stuckness as a form of silencing means that we have to recharacterize the problem: in other words, being stuck in our writing isn't just an intellectual or emotional problem; it's a power problem. One we face, not because we're trying to figure out our thoughts, but because we're trying to figure them out in order to gain or maintain a place in the scholarly community. And that struggle is made harder for some scholars than others because of the way universities reproduce social hierarchies. In addition, getting stuck is an understandable response to those conditions within which we work. As Feenstra et al. (2020) argue, getting stuck is not "a dysfunctional 'syndrome' that resides within certain individuals, but instead as a psychological response to a dysfunctional context."

## Focus Point

To what extent have the risks of writing negatively impacted your ability to write? How have your responses mirrored or differed from those of the scholars described earlier in the chapter?

Is it any wonder, then, that we sometimes get stuck while writing? That the fits and starts of writing, no matter how natural they are, feel uncomfortable and at times, unbearable? Our ideas, when we first begin to play with them, are naturally ill-formed and uncertain; our prose is disjointed and ugly. Writing requires that we simultaneously expose and tolerate a level of ignorance and confusion that in general are devalued by our peers, whose bread and butter is the proffering and defense of elegant argument. Tolerating such discomfort, and muddling one's way through it without training in how to do so, is hard enough on its own. When experienced within the context of economic uncertainty, unequal treatment, and risk to our social and professional future, it is hardly surprising that we might turn away from writing and silence our most daring and interesting thoughts.

If you have been feeling alone and singular in your struggles with writing, I hope that this chapter has illustrated how untrue that is: you are not the only person who has faced and perhaps even felt beaten by these challenges. That is the first cause for hope: if you find yourself stuck, it's not because there's anything wrong with you. It's because writing *is ridiculously difficult*, even under the best, most supportive circumstances. And our responses to that difficulty are driven by physiology and profoundly conditioned by a professional environment that—rather than being supportive, often makes writing even harder than it already is. So writing becomes a risky endeavor, one so intimidating that it can cause us to so strongly internalize the voices of judgment that we silence ourselves.

Naming stuck as a power problem might seem to create an impossible additional hurdle for you to manage as a writer. I've laid out a scenario in which the structures that you're a part of might seem to bind you so much that either there is no hope at all or the only way to attack the problem is to fight the entire professional culture and structure of academia—which wouldn't help your writing in the least. But while you may be constrained by that environment, you are not predetermined by it. It is possible to navigate this treacherous territory. You've already done so, many, many times before. It's hard to remember, when the clock is ticking and imaginary reviewers sit, sneering, on your shoulder. But you already have an amazing resource at your fingertips that can help you get unstuck: you have your writing process. The steps you go through to get your



ideas out of your head and onto the page. Your writing process is all yours. It's particular to you and has grown with you over time. And it makes writing not just less difficult but also more enjoyable, less lonely, and a truer expression of who you are as a writer and a thinker.

Let's give it a closer look.

## Notes

1. Although descriptions of adjunct labor by Nzinga (2020) and others make clear that the working conditions of contingent faculty members are quite exploitative.
2. Writing is also a craft and Helen Sword talks extensively about that aspect (2017), while I focus here on the technical skill involved in learning the multiple genres that are part of academic writing.
3. Scholars who are neurodivergent must also contend with an added layer of disruption. Those diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for example, may have trouble focusing on one idea for a long time or drawing from their working memory while crafting ideas (<https://carleton.ca/determinants/2019/being-diagnosed-with-adult-adhd-as-a-professor/>). These disruptions may be invisible, even to them—or if apparent, they may have the extra burden of feeling compelled to hide their condition from their colleagues.
4. See as well Paltridge, (2002), and Anderson et al., (2021), on the different types of dissertation.
5. Inadequacy when our committee tells us, once again, that more revisions are needed. Furious, frightened impotence when an editor or advisor insists, with no awareness, that we change the argument back to the one we'd been making nine months ago. Boredom when we think of having to write yet one more journal article.
6. As Wynne et al. (2014), show, scholars have slipped between using the term apprehension and anxiety. And as Rose (1984) and Hjortshoj (2001) both point out, scholars who are stuck aren't always anxious.
7. After writing this book, I now suspect that this is because the understanding of how to write a literature review is a form of tacit knowledge (see Chapter 3), one we pick up through doing rather than through explicit instruction. I can say for myself, that I only truly learned (rather than dimly perceived) the ins and outs of both literature reviews and ethnographic methods when I was forced to

teach these topics to undergraduates, and in the process of seeking clear definitions and explanations for what I wanted from them, found texts that finally explicitly conveyed what I'd been doing (and what I'd been doing incorrectly).

8. Thesen adopts Mary Louise Pratt's language of contact zones to describe the academic community, naming it as one of the many "social spaces in which cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths" (quoted in Thesen & Cooper, 2014, p. 3).
9. As Usher suggests, we are now dealing with a knowledge economy that "replaces an epistemological with an economic definition of knowledge" (Usher, 2002, p. 44).
10. See especially the essays by Schoorman (2021) and Hardman (2021) in this same volume.
11. While I've been discussing faculty, the same situation applies to librarians as well: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/diversity/odlos-blog/laboring>.
12. For a dazzling analysis of the impact of race and power in academic life, see Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2008).
13. And as Mountz et al. point out, the way we prove that worth is through counting. As universities do things like shorten the allowable time for the completion of the PhD, expect even more publications from new hires, and institute numeric assessment systems of scholarship, the meaning of writing changes so that "writing becomes an instrumental skill rather than an epistemological experience" (Mountz et al., 2015, 1241).