12. Anxious Writers in Context

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Anxiously writers in context may be neither anxious nor a writer. The fundamental premise of social psychologist Kurt Lewin’s classic *Field Theory in Social Science* is that behavior is the function of the interaction between the individual and his or her environment rather than a function of one or the other acting alone (see application in M. Bloom). And in “Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?” Elliott G. Mishler makes a compelling case for researchers in the social and psychological sciences and in education to consider the context of the behavior they study as a necessary condition for understanding that behavior.¹

Too often teachers or writing researchers focus on only a single context, such as the school-based timed writing task, rather than on the multiple frames of reference in which the writer is operating. The more thoroughly that teachers, researchers, or the writers themselves get to know these contexts, which are nevertheless susceptible to change, the greater the chance not only to understand the difficulties but to resolve them.

Such a contextual approach has recently gained some popularity in research on writing processes, particularly in research with children, and with college students who are basic writers. Among the most notable investigations of children’s writing processes are the longitudinal studies by Donald Graves (1975), Lucy Calkins, and their colleagues at the University of New Hampshire (Graves, Calkins, & Sowers). These researchers spent months in elementary school classrooms gaining the confidence of their subjects and carefully noting the occasions for writing, the instructions the teachers gave, and the opportunities for spontaneous writing. They watched their subjects write and talked with them about their writing, sometimes while they were doing it, sometimes immediately afterward. Over time the omnipresent investigators became fixtures in the classroom, part of the context. Their careful observations, based on meticulous record-keeping, reflect
numerous emotional, temperamental, and social aspects of the children’s writing context, in addition to its intellectual features. When we read accounts of such investigations, we feel that we have gained a remarkably clear understanding of how schoolchildren write in different modes in the context of their classrooms.

Shaughnessy’s pioneering *Errors and Expectations* and Bartholomae’s “The Study of Error” make a convincing case for examining the writings of basic writers in their emotional, linguistic, rhetorical, and intellectual contexts. Bartholomae explains the theory of error analysis and justifies its contextual application:

Error analysis begins with a theory of writing, a theory of language production and language development, that allows us to see errors as evidence of choice or strategy among a range of possible choices or strategies. . . . Errors, then, are stylistic features, information about this writer and this language; they are not necessarily . . . accidents of composing, or malfunctions in the language process. Consequently, we cannot identify errors without identifying them in context, and the context is not the text, but the activity of composing that presented the erroneous form as a possible solution to the problem of making a meaningful statement. (257)

Shaughnessy’s taxonomy of error, Bartholomae points out, “identifies errors according to their source, not their type” (257). A single type of error, such as subject-verb agreement, could have a variety of causes and might be variously categorized as “evidence of an intermediate system,” an accident, or an “error of language transfer,” such as dialect interference. A teacher familiar with the student writer’s social and cultural contexts—such as the nature of the community and the language or dialect spoken at home—would be better able to identify the causes and provide appropriate solutions than would a teacher who focused merely on the errors and the “rules” for correcting them. Error cannot be accurately understood without an understanding of the student’s history and current environment.

Considering the writer’s immediate and broader social contexts, then, has proven valuable in understanding both how writers’ abilities are developed and why errors are committed. I have found that considering such contexts has deepened my understanding of the difficulties or successes that other populations have with writing.

To understand the difficulties of anxious writers we must examine them in context, for in the context may lie clues to the solutions, as well as to the problems. “Writing anxiety,” as I use the term, is a label for one or a combination feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that interfere with a person’s ability to
start, work on, or finish a given writing task that he or she is intellectually capable of doing. The anxious writers who are the subjects of this and much other research are able to function well in other contexts; for them, the “inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of skill or commitment” (Rose, *Writer’s Block*) is a particular and perhaps isolated problem. Nevertheless, its significance or intensity may be powerful enough to overwhelm the writer’s whole life, especially if finishing a dissertation or writing articles or books is crucial to the writer’s career. Since writing anxiety often appears as context-specific, it is clear that the particular context must intrinsically be part of the guiding conceptual framework we use to define, study, and resolve writing anxiety.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INDIVIDUAL WRITERS AND THEIR CONTEXTS

Before focusing on two case studies of academic women in context, I’d like to briefly identify the conceptual framework of this study.

Writers aren’t simply the sum of their contexts. They bring individual differences in perception, ability, and disposition to their writing contexts—perceptions and abilities that were themselves developed through interactions with previous contexts. Some features of this complex interaction may be seen as internal to the writer (intellectual, temperamental, emotional), others as external (social, economic, academic), though to an extent these overlap. I will attempt to identify and illustrate some of these features.

Internal features

*Intellectual Factors.* These consist of the writer’s understanding of the subject, knowledge of appropriate methods and strategies to use in research and writing (such as how to find resources and organize notes from multiple sources), vocabulary, and writing skills. It may also, when relevant, include a knowledge of how to type, edit, or use a word processor. If the knowledge is incomplete or inappropriately applied (e.g., “Always grab your audience immediately”) the writer may become enmeshed in a rigid, convoluted, or otherwise ineffective composing process (Rose “Rigid Rules,” *Writer’s Block*).

*Artistic Factors.* A writer may be more or less creative, independent, insightful, willing to make or break rules and take other risks that, if successful, will result in good writing.

*Temperamental Factors.* The writer’s motivation to start a particular piece of writing, and drive to continue and finish it, are critical factors. Whether a person can easily set goals, priorities, and time schedules and stick to them may well determine whether she finishes the work or not. A
writer's self-confidence (or lack thereof) may also influence what the
writer has to say and whether or not she says it.

*Biological Factors.* The writer's general level of energy and how much of
that he expends on a given piece of writing are of central concern, as is his
state of health. A writer's awareness of his daily biorhythmic pattern can
enable him to schedule his writing when he's at his most energetic and cre­
ative and to avoid writing at those times of the day or night when he's not.
The effect of the writer's gender will be discussed in the section on social
context.

*Emotional Factors.* The research of John Daly and various associates on
apprehensive writers has demonstrated the importance of writers' attitudes
toward writing in general and toward their own writing in particular. They
can hold mythical beliefs that make them fearful of writing: "Writing is
easy for everyone else and hard for me." They may have been forced to
write as punishment. Or they may harbor fears and resentments of past
experiences with stifling writing assignments ("What I Did on My Summer
Vacation"), with stultifying formats (formulaic five-paragraph themes),
and with scarifying writing evaluations (papers bleeding with red marks).

External contexts

The writer's individual factors interact with various social and cultural
contexts. The two contexts of particular concern here are the broad social
context and the more circumscribed academic contest.

*Social Context.* Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen emphasize the difficul­
ties that social contexts create to inhibit or curtail altogether their writing
and that of their peers. Virginia Woolf gave *A Room of One's Own* a
metaphorical title for the literal context she considered essential for writ­
ing. She contends that "it would have been impossible, completely and
entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age
of Shakespeare" (48) because of the absence of supportive contexts and
the presence of deterring ones. Women in that age would have had no
educational context, no parental or social encouragement for writing.
Their social context dictated early marriage, childbearing, and extinction
of their literary talents, if not their very lives. Tillie Olsen, in *Silences*
(1978), points out comparable difficulties for modern women, citing the
frustrations of her own desire to write by the crushing needs to earn
money, keep house, and care for children. In *Alice James: A Biography*
(1980), biographer Jean Strouse focuses on the delicate Alice James in the
context of her parents and vigorous brothers. Strouse contends that Alice
had enormous literary and intellectual talents and was as fully capable of
being as fine a writer and thinker as were her famous brothers, William and Henry. Yet while her domineering father encouraged his sons to enter intellectual professions, Alice, ever the dutiful daughter, was encouraged to languish at home as a progressively deteriorating psychosomatic invalid. Clearly, the presence or absence of familial and social supports for writing can be crucial.

Academic Contexts. Academic contexts are consistently important as an encouragement or deterrent to writers, as is demonstrated by the research on elementary, high school, and college students cited above (see also Daly), and by the case studies of graduate students that I shall discuss in this chapter. These contexts, like others, have norms and expectations of the modes, style, extent, and sometimes content of student and faculty writing, often with rewards and punishments attached (grades, degrees, promotion and tenure). The same is true of much writing expected in the context of one’s job. The pressure of deadlines, too much work, or the distractions by coworkers and a noisy or uncongenial environment may severely inhibit the writing, while the absence of such pressures may enhance it (L. Bloom, “Why Graduate Students Can’t Write”).

TWO CASE STUDIES OF GRADUATE STUDENT WRITERS

The case studies of graduate students, Sarah and Ellen, discussed below, offer long-term explorations of the relevant factors in their larger social and academic contexts in order to convey the situational reality behind the writing problems of these women. The solutions I’ve proposed are also related to these contexts.

Both Sarah and Ellen had completed their doctoral course work in English and in philosophy, respectively, at excellent universities but had become bogged down in their dissertations. Two and four years ago respectively, each came to my three-session series of workshops on Overcoming Writing Anxiety (L. Bloom, “Fear of Writing”) for help in finishing their work. Sarah succeeded, but in the four years since the workshops Ellen has yet to complete a single chapter. I have become friends with both women and converse with or see each separately every other month or so. Each knows that she is the basis for a case history and provides information on which I have taken detailed notes. I have watched each write—or try to write—sitting slightly behind her, out of her line of vision but where her face and the writing on the paper are visible. I’ve timed the various aspects of their writing processes—occasionally interrupting (alas, an artifact of the investigation; see Mishler 5) to ask
what they were thinking about, why they were pausing or doing something else—and have taken elaborate notes on this and on our conversations immediately following the writing sessions. Because these women were trying to write over a period of months or years, it did not seem feasible to try to videotape their writing.

Sarah, graduate student and assistant professor: role conflicts and contextual continuity

Sarah's first two years of her first teaching job were plagued by the conflicts between her role as a graduate student trying to finish a dissertation and her role as an assistant professor of English at a major state university. The demands of her teaching role were so pervasive and all-consuming that they overwhelmed the supports from that same academic context that might have enabled her to finish her dissertation during this time.

Sarah was well-prepared to fulfill both roles. With a bachelor's degree in Classical Studies, and a doctorate in English nearly completed, she had been well-trained in literary analysis. Yet, as is typical of many students, she lacked self-confidence and continually needed to receive external validation of her capability (Tavris & Offir 189) through high grades, instructors' praise, and encouragement to publish. (Indeed, the publication of one chapter of her dissertation helped her to get her first academic job.) This supportive context was ideal for writing.

Sarah's excellent initial appointment validated the extra year she expected to spend writing the last chapter of her dissertation and preparing the entire work for publication. However, her new context, although academic, turned out to be anything but supportive of her writing aims because her professorial role dominated her student role to the point of oblivion. Sarah knew she was expected to excel in teaching, scholarship, and service to the university. Because she was conscientious and perfectionistic about every aspect of her work, she spent a great deal of time in class preparation and fifteen to twenty minutes in grading every student paper.

Sarah also spent a great deal of time on committee work—which she felt obliged to perform—and a half day a week volunteering at the campus Women's Center. So the time she had initially set aside for writing, two days and two evenings a week, was continually eroded. Although she could keep up with the current scholarship on her dissertation topic by reading during the short blocks of time available, Sarah believed, erroneously, that for writing she needed a minimum of four hours of uninterrupted time, which was virtually nonexistent. Consequently, she postponed the actual
writing until vacations, stopped trying to write during the academic year, and measured her progress instead by the stacks of notecards that continued to accumulate.

But when summer came, she took advantage of the opportunity to gain administrative experience, another facet of her professorial role, by directing a program for women returning to school. “It’s only for five weeks,” she rationalized. “I’ll still have the rest of the summer to finish my dissertation, and I need the money.” But by the time she got back to her dissertation, her fine critical eye was slightly out of focus, and to get up sufficient momentum to write she had to reread and rethink the preceding chapters. This led to several weeks of endless tinkering with what she had believed she’d already completed the year before, and all too soon it was time to prepare for the fall semester’s classes.

Sarah spent the first semester of her second professorial year in a manner similar to the first. Procrastination in the name of preparation, either for her own classes or for her last chapter, was no crime, she continually repeated. Moreover, there was far more pressure from her chairman, peers, and students to function fully in her teaching role at the expense of her graduate work. What little counterpressure there was came not by her own instigation but from new members of her dissertation committee who, by long distance, were insisting on a number of fundamental changes in the existing manuscript before she could even get to the unwritten chapter. They, like most such committees, focused entirely on the text, unaware of and indifferent to the context in which the work wasn’t getting done.

However, in January the university exerted pressure on Sarah to finish her dissertation or be fired; this impelled her to seek help in my workshop on Overcoming Writing Anxiety. Together we worked out a plan of action that allowed her to give appropriate emphasis to both student and teacher roles in order to complete the necessary writing.

This meant that Sarah had to change some of the dimensions of her current situation. She had to establish priorities and set goals that could be accomplished within a realistic time schedule. This meant allocating enough time, week by week, month by month, to fulfill her most pressing obligations. So she divided her worktime (including evening and weekend hours) about equally between teaching and dissertation writing, pared down her university committee work, greatly reduced her paper grading time (without loss of meaningful commentary—it can be done), and eliminated activities not directed toward her primary goals of finishing her dissertation and keeping her job.
Sarah's new, realistically demanding schedule provided a far more structured context than she had been working in before. It enabled her to balance her primary roles judiciously and to write about twenty hours per week during the academic year, a great deal more than had her earlier, vaguer schedule of "finish my dissertation by the end of the summer." She had to accomplish definite goals by the end of each week or month—for instance, to revise a chapter, or to write ten pages of the new chapter.

Her emphasis on the ends, on actually finishing the writing, led her to stop spending excessive time pursuing the means, and she stopped investigating materials that exceeded the boundaries of her research. She realized that such protracted reading had become an insidious form of procrastination. Her excessive reading on peripheral topics had also begun to drastically alter the shape of her dissertation as she tried to accommodate all of her diverse notes. Trained from childhood to be deferential to authority, a characteristic more common in women than in men (Maccoby & Jacklin), she had begun to believe she could say nothing as original or as perspicacious as her sources, nor could she write as elegantly.

Sarah was further inhibited at this point by a writing problem that had not appeared until the stakes for finishing her dissertation became so high. She grew perfectionistic, rigidly adhering to an inappropriate rule ("Always perfect each paragraph before you proceed to the next") that made her feel obliged to rewrite small blocks of text incessantly without notable improvement.

Neither perfectionism nor labor in excess of the demands of the task appears to be related to gender (Tavris & Offir, chapter six), nor is writing anxiety so related (Daly). In fact, since from the age of ten or eleven through the high school years, girls outperform boys of the same age on both "lower" and "higher" measures of verbal skill (Maccoby & Jacklin), we might expect girls to be less anxious as writers than boys. We might also expect that this greater confidence—fostered, perhaps, by more writing experience—might carry over into adulthood. But such is not the case. It may be that, because women in general have lower self-confidence than men (Tavris & Offir 189) and are socialized not to be risk-takers, the pressures of writing a dissertation affect them more strongly than men, though this remains to be explored in research.

However, women also appear to be more willing than men to try to reduce the pressures and more socialized toward getting help to do so. Nathanson has found that women are more oriented than men toward both preventing and relieving medical and psychological problems. This
may explain why over twice as many women as men seek help from writing specialists, a ratio comparable to that of clients consulting physicians, social workers, and other professionals for advice on other problems.

With my help, Sarah was able to regain some of her initial confidence in writing and to follow the manageable time schedule we established. Fortunately, her restructured academic context provided large blocks of time for writing and reinforced that writing with the normative expectation that it would not only be accomplished but rewarded. With two others struggling to finish their dissertations, she formed a support group (another type of context), an informal “Dissertations Anonymous.” They met weekly to chart their progress, reinforce their writing goals, and encourage each other.

Sarah finished her dissertation on schedule, earned her Ph.D., and then followed the same schedule to write a related article. By ending her role as a graduate student, Sarah also ended her role conflict, and she learned to let the elements of her academic context that were conducive to writing function to support her writing as a continuing aspect of her academic career.

Ellen: A Study In Contextual Interference

Ellen, thirty-eight, has been a graduate student for nine years and is never likely to finish her dissertation, despite a great deal of good advice on how to do so. She cannot escape the many interferences from the contexts of her marriage, motherhood, and community, all of which interfere with her often postponed plans for extended research and writing.

Ellen, married at nineteen, spent four years as a part-time student while she reared her infant daughter. Divorced at twenty-four, she worked for three years as a copy editor. During this time she became a meticulous corrector and reviewer of others’ writing but was sufficiently inhibited by this process to avoid writing on her own.

Ellen married again at twenty-eight and started graduate work as a part-time doctoral student in philosophy, while Stan, her husband, began an assistant professorship in history. It was hard to write papers in her existing physical context—an apartment with no space to leave her materials out between writing sessions, no “room of one’s own.” As a hypercritical former editor, Ellen was left with a mental set that made it difficult to write and to evaluate her own work. Her marital context exacerbated these difficulties because both Ellen and Stan felt that, since Stan was the family breadwinner, his requirements for research and writing took priority over Ellen’s.

Their family pattern called for Ellen to do nearly all the housework and to care for their two young children herself, generally unrelieved by Stan or
a sitter. When the children were awake, they dominated the apartment and eliminated both the temporal and physical contexts conducive to writing. Ellen, temperamentally most alert in the morning, had no choice but to do most of her reading and writing at night after the children were in bed, when she was tired. Her family situation and her academic situation continually impinged on each other. Ellen's course work was prolonged over six years to accommodate her domestic situation. Nevertheless, the academic context provided some necessary supports: fixed deadlines for papers, easily accessible library facilities, professors and peers with whom she could discuss her work. She had just passed the qualifying exams when Stan took another job, still untenured because he himself had not finished the book he'd been working on during the entire time.

The move uprooted Ellen from her academic context and eliminated its supports. Her dissertation chairman let Ellen take the initiative in communicating with him. At a distance she was not only out of sight, but out of mind. She knew no one nearby with whom she could discuss her dissertation research. She had to get most of her research materials through interlibrary loan for short periods only, a time-consuming and frustrating process.

She was particularly hampered by the intellectual factor. She didn't know how to do research for a long work or how to write one. Nor did she know how to schedule her research and writing time to finish in an appropriate period. Her advisor never told her how to do it. A prolific writer himself, he simply assumed that all his graduate students knew how, and they didn't want to appear ignorant by asking him. Stan, mired hopelessly in his own work-in-progress, provided a poor model and no constructive advice. So, typical of many novice researchers, Ellen decided to read everything in the general field before focusing more precisely on her topic.

A year later, still reading in an increasingly desultory fashion, she came to my workshop for Overcoming Writing Anxiety. Several other factors became clear from our discussion. Her family situation was a consistent deterrent to her writing, for she continued to assume most of the responsibility for rearing the children and running the household; their needs always took precedence over her own. Her community involvement took second priority, as she performed many services for her neighbors and community organizations. Her emotions and temperament contributed to the setting of these priorities; she enjoyed these purposeful activities and found it far easier to complete those with their specific time limits than to work on her unstructured dissertation reading, which she kept postponing to an unspecified later time. When she did work on her preliminary
research, it became less and less focused because every topic suggested a myriad of others.

My advice to Ellen centered on re-establishing her academic context and on structuring her intellectual and domestic contexts so she could work effectively. She should resume communication with her advisor (whom she’d been avoiding for over a year) to arrive at a clear understanding of the scope, emphasis, methodology, innovativeness, and length of her dissertation. With her advisor’s assistance, Ellen should determine the appropriate resource materials for her first chapter, which she would write in a less-than-perfect draft and send to her advisor for comments before revising. She should feel free to ask him anything at any point, rather than struggling in isolation with problems she couldn’t solve.

Moreover, Ellen and her advisor should also determine a realistic time schedule for writing the first draft of each chapter, for circulating it among her committee members, and for revising her writing. Ellen’s schedule should accommodate the other essential demands on her time, and she should postpone less crucial community and domestic activities until after she had finished her dissertation. She should also try to write regularly when she was most alert—in her case, in the morning.

Yet despite Ellen’s good intentions, this plan (ambitious but realistic) did not work. There were many reasons, some personal, some contextual. Ellen’s temperament undermined her schedule. Without sufficient self-motivation, there was no feasible way for her to remain accountable to either her schedule or her advisor. Although Ellen believed, “I need to finish my dissertation to get out from under my dependency on my advisor,” she actually enjoyed the erratic but increasingly slower pace of her desultory reading and was reluctant to change it. She also enjoyed the activities of her family and community too much to put them aside, even temporarily; and so when she did try to write it was, she said, “only in small stretches,” an inefficient pattern because of the large percentage of warmup time her particular writing process required.

Ellen’s temporal and social contexts combined to contribute to her inertia. Why work so hard, as Stan continued to do, for the dubious rewards of an academic career, when jobs, scarce in any case, were even more difficult to obtain for a beginner with limited geographic mobility? Why work so hard when, at her age, her career span would be relatively short?

Trying to write in the context of her marriage was a particular deterrent because Stan’s difficulties with his own writing had such a negative impact on Ellen’s work as well. Each spouse interpreted the other’s queries about work (“How’s your writing going?”) “as a form of nagging, no matter how
well meant," said Ellen. "We haven't been able to discuss our work with each other in several years. When Stan’s writing is not going well, he thinks of ways to interrupt me, and I can't write either. Or else I feel guilty if my work is going along better than his, and I stop."

To resolve Ellen’s writing problems would require a marriage therapist in addition to a writing specialist, to focus intensively on their family context as the source of some of the difficulties. Perhaps such therapy would stimulate in both partners a greater desire than either member of the couple currently possesses to complete their extended writing projects (see M. Bloom). Alas, in this case carpe diem has seemed preferable to carpe dissertation.

As Ellen's case illustrates, when contexts not conducive to writing interfere with those that are, the conflict may produce little writing—and little desire to do any. Even when writing teachers and researchers understand the scope of the problems, they may not be able to resolve the difficulties of approximately one quarter of the anxious writers who seek help. As Milton’s Satan laments of his own context in Paradise Lost, “Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell.” More psychologically oriented writing therapists (often people with Ph.D.s in English and several months of counseling training) often claim that after several months of therapy their clients feel a great deal more comfortable about writing, but to my knowledge there is no available data on whether or not the clients are actually completing the writing projects that drove them to the counselor in the first place. Yet, as Sarah’s case reveals, by considering intellectual, emotional, temperamental, and other factors, teachers and researchers can often help anxious writers, providing specific solutions adapted to the social and academic contexts in which the difficulties occur.

Case studies, as has been implied throughout the exploration of the histories of Sarah and Ellen, reveal the importance of studying writing processes in the relevant contexts of the writer’s life. Not only are the immediate writing contexts (such as the university and the home) of paramount influence on the performance of the writer; so are the writer’s multiple roles in these contexts, among others, the roles of student, professor, spouse, parent, wage earner. Equally important is the writer’s socialization into these roles, which determines how he or she is likely to perform in a given situation. For instance, the intensity with which the writer pursues the goals of working on and completing a particular writing task in inevitably influenced by his or her involvement in other roles and commitment to other activities perhaps unrelated to writing. When the aims and responsibilities of one role (say, wife, mother, or faculty member) conflict
with another (say, student), the nature of the disequilibrium in its full context has to be understood before the person can be helped.

The dancer, the dance, and the place of performance are inextricably interrelated; they cannot be understood in isolation. Teachers, dissertation advisors, researchers, counselors, friends, or others working with anxious writers need to understand the writing problems as fully as possible in the appropriate contexts in order to provide specific, workable solutions adapted to the writer's temperament and to the performance of multiple roles in multiple contexts. An anxious writer, fully understood in context, can be more readily helped to be less anxious, more productive—to be simply, a writer.

NOTES

1. Mishler's view is reinforced by Janet Emig's theoretical "Inquiry Paradigms and Writing" (1982) and by Carol Berkenkotter's illuminating application of the "methodology of protocol analysis" combined with "the techniques of naturalistic inquiry" in her study of "The Planning Strategies of a Publishing Writer" (1983).

2. It should be noted here that coworkers in business settings may also impede each other's efforts in similar ways. Bosses can make their employees who have to write reports or memos highly anxious by failing to provide clear instructions for what they should do, yet making them do the work over—and over, and over again—when it isn't right. Likewise, a perfectionist colleague who is never satisfied with the penultimate draft may slow down a rapid and capable writer.