

## Chapter 26. Administrative Writing: Making Genres, Actions, and Topoi Work in Institutions

Throughout my career I have learned to do some kinds of organizational writing, and have come to see its value in moving an organization forward, maintaining its memory, setting agendas, identifying tasks, organizing work, inviting people to engage, supporting people, and keeping people on task. Writing regularly mediates among stakeholders, groups, or levels of organization. Each of these writing tasks requires understanding the social, organizational, and institutional contexts for the communications, identifying the genres to write in, and deploying the argumentative topoi that would fulfill expectations, gain cooperation, or win approval.

These skills are familiar to anyone who has been in any leadership position, which changes one's relationship to the individuals and institutions involved. Cynicism can grow with such knowledge or appreciation can increase of the complexities of organizations and the difficulties of coordinating people of different perspectives and interests. One may even learn both. In my case I learned more to appreciate than to disdain, but that was a function of the opportunities and situations that became available to me, and it certainly changed throughout my career. The most important thing I learned through unfortunate experiences was selecting those leadership and administrative positions where I could have a positive effect, avoiding predictable failures or unneeded pain.

### Advocacy for Writing in CUNY and Georgia Tech

Unusually for someone in my generation in the teaching of writing, I have never been a writing program administrator or director of a writing center or any equivalent position, though not for my lack of trying. Early in my career at Baruch College I had been a member, and then the chair (and for a time the sole member) of a departmental composition committee in a department without any administrative structure for the teaching of writing, despite that being the overwhelmingly dominant task for both the full-time and the many part-time instructors. As Composition Committee Chair, I could only advocate for some policies and institutional arrangements and propose curricula for departmental vote. Mostly what I learned was what didn't work in the face of the self-interests, identities, institutional agendas, or perspectives of colleagues and other more powerful actors. I did learn, however, how positions and actions were framed within institutional arrangements—constrained by regulations and procedures. I learned to identify where levers for change lay and, more often, where they did not.

Eventually administrative roles for writing did emerge in composition at Baruch—I would like to think in part as a delayed result of my advocacy, though other factors had little to do with me. By that time, however, my years of advocacy had made me *persona non grata*, so candidates were hired from the outside. At CUNY beyond my campus I had, however, taken on organizational roles as the first secretary of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS) and founding co-editor of the Newsletter CAUSES. In these roles I learned the value of being able to shape the historical record of the organization and identifying issues requiring attention and action. I organized the minutes of meetings around action items, foregrounding decisions made and projects looking forward, while keeping the deliberations *in camera*. Similarly, I saw the newsletter as a means of keeping the attention of the organization looking forward to resolve problems and build programs. In doing so I was coming to learn how barely visible roles could shape futures—by coordinating energies and attentions of multiple actors. These lessons continued as I was to organize a research reading group and then become co-chair of CAWS and enter the leadership of other professional organizations. These lessons also entered into my growing research and theoretical awareness of how documents formed the knowledge of organizations and became the site of institutional reasoning and planning. I came to see texts and writing as infrastructural to complex forms of social organization that extended beyond immediate co-presence of participants, but which then could also inform, regulate, and direct face-to-face participation.

Given the frustrations I encountered in advancing writing programs at Baruch, after a four-year job search attempting to coordinate spousal positions, I took up a position at Georgia Tech at the same time as my wife moved her position to the University of California Santa Barbara. During my 4 years at Georgia Tech, commuting to Santa Barbara, my role was to help design, get agreement on, and initiate new programs. Using the tools of curriculum design I had previously developed, I was able to facilitate the emergence of a new M.S. in Information Design and Communication, which was in the interest of most department members and leadership at all levels of the institution. I, however, was hired and strongly committed to develop a Ph.D. program in scientific rhetoric and composition, even though I had no formal institutional power beyond being chair of a committee, and was commuting to my family in California. Further, the project was not in the interest of several vocal members of the department, who stood in the way of the project or tried to redirect it for their interests, especially when I was out of town. When the committee started to develop the documents that could realize the proposal, it hit numerous political problems. This reinforced the lessons I had learned earlier that documents and documentary processes could only be successful under the right conditions and at the right moment—when the stars aligned as I often said. Then when the stars did align one needed to move fast to institutionalize the project in ways that would have continuing value. Here the stars were rapidly moving out of alignment. I also learned that being asked to be an agent of change without the institutional roles that would facilitate making

those changes was perilous. In the end I again became *persona non grata* for advocating unpopular programs. Nonetheless my years at Georgia Tech had made me more familiar and thoughtful about writing technologies which were becoming ever more important for writing. Also my commuting schedule, while interfering with my ability to move programs forward, gave me more time to focus on my writing and the projects that emerged in the first half of the '90s.

## Finding Programmatic Niches at the University of California

After hitting some brick walls at Georgia Tech, I was then happy to take up a position at UCSB in 1994 as a trailing spouse, initially in the English Department. For complicated local political reasons, I was not chosen to direct the writing program in 1991, despite being the leading candidate of the search committee. The previous year the same thing had happened at UCLA. So twice more I had failed to gain the administrative responsibilities of directing a writing program. At UCSB the Writing Program had recently separated from the English Department, which has happy with the divorce, but this left the Writing Program with only contract lecturers and other contingent positions. The English Department had little interest in writing studies or composition so they had little role for me and attempted to reframe my writing studies expertise into teaching literary texts, which was also expected by the English major students in my courses. As a marginal person in the department, again I had plenty of time to devote to my writing which again facilitated my productivity through the remainder of the '90s.

After a few years, however, I was able to arrange a joint appointment with the Education Department, and I started recruiting doctoral students in writing studies. This required no new programmatic approval as the education requirements, to my mind, were ideal for writing studies in a more applied social science mold, with a heavy research methodology requirement supported by a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods courses, tied to a series of research milestones. The reading lists for qualifying exams were negotiated between advisor, committee, and candidates, in relation to the candidate's projects and career. A number of colleagues also specialized in literacy and language at different ages and levels of schooling and beyond. This facilitated recruiting students and offering courses that located writing studies within literacy teaching and learning across the lifespan, with a focus on empirical research. Since most of the students I recruited had B.A.s (and often M.A.s) in humanities, they already were grounded in literary cultures and were predisposed to reach beyond the typical assumptions and approaches in the humanities. (I present the advantages of such an arrangement in Bazerman et al., 2006f). With time, the Writing Program was also able to hire senate faculty who could collaborate in mentoring doctoral students and offer additional specialized graduate writing studies courses.

Mentoring writing research students for more than twenty years has also helped me as a writer of such research. Helping students focus their research questions has led me to focus my own, while their inquiries have opened my mind to different kinds of questions that could be asked. Working with them on developing their methods has increased my standards of what counts as sufficient evidence, and attuned me to noticing nuance of evidence—while increasing my sense of the various kinds of data that might produce evidence. Working to tighten students' observations and interpretations has also sharpened my own eye for argument structures. Perhaps most, discussing ideas about writing over the years has expanded my theoretical scope and prepared me for writing more synthetic theory exploring activity theory, lifespan development, the connection between social and psychological issues in writing, international comparisons of writing education, and the relationship among various strands of writing studies. All of these have been thematic in my seminars and my more recent publications.

## Being a Department Chair as a Writing Challenge

As I was the newest member of the Education Department, but with an advanced rank, I was ripe to be elected as department chair. As several people told me, I had no history with them—and thus was not caught up in departmental politics and divisions. So at the late age of 55 I finally had my first taste of academic administration. This also allowed me to move full-time into the Education Department, which I found a welcoming home for my line of work. Immediately upon my election I sensed a reorientation of my sensibilities and priorities, as I now felt a responsibility for the health and effectiveness of the whole department, which meant taking on causes and supporting members of the department who previously had been outside my scope of interest.

Being chair was for me a practical application of years of studying organizational genres and activity systems. I saw the job of chair largely as producing effective documents to serve the interests of the department and its members within institutional systems. My long practice and reflection on writing prepared me to produce those documents efficiently and without much procrastination or stress. UCSB's well-institutionalized and elaborate system of dual governance meant that the venues and genres for arguing programmatic and personnel issues, as well as department self-reflection and change, were well stabilized. Further, topoi relevant to the different committees and other recipients of institutional texts were readily identifiable, often explicitly set out in regulatory or advisory documents. Much of my writing simply required intertextual attention to the governing documents, including the ubiquitous "red binder" with the system-wide University of California regulations.

I quickly discovered that the most important thing for my sanity was having an efficient and effective staff, which I had fortunately inherited from the previous chair. The next thing I discovered was that the most important thing for

maintaining departmental support was successfully presenting personnel cases for tenure, promotion, and other advancement. In our system the chair wrote the letters that reported departmental evaluations to the campus reviewing committees and administrators. To write persuasive letters I had to understand the work of people whose specialties were far from mine and foreground those elements that would most pass muster with the upper reviewing bodies. These letters would always need to make carefully documented, detailed arguments in relation to institutional criteria, explaining weaknesses as well as strengths in each case to maintain credibility. In complex cases the letters could be as long as 6 to 8 single-spaced pages. Since the University of California has many steps within each rank, as well as the standard major promotions, every tenurable or tenured professor was reviewed every two or three years (above scale or distinguished professors were given a bit of breathing space with reviews only every fourth year). Consequently, at least a third of the faculty were up for review every year. Writing these letters was a major part of the job.

Trickiest, though, and where one could lose departmental support (as I did), was holding faculty to regulations and responsibilities, running up against the university's strong traditions of faculty rights and prerogatives, magnified by individual personalities. Course scheduling was particularly sensitive in my department, where faculty over the years had gained expectations of self-scheduling with only limited centralized coordination. The only main point of accountability was the regular promotion considerations. Expectations had become quite flexible with the result that creating some kind of order and equity within course scheduling was fraught with perils. This was a lesson in the intersection between documentary procedures and personal relations, and of recognizing points of leverage and flash points in creating institutional change. Moving the discussion away from sensitive individual cases to departmental approved policies about course expectations and scheduling procedures set in motion a process that eventually created more institutional regularity and rationality over time, years after my chairship.

As chair I was expected to participate in proposals for special projects and programs in response to institutional funding initiatives. The pressures, opportunities, and temptations to respond to institutional initiatives are much greater in education schools than in English departments, not least because of education's role in society and its ties to organizations beyond the university. Education schools are the potential recipients of state and federal government grants, contracts with regional school districts, and private foundation money. Early in my career, however, working within English departments, I had become used to funding being sporadic and relatively small. After going after a few grants early in my career, I had found that they were rarely worth the time for the limited amounts of money, plus restrictions often meant the grants didn't allow you to do what you wanted to do. Further, often enough, the funding wouldn't lead to anything that lasted past the end of the funding, so the project either had to be

valuable in the short term or had to clearly lead to some kind of long-term institutionalization. My personal research projects, as well, didn't usually have much of a cost beyond my time, some photocopying, and occasional materials.

Nonetheless, when I became chair of Education, the growth of department programs often depended on state initiative funding, and even maintenance of some of our existing programs required soft money. Consequently, I worked on proposals for a number of programmatic initiatives, even though I was aware that funded programs might vanish when funding ended or personnel changed. As a writing specialist I wound up being at the center of the negotiation and production of the core documents. The actual project narratives were not the challenge, but they depended on the various committees coming to agreement over workable effective plans, that would be sustainable, equitable, and ethical in their procedures and results—as well as being attractive to the sponsors. This required a kind of forecasting of realities that would emerge from planning and proposal documents. I kept trying to imagine what would result from the various provisions we were including in the proposal. I won't go into the details of what happened, but in at least one case the faulty terms of the proposal predicted exactly the fate of one of the programs that did get funded. I was not enamored with this program from the start, but I did my best to try to make it work following the enthusiasms or institutional desires of the other participants, including the Chancellor and Dean. In the planning process I kept pushing on issues of sustainability, long term partner participation, maintaining quality programs, and workability of specific proposed collaborative research groups. I gained some improvements along these lines, but within four or five years this program fell apart on just these issues, leaving the department holding the bag for further expenses and responsibilities. Even the money that came with the initiative was used for purposes that did not add to the department. Other programs, whether funded or unfunded, seemed to me to be similarly futile, as pieces seemed to be pulled together more for the funding than a real vision from those who would carry it out. What vision there was came from the top down—the granters, who had some goals, but from a great distance with little sense of what was concretely to be done nor of the interests of the people who would actually carry out the work. But this may be my sour grapes.

The few projects that were closest to my heart were not funded because higher education writing was not the typical *métier* of education schools. All this experience reinforced my earlier disposition not to go after funding unless the funding opportunity really matched what I wanted to do.

## Organizational Leadership

Immediately following my six years as departmental chair (as I joked in my farewell speech, I had rapidly solved the problem of my lack of prior history with my colleagues), I ran for chair of the Conference on College Composition and

Communication. This gave me the opportunity to support my profession while advancing particular themes in the organization—in this case research, internationalization, and the role of writing in documenting realities and fostering social change. The first challenge of writing the candidate's statement was an exercise in topoi and politics which also required some values clarification on my part to articulate what I saw as the importance of our profession and put it in striking terms. Once I was elected, I was introduced to the complexities of the organization I had only seen as a conference goer and journal reader. In the four-year chair cycle, the first-year assistant chair planned and carried out the annual conference, the second-year associate chair supported the chair, the third-year chair took leadership, while the fourth-year past chair tried to look wise and not meddle too much. The organization's permanent professional staff guided us through all the tasks and documents for each year's role: conference planning documents, reports, charges for committees, policy statements, communications with the memberships, and so on. Many of these documents were written collaboratively, but some were the particular responsibility of an individual, such as the platform speeches at the conferences. As an organization leader I had to join with others in evaluating reports from various committees and task forces to come to decisions. The face-to-face political interactions were well-embedded within the documentary procedures of the organization, and fostering documents that successfully inscribed the focus and scope of the organization could have long term impact on the directions the organization would take. Since I wanted to move the organization on specific themes, however, I needed to understand how to plant a few ideas that would sustain after I left the scene. Standard procedures like creating an award or forming a committee with a charge to report on certain issues could redirect the attention of the organization to certain parts of the profession, add knowledge and facts to the organization's deliberations and calculations, or highlight problems that, once visible, might be addressed. Small changes in the documentary systems could gradually modify the portfolio of the organization.

An entirely different leadership opportunity arose from a series of smaller research conferences that graduate students and I initially organized at UCSB. These grew from regional to national and international in scope over the first three iterations in 2002, 2005, and 2008. Other conferences in writing in the US were focused mostly on programs and practices, leaving an unmet need for more research focused meetings, including ones that focused on all ages and levels of writing development. A parallel movement was occurring in Europe with the development of the SIG Writing conference every other year starting in 2004. From early on there was cross-attendance and cross-fertilization between the two groups. Our first conference at UCSB was a simple, one-day regional meeting. It required only standard university room booking and small grant procedures. As the conference grew, space and funding became a bit more difficult, as the application, reviewing, and program planning became more extensive and involved more participants, plus our conference was a lower priority for rooms. Publicity

involved only a few messages distributed through standard listservs, and then a website for conference information, proposal submission, registration, program distribution, housing, and other logistic matters. I came to rely on knowledgeable volunteers for the web design, as my skills were and remain basic. As we moved to longer conferences, contracts and guarantees with hotels and caterers also followed well-established paths within those commercial organizations, although we needed to learn about these. In 2011 the conference moved to another U.S. university, George Mason University near Washington, D.C., where Paul Rogers, a former graduate student who had been instrumental in the organization of the first Santa Barbara conferences, had gotten a professorial position. At George Mason he took over the increasingly complex institutional proposals, documentation, and commercial arrangements.

By the 2008 and 2011 conferences, enthusiasm for a regular international conference was manifest, so we decided to create an organization with a constitution and formal leadership structure. At the 2011 meeting the conference scientific committee voted to create the organization and an interim steering committee, with me as interim chair, to write a constitution and by-laws, which included mechanisms and criteria for proposing future venues as well as regular election of leadership. Collaboration skills (both in person and on email) were needed to be able to bring the steering committee into agreement, and some examination of other organizations' documents aided drafting provisions for the constitution, keeping in mind the sustainability of the organization and its processes. With the organization regularized institutionally, the steering committee became focused on the defined functions and agendas set out by the chair, in consultation with vice chair and past chair. Successful meetings were held in Paris in 2014 and Bogota in 2017. The planned conference in Xi'an for 2020 became a virtual event in 2021 because of the pandemic. The next traditional conference was successfully carried out in 2023 in Trondheim, Norway. The organization now is in other hands to direct its course now that I have cycled out of the leadership.

Volumes of selected papers came out after the 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2017 conferences. As Chief editor or co-editor of the first four, I largely followed what I had learned in earlier collections about spotting potentials in proposals, working developmentally with authors, and keeping deadlines urgent. I also learned to support and coordinate contributing editors who may have been doing such work for the first time. Since the volumes were international, challenges appeared in establishing shared international standards, editing chapters in multiple languages, and supporting non-native English speakers who nonetheless wanted to present their chapters in English. As some of these authors were also not as familiar with how to tell their story to an international audience, they needed developmental guidance to realize the potential of their studies.

Most recently, I organized the Lifespan Project which I will discuss in Chapter 30, but some administrative parts are relevant here, particularly in seeking funding to bring the small group of participants together for annual three-day work

retreats, with some small incidental expenses. This project, however, fell outside the scope of existing programs of funders, and we had little uptake from formal grant submission processes. When I wrote a brief inquiry email to the Spencer Foundation, however, I immediately got back an invitation to elaborate the plan for special funding outside their regular programs. Following a few short narrative paragraphs, the money was rapidly granted; at the end of the three-year cycle additional funding was granted for the final two years. The money was modest given Spencer's typical programs, but it was more than sufficient for our needs. This consequent administrative component was low key, involving only a few hotel, restaurant, and catering bookings, meeting rooms and technology booking, and contact with journals and publishers.

Administrative writing in its many guises taught me to work in a variety of genres to carry out a range of activities. In each case they required gaining an understanding of the work of these different organizations, the documents by which one carried out actions, the form and timing of submissions, and the interests, roles, and perspectives of the various audiences evaluating documents. Working with these organizations required amalgams of face-to-face interactions with regulatory, procedural, and deliberative documents. In some situations, I was simply moving the gears of stable machines, but in other cases I sought to change the machinery, and in a few cases I tried to create more enduring arrangements by establishing documentary machinery. All these attuned me to what writing can do and how to wield that power.