

**TEACHING MINDFUL WRITERS**

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## 2 THE CONTENT OF/IS WRITING

This book is about how to teach students to be mindful throughout any and all major writing tasks—during your FYW course and beyond. We'll get into the details of mindfulness in the next two chapters. For students to be fully mindful writers, I'd argue, there are principles (theories, research findings, best practices) they need to understand, and these principles constitute the content of the course, as we discussed in the last chapter. I'm using the word *understand* here in a specific way. In the 1950s, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom proposed a taxonomy of learning levels, from simple knowledge through application and eventually evaluation. When the ed bureaucrats talk about "deep learning" or "higher-order learning" as teaching goals, they are talking in some way about Bloom's taxonomy of learning.

In a revised version, favored by metacognition scholar Saundra Yancey McGuire, the hierarchy of learning goes in this order: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, creating. The assumption behind this "hierarchy," if we can call it that, is that each level requires just a little more from the "ol' dog's breakfast" (novelist Kurt Vonnegut's term for our brains). At the lowest level, you can spit out info you've memorized without really understanding it. (Like that one time when I was three and sang Rick James's "Super Freak" in front of my mother's church friends, though I didn't know what a *kinky girl* was.) At the highest, you can "come up with your own ideas about solving different kinds of problems" (McGuire and McGuire 2015, 35). The language from our course outcomes often follows Bloom's taxonomy ("Students will *analyze* professional writing for rhetorical strategies . . ."), "Students will *evaluate* the writing of a peer using course criteria . . ."), though in writing studies we haven't been too interested in hierarchizing our threshold concepts by assuming one is more sophisticated than another.

McGuire recommends we teach students directly about Bloom's terms to improve their metacognition. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe see understanding as the governing term of learning: "the ability to

marshal skills and facts wisely and appropriately, through effective application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (2005, 39). It is clear in almost every discipline that students cannot analyze, synthesize, or evaluate if their content knowledge is shallow (see Lang 2016).

In taking up this topic, we're flirting with what I think is a fundamental debate in all education: What is the relationship between the subject matter and the student? Often we think of learning as knowing stuff or mastering disciplinary factoids. As a young college student, I took a biology course to fulfill a general education requirement. As you can imagine, the course was about, you know, biology—textbook, lectures, ill-designed slides, and multiple-choice tests. Yet my affective relationship to biology—as in, what it had to do with my life and how I might use what I learned—was immaterial in the frantic covering of the material.

The American education philosopher John Dewey made the very strong case throughout his career that the subject matter of schooling is important only insofar as it leads to intellectual growth and "trained capacities" of being and acting in the world, capacities he called "social intelligence" and "social power" (1972b, 75). He believed education should lead to the self-realization of everyone, a power to act with our own skills in harmony with other actors and their skills. In 1902, while serving as professor of education at the University of Chicago, he wrote an essay titled "The Child and the Curriculum," in which he argued that the subject matter of schools should be "psychologized," meaning that it should be presented to students as integral to their own experience, as an "outgrowth of present tendencies and activities" (2008, 287). Specifically, content should be presented to students as equipment for solving "intellectual, practical, or ethical" problems (287). You solve the problem of student motivation, in part, by framing content this way. In this way, understanding, as we've defined it, means discovering how content gives you dispositions for acting in the world.

Therefore, in order to be mindful writers—to apply, evaluate, and create—students need to *understand* the principles they will use as writers, in this Deweyan sense. They need some pragmatic content knowledge about writing process and rhetoric, our two metatheories mentioned in chapter 1, which together form the theoretical and philosophical core of FYW.

There is some debate about how much students need to know about rhetoric and writing studies to be successful writers. ("Stop Using Rhetoric to Teach Writing," reads the title of an *Inside Higher Ed* piece from 2008—which was then swarmed by rhetoricians in the comment section.) Some of what we teach as rhetoric scholars seems like banal

common sense. ("You say I should think about my audience when I speak or write. And you went to how many years of grad school to learn that?") Either common sense, or Greek nonsense. ("The President used *apophysis*, not *antiphthesis*, when he insulted the journalist.") Both views are caricatures of what rhetoric is and can do for our students.

Several decades ago, when scholars with PhDs in literature started running college writing programs, they cast about looking for theoretical underpinnings for their practice, and they found rhetoric—a 2,500-year-old tradition of teaching and theorizing about the power of language to influence the attitudes and judgments of others. Turns out that rhetorical principles had always been there, in both speech and writing education—we just needed to find and formalize all of it. This interest has led to a rich body of work on classical rhetoric, rhetorical theory, rhetorical criticism, comparative rhetorics, and the relationship between rhetoric and teaching student writers. Over the years we've used insights from classics, philosophy, poetics, education, linguistics, cultural studies, political science, and psychology (cognitive, social, and moral) to inquire into language practices of all kinds, with particular concern for teaching, which in my view is rhetoric's most important and enduring heritage.

How much of this stuff do our students need to know? Answers to this question have varied. If you gather up all the "rhetorics"—textbooks that aren't handbooks or readers, the ones that teach writing principles through a rhetorical lens—you'll find some commonalities across the texts. They often begin by pointing out the ubiquity of writing—heck, it's everywhere—and describe its situatedness in social contexts. Students are then introduced to the word *rhetoric*. But since the word, as I said in the last chapter, has experienced dramatic linguistic pejoration over the years (connotations—empty! inflammatory! dishonest!—have become almost universally negative outside our little circle), the textbooks have to explain what the word really means and how it emerged from the language practices of the classical world.

From that point, some form of Aristotle's *psistis*—the appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, often overlaid, confusingly, on "the rhetorical triangle" of writer, audience, and text—appear, and, alongside a description of the writing process, some form of the classical rhetorical canons is presented, most likely invention (coming up with stuff to say about whatever), arrangement (organizing), and style. Some texts make explicit the connection between classical rhetorical theory and contemporary writing instruction (Corbett and Connors 1998; Crowley and Hawhee 2011). Others hide the Greek terms but keep their

salience (why say *kairns* when you can just say *timely*?). Many texts with a rhetorical bent talk about *argument* and use principles from informal logic. Recently *genre* has become a god-term in rhetorical instruction, for good reason, but the theoretical source is more contemporary rhetorical theory, particularly Carolyn Miller's 1984 groundbreaking article and subsequent work in what has been called rhetorical genre studies (RGS) (Bawarshi and Reiff 2010; see also Fulkerson 2005 for a review of all these approaches, and others). We use rhetorical theory as a method of inquiry, invention, assertion, identification, art.

So what? The point is that we have a rich disciplinary literature on effective communication, spanning more than 2,500 years, to draw from when we teach the content of mindful writing. However, if we're not careful with the scope, students will not be able to see the forest for the trees. In fact one online teaching source, the excellent "Forest of Rhetoric," compiled by my colleague Gideon Burton, plays with that forest/trees metaphor directly when introducing several hundred Greek and Latin terms (like *epexegesis*, or *restricio*) for rhetorical strategies.

Thou shalt not commit coverage (see chapter 6).

While instructors should learn all we can about language, rhetoric, and the writing process, we should probably keep our content teaching in FYW limited to a handful of essentials. (No *bomphologicalia*!) In addition to rhetorical theory as pedagogical content, we also have *writing theory*—or the cognitive, metacognitive, linguistic, orthographic, insitutional, grammatical, technological, social, and stylistic perspectives we bring to bear on writing as a human activity.

It's too much. Even graduate programs can't cover it all. Thankfully, as we saw in chapter 1, writing studies scholars have started talking about "threshold concepts," or the "concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area [like writing] or within a community of practice" (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015, 2). The "continued learning" part is key to our discussion of metacognition. We assume that if students understand (in the more advanced Bloomian sense) key concepts on writing, they will be able to apply those principles in any writing setting they encounter after our class. Again, Wiggins and McTighe think of "understanding" as the ability to explain key concepts and "use them *mindfully*" (2005, 39, their emphasis). Hardly trivia.

Members of the writing studies community have proposed a few dozen concepts that make up a somewhat provisional, but solid, base for a content for FYW. In table 2.1, I have synthesized three organizing categories of threshold concepts (rhetorical situation, genre, and writing and the writer) from three publications: *Naming What We Know*

Table 2.1. Major threshold concepts from three publications

	<i>Naming What We Know</i>	<i>Writing about Writing</i>	<i>Critical Transitions</i>
Rhetorical Situation	Writing is a social and rhetorical activity.	"Good" writing is dependent on writers, readers, situation, technology, and use.	Writing always occurs in context, and no two contexts are exactly alike.
Genre	Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms.	Genres: writing responds to repeating situations through recognizable forms.	Genre awareness contributes to successful transfer.
Writing and the Writer	Writing is (also always) a cognitive activity.	Writing is a process, all writers have more to learn, and writing is not perfectable.	Prior knowledge, experience, attitudes, and beliefs set the stage for writing and shape new writing experiences and learning.
	Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies.	Writing is impacted by prior experiences.	Reflection is critical for a writer's development.
	All writers have more to learn.	Writing is an activity and a subject of study.	

(Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015), *Writing about Writing* (Wardle and Downs 2017), and *Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer* (Anson and Moore 2017). Each of the five concepts in *Naming What We Know* has several subconcepts that could develop a student's transferable writing power even more. I also want to point out that the concepts in the *Writing about Writing* column come from a popular textbook, which means that Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs catered the wording specifically to understanding on the part of undergraduate writing students. Their textbook is a thousand pages of sweet writing studies goodness.

How do we want our students to understand these concepts? Recitation would be simple enough; give them a handout of the above table and then a quiz the next day. But that's a low-level learning activity—not "understanding," as we've defined it, and certainly not metacognitive. We want the students to feel these truths in their bones, to drag them out of long-term memory three years after we've taught them and they're sitting down to write a literature review for a dietetics class. We want them to understand how these concepts work in practice, how they inform and circumscribe and strengthen any writing task. An

effective writing course will have these concepts woven into the fabric of the entire course, making appearances in class discussions, supporting documents, comments on student writing, and reflective activities. (Wardle and Downs 2017 include "Meta Moment" discussion activities after their readings.)

More practically, I would propose reserving two class periods to introduce students to these concepts more thoroughly before they jump into their first writing task. In addition to all the important stuff you need to do on the first day, you could engage the students in a conversation about their experience as writers (see the interlude between parts I and II). In their Teaching for Transfer model, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak encourage their students to "articulate a theory of writing" from the beginning of the semester using key rhetorical terms such as audience, discourse community, and circulation (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014, 58). When I talk about the writing process with students in the first few days, I often have them draw a picture of their composing space—where they write, under what conditions, and with what technologies—so they can hover above it and describe what they see and don't see.

On the second day, you can introduce students to the rhetorical situation as our workable theory of communication. You should develop your own vocabulary for this instruction or find a free source students can consult for their key terms (maybe from Joe Moxley's online *Writing Commons*). Although I find acronyms embarrassing, I use GRAPE to describe the rhetorical situation: genre, rhetor (speaker, writer), audience, purpose, and exigence (the sociohistorical event that "called forth" the writing).

On GRAPE day, I assign students to read something—and, really, it can be anything interesting; how about a fortune cookie message?—and then in class we talk about how that text is embedded in a social situation governed by rhetorical dynamics. Specifically, I ask students to work in groups to describe how each dynamic of the rhetorical situation is reflected in the text. This activity helps them understand key terms but also *analyze* in a Bloomian sense, how those terms "relate to one another and to an overall structure" of a text (McGuire and McGuire 2015, 35). I've found in these conversations that terms that seem straightforward such as purpose or audience become rich and complicated and confounding, in a good way. (How is the assumed purpose of a fortune cookie message different from its actual purpose?) These conversations lay the groundwork for a semester-long discussion about rhetorical theory, with these terms as workable heuristics for new texts and situations.

I've also found it useful to focus students' attention on the rhetorical situation separate from rhetorical strategies. Let me be more specific: I feel like *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* have killed rhetorical literacy in the United States. Many states use those terms directly in their Common Core standards for high school students. The trunivirate sticks. When young writers think about rhetoric, they often think of these appeals, and often think of them poorly. Logos is the worst. My heart leapt when my son, a junior in high school, dropped the term in a dinner conversation one night, but then my heart plunged when he told us it meant "facts." Well. We have to start somewhere. Aside from my snooty concern about the proper usage of Greek terms, my beef with the appeals—which I am here categorizing under the term *strategies*—is that they easily can be reduced to just another close-ish reading exercise ("this fact here in King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech is logos") that elides language as social action. Maybe I'm being a curmudgeon. At any rate, I want my students to delay questions of strategy till they've grasped fully the dynamics of situation.

All this is to say that the content of writing is writing—how and why writers use rhetorical strategies in social contexts to achieve whatever it is they're trying to achieve. No matter what you choose to read, talk, and write about (climate change! guns! social media! immigration! donuts!), the core content of FYW should be fashioned around the ways and whys people communicate to get things done in the world. A carefully selected, and short, list of these threshold concepts can orient a semester's worth of teaching. Specifically, mindful writing can help students reflect on how their prior experience with these concepts is being reshaped and repurposed for present writing tasks.

### 3 METACOGNITION AND MINDFUL WRITING

So: You're a writing teacher. The teaching of writing has a millennia-long pedigree. While there have been a variety of approaches, some more soul crushing than others, the most powerful approach at the moment is to combine rhetorical knowledge and writing process as the metathemes of learning to write with power. We will now add to this content knowledge the engine of self-directed learning itself: metacognition.

#### PULLING OUR HEADS OFF AS WE WRITE

This one might as I was buttoning up the house, I spotted my fourteen-year-old daughter, Lydia, sitting on the couch staring out the window into the darkness. She had her winter coat on (indoors?) and headphones over her ears. I tapped her on the shoulder. She looked startled and pulled off her headphones.

I asked, "How's it going?"

She said, "I'm working on my story."

She was not typing. She had no paper or pencil in hand.

She explained that she had discovered that all her good ideas for her fantasy writing came not while she was actually sitting in front of the computer typing but while she was daydreaming—just walking around or sitting in the quiet of the house, listening to Approaching Nirvana, an electronic band, and letting her mind do whatever it had a mind to do. The point was that she knew this about her creative process, and she was intentionally placing herself in what photographer Dewitt Jones calls "the place of most potential" for creative work. I don't know when or how she learned to do that. Somehow, she figured out how to gaze into the workings of her own mind.

On the western facade of the Notre Dame cathedral, in Paris, France, there is a sculpture of St. Denis, standing between two angels, holding his own severed head in his hands (figure 3.1). Wikipedia tells me that Denis was bishop of Paris in the third century and was martyred by



Figure 3.1.  
St. Denis—professional  
cephalophore, Notre Dame

decapitation. This did not slow down Denis, who, according to popular legend, picked up his head and walked around with it in his hands, preaching sermons, thus becoming one of several famous *cephalophores* (Greek for “head carrier”).

I’ve thought about this delightful image of St. Denis—holding his head in his hands as if inspecting it with eyes that aren’t there anymore—as I’ve thought about *metacognition*, or the act of thinking about our thinking, which is central to my model of teaching writing. How nice it would be to get that kind of critical distance from our own heads, to examine our assumptions, thoughts, impressions, memories without being so wrapped up in them. To examine ourselves, to be aware of ourselves, to act intentionally in the world with this awareness, for the benefit of ourselves and others—this seems to me the sign of a philosophical life, a purposeful and mindful life.

That word *mindful* is quite trendy (“What Mindfulness App Is Right for You?” asked one *Huffington Post* article in April 2015; *The New*

*Mindfulness*, shouted the title of a magazine at the grocery checkout last week), even though it was coined by professor of medicine Jon Kabat-Zinn back in the 1970s. One brand of mindfulness, borrowing from Eastern philosophy, particularly Buddhism, teaches us to “come back to the present moment” through intense concentration on breathing and the current state of the body, while resisting judgments about self or affective states (Nhat Hanh 1973, 64). Another brand, made popular by psychologist Ellen Langer, is more about learning, about having “a limber mind” (1989, 70) attuned to new categories of thought and experience. In both approaches, mindfulness is transformative because it invites the practitioner to stop the incessant flow of life and take control of the moment.

While I want to capitalize on the mindfulness movement, I think it’s important to distinguish the kind of mindfulness I’m talking about from other kinds. For instance, the approach to mindfulness popularized by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh is about being fully present in your body, living and breathing only in that very moment, without judgment, and learning how living in the present leads to what the classical Stoics called *euthymia*, or tranquility. Its methods have been used as a mental health practice to reduce stress—in elementary school children, for example (L. Davis 2015)—and foster overall emotional and spiritual well-being. From an education standpoint, this kind of mindful practice is like recess: Even if it is not directly related to learning, it helps students produce a state of being conducive to learning. And three cheers for anything that will do that.

On the other hand, mindfulness conceived as metacognition is more intimately connected to the learning process itself. In fact, you could say it *governs* the learning process, like a TV producer running a big awards show. For me, mindful writing requires being present in the moment of writing (as creative writer and practicing Buddhist Dinty Moore conceives it) *and* projecting or reflecting across time as a way to realize writing power. For me, mindfulness is a purposeful, deliberate awareness of what we are doing and how we could do it better—right now, and in the future.

My argument in this chapter is that first-year student writers (or any writers, for that matter) benefit when they learn metacognitive strategies for taking their heads off, so to speak, and paying attention to what they’re thinking and doing as they move purposefully through a writing task. (The chemist Sandra McGuire tells her students to think of metacognition as having “a big brain outside of your brain looking at what your brain is doing”; McGuire and McGuire 2015, 16.) Learning about

metacognition—understood as a writer’s habit of mind—will help us be better teachers. It will also lay the groundwork for the model of mindful writing I’m suggesting is at the heart of a writing teacher’s strategies.

#### A NEW SET OF SKILLS

Much of our education culture has been informed by what journalist Paul Tough calls the “cognitive hypothesis”—the belief that learning means mastering certain cognitive skills that help you on quantifiable exams (recalling facts, writing clear sentences, analyzing, solving math problems, and the like). We need cognitive skills, obviously, but Paul Tough (2012) describes a recent movement in education that has questioned the cognitive hypothesis by suggesting that learners need “a very different set of qualities” to succeed in school and life: “persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence” (xv). Economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman is one of many scholars hoisting up data to support the conclusion that *character development*—as old, at least, as Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and once the primary concern of American public education—is just as important to the future success of students as cognitive abilities (Heckman and Kautz 2014).

For the past ten years or so, learning science and writing studies have converged on a novel vision for teaching writing that responds to this call to engage more fully with the whole learner. The vision is novel because it draws our attention more to what student writers become as a result of taking our classes rather than what they produce (i.e., writing). If we adopt this vision, we focus on the “habits of mind” or “dispositions” students “cultivate” as a result of our instruction as much as, or actually more than, the double-spaced essays they crank out (Behm, Rankins-Robertson, Roen 2017, xxiii; Driscoll and Wells 2012). We will care as much about how students will succeed as writers in (say) a future microbiology class as we do about their research papers for ours, because we’re interested in portable dispositions more than current writing performance. To that end, the 2011 “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing”—developed jointly by (big breath) the Council for Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, all our big hitters—adds to the standard outcomes (e.g., writing process knowledge) eight new “habits of mind essential for success in college writing”: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition (“Framework” 2011). Alice Horning argues we should add critical reading skills to this list as well (2017).

While this list is no doubt exciting to teachers, it is no easy task trying to articulate what “creativity” or “persistence” might look like or how we help students cultivate them. A habit such as “openness” sounds virtuous, but then the fact that it sounds virtuous becomes a liability: Are we teaching writing or ethics, or somehow both? In sixteen weeks?

This is a daunting task, this “cultivating habits” business. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle equates habit with *ethos*, a term that means much more than credibility—it means identity. For Aristotle, we become who we are by habitual behavior; we are “habituated” by “doing the acts that we do” (1947, 953). Habits, in this sense, are not slavish acts (like biting your fingernails) but deliberate acts of attunement—self-driven decisions about “what is good and expedient” for ourselves (1026). When we teach, we invite students to habituate themselves to certain ways of being. In the literature, this way of being has been called *self-regulated*. Self-regulated learners are fully in charge of their learning. They know what they want to achieve, they believe in their abilities, they set goals, they stay focused and committed, even when everything goes sideways, they are motivated, they seek help when they need it, they pay close attention to how it’s all working, and they make necessary adjustments to their behavior and environment to get what they want (Nilsson 2013; Zimmerman and Moylan 2009).

It can be intimidating thinking about our jobs as writing teachers in terms of cultivating habits. Nevertheless, since the act of writing “enacts and creates identities” (Scott 2015, 48), we cannot ignore this dimension of teaching writing.

The writers of the “Framework” have argued that writing students should be habituated in a variety of ways, but one of the most important is in *metacognition*. Through metacognitive habituation, writers learn how to take control of their writing tasks and become self-directed learners. We can teach them how to do that. And if we do, they might take what they’ve learned when they leave our course. In the rest of this chapter, I will describe what metacognition is, how it works in writing, and why it is important for our model for mindful writing.

#### METACOGNITION

The term *metacognition* appears last on the “Framework” list, but it may very well be the one disposition to rule them all. Metacognition is an attribute of mind that distinguishes an expert from a novice (National Research Council 2002, 47). By some accounts, the term was coined by child psychologist John Flavell in 1976 in *The Nature of Intelligence*. Three

years later, in *American Psychologist*, Flavell (1979) explained that while studying developmental differences in schoolchildren, he discovered that most children “do relatively little monitoring of their own memory, comprehension, and other cognitive enterprises” (906). Even though Piaget found evidence of sophisticated dual processing in children as young as two, Flavell noted that, on the whole, schooled children didn’t know whether they were learning, or how or why. Often they don’t know what they know or don’t, and they don’t know how to make their knowing work better for them. It may not come as a surprise to discover that college students likewise struggle to pay attention to their learning and improve it (Nilson 2013, 2–3).

These twin challenges are presented in the research as *monitoring*—“assessing or evaluating the ongoing progress or current state of a particular cognitive activity”—and *controlling*—“regulating the ongoing cognitive activity” (Dunlosky and Metcalfe 2009, 3). Some scholars also include a third aspect, *knowledge*, which is essentially epistemological: knowing how things are known and why (Dunlosky and Metcalfe 2009; Tarricone 2011). Metacognition, then, is the act of monitoring and controlling your own mental activity.

According to another classical text by Jacobs and Paris, the goal of metacognition is to be able to plan learning, evaluate how one is learning, and make changes to improve, both during tasks and for future ones (McCormick, Dimmitt, and Sullivan 2013). In essence, metacognition is used to improve performance, and in fact dozens of education studies assert that this is precisely what it does (see McCormick, Dimmitt, and Sullivan 2013; Santangelo, Harris, and Graham 2016). One major metastudy has revealed that metacognitive teaching strategies have an effect size of 0.69, ranking 14 out of 150 studied influences on student achievement (Hattie 2012, 266). (Effect size refers to the difference between one type of instruction and a comparison group. Any positive number suggests that the type of instruction had a positive effect compared to a control group. Effect sizes at 0.5 or above are moderate to strong.) Clearly, teaching students how to think metacognitively is a best practice.

It could be said that all learning is metacognitive in the sense that in pursuing our goals we experience feedback that teaches us something about how we’re doing. However, philosopher Joelle Proust argues for a more active and purposeful view of metacognition. Metacognition activates a “cognitive subsystem” that works as “an independent form of mental agency”—a kind of second self, a monitoring self, a self attuned to the values that lead to success (2013, 7). This kind of self-investigation

was popular in Greco-Roman philosophy and education. However, the nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte had his doubts about its viability: “The thinking subject cannot divide himself into two parts, one of which would reason, while the other would observe its reasoning” (in Dunlosky and Metcalfe 2009, 12).

True, there is something spooky about metacognition if we entertain the idea that one part of our cognitive self can be more perspicacious than another part. (The cephalophore, presumably, looking at her own head is somehow wiser than her own head.) And yet recent neurological studies support the idea that self-reflection is not only possible but neurologically distinct from other cognitive activities, such as memory retrieval (Dunlosky and Metcalfe 2009; Schwartz, Scott, and Holzberger 2013). Our metacognitions—much like the maladaptive “automatic thoughts” (Beck 1979) that make us mentally ill—have “epistemic authority,” meaning that they can influence our “judgments, memories and intellectual performances” (Nelson, Kruglanski, and Jost 1998, 77; see also Dweck 2006). What we think about ourselves as learners has persuasive power. Metacognition is an act of self-persuasion, inviting us to transform the conditions of our work.

I’ve been saying “we.” Who’s *we*, really? Does everyone, no matter where or how you live on earth, use the same metacognitive processes? Seems like the answer is *yes* and *no*. I’m punching dangerously above my intellectual weight class here, but the most recent research takes two positions on the question: (1) If metacognition is defined as the monitoring and controlling of mental processes, then every culture (studied, at least) has methods for explaining and refining this process; (2) but epistemological practices such as metacognition are meant to select, transmit, use, expand, and teach information “relevant to a [particular] group” (Proust and Fortier 2018, 2). Any time we talk about metacognition, we are talking about a universal practice with culturally specific operations and values. Thinking—along with speaking and writing and reading—is an activity meant to “enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities” (Gee 2012, 152).

#### METACOGNITION AND WRITING

In writing studies, metacognition is considered one of the dispositions or habits of mind of successful writers—along with other attributes related to metacognition, such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, motivation, attribution, meta-awareness, and the other “Framework” habits (e.g., flexibility). And in fact, this understanding of metacognition

has been part of the mental model from the beginning of cognitive writing studies in the 1970s. While the earliest models (Hayes/Flower, and Bereiter/Scardamalia) did not use the term *metacognition*, they distinguished the act of writing (i.e., thinking of words, writing words, reviewing those words) from the social environment in which the writing takes place (the audience and purpose) and the *task schema* writers use to monitor and control the writing process (McCutchen, Teske, and Banks 2008).

Schemata are mental models we apply, deliberately or automatically, to solve problems. Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia used the term *intentional cognition* rather than *metacognition* to describe how a writer has a “self-directed mental life” that is “carried on consciously and purposefully” as they write (1987, 336). Expert writers show “deliberate control” through “goal setting, planning, memory search, problem solving, evaluation, and diagnosis” (xiii). In a recent refiguring of this complex model, John Hayes, an emeritus psychologist at Carnegie Mellon, placed metacognitive skills on a “control level,” separate from the “process level” (i.e., the act of writing in a social context) and the “resource level” (i.e., cognitive resources such as long-term memory and attention) (Hayes 2012). In short, this research showed that expert writers can separate themselves from the act of plinking out words on the page in order to set goals, make plans, monitor their process, make adjustments as they go, and reflect on the value of the product and the experience—all in the service of their craft. Expert writers are cephalophores.

As you can imagine, the knock on this research was that it was too obsessively focused on how the three-pound universe between a writer’s ears produced the writing. But why do people write in the first place? As Charles Bazerman argues, “writing is a technology designed to communicate among people,” and it is “learned and produced in social circumstances, establishes social relationships, changes the writer’s social presence, creates shared meanings, and accomplishes social action” (2016, 11). As I said in the last chapter, before children learn to scratch out real words, they often write rows and rows of squiggly lines on notepaper and expect friends and family to read it. Their need to communicate in writing develops faster than their ability to do so. What’s the point of all that monitoring and controlling and taking off our heads if we’re not communicating with others?

Here’s the point for writing teachers: The habits of mind mentioned in the “Framework,” including metacognition, are established, maintained, and deeply enhanced by our motivation to speak to others. These dispositions spring into action in social contexts—with genres,

audiences, and purposes all embedded in the relationships that give them *telos*, the ultimate aim of writing: communion. The mindful writer wants to refine the process of being together through language.

We can see this rhetorical awareness in action when as children we learn how to speak with the people we live with. However, in unnatural and schooled writing, we develop socially motivated metacognition over years of practice. According to one study, our “cognitive apprenticeship” as audience-centered writers takes twenty years or more of deliberate practice as we develop control techniques that can juggle both the text and a representation of a reader’s needs (Kelllogg 2008, 3). Our young students may struggle to understand how to plan, execute, and evaluate their own writing as an addressed, pragmatic act in a social world (Beach, Newell, and VanderHeide 2016), especially if we continue to give them writing tasks that do not have any imagined audience beyond a teacher with a gradebook. “The only true education,” wrote American philosopher John Dewey over 100 years ago, stimulates a learner’s powers through “the demands of the social situations” they find themselves in (1972b, 84).

#### METACOGNITION AND TEACHING WRITING

So, where are we? Let’s review: For a writer, metacognition—a kind of mindfulness—is the act of monitoring and controlling your own mental activity as you write in social contexts for social goals. It is a habit of mind separate from other writing processes (e.g., typing syntactically clear sentences or drawing from what you know about a topic), and it can be developed through deliberate practice. And research tells us it *should* be developed, since writing performance is influenced by the writer’s ability to monitor and control the writing process purposefully, considering the audience and rhetorical goals.

There is another reason for teaching students metacognitive strategies—a biggie. Recent research suggests that students who develop metacognitive strategies are more likely to transfer important writing skills to new settings. Being the bearers of bumper news, we tell our students that after they leave our sixteen-week crash course on writing, they will find themselves once again in a situation that calls for them to write. (Turns out that writing is a life sentence. Pun intended.) And it’s likely that the new writing task, whether in school or out, won’t look much like the ones we throw at them in first-year writing. (“Write a literacy narrative,” says no boss ever at no engineering firm.) But if students can see how all writing tasks share certain attributes across contexts, they can

write with the power of their metainds. We call this trick of abstraction *transfer*—when a writer can “repurpose or transform prior knowledge about writing for a new audience, purpose, and context” through “mindful abstraction” (Moore 2017, 2).

The research on writing transfer is deep, rich, and growing like kudzu. (See Beaufort 2016 for a nice synthesis; also Anson and Moore 2016; Moore and Bass 2017; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014.) Here’s what a writing teacher needs to know from this research:

- Transfer is the ultimate goal of all learning, if we think of learning as developing powers to understand and act in new situations.
- Transfer is easy and somewhat automatic when a new situation is identical or near-identical to a prior situation (which is why you can drive a rental car you’ve never sat in before); but higher learning, including learning to write, requires a significant degree of abstraction—learning to see in novel situations what might apply from dissimilar prior experiences.
- Transfer is hard to detect in research studies, and often in writing studies students show *negative transfer* from one writing situation to the next, meaning (for us) that what they learned in first-year writing interferes with new writing tasks, because prior learning plays a commanding role in new learning.
- Transfer is aided by metacognitive habits that help students become aware of themselves as learners and writers, monitoring and controlling the writing process in a new social context.
- The list of “abstractable” schemata writers need varies, but a good starter list would include genre knowledge, knowledge about the writing process, and knowledge about how writing works as “a social and rhetorical activity” (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015).
- Students can develop metacognitive habits of mind more effectively if we (a) teach them about metacognition and transfer explicitly during the course (as in, “Hey students, this thing I’m teaching you about genre: You’ll need it every time you get another writing task”), (b) give them multiple opportunities to practice metacognition, particularly as they transition from task to task, and (c) provide feedback for their metacognitions.

In this chapter, I’ve tried to establish a little of the theory behind what I will now call, without much poetry, the “learning cycle for mindful writers.” Metacognition is at the heart of it. In the next chapter we’ll take a brief look at this cycle.

## 4

### THE LEARNING CYCLE FOR MINDFUL WRITERS

We know that expert writers have very good metacognitive skills: They monitor and control the writing task in its social context. We know students don’t necessarily come to us with all those skills, but we know we can intervene and teach them to develop habits of mind that will help them as lifelong writers. How, exactly, do we do that?

We can start with the insight that effective metacognition in writing, or any other kind of learning, flows through time in a *sequence*. Barry Zimmerman, one of the most important figures in this line of study, calls this sequence the “personal feedback loop,” and for him it rolled out in three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection (2009, 300). Others have suggested plan, monitor, evaluate (Nilson 2013, 8). Susan Ambrose and her research team suggest five steps in a “cycle of self-directed learning” (assess, evaluate, plan, apply, reflect), and I am greatly indebted to their work for my own learning cycle for mindful writers (Ambrose et al. 2010, 193). For a writer confronted with a project, the three-step sequence might look like this: (1) You analyze what this writing task is asking you to do, set goals, and make a plan; (2) you write the thing, using whatever strategies you know, all the while monitoring yourself to see how you’re doing, making adjustments when necessary, with the help of others; and then (3) you finish, looking back and assessing how you did, making sense of it all in the context of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

As we’ve established, this kind of self-directed writing does not happen naturally. And the traditional model of teaching writing—one that I imagine is still quite popular—shortchanges the forethought and self-reflection phases and shoves all its chips onto the performance (i.e., drafting + revising) phase. We can help writing students build mindfulness during major writing assignments by asking them to practice thinking metacognitively—in writing—at various stages throughout the process.