How We Write: Understanding Scholarly Writing through Metaphor

Michelle Boyd, University of Illinois, Chicago

ABSTRACT

This article introduces the writing metaphor and examines why political scientists should consider developing one to describe their own writing process. Drawing on the author’s experience with writing accountability groups, it defines the components of the writing metaphor, provides an example, and discusses its advantages and disadvantages. The article argues that the writing metaphor can clarify scholars’ implicit assumptions about the act of writing and the writing product and reveal unexpected information about their work habits and thinking process. By doing so, the writing metaphor can increase scholars’ productivity and may ultimately enhance their writing experience.

Political scientists who seek assistance negotiating the “publish or perish” directive need not look very far. Not only do many academic success manuals include a general section on writing (Boice 2000; Lucas and Murry 2007; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008; Schoenfeld and Magnan 2004), but scholars can also find a range of resources to help them address their specific writing difficulties. Some of this work is tailored to graduate students struggling to finish their dissertations (Boyle Single 2009; Foss and Waters 2007); other sources help faculty integrate writing into their daily schedule (Murray and Moore 2006). For those who learn best by doing, there are workshops and webinars that provide telephone, online, and face-to-face instruction and support.1 And scholars who need respite from the demands of their everyday professional and personal life can participate in multiday writing retreats.2 Whether the writer is a postdoc in need of direction or a senior scholar seeking inspiration and focus, these resources provide systematic approaches and concrete tactics that are rarely found in graduate training or faculty mentoring programs.

Because scholars are so concerned about their productivity, the literature on academic writing tends to focus on increasing output (Hartley and Branthwaite 1989; Mayrath 2008). As a result, we know a lot about the strategies used by prolific academic writers, including frequent incremental writing, monitoring of writing progress, accountability to external forces, and a system of rewards (Belcher 2009; Boice 1990; Gray 2005; Silva 2007). What we know very little about is how scholars understand and experience the act of writing. “What is this writing, anyway… And how have other people who have done this thing viewed their own activity, and themselves in relation to it?… And what exactly do we mean when we say a writer?” (Atwood 2002, xvii–xviii). These questions, so frequently explored by fiction writers and poets, are rarely broached by academics. The texts that do consider these issues tend to analyze academics’ writing problems rather than their writing experience as a whole.3 Boice (1990), for example, begins his classic text Professors as Writers with a description of the challenges typically faced by scholars who come to him for writing advice, noting that they often feel better about their own problems when they hear about those of other scholars.

While there is great value to realizing that we are not distinguished by our writing problems, there is equal value in expanding our focus beyond our writing woes. Despite the fact that writing is central to both the development and communication of our ideas, it remains the only part of the intellectual process that academics are willing (and sometimes eager) to leave largely unexamined. Scholars who see writing as a trial might have been straining so hard to avoid it that they have little recollection of what the experience of writing (as opposed to not writing) is actually like. Even those who enjoy writing may not understand much about it if they see it as a magical process and wrap it in ritual and mystery. Political scientists, among all the social scientists, try hardest to model themselves after natural scientists, and may feel particularly skittish about exploring the act of writing. But if we are to truly understand this aspect of our scholarship, we must explore the writing process in its entirety.

Developing a metaphor for one’s writing process is a technique that academic writers can use to describe and understand their writing experience as a whole. The concept of the metaphor is concrete, familiar, and simple—so it is especially useful for scholars who might balk at more “touchy-feely” strategies for exploring the writing process. Simply defined, a metaphor is a figure of speech in which one object or process is described in terms of another, so as to suggest a likeness between them. Metaphors are key to building comprehension because they are “the basis for everyday cognition”—in other words, we come to understand
My writing group helped me learn to break my writing into manageable chunks that could be achieved with a daily writing habit. This new approach respected both personal sanity and the new limits on my time.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Stage</th>
<th>Clarity of Argument</th>
<th>Quality of Writing</th>
<th>Suitable for Sharing?</th>
<th>Actions Involved</th>
<th>Time to Finish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conception: the discovery of an idea for a manuscript.</td>
<td>Varies: argument may be complete or nonexistent.</td>
<td>Of any length or quality.</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Quick recording of all ideas in any format: a line, question, paragraph, or abstract.</td>
<td>5 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embryonic Development: in which fundamental parts of the argument are established.</td>
<td>Varies: argument may be complete or nonexistent.</td>
<td>Of generally poor quality.</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Identifying, sketching, outlining the parts of the argument or sections of a paper; deciding the form the article will take.</td>
<td>1–2 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Fetal Development: in which the early ideas and sections of paper continue to grow and are differentiated.</td>
<td>Minimal: argument is stated, but is unclear, contradicted, unelaborated (not carried through text), or unsupported.</td>
<td>Grammar and spelling errors are plentiful; sentence structure is labored and confused; style is clunky and inconsistent.</td>
<td>No: Reading the draft is a burden to others and only to be asked of the closest and most trusted relationships.</td>
<td>Fleshing out the arguments made in each individual section by taking statements to their logical conclusion; providing background and context; offering evidence.</td>
<td>1–4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Fetal Development: in which the most important ideas are identified, elaborated, and eliminated.</td>
<td>Minimal: multiple arguments may not match the data. Subject to revision as author discovers, accepts, and rejects new and old arguments.</td>
<td>Grammar, sentence structure, and style are inconsistent but increasingly polished.</td>
<td>Yes, but only by close colleagues. Reading this draft is easier, but discussing it is more difficult because of author’s confusion about where the work is going.</td>
<td>Weaving between different sections of the paper to examine how the questions raised and arguments made in one section are related to those that are raised and made in other sections of the text.</td>
<td>5–8 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later Development: in which the content and presentation of ideas is refined and the draft is transformed into a manuscript.</td>
<td>The argument is clearly understood by the author and its essential kernel exists through the entire piece.</td>
<td>Grammar, structure, and style are rushed and clunky, but hold the necessary ideas to form a smooth, seamless line of argument.</td>
<td>Yes: Reading draft and discussing it with author helps her make connections and clarify ideas.</td>
<td>Focused revision and elaboration of individual sections and sub-arguments; comparison between different sections to ensure that arguments are clearly articulated, supported, and carried through the document.</td>
<td>5–8 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor: The process through which the completed manuscript is prepared for submission to reviewers.</td>
<td>The argument is clearly articulated, carried throughout the manuscript, and convincingly supported.</td>
<td>Grammar and spelling errors are virtually nonexistent. Sentence structure is elegant. Writing style is melodic and engaging.</td>
<td>The work is a pleasure to read and leaves the reader struggling to find criticisms. Suitable for conference presentation and outside review.</td>
<td>Editing; clarifying submission requirements; gathering/preparing citations; writing cover letters, keywords, abstracts, and acknowledgements; creating relevant titles and headings.</td>
<td>2–4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pressing Send.</td>
<td>1 min.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
never see the light of day. Certainly, I developed answers for why I had failed to meet my writing deadlines in the past. Yet, I also developed insight into how I understand and live out the “life of the mind” that these deadlines are supposedly meant to serve.

For example, my writing metaphor helped me recognize important components of the writing process to which I had previously paid little attention. In thinking through the “labor” process, for example, I realized that I never allotted sufficient time to complete the nagging, time-consuming details required to polish a piece and prepare it for formal submission. Because of the way I write, this process includes fact-checking work such as searching my files for cited texts, rereading the text and my notes to ensure that I have accurately captured the argument, and typing out the entire citation. It also involves important tasks related to self-presentation like searching for journal submission requirements, reformatting or revising my document to meet those requirements, and copyediting. Perhaps most daunting is the substantive work of titling the paper and its sections with interesting and accurate keywords, writing a concise and engaging abstract, and composing a cover letter that properly contextualizes the work (or, in the case of resubmission, explains how the revision has addressed the competing concerns of multiple reviewers). It is unlikely that I need to explain to readers how significant these tasks are. It is enough to say that it does not pay to give them short shrift.

But when I began observing and thinking about this pattern (rather than just enduring it), I began to see that what looked like mere confusion was actually the route I take to clarity.

Yet, I was always surprised by the amount of time that these tasks took. I tended to think of this as “nonthinking” work that I could easily complete in an hour or two, maybe three. Even though every writing project included these time-consuming steps, I never acknowledged that this phase existed, much less that it involved a different caliber of focus, synthesis, and attention to detail than did the analysis of data or the construction of narrative. Because I always underestimated the time-consuming nature of these steps, I regularly needed, depending on the amount of time I had available for writing, another two to four weeks to make the piece presentable to an audience of unknowns. This extra month of work disrupted winter breaks and pushed back the beginning of new projects. Here (finally!) was one answer to the question of why I consistently failed to meet my deadlines. The process of creating the metaphor helped me develop more accurate estimates of what I could accomplish each semester. Just as important, however, is how the metaphor helped me recognize the time, care, and concentration required by this final “push,” despite its seemingly cosmetic nature and relatively short duration.

Another benefit of the writing metaphor is that it helped me normalize my own writing process. As is evident from the “Actions Involved” column of table 1, my later stages of draft development are characterized by what, even now, I find to be a bizarre sifting process that is somewhat like creating a mosaic. I move back and forth between different sections of a document, trying to piece them into a whole. I place this idea next to that supposition, and I look to see what each requires of the other, all the while shaving off bits here and adding parts there to make sense and beauty of it all. I know what some pieces look like before I begin writing. Others I cannot see until afterward. Some I miss entirely and can only hope they will reappear in some other context. Because this stage reveals the inconsistencies in my thinking and the multiple roads I could take in developing an argument, I was easily discouraged by it and could spend long, lonely weeks snared by self-doubt (yet another clue to the missed-deadline puzzle). But when I began observing and thinking about this pattern (rather than just enduring it), I began to see that what looked like mere confusion was actually the route I take to clarity. Such messiness is a natural and necessary part of my writing process, and developing the writing metaphor helped me recognize that fact. After I fully absorbed that information, it ceased having the same effect on my writing. I want to be clear that I have not stopped going through that stage: I still spend long periods of time unclear about where I am going with at least one portion of anything I write. However, I am better able to untangle myself from the emotional snags of this experience, because I no longer regard it as a sign of intellectual incapacity.

Finally, the writing metaphor helped me understand and accept the pace at which I write and think. Joining the writing group had already helped give me an honest account of how often, how long, and how diligently I wrote each week. Yet I still compared myself to others, even (perhaps especially) those colleagues whose habits and process I knew nothing about. Developing a writing met-
their gaze, just enough to allow for new insights and perspectives on an unexplored dimension of their work, even if they cannot act on those insights immediately.

The second limitation to the writing metaphor is that it is unlikely to be complete. Even in this article, I have described my own writing process as akin to both the gestation process and the construction of a mosaic. Which is most apt? If it can be described in so many terms, have I missed something crucial? Probably. The writing metaphor need not be perfect or singular to be useful. What it does is stimulate our thinking about a process that remains, for many of us, mysterious and anxiety-provoking. One sharp reviewer who mentioned a weakness in my metaphor is worth quoting. The reviewer pointed out that what I describe as the “labor” stage of a writing project seems more like those last hours or day in the hospital post-delivery. That is when new parents need to be sure they know how to handle breast feeding (if that is how they are feeding the baby), have the car seat attached properly, understand when they would need to contact a pediatrician, etc.—all very important stuff, but more niggling and less dramatic than labor.

This point set me mulling over the last two stages of writing, reexamining these to determine whose metaphor, mine or the reviewer’s, best described my experience. At the moment, I remain convinced that my original conceptualization best describes my experience: in the final stages of polishing an argument, I often take an easy pleasure in the work. Preparing a manuscript for public viewing, in contrast, requires me to bear down and focus on details in a way I would rather not. But in truth, it does not matter much whose metaphor is more apt. What is most important is that developing the metaphor shook me from the rut of complacency. My experience invited me to consider the possibility that writing might not be an easy process, but one that requires effort and commitment.

Second, and most importantly, developing a writing metaphor can help scholars develop a set of work standards that align as much with our values and circumstances as they do with the external standards of our institutions and disciplines. Graduate programs and tenure-track positions impart relatively clear guidelines about what constitutes rigorous research and a tenable publishing record. In doing so, they tell us what we must do to gain the approval of our colleagues and the rewards of the profession. What these programs cannot tell us is how to achieve the internal sense of satisfaction that comes from making our best effort or doing our best work. When used in a thoughtful way, the writing metaphor can deepen our understanding of our own writing process and remind us of the joy of thinking through an idea—and that is what we all signed up for anyway.

**CONCLUSION**

By identifying the habits and techniques used by the profession’s most productive writers, the literature on academic writing has helped scholars demystify a largely unexplored part of our work. To those who do not think of themselves as writers, this practical approach to writing productivity is invaluable and helps bring order to an often chaotic, incomprehensible practice. Yet, when we shift our focus from writing productivity to the writing experience, we may glean two important lessons about the nature of our work.

First, writing includes many kinds of intellectual labor, each of which requires different skills. Creating a manuscript can involve generating and capturing ideas, fleshing them out, composing narrative, reading and incorporating background litera-

**NOTES**

1. Examples include the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (newfacultysuccess.com) and the Academic Ladder (http://academicwritingclub.com).

2. See for example, the Scholar’s Retreat (http://www.sonjafoodos.com/html/overview.html) or the Sisters of the Academy Writing Clinic (http://www.sistersoftheacademy.org/writing/retreat/).


4. My interdisciplinary African American Studies department has included anthropologists, historians, cultural and literary critics, sociologists, psychologists, and dancers. The writing group I belonged in at the time I developed the metaphor included a historian, a sociologist, and an English professor.

5. While I did not realize it at the time, this metaphor is hardly an original one. Its use has long been the subject of much debate and conversation among writers and literary scholars. See for example, Stanford Friedman (1987).

6. This unthinking approach to writing is one of the big differences between writers and scholars who write. Most academic writing guides do not explore the meaning of writing for scholars. One exception is Pamela Richards’ chapter in Arnold Becker’s *Writing for Social Scientists* (1986). Nonacademic writers, by contrast, muse endlessly about the nature of writing and those who do it for living. Two of the best are Margaret Atwood’s *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002) and Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life* (1989).

7. And yet, I can count on one finger the number of women who have told me that their last few weeks of pregnancy felt “easy” or “pleasurable.” More evidence that the strength of the metaphor lies, not in perfect accuracy, but in its power as a prompt for thinking through one’s experience.

**REFERENCES**


In July 2012, APSA launched a new monthly and online journal focused on jobs in political science. *Political Science Jobs* contains active job listings from APSA’s eJobs database. The combination of the new online journal and the daily APSA eJobs database provides a continued platform for a transparent, efficient, and ethically grounded political science labor market. APSA has maintained an open academic job market for many years, and this new journal forms the next phase of these efforts.

**Format and Frequency**

*Political Science Jobs* includes all active positions in a monthly downloadable PDF and link to the searchable eJobs system online.

**APSA Members**

APSA members (individuals and departments) have free access to the online journal as a benefit of membership. All members also receive free access to the daily PDF of eJobs listings.

**Replacing PS Supplement with Political Science Jobs**

*Political Science Jobs* replaces the former *PS Supplement* of job listings. The April 2012 *PS Supplement* was the last published volume since establishing the journal in 2008 to fulfill federal regulatory requirements tied to international hiring requirements. These federal rules recently changed to recognize online or web-based professional journals as an eligible outlet.

www.apsanet.org/jobs