

# Working With Faculty Partners to Change Conceptions of Writing Beyond University Walls

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This article argues that writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs are well-positioned to change not only faculty (and student) conceptions around writing within the university, but also to collaborate with disciplinary faculty who have crossed conceptual thresholds about writing and work together with them to advocate for changed conceptions of writing *beyond the university*. Faculty can and do change their conceptions around writing when engaging in WAC programming that is intentionally designed around conceptual and systemic change. Similar methods for change-focused work can also be used beyond the university, and disciplinary faculty can become ambassadors and messengers in our efforts to help change public misconceptions of writing. This article argues for and demonstrates how to take advantage of the methods and heuristics used in WAC programming to reach the larger public through the example of the online Miami Writing Institute, designed around common myths about writing and alternative threshold concepts based in writing research.

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To enroll in the Miami Writing Institute, visit: <https://miamioh.edu/online/professional-education/programs/miami-writing-institute/index.html>.

## Introduction

**M**isunderstandings of writing and rhetoric run deep in society. Rhetoric is often portrayed as false and misleading language, as that of unsavory politicians and what Booth (2004) calls “rhetickery.” “Writing” is understood

in narrow ways as formal, extended prose of the type found in literature courses, and “good writing” is understood as avoiding error and adhering to narrow ideas of correctness corresponding with the current traditional approach to teaching writing in ways that are reductive and can uphold pillars of white supremacy (Young, 2010). Writing can be seen as remedial, and writing instruction has historically been undertaken by the least powerful, least paid, least expert teachers (Connors, 1997/2001). Writing overall is seen as a skill separate from content and thus as easily assessed through timed tests on unknown topics. People often talk about “natural writers” as though writing is something some people are born able to do well and others are not. The consequences of these misunderstandings are profound, both inside and outside institutions of higher learning.

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs have long been concerned with countering these and other misconceptions and their consequences—for both faculty and college students. WAC scholars have long pursued the mission of working with people outside of our own field in order to change ideas and practices around writing, having been founded in response to one of the many literacy “crises” that misunderstood writing and writers and how learning works (Palmquist et al., 2020). The tie between WAC and the many literacy “crises” serves to illustrate the central role that public conceptions (and misconceptions) have played in the WAC movement.

In this article, we argue that WAC programs are well-positioned to change not only faculty (and student) conceptions around writing within the university, but also to collaborate with disciplinary faculty who have crossed conceptual thresholds about writing and work together with them to advocate for changed conceptions of writing *beyond the university*. As our research has demonstrated (Glotfelter, Updike, & Wardle, 2020; Glotfelter et al., 2022), faculty can and do change their conceptions around writing when engaging in WAC programming that is intentionally designed around conceptual and systemic change. The methods for such change-focused work can also be used beyond the university, and disciplinary faculty can become ambassadors in efforts to help change public misconceptions of writing. Essentially, we argue here for and demonstrate how to take advantage of the methods and heuristics used in WAC programming to reach the larger public.

In what follows, we first describe a WAC effort which had as its primary goal to instigate conceptual and then practical change among faculty from across disciplines. We then outline changes that faculty have made as a result of the conceptual shifts they underwent in the program. Next, we describe why and how we came to the realization that we should be using what we had learned from WAC programming to create interventions for the general public beyond the Ivory Tower; further, we share how we realized late in our efforts that we could and should be creating such interventions in collaboration with some of the faculty who have participated in our

WAC program. These faculty, who do not study writing for a living but have come to understand writing differently, have compelling stories to share with the public. We end by suggesting ways that WAC leaders can work together with disciplinary faculty to engage in change-making efforts around writing beyond the university.

### **Conceptual Change and Changed Practices Around Writing**

Many of the problematic practices with and around writing stem from deeply-held (and often unconscious) misconceptions about writing and writers—for example, when people are hesitant to write because they think they are “bad writers,” or when colleges use timed writing tests as a judge of a student’s overall writing ability because they believe a “good writer” can perform quickly and on demand. The ideas people carry with them about writing come from what others say to them, what teachers have assigned them, and what they read in books or see in movies. Prior knowledge, as research on learning and transfer indicate, is deeply pervasive; prior knowledge can “help or hinder student learning” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 4) as well as inform practices in new contexts (Lobato, 2006; Rounsaville, 2012). Our conceptions of writing arise from a lifetime of absorbing such ideas, mostly unconsciously. All around us are ideas about writing that are not only wrong, but which, when enacted, can be limiting, painful, and even harmful. Unfortunately, such ideas and conceptions are often already internalized as people interact with the world and the various types of writing within it.

Rhetoric and writing scholars have amassed extended bodies of research, theory, and experience that contradict many commonly-held beliefs about writing (student-directed texts that describe such work include Ball and Loewe’s *Bad Ideas About Writing* and Wardle and Downs’ *Writing About Writing*). Much of what we have learned has become so normalized to us that we rarely explicitly state it. For example, writing scholars would be unlikely to begin an article by first needing to argue that revision is a useful part of writing or that writers benefit from feedback; no one in our field is likely to disagree with such assumptions. Writing scholars have simply absorbed or accepted many of these research-based findings, and we draw on them in our thinking, research, and teaching. They are our “ways of thinking and practicing,” or what Erik Meyer and Ray Land (2003) would call our field’s “threshold concepts.” However, many of the ideas about writing that we accept as obvious are novel to those who do *not* think explicitly about how writing works, except to feel the many emotions that accompany common misconceptions about writing, such as guilt (“I should write better”), shame (“I don’t write in the ways my teachers expect”), anxiety (“I have to write an email to my boss but I’m so worried about making a mistake”), or anger (“Why did that teacher tell me I was a ‘bad writer’ or ‘slow reader?’”).

As rhetoric and writing scholars, we often struggle with the contradiction that our field knows so much about writing that would alleviate these sorts of problems, yet the general public struggles to see or value what we know. While *we* know that rhetoric is not merely trickery and that writing is difficult for everyone, is not natural, and is capacious to the point that all writers have more to learn (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015), public misconceptions about these matters are still quite common. As a field, we have struggled to take our research and work outward to the public in accessible, meaningful ways that would create a change in conceptions about rhetoric and writing.

There is another article to be written about the efforts our field has made in this regard (and when such efforts succeeded or failed, or succeeded but then died out), but here we want to focus on a different part of the challenge: that changing people's ideas (conceptions) is a lot harder than just changing one practice, policy, or rule. Part of the reason why public misconceptions of writing prevail is because members of the general public have not undergone significant conceptual change, even if they might have changed a few practices or policies as a result of schooling or other writing studies-related efforts. Conceptual change is a central part of what scholar Adrianna Kezar (2018) calls deep change, which is distinct from first-order change that does not necessarily require conceptual shifts. First-order change involves "minor improvements or adjustments" while second-order change requires addressing "underlying values, assumptions, structures, processes and cultures" in order to occur (p. 71). Research on deep change suggests that when deeply-held beliefs result in problematic practices (as they do with writing), meaningful changes in practice can't happen without conceptual changes as well. In other words, if we want people to do different things with and around writing, we have to help them change their minds about writing. Conceptual change can be very troublesome (Perkins, 2008), because it requires people to reconceive something they think they know, and which likely serves them in some way (or is at least comfortable or familiar for them). Asking people to change their ideas is asking them to transform "long-held views that help [them] make sense of the world" (Paz, 2019, p. 11). This type of change can be quite difficult, but when it happens, people behave differently and make changes in practices, habits, policies, and pedagogies—with wide-ranging impact.

The WAC movement has, arguably, always been about making change (Glotfelter et al., 2022) and is a site where writing scholars tend to slow down and explain the threshold concepts about writing and writers that they would generally gloss over when speaking to other writing scholars. WAC leaders know that even seemingly basic ideas like "writing is social" or "writing is hard for everyone and must be learned in context" need to be explicitly considered by faculty from other disciplines if they are to adapt their teaching practices in response. WAC leaders also recognize that

simply telling other faculty these things does not produce changed teaching. Rather, faculty must engage the ideas, consider how they work in their own lives, compare what they are learning to what they do in their teaching, and then reconsider their teaching practices. This is, in effect, what it means to work with threshold concepts about writing. Since threshold concepts are not simply things people know but also what they do with that knowledge, they are “ways of thinking and practicing” (Meyer & Land, 2003).

Thus, whether or not WAC leaders use terms like “conceptual change” or “threshold concepts,” we all know from our daily work with faculty that there are ideas faculty have about writing that can obstruct good teaching, and that if faculty can shift their ideas, then they can teach about writing and with writing more effectively. When WAC programs are very successful, this work extends beyond a few teachers and classrooms, and begins to permeate campus culture in meaningful ways. When that occurs, a campus has engaged in the sort of deep change that Kezar (2018) describes. We know this sort of campus-wide deep change is challenging to enact, but there are many examples that illustrate that deep conceptual change around writing and teaching writing is possible. In the next section, we share an example of one WAC program that was designed to effect such conceptual change, and how it impacted faculty practices with writing both in and beyond the university.

## **WAC Programming for Deep Conceptual Change at Miami University**

In 2017, Miami University’s WAC program began pursuing programming that would help faculty engage in deep conceptual changes around writing. Drawing on research from change theory (Kezar, 2018), learning theory (Ambrose et al., 2010; Bean & Melzer, 2021), and the threshold concept framework (Meyer & Land, 2003), we designed a program called Faculty Writing Fellows (hereafter, Fellows) that enrolls teams of faculty from multiple disciplines to engage in sustained work over a semester. As we explain elsewhere<sup>1</sup> (Glottfelter et al., 2020; Glottfelter et al., 2022; Wardle, 2019), Fellows is designed around the following principles:

- “*Teams of people from the same program or department* must participate, so there are enough people undergoing conceptual change at the same time to shift the culture of their programs and departments . . .

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1. These publications explain in more detail the design, facilitation, and impact of the Fellows program, and explains the compensation for Fellows’ time. For the purposes of this article, we just briefly describe the program with the emphasis that its goal is to change *conceptions* of writing as that leads to some of the meaningful change efforts with disciplinary faculty that we profile in the remainder of this article.

- These teams *have the opportunity to also engage with teams from other programs and departments*. These cross-disciplinary interactions provide a helpful means for those with shared conceptions and values to compare their ideas with others who understand teaching, learning, and writing differently . . .
- The program *takes place across time, with plenty of opportunity for participants to read, think, talk, and apply ideas*. One-time workshops are unlikely to provide the necessary time for participants to reflect deeply, imagine new ways of thinking, and change their conceptions. . . .
- The program provides participants with *theoretical frameworks for thinking about their ideas and practices and with the opportunity to engage with scholarship around teaching and learning*. The roots of the very first WAC seminars with Elaine Maimon and Harriet Sheridan were guided by this approach . . .” (Glotfelter et al., 2020; Glotfelter et al., 2022; Wardle, 2019, p. 9).

As a semester-long program, Fellows asks faculty to engage in the sort of embodied reflection and application we described earlier: considering how writing works in their own lives, reflecting on their changing ideas about writing, and then imagining what their changing conceptions might mean for their classroom practices.

For example, when we introduce faculty to threshold concepts of rhetoric and writing early in the program, we ask them to analyze different genres of writing they use in their daily personal and professional lives to help them see and understand writing as not just (or only) a skill but as something that gets things done. They see that they write grocery lists so that they can remember what to buy from the grocery store; they see how they write grant proposals so that they can apply for money to fund research. Through guided activities that call for faculty to write things together in a Google document, discuss in small groups, and then discuss again in the whole group, we help them conceptualize writing and the ways it can be taught in their courses, recognizing that they have invaluable expertise in writing in their specific disciplines and that there are certainly disciplinary ways of reading and writing. Faculty come to understand that learning to write is challenging for everyone, and that writing with and for others is an important part of becoming an effective writer in context. (For more on how the program works, see Glotfelter et al., 2020; Glotfelter et al., 2022; Wardle, 2019. For working methods that informed this program and a similar one at the University of California Santa Barbara, see Adler-Kassner and Wardle, *Writing Expertise: A Research-Based Approach to Writing and Learning Across Disciplines*, 2022).

The Fellows program is only the first stage of change-making, since change efforts take time and require Fellows to collaborate with other faculty members in their

departments. Such collaboration can lead to sensemaking, which is an organizational strategy in change theory scholarship that involves individuals “attach[ing] new meaning to familiar concepts and ideas” (Kezar, 2018, p. 87). That is, while Fellows have undergone conceptual transformations around ideas and conceptions of writing and how it could and should be taught, they must then help their colleagues embark on such work. Fellows have had varied success in doing so, given institutional constraints (see Martin & Wardle, 2022 for more in-depth discussions of faculty change, sensemaking, and barriers to changemaking).

Overall, our WAC programming—including Fellows—has a strong focus on deep, system-level change, where we work with faculty to consider what writing is, to understand rhetorical concepts such as genre, and how to teach writing beyond just one course. The goal of such programming is to empower faculty to make changes to their practices on their own and in ways that make sense for their disciplines. There’s a lot to be said about the role of disciplinary faculty expertise, but here, our point is that faculty bring valuable disciplinary expertise with them into WAC programming and after leaving our programming, they can spread the good news of writing threshold concepts to other audiences—including, as we will discuss later, to those outside of university contexts.

## Changing Conceptions Leading to Changed Practices: Examples

We and many of the Fellows have published extensively about the change efforts of this particular program (see Glotfelter et al., 2020; Glotfelter et al., 2022; Wardle, 2019; [Miami Writing Spotlights](#); Olejnik, 2022). In this section we briefly outline a few of the areas where WAC Fellows programming has impacted faculty in order to demonstrate how changed conceptions can and do lead to changed practices. As we will argue later in this article, faculty whose conceptions of writing change and who enact research-based best practices from writing and rhetoric can become important ambassadors for not only WAC programming but writing instruction overall. Many of the faculty we have worked with take writing seriously as their own charge to teach in their disciplines and have done phenomenal work on their own (or with sideline support from us).

As we outline in more detail in *Changing Conceptions, Changing Practices* (Glotfelter et al., 2022), the IRB-approved studies we have conducted of Fellows demonstrate that “(1) individual conceptions of writing do change (often quite dramatically) to align more with conceptions of writing from the field of writing studies as a result of the program, (2) faculty subsequently demonstrate mindfully changed practices informed by their new conceptions, and (3) participants often seek changes at the program/department level...” (p. 7). In a survey of Fellows alumni, we found that “92 percent noticed changes in the way they think and talk about writing” (p.

7), and ninety-six percent said “they had changed their courses in ways they thought were related to their work as Fellows” (p. 10). The changes include expanded understandings of what writing is, a direct interest in teaching research-based approaches to writing in their courses, a recognition of the ways that writing is context specific and bound up with disciplinary identities, and an enhanced understanding of the processes writers undertake in order to write in context-appropriate ways.

### *Expanded Understandings of Writing and Research-Informed Teaching of Writing*

Many faculty who have participated in Fellows leave with a broader and more inclusive definition of what “counts” as writing. A team from economics, for example, understands writing as more than just alphabetic text—writing in economics can include charts and graphs and other visual elements (Martin, 2020). Related to this revelation, the team underwent a shift in what writing can look like in an economics classroom. As they explain:

...our definition of writing when we started the Fellows Program was akin to a typical paper published in an academic journal. However, this view of writing, possibly entrenched in our mind since graduate school, was too restrictive both from a pedagogical standpoint and from the standpoint of meeting a mandate. By limiting our understanding of writing to papers of a certain length, we might have undervalued writing as an important way of learning economics, especially in large sections. (Kinghorn & Shao, 2022, p. 66)

As faculty come to understand what they do as writing and thus to recognize writing as something they can and want to teach, they seek out scholarship and teaching materials to help them do so. Two gerontologists, for instance, describe their use of writing studies scholarship in their own teaching, as they help their students rhetorically analyze the new genres they are being asked to write (Kinney & de Medeiros, 2022).

### *Writing Is Context-Specific and Bound Up with Identity*

Many of the Fellows came to recognize that their disciplines use writing in quite particular ways that students must be taught explicitly. The economists, for example, note they “had been teaching introductory economics for many years and were familiar with the phrase ‘think like an economist,’ found in almost every beginning economics textbook. Yet...only a small fraction of our students would somehow ‘get’ it, while for many students it would remain a lofty goal.” They discovered that writing is fundamental to thinking like an economist but that students must be taught to “write like an economist” (Kinghorn and Shao, 2022, p. 67).



The philosophers struggled to make their expectations of and practices with writing explicit, noting that “philosophy operates foremost at a conceptual—not only at an empirical—level, pursuing conceptual clarity, evaluating the adequacy of concepts, modifying concepts, and creating concepts...For virtually all new students to philosophy, the idea of investigating a topic without a clear link to the empirical can derail their progress from the start...” As a result of their work in Fellows, they write that they “now explicitly return to this distinction throughout the semester, particularly when giving and explaining our writing assignments” (Fennen et al., 2022, pp. 81-2).

### *Learning to Write in Context Is a Process that Takes Time and Instruction*

The gerontologists came to recognize that the “gerontological voice” they wanted their students to use took extensive time, instruction, and practice to master. They write that they developed “assignments in our introductory and advanced graduate-level theory courses...to socialize students to the discipline...[and] exercise their gerontological voice” (Kinney & de Medeiros, 2022, p. 107). They also developed a doctoral course to, among other things, “(1) make the process of writing in social gerontology explicit [and] (2) give each student the opportunity to develop good writing habits...” (p. 109). They also drew on rhetoric and writing studies scholarship to teach writing and research as “conversational inquiry” in order to help their students explore “the open question, What does it mean to write like a social gerontologist?” ; to teach rhetorical reading ; and to engage in genre analysis (p. 109).

The psychology team found that what writing studies scholarship had to share about the writing process dovetailed nicely with psychology research on learning and cognition, leading them to rethink how and why they invite their students to engage with writing. They describe the ways that “the threshold concepts that ‘writing is a... social activity’ (Roozen, 2015) as well as a ‘cognitive activity’ (Dryer, 2015) and that ‘all writers have more to learn’ (Rose, 2015) resonated” with them and helped them identify places where their “current methods of teaching were unsatisfactory” (Hall et al., 2022, p. 117). They explain that they had previously focused “on mechanics and essentially [neglected] idea development (thinking) and orientations to the conversations happening in the discipline” (p. 117). In rethinking their teaching practices, they focused on the team “term paper” they assigned and reflected on how professional psychologists engage in writing about research. They found that “although one goal of major-specific curriculum is to prepare students to engage in professional writing in that particular discipline through writing that approximates professional activities (Brown, et al., 1989), students are often held to a more solitary and linear process than professionals in the field actually engage in” (p. 118). They then designed a carefully scaffolded team research project and innovated assessment using what they came to call “state-of-the-draft rubrics” (p. 137).

Faculty Fellows have undergone many more conceptual shifts leading to innovative pedagogical changes, but we trust this short summary serves to illustrate what those changes can look like.

## Focusing on Changed Conceptions Beyond the Academy

As the last section illustrates, the efforts of Miami University's WAC program—particularly, Fellows—to successfully engage faculty in changed conceptions and innovative changed practices around rhetoric and writing was a successful experiment. We had theorized that teams working in and across disciplines for extended time would want to engage in the work of examining ideas about writing, and they did. We had theorized that if people changed their ideas, they would also change their practices with writing, and they did.

Yet, we were troubled by the fact that public misconceptions of writing remained rampant, and that our work alongside academics with a goal of influencing their teaching, would only do so much to combat this problem. We began to wonder if it would be possible to draw on what we had learned from working with faculty in order to reach people and change conceptions of writing beyond university walls. In the spring of 2021 during the height of the COVID pandemic, the Miami University president approached the Director of the Howe Center for Writing Excellence and asked us to design an free, online writing institute for university alumni, which would later be opened up to anyone. This invitation provided us with the opportunity to apply what we had learned and adapt it to a new medium that could reach many more people beyond our previous focus on training for teachers.

We spent seven months designing a free, interactive, Miami Writing Institute around four common “myths” about writing. These myths were designed around some of the big ideas and concepts that seemed transformative for faculty; our aim was to imagine new ways to help people who are not teachers change their thinking about writing. It was only when we reached the final myth that we came to the realization that, while there was a lot we could do as WAC leaders and writing scholars to help change hearts and minds, we were missing a golden opportunity to draw in the stories and experiences of WAC Fellows alumni as ambassadors of writing<sup>2</sup>.

Next, we briefly describe how the Miami Writing Institute disciplinary faculty members can engage in change-making efforts around writing beyond the university. We then highlight Myth 4: “Some People Are Just Born Good Writers, and Writing is a Solitary Activity,” with a focus on how one Fellows alumni and her graduate student came to play a central role in debunking this myth after having crossed important conceptual threshold themselves.

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2. In another in-process article, we discuss in detail how we made decisions about content, including how insights from usability testing led us to pay attention to inclusive representation.

*The Miami Writing Institute: Overall Structure*

We designed the Miami Writing Institute to be an open-access, self-paced, asynchronous course framed around research-based ideas about writing and rhetoric. As we have noted, it was designed explicitly to try to shift conceptions about what writing is and does. Rooted in threshold concepts of writing, it attempts to counter four common myths (or misconceptions) about writing and rhetoric, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The myths of the Miami Writing Institute along with the correlating threshold concepts around writing.

<p>Myth 1: Writing Is Just Words and Rhetoric is Empty Speech</p>	<p>Writing is more than formal, long-form, alphabetic text. It encompasses many genres.</p> <p>Writing in general is impossible—all writing has one or more purposes directed at particular audiences.</p> <p>Rhetoric is not empty words but a way of thinking about how to communicate persuasively and effectively.</p>
<p>Myth 2: Good Writing Is Just Good Writing</p>	<p>Good writing takes audiences, purposes, conventions, and contexts into account. It communicates effectively and enables readers to act but may break from expected forms and conventions when necessary.</p> <p>Good writing is also ethical writing that does not use features of objective and correct language to hide questionable or unethical purposes.</p>
<p>Myth 3: Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Words Will Never Hurt Me</p>	<p>Words create action in a number of ways, including through rhetorical appeals and genres.</p> <p>When words create action through genres, they also often form genre sets, which can, in turn, form genre systems.</p> <p>No matter how words do things in the world, we can understand their work as mediating activity.</p>
<p>Myth 4: Writing is Solitary and Some People are Just Born Good Writers</p>	<p>Writing is not the work of a solitary genius. Instead, writing is inherently social.</p> <p>Writers often write in and for discourse communities that include specialized goals, genres, mechanisms for communication, members, and lexis.</p> <p>No one is born inherently gifted (or not gifted) at writing. Writing is a process and all writers have more to learn.</p>

Through interactive units, participants consider their own conceptions of writing and writing practices. In developing the content, we collected materials from alumni who had experienced writing as social and mediational in their coursework, working professionals who could provide examples of everyday texts and how they mediate work in their fields. We also drew on existing published cases and public materials about events where writing had played a key role in shaping action and understanding. Throughout, participants are asked to reflect on what they learn throughout the Institute in order to challenge their conceptions of writing.

The goal is for participants to see for themselves how writing works and then consider the implications of that knowledge in their own personal and professional lives through scaffolded reflection. For example, in Myth 2, learners are invited to rethink what “good writing” is. They first consider everyday genres they are all likely to have written: grocery lists, text, messages, and work emails. They are asked to consider what makes each of these forms of writing “good,” and then to reflect on the implications for their definition of “good writing.” Later in the unit, they look at three workplace genres (a work order, software code documentation, and a blog post), which are introduced and analyzed orally by the workers who use them (a production manager at a conveyor belt company, a software developer at a Department of Defense contractor, and a psychology professor / Fellows alumni). The workplace writers explain the genres and finally describe what makes them effective. Then, again, the participants in the course are asked to rethink their ideas about writing in light of what they learned. Finally, they spend extended time reading and exploring a case study, including several memos written before the Challenger explosion. By the end of the case, participants are asked to rethink once more their views on what makes writing “good,” and are presented with a “more accurate conception of good writing” and a set of “rhetorical actions” they can take, drawing on this new conception.

The units include visual, oral, and textual examples and a variety of interactive elements to walk participants through new learning thresholds about writing. In Myths 2 and 3, we drew on published research to form the basis for the case studies. By Myth 4, however (which we designed last), we finally came to the realization that we were missing an opportunity to draw on the experiences of some of the Fellows alumni. As a result, we turned to a Fellows alumni and frequent participant in our other WAC programming to see if she would be willing to share some of what she had learned and applied about writing. Next in this article, we describe how Myth 4 works and the compelling message Dr. Kinney and her former graduate student, Leah, were able to share.

## *Debunking the Myth That Some People are Just Born Good Writers and Writing is a Solitary Activity*

Myth 2, as we mentioned, takes on the common misconceptions that some people are just born good writers and others are not, and that writing is something you must do (and suffer with) alone. As we also demonstrated earlier, these are regular topics of discussion in our WAC Fellows Program as well, drawing from threshold concepts of writing. Believing that some students just “aren’t cut out” for their fields or their preferred forms of writing, faculty members can come into our WAC programming facing these and other misconceptions, when, as we know, research demonstrates how anyone can learn to write in specific ways with practice, well-timed feedback, and the opportunity to for revision (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Bean & Melzer, 2021).

In Myth 2, we introduce the two parts of this myth in turn, noting how commonly they show up in daily life (Figure 1). After naming each myth, we provide counter illustrations from everyday life to demonstrate why these are misconceptions—and harmful ones at that (Figure 2).

### **Part 2: Introduction to Myth 4 – Some People are Just Born Good Writers and Others Aren't**



Figure 1: Crumpled up paper in a trashcan

People commonly talk about how someone they know is “just a natural born writer” or they say things like “I am not a good writer because writing is hard and I have to revise a lot.”

## Part 5: The Myth – Writing is Solitary

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Figure 5: A woman sits alone at a writing desk.

So far in this myth, we have demonstrated that no one is born a good writer. Writers must learn to write and revise; they must fail and try again. Now we want to talk about the second part of the myth, that writing is solitary.

Many common images of writers show them writing alone, having brilliant ideas by themselves.

Students are often admonished never to work with anyone else or they will be considered cheaters or plagiarists.

"Real" writers are always "original."

Figure 1: Introduction to the misconceptions in Myth 2. [Alt-text for figure 1: Two screenshots from the Miami Writing Institute. The first image has the title "Part 2: Introduction to Myth 4—Some People are Just Born Good Writers and Others Aren't" and includes a picture of crumpled up paper balls in and around a wire trashcan. The second image has the title "Part 5: The Myth—Writing is Solitary" with an illustration of a woman sitting at a writing desk with her head in her hand.]

# Some Counterexamples

Stories about how famous writers encounter failure and writer's block, how writing is difficult even for distinguished or recognized writers and professionals, or about how they needed others in order to improve or make progress. For example:



**Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor**, author of several books, has talked frequently about the challenges she has faced as a writer: "Writing remains a challenge for me even today—every thing I write goes through multiple drafts—I am not a natural"



We have already begun to dismantle this myth implicitly in this Institute. In Myth 3, we illustrated that writing gets things done. It **mediates activity** through **genre sets** and **systems** and by using various **rhetorical appeals** (Figures 6, 7, 8). What we implied there, but did not directly state, is that writing is inherently **social**.



Figure 6: Genre Set infographic

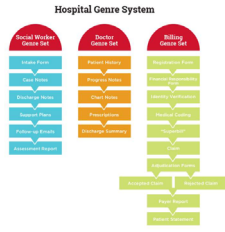


Figure 7: Hospital Genre System infographic



Figure 8: Logos, Ethos, Pathos infographic

Writers use writing to persuade, inform, praise, blame, deliberate, and remember. Even when writers are alone, writing only for themselves, they are drawing on ideas of others and prior experiences. So even at its most isolated, writing is still always inherently social.

Figure 2: Counterexamples [alt-text for figure 2: Screenshots from the Miami Writing institute. The first image has the title “Some Counterexamples” with a picture of Billie Eilish holding a microphone, text about Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor noting “writing

remains a challenge,” and a picture of Anne Enright looking at the camera. The second image includes text about genre systems and explains how writing mediates activity. There are three colorful infographics that include a genre set of a purchase order, a hospital genre system, and an infographic of logos, ethos, and pathos.]

Asking participants to explore how writing works in social ways in their own daily lives, we introduce the idea of the discourse community and provide yet more interactive illustrations.

The heart of Myth 4, however, is the case study: Learning to Write Like a Gerontologist. Here, the Fellows alumni and her former graduate student (who had herself participated in a graduate-student version of Faculty Fellows) share audio, video, and textual examples to illustrate that “writing is social, that learning to write is social, and that all writers can learn and improve by working with others in context to revise and reflect.” All three of these ideas are ones that the Fellows alumni came to understand explicitly during her work with our WAC program, and then to integrate into her teaching. The case is divided into three sections: Dr. Kinney Navigates Writing in a New Field of Gerontology; Dr. Kinney Helps Her Students to Learn to Write as Gerontologists; and Leah Learns to Write as a Gerontologist in School and On the Job.

In the first section, Dr. Kinney begins by explaining her own challenges learning to write as a graduate student in psychology and then moving to an adjacent and new field as a professor, where the written conventions and expectations are different (Figure 3). Her focus in sharing this story is on the difficulty of writing and the need for all writers to ask for help and feedback from others (a threshold concept of writing studies):

I think part of the struggle is accepting (and embracing) the idea that writing is a process... And, even when you are good at it—maybe especially when you are good at it—it takes a lot of time. Writing is also a habit; it takes a lot of practice to get better at it. A third struggle is that a lot of us have a hard time asking for help. But when you ask for help with writing, and give help to others, writing becomes a community effort. And communities can accomplish more than individuals.



Learning to write as a gerontologist is hard, but it is hard for the same reasons that learning to write in any new discourse community is hard.

Dr. Kinney says, "I think part of the struggle is accepting (and embracing) the idea that **writing is a process**... And, even when you are good at it—maybe *especially* when you are good at it—it takes a lot of time. **Writing is also a habit**; it takes a lot of practice to get better at it. A third struggle is that a lot of us have a hard time asking for help. But when you ask for help with writing, and give help to others, **writing becomes a community effort**. And communities can accomplish more than individuals."

"...a lot of us **have a hard time asking for help**. But when you ask for help with writing, and give help to others, **writing becomes a community effort**. And **communities can accomplish more than individuals**."

Figure 3: Former Fellows participant Jennifer Kinney explains her struggle to write in Myth 4. [alt-text for figure 3: A screenshot of the Miami Writing Institute with a comment from Dr. Kinney about the struggle of learning how to write. There is a large orange square with a pull quote from Dr. Kinney: "...a lot of us have a hard time asking for help. But when you ask for help with writing, and give help to others, writing becomes a community effort. And communities can accomplish more than individuals."]

In the next section, she outlines in a video interview why and how she began changing her teaching to help students recognize and do what she had done to embrace the challenges that all writers face (Figure 4):

"If you think you are the only one who struggles with writing and/or thinks you aren't a good writer, but you don't talk about this, **it becomes a secret. Secrets have power and can become self-fulfilling prophecies.**"

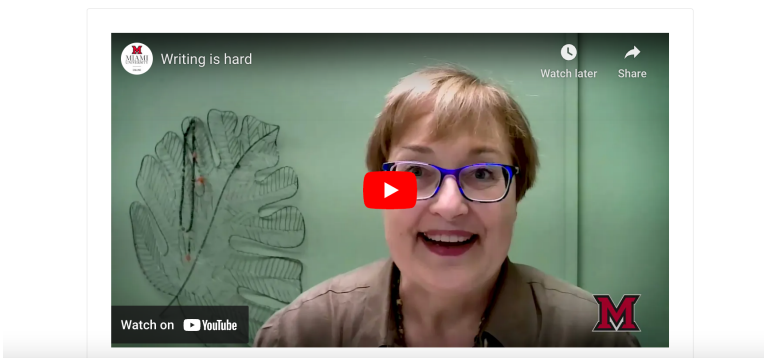


Figure 4: Dr. Kinney explains how she helps her gerontology students learn to write. [alt-text for figure 4: A screenshot from the Miami Writing Institute. At the top is a quote of black text in a sage green box: "If you think you are the only one who struggles with writing and/or thinks you aren't a good writer, but you don't talk about this, it becomes a secret. Secrets have power and can become self-fulfilling prophecies." Below the quote is a YouTube video with Dr. Kinney looking at the camera.]

Myth 4 demonstrates the various threshold concepts that Dr. Kinney enacts in her teaching: the importance of giving and getting feedback, writing in community, and recognizing that writing is hard even for the most accomplished writer and writing is not "one and done" (See Figure 5).

Models how writing is a process; tells students that writing is “not one-and-done” (i.e., written instructor feedback each step, two meetings with instructor early in the project, feedback from other people later in the process).

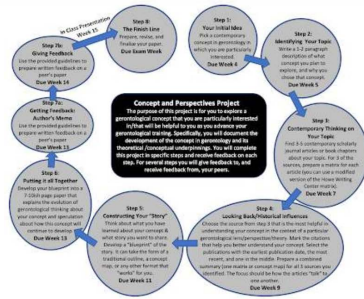


Figure 26: Concept and Perspectives Project process plan

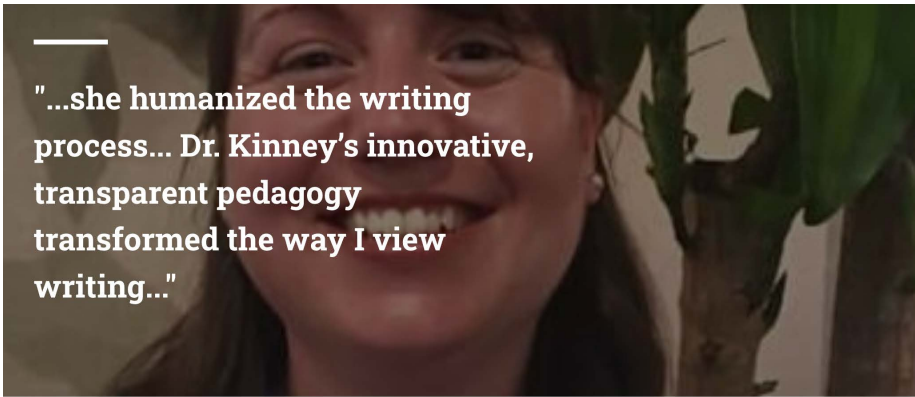


Figure 27: Gerontology faculty and students talking

Invites other faculty to talk to students about how they write and what their struggles with writing are.

Figure 5: Dr. Kinney’s reimagined pedagogy for writing as a gerontologist. [Alt-text in figure 5: A screenshot of the Miami Writing Institute that has an infographic of the writing process model demonstrating how Dr. Kinney’s concept and perspectives project is a process of steps. And a picture of Dr. Kinney with four graduate students sitting around a table talking.]

Then in Myth 4 her students share how they, too, internalized what Jennifer taught them about writing (Figure 6):



Another student, Valerie Kessler, wrote: "...as an undergraduate student... I was never taught, at any point, that writing is a process. I have been a graduate student of Dr. Kinney for three years now and she has taught me more about writing over the last couple years than I feel I have ever learned... Dr. Kinney... gave us a space to talk about the ups and downs that can come with writing... We talked through the procrastination that can come with writing, how fear is a player in why it exists, and how creating a community of writers can help to combat fear and encourage growth in our writing. Because of her I have learned that **writing is a process that takes time and care**, that writing is thinking, that what I have to say matters, and that writing is a truly powerful form of communication."

Figure 6: Valerie explains how Dr. Kinney's approach to writing transformed her own ideas about writing. [alt-text in figure 6: A picture of a graduate student named Valerie Kessler standing in front of a plant looking at the camera with the following quote on top of the picture: "...she humanized the writing process...Dr. Kinney's innovative, transparent pedagogy transformed the way I view writing..." There is also a block of text beneath that includes the pull quote.]

Throughout this myth, Dr. Kinney and her students share healthier conceptions of writing that they have learned to enact across time. The messages and examples are coming from people who do not study writing and who might not immediately be thought of by others as "writers." The message is especially powerful because of this, with the video excerpts providing a personalized delivery of her message in ways participants of the Institute have noted as being effective and sticking with them.

There is another article to be written about the impact of the Institute on the participants who have completed it. For now, we note that many participants point to Myth 4 as particularly powerful. For example, when asked what content impacted them the most, participants wrote:

- The final unit/Myth on the importance of a discourse community was the most encouraging since it reminded me that I should never assume that I must be 100% original in my writing and that I should not shy away from seeking assistance from others.
- That good writers are born, not made. I think this is a myth that I often believed as I have grown as a writer. Busting this myth is valuable...
- Myth 4 was the most impactful. I was under the impression that some people are naturally good writers, they do not need drafts, they do not need to rewrite their work, writing is easy for them. But I learned from the presentations that writing like any skill has to be developed and developed very intentionally.
- Myth 4; I've always bought into the idea that successful writers are "naturally gifted," and that they are a lone wolf. I still think some people have a little gifting in this area, but I love turning that idea on its head that anyone can write, and learn to write better. I'm encouraged that writing is also a process that works best in community with feedback.
- Myth 4 impacted me most. It really got me thinking about how I viewed myself (and others) in terms of natural writing ability. I felt that I was a fair writer, but an amazing editor; that I wasn't naturally talented enough to actually write. I am hoping to build up some confidence in myself as a writer.

When asked what, if anything, they might do differently as a result of what they learned from the Institute, they wrote:

- Try to find a community to work with on a regular basis not just within my lexicon of people—a broader perspective would be good. Think about my audience more.
- Search out discourse communities for writing that I have been doing independently. I need to make my fiction writing collaborative and in conversation with people and texts and not keep searching for inspiration or my own genius to show up.
- Stop being so hard on myself with my own writing experiences, and to not be so critical of others' writing.
- I believe that I am going to put myself in situations in which I will seek collaboration and advice. I have been a "solo" writer for too long. I have had to write articles reporting activities in an organization. This would be a perfect opportunity for some collaborative writing.

## Conclusion: WAC Programs and Disciplinary Faculty Working Together for Public Change

The experience of having non-writing scholars who have crossed conceptual thresholds about writing share their new ideas with others was at first eye-opening for us—and then, completely obvious. We recognized that Fellows are not only using what they know about writing to teach more effectively in their courses and programs but that they are also part of professional communities of practice and engaging with multiple publics where they share their changed ideas about writing. In sum, they serve as effective ambassadors for broadly changing public ideas about writing, as they speak to audiences in ways and from communities that differ from those who are experts in rhetoric and writing.

While their work in the Miami Writing Institute was rewarding, it is far from the only way such faculty are impacting public conceptions of writing. Disciplinary faculty can make meaningful contributions toward changing public conceptions of writing without contributing to a time, labor, and resource-intensive institute like the Miami Writing Institute. Faculty Fellows have taken what they've learned into their public-facing contexts in other ways as well. For example, the gerontology faculty conduct scholarship on aging through a research center on campus that reaches not only other academics but trained professionals to also serve older people in sites such as care homes and senior centers. The gerontology faculty members' changed understanding of writing impacts other scholars, working professionals, and the older people with whom they all work. As another example, there have been several teams of Faculty Fellows from teacher education, including a group who works in a partnership with communities of color in a nearby large city. The teacher education faculty seek to influence every future teacher to understand and value writing as an invaluable tool for learning—and as a tool for social justice with the communities where their students live. In yet another example, a Fellow from psychology recognized that using writing to convey science to the public, including children, was an important step for scientists to take. She drew on what she had learned in Fellows to pair her graduate students with a local elementary school who served as reviewers of science articles written for children. These disciplinary faculty, then, having crossed a variety of learning thresholds about rhetoric and writing, change their conceptions and then their practices and, in turn, engage with people we do not in order to change conceptions of rhetoric and writing far and wide.

WAC leaders can work together with disciplinary faculty to make meaningful change—in the university, as our previously published work and a plethora of other WAC publications can testify, but also beyond the university in sites where rhetoric and writing scholars typically cannot reach. Teacher education faculty work regularly with future teachers who will staff hundreds of classrooms and influence thousands

of student writers. Gerontologists spend time in community and care homes and train staff who can use writing in their work with older people—and to write about how to do that work more effectively. Psychologists share their findings in writing with the public and share ideas about the role of the science writer. (In a similar vein, Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail [2010] have described how former writing center tutors have taken their changed conceptions and practices with them to various contexts after graduation).

When WAC programs influence how faculty across disciplines think about and use writing, those people in turn take changed ideas to their own contexts, both inside and outside the university. When WAC leaders view and utilize disciplinary faculty as collaborative ambassadors of writing, we can find opportunities to overcome some of the barriers we have faced in changing the way members of the public think about and use writing, and view themselves as writers. Where WAC leaders might not have access to thousands of schoolchildren, teacher education faculty do, for instance.

Throughout this article we have sought to demonstrate that WAC programs have an important role to play in helping change public conceptions of and practices around writing and that faculty who have participated in WAC programming are central to expanding the reach of such efforts. Not every WAC program has the time, staff, or resources to develop an online course on the scale that we did, but that is not the only way to partner with disciplinary faculty to reach members of the larger public. Our colleagues across disciplines can be co-change makers with us, and in sites far beyond those we are ever likely to reach as ambassadors of rhetoric and writing.

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