How We Write: Understanding Scholarly Writing through Metaphor

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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

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things by comparing them to others (Garner 2005, 5). A fair amount of literature describes the role of analogy and metaphor in teaching; for example, metaphors can help professors more clearly convey ideas in the classroom and increase students' absorption and assimilation of information (Glynn and Takahashi 1998; National Research Council 2000; Williams 1986). In addition, scholars use metaphor to conceptualize the teaching process and their role in it (McShane 2005). Little has been said about how scholars use metaphor to conceptualize the writing process.

Why hasn't this metaphor technique received more attention in academia? One reason may be that it does not focus on increasing writing productivity, at least not directly. I suggest, however, that our assumptions about how to increase output are partly based on our perceptions of what writing is actually like; therefore, the better we understand what we face when we sit down to write, the better able we are to devise strategies to get the writing done.

More important than its impact on the quantity of output, is how the writing metaphor places our focus on the craft of writing and the manner in which we practice it. In my own case, developing a writing metaphor made that process both more manageable and more pleasurable. It also helped me develop a standard for what constituted strong work, one that took into account not just the demands of my institution and profession, but the reality of who I am as a writer. In what follows, I explain how I developed my own writing metaphor, describe its component parts, and analyze its benefits and limitations.

FROM DEARTH TO BIRTH: THE GESTATION WRITING METAPHOR

In my second year as a faculty member I was invited by a senior colleague to join a writing accountability group. Unlike a traditional writing group, in which members read and respond to each ing group members was pointless—both my department and my writing group were multidisciplinary and their members varied too widely in seniority, productivity, and writing form to serve as a reasonable model for my own output.[4] Moreover, I sensed that, had I been able to find a suitable model, using some other scholar as a benchmark for my own pace and process would only lead to unhealthy comparison and useless competition. After yet another meeting focused on this problem, my fellow group members suggested that one of my goals for the following week be to determine how long it takes for me to draft a journal-length article while teaching the standard 2:2 course load at my university.

The metaphor I devised at the time is presented in table 1. It describes the process of drafting and sending off a manuscript as akin to the gestation and birth of a human baby.[5] The first column identifies and defines the stages of writing, each one named after a phase of gestation and labor. The subsequent three columns describe the writing process along several dimensions: the clarity of the argument, the quality of the writing, and its suitability for review by various audiences. The fifth column describes what writing activities take place in each stage of draft development. The final column estimates the amount of time I typically need to complete each stage during the fall or spring semester.

It's important to remember that my original assignment was not to *develop an analogy* for the writing process. Rather, my assignment was to *devise a time estimate*. I soon realized, however, that one reason I could not accurately estimate the time required to draft an article is that I could not define a draft. That is, I was using the word "draft" inconsistently: sometimes the word referred to a confused and convoluted collection of big ideas that I showed to very close colleagues in the hope that a second eye would help clarify my thinking. At other times a draft was a more polished piece of work ready to be seen by more distant colleagues—those

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other's drafts, the writing accountability group met weekly to set and review progress on each member's writing goals. This group was essential to helping me learn to prioritize writing while juggling my new teaching and service responsibilities. Toward the end of graduate school, I had become a binge writer who worked inordinately long days in pajamas and sweats. These marathon writing sessions did not fit well with my new schedule, which required that I get dressed, travel to campus, hold office hours, prepare and teach classes, and attend faculty meetings, committee meetings, receptions, and lectures. 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.

Despite these improvements, I consistently failed to meet my writing goals during the first few semesters I participated in the group. Each week I would accomplish a significant amount of work, yet by the end of the semester, I always fell short of what I had set out to do. After extensive discussion with group members, I realized that I had no sense of what was a reasonable goal given my own writing pace. Patterning myself on my colleagues or writ-

whose experience and expertise made them excellent sources of feedback, but to whom I was unwilling to expose my flaws. I also used the word draft to refer to the finished piece of work I submitted to refereed journals, but which I expected to revise after receiving feedback from reviewers. Which was I referring to at any given time? More importantly, what kind of work was required to produce each one? I knew I had to write, of course, but had no idea what actually took place when I wrote. All three kinds of drafts differed in purpose, scope, and polish. What was involved in working on different kinds of drafts? What did progress look like for each? How and when did I capture ideas? Develop arguments? Narrow down claims? Or reconcile inconsistencies? Like many scholars, I had never purposefully considered these questions.[6] After I began my assignment, however, my question quickly changed from "How fast?" to "How in the world...?"

THE VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE WRITING ANALOGY

Herein lies the great benefit of the writing metaphor: because it changes our focus from pace to process, it reveals unexpected information about what we do and how we do it that might otherwise

Table 1

WRITING STAGE	CLARITY OF ARGUMENT	QUALITY OF WRITING	SUITABLE FOR SHARING?	ACTIONS INVOLVED	TIME TO FINISH
Conception: the discovery of an idea for a manuscript.	Varies: argument may be complete or nonexistent.	Of any length or quality.	No.	Quick recording of all ideas in any format: a line, question, paragraph, or abstract.	5 min.
Embryonic Development: in which fundamental parts of the argument are established.	Varies: argument may be complete or nonexistent.	Of generally poor quality.	No.	Identifying, sketching, outlining the parts of the argument or sections of a paper; deciding the form the article will take.	1–2 weeks
Early Fetal Development: in which the early ideas and sections of paper continue to grow and are differentiated.	Minimal: argument is stated, but is unclear, contradicted, unelaborated (not carried through text), or unsupported.	Grammar and spelling errors are plentiful; sentence structure is labored and confused; style is clunky and inconsistent.	No: Reading the draft is a burden to others and only to be asked of the closest and most trusted relationships.	Fleshing out the arguments made in each individual section by taking statements to their logical conclusion; providing background and context; offering evidence.	1–4 weeks
Middle Fetal Development: in which the most important ideas are identified, elaborated, and eliminated.	Minimal: multiple arguments may not match the data. Subject to revision as author discovers, accepts, and rejects new and old arguments.	Grammar, sentence structure, and style are inconsistent but increasingly polished.	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.	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.	5–8 weeks
Later Development: in which the content and presentation of ideas is refined and the draft is transformed into a manuscript.	The argument is clearly understood by the author and its essential kernel exists through the entire piece.	Grammar, structure, and style are rushed and clunky, but hold the necessary ideas to form a smooth, seamless line of argument.	Yes: Reading draft and discussing it with author helps her make connections and clarify ideas.	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.	5–8 weeks
Labor: The process through which the completed manuscript is prepared for submission to reviewers.	The argument is clearly articulated, carried throughout the manuscript, and convincingly supported.	Grammar and spelling errors are virtually nonexistent. Sentence structure is elegant. Writing style is melodic and engaging.	The work is a pleasure to read and leaves the reader struggling to find criticisms. Suitable for conference presentation and outside review.	Editing; clarifying submission requirements; gathering/preparing citations; writing cover letters, keywords, abstracts, and acknowledgements; creating relevant titles and headings.	2–4 weeks
Delivery				Pressing Send.	1 min.

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 niggling, 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.

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-

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aphor forced me to observe what I actually did when I sat down to write. This, in turn, showed me that certain kinds of tasks were going to take me a certain amount of time; how long I wanted these to take and how long they took other people was irrelevant. Did I then feel free to ignore the tenure requirements of my institution? To take summers off and relax during spring break? Hardly. I continued to worry that my rate of output would not allow me to meet the standards of my institution. However, I also came to see that even if my publication record could not earn me tenure at my university, *there was really nothing else I could have done short of leave*. I was forced to acknowledge, given the particular constellation of demands and priorities that made up my life, the limits to what I could do in a given amount of time. In other words, the writing metaphor encouraged me to think about process instead of product. In doing so, it helped me develop a clearer sense of my limitations, my areas of excellence, and what constituted my best effort given both.

Despite the metaphor's many benefits, two of its limitations spring instantly to mind. First, the insights it reveals are unlikely to sink in and immediately liberate us from the pressure to focus on the quantity of publications we produce. The forces of habit, fear, and expectation are strong; they are likely to keep most of us focused on output until we achieve our particular ideal of professional security and prestige. Indeed, I did not fully appreciate this metaphor when I first wrote it. It is only from the softened seat of tenure that I feel free enough to think more fully about these issues. The writing metaphor, then, is not a recipe for instant academic bliss. Rather, this technique invites scholars to slightly shift

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

ture, outlining and developing arguments, reviewing and reanalyzing data, responding to external feedback, copyediting, fact-checking, and submission logistics. All of this is "thinking" work, although each is a different kind of thinking work: some parts of it may feel somewhat routine, while other steps have a creative element that cannot be controlled. When we degrade or dismiss effort that does not fit into our narrow vision of "real work" we fail to give ourselves credit for the amount and difficulty of our work.

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 tenurable 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. ■

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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.[7] 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 not considering writing at all. A writing metaphor is valuable, not because it is a formula that accounts for all variables; but because it is a net that captures a different species of fish. It is enough, then, that it prompts us to look at our work with fresh eyes and a new sense of purpose.

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://academicwriting club.com).

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

3. Olson and Worsham (2003) and Antoniou and Moriarty (2008).

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.

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