Developing Writers in Higher Education

Gere, Anne Ruggles

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Even in their sophomore year, students in our study were thinking about their goals for life after college, and writing figured prominently in their projections. Responses to survey questions about the importance of writing for success in undergraduate academics, in graduate school admission, in achieving long-term academic goals, and in being able to change careers were so highly positive in the sophomore year that there was no statistical difference between students’ sophomore and senior year responses. The only statistically significant difference appeared in the question that asked students about the importance of writing for “achieving career goals,” which showed a more positive response in the exit survey, but with a $p$-value of .083 it was not a strong difference. Students included in this study—both minors and nonminors and both early and late in their undergraduate years—clearly saw writing as essential to their lives after leaving the university. To be sure, this group elected to participate in a study of writing, so they may be somewhat atypical, but their other similarities to so many of their nonstudy peers suggest that many undergraduates think writing will be important in their futures. Furthermore, their view of writing and future work echoes Deborah Brandt’s findings in *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy* regarding the information economy’s transformational effect on the importance of writing in the workplace.

Interview questions about the role students expected writing to play in their futures elicited similarly positive responses, although explanations varied. Not surprisingly, one of the most common responses focused on writing’s importance to students’ future professional lives, with more than forty students, including both minors and nonminors, explaining how they expected writing to contribute to their careers. These students, despite sharing this view, construed the details of writing’s importance in many different ways. The variations included the importance of various genres of writing that students imagined themselves writing in the future, such as personal statements, sales reports, or legal briefs; the value of writing for a range
of academic or employment contexts, such as explaining scientific data, making a presentation to a client, or translating statistical data; and digital modes, such as blogs, tweets, and other social media. Another group of approximately eighteen students enumerated specific writing strategies or repertoires that they expected to use in the future, strategies such as seeking advice about drafts, shifting style or register for different audiences, and editing for clarity and correctness. A handful of students looked toward continuing to write for personal pleasure, and three talked about wanting to become published authors. These imagined futures, in all their variety, demonstrated students’ capacity to reflect on writing’s meaning and purposes in their lives, another mark of development.

Unpacking the aspirations and goals students attached to their future writing offers another perspective on writing development, because it provides insight into what they think writing is and what it can do. A number of students stated that they wanted to develop specific features in their writing, with “concise” and “clear” being the most prominent. This explanation offered by Jake was typical: “Being concise, being clear, just getting the point across in a way that people can understand. Pretty mundane.” Students also indicated that correctness was another important feature: “You can’t make a mistake and have grammatical errors in your sentences,” Abby said, reflecting a view of writing similar to Marie’s in chapter 9 by Sarah Swofford. Students like these appeared to see writing in instrumental terms, portraying it as relatively transparent, a means of conveying ideas and information that have already taken shape. This does not mean these students didn’t see writing in other ways simultaneously. As Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson show in chapter 3, a number of students saw writing in bifurcated terms, divided into two domains. One, which they termed “academic,” represented already formed ideas, and the other, which they called “creative,” generated new ideas. Students showed similar inclinations toward binary thinking as they looked toward their own futures as writers.

A number of students hoped to pursue graduate work and alluded to the relationship between genres and disciplines as they talked about fields they wanted to enter via graduate school—including law, medicine, veterinary science, philosophy, and nursing. To be sure, some students simply talked about writing as key to the admissions process: “I need to write to get into school,” said Mary. But more students made connections like this one, from Annie: “Well, I’m applying to law school . . . so I think that the writing that I do for political science . . . it’s the usual profession to go from political science to law school. I think writing those types of papers will probably be most helpful.” Annie could see how writing in one genre could be helpful in another, and she valued the opportunity to make the connection as part of her preparation for graduate school.
Students also connected disciplines and genres in discussing more immediate goals. Samuel, a student in the business school, had a very specific goal: “If I can write a case that presents the company’s history, goes into their challenges, and then that case can be used in the business club that I’m part of, that would be something I’d be really proud of, so that’s one of my main goals, too.” Chassi said, “I’m going to have to emphasize science writing as something that I have to get good at, or I should get good at. Gathering information as a writer is going to be very important, and also synthesizing it in a meaningful way.” Dariella, a biology major, explained, “I could go more science-y and learn how to write really good scientific papers, which I think would be more useful for the career path that I’m headed towards.” She went on to articulate a more expansive view of the ways she might use writing in her future career: “I would like to apply science to real-life situations, so I think I’d want to try to make that connection. Maybe I could take scientific findings and apply those through writing to a real-world situation. I don’t know what kind of job that is.” Although she cannot tie it to a specific career path, Dariella expresses a goal that appears much more frequently among graduating seniors, as I will show below. But it is worth pausing to note this goal of translating, of seeking to convey disciplinary language in terms that people outside the field can understand, because it was articulated by a number of students, both minors and nonminors.

Connections between writing and their goals for employment in fields such as business, education, sports management, nonprofits, journalism, music, and public policy punctuated many student interviews. Some were quite specific about the ways they expected to use writing in their work. As Maggie put it, “I don’t want to go on and write books. I just want to be able to redo people’s promotional materials for their fitness centers or something like that.” Kelly explained: “As a vet you can make newsletters and stuff for your clinic, so I guess there’s a little bit of writing there that I think I’d like.” Charlotte, a journalism student, explained her goals as “Learning to write objectively and cite two sides of a story . . . a lot of the research aspect, just because journalism requires a lot of research.” Margaret, a violinist, talked about writing program notes and press releases for her recitals and concerts. Erica, a pre-med student, confessed that she had originally thought writing was not part of her future, but her work in a lab changed her mind: “I kind of realized that my very narrow-minded thought process of not needing to be a strong writer in the medical field was just not accurate.” With comments like these, sophomores demonstrated awareness that writing can take many forms, and that these various manifestations of writing become part of the activity systems of specific work environments. At the same time, these students expressed a sense of agency, that they could adapt writing to their own purposes.
A related theme focused on the many things students felt they could do with writing. Some sophomores expressed this as confidence in their entry interviews. Looking back at her writing in the first two years, Kaitlin, who appears in several chapters in this volume, commented, “It just kind of gave me more confidence that I have done this, so I shouldn’t be doubting that I can do it again.” Another, Natalie, who also appears in Sarah Swofford’s chapter (9), said about her experience in writing courses, “It’s given me tools to be able to speak better, to show myself better, and, going back to the reflective thing, to tell people why I’m doing what I’m doing.” Reflection permeated writing instruction, and as this quote indicates, enabled students to enumerate the repertoires they could call on: “The writing process, argumentative writing versus research writing versus creative writing. They’re all really different. I think it’s really cool that it shows my diversity as a writer,” said Megan. Tim, a pre-law student, noted, “Most everything settles out of court, and a lot of that is memos and writing, and finding sources that back up your point and all that stuff so it’s basically like the writing process in real life, and that’s why I kinda think I’ll be good at it.” Woven through these comments are indications of rhetorical flexibility based on a repertoire of approaches to writing. This, along with the students’ writerly confidence, constitutes another dimension of writing development.

No doubt, the reflection encouraged by writing instructors contributed to students’ ability to identify some of their own strengths, and it surely helped them to see how they could transfer their repertoires of strategies from one context to another. For example, in talking about a writing course, Joy commented on learning “about the ethics in writing and how to be a more credible writer. Those are skills that I can carry over to magazine journalism. . . . I would definitely take what I’ve learned in this class and apply it to making videos for Her Campus,” a nationally circulated online magazine. Sophia talked about using reflection outside of the academy: “I had to apply, over the summer, for that job. It was a lot about reflecting on past experiences in terms of leadership, and working in teams and stuff like that. That kind of forced me to think about all the experience I’d had up until that point and flesh them out into a way that made me seem desirable as a candidate.” Because she had learned how to reflect on her writing, Sophie was able to transfer that capacity to writing a job application. In addition to transferring learning from one context to another, the repertoires students claimed gave them rhetorical flexibility: “My style changes based off of what type of paper it is,” said Jack. Jonah claimed, “I think that [reflection] eventually will translate into, will help me in a job in the future, just being able to adapt and learn different ways of writing. . . . I’m probably not going to be writing research papers or essays about stuff, but I think it does translate into other ways of working.” This capacity for using reflection to identify
one’s own writerly abilities and to figure out how to use them in new situations points to another dimension of writing development.

Seeing writing as a flexible set of capacities that can be used for a variety of purposes in multiple contexts both indicates and fosters writing development. Few first-year students can enumerate a repertoire of writing strategies and imagine ways to use them in the future, so the fact that students begin to show this capacity by the sophomore year is evidence of change that can be described as a form of development. At the same time, the ability to approach writing in more than one way, to feel comfortable with more than one genre, to recognize more than one way to present ideas fosters writing development because those who see writing in flexible terms are better able to add to their repertoires. At the sophomore level a majority of both writing minors and nonminors expressed this type of comfort.

One area where minors and nonminors differed was in expressions of strong personal connections to writing. Angela, a nonminor, talked about journaling regularly and claimed “writing is in my life,” but many more minors claimed that writing was very important in their lives. In exit interviews they said they wanted to continue writing forever, they saw themselves as writers, and several said that they would like to publish an article or a book. Sentences such as Susanne’s “I would like to be involved with writing throughout my life,” Willa’s “My hope is that writing is always in some regular part of my life because I know I’m happier when I am, you know, journaling or getting to write papers and stuff like that,” and Mariana’s “I definitely don’t want to ever stop writing” punctuated their interviews. To some extent, these differences can be attributed to the fact that minors had made a commitment to writing, but these variations also remind us that writerly development takes multiple directions. The fact that fewer nonminors expressed a desire to continue writing does not suggest that they did not develop as writers; they simply developed differently.

Although nonminors made fewer statements about a personal connection to writing, several of them spoke poignantly about a sense of impending loss. Sara explained, “I don’t want to stop writing because it is something that I feel like I’ve done for so long . . . it’s very similar to a language. At the end of my sophomore year, I was entirely fluent in French, but I haven’t had an opportunity to speak French . . . so I’ve lost it a lot. I feel like the same thing will happen with my writing.” Dariella echoes Sara’s analogy between writing and learning a language by saying she is fluent in three languages—English, Spanish, and writing. Louisa described a personal writing club she and friends had created, where “we come in with our stories, and we brainstorm together, and we bounce back and forth. I’m hoping that continues . . . ,” but she didn’t sound confident that it would. Amy lamented, “I realized
how little writing I did over the whole semester. It kind of made me think maybe I should do more writing on my own just so I can keep up with it and not forget it.” “I’m afraid I’ll lose writing,” said Stephanie. Implicit in these concerns about loss is an assumption that writing—and writing development—needs continual practice, that it cannot be taken for granted.

I was interested in learning more about the contours of students’ writerly development—its relative importance and role, its relationship to field-specific genres, students’ rhetorical repertoires, and the associated gains and losses after graduation. This interest led me to look closely at the complete data—surveys, interviews, and archives of writing or eportfolios—for four students, two minors and two nonminors, and to conduct follow-up interviews with each to learn more about their writing development after graduation. I selected the four from a group of approximately thirty minors and thirty nonminors for whom we had the most complete collections of data. I chose students who represented variety in gender, major, and postgraduation occupation. My final selections were based on alumni’s willingness and ability to participate in an interview either in person or via Skype.

Stephanie: The Math Side and the English Side

Stephanie graduated in 2014 with majors in both English and actuarial math and wrote an honors thesis on Edmund Spencer’s *The Faerie Queen*. The writing she archived as a nonminor included a first-year essay titled “Identity through Commonality: The Effectiveness of Comedy and Tragedy.” This paper, an analysis of the ways Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* and Aeschylus’s *Persians* portray the consequences of Athenian aggression, was written for a Great Books course open to honors students only. In reflecting on her high school preparation, Stephanie claimed that she arrived at the university especially well prepared, noting that she had been asked to write lengthy analytical papers in high school. Unlike Natalie in Sarah Swofford’s chapter, Stephanie’s assessment of her preparation proved to be highly accurate. Another of the papers she archived focuses on issues of agency and free will in Chaucer’s “Troilus and Criseyde,” and Stephanie makes a complex argument about the various forms of agency and free will assigned to characters in the poem. In another paper, titled “Two Wrongs Make a Right: An Analysis of Necessary Rape in ‘Sir Degaré,” Stephanie draws on textual evidence to show how rape enables a princess to free herself from her father. In all three cases the writing is sophisticated, and the arguments are well documented and convincing.

The same is true for her honors thesis, titled “Refashioning the Epic: An Anal-
ysis of Spenser’s Breaks within *The Faerie Queene*.” Here, as in her other archived selections, Stephanie does complex literary analysis, arguing that Spencer draws on both epic and lyric traditions to create a unique form that wrestles with chronological and allegorical time and moves into the realm of the unwritten word. In every case, Stephanie’s writing draws on considerable research, demonstrates an ability for original thinking, and conveys complex ideas in lucid prose. She demonstrates all the capacities of an accomplished writer, and she values writing as part of her academic experience. For example, at the beginning of her exit interview, Stephanie described the role of writing in her life as “Huge . . . it has huge importance in my life. I’m an English major—and math as well—and I’m always writing essays. I’m always researching. I’m always thinking about how to interact with the writers I’m reading about.” But in the second semester of her first year, having matriculated as a math major, she came to a realization: “I realized I’m missing something, so I took Shakespeare with Professor T and it made me realize that I was a writer.” In reflecting on her response to the college Shakespeare course, she looked back at her high school experience: “It wasn’t just taking AP Lit because that’s how you’re going to get to the good schools; it was, this is a part of you. This definitely brings you joy.” For Stephanie, writing is not only a place to demonstrate her considerable academic capacities; it is also a source of deep pleasure. The mixture of affective and intellectual investments in writing explain its “huge” importance in her life, and it also explains why she invested so much time and talent in writerly development.

Since Stephanie was already a very proficient writer when she arrived on campus, it would be easy to claim that she developed very little during her college years, but her own assessment is that she grew a lot as a writer during her time as an undergraduate. In particular, she felt that she gained greater confidence in her writing abilities. In her exit interview, she claimed, “I wasn’t nearly as confident as I am now. I think that having just the sheer amount of writing that we’ve been doing at the university has helped with that, but I wouldn’t say that I was a newbie coming in either.” In reflecting on her confidence, Stephanie looked back at her high school argumentative essays and “the 15–20-page term papers” she was required to write. “That was normal for us,” she claimed. Although she did not write in a wide variety of genres during her college years, Stephanie felt that her writing became better and better as she moved forward. Both the quantity and quality of the writing she produced, especially in her senior year, led Stephanie to see herself as a highly competent writer when she graduated. Looking at the entire collection of writing that she had archived during her undergraduate years, she was impressed by the totality of what she had accomplished, saying “this is pretty good.” She also looked at her recently completed thesis and observed: “The fact that I’ve completed
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a 57-page scholarly piece of writing and people actually think it’s legit and worth honors is a huge huge growth. Coming in freshman year, I don't think I ever would have thought that I would have been able to do anything like that.” Stephanie's case shows how writing development interacts with personal growth, and both achievement and confidence are interwoven with and supported by affective dimensions such as the pleasure and joy she finds in writing, whereas Grace, also an honors student, who appears in chapter 7 by Anna Knutson, found the path toward writing development much more complicated and difficult.

Stephanie's high school experiences laid the foundation for her decision to major in English as well as math, but writing took on increased importance as she negotiated the spaces between her two majors. At the same time, however, she expressed concern that she would “lose” writing by working in the insurance business: “I definitely want to keep writing. Going into the insurance business, I’m definitely nervous that I’m going to be losing it.” Like many minors, Stephanie's immersion in writing, particularly her honors thesis, made her treasure the “joy” that writing brought her, and the prospect of graduation made her fear that she would not be able to continue it.

Her interview with me two years later confirmed that Stephanie was right to be nervous, because as she moved into her position as a trade credit underwriter she had to abandon the scholarly writing she had enjoyed as an undergraduate. She said, “Unfortunately I kind of lost that type of writing. Now I am doing more analytical, a lot of persuasive writing.” Her job requires her to summarize data for more senior colleagues who have to make financial decisions. She explained how she writes: “Here’s what I recommend. Here are seven or eight bullet points of financial ratios and positive or negative news and press releases. Here’s how the soybean crop is going in Brazil and all that.” She also described writing “diplomatic emails to brokers, the people who stand between us and our clients, trying to sugarcoat the no’s and make the yes’s kind of sound like we’re doing them a favor.” This variation in genres—the recommendation versus the diplomatic email—demonstrates Stephanie's rhetorical repertoire, and she credits her honors thesis with preparing her for both the persuasive and diplomatic writing. In her undergraduate exit interview she indicated that she did not see any influence of her math writing on her English essays, although she acknowledged the reverse. In talking about her postgraduation writing, however, she described the interaction of her math and English majors as key to her writing: “The math side helps me weave from step one to step two to step three, whereas the English has helped me say why that is step one.” This integrated view, which demonstrates Stephanie’s development as a writer, served her well, insuring her success in taking up the new genres required by her
work: “Usually when I write the persuasive essay I get the answer that I want so I think I’m still a confident writer, definitely more confident now in the persuasive and analytic.” Stephanie built on her college writing experiences to broaden her rhetorical repertoire. She benefited from arriving at her firm when two colleagues were out on maternity leave, which enabled her to “skip that pure data entry nine-month period” and start analytical writing immediately. In contrast, others in her entry cohort weren’t doing “the persuasive writing the analytical writing easily until a year in,” but she was also more prepared than her peers who lacked her experience with writing extensively as an undergraduate.

In addition to building on genres she had practiced in college, Stephanie continued familiar writing processes after graduation. During her exit interview, for example, she noted that peer review was a regular part of class, sometimes in small groups and sometimes with everyone in the class workshopping one student’s draft. She also described long meetings with the cohort of students who were all writing honors theses. They would talk together about their projects, share ideas and strategies for their writing, and exchange drafts: “We would pass drafts back and forth and say, ‘Hey, can you read these four pages of my chapter and let me know what makes sense.’” In her view, sharing drafts and ideas with the cohort of seventeen honors students had a major effect on her writing: “They’ve influenced my writing so far that it’s not all my writing; they’ve shaped certain aspects of my thesis.” In her interview with me, Stephanie talked about the social nature of her writing as a trade credit underwriter, explaining that she works in a group of nine where each has an area of specialty: “I know the agricultural sector in the US and South America as well as the RV industry, projectors and the tech industry. Someone else knows all about the metal prices around the world.” She made it clear that she and her colleagues rely on one another for data about various industries, but they also bounce ideas off one another as they prepare to write about their recommendations: “Hey, I’m looking at company X that’s selling to company Y but on these kind of weird payment terms. Has anyone see something like that and how do you price it?” Stephanie may not send her draft for someone in the group to read, but her writing process includes social practices similar to those of her undergraduate years.

Feedback from instructors was also important to Stephanie as an undergraduate. As she explained in her exit interview, she saw her professors as resources and often sought their advice: “If I ever had an essay where I wasn’t 100 percent sure of the thesis or just wanted to talk through some of the problems I’d been having, the professors were always willing to meet with me to discuss it and bring other viewpoints.” These kinds of encounters, in addition to exchanging drafts with peers, made the social nature of writing clear and important to Stephanie. Her professors,
particularly the supervisors of her honors thesis, led her toward more self-critique as well. In the required course for thesis writers, students were required to evaluate their own work and progress: “We had to do evaluations every other week, saying this is what we’re supposed to be doing on our thesis in order to get it done by the deadline.” This combination of looking to more expert writers and becoming better able to evaluate her own writing appears in Stephanie’s description of her work as an underwriter: “When I do persuasive summaries and whatnot, I save all of them just because per legal requirements we have to save them for two years. When my manager says, ‘Hey, that was a really good review,’ I save a copy of it into a different folder in an email, and I will look back at those and say what do I do here that was so different than the other ones that may not have been flagged for being great.”

Even in an environment where she is not getting explicit feedback on her writing, Stephanie has found a way to continue her practice of using feedback to reflect on and improve her writing. Significantly, that reflection involves the same sort of critical engagement that Emily Wilson and Justine Post describe in chapter 1 as crucial for writerly development.

Another dimension of writing that mattered to Stephanie in both her undergraduate and work life was its capacity to help her organize her thoughts. In some cases this took the form of outlining or developing a plan for writing, but it also fulfilled larger personal needs. In the interview at the time of her graduation, Stephanie noted that when she began at the university she thought outlining was a waste of time and never did it. However, by the time she graduated she felt that outlining had some value. Significantly, outlining meant organizing ideas in preparation for writing an essay (“I turn to writing as a way to organize my thoughts”), but it also served to relieve stress: “If things are getting really overwhelming, a lot of times I just make lists, or I journal just to get all of the ideas that are floating around in my mind on paper.” This use of outlining demonstrates one way that writing fosters personal growth because it provides strategies for students like Stephanie to deal with the inevitable challenges of being college students. In her interview with me, Stephanie claimed, “Outlining is like a new commandment for me . . . it’s less formal than what it used to be simply because I don’t have to write a five-page paper in seven hours. So it’s less structured because I feel like the ‘assignment’ is less structured. It doesn’t matter if I have two bullet points or four or twelve, so long as it’s persuasive enough to get the answer I want.” As with genres, feedback, and social dimensions of writing, outlining—in the broadest sense—continued to be important to Stephanie as she moved from student to professional. She also clung to the idea of writing as a system for organizing ideas and creating structures to think with.
Since she has nearly completed her training as an underwriter, as she looks ahead in her career, Stephanie has several choices. She could become an actuary and create spreadsheets to guide insurance companies in pricing, she could remain as an underwriter, she could go to law school and become a legal counsel in the insurance industry, or she could go into claims. At this point she is leaning toward claims, largely because it would enable her to do more writing: “You are drafting decision letters regarding the language of the policy, what a certain comma means, and how that is going to determine whether or not the claim is accepted or denied. That’s where I’d like to move toward, getting a little more Englishy.” The “huge” importance of writing in Stephanie’s life seems to be guiding her career choices, and she has found ways to continue many of the writing practices she used in college. For Stephanie, writing development means adapting strategies and understandings of writing to new contexts. Strengthened by growing confidence in her abilities, her visible accomplishments, the deep pleasure she takes in writing, and her ability to look back at her work at the same time she looks ahead, Stephanie is poised to continue developing as a writer.

Linda: I Go to the Place Where Stories Are Born

Stephanie acknowledges that her position in the insurance business does not afford opportunities to write in depth as she did in college, but she seems comfortable with the compromise. In contrast, Linda, a 2015 graduate and a writing minor, appears unwilling to move away from the writing that matters to her. In her follow-up interview with me, Linda said, “I’ve always loved writing. I’ve been writing since I was a kid. . . . Since I was a kid I had a dream that I was going to be a professional writer. . . . I knew from a young age that was what I wanted to do. I can’t exist without writing.” This was not an exaggeration because, as she went on to explain, Linda had just left her sales position with an automotive supply company after working there for about a year and a half. “I ended up leaving the company to pursue writing because that job was not very writer-friendly. It was a great first job, but that’s not really where my career is. I’m hoping to find another job more focused on writing. . . . Writing is one of the things I’m meant to do.” Unlike Stephanie as well as Kris and Dan, the other two students considered here, Linda arrived at the university with a firmly established writerly identity, forged out of youthful experiences.

The landing page of Linda’s Capstone eportfolio is filled with colorful petroglyphs of animals and a greeting, “Welcome to Wild Wood.” In the introduction she explains that she has constructed the eportfolio as a showcase of her best writing
in college. One of her essays, “Becoming Catskin,” shows why she selected “Wild Wood” as the title for her eportfolio and shows how writing became so important to her. This essay begins: “I lie on the ground feeling like a tightknit ball of bones slung over with a pink jacket. I feel, rather than see, the three elementary schoolgirls behind me Dory, Yolanda, and Tamia. Their skin is as black as mine. One of them kicks my back. I don’t move. I don’t cry, not anymore.” The narrative continues, showing how these three girls regularly attacked her and how she often fled to the forest near the elementary school playground to escape the bullying girls. In the forest, which became a tropical rainforest for her, she created a safe space to interact with animals and meet her imaginary friend Arden, a six-foot gryphon who took the place of her absent father and helped her through her parents’ divorce.

As the narrative goes on, Linda eventually fights back against the bullying girls and returns their punches, kicks, and insults. Teachers, who had either ignored or been unaware of the bullying Linda regularly received, punish her for fighting, and the punishment included forbidding her return to her beloved forest. In her desolation, she discovers the power of writing:

At first, I only feel the ache of losing my forest. Then I search deeper, and discover a new part of my mind. There, in that new space, I create words, and then write them on the empty page. Now, I know what I will do. I will write tales about my rainforest. Maybe then, I can go back to that wonderful place, even if it’s just for the length of a story. I plow through line after line of my notebook, until I have filled a full page with makebelieve adventures. I cannot stop writing. My hand is bound to the paper by a new power. There is no restraint to this power. There are only words.

Her eight-year-old self’s experience with trauma makes writing an integral part of Linda’s identity, and she continues to ground her creative writing in nature-based fantasy stories through all her schooling and into her young adult life. Beginning with her elementary school notebook, Linda filled pages with her writing. She wrote short stories in middle school and her first novel in high school. She is currently completing a second novel. The major project included in her eportfolio was a novella that she is currently revising into a novel she hopes to publish.

Linda’s identity as a writer is remarkable given how little support she received before entering the university. As she explained in our interview, it was not until college that she had “teachers who really helped show me, people who were professional writers themselves and knew about the craft.” Prior to that she had to rely on reading and her own imagination. Fortunately, she had a parent who fostered reading. One of the personal essays included in her eportfolio includes a descrip-
tion of the difficult summer after her parents separated, leaving her mother with two young daughters and very little money. Linda writes:

Then a miracle happened; the local library moved into a strip mall that was only one mile from our house. . . . Almost every day that summer, Mother would dress us in sunhats and walk hand-in-hand with us to the library. I remember few things from my childhood as vividly as that library. Every time we went there my sister and I left carrying as many books as we could carry in our tote bags. We would spend our nights poring over our treasure trove in the family room.

Immersion in reading played a significant role in Linda’s development, enabling her to turn to writing when faced with personal and social challenges. Yet there is little evidence that Linda’s literacies received school support; hers was self-sponsored writing. In reflecting on her writerly experiences during high school, she noted that before college she received very little feedback on her writing. In college in both the writing minor and her other courses she found “a professional writing environment to really grow in,” and received useful responses to her writing from both peers and instructors. Before that, “I didn’t really have a feedback loop,” she explained. For Linda, as for the great majority of students in our study, feedback contributed substantially to writerly development.

An Asian studies major as well as a minor in writing, Linda took advantage of many opportunities for writing in college, as was evident in the wide variety of material she included in her eportfolio: nine essays for courses in Asian studies, some written in Japanese or Chinese; several poems; photographs; three personal essays; an audiobook; and a video essay. Animals and nature are dominant throughout the entire collection. For Linda, “the place where stories are born” is always in the natural world, peopled by animals. Her poetry features geese, bucks, a swan, a blue heron, and a seascape; her photobook contains images of animals, plants, and birds; her video essay offers instructions for sewing stuffed animals. The one piece that doesn’t fit the pattern is “Roots to Grow and Wings to Fly,” the personal narrative about her experience of her parents’ divorce and her life with a single mom. In the introduction, she acknowledges that it really doesn’t fit with the rest of the material in the eportfolio but explains that she included it because she thought it was one of her best pieces. I would add that this narrative adds another dimension to Linda’s writerly identity because it elaborates on the pain that made writing so important to her. She deliberately undercut the conceptual unity of her eportfolio, but she did it to exercise her own critical judgment. Like other students whose writerly development generated a willingness to disagree with
academic requirements, Linda challenged the instructor’s emphasis on coherence by asserting her writerly authority.

The essays written for Linda’s courses in Asian studies focus on animals in nature, just as her fiction does. Her paper “When God Was a Fox” argues that Inari, the god of agriculture, was a deity who took animal form; her “Tales of Tirvagyoni” examines the ways animals are portrayed in four different stories; and a paper on Potania Theron, goddess of animals and wilderness, redefines the nature of this goddess. Although Linda credits the writing minor for much of her development as a writer, she makes clear that her Asian studies classes were “very big on essay writing” and provided both peer and instructor feedback. Furthermore, the material she studied gave her “some new material to write about,” and she felt that what she wrote for Asian studies contributed to her fiction writing: “I think if I hadn’t taken those courses, I wouldn’t have written some of my creative writing pieces.” From an electronic perspective Linda’s eportfolio might be seen as not particularly well integrated because it does not include links across selections. However, the pervasive emphasis on wilderness and animals makes clear the conceptual connections that hold the entire eportfolio together.

Another unifying factor in Linda’s eportfolio is visual. In addition to the images of petroglyphs on the landing page, she includes a photobook titled “The Invisible World,” which includes over forty pictures of things that usually escape notice. Linda describes the images this way: “Wildflowers growing at the side of the road, or the odd-shaped rock in someone’s front yard—these are things that seem small and insignificant but actually hold a world of photogenic magic.” The photogenic magic connects directly with Linda’s writerly identity, as she explains in the photobook introduction: “Writing to me is about escaping the ordinary for the fantastical, for when I write I may choose to replace my reality with my innermost desires and fascinations. For me, the wilderness has always been the refuge of my dreams, because nature in just about any form inspires me as a writer.” The importance Linda assigns to nature in her writing is remarkable in that she, a child of the city, had few opportunities to connect with the natural world, but in her view that circumstance made nature even more valuable to her. In her “Why I Write” essay she explains: “The sheer scarcity of wilderness in my life caused my childhood fascination with all things animals and nature. That fascination is what ultimately led me to discover myself as a writer.” Although Linda developed the range and complexity of her writing across four years, her motivations and goals remained relatively unchanged.

When Linda took a position in sales with an auto supply company after graduation, she thought that it would provide opportunities to continue her development as a writer. Although she estimated that she wrote about one-third of the time,
most of the writing consisted of emails about orders, queries about problems with materials received, and presentations about sales data for her department. She also spent a lot of time producing and rearranging spreadsheets designed to track and improve efficiency in plant production. Initial training for her position included a few online videos about writing conventions such as formatting emails and using professional language, “things I already knew,” Linda commented. She soon realized that writing as she understood it was not valued in her workplace. There were no opportunities for creativity, nor was feedback provided. “It was the polar opposite of the writing I did at UM,” she sighed. After a year and a half, Linda left this position, determined to spend more time engaged in the writing she values so highly.

Linda has continued to write, but she describes it as a lonely process because she hasn’t found a community of writers where she can give and receive feedback. “I briefly joined a writing support group, but they weren’t the group I was looking for. They were more a place where you could go to write for a few hours a week. There wasn’t any sort of feedback or critique,” she said. Linda’s search for a community of writers underscores the importance she and many other students attach to writing among other writers. In some cases they, like Stephanie, adapt elements of their new context to address their desire for the company of other writers, and in other cases, like Linda, they continue to search for greater continuity with their college writing practices. Fear of an abrupt loss of their writing community echoed in the exit interviews of many students, just as the value students ascribe to communities of writers appears in many chapters in this collection. Linda’s experience demonstrates the pain of losing such a community.

She is thinking of applying to MFA programs as a way of finding a community of writers, and she continues to write regularly: “I think the most important thing is to take time off and just write as much as possible. The only way to do it at this point is just do it. That’s why I write every day.” Meanwhile, ever resourceful, Linda turned to images, this time images she creates herself: “I took up acrylic painting, and it’s very beneficial to my fiction writing.” She explains, “I use it to flesh out scenes or explore character and settings . . . I’m not a person that outlines novels; I think art kind of takes that place and acts as the outlining aspect of writing a novel. I draw before, during and after writing. . . . After a session, I might do a quick painting of a scene that I liked in the novel, maybe to brainstorm ideas for revising.” She is even considering creating illustrations for her novel. In the absence of the feedback she finds necessary to developing her writing, Linda produces art that enables her to both plan and revise her fiction. This integration of art and writing fits into the larger pattern of Linda’s writerly development, a pattern of close connections between the visual (largely of the natural world) and the narratives she creates.
Linda’s identity as a writer was firmly established long before she entered the university, and her development during her undergraduate years can be described as solidifying that identity more than broadening her rhetorical repertoire. To be sure, she was a very successful student who produced a number of academic essays that required identification and integration of scholarly resources, and she wrote in both Japanese and Mandarin as well as English. But in her academic essays she focused on topics and themes closely related to her interest in writing fantasies centered in the natural world. As she noted, she saw her work in Asian studies as providing resources for her fiction. Feedback on her writing constituted the most powerful influence on Linda’s development as a writer, and she came to value and even depend on it as part of her process of writing. Since graduating, Linda has become even more convinced about her writing goals, and she seems unwilling to settle for less than full-time attention to her novel. Linda the writer is a maker, of images and of imaginary worlds.

Kris: I Am Confident in My Inabilities

Like the students Sarah Swofford describes in chapter 9, Kris, a nonminor, brought from high school a set of assumptions that shaped her view of college writing. Because her high school emphasized a technical program she did not feel confident as a writer or prepared for the first-year writing requirement, so she enrolled in the developmental course that provides support to students prior to the first-year writing course. After that she took a first-year writing course, and as she put it, “That pretty much ended the writing courses that I took except for I transitioned to more philosophy-based courses, and I really enjoyed the writing aspect of those classes. It kind of contrasts with scientific writing which was a lot of fun. Then for my upper level writing requirement I did a thesis, an honors thesis.” Unlike Stephanie or Linda, Kris did not arrive at the university feeling well prepared for writing or convinced that she had any special talent as a writer. Her enrollment in the developmental course, probably based on her experience with the university’s directed self-placement essay, marked her as someone who felt the need for extra support as a writer. Yet, by the time she graduated, Kris had become a confident and effective writer who wrote an honors thesis as well as a successful application for a highly competitive graduate school fellowship.

Kris’s development as a writer owed little to writing courses, however. Her study in philosophy and the natural sciences, extensive reading, high-stakes writing for career advancement, and the honors thesis provided the grounding for her growth
as a writer. After completing the developmental course and the required first-year course, Kris took several philosophy courses because she liked the way it led her to think and because she enjoyed reading philosophy. Reflecting on this choice in her exit interview, Kris explained that writing in philosophy pushed her in new directions, which helped her to “reflect on the way we write in science.” But her love of science took priority, even in philosophy, leading her to write about scientific concepts and issues in philosophical terms. For instance, she wrote a philosophy paper arguing that all children should be vaccinated. Although scientific evidence about the faulty basis of the antivaccination movement provided the exigency for her paper, her argument was based on philosophical principles. In her exit interview, she explained, “One of my goals is to be able to communicate with people who aren’t in academia but need access to scientific information. . . . We need to be able to communicate our research to these people. I’m from a rural community myself, and I want to make science accessible to people there.” In her view, effective communication meant explaining a concept to people who don’t understand it: “That is the biggest thing I learned from working in the lab, not from the writing classes I had. I wish I would have had this more in my writing classes.” Kris’s interviews do not include more detailed explanations of how writing courses could have served her better, but she made it clear that her science professors did an excellent job of showing her how to make her writing more effective.

At the same time, Kris’s exit interview suggested considerable personal agency in her writerly development. She described herself as a voracious reader. “We read a lot in science, and I read a lot for fun. I’ve always loved, loved, loved reading, and I began to realize reading and writing were intimately tied together.” During her first two years as an undergraduate Kris “got fed up with the competitive grading and standardized testing” in higher education and was ready to leave the university. Her parents persuaded her to stay, but she remained more on her own terms: “I started reading. I just read everything I could get my hands on in science. Then it came to my junior year. I started taking microbiology classes. It was crazy to me because people were taking these exams, and they had studied out of the book a lot. I just knew the answers because they came out of the primary research and all the books that I had read.” Self-sponsored reading not only enabled Kris to thrive in her microbiology courses, it fostered her development as a writer because even though many of the authors she read intimidated her with their knowledge and style, they also inspired her because of her passionate interest in science. As she put it, “Ultimately nothing is going to be more interesting, more important to me than my research.” Powered by extensive reading and a deep commitment to science, Kris took on challenges that furthered her writerly development.
In her exit interview Kris said, “The three most important things I’ve written so far, in terms of advancement of my career and where I’m going, is that I’ve had to write abstracts for conferences, I’ve had to write for grad school, and then I had to write for a grant as well. Those experiences were very necessary, but they also taught me a lot about writing and its importance.” None of these things—participating in conferences, applying to graduate school, and seeking a National Science Foundation fellowship—is required of an undergraduate student, and each of them represents a significant challenge. In reflecting on her conference participation, Kris acknowledged a lot of anxiety: “What’s really nerve wracking about this is that I don’t even like standing in front of my peers in class. At a conference I’m standing in front of grad students, post docs, and professors.” Even though making conference presentations was “nerve wracking,” it increased Kris’s confidence, making her feel that she successfully brought her reading and writing together. Graduate school applications require students to create written representations of themselves that will be convincing to admissions committees, and Kris willingly undertook this challenging project. The most successful STEM students arrive in graduate school with a fellowship to support their research, and Kris applied for and received one, another instance of her choosing to engage in high-stakes writing that she chose. Kris’s claim that these three pieces of writing were necessary rings true because together they helped to position her as a successful graduate student in microbiology. They simultaneously tested her commitment and capacity for writing and enhanced her confidence as a writer.

Although Kris did not include her honors thesis as one of the three most important pieces of writing, she asserted that the process of writing it was “transformative,” and her description of the process suggested that the thesis made a significant contribution to her development as a writer. Part of the thesis’s powerful effect derived from the fact that it was based in the lab. Kris’s struggle with the competitive grading in undergraduate courses diminished when she joined a lab group: “I was all against academia until my junior year when I joined a lab. This was the second semester of junior year. I didn’t really decide to jump on the thesis boat until senior year when I had only six months of research under my belt.” Kris’s was an unusually tight schedule since she had to complete graduate school and fellowship applications during the same semester when she was writing her thesis, but it gave her “a fantastic experience.” She said her process involved “reading a ton of primary literature, beating my head against the wall, doing several drafts, and then sending it to my advisor.” Kris’s description of the benefits of writing the thesis included this: “It’s really great to think about your research in that way and have to do a literature review.” But she saved the greatest praise for her advisor, characterizing
him as “very very helpful. He is a fantastic guy, and I couldn’t speak more highly of him.” She described his response to her writing this way: “Well look at this section. You might want to try this.’ He let me make my own mistakes and then correct my own mistakes by saying, ‘This is what you did well. In science we do it this way, so go back and redo it.” This combination of guidance and freedom, particularly freedom to make mistakes, moved Kris into the company of more confident and effective writers.

When asked in her exit interview what contributed most to her writerly development, Kris said, “Peer review, I think, is the most important lesson I’ve learned in the classroom because we were forced to do that in first-year writing. Then I actually picked up on that and I was like, wow, that’s helpful.” She also, however, associated peer review with her lab and the study groups associated with her science courses. “It’s very nice to sit down, especially with somebody who’s kind of your age, or just a little bit older, and say ’Will you read this’ because what we find, even when we discuss science. . . . your ideas, while they can be really great, are kind of consistent with your own logic. Then somebody will come in, and they’ll be like “That doesn’t make any sense;’ ‘That makes a lot of sense;’ ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’” Because she had come to value peer response so highly, Kris actively sought it: “With my thesis, I got a group of my friends together. I bought them dinner and I was like ’Will you read this?’ They were like ’I guess,’ and I got some really great feedback.” Like the students Ben Keating describes in chapter 2, Kris transformed a practice that had been “forced” on her into an essential part of her writing by translating it into scientific terms.

Other dimensions of Kris’s development as a writer came directly from her experience as a student of science. Concision, for instance, emerged from page limits imposed by scientific genres such as abstracts and grant proposals. When she first entered the university, Kris “always associated writing well with writing long, kind of just filling the page,” but in her science classes she found that “the most important documents I’ve written had an extremely short and strict page limit. It is so hard to communicate your ideas in a short amount of space.” Reflecting on her difficulty in adjusting to such limits, Kris suggested that instructors could modify their approach: “Instead of always saying okay, you need to write this much, saying you can only write this much to communicate your ideas.” Another thing Kris learned from studying science centered on the role of writing itself. As she put it, “A lot of what we learn as undergrads is not really a reflection of the actual profession and what the professors do, especially the dichotomy between writing and science.” She went on to explain that she began from the assumption that writing wasn’t very important in science, but by her senior year she saw writing as central. Along with
this developmental shift came another. In her exit interview Kris explained that initially the process of creating an archive of her writing for this study had been a grade-conscious and essentially mechanical process: “My first couple of semesters I was like, it’s a writing assignment. There you go. There’s another writing assignment. There you go. I think you can definitely see at the beginning they’re just some pieces that I wrote and received good marks on.” She went on to say, “Whereas at the end I wasn’t concerned about the marks. I was like, this is something that I feel passionately about, and you can see that reflected in my writing.” For Kris the passion for writing, the appreciation of concision, and the increased valuing of writing itself grew out of her development as a student of science and her growing understanding of what the life of a professional scientist entails.

Unlike nearly all the students in this study, Kris did not leave the university when she graduated; she continued as a graduate student. With her prestigious NSF fellowship and excellent academic record, she had many graduate school options, but she chose to remain at UM because it seemed to offer the best program in her area. When I interviewed her, she had just finished her second year of graduate school and was continuing the same line of research on bacteria that she had begun in her undergraduate honors thesis. As we talked, a number of continuities with Kris’s undergraduate experience emerged. She affirmed the importance of reading for her development as a writer: “I guess what was most significant in my progression as a writer in any particular area was what I was reading along with it. If I read something . . . I get excited about writing more.” As Ryan McCarty notes in his chapter 4 discussion of Kris’s developing scientific writing, reading journal articles was a way for her to learn the genre as an undergraduate. As a graduate student, however, her reading serves more as a form of invention or a means of getting ideas for both her writing and her research. This shift indicates her further development as a writer because she has moved beyond simply following models to actively contribute to conversations in her field.

Kris remained deeply committed to her research, particularly the study of bacteria begun in her honors thesis, and she was edging closer toward her goal of publishing it, “just adding more information, additional experiments, to clear things up, solidify.” Communicating science to a nonacademic audience likewise remained an important writing goal for Kris, and she talked enthusiastically about making a presentation on her research to students in her former high school in northern Michigan. She continued, “One of the biggest questions I still struggle with is how do I . . . justify spending your taxpayer dollars on what I do? I feel like every academic should be compelled to do that.”

Even though she remained in the same university in the same department with
the same advisor, Kris experienced many discontinuities in her development as a writer when she became a graduate student. Her long-term ambivalence about writing took new form as she met different challenges, came to wider understandings, and took up new writing practices. The biggest change, as Kris saw it, was the increased amount of writing required. “In my first two years of graduate school I’ve probably spent at least 50 percent of my time writing, balancing that with experiments.” She continued, “If you would’ve told me that at the beginning, I would not have signed on. It’s truly a love-hate relationship because you learn so much when you’re forced to sit down and take all of the ideas that are in your head. . . . Then you write them down and then you realize there are pitfalls. Then, as academic communication goes, you get back those pitfalls.” Part of Kris’s love-hate relationship with writing results, no doubt, from the inevitable critiques (making pitfalls visible) that are part of peer review, whether for undergraduates or scientists submitting papers for publication. Although the demands on her as a writer increased, Kris came to terms with them:

At the outset I was just very uncomfortable with my abilities to write and I was able to distance myself from my lack of skill by saying “Well I don’t need that, it’s not what I do.” . . . Once I was able to swallow the pill that writing and science are linked I could respect writing and what it does and how it communicates. That changed my perspective. . . . I’m more open to the idea that I can be a writer and a scientist.

Kris’s deep commitment to communicating science to audiences outside academia helped her move past her negative feelings about writing and embrace the opportunities it provided.

Using new strategies also changed Kris’s perspective on writing. In preparing manuscripts for publication she had to develop figures, a standard feature of scientific articles. She described the figures as the narrative spine of an article; readers should be able to scroll through figures and tell the story of the article. In her view, figures help writers because each one addresses a question, “You have the ‘what is my question that this figure is going to answer?’ and then each figure takes you step by step through and then you’re just doing the writing to supplement that.” At another point in the interview Kris said she found outlines helpful, and it appears that figures serve a similar function by creating a structure into which she can write. Another strategy she described can be seen as a version of writing to learn. She explained that in preparing for her preliminary exam presentation she followed a process where “you write all the questions that you can come up with that could possibly be asked on any given slide and then you go back through and
you write answers to all those questions.” Although she did not use writing-to-learn terminology, Kris’s explanation echoed its central premise: “You need to feel fundamentally sound in your ability to write about your project . . . writing forces you to put all your ideas on paper in a way that you can communicate them.” Writing enabled Kris to make a much more effective presentation, and thereby helped her see another way that it fostered her career in science.

Another instance of this new role for writing in Kris’s life had both personal and professional dimensions. During her exit interview as an undergraduate she claimed that she had never done any reflective writing. However, in her follow-up interview with me she explained that she has taken up a new practice: “I write independently for catharsis—it has nothing to do with science. . . . I can put all my ideas in one place, and the process of writing opens up my mind and frees up some space.” Sometimes the writing deals with interpersonal issues, and she writes as “an outsider looking in and explaining the situation.” While this writing is not directed toward professional goals, it carries benefits for these goals because it enables her to focus on her work: “I could get an experiment done with extreme focus, whereas before I was splitting the time between ‘I need to add this much, but that person said . . . ’” Writing about personal issues enables Kris to simultaneously deal with them and to become more focused on her work in the lab. It also nurtures her personal and social development to, as she puts it, “be a better human being.”

In her exit interview, Kris made very clear statements about not using social media. When asked if she used any form of new media writing, she responded that she did not, but she did acknowledge that she read her sister’s blog about business school, and speculated that new media might provide a means of communicating her views on science to a wider audience: “I would love to be able to share—people don’t understand why I get excited, and I’d love to be able to share why I get excited, you know? I think maybe a blog or something like that, is the way to do that.” Two years later, Kris was not writing a blog to share her excitement about science with others, but she had required students to tweet what they had learned from a workshop she offered, and she said, “I have a Twitter feed, and I follow almost exclusively scientists. I scroll through and I pick up papers. . . . There is a lot of writing and exchanging going on out there.” Social media now shape both her reading and writing, and it has contributed to her development as a writer by creating yet another link between reading and writing while simultaneously providing another way to exchange ideas with other writers.

The most substantial contribution to Kris’s writerly development centered on how her view of herself as a writer and of the nature of writing shifted during her
first two years of graduate school. As a high-achieving student who saw herself as a scientist rather than a writer, she struggled to incorporate the writer role. She noted that it was really in elementary school that she first began to think, “I’m not a particularly good writer, but I’m a science person, and because I’m a science person I’m not a good writer,” much like Marie in Swofford’s chapter 9. This dichotomy shaped her thinking throughout most of her undergraduate education. In part, as noted above, her perspective shifted because she recognized that writing would enable her to accomplish her goal of making science more accessible to wider audiences. However, a more profound change took shape when her principal investigator, with whom she was writing proposals and papers, admitted “that writing wasn’t easy for him.” She explained, “As a like-minded science person this idea that okay we’ve doing something and I still don’t think I’m good at it, and I’ve been a very successful scientist for X number of years . . . has been extremely helpful.” Along with understanding that an admired mentor also found writing difficult, Kris came to understand more about writing. Specifically, she learned that “it didn’t have to be perfect . . . it’s never going to be perfect and it’s not that I am a writer or I’m not a writer.” With this recognition she was able to see that she did not have to think of writing in bimodal terms; she could be a person who writes to communicate. She also acknowledged a range of audiences and purposes: “It’s me communicating with myself through writing about an experience that I’m trying to go through or writing a letter to my mom or writing a scientific article for the community.” She was able to free herself from a need for perfection and value what writing enabled her to do.

Along with this recognition came another. One of the questions I asked in our interview referred back to her exit interview statement that she was developing confidence as a writer. “Is that still happening?” I asked. Kris responded:

I would amend that statement. I’m confident in my inabilities. I’m confident that I can write a first draft, and that it will be terrible, but I will have a first draft with all of my ideas in one place. Then I’m confident that I can find, whether it be professors or other resources, to give me feedback and comments, incorporate those comments, and edit. I’m confident in the writing process, and I’m not sure that I’ll ever be confident in my writing abilities, but I don’t want—in some ways that’s good because I don’t want it to breed complacency. I’m never going to sit down and think, well, I’m a great writer. I’m just going to sit down and power this out because that’s not the way it works for me. It takes several iterations and so I’m confident in being able to utilize resources and get things done, but not in my raw writing abilities.
With this statement Kris identifies herself as a writer who understands and depends on processes that she has developed. Because she sees writing in social terms, she is comfortable asking for help rather than relying entirely on her own abilities. Although she doesn’t mention her extensive reading here, that background surely contributes to her confidence in being able to effectively use the help she receives; she has honed an ability to identify when and how to use the resources available. In a deep and hard-won way she understands writing as never entirely finalized and never quite perfect, and within these terms she is confident in her ability to perform successfully as a writer.

**Dan: I Need to Control the Story**

Like Kris’s, Dan’s postgraduation journey led him to a much deeper appreciation for the social and collaborative dimension of writing, but he arrived at this place via a very different route. A communications major who graduated in 2015, he now serves as social media coordinator for a professional baseball team. Dan’s application to the minor in writing explained that he wanted to enter the program because he was a new staff member for the *Michigan Daily* and felt that the minor would add “an academic context” to his journalistic writing experience. One theme that emerged in Dan’s entry interview and in the writer’s evolution essay he wrote before graduating is an ambivalent view of collaboration in writing, one interwoven with varying statements about confidence. In the entry interview, he claimed that he was nervous about his writing abilities when he entered the university, unsure that he would measure up to its standards, and anxious to have others read his work so he “would feel better about it.” This uncertainty echoed in his evolution essay when he explained that he kept writing even though he didn’t really enjoy it; writing was his fallback because, as he states, “I struggled with math and science, was bored by history and politics and didn’t pick up Spanish quickly enough, so I stuck to writing.” Unlike the other three students profiled here, Dan was not a reader. “I didn’t read books for fun. . . . I couldn’t even finish the Harry Potter series because I was more content seeing the movies,” he claimed. Lacking a solid grounding as a reader, and making comments about seeking reassurance from other readers and turning to writing as a last academic resort suggest a writer who lacked confidence and depended on collaboration with others to assure the quality of his writing.

Yet it was confidence in his own writing abilities that led Dan to write for the *Daily*. The backstory, which he repeated in his application to the writing minor and his “Why I Write” paper, is that he was reading a *Daily* article about a hockey game
and thought “I can write a better story than this.” He began writing sports stories for the Daily, attracted positive attention from editors, and went on to become an editor himself. Dan’s story can be read as the narrative of a very successful student journalist who found a niche for himself early in his college career, and in his evolution essay Dan explains how his perspective on writing shifted. He explains, “Writing wasn’t fun in the beginning because the assignments weren’t interesting.” What he did find interesting was a first-year writing assignment that required him to go out and conduct interviews. His writing in response to this assignment was, to Dan’s ear, “one of the first examples in which I didn’t sound like I disliked writing.” Journalistic writing, which meant writing about others, suited Dan because, as he said during his entry interview, “I need to control the story.” He claimed to enjoy the control: “I control what is included and excluded. No one gets to determine my writing process but myself. . . . The power that I can wield in a single phrase is incredible.” Here there is no indication of the nervous writer who seeks support and reassurance from others. Instead Dan expressed enough confidence in his own abilities to be rather dismissive of peer review. “I have a good sense of what is my best writing,” he said. He also asserted that he could write a paper and “it wasn’t going to be the end of the world if I didn’t talk to someone about it.” When he did receive feedback from peers he felt free to reject it, claiming that he knew better what he was trying to accomplish and preferred the “best” feedback that would come from instructors. Dan’s confidence in his own writing and his ability to discern its best parts led him reject, at least while he was an undergraduate, the collaboration made possible by peer feedback. At this point in his writerly development he seemed to see collaboration as undercutting the control he sought in writing.

In his senior year writer’s evolution essay Dan offered a more complicated explanation of the control inherent in writing stories about others. He acknowledged that writing about others rather than himself could be seen as avoiding the vulnerability that comes with self-disclosure. He wrote:

I don’t write about others because I’m afraid of being vulnerable—really, there’s some vulnerability to doing that itself—but it’s a strange concept to open up to others about things that would otherwise be kept inside, especially because it doesn’t serve as much of a purpose as sharing information does. In a way, it was easier and more informative to write about someone else’s vulnerabilities than my own.

These two sentences both deny and affirm Dan’s reluctance to make himself vulnerable through self-disclosure in writing. He says he is not afraid to reveal himself but describes it as strange and lacking the purpose and ease of “sharing information.”
The equation between information and purpose offers another angle on the issue of control. Purposeful writing about information can be controlled whereas self-disclosure could lead to loss of control or vulnerability.

Nearly all of the work included in Dan’s eportfolio demonstrates his desire and ability to exert control in writing. For Dan, control is a comprehensive term that includes everything from his topics—a focus on others rather than himself—to sentence-level decisions about syntax and punctuation that shape meanings. The majority of selections come from his work as a Daily sports reporter and feature accounts of sporting events, profiles of key players, and interviews with coaches, all organized like a sports blog with the newest at the top. These, along with a rich collection of sports-oriented photographs, display Dan’s considerable ability as a sports journalist and introduce him to prospective employers. Both in several of the sports clips and other selections included in the eportfolio, Dan adopts a humorous style that can be read as a form of control. A revised version of the “Why I Write” essay from his Gateway portfolio takes the form of a series of statements with a number of humorous asides, such as attributing his interest in telling the stories of others (rather than his own) to his “inner ‘Gossip Girl’” and suggesting that “everyone has read the Daily and thought they could do better.” In his evolution essay Dan acknowledges that he prefers to deflect attention away from himself and cites a piece titled “Karma,” a humorous first-person account of tempting fate by being dishonest and lazy to see if he will be punished. He explains, “I found ways in my [creative nonfiction] course to write a personal essay (as instructed) without writing about myself. . . . I developed the ability to put myself into the story without being the focus which has long been important to my work at the Daily and beyond.” “Feature,” a genre-bending use of sports-event narrative style to describe a young man’s attempts to hook up with a woman at a bar offers another example of the humorous deflection. Similarly, Dan’s Capstone project, “Journey to Adulthood,” recounts his attempts to accomplish feats such as administering the Heimlich maneuver, cooking a meal, building a fire, sewing a button, and jump-starting a car to prove his maturity. The one exception is “Remembering,” a serious account of Dan’s body image issues. Otherwise, he demonstrates considerable ability to “control the story” and deflect attention away from himself with humor, information, or the language of sports.

Although he was not particularly interested in the social dimension of peer response to his writing in the context of a course, Dan was keenly aware of and attuned to responses from audiences for his journalism. When asked, during his entry interview, what constitutes good writing, he said, “Originally I would say it meant
getting an A. Now I would revise that to saying it’s writing to your audience . . .
when the person who read it thought, okay, I think this piece was well written and
was understood.” He goes on to explain, “A great piece of writing transcends a good
piece of writing when other people continue to talk about it.” Audience awareness
loomed large for Dan, and writing for the Daily gave him immediate feedback from
his audience: “The scary thing and the great thing about the Daily is that it tracks
the number of reads you get online so when a piece does really well or a piece
doesn’t do well, maybe, you can go back and make yourself more paranoid about
that.” Dan’s humorous comment about becoming paranoid tempered but did not
obviate the seriousness with which he thought about the effects of his writing on
his audience. Furthermore, he made it clear that he drew on audience response to
develop as a writer: “I’ll go back and check out a piece that I might have worked on
longer or that got more reads, and I’ll reflect on that and I’ll think, okay. Yeah. I did
well here. Or, like, I’ll hit myself, ‘Damn it, Dan,’ or something like that.”

Two years later, when I interviewed him, Dan had a very different view of feed-
back from his peers: “I’m realizing now that I wish I had bought in more to the
classmate feedback.” He explained, “That was tough for me to accept really early
on and probably into the senior year just because . . . I thought back then, ‘I know
what I’m doing. I don’t need another student to tell me this.’” In his position as
social media coordinator for a professional baseball team, Dan finds collaboration
central to his work: “When you jump into a thing like social media . . . you have to
be willing to collaborate with anyone and everyone. . . . I’m taking anyone’s voice
who can offer it to me.” Dan’s social media—Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—
plunged him into a cacophony of other voices. In addition to responding to and
drawing on readers who commented on his tweets and posts, Dan enjoys a collabor-
ative relationship with his boss: “I can shoot my boss . . . an idea like ‘Hey what
do you think about this?’ Sometimes it might be like, ‘Wait, just too far,’ ‘Probably
not the voice we want,’ or something, and he’ll say ‘I wouldn’t do that.’ It’s fair. I’m
appreciative of that.” On other occasions, Dan’s boss is encouraging: “I like what
you’re doing. What if you tried . . . working with these keywords you’ve used?” As
he became more comfortable in his role, Dan sometimes questioned his boss’s sug-
gestions, saying “I don’t know if I necessarily think that works . . . it was tough for
me to say it to him at first.” From one perspective, the boss takes on the role of an
instructor, offering praise, guidance, and correction, but Dan’s ability to question
his boss’s judgment illuminates another dimension of the relationship, especially
when the boss says, “Yeah, you’re right. It doesn’t really sound that great now that
I think about it. Love what you had.” In this version of collaboration Dan felt com-
fortable evaluating and ultimately rejecting his boss's advice—much as students
described in Emily Wilson and Justine Post's chapter 1 critically engaged with in-
structor feedback—and, thereby, retained control of the story.

When I asked Dan about the ways he had changed and developed as a writer
since graduation, he had a ready answer: “You have to be able to take criticism and
feedback in real time. The stakes are higher, and I’ve had to grow into that. I’ve had
to be like, ‘Okay, I’m putting something out there on the internet, and it’s going to
be seen by millions of people. I have to be ready to live with that. I was not accus-
tomed to that type of writing.” Because his audience is so large and so immediate,
Dan is keenly aware of the social nature of writing: “Collaboration is something
I really, really enjoy. The more and more you collaborate the more ideas you get.”
Here collaboration includes responses from both his boss and his readers, and Dan
was reminded of the multiple perspectives of peers who responded to his writing in
college: “The minor took in a lot of different voices. I had friends from chemistry,
sciences, and those who were in political science.” The rich collection of his readers’
voices mirrors what Dan experienced as an undergraduate, but the stakes are much
higher in his social media position, and he has learned to collaborate with a wide
and diverse audience.

Social media not only offers Dan a large audience, it shapes or controls the de-
velopment of his writing. When I asked him to reflect on his development as a
writer, he first took a global perspective, saying, “I imagine in two more years I
might have some different answers. I think that writing is one of those great things
that as you get older you don’t necessarily get worse at it.” But then he quickly
shifted, stating,

I want to stress just how big and important social media counts as a form of writing. . . .
This Twitter profile isn't just a chance for me to talk with friends. It's really a chance for
me to continue writing and to think about saying something in fewer characters. . . .
The new media focus is critical to how I think about writing. . . . I’m intrigued by how
writing changes through these mediums.

Dan’s development as a writer is evident in the way he continues to think about the
nature of writing itself and the shaping effect of the various forms of social media
he uses. In addition to using the tools of social media effectively on a daily basis, he
reflects on the significance of this form of writing. He has to think about concision
in a new way, finding ways to convey his ideas in fewer characters. He also has to
write in “real time,” with little opportunity for revision, but, as interchanges with his
boss show, collaboration remains part of his writing process. “It’s like editing on the
fly,” he explains. Of course, social media also create the audiences that shape Dan’s writing by responding to what he posts or tweets, and it fosters additional forms of collaboration. One audience positions Dan in relation to other developing writers: “I am seeing a lot of upcoming writers or a lot of upcoming students, because they’re interacting with me on Twitter on an everyday basis or on Facebook.” Dan can be seen as a mentor figure to the upcoming writers and students he interacts with, helping prepare them for the ever-larger role social media will play in writing. Another shaping or controlling force on Dan’s writing is the baseball team itself and the way it performs. As he puts it, “There’s nine guys on the field, and if they do well, I can be funnier and I can be more sarcastic.” Still, however, Dan sees social media as giving him another way to control the story: “Social media—I like to think of it as talking from a position of power. . . . You can say, ‘Why don’t you look at. . . .’”

Part of Dan’s development as a writer led him to adopt a more inclusive view of collaboration. In his professional role he came to see a value in peer response that had been invisible to him during his undergraduate years. While he still looks to authority—his boss took the place of instructors—he also recognizes the value of the multiple voices who respond to his writing on social media, for both their contributions to his thinking and the ways he can support their growth as writers. Dan’s desire to control the story remained constant, however. From his undergraduate years to the present he focuses on the stories of others rather than his own; he uses humor, information, and sports narratives to deflect attention away from himself; and he believes that social media, along with other technologies of writing, give him a position of power so that he can control the story.

Conclusion

Despite significant differences in their levels of writerly confidence and their writing experiences as undergraduates, these four students followed a number of similar paths in writing development after college. There were no clear variations between minors and nonminors in the ways they conceptualized writing or their capacities as writers. All saw writing as essential to the work they were doing, and they felt prepared to take up the writing challenges of their new positions, even as they recognized the need to adapt their writing processes to new contexts. All of them became even more aware of the audiences for whom they were writing, whether colleagues in the insurance business, other scientists, the hoped-for agent or publisher, or baseball fans, and they adjusted their writing accordingly. All, with the possible exception of Linda, adapted their processes of
writing to unfamiliar genres, including recommendations on insurance pricing; articles for scientific journals; and tweets, posts, and captions. And Linda’s shift toward integrating painting and writing may lead her toward a multimodal genre that includes both text and image. The entire group saw writing in positive terms and expressed pleasure about what they were able to accomplish with it. They had repertoires that enabled them to approach writing in more than one way and to work comfortably with new genres.

The social dimension of writing was clearly visible to all four. They actively sought some form of feedback and reflected on what they learned. Stephanie’s practice of saving and rereading praise-winning reports; Dan’s exchanges with his boss and constant attention to fans’ responses to his tweets, posts, and captions; Kris’s lab-based collaborations; and Linda’s attempt to find a writing community all show how these writers translated their college experiences with feedback into their work environments. None of the four mentioned having experience with peer review in high school, but all reported being introduced to it in their university courses, and they each found ways to replicate peer review as they stepped into their new roles. In many ways, then, these four young adults successfully enacted the writerly behaviors that student responses in the exit survey anticipated. Writing enabled them to achieve professional aspirations, they proceeded reflectively as they faced writing challenges, and they felt capable as they faced new and field-specific rhetorical situations.

One of the challenges faced by all four concerned new ways of integrating the visual and textual. To be sure, Dan and Linda had experience with creating the eportfolio required of writing minors and so knew something about multimedia writing, but Dan’s undergraduate writing did not include creating captions for Instagram images, and Linda had no prior experience connecting painting with her fiction writing. Stephanie’s English-major writing did not include incorporating charts, and Kris had never before had to create figures for science publications. Each of the four met these challenges, but the fact that incorporating the visual was required in these very different lines of work is worth noting as we think about what writing is in the twenty-first century.

Despite their similarities, these four young adults established writing patterns as undergraduates that continued and took firmer form as they assumed new positions. Linda continued to focus on creating fantasies based in the natural world. Stephanie kept doing research, analyzing it, and writing about what she concluded, even though she shifted from literary texts to commodities. Dan went on controlling the story by using humor and sports narratives. Kris carried on with her process of collaborating to write about science. Implicit in these patterns were as-
sumptions about the nature of writing. For Linda it continues to be a safe place constructed by the imagination, for Stephanie it is a means of persuading others, for Dan it is a vehicle for sharing information and offering humor, and for Kris it is a way to provide useful information to people outside the academy.

All of these students are only two or three years out of college, and each faces many challenges ahead. Stephanie will need to decide which area of insurance she wants to pursue and whether she will seek another degree. Kris faces a long road of graduate school, dissertation, postdoc, and the uncertainty of academic employment. Linda has to make both short-term and long-term decisions about how she will maintain herself as a novelist. Dan is already thinking about where he might go next in the world of sports journalism. As they move forward writing will continue to play an important role in their professional lives, and based on the patterns of development they have already shown, it seems likely that they will continue to draw and build on the ways of writing they developed as undergraduates.

WORK CITED