

CHAPTER 12

MANAGING WRITING PROCESSES AND THE EMERGENT TEXT

The guidance in this book has focused on the identification and crystallization of the communicative space—the textual version of the rhetorical situation—and the emergence of the text in that space. The focus has been on the textual object being made, the actions it is carrying out, and the people it is going to. Although the ultimate product is external to the writer in the form of a text that travels in the world, much of the work and meaning that makes it happen arises from within the writer. When the task is familiar and simple we may not think much about our writing processes, as the writing solutions may be immediately at hand. A memo similar to many we have seen and have written many times may be more an exercise in typing from memory with a few local adjustments than difficult problem solving. But as the difficulty of the task increases, it helps us to be able to understand our processes, manage them to best effect, and adjust them to fit the particulars of the task.

The previous chapters have discussed how to conceive of and direct the work to make that emergent document as though the writer were fully rational—but humans aren't built like that. Even our rational, conscious, and self-aware processes work in curious ways. These psychological complexities have their origin in the complexities of neurobiological human nature; the richness of our experiences; the limitations of our attention; our self-perceptions of identity, roles, and relationships, and the potential (or imagined) social consequences of our words.

This volume, particularly in the last few chapters, has focused on a writer working individually in semi-privacy, though with input and response from others. This chapter continues in that vein. Much writing in organizations and disciplines, however, is accomplished collaboratively, with work negotiated and distributed among many participants, and managing that collaboration requires particular skills and organization of the tasks. Nonetheless, all the tasks and functions presented here can be reconsidered in a collaborative context. Even some of the personal issues of anxiety and risk discussed later in this chapter, are often played out in a collaborative context, but with the advantageous potential of these problems in some team members being recognized by others and brought to explicit discussion and management.

In this chapter I want to give an overview of some of the many psychological issues that may play out at various moments in this emergent process, starting with when we enter into a situation that may call for writing.

IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH WRITING EPISODES

As discussed in Chapter 3, the impulse to write arises in response to situations, so writing begins with recognition of a rhetorical situation where we see people and events around us coming together in an exigence that we feel can be influenced, affected, or constrained by our words. The recognition of people, events, exigence, impulse, and possibility of influence all involve individual perceptions, and judgments. The accuracy of those perceptions and judgments are likely to affect the success of our endeavors.

Sometimes it is easy to perceive with some accuracy our need to respond to the people and events outside us, and even the likelihood of our influencing events through writing. If students are enrolled in an academic course, and the instructor announces an assignment of an essay that must be completed in class that day to count for 10% of the course grade, the students are immediately mobilized to read the assignment prompt and begin thinking about it. Unless unprepared or confused, the students will soon be writing and focused on the task. If it is, however, announced that the assignment will be due weeks later at the end of the term, only some of the students are likely to feel an immediate need to start thinking about the assignment, gathering the materials, and interpreting the instruction of the course through the need to produce the paper, while others may not start feeling any exigency until the night before the due date. The ones who perceive the exigency early can devote more work and attention to the task through a more extended process, and are likely to do better. In such an example, we see the value in recognizing and committing to a rhetorical situation early when we find ourselves in it. The more clearly and immediately we see it and commit to it, the more we can gather and interpret information, think about our purposes and focus, and allow our response to emerge over time with multiple levels of thought and work.

There are many instances where we are handed assignments by others, whether on the job, from government, or in the community. We are asked to write a report, file a document, or prepare publicity for neighborhood fair. We are in effect told what the situation and events are, who the relevant people are, what is at stake, and our ability to affect the situation (if only to avoid the penalties of not doing what is requested).

At other times, however, it is up to us to recognize how events and people come together to create a situation calling for our writing. No one but ourselves perceives it is time to write a personal letter, submit an application for a job, or begin a book, although we may perceive external pressures that push us to those actions. The extreme case of self-defined writing episodes is personal reflective writing, impelled only by inner compulsion to sort out emotions, events, and thoughts. Our decision to open a notebook depends entirely on our perception of our needs in our current situation, but making that choice then establishes a commitment to a writing task and initiates a writing episode.

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING THE WRITING ORIENTATION

The very impulse to write is based on a kind of psychological orientation to action, arising from our perception of the situation. This is what psychologists call arousal. Something has caught our attention as potentially needing some action, so we attend, gather information and start weighing choices of action, whether conscious or not. Recognition of this state of focused attention directed toward action is worth noting, so as not to deny it or fight against it, but rather to make most of it. In a state of arousal, brain systems are mobilized and neurological chemicals are released, heart rate and blood pressure go up, and senses are more alert and ready to act.

A century old principle of psychology (the Yerkes-Dodson law) correlates arousal with quality of performance, but if arousal is too great, performances may suffer. This suggests for writing that recognition and self-regulation of one's level of engagement in a piece of writing may help keep one at the maximum level of performance—working hard but not overwhelmed. Many writers have experienced the pleasure and focus of writing episodes, where all one's attention and energies are focused toward the object of creating a text, but many have also experienced becoming so obsessed or so stressed that they no longer can think straight. At the extreme they no longer can decide what to do next or what words to put down: they are exhausted with a welter of conflicting ideas, and they suffer tunnel vision and decreased memory. They can no longer solve problems and are caught in an impasse. When writers reach that point then they have to turn attention away from the writing task and do something else until they can think straight and separate useful ideas from noise.

Awareness of one's state of arousal can help the writer see and accept the need for an extended, punctuated writing process that allows for regular periods

of work, interspersed with breaks and engagement with other tasks. This is part of the core wisdom behind recommendations that it is better to write for short, regular periods every day rather than for extended concentrated sessions over a short period of time. Multiple moments of attention over many different sessions also allow the writer to focus on a limited number of things at a time, but gradually covering all the multiple levels and focuses of attention the complex document may need. In addition, awareness of arousal can also alert writers to the difficulties that might come with narrowed attention. Reviewing drafts after placing them aside for days or weeks allows one to reexamine the writing when one's mind is no longer encased within tunnel vision.

Being in an aroused state of writing is a bit different than arousal in a brief sexual episode, or in a fire, where one is intensely focused for minutes with all else fading from view. With writing, this period of engagement with a text may extend over days, months or years, while other aspects of life continue. Unless the writing task is short, one cannot give undivided attention to the writing task from start to finish. Learning how to regulate the intermittent periods of full attention, knowing when is enough for each day, each session, also means the writer needs to learn to keep the task alive in a more subdued mode during the interim periods. Without constant commitment and regular return to fuller attention, the mental orientation to the project may evaporate. The writer can readily lose a sense of the emergent impulse and emergent text, as attention turns elsewhere. Even if the writer maintains a commitment to a project, if he or she cannot find a way to bring attention back into the project and recreate a state of mind where the writing project dynamically grows, the project can fade from attention and commitment.

The writer needs to build skills to return to the mental place of writing where a perception of the task and situation has formed an impulse to communicate and is crystallizing in a set of meanings and textual forms. Letting the mind refocus and reassemble its internal attention and resources toward written action is a form of meditation and mental composure. Beginning writers may only be able to visit such a writing state of mind in the presence of supportive mentors, and each writing session is a fresh start. We can see this in young children whose ideas for writing are prompted by questions from adults who remain in the vicinity to help with problems of formulation and transcription so the child can remain on task. Even at university level, facilitation by an instructor or tutor at crucial junctures helps students focus on a writing task and overcome difficulties that might lead to loss of direction and vitiation of attention. Even very advanced writers may have difficulties mentally recovering projects that have been long dormant or challenging projects that strain their mental resources. Nonetheless, practiced writers over time can build their

ability to remember the motives and processes of an emergent text, where they were in the text, or even more pertinently in their mind—over a day, a week, or even months.

This process of re-calling the writing project to mind can be helped by, at the end of each writing session, leaving off at a place where it is easy to restart, rather than at a place of impasse. This requires recognizing that you are approaching the limit for the day and stopping at an opportune place before reaching that limit. Perhaps sketching a few sentences or phrases indicating the way forward or outlining the next section and identifying topics to be covered can help remind you where you are headed. If you are not quite sure where you are heading, briefly writing out the problem that needs to be solved before you go forward can at least remind you what you were working on, and may even give you something to mull over before the next writing session. If you foresee an extended period where you will not have the focused time to do the deepest composition, may set yourself some lower order tasks that you can take on as discrete units. For example, if I foresee as the summer ends that I will have only limited time and attention in the coming term, I might identify some material that needs describing, or some sections needing polishing. I will then set up those tasks so I know what I have to do with the limited time, attention, and energy available to me in the next few months. This way I can keep making progress without having to bring the whole project to mind and without having to occupy my whole mind and state of being in the project while I am also occupied with other compelling tasks.

When I come back to the text, I have tricks to pick up the breadcrumb trail. I draw on all the relaxation and focusing techniques I have learned from performance arts, sports, and meditation practices to remove extraneous thoughts and focus on the work at hand. I work at places conducive for concentration, depending on my mood, whether it is at my desk with a cup of coffee or in a quiet corner in a coffee shop if I feel I need others around me (though not disturbing me) to help me concentrate. If I am still mentally not there, I begin revising earlier sections, creating outlines of the most recent sections I have written, or free-writing about my current thinking. If the project has been dormant for a while, I may work my way back into the text by looking over some of the source texts or theory, reexamining data collections, or reading. At times I may even impose on someone else as I talk aloud my thoughts on where I have been and where I am heading. These actions may take minutes, or days, or even longer to reprise extended projects that have slid into the further recesses of my mind.

This slow cooking of projects over time has added benefits and dangers. It provides time to solve numerous puzzles, take in more information consciously

and unconsciously, and play around with many solutions, configurations, and strategies. While we may not be aware of the relevance of some of the stray thoughts or observations during these fallow periods, they may indeed be part of drawing on resources and ideas from surprising sources to help find ways to solve problems. We are relieved of the tunnel vision of intense concentration and can explore more widely. Yet all of this requires that the project remain at least activated at some level, with commitment and attention somewhere in the back of the mind. Awareness of a project on slow simmer, on the other hand, may raise anxiety about an incomplete project with many things left to be done, but as we gain confidence that cooking continues even at a slow rate, we become more comfortable with the project evolving at its own pace. In slow cooking, however, one must keep an eye on the pot so as to adjust it to the right temperature. A very slow cook that still leaves one with almost all the work to do at the last minute may be little better than starting the night before. This monitoring of the pace of the project is also part of the work of successful writing.

Just as an individual enters a state of arousal when beginning a writing episode, a group of people or an organization is mobilized for a period as they recognize and commit to writing tasks. While there may be focused moments of intense group collaboration and attention in developing plans or forming core texts, there may be other moments of individuals and the group attending to other tasks. While individuals gradually make their own progress on their separate contributions, the group can periodically return to discussion and planning to reestablish coalignment or one person may coordinate the work and monitor the overall progress and meaning of the document. An organization can work on an even slower time scale, setting in motion information-gathering and analytic processes, to eventually lead to a report or a plan or a sales documents years down the line. While there may not be frenetic group activity and other aspects of the group life may get more attention (at least until the latter stages of producing the final document), yet there is a continuing group activation moving the project along. If that activation vitiates, progress on the document fades.

RESISTANCES TO WRITING

Recognizing that we are entering into a writing episode creates challenges, challenges that we may prefer not to have. First, a writing episode requires cognitive work, sometimes quite strenuous, exhausting, and even painful and debilitating work. Writing is hard work that can produce headaches along

with all the ultimate pleasures of accomplishment and discovery. Second, this work requires a commitment that puts an obligation on us and becomes a statement of what we value to others. Third, writing defines a relationship to others, represented in the text or to whom the text is addressed, and we may not feel fully comfortable with the commitment, confrontation, criticism, affiliation, or other social positioning that is emerging through the text. Finally, commitment to acting in a situation puts at risk—of both failure and success and the consequences of each.

Often enough ignoring work assignments or public debates over rezoning our neighborhood may require less effort and evoke less anxiety. One common method of avoiding recognizing we are in a potential situation is to believe we have little influence over events, and that our statements would be unlikely to change any outcomes. In this way we erase the possibility of a rhetorical situation and we don't even begin to search for kinds of genres that might have an impact or the kinds of things we might have to say. We just do not take on the commitments and obligations, work, and risks of the situation. Another common method is to put off thinking about the situation until the last minute when we do the task in a rushed panic that does not allow us to confront the full complexity, meaning, and potential of the task. Or if we procrastinate really successfully, the time will pass and it will be too late, relieving us of all obligation, even if we have to live with the consequences of inaction.

Once we have recognized there is a situation and made a commitment—perhaps because we want to keep our job or pass a course, or more positively because we anticipate enjoyment or success—then we still have many ways to resist, slow down, deviate, or wander from the task. Internal criticism about our ability to produce may keep us from setting to work with a whole mind, and cause us to question our choices at every stage from first definition of the situation to every grammatical choice. This questioning from lack of self-efficacy is far beyond the reasonable monitoring we need in order to evaluate our choices and consider alternatives. This self-questioning in particular may be fueled by our doubts of how our words will appear to others and how they will evaluate those words. When we put words on paper we are making a statement and committing to a public presence that may endure. This anxiety about our presence may go well beyond our spelling or grammar, which others may use to stigmatize our education and intelligence, to the opinions, perspectives, knowledge and reasoning we inscribe for others to look at carefully over time. People might declare us as right or wrong, informed or ill-informed, interested in trivial topics or important ones, too political or not political enough, advocating the right side or the wrong side. By writing we commit ourselves to roles, whether as an applicant for a job or as a poet or a reporter for a hobbyist

newsletter. The anxieties raised by such concerns may lead us to wander from the task or may cloud our mind so we cannot think as sharply as we might, or to veer away from the topic and most anxiety-provoking or challenging issues as we write.

Robert Boice in his very practical book *Professors as Writers* (1990, useful also for non-academics) summarizes the extensive literature on psychological resistances to writing and finds the following diagnostic behaviors for people with blocking problems: work apprehension and low energy when writing, dysphoria, evaluation anxiety, perfectionism, procrastination, and impatience. These he finds related to the following causal factors: internal censors or critics, fears of failure, negative early experiences, general state of mental health, personality types, work habits and attitudes. He offers many useful ideas for short term and long term ways of improving productivity and overcoming these resistances and their causes.

PROMPTING AND ACCEPTING THE MUSE

Writers sometimes have golden moments when the writing overtakes them, and they feel compelled to sit down and transcribe the words flowing through their heads. They awake in the middle of the night or pick up a notebook in the middle of a journey, then lose all track of time as they seem to be transcribing words handed to them by the muse. Such moments have been reported sufficiently often for them to become iconic for the experience of “really writing,” and some people will not sit down to write unless they sense such an inspired moment to be overtaking them.

But for such a moment to arise, the writer’s mind must already be working on a writing problem or another problem that finds its expression in writing, whether the writer has been consciously focused on it or not. A writer who recognizes and is committed to a writing episode and is consciously working on the problems posed by the writing is more likely to assemble pieces that will come together in such moments of deep flow, as Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has described the experience. As writers, we gain if we learn to take ourselves regularly into places of complex problem solving, no matter what fears, pain, risks, or tempting distractions may stand at the entryway—even when inspiration hasn’t quite taken over. Regular work, a short set amount every day, even if uninspired is more likely to define the problem you are working on, identify resources, consider possibilities, and otherwise set the table for when the muse decides to arrive (or more accurately, when your mind finds a set of solutions that is generative for producing text).

The impulse to write within one is more likely to blossom if you make space for it and invite it. Having set the table with the preliminary work, you still need to commence the meal—creating moments to confront all that you have assembled, to listen to the inner impulses bringing the disparate pieces of the task together, and to attempt solutions. Setting moments to examine the pieces you are working with, seeing how they are fitting together, and shaking them around will increase the chances that they will fall in place and a clear direction forward will emerge.

The muse, or the creative problem-solving thoughts, moreover, when they arise, may not always be pleasant—for such reasons as discussed previously of anxiety, overtaxing one's brain which may become oxygen depleted, and challenging settled mental organization. We may then experience exhaustion accompanied by dysphoric feelings. Words pressing to be expressed can feel raw and pressured as they emerge. This is all the more reason why we need to commit to regular work and regular times, so we confront this difficult and sometimes painful work. At times I have felt I need metaphorically to chain myself to my desk. Writers often need to find a quiet room far from distractions, and not emerge until they have gotten past the hard parts. Some go out of town and rent hotel rooms. Numerous rural writers' colonies are organized so there is little to do but write.

This commitment to confront the taskmaster muse does not mean we should torture ourselves when we reach an impasse. When the mountain is too high to climb at the moment, we can select a smaller preparatory task, head off in a related side direction for a bit, do some warm-up activity like free-writing or sketching out goals. We may even on occasion walk away for a bit, having looked the task in the face for a time and finding no way forward. While we turn to other tasks our mind can continue to sort out what the problems we have framed. But then we need to re-gather our thoughts and courage to return to the task. Otherwise, the mountain remains unclimbed and the text never written. But then also come the wonderful moments of parts falling in place, discovering new ideas, surprising phrases appearing on the page, and satisfaction with accomplishment. The climb is strenuous and muscles may be sore, but the mountain has its pleasures and rewards.

TRUSTING THE PROCESS

We have to accomplish many kinds of work in writing—and except for simple and familiar tasks all this work rarely happens in a single piece, despite our hopes that it will all come in a vision, as symphonies purportedly came to

Mozart—with all the rest just being transcription. Such visions in themselves indicate the mind has already been working on a problem, whether consciously or unconsciously, and there is one fortunate, memorable, glorious moment when all falls together. Further, even if we are fortunate enough to have had a vision of the overall structure and gist of a text (this does happen), yet there are still many details and levels of work that need to be pursued to bring the text to realization. I remember visiting an archive when over the course of a few hours the vision of what was to be the book *The Languages of Edison's Light* (Bazerman, 1999) came to me, but I had been working on the rhetoric of science for over a decade, and I had specifically been working on electricity for three years, with several papers already written. And then it took another ten years to carry out the detailed research, write and revise the chapters, and work with the publishers to bring the book to press.

So writing is inevitably a process, even if it is just in two-minutes for reading an email, recognizing we need to respond, deciding what we need to communicate, framing the best words, and proofreading before pressing the send button. Whether the process lasts two minutes or a decade, the initial impulses and words on the page may not be anywhere near what the final completed document will be. The imperfection of the first words may lead to despair at the limits of our accomplishment and the immensity of distance we still have to go, but awareness that there is a process to guide us can give us confidence and direction, limiting our work and attention at each moment with the assurance that we will be able to attend to other matters at some point in the future. It is a relief to not feel we have to solve all problems simultaneously and keep everything in mind all at once; we are then able to focus our inevitably limited mental resources on one item at a time.

Process is not a fixed sequence, as it is sometimes taught in school, because each task, each set of conditions, and each personality working with particular sets of resources calls for different ways of working and different sequences of events and attention. The standard processes taught in school arise out of the particular conditions of assignments set in the classroom to be completed in a relatively short time, with resources largely already in the student's mind. Although such a model that moves from idea-generation through drafting to revision does not fully recognize individual differences, it does serve well enough to introduce students to the idea of process. But outside school some tasks must be done in two minutes and others may continue for years with no fixed deadline; some tasks require great attention to social politeness while others require extensive reading or fact gathering; some are parts of large collaborative projects during the work day and others are personal projects done in spare time; some are strictly regulated in bureaucratic coordination while others are

improvisatory or even disrupted by untimely addition of constraints or new information. Processes necessarily vary to fit the tasks. Moreover, especially as tasks become more complex, people have different preferences about how the work should be done. Yet there is always a process.

Explicitly identifying and understanding the process you are engaged in will most directly help you identify what you are primarily working on at each moment and what is the next task in front of you. It will also make possible an overview to make sure that all the necessary work will be done and all the dimensions of the task will be addressed. Most of all, it will relieve you of the debilitating sense that everything must be worked on at once and the equally debilitating sense that the text has not gone far and is riddled with problems. There will be time to go further and to address each problem in its time. By seeing that there is a process, you can come to trust the process.

Of course the mind is unruly and the emergent text is constantly suggestive of what needs further to be done. So you need not be a slave to your initial process plan and you can adjust it—whether doing new research to cover a new essential topic you uncovered in writing, adding in new rounds of discussion with the management team to identify their goals more clearly, or suggesting an alternate strategy that occurred to you as you put the facts together. As you read a draft, you may realize you need to rearrange the order of your paragraphs, or you need to change the tone of the sentences. Equally, if in sketching out early ideas you get an idea for a way of phrasing a crucial section, you may want to spend some time in carefully drafting a short section before returning to the sketching ideas. Although you may be far from proofreading, if you see a few misspellings and typos you might want to fix them, but you don't have to, either, because you know you will get to that later—it is just easier and more convenient to do it now, as long as it does not distract you from the task at hand. It would, however, be a waste of time to correct every spelling and typo in a draft so rough it is possible you may not use much of the exact phrasing you have at the moment.

Trusting the process is particularly important in the earliest stages of writing when ideas about what the final text might look like may be unformed and uncertain, with little concrete direction. At this moment, we may be casting widely outward to understand the situation and discover what might be useful resources, while looking inward to discover our interests and concerns in the situation and what we want to say. Such work requires some presence of mind and freedom from anxiety. Yet this may be a place of great uncertainty, needing the greatest courage and confidence to face—the hardest place to step up to the task. We need to have great trust in the process to begin and give our work directions that will become more focused as we progress.

LIVING WITH OUR LIMITATIONS WHILE DEMANDING THE BEST

As our text emerges, almost inevitably we will find flaws and limitations. As our unformed impulses take shape in words they may seem less grand and transformative, less novel and creative than we first thought. What seems large in the struggles of our mind, turns into something smaller and specific in the world. As we draw on the language and resources we find around us, the received language and knowledge of our society, our words can start seeming more similar to others, and perhaps less impressive. Psychologists may talk of confronting the grandiosity of narcissism, but we can also recognize that the world of communication is concrete and specific using genres, language, and situations already richly formed in prior interaction. Each utterance we add only moves the discussion and interaction along, sometimes with more force and redirection than other times, but rarely in the transformative way we imagine. Communication brings us from our private world of mental changes to the complex of social interactions. The more people involved in those interactions, the more our words will have to intersect with the thoughts, beliefs, forms, and words that move others. Moving the minds of many requires entering into familiar shared worlds of meanings.

Further, texts in process are unfinished and will rarely be as impressive as the reworked, revised, polished prose they might turn into. Further, when we are in the middle of working on our texts, we are constantly problem solving, so we are always looking for parts that need development or revision. We are in the business of finding faults to work on, so it is no wonder we become aware of many flaws, and may even despair of fixing them all. We are also aware of the devices we use to solve or sidestep these problems, and we may not feel fully confident in them, or we may feel that we are making only surface technical fixes and not addressing something deeper. In any event, because we are in the middle of the factory, watching the messy and contingent process by which texts are produced, we are aware of the difference between where our text is and where we would like it to be.

Finally, our awareness of all these limitations of our emerging texts makes us aware of our own limitations as writers. We become aware that it would be good to be familiar with certain facts or theories we have not addressed or do not know in detail. We wish we had studied certain other models more deeply. We wish we were more skilled in finding creative organization, or finding fresher and more powerful metaphors or writing more focused and incisive sentences. This awareness of our own limitations can be compounded by beliefs about how others will judge us through our writing. By writing we put ourselves literally

on the line, for others to evaluate our accomplishment. Thus as our text emerges toward final form, we can become even more unsure of how others might value our work and us. We may even fall into a kind of obsessive perfectionism, that if only we can make this text precise and perfect, it will overcome all of the uncertainties of audience and consequence to have exactly the effect we hope.

To move forward with our writing, however, we need to learn to live with our uncertainty and sense of limitation. There is no alternative, if we are to write and grow as writers, to keep on working despite our perception of our limitations. Every time we feel moved or need to write, we work from limited knowledge, limited skills, limited sense of the environment, with only guesses about the impact of our words on others and possible outcomes of events. While there are occasions when the situation of writing is so well known, shared and constrained that we can be fairly sure of the outcome, yet in many situations we must often act within deep uncertainty about the situation and anxiety about the outcome. Thus writing takes courage and a willingness to step forward despite risk and uncertainty.

We write with the skills and knowledge and resources we have now, and not the skills or knowledge we might have in five years. But we will not progress unless we keep working on the tasks in front of us. It is through confronting tasks, gathering the knowledge to pursue them, and solving the problems these tasks pose that we develop as writers, so that perhaps our work five years from now will be more advanced. We have to keep in the game. Yet making our peace with our limited skills and resources, does not relieve us from doing the best we can under the current circumstances—seeking the extra information if it is available, rewriting and reorganizing the draft if we see a better path, going over the drafts enough times from enough angles to be sure we have done the best we can do now—and then leaving it at that. You place your bets and take your chances.

BEING PREPARED FOR THE AFTERMATH

The text being finished does not mean the end of personal and psychological issues we have to deal with. First, particularly if the writing has required especially intense effort and problem solving, our relief at having finished may be mixed with less pleasant emotions. We may suffer a mental exhaustion, leaving us unable to concentrate on any mental work, especially other writing. We may even feel physically drained, even unable to engage in any kind of distraction. This may be further compounded if the writing has been the central focus of our thinking for an extended period, so we may not easily find something else

to turn our attention to. This exhaustion and lack of distracting alternatives finally may lead to us to dwell on our anxieties about the text and what people may think about it. We may be filled with second thoughts and obsess about imagined faults.

Such feelings may lead us to hold on to the text long after useful work has been completed. Even after we send it to the editors, publish it to the blog, or hand it to our boss, we may be haunted with such thoughts. There is little to be done with such feelings except to recognize them as such and not get too upset by them or take them too seriously. Resting, turning attention elsewhere as emotional resources renew, and waiting for realistic responses before making any judgment about the text's effectiveness are all that can be done. After all, we have done the best we can do, and the rest is in the hands of others.

Often with writing we may get little or no response, which can be quite disappointing, increasing self-doubt about the value of our message or our skill in delivering it. This uncertainty may arise from something as simple as our not getting a response when we fill out an online form and getting no acknowledgment of our submission (Did we fill it out correctly? Will we get the product? Will our credit card be charged with inappropriate fees?) The uncertainty and disappointment becomes greater the more the writing reflects our extended work and thought. If no one, however, writes a response to an article, that does not mean in fact that no one has read it, thought about it, or was influenced by it. It is in the nature of writing that texts go out into the world often with little feedback or response returning to us.

On a smaller scale we feel such abandonment if we are participating on a list serve or a chatroom and the discussion goes on just as if we had never contributed. We seem not to have created a visible social fact that has changed the dialogic landscape. As writers we have to come to terms with this kind of inattention, and try to learn from it, to understand why our message seemed ineffective in order to make it more effective the next time, to wait for the right moment, to enter the discussion from a different angle, to make our message more pointed and forceful, or to enter with issues that might connect more to the other readers. We cannot let the rejection so discourage us that we do not attempt again, but rather understand that this is just a sign of how hard we have to work on effective writing to have an impact where we want it.

When others do respond, then we have further issues to deal with. We would like people to accept and understand our message just as we imagine it with all the emotion and importance we attribute to it, yet that often does not happen. The one place we are most likely to get response or feedback is in school, but the teacher's role is complicated. Often teachers feel the need to identify areas for correction, improvement, and instruction, or even evaluate our work for a

grade. This may lead to many negative comments mixed in with the positive receptive comments. Teacher responses may make us fear all audiences will be constantly evaluating and correcting us. Even if teacher comments are positive and receptive, we know they are responding from a teacher's role rather than as someone who has practical, personal, or functional reasons to take our messages seriously.

If we submit something for publication, editors and reviewers, even if they like our manuscript and want to publish it, are likely to have suggestions for improving the text. While we sometimes may immediately appreciate the wisdom of these comments and begin to meet their concerns, we may well see the comments as misguided, foolish, or silly, perhaps even threatening the integrity and meaning of what we are trying to communicate. It is common for authors to respond with anger, sense of insult, and a strong desire to give colorful labels to these editors and reviewers, no matter how tactfully the criticisms are phrased. Reporters have a saying: All editors are idiots; there are no exceptions. Yet editorial comments may sometimes actually be right on target and have touched a raw nerve or blindspot we have had. After some time to let the temper cool, it is worth rereading and thinking through exactly what is being suggested under the assumption that the reviewers are intelligent, well-intentioned people.

Even if the comments are in fact totally misguided and missing the text's meaning or ignorant of important contexts and background, we need to ask ourselves why those readers read your texts in such unexpected ways. Those editors and reviewers may well be indicative of our desired audience, and if they are misunderstanding or unjustly rejecting, we need to figure out why and how the text might be able to reach those readers, or at least counter the stated objections. The way readers understand and respond to a text is very important information and we should always be thankful for it, even if it at first we find it offensive. Part of developing a professional attitude toward writing is being able to see our writing in its larger communicative context and not assume that others ought to see things as we do. People's experiences, knowledge, beliefs and commitments are so various, that to reach them and activate their minds in ways that are receptive to our message may require much thought and skill, and any information we may get about how the message is received by different audiences, no matter how negative, helps us understand the challenges better.

When facing the text again for further revisions on the basis of feedback from teachers, editors, reviewers, or friends, it helps to look at the text through their eyes, to see what they have seen in it. This may mean significant changes in the text, rearranging orders of ideas, providing different entryways to bring readers in, offering them more guidance, or eliminating things that are obvious

or irrelevant to them. It may even mean eliminating elements that we may be most attached to—because they represent idiosyncratic perspectives or phrasing that are more meaningful to us than to anyone else. If these meanings are essential to the text we may need to find a different way to express them and show their relevance and importance. At the very least, trying to take the position of the reader will give a deeper understanding of what the text does and does not accomplish for others, and how to make it more effective for them.

Then once our words are out there, we have to learn to live with what we have said, but yet see it as part of a long dialogue carried out over time. If we are fortunate enough to get specific response, it is likely not to be simply positive in adopting our views. People are more likely to respond if they have something to discuss or argue with or present an alternative to. So then we need to decide whether to respond immediately, not respond at all, or let the discussion evolve before we chime in again. And then if we respond, we need to find a constructive way to do so, even if we need to defend something we have previously written. We have to find a way to clarify and defend what we have put on the line without being defensive. But we should also be open to evolving our thoughts as a result of the dialogue.

Few texts are timeless. Some are read over more times than others. Some may be read actively for months or years, influencing ongoing discussions. Some live for a few moments then vanish maybe into archives, or maybe into the trash. Discussions and contexts evolve, modifying the meaning attributed to the text, providing opportunity to make further contributions, or taking ideas and work further. Those few works still read over centuries have different effect and different meanings in changing contexts and social concerns. Even sacred scriptures undergo changed interpretation in changing contexts and applications. We need to see our texts within the changing world they are part of and our own ability to say more. When we are writing, finishing the text seems to be an end in itself: we want it to say all we have to say on the subject, and to say it for all time. But if we are aware whatever we write as part of an evolving universe of meanings, we will have more equanimity as we write, and later as we see what happens to our text as it does or does not get filtered through other minds. We do not always have to be writing the final and permanent word. In fact, we never do.