

## Acknowledgments

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## Part I

### How Do Writers Find Their Subjects?

Write before you know what you have to say or how to say it. Ignorance is a great starting place. Write as fast as you can—and then increase the speed! Don't worry about penmanship or typing, punctuation or correctness, making sense or being silly. Velocity is as important in writing as in bicycle riding—speed gets you ahead of the censor and causes the accidents of meaning and language essential to good writing. . . . Later you can read what you have written and the draft, rough as it is, will often reveal what you have to say and how you can say it.

—Donald Murray, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist

The most powerful thing about journal writing, for me, can be visualized as a sort of wheel, a snake with its tail in its mouth. At some point, the wheel is labeled "writing." Somewhere on the other side, it's labeled "thinking" or "learning." Writing, in other words, *leads* to thinking and learning. Thinking and learning lead, in turn, to more writing. And on and on, like a mantra. I think this concept works especially well with journal writing because it suggests the exploratory nature of journals and emphasizes their chief value: contemplation.

—Chris M. Anson, writing teacher

One use of the journal is to extend or explore your thinking in order to construct your own knowledge. Rather than simply restate or rehearse ideas shared in a course, you're using the journal to reformulate and reflect on ideas *in your own words*. In that way, you're assimilating these ideas into what you already know and believe. . . . You may also use your journal entries as prewriting to develop ideas for your papers. As you begin to define and clarify a possible paper topic, you could highlight or circle material and entitle that material in the margin according to its relevance to your overall topic.

– Richard Beach, writing teacher

I've been learning to write since before I can remember—since first holding a crayon in my hand—yet I've only scratched the surface of what there is to learn and to write about. Some of my best writing has grown out of my journals, has come instantly, like magic. I didn't know what I was going to write, it just came out. Other writing has taken months to research, or years to simmer and season in my memory and my heart, before I could bear to write it down. I write better than I did, say, a year ago, but I still don't write as well as I want to.

–Carolyn Kremers, writing teacher

What matters, when you first sit down to write, is that the who you are writing for is yourself and the why is to make that writing a process of discovery. It is the act of writing that makes the search for new meaning possible. You may decide to share this initial thinking with a fellow student or with your teacher, but hold on to the certainty that whether to share or not, at this predraft stage, is your decision.

– Pat D'Arcy, writing teacher

## Writing as a Tool for Learning and Discovery

Thia Wolf

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Thia Wolf is Associate Professor of Composition Studies at California State University, Chico, where she coordinates the English Composition Program. She teaches courses in writing and rhetoric to undergraduates and courses in composition theory to graduate students. The birth of her son in 1995 has inspired her to investigate learning development in children. She resides in Richardson Springs, a canyon just outside of Chico, with her family and three rambunctious dogs.

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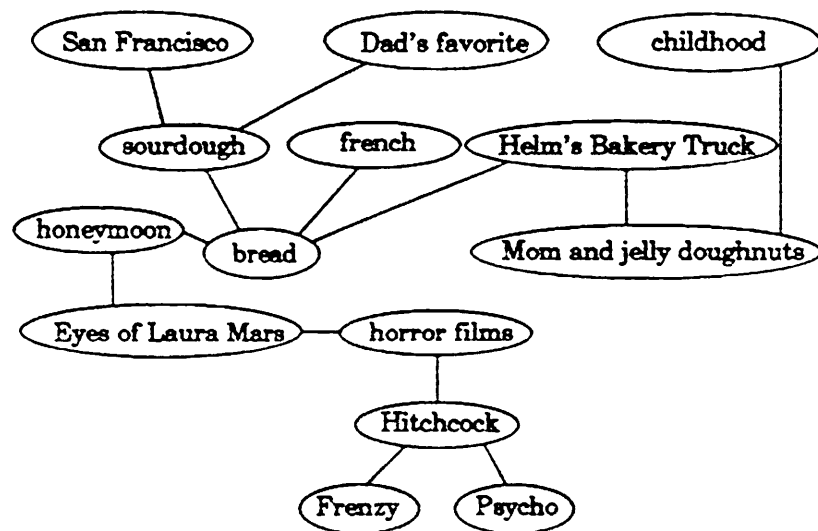
This essay examines ways of using writing to improve memory, foster insights, and accelerate learning. Few of us stop to consider that writing can be more than a functional activity (something we do when we need to apply for a job or prepare for a trip to the grocery store) and different from mandatory assignments. Writing is a uniquely human tool, a means to stimulate memory, construct new knowledge, and explore both ourselves and our environment. Even people who don't like to write essays, letters, or research papers may find that they enjoy using writing to increase their learning potential. I want to introduce you to writing activities that can support you in learning and in living. You'll probably get the most out of this essay if you have paper and pencil handy. Rather than reading straight through, plan to sit down with the essay more than once. On each occasion of your reading, try one or two of the activities suggested here. They are scattered throughout the text.

Let's begin by looking at some ways that writing stimulates and enhances memory. Although researchers still have a long way to go before understanding all about the ways our brains work, they have created useful hypotheses, or theories, about brain function. Obviously, our brains store information over the entire course of our lives; this stored information forms the basic building blocks of our memories.

We'll try a simple writing activity that demonstrates how memory becomes activated through language. Start with a word that seems neutral, even uninteresting, and print it in the middle of a sheet of paper. (In my example, below, I started with the word *bread*.) After you've printed this word, print other words or phrases that it reminds you of. (You'll see that I wrote names of breads, but pretty soon I found myself writing names and places where I'd eaten bread, people I know who like bread, childhood memories about bread, etc.) Keep track of the thoughts that go through your mind by noting as many words and phrases as you can around other words and phrases on the page that trigger a memory or association. You may be surprised at how many memories come back to you and how many associations you have for simple words such as *tree*, *lamp*, or *blanket*.

The map below (Figure 1-1) is a visual representation of the ways my brain became stimulated when I thought of the word *bread*. I began by categorizing breads: sourdough, French. And I suddenly remembered something I think of only rarely—the Helm's Bakery Truck that used to visit our neighborhood when I was a child. The Helm's truck was like an ice cream truck,

Figure 1-1



except that it was filled with shelves of breads, doughnuts, and other bakery goods. Although I didn't mention it in my map, remembering the Helm's truck brought back memories of some of the most delicious smells imaginable. When the Helm's man opened the large back doors to his truck and invited us up a step and into his bakery, my mother and I found ourselves enveloped in the thick, sweet smells of freshly baked treats.

Remembering what it felt like to enter the truck with my mother, I also remembered her favorite food: lemon jelly doughnuts. But my thinking didn't stop there. Coming back to my original word trigger, *bread*, I realized that sourdough bread reminds me both of my father, who loves it, and of San Francisco, a place renowned for its sourdough loaves. Thinking of San Francisco reminded me of my honeymoon and of a film my husband and I saw while we were there. That film, a horror film, made me think of other horror films I've known.

Create a map yourself and see what it shows you about how your memory works.

## Activity

When I made my map and reviewed it, I realized how important the sense of smell is in my memory process: the smell of the Helm's Bakery Truck and the smell of the sourdough loaves on San Francisco's fisherman's wharf brought back the richest memories for me.

Writing researchers Linda Flower and John Hayes (1977) explain that we store memory in "rich bits," chemically encoded pieces of information that incorporate many experiences and associations. Flower and Hayes liken them to intuition and explain that without the intervention of language these bits never become useful to us. Although I have stored many complex bits of information about my family and my daily experience in my brain, I can only examine, enjoy, and use this information fully when I put it into words. Looking over my map I can also see that relationships occupy a central place in my memory process: Most of my memories center on my relationships with my family members. The words in my map serve as memory triggers, allowing me to relive significant moments in my life and to make new connections between my past experience and my present situation. If you examine your cognitive map, what memory triggers seem to matter most to you? Did you remember any details when you did your map that surprised or pleased you? What were they?

Most people who use writing as a way of remembering the past find that many small details they had entirely forgotten resurface during the writing activity. This is not to say that all of these memories are accurate. Experiments on the working of memory reveal that many factors—including stress, distorted self-assessment, and elapsed time—alter the way we remember past events. Also, the way others remember or represent the past can influence our memories of it (Loftus 1988).

To demonstrate how malleable memory really is, write a one-page description of something you remember from your childhood. Make sure that it's a memory that is fairly vivid for you and that someone in your family will probably also remember. After you've written your description down, talk to the family member who shared the experience with you. Ask for his or her description. What discrepancies did you find?

I've often found that my memory of a situation differs radically from others' memories. When I finished high school, I expected to be given my father's old Volkswagen Beetle; I clearly remembered that he had promised it to me when I was a freshman. My graduation day arrived at last, but my father had no memory of any such promise! He eventually traded the car in on a new car for himself. Because I know my father is an honest man, I know he really didn't remember having promised me the car. It's not impossible, in fact, that I made up the promise in my own mind and came to believe in it because I wanted it to be true.

The malleability of memory is one reason why some people like to keep daily journals: a written record of the highlights in one's life can help to keep memory more accurate. In business situations, many individuals like to create a "paper trail," a series of memos and notes that record each worker's responsibilities for a certain project. In these cases, writing becomes a way of preserving memory and creating a history of a business undertaking or a private life.

But writing has many more interesting uses than to preserve or explore memory. In and out of school settings, writing can help individuals synthesize new information with previously learned information and thus create new, complex structures of *understanding*. So let's move from the realm of memory and examine some writing activities that help us to think more clearly and create new ways of knowing what we need to know.

## Activity

One writing activity my students and I both enjoy is the "teacher exercise," an activity passed on to me by a friend who took a workshop on creative diary keeping. The teacher exercise is an example of a dialogue activity, a way of externalizing some of the internal conversations that take place between different voices within yourself. To create a successful dialogue with one of your internal teaching voices, start by listing important teachers in your life. These may be people you have known and admired, people you've never met, characters in stories or film, places you've traveled, even objects. (For example, I learn a lot by watching the ways trees share ground and sky with one another; they're a cooperative group that live together peaceably unless dire necessity forces them to struggle for the same ground. From trees I've learned the importance of being as much as one can be wherever one stands.) I've included a partial list of my favorite teachers below:

My music teacher, Virginia Petersen

My dissertation director, Professor Don Daiker

My colleague, Elizabeth Renfro

My neighbor, Jean Graybeal

Trees

After you make a list that suits you, try writing a dialogue between yourself and one of your teachers about a problem you want to solve. Write as quickly as you can, allowing the dialogue to surprise you. Continue to write for several pages.

Written dialogue exercises like this one frequently allow writers to experience sudden insights about problems as diverse as family fights and difficult chemistry equations. Even if your internal teacher doesn't have an answer for your problem, he or she can often provide a strategy for approaching the problem so that you can think about it more calmly, analytically, and effectively.

Another useful dialogue exercise involves re-creating an argument you've had with someone, but approaching the argument from the other person's point of view. Include not only the spoken part of the argument, but also the thoughts of the person you argued against. How does that person respond internally to the things you did and said during the argument? When you consider the argument from his or her viewpoint, can you better understand why he or she responded to you in the way he or she did? Try this dialogue exercise here, including the other person's internal thoughts in parentheses.

Being able to understand your opponent's point of view has long been a recommended technique for learning how to persuade others to see your side of an argument. Psychologist Carl Rogers (1965) has claimed that only through validating the viewpoint of another can we hope to have our own viewpoints validated. Analyzing and validating an opponent's view before opposing it may lead to better negotiations for a third, socially constructed viewpoint between all of the parties involved. And you may surprise yourself by finding that, after studying someone else's view, you agree with his/her opinion more than you'd realized.

I recall a turbulent time in my household when I was still in my teens. During an argument with my mother, I claimed that she always put her own needs and interests ahead of my own. She countered by telling me that most of her activities (cooking, cleaning, driving, shopping) revolved around my needs, and that if I didn't understand this, I had better start trying some of her responsibilities on for size. If I had stopped to think about the world from her point of view, I would have seen that she contributed a generous share of her time and energy to keeping me happy. Because I didn't stop to think about her perspective, I made her angry, had some of my privileges revoked, and took on a new household responsibility, that of family cook. She and I

didn't have a conversation about our misunderstandings: we had a fight. And fighting, although it produces a satisfactory amount of adrenaline and a momentary surge of self-righteous indignation, rarely transforms the problems it seeks to address.

Now that you've warmed up your imagination by creating the voices of a teacher and an opponent, consider some of the other ways that imagination can intersect with writing to help you create connections and new insights. Below, I've described a few activities that students of mine have found useful. Read them over, then try one.

## Activity

*Letter from the Future.* Write yourself a letter from an older version of yourself. What will you be like in twenty-five years? Where will you live? What will you do for a living? What will matter to you most? Write to yourself from this older perspective. What advice should your older self give your present self to make sure you arrive at the future you most want?

*Intersection.* List five subjects you've studied in school. Choose the two that seem most different from each other and write a paragraph describing all of their similarities and connections, even if you really have to stretch to find these.

*Drawing into Writing.* Draw three pictures of a recurring problem in your life, whether it's studying mathematics or making satisfying friendships. Date one of these pictures from an earlier time in your life, one from the present, and one from the future. Write a paragraph or two that explores the connections between these pictures. What patterns can you start to detect by exploring the ways these pictures relate to each other? What alternative behaviors or approaches might help you solve the problem you've explored?

These activities work equally well for advancing your understanding of your private life and of your scholastic endeavors. You can just as easily ask a future version of yourself about the many reasons why studying writing or mathematics now might help you later in life as you can ask that self about the benefits of vigorous exercise over the course of many years. One important feature of activities like these is that they give you a chance to become more involved in your learning process. Research on cognition, our internal thought processes, indicates that personal involvement in any learning activity increases the chances that learning will be sophisticated rather than superficial, and memorable rather than easily forgotten (Mandler 1984). With a little thought and creativity, you can see how activities such as these could help you in a variety of classes and situations. In a history course, you might write a journal entry from the point of view of a historical figure; in a chemistry course, you might write

a conversation among the elements in an equation. You'll enjoy learning more and learn more effectively if you can construct approaches to learning that engage your attention and challenge your imagination.

One of the most powerful ways to challenge yourself through written language and to learn any lesson well is to develop a facility with metaphors and similes. Some researchers argue that metaphors—comparisons between like things—are the fundamental building blocks of all interpretive endeavors. This is because metaphors tap in to our most basic ways of knowing about the world—through our senses and our bodily motions. Everything we understand, every new piece of knowledge we add to what we already know, connects with some physical experience of our environment. This is the critical function of metaphor: to provide us with linguistic links between abstract or unexamined thoughts and our physical understanding of the world in which we live.

That last sentence may be hard to understand without a concrete example of the way metaphors and similes work. Let me provide you with an example from my own life. As a freshman in college, I enrolled in an astronomy course, a class I nearly failed. I have hated astronomy ever since but never stopped to think about why. By constructing a simile, I can begin to examine my reasons for responding so negatively to this academic subject. To construct the simile, I'll use the abstract, unexamined problem ("I hate studying astronomy") and a physical experience to which I can compare it. For my physical experience, I use the technique of association, jotting down the first example that comes to mind of something else I hate: eating a rotten Bing cherry. So here's my simile: Studying astronomy is like *eating a rotten Bing cherry*.

What sense can I make of this comparison? I'll start with the physical side of the equation. Bing cherries are my favorite food. I look forward to cherry season every year and have been known to consume a whole bag of cherries for lunch or dinner. So when I get a rotten cherry, I'm disappointed and disagreeably surprised. My mouth is all set for one kind of taste sensation, but the cherry feels mealy and tastes moldy on my tongue.

Having sorted through these reactions to the rotten cherry, I can start thinking about ways the eating experience reminds me of the astronomy class I took. I remember now that before I enrolled in the course, I expected to like it. I've always been a science fiction fan, and I assumed an astronomy class would focus mostly on facts about distant planets (with some speculation about extraterrestrial life-forms thrown in for good measure). In fact, the professor talked mostly about physics. He wanted us to learn a variety of mathematical calculations that would help us understand how scientists interpret the information they receive from telescopes. Because I expected one kind of experience in the course and got another (very much like expecting a good cherry but biting into a rotten one), I reacted to astronomy with distaste. Realizing this makes me wonder if I wouldn't be wise to give astronomy another try. After all, I may have caused my own problems in learning because of the expectations I carried with me into the class. Now that I'm older and a

bit more open-minded. I might enjoy learning something about telescopes and the use of physics to understand the stars.

Writing theorist Peter Elbow (1981) suggests an interesting metaphor activity, which students in many of my writing classes tell me later is the single most useful discovery tool I taught them. This activity will help you make surprising, creative connections if you do the first half quickly and the second half thoughtfully. First, choose a problem (scholastic or personal) that you haven't yet solved. Quickly, without stopping to think about your response, write down its color, its shape, its size, its smell. Now take several minutes to explain, in writing, why you gave this problem each of these physical properties (for a whole series of metaphor activities, see Elbow 1981). Were you able to discover what some of your metaphors meant?

Often, using metaphors to redefine a problem can give you an entirely new perspective on your situation. Developing skill with metaphors will also enhance your use of descriptive and poetic language in your more formal writing tasks.

Finally, you can also employ writing in classes across the disciplines to help strengthen your learning process. Most students take notes during lectures, even though many classroom lectures only repeat material that can be found in the course textbook. If you notice that the professors in some of your classes go over reading material in their lectures, consider using writing in their classes to do something other than take notes. Here are some suggestions: periodically summarize the key points the lecturer has just covered; decide what puzzles you about what you've heard, and write down questions that you'd like to ask in class or during the teacher's office hours; listen for and jot down discrepancies between what the lecturer says and what you thought you knew about the subject (discrepancies should be cleared up in a conversation with the teacher or by rereading the course's text). All of these writing strategies allow you to interact with your learning, to question the material actively instead of sitting like a porous lump in the lecture hall waiting to be filled with someone else's knowledge. Students who take an assertive, interested approach to learning get more out of the courses they take and enjoy their educational experiences far more than students who learn material by rote for exams.

The writing strategies mentioned above can help you during your assigned reading. Keep blank paper handy to copy out intriguing or confusing portions of the text. Select some of these passages for brief writing: What questions do the passages raise or what new ideas do they give you? A particularly rewarding technique for examining your assigned reading is to make connections between unrelated courses. Ask yourself hard questions, such as How does this rule in physics connect with what I learned about the law of supply and demand in my economics course? or Did the conquest of the New World by the Spanish that I'm studying in my history course contain any of the ethical dilemmas I'm studying in my philosophy class? If you take a few minutes to note these questions and respond to them briefly in writing, you'll

begin to see many opportunities for drawing on information from all of your classes in developing an educated worldview. You'll probably come up with some interesting paper topics this way, too.

Above all, remember that writing for learning need not be correct, sophisticated, or polished. Writing for learning should serve you as a tool for analyzing and synthesizing many kinds of information in your life. This is writing for *you*, not a teacher, employer, or classmate. Although you may choose to share some of this writing or to develop ideas from this writing into more formal prose, writing for learning should be stress-free, exploratory, and mind-opening. Use it to enjoy and enhance your mind's activity as you study, reflect, and live.

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## Sharing Ideas

- As you tried Thia Wolf's activities while you read, which proved most useful to you and why?
- In an essay later in this collection, Kate Ronald explains that "with computers and copier machines, we don't worry much anymore about memory." In Thia's essay, however, a writer's memories are very important, and writing is a way to "improve memory, foster insights, and accelerate learning." Are these essayists contradicting each other or are they discussing memory in different ways?
- Thia suggests that you can tap in to your memories through writing in general and through particular writing strategies like mapping, setting up dialogues with internal voices, and drawing. What, then, is the importance of memory to writers?
- You may have used memory maps before (the technique is sometimes called clustering) or you may freewrite or list to capture the vivid and important details of your past. Share your personal methods (listening to music, walking, etc.) for triggering memory.
- How have two different memories of the same event (yours and another family member's, for example) affected your life?