

12-2018

The Writer: An Endangered Species

Hayley Dykman
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dykman, Hayley, "The Writer: An Endangered Species" (2018). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 27.
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor/27

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the USU Writing Center at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tutor's Column by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact rebecca.nelson@usu.edu.



The Writer: An Endangered Species

By Hayley Dykman

ABSTRACT: The ability to write is a necessity in every stage of education and the career field beyond; however, few people are willing to label themselves as “writers.” It is especially important that students adopt the mindset that they are “writers” because writing is something they are required to do frequently. Believing you are a “writer” makes writing seem easier and a more innate part of your abilities. However, students often have an incorrect idea of what it means to be a “writer,” thinking that to be a “writer” is to be a published author or someone who always enjoys the writing process. This article analyzes three key definitions of the word “writer,” evaluating the definitions for their usefulness and the effect they have on students. In writing centers, it is essential to gently correct students’ misinterpretation of the word “writer” by providing them the word’s true and simple definition: the ability to write. This enables students to free themselves of the mental cage that prevents them from identifying as “writers.” It is crucial to show students that everyday writing (such as drafting text messages, Instagram posts, and emails) requires the same skills as academic writing, and these skills are what make them “writers.”

KEY WORDS: writer, personal identity, confidence, empowerment, definitions, mindset

It's 4:23 in the afternoon on a Monday. I am sitting in my bedroom in front of my laptop and a piece of notebook paper, trying to outline this very article. Every three minutes or so, my thoughts and the music playing from my phone are interrupted by a frustrated scream and some variation of the irritated exclamation, "I don't want to write my essay!" That's my roommate Jasmine, a second-year undergraduate biological engineering student. If the volume of her frustration is still unclear, please note there are two walls and a bedroom between her bedroom and mine.

Whether we like to admit it or not, Jasmine's reaction is common to just about everyone, both "writers" and "non-writers" alike. I've groaned and grumbled through the whole writing process more times than I care to admit, and yet I work in my university's writing center. Most tutors, I'd assume, can recall at least one tutoring session that was acutely uncomfortable or awkward because the student did not want to be there, was only there for class credit, and/or did not want to face the fact that their thoroughly incomplete essay was due at midnight. Like Jasmine, most of these students are intelligent and skilled, but they refuse to carry the identity label "writer" because writing is something they think they hate. They believe writing is only a necessary evil they must suffer through for academic credit.

It is naïve to think that amateurs are the only "writers" who often despise writing. Kurt Vonnegut, author of *Slaughterhouse Five*, recounts that writing makes him feel like "an armless, legless man with a crayon in his mouth" (qtd. in Cotter). James Joyce acknowledged that "writing in English is the most ingenious torture ever devised for sins committed in previous lives," a sentiment I'm sure many of us often share (qtd. in Cotter).

What sets apart "writers" from "non-writers?" Both can loathe writing from time to time. Both are forced to put pen to paper to meet some sort of a deadline. Even the best "writers" are

not flawless; they have editors to make surface- and content-level revisions. Why, then, do students struggle to add “writer” to their identity?

The answer to this question lies in a definition. There exists a disconnect between what students think a “writer” is and what a “writer” should actually be. The English Oxford Living Dictionary states, “[a writer is] a person who writes books, stories, or articles as a job or regular occupation.” Isn’t this the definition that comes to mind, at least initially?

This definition is damaging in that it is limiting. It reserves the identifier “writer” for the scarce and much-revered published author. This “writer” focuses their time solely on producing publishable works that will (hopefully) earn them more than a shiny nickel. They enjoy writing. They enjoy their subject matter. They are professionals in their fields, experts whose written word is widely distributed and highly sought-after.

The average student, on the other hand, does not write novels. They do not write for pleasure. Their papers will only be read fully by themselves (hopefully), peer tutors (if they are wise), and their teachers (if they submit by the deadline). They probably do not enjoy their assigned subject matter. Their papers will not ever be published. Their papers will never make them any money.

If this definition is truly definitive, only a fraction of the population of people willing to pick up a pencil are actually “writers.” Writing centers are, therefore, filled with frauds masquerading as experts qualified to be tutors. The “writer” is an endangered species.

Consider instead a second definition: “a person who commits his or her thoughts, ideas, etc., to writing” (Dictionary.com).

This definition feels more comfortable and less confining. If there’s one thing most people can do, it’s form an opinion about anything and everything. If this is the true definition,

then “writers” must only have thoughts and a pencil. However, a mile-high mental roadblock is quickly constructed in a student’s mind when they feel their opinion must be “correct,” lest their teacher butcher their paper and confidence with red ink. If a student has little to no self-confidence in their writing ability, they “may be unwilling to establish sophisticated rhetorical problems, to spend time planning and revising, or to try new writing strategies when existing ones fail” (Hawkins 4). It is so easy for students to misinterpret a professor’s criticism of a failed attempt to support an idea for criticism of the idea itself. If a student feels like their thoughts and ideas are the problem, their self-confidence will crumble. As a consequence, they will believe that they cannot possibly be “writers” unless their thoughts and writing are perfect.

A small, key part of this definition is something with which I personally struggle: it is incredibly difficult for me to “commit.” Penning my thoughts, even typing them into a blank document, is often as agonizing as carving letters into a single, tiny stone tablet. For some reason, I feel that transcribing my thoughts somehow preserves their imperfections indefinitely. Being a “writer” is extremely taxing, and the process only becomes easier when I practice freewriting extensively.

Though the previous definitions are certainly true, I feel the definition that captures the true essence of “writer” is simple: “a person who writes or is able to write” (Dictionary.com).

This definition is so obvious that it is easy to overlook, yet it is the truest of the three. Writing is all about communication. We all communicate, or write, in one form or another, whether it be in text messages, emails, diary entries, academic papers, notes passed in class, on sticky notes, weekly planners, or through artistic expression. Writing is not impossible; instead, it is something we cannot live without. We are “writers” by nature.

Life became easier for me when I realized I was a “writer.” I am in my third year of studying mathematics and statistics at my university. I have always enjoyed reading and writing, but until very recently, my perception of what it means to be a “writer” was not in harmony with the truth. I assumed “writers” were almost exclusively English majors who were planning on writing hit novels. The turning point came when I took a creative writing class for the sole purpose of filling up my schedule. I learned that the stories I sometimes toyed around with in my head could actually be written down, despite the fact that I’m not an English major. I also learned that writing is not permanent: I could delete words, sentences, and paragraphs if I decided I didn’t like them. I learned that I am a “writer,” and I always have been.

The most important role that I have assumed as a tutor is that of a misconception corrector. I believe that a fundamental responsibility of writing centers is to gently correct the misunderstanding students have about what it means to be a “writer.” To do this, we, the tutors, need to show them that writing is a natural part of who they are. We must help students embrace what writing abilities they already have, like the ability to write an email, text message, or Instagram post caption. If we can show students that the critical thinking and writing skills involved in drafting a clever Instagram post help make them a “writer,” it is my hope that they will realize those skills can be transferred to the sphere of academic writing, and that they can be “writers” in academia, too. Writing centers aim to help students become more confident “writers,” and what’s a better way to do so than to gently guide them to the correct definition of the word itself?

Works Cited

- Cotter, Bill. "10 Famous Writers Who Hated Writing." *The Huffington Post*, Oath Inc., 6 Dec. 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/bill-cotter/post_7211_b_5044571.html. Accessed 22 Oct. 2018.
- Hawkins, Evon R. "'From Interest and Expertise': Improving Student Writers' Working Authorial Identities." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 32, no. 6, 2008, pp. 1-5, <https://wlnjournal.org/archives/v32/32.6.pdf>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2018.
- "Writer." *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/writer>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2018.
- "Writer." *English Oxford Living Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/writer>. Accessed. 22 Oct. 2018.