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Crossing the writing threshold

Carol Lea Clark

Crossing the Writing Threshold

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment

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in

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by

Carol Lea Clark

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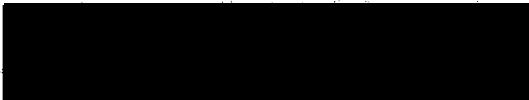
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Abstract

This thesis proposes a new term, "the writing threshold," for the moment when, with a sense of ease or difficulty, the thoughts in a writer's mind, the writing situation, and personal motivations blend into a momentum that results in words formed in a pattern on a page of paper or on a computer screen.

Defining the "writing threshold" gives identity to a critical but largely ignored part of the writing process; and isolating the precipitating states which lead to the writing threshold will increase our understanding of how people differ and how these differences affect the writing process.

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Chapter 1: Crossing the Writing Threshold

Writing--putting pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard--is never <u>really</u> easy. Even at the best of times, with inspired ideas focused in the mind's eye, there is always the nagging complication of having to translate those thoughts into words on pages of paper. Sometimes and for some people the writing comes more easily than others. Calvin Trillin reflects, "Sometimes--when I am very lucky-- the story just opens up before me and I realize which direction to go in" (11-12). Another writer, Donald M. Murray, says of his alter ego "Morison" on one of his less fluent days, "He clears writing time on his schedule, shuts the door . . . and watches a tree grow . . . he makes neat work plans . . . and doesn't follow them" (219). One of my students voices the same reality: "Sometimes I can sit down and write right off the top of my head. Yet, at other times I sit down and can't think of a single word."

Ideas may come with ease or with difficulty; but in the final analysis, ideas aren't writing until they become written words. Intricate plots waking writers in the middle of the night don't become short stories unless they are written down. Term papers written word-by-painful word

don't become term papers until those painful words are on paper or on the computer screen. No matter how extensive the preparation, how well composed the ideas, the flow of words must begin at some point or writing does not happens at all. What brings a writer to that critical point of generating words, whether the words come with ease or with difficulty? What pushes a writer over the edge of thought into text production?

The Writing Threshold

Stephen Witte, Muriel Harris, Carol Berkenkotter, Sondra Perl and others have studied the writing process. Though none of them specifically identifies a point when thoughts become text, their work shows indications of its existence. In this thesis I propose a new term, "the writing threshold," for this moment when, with a sense of ease or difficulty, the thoughts in a writer's mind, the writing situation, and personal motivations create a momentum that results in words formed in a pattern on a page of paper or on a computer screen. This threshold is crossed when an individual first begins a piece of writing, and it is also crossed over and over again each time he or she pauses in the act of writing to reflect, edit, or mentally compose before continuing to write.

Stephen Witte analyzes the mental composition of words prior to writing and uses the term "pre-text" to refer to "a

writer's linguistic representation of intended meaning, a 'trial locution' that is produced in the mind, stored in the writer's memory, and sometimes manipulated mentally prior to being transcribed as written text" (397). Some writers use pre-text extensively, even revising what they have composed mentally before putting words on paper. Others make little use of pre-text, writing down words almost as they are thought.

The "writing threshold" meshes with "pre-text" at the moment at which words are put on paper or on a computer screen. So, a writer who makes extensive use of pre-text would likely have a more polished composition at the point of crossing the writing threshold. Another writer who crosses the writing threshold earlier in the writing process, writing down unedited thoughts, may revise after the written words have been made visible.

Muriel Harris also offers evidence that everyone does not cross the writing threshold in the same way. She finds that accomplished one-draft writers feel a strong need to clarify their thinking prior to beginning to write. In contrast, equally successful multi-drafters resist any attempt at clarification prior to writing. They prefer open-ended exploration as they write (181).

A writer, comfortable with one stage of pre-text before writing, may find the process of crossing the writing threshold breaks down when material is less well understood.

Carol Berkenkotter, in her analysis of Donald Murray's composing aloud protocols, describes him as writing with great fluency and ease when he is thoroughly familiar with a subject. But when he is writing about new ideas, his pace slows and his voice becomes halting; often his drafting process breaks down, forcing him to return to his notes before writing again (168). When he is unsure of the direction of his writing, Murray is unable to keep going the process of crossing the writing threshold, and he needs to regroup before continuing.

Sondra Perl quotes Anne, a writer she studied, as saying: "I almost never move from the writing of one sentence directly to the next . . . I often have to read the several preceding sentences a few times as if to gain momentum to carry me to the next sentence" (115). Perl claims that writers decide to write after they have a "dawning awareness that something has clicked" (115). This awareness of a "click" gives "momentum" which writers use to carry them across the writing threshold. Perl uses the term "felt sense," which is a "very careful attention to one's inner reflections" (116), to describe this "click" experience. She comments that many writers are not aware of a "felt sense," though they use it to direct their production of words.

Writers may also be unaware of a barrier, a writing threshold, they must cross before words can be produced. I

propose that the writing threshold functions like a membrane between the mass of ideas in a writer's head and the flow of words onto a page. A precipitating state (such as creative flow, discussed below) results in the crossing of the membrane or threshold. The flow of words, though, can be stopped at any point by factors which demand the writer's attention (such as grammatical accuracy, discussed on page 20, Chapter 3) and "clog" the membrane. The precipitating states causing the momentum of words across the threshold and the factors which demand a writer's attention in the composition process are the subjects of this thesis.

Precipitating States for Crossing the Writing Threshold

In my analysis of the literature relating to the writing process, I have tentatively identified three precipitating states that result in crossing the writing threshold:

1. Deadline Anxiety--Cynthia L. Selfe constructs an in-depth case study of Bev, an eighteen-year-old student diagnosed as an apprehensive writer. Bev has made procrastination a part of her writing process, saying "Pressure is definitely a big factor in my writing. I get an assignment, stick it away, and mark the [due] date on my calendar" (85). And only on the day before the assignment is due does the pressure of the deadline overcome her fear of writing. She gets the assignment over as quickly as

possible so that she has to stay in an anxiety state as short a time as possible.

Muriel Harris explores the composing process differences between experienced one- and multi-draft writers. She finds that one-drafters describe themselves as "incurable procrastinators who begin even long papers the night before . . . while they worry about whether they will finish on time, these one-drafters generally do" (182). The one-drafters she studied were accomplished writers and didn't complain of painful anxiety, like Selfe's student Bev. Rather, Harris' subjects knew their own abilities and simply put off writing until deadline pressure was critical; they still allowed themselves time to complete assignments competently. But, of course, all teachers are familiar with less accomplished one-drafters who procrastinate until they are incapacitated by anxiety and cannot produce required text before deadline.

2. Conscious intent--Irving Wallace, like many other prolific writers, established his own program of writing every day whether he felt like it or not. Wallace explains why:

> Once, long ago, deceived by the instructors,
> professors, by an old romantic tradition, I had
> believed that a writer writes only when he feels
> like it, only when he is touched by mystic
> inspiration. But then, I realized that most
> successful writers invest their work with
> professionalism. (qtd. in Pear 519)

By professionalism Wallace means treating writing like a

chosen and valued career, working every day with a sense of dedicated discipline. Wallace kept charts of his daily progress from the time he wrote his first (and unpublished) novel at age nineteen.

Some beginning writers evidence periods of conscious intent. One of the students in Reed Larson's case studies, S.N., described regular times each day when he worked on his term paper project. He set up goals for the amount he planned to accomplish each session. He was, though, flexible enough to allow his research and writing to take him in directions he hadn't planned. And when he knew the session was going to be a difficult one, he decided in advance to make it shorter to avoid being overwhelmed. Of course, S.N. was working with a deadline in mind, but he wasn't deadline driven. He worked ahead at a pace that was comfortable, and even sometimes pleasurable, not waiting to begin writing until his deadline to put him into a stage of anxiety (34-35).

3. Creative Flow--E.B. White writes: "He [the writer] is like a surfer--he bides his time. Waits for the perfect wave on which to ride in" (qtd. in Murray 219-20). The surfer gauges the waves not by sitting idle in a beach chair but by immersing himself and his surfboard in the building turbulence of the waves. The writer isn't idle either. He is researching, planning, sensing, and thinking as he bides his time, waiting for a flash of insight. Carol McCabe, a

journalist, explains:

> The time just before I begin to write is the
> most important time I spend on a piece. By now
> the piece is there, waiting inside the notebook,
> tape or transcripts, clip files and photos, like a
> sculpture, waiting for release from a block of
> limestone. I just have to figure out how to get
> it out of there. (qtd. in Murray 220)

The way many writers "get it out of there" is through a

flow-like process in which they make intuitive connections

forming patterns in the data they have absorbed. McCabe

submerges herself in a total focus on her writing, listening

to her internal voices. Later, she can revise and edit. But

during creative flow she trusts her preparation, trusts her

writing process, and she lets the writing happen.

Reed Larson's case study, S.N. (discussed above)

reported sessions of working on his term paper in which he

experienced intense, flow-like involvement: "I was really

shut off from everything that was happening. My phone rang,

and it took me three rings to realize it; I mean I was

really engrossed" (35). Larson points out that S.N. had no

more writing experience than other students in his study; in

fact, his basic abilities as a writer were no greater. What

was different was S.N.'s "internal regulation and his

ability to create enjoyment allowing him the patience and

command of thought to lay out his materials in such a

deliberate and compelling fashion" (38). S.N. also seemed to

have the ability to begin writing with conscious intent but

to involve himself in the experience until it was flow-like

and deeply pleasurable for him.

Why is the Writing Threshold Important?

Teachers facing rooms full of twenty-five freshmen on
the brink of writing their first college compositions may
find it comforting to assume that all students will respond
as their teachers did to writing instruction and that all
students will respond in the same way. We can teach them
methods we have ourselves found effective: freewriting,
revising, etc. According to George H. Jensen and John K.
DiTiberio, though, we will be lucky if any one process we
teach works for some of our students. It will, they say, not
work for others, for it will force them to write in a way
that will fail to draw upon the students' strengths as
individuals. Or, if we realize that all students don't
respond in the same way, we may teach a variety of
approaches. Unfortunately, some students will be further
confused by open-ended variety. The third alternative,
according to Jensen and DiTiberio, is to "develop an
understanding of how people differ and how these differences
affect the writing process. We can then more effectively
individualize writing instruction" (286).

Defining the writing threshold will give identity to a
critically individual but largely ignored part of the
writing process. And if we can help our students realize
there are different ways to cross the writing threshold, we

will help them de-mystify the process of putting words on paper. We can help them realize that there is more than one right way to write.

Chapter 2: Threshold Stoppage Constraints

Annie Dillard presents an eloquent image of a writer

crossing the writing threshold and what follows:

> Every morning you climb several flights of
> stairs, enter your study, open the French doors,
> and slide your desk and chair out into the middle
> of the air . . . . Your work is to keep cranking the
> flywheel that turns the gears that spin the belt
> in the engine of belief that keeps you and your
> desk in midair. (10)

All writers are faced with the same feat. Somehow they

attain one of the precipitating states (discussed in Chapter

1) necessary to begin the flow of words. They cross the

writing threshold out into the "middle of the air" and by

sheer mental effort they "turn the gears" that keep the flow

of words from stopping. For if the words stop flowing, the

desk falls to the ground and the writer must again somehow

attain a precipitating state to cross the threshold. It is

no wonder that writing an exhausting and often difficult

task.

Constraints That Can Stop the Threshold

Traditionally, composition theory and research have

addressed one or a few constraints in the writing process at

a time, an understandable approach considering the

complexity of the factors involved. Unfortunately, though,

this approach has resulted in the assumption that writers

also consider only one or a few constraints at a time. As Ann E. Berthoff describes it, "There is no understanding in current rhetorical theory that in composing everything has to happen at once or it does not happen at all" (21). She uses the word "atoneness" to describe the writer's state, one in which meanings are not made unless the writer is actively engaged in all parts of the writing process at once. And she identifies our pedagogical challenge as helping students see this "atoneness" as a resource, not a source of dilemmas.

But it is easy for student writers to see all these constraints, not as "atoneness" but as questions and thoughts all demanding attention at the same time. Deborah Brandt proposes that the central concern of readers and writers in action is not "'What does that say?' or 'What do I make that say?' but more like, 'What do I do now?'" (38). The focus in writing, she claims, is on keeping the process going even while it is breaking down. Student writers have trouble with that "What do I do now?" They have trouble initiating the process of producing words for a writing project, which I call "crossing the writing threshold," and once the threshold is crossed, they have trouble keeping going the flow of words.

For there are many things that can "stop" the flow of words in the sense of "to block" or "to close" and prevent the words from continuing. Let us return to the metaphor of

the writing threshold as a membrane that can only be
permeated or crossed when the writer has developed a
momentum from a precipitating state. The necessity to
develop a rhetorical structure, for example, can "stop" or
"clog" the membrane.

I have tentatively divided into the following four
categories constraints which can stop the a writer's flow of
words: 1) developing content within a rhetorical structure,
2) emulating literate discourse, 3) editing mechanical
errors and 4) coping with the emotions aroused by this
process. I will discuss each individually.

Developing Content Within a Rhetorical Structure

One of my students wrote, "I have so many thoughts and
no idea how to either bring them together in an orderly
fashion or to pick one and develop it." His problem was not
coming up with ideas but how to put those ideas together and
how to further develop crucial ones. Nancy Sommers finds
that students have strategies for connecting words and
phrases into sections but not for conceptualizing whole
essays as units. Students, she writes, view compositions in
a linear way as a series of parts--an introduction, a body,
and a conclusion. If these various parts don't go together
well, students are at a loss; they know vaguely something is
wrong, but they don't have any idea how to re-conceptualize
the whole of the essay to fix the problem.

I have already cited Nancy Sommers' case study of Rita, an unskilled college freshman who has taken one semester of college composition. Asked to write an essay, Rita crosses the writing threshold immediately without pausing for reflection. Soon, though, she is "stuck." She cannot think of examples to support her topic sentence. She is also stuck when writing the conclusion because she had been taught that "conclusions merely restate introductions, but in different words" (44); and she doesn't know how to do that. Sommers points out that Rita's main concern in her essay has been applying the rules she has learned. Rita suffers from the problem facing all students who attempt to write by the rules; there is no one rule that fits every situation. So, she is forced to revise "word by word, sentence by sentence, rule by rule" (46).

Brandt gives an example of a college student also taking a composition class who is a little more successful in his efforts to compose an academic essay. This student [not named] is attempting to produce a reasoned exposition about a situation in the objective world. He reveals in his composing-aloud protocol that he constantly scans what he has written with an eye toward the information he is giving his reader. At some points he seems to speak directly to his reader, urging patience, and saying, "This is not nearly so general as it sounds" (43). He is concerned about what may be in his mind that he hasn't communicated to the

reader, saying at one point, "If I'm going to say this it might be wise to explain what I mean with an example" (43). This writer is comfortable with his ability to convey his thoughts and feelings to a reader, unlike less skilled students like Rita who begin writing with only a partial grasp of what is going on. As Brandt points out, "What the writer is reflecting on primarily are the means by which he and his reader together can reach his point, that is, the intersubjective conditions that must exist for both of them finally to 'get it'" (44). Brandt's student is concerned with the making of meaning, not just with putting together sentences that sound all right, and he is concerned with the ways he can communicate that meaning to his reader.

Linda Flower and John R. Hayes postulate that experienced and beginning writers approach a rhetorical problem differently. Experienced writers are concerned with all aspects of a rhetorical problem (assignment, audience, goals) while inexperienced writers are more concerned with the conventions of a text (grammar, number of pages or format). Experienced writers construct a logical argument with more breadth but also with more depth than do inexperienced ones. In essence, Flower and Hayes conclude, experienced writers are solving a different problem than are the inexperienced; many inexperienced student writers try to "psych out" the instructor's intent in a writing assignment and then to put together the most expedient approach to

satisfying that perception of the instructor's intent. Experienced writers construct the content of a piece of writing by thoroughly exploring the rhetorical problem and building a unique problem they want to solve (99-102).

Emulating Literate Discourse

As a student writes an essay in an academic setting he is, consciously or unconsciously, mimicking the language of academia. As David Bartholomae has described it, "the student has to invent the university for the occasion." The student must put on the peculiar ways of "knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing" that define academic discourse (Inventing 134). Teachers expect students to know this academic discourse intuitively, and students valiantly try to oblige, often with mixed results.

Bartholomae believes that at the moment of writing the writer becomes "subject to a language he can neither command nor control." A text passes through codes of the "already written" which affect any originality in what is being said. "A writer does not write . . . but is, himself, written by the languages available to him" (Inventing 142-3). So a student, striving to write an academic essay, must filter whatever he wants to say through his perception of the codes of academia.

Bartholomae gives an example of a placement essay

written by a college freshman in response to the prompt:
"Describe a time when you did something you felt to be
creative" (136):

> In the past time I thought that an incident was
> creative was when I had to make a clay model of
> the earth . . . In the beginning of the clay
> model, I had to research and learn the different
> dimensions of the earth . . . Creativity is the
> venture of the mind at work with the mechanics
> relay to the limbs from the cranium, which stores
> and triggers this action. (135)

Bartholomae points out the patience and goodwill of this
student who is trying to write like an academician when he
knows he doesn't have the knowledge that would make the
essay more than an exercise. He writes in what he perceives
as academic jargon--"creativity is the venture of the mind.
. . ." It is no wonder that one so often hears college
students talk about "faking it," for that is really what we
are asking them to do--fake the discourse of academia until
they, by a process of trial and error, learn the unwritten
agenda, the hidden rules.

Some unwritten agendas are in the form of schema, or
cognitive maps of discourse formats. A schema can be,
according to Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald, "as general as an
introduction, body, and conclusion, or it can be as specific
as the structure of effective argumentation" (31-32). Until
a writer learns a repertoire of schema, he or she must
create a new one for each writing occasion. Once schema are
learned, they can be modified to satisfy new occasions, a
process which is generally easier than creating new ones.

One particular schema pattern that basic writers tend to

lack, according to Fitzgerald is "the ability to move from

general to specific and back again" (32). Papers of basic

writers tend to have either generalities or special cases

but not both. Papers of more accomplished writers tend to

combine general statements with support evidence in the form

of specific cases.

Cynthia L. Selfe's case study of Bev illustrates what

writing is like for a freshman student who has little faith

in her composing skills. Bev writes: "I will never

understand . . . writing. It just doesn't . . I could sit

there all day, but I just don't grasp it. You know every

year I get, 'Write it this way, write it this way.' or 'This

time do it this way.' But I know I just don't know how"

(85). Bev felt she was a failure if she couldn't produce the

error-free prose she thought her instructors demanded, and,

thus, she found academic writing to be far more "punishing"

than "rewarding." The result for Bev was that

procrastination became part of her composing style.

Joy S. Ritchie points out that many students

internalize so rigidly what they perceive as academic

discourse that they cannot write about their own opinions

and ideas. Ritchie describes one student, Becky, who

"believed that writing is a matter of conforming to the

conventions of academic discourse" (160). Becky had never

invested her "self" in her writing and could not conceive of

topics which might interest readers. Her rigid perception of the rules of academic discourse had stunted her development as a writer. Ritchie traces Becky's experiences in a composition class featuring frequent small group evaluation. Becky, initially confused by an instructor who did not tell her the "right" way to write, eventually began to use writing to explore her own experiences and beliefs, focusing on her family's rural lifestyle. She told Ritchie, "All that writing of the papers helped me understand myself and my family" (164). Over a three-month period Becky tried out different voices:

> She could assume the voice of the
> dispassionate journalist telling why raising sheep
> is a good experience for families . . . she could
> be the young adult reflecting on the nature of her
> family relationships revealed in their behavior
> while working on the farm; and she could be the
> farm-kid, now college student, giving her peers
> from the city an entertaining, poetic and
> sympathetic view of rural life. She even rewrote
> one of her 'sheep-raising' drafts as a speech for
> a campus group she belonged to. (166)

Becky's response group continued to encourage her as she tried out these different approaches. Paradoxically, as Becky gave up her rigid perceptions of the rules of academic discourse and began to experiment, her writing began to develop a maturity that is closer to the type of discourse actually favored in academic settings. She seems to be learning that there is more than one correct way to construct an academic essay, and that the best way for her is one that makes use of her own perceptions and

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experiences. She also appears to be realizing that developing an ability to write "successful" academic discourse is a trial-and-error process of experimentation that cannot be taught, only learned.

Editing Mechanical Errors

Nancy Sommers postulates that beginning students think of revising as rewording. They aim to "clean up" their compositions. They cross out and write over, removing redundancies and substituting more colorful adjectives for drab ones. Sommers describes the "remarkable contradiction of cleaning by marking [which] might, indeed, stand for student revision as I have encountered it" (Strategies 122).

Selfe's case study of Bev (discussed above) reveals that students often are obsessed with mechanical correctness to the detriment of organization and logical soundness of their essays. Bev writes, "After my sister's talk, I began to see for myself how I had shut myself off from the real meanen. . . ." (90). Realizing that "meanen" is a misspelling, she loses her train of thought while she corrects the word. She rereads the sentence, finds two more words she wants to change and then has to reread the whole passage before she can continue. To make matter's worse, Bev knew that her editing skills were not equal to the complexity of problems in her essay, and she spent much of her editing time writing around problems. Specifically she

is "avoiding words she suspected she misspelled by using alternatives she was more 'sure of,' and resolving difficulties with lengthy clauses that did not 'sound right' by constructing two separate sentences" (91). Bev's concern with mechanical correctness and resultant premature editing unfortunately prevents her from worrying about how best to present her narrative to her audience.

David Bartholomae writes about student errors in a slightly different context. He argues that basic writing is "a variety of writing, not writing with fewer parts or more rudimentary constituents. It is not evidence of arrested cognitive development, arrested language development, or unruly or unpredictable language use" (Error 304). He divides errors into three categories:

> errors that are evidence of an intermediate
> system [a so far unsuccessful attempt to
> internalize rules of standard edited English];
> errors that could be said to be accidents, or
> slips of the pen as a writer's mind rushes ahead
> faster than his hand; and, finally, errors of
> language transfer, or more commonly, dialect
> interference, where in the attempt to produce the
> target language, the writer intrudes from the
> 'first' or 'native' language rather than inventing
> some intermediate form. (307)

There is, according to Bartholomae, an internal consistency to most errors that can be determined if errors are analyzed in context.

Glynda Hull and Mike Rose reported a case study of Tanya, a student in a community college basic writing class which was close, in level, to that of an adult literacy

program. After tutoring Tanya for four months they asked her to write a summary of an article which was in line with her interest in being a nurse's aid; the article for her to summarize was "Handling the Difficult Patient." Tanya's resulting summary is one of the kind that arouses our worries about the consequences of illiteracy; its "patchwork" approach not only has grammar and spelling errors but also might suggest to the reader that she is linguistically and cognitively deficient. But Hull and Rose looked more closely and reached different conclusions:

> Tanya seems to be operating with two intentions
> here: to display and convey knowledge ("a
> teacher'll really know what I'm talking about")
> and to show she's "not . . . that kind of student
> that would copy." (148- 149)

Tanya's naive fear of plagiarism recalls for Hull and Rose the reality that writing situations have been mainly negative for Tanya; she had been "kicked out of five high schools during her senior year, [been] hit on the hand with rulers, [been] chastised in the middle of reading class for not coming to school, and [feigned] sleep for fear of being called on" (149). In spite of this history, Tanya is inspired by the idea of becoming a nurse's aid--a demanding goal for her, and she wants to "try on" the kinds of language used by such a person. Reviewing Tanya's work in context made Hull and Rose realize that her "bizarre word salad is, perhaps, not so bizarre after all" (151). It has its own internal logic. Yet, the way she writes, with a

style that is flawed grammatically and mechanically, is the very stereotype of illiteracy. It is so easy to focus on that surface appearance and ignore the profound attempt Tanya is making to adopt a new voice and in doing so, redefine her life and as someone who can someday "make it" as a nurse's aid.

No one would advocate total disregard for mechanical errors on the part of students. Still, students such as these described by Hull and Rose, Sommers and Selfe display premature concern for editing that can get in the way of developing a train of thought in a composition.

Coping With the Emotions Aroused by the Writing Process

Reed Larson studied the connection between the cognitive processes and emotional processes in students' writing performance. He presents case studies of high school students whose emotions affected their writing in disruptive or constructive ways. Larson gives a description of E.S. as an example of the student who felt so anxious about writing that she was not able to concentrate. E.S. felt slightly positive about the term paper assignment before beginning, but she had a hard time making choices and narrowing her topic. Then she began to doubt her own abilities and began to feel worse and worse as her deadline approached. A reader of her paper reported, "E.S. seems to understand perfectly well how her introduction should affect

the reader . . . . This introduction does all of these things, but in the crudest way imaginable" (24). She knew how an introduction should be crafted, but her anxiety is getting in her way. Frustrated, she restates the same points over and over, resulting in a "diffused jumble of thoughts and ideas" (25).

Bev, the student in Selfe's case study discussed above, was extremely apprehensive about her ability to produce a paper of the type her instructor wanted; her apprehension resulted in a composing style that ensured the result she feared. Selfe explains:

> One of Bev's primary methods of reducing her apprehension about academic tasks in this session involved completing a first draft in what she described as a "mad, frantic, get-everything-you-can-down-on-paper-rush." At this rapid pace, Bev wrote approximately 3 pages of material, 457 words, and 24 sentences in a session lasting 51 minutes and 15 seconds. (88)

This frantic writing produced a draft in an absolute minimum amount of time and, coincidentally, kept her so busy while she was doing it that she didn't have time to think about how she was feeling. Then her resurfacing apprehension prevented her from adequately revising her very rough draft.

Another of Larson's students, D.V., exhibits symptoms of a lack of motivation--disinterest or apathy about the assignment. He approaches the assignment mechanically, unaware of any possibilities for excitement or challenge in the experience. His work reflects his internal state. A reviewer wrote: "This is a pedestrian work; one topic at a

time, little attention to the reader's possible reactions,
little effort to make the paper interesting" (31).

In contrast, Larson also reports case studies of
students who enjoyed their writing, who felt a "deep, flow-
like involvement." These students experienced:

> deep absorption ("All my brain was there") to
> intrinsic motivation ("I just loved it"). They
> reported losing track of time, a common element of
> flow ("I'd get there at 6 o'clock and, before I
> knew it, it's 10 o'clock and time to go home");
> and they reported having great control over the
> materials ("I felt really powerful, like I had the
> information in the palm of my hand and could mold
> it any way I wanted"). (34)

Larson stops short of claiming that enjoyment causes good
writing, though he thinks it likely that the conditions that
create enjoyment and that create good writing are closely
related. Enjoyment is both cause and effect--if a student
looks forward to a writing assignment with anticipated
enjoyment, an experience of sustained flow is more likely to
happen and, thus, lead to the anticipated enjoyment.

These Four Constraints and the Writing Threshold

When writers face unmarked pieces of white paper or
blank computer screens, they don't go down check lists of
items demanding attention in the writing process. Writers
don't first worry about rhetorical structure, then
mechanical correctness, then emotions aroused by the
process, etc. No, writers are concentrating on developing
topics, and these constraints are being attended to on an

unconscious level. When many writers cross the writing threshold, words that flow onto the paper are generally spelled correctly and in a logical structure of paragraphs. But, then there comes an unfamiliar word or a place where the logic of the flowing words just doesn't quite fit. A writer must then stop the flow of words and attend to that attention-demanding snag before crossing the writing threshold once again and continuing. For an experienced writer, the pause is often a minor one and the flow of words continues easily.

For student writers the process often isn't a smooth one. Bev and Rita, students cited above, exemplify how a student writer can become so distracted by "snags" demanding attention that they lose train of thought and become "stuck," unable to cross the writing threshold again. They may have over-generalized rules which they do not fully understand. So, students in the writing process stop to puzzle over some threshold stoppage constraints they do not fully understand and their flow of words ceases.

To return to Annie Dillard's image, beginning writers have a more difficult time than professional writers sliding the "desk and chair out into the air," or, as I have identified it, of crossing the writing threshold. Beginning writers also have a more difficult time preventing threshold stoppage constraints from clogging "the gears that spin the belt in the engine of belief" (10) that keep going the

process of producing words.

Chapter 3: The Timing of Crossing the Threshold

One of my students explained how he writes most easily in the peace and quiet of his room at night: "I take about twenty minutes to think about a topic. It's like brainstorming, but not on paper. After that, I write down these ideas in a rough draft, and I go from there." Another explains a different, fear motivated process: "In the past, writing has been my most dreaded task in school. In all cases, my first has been my last draft. That way I don't have to spend any more time dreading the process than necessary." Two very different attitudes toward crossing the writing threshold! The first student has a routine pattern for generating ideas for producing words; the pattern has worked before, and he is confident it will work again. For the other, the act of producing words is like taking medicine; figuratively, he holds his nose and swallows, trying to get it over as fast as possible. Both students are putting words on paper, but their situations for producing words are vastly different.

Does it matter at what point a writer crosses the writing threshold? Is it better for a writer to create a mental representation of words before putting them on paper? Or, does it work as well to put first thoughts down on paper and revise later? Does it matter if the writing threshold is crossed easily or with difficulty? That is, are words

written in a "flow-like" state more profound, more readable, or in any way better than those written word by painful word?

Nancy Sommers' case study of Rita, a beginning college writer, shows that Rita doesn't wait for reflection, or for accumulating information, before beginning writing after she is given an assignment, "Write an article for Parent magazine in which you explain what you believe to be the biggest mistake (or mistakes) parents make in raising their children" (Intentions 43). Rita's first few words come easily. She re-reads the topic a few time then decides upon her approach, that of writing about domineering parents. And after five minutes of brainstorming, she has her thesis statement. But then she becomes "stuck." She writes six versions of her introductory paragraph before she is able to move on, and then she quickly becomes "stuck" again as she tries to find examples to use in her body paragraphs. Rita has crossed the writing threshold too soon, producing words before she has the quantity of ideas needed to sustain the process without becoming "stuck."

The other case study cited in Sommer's article, that of Walter, a published writer, shows that his process was quite different. He does not immediately begin writing, but rather thinks first about different kinds of parents he has known. He doesn't seize the first words that come to mind and put them on the page. Rather, he postpones producing words until

he has generated a number of ideas about the subject. But once Walter begins the flow of words, he is intent on continuing until he has "some kind of frame or structure" (47) for the article. Even though he notes mid-way through the first draft that he has decided to change his introduction, he does not start on that revision until the structure is established.

Sommers comments, "For Walter, finding a structure was a strategy for finding meaning . . . For Rita, structure did not develop--it was a given" (48). Her meaning was her thesis statement; all she wanted to do was to add formulaic examples and be done. What can be learned from Walter and other experienced writers, according to Sommers, is the importance of a writer's "understanding of the purpose of the different parts [of an essay] and how they fit with the whole" (49). Developing a structure for a piece of writing is more important than the speed with which one begins writing; it is more important than the immediate accuracy of any individual sentence; parts can be fixed. Without a structure, fixing individual parts won't help the whole.

Donald Murray bemoans the times when he "writes too soon" because he then has written badly, without a sufficient awareness of structure, or so he thinks. Not writing when a deadline looms can be interpreted as writer's block, but frequently it isn't, according to Murray. It is dangerous to write before enough, and the right kind of,

information has been accumulated. "Specifics give off meaning," writes Murray. "They connect with each other in such a way that two plus two equals seven--or eleven" (221). If a writer puts pen to paper before he or she has accumulated sufficient detail, and developed connections among the detail, it is too soon. "The writer has to accept the writer's own ridiculousness of working by not working." Murray believes a writer "must not write to write" (226).

It is interesting to note that though Murray reports that he spends more time not writing than he does writing, he produces a very respectable amount of work. In 1982 he kept an informal account of his writing for 43 weeks; he averaged less than an hour a day, less than five hours a week:

> I wrote the introductory material for a
> collection of my articles on writing and teaching,
> responded to the editing of a collection of pieces
> on writing journalism, edited a journal article,
> drafted and revised chapters for two different
> collections, completed a newspaper editorial,
> wrote several poems, finished a freshman text
> and revised it once, worked on a novel. (220)

So, effective writers may be careful not to write "too soon," but they are also careful to pace themselves so that the pressure of a deadline doesn't interfere with their ability to write well. Effective writers also may seek a "creative flow" state, but they don't wait for it. Norah Hess, well-known romance novelist, explains,

> When I am starting a new book, I do lots of
> research about the historical aspects, the look of
> the clothes, the kind of cooking utensils, that

> kind of thing. And I do biographical sketches of
> the characters. But I cannot begin writing the
> book until I hear the characters talking to each
> other in my head, saying things I hadn't planned
> or expected. (personal communication, 1990)

Hess doesn't just wait for that magical moment when the

characters start to talk; she does lots of preparation, and

that preparation, by putting the right kinds of information

into her head, makes the magical moment possible.

Is a "Creative Flow" State Necessarily Better?

Norah Hess and many other writers seem to seek a

creative flow state for writing. But is writing produced in

a "flow" state "better" than writing produced while in

another state? Maybe not, according to Linda Flower and

John H. Hayes. They argue that both students and

professional writers can be misled by a writing "myth."

Students believe that their writing processes are inferior

because writing does not always come easily and naturally,

and they have heard tales of the "charmed" state in which

legendary writers produce their prose. Writers are also

fooled by the "myth" because they believe that if a piece of

writing is produced in a "flow" state, it is successful when

that piece may in reality need revision to be effective.

Thus, according to Flower and Hayes, writing "myths" "lead

the poor writer to give up too soon and the fluent writer to

be satisfied with too little" (93). It seems that creative

flow is a state writers should and do value because it

"unstops" or "short circuits" all the stoppage factors

discussed in Chapter 2, and ideas connect in new ways. But

this does not mean that effective prose cannot be written in

states other than creative flow. Nor does it mean that prose

written in creative flow will be flawless and without need

of editing or revision.

Can the Precipitating State Change During Production?

Calvin Trillin's approach for crossing the writing

threshold seems to begin with "conscious intent" (see page

6, Chapter 1 for definition), but he seems to change

precipitating states during the process of writing. When

doing non-fiction pieces for The New Yorker, Trillin first

collects as many facts as possible: "The more you know about

a situation, the more small details and knowledge you have

beyond what you seem to need, the better you can write about

it" (8). His first real writing, his first crossing of the

writing threshold for a particular article, begins the day

after he gets home from a fact-finding trip. It is an

exercise of "conscious intent," but he allows it to change,

if it happens, into an uncontrolled exercise of "creative

flow":

> The day after I get home, I do a kind of a pre-
> draft--what I call a 'vomit-out.' I don't even
> look at my notes to write it . . . . [It] starts
> out, at least, in the form of a story. But it
> degenerates fairly quickly, and by page four or
> five, sometimes the sentences aren't complete . .
> . .(10)

This 'vomit-out' draft, seems to short-circuit any preoccupation with the abundance of detail he collects for his articles; by not referring to his notes at this early point, he simply allows all his conscious and unconscious thoughts to flow unedited onto the page.   Sometimes the words come in "creative flow," and sometimes it can take him all day to write an hour's worth of words. But he doesn't judge; he just lets it happen, knowing that he has the time and the mental tools to make sense of the words later, or even to start all over if necessary.

The second draft may begin in a "creative flow" state, "Sometimes--when I am very lucky--the story just opens up before me and I realize which direction to go in" (12). It isn't that he has found more facts; rather, he somehow looks at those facts differently, from a new perspective that allows him to write creatively. Then he goes back to his facts and figures and fits them into his new perspective. Trillin's rituals, his procedures, form a flexible step-by-step pattern he has developed over the years which allows him to produce always competent, sometimes inspired prose. If the "creative flow" never happens, Trillin is still able to produce effective, well-written articles that may be indistinguishable in terms of quality, at least to his readers, from the articles in which "creative flow" played a part.

The ability to change from a state of "conscious

intent" to "creative flow" doesn't seem to be restricted to professional writers as evidenced by Reed Larson's case study of S.N., discussed above. Larson relates that S.N. repeatedly showed a sensitivity to his inner states, monitoring his energy level and emotions so that he would not be "overwhelmed" by his project at any point. According to Larson, S.N. "regulated the balance of challenges and skills, creating conditions for enjoyable involvement" (35). Larson also cites another student, A.R., who was initially anxious about her writing project, relating that she "was having trouble putting things in logical order" (36). She didn't give in to panic, but rather decided to experiment with different outlines of her project. After she found an approach that she liked, she said, "As I was writing the rough draft and converting it to final copy, I sensed a real flow in the materials and I felt as if everything was finally falling together" (36).

Do Writers Change Threshold Patterns Over Time?

Will Bev, the student cited earlier, always cross the writing threshold in a state of acute anxiety? Will she ever learn to pace her pattern of writing, crossing the writing threshold with conscious intent as did Walter, the experienced writer in the same study? Or will she ever experience writing with creative flow?

From the research on the composition process so far, it

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isn't possible to answer these questions. We do know, though, that the pattern of crossing the writing threshold seems to vary greatly, even among accomplished writers. Muriel Harris, who studied one- and multi-draft writers doesn't advocate trying to change all one-draft writers into those who revise extensively. She sees strengths in the techniques of both one- and multi-draft writers. The one drafters she studied seemed to resist putting words on paper, to resist crossing the writing threshold. In order to be effective writers they had developed patterns of extensive mental pre-text planning and revising before they put words on paper. They did little or no re-transcribing afterwards. The multi-drafters she studied needed to interact with their written texts in order to revise. Regardless of how much planning or "incubating" they did before transcribing words onto paper, they revised extensively (187). She explains the major difference between the two groups: "All of the four one-drafters expressed a strong need to clarify their thinking prior to beginning to transcribe . . . [Consistent was] these writers' need to know where they are headed beforehand and a feeling that they are not ready to write or cannot write-- until they are at that state" (180-1). In contrast, the multi-drafters explained that they "resist knowing, resist any attempt at clarification prior to writing. Their preference is for open-ended exploration as they write"

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(181).

Another consistent and clearly related difference

between one- and multi-drafters, according to Harris, is the

"difference in the quantity of options they will generate,

from words and sentences to whole sections of a paper, and

the way in which they will evaluate these options . . . the

one drafters . . . . exhibited none of the agonizing over

possibilities that other writers experience, and they appear

to be able to accept their choices quickly and move on"

(182). Perhaps the multi-drafters sometimes cross the

writing threshold into words too soon, when there is not

enough momentum to carry them satisfactorily through the

writing process. One-drafters may sometimes leave crossing

the threshold until too late, when their anxiety levels are

high enough to interfere with the writing process. Harris

speculates that it may be helpful to expose writers at

either extreme of one- or multi-drafting styles to the

possibilities of modifying their styles.

Harris postulates that if we better understand

composing strategies, we can help multi-drafters to

recognize that they may linger too long over making choices.

And one-drafters may be writers who find the stage of

putting words on paper is the source of their irritation,

not the whole writing process. In other words, they may not

mind mental prewriting, only the process of "transcribing"

their mental prewriting into written words. Harris suggests

that by generalizing their frustration with one part of the writing process to the whole, "some writers unknowingly get themselves caught in linguistic traps . . . What is needed here is some assistance in helping students define their problems more precisely" (198). So, to apply Harris' analysis to Bev and other students who wait until the last possible moment to write, we as teachers might help them pinpoint their exact sources of frustration in the writing process with the hope that they would not then generalize their dislike to the entire writing process.

What is needed is not an attempt to change students so that they all cross the writing threshold in the same way. An appreciation is needed that there are different ways to cross the writing threshold and that different writers may experience different precipitating states at different times and with different writing projects.

Chapter 4: How Does The Writing Threshold

Relate to Teaching?

On a sunny, humid day in late August, the first day of

class for the fall semester, I found myself in front of a

class of twenty-five young men and women. These were

freshmen, some of them just back from water skiing vacations

and others from summer jobs tossing hamburgers at fast food

restaurants. Most were dressed in painfully new running

shoes or penny loafers and in deliberately casual denim

clothes chosen to make them look like experienced members of

this college community.

Like thousands of other instructors in thousands of

other classrooms, I faced them across a desk and began what

we call "Freshman Writer's Workshop." But what could I, in

one semester, teach them about the process of producing

words? It isn't as if they had never written before. All

were veterans of high school composition. Yet, they told me

that day, as have other freshmen I have taught, that this

familiar process of producing words was still somehow

mysterious and anxiety producing. One summarized a

prevailing attitude, "The word fear comes to mind when I

think of writing this semester. It's simply because I never

know if my teacher will like what am I going to produce."

But why do students have these attitudes? What is it about

the "mere" writing of essays in freshman composition that can inspire such an adverse reaction?

One answer to that question can be expressed by the metaphor of a student writer as a performer juggling balls before an audience. The balls are the conditions demanding students' attention while writing: how do they develop a series of ideas about a topic? How do they phrase their ideas in the kind of language the teacher wants? How do they avoid grammatical and spelling mistakes? Like jugglers, student writers must keep these conditions in the air, looking first at one without forgetting the others. If one ball is dropped, it is likely that all the others will fly out of control, to the juggler's mortification and the audience's ridicule. And the situation is even more complex; writers must, at the same time they are mentally juggling conditions, step forward and cross the writing threshold. Student writers face the daunting task of learning to keep going, slowly, step-by-step, the process of producing words while juggling complex constraints. If they lose one ball or stumble over a crack in the flooring, the whole process comes to a halt. Then slowly, they must begin again, first tossing one ball in the air and then another before they can take that next step through the writing threshold. With all this complexity, it's a wonder, not that student writers have trouble articulating their thoughts, but that they ever manage coherently to put words in a row on paper.

As my students face me, they hold pencils and notebooks of blank white paper. Back at their dorm rooms are computers waiting with lettered keys and blank screens. These are the places my students will record what they produce as they cross the writing threshold this semester. My students aren't aware that they are crossing a threshold when they put words on paper or on a computer screen. They aren't aware that once they have crossed that threshold there are constraints that can "stop" the flow of words. They are too intent on on carrying out this familiar yet still mysterious and anxiety arousing process of producing words.

Utility of the Concept "Writing Threshold"

My contention is that the term "writing threshold" has utility in the classroom. Along with study of pre-writing, revision and other writing processes, it may be useful for teachers to identify for students the different precipitating states for crossing the writing threshold and the different constraints demanding a writer's attention in the composing process.

I will use as an illustration Andy, one of my students in freshman composition. In a diagnostic essay Andy explains he dreads the process of composition so much that he procrastinates until the last possible moment before beginning an assigned essay:

When I learned that this class was all writing,
I almost died because I knew I had to take it in

> order to graduate. Like in high school, I'll
> probably write down in my calendar the due date
> for each assignment and avoid thinking about it
> till the night before.

Clearly, Andy uses an extreme version of deadline anxiety as

his precipitating state for crossing the writing threshold.

He may not realize it yet, but this pattern likely will

cause him problems in college because he isn't allowing

himself enough time for writing. Likely, Andy won't attempt

to change his pattern of crossing the threshold until fear

of failure drives him to request assistance.

Susan, another student, writes that she doesn't begin

all her writing in the same way:

> When something really great has happened in my
> life, I like to sit down and write about it to a
> friend. The words flow easily, and it's fun. When
> I write an assignment, though, I just have to make
> myself do it. I get in a quiet place without any
> distractions, like my room at night, and I write
> until I have a rough draft. Then I put it away for
> awhile before I try rewriting.

Susan's words flow easily and pleasurably in the letter to a

friend, a state which can be identified as creative flow. In

writing an essay, in contrast, she doesn't feel that same

ease. Instead, she makes conscious plans for writing that

she knows will accomplish her purpose. Susan's method of

crossing the writing threshold for essay writing is

certainly more functional than Andy's. She plans a time to

write each draft and doesn't stop until it is completed.

Apparently, though, she hasn't yet considered seeking the

kind of creative flow in her essay writing that she

experiences in letter writing. Perhaps the essay writing

doesn't flow because she doesn't have a clearly perceived

audience as she does for her letter writing. Or perhaps she

hasn't yet found essay topics of sufficient interest to

inspire a state of creative flow.

Jugglers Improve With Practice

Returning briefly to the metaphor of the student writer

as juggler, it is instructive to remember that apprentice

jugglers eventually do learn how to keep all the balls in

the air. They may even progress, if they wish, from

juggling mundane colored balls to tossing and catching sharp

knives or flaming torches. The same is true, in a sense, of

students who stay with the difficult task of developing

their abilities as a writer. They can, over time, develop

justified confidence in their own abilities to control all

the conflicting factors demanding their attention, and they

go on competently to tackle more challenging writing

situations.

The problem with composition classes for beginning

student writers is that they, like the students themselves,

suffer from "atoneness," as Berthoff calls it. So many

things need to be addressed at the same time. Where is a

writing instructor to begin?

The research of Robert Boice, a psychologist, suggests

that a simple but effective start may be simply to require

students to write frequently. Boice's study was of academicians who complained of writers block, rather than of students, but his results raise the intriguing question of whether the results would be similar with students experiencing writing difficulties. Boice divided his academicians into three groups; nine each were assigned to a "condition where they (a) were forced to write five days a week by strong external contingencies, or (b) were left to write spontaneously, or (c) agreed to put off all but emergency writing until the ten-week experiment had ended" (203). All kept graphs of numbers of pages of writing completed and creative ideas generated. The results were striking: those who wrote every day produced more writing and more creative ideas. Why? Boice postulates that the habit of regular writing establishes optimal conditions for thinking about writing, a trait that has been associated with successful writers. Alternatively or additionally, Boice suggests writing, like other creative pursuits, must be practiced regularly for best effects (204).

Is the same true for students? Do they improve simply by writing more frequently? One of my students, in his diagnostic essay at the beginning of the semester, made a comment that unknowingly echoes Boice: "I guess that writing is just like everything else you do. You have to work at it a lot to be good at it." Practice may not make perfect, but it alone, with or without any other "treatment," may result

in improvement for many students. Students, like this one, have an intuitive sense that their writing will improve if they just do more of it, regardless of the type of instruction they receive. What he and other students of similar attitude may hope is that their instructors will help guide them to progress more efficiently than they could in an instructor-less trial and error method.

What about aspects of writing instruction other than writing frequency? Willa Wolcott and Dianne Buhr propose that writing teachers strive to de-mystify the writing process through instruction in pre-writing, invention, revision, etc., and that they help students cope with any writing apprehension by attempting to locate the specific sources of their negative feelings. They also suggest teachers work toward increasing students' awareness of the utility of writing in their college careers and in the workplace (6-8). They base their recommendations on their research findings that students with a positive attitude toward writing (as evidenced on questionnaires) were more likely to make significant improvement in their writing of essays than were students with neutral or negative attitudes. Wolcott and Buhr don't assume that positive attitude caused writing improvement but rather suggest that students who have positive attitudes toward writing may work harder and perform better, thus reinforcing their positive attitudes. Wolcott and Buhr's research shows a positive

correlation between students' knowledge of the complexities of the writing process (such as pre-writing and revision) and writing improvement.

Flower and Hayes recommend instruction in rhetorical problem solving which they assert is "eminently teachable" (102). Students, they explain, can be taught to explore a topic and also to identify the "signals" which tell writers it is time to write, such as finding a voice or a point of view. According to Flower and Hayes, "If we can teach students to explore and define their own problems, even within the constraints of an assignment, we can help them to create inspiration instead of wait for it" (102).

My Recommendation

Another of my students wrote in his diagnostic essay at the beginning of the semester, "I get frustrated because I'm often not sure the paper gets across the idea I am trying to express. It takes me a long time and a lot of rewriting to be satisfied with what I write." This student wants to write, if only given a reasonably non-threatening situation in which to do so; he wants to find ways to confront the constraints that plague him in the writing process. What I would recommend for my student, what I try to provide in my classroom, is an atmosphere where students may practice the "atoneness" of writing. It is a trial and error process for both of us, student and teacher, as we try to find a

reasonable combination of writing, peer editing, discussion of rhetorical problem solving, location of sources of apprehension, discussion of academic conventions, analysis of error, consideration of the writing threshold, and other issues that seem appropriate. It's not a small agenda for a semester, needless to say.

What is different about my approach is that I actually discuss the writing threshold in the classroom as part of the process of demystifying the writing process. I believe it is useful to help students to identify their precipitating states for crossing the writing threshold and factors that may "clog" the threshold and stop the flow of writing. Many students believe that there is something inexplicably wrong about the way they produce text. If their ways aren't wrong, they think, why is it frequently so painful and so difficult to write? Suppose students, through considering the writing threshold, become aware that all writers experience times when writing is difficult, times when they procrastinate, times when they have to force themselves to write, and times when, sometimes unexpectedly, the writing comes easily. Suppose students come to realize that their procrastinations, their fears, and their joys are normal reactions to the process of putting words on paper? Suppose students learn that it is possible to alter the ways that they cross the writing threshold?

Alan, another of my students, offers an answer to these

questions as he describes his thoughts after becoming more aware of the writing process of professional writers and of his fellow students:

> Before, I had this image of professional writers sitting at computers and smiling ear to ear, not a bit anxious or worried. After reading some authors' essays about writing, I have begun to see that they have the same feelings of anxiety and pain that I do. As my deadline gets closer, I start to get more and more stressed. When I get to the point that I can't sleep, I know it's time to begin writing. Just knowing that other writers do the same thing is comforting . . . Maybe as I write more, I'll be able to write before I get so uncomfortable; but if that doesn't happen, I'm not alone. Other writers have the   same problem.

Not feeling alone in the writing process, not fearing it quite so much, and perhaps even daring to modify it in positive ways--students experience these results after identifying the writing threshold and the ways it is crossed.

All writers are, in a sense, alone when they face that blank sheet of paper. But, in another sense, they share a common task, that of putting words in a row on that blank page. Identifying and teaching the term "writing threshold" may help make that moment of text production less mysterious, more approachable for students and, perhaps, for all writers.

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