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## Chapter 5. A Definition of Everyday Writing: Methods for a Writer-Informed Approach to Lifespan Writing

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## CHAPTER 5.

# A DEFINITION OF EVERYDAY WRITING: METHODS FOR A WRITER-INFORMED APPROACH TO LIFESPAN WRITING

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On the opening page of Bazerman et al.'s (2018) *The Lifespan Development of Writing*, the authors point out that “[w]e may readily grant that learning and development are life long, yet we stay focused—as we must—on the immediacies of our academic locations” (p. 3). If we do not expand our scope beyond these locations, they argue, “we [will] know too little about how writing develops before, during, and after schooling; too little about how a person’s writing experiences relate to each other developmentally across the lifespan” (Bazerman et al., 2018, p. 4). Similarly, in this chapter I argue that if we stay focused on the immediacies of our scholarly assumptions of what writing is and how it should be defined, then we will be unable to more fully understand the ways that writing is defined by everyday writers and how these definitions are shaped across the lifespan.

One way that we can begin to expand and enrich our understanding of everyday writers, and the ways they use writing, is to use a writer-informed approach. This kind of approach, which has been taken up by researchers like Bowen (this volume), Rosenberg (this volume), and Prior and Shipka (2003), gives the writers we study a role in collecting and selecting the data we analyze, in shaping our interviews, and, ultimately, in guiding the trajectory of our research and results. Importantly, this kind of approach can aid in the discovery of not just how and why people are writing through their lifespans and how they define writing, but it can also—and perhaps more importantly—aid in the discovery of where our scholarly assumptions and understandings diverge from those engaged in writing in their everyday lives. In other words, a writer-informed approach provides an opportunity for us to supplement our own assumptions and understandings with those of the everyday writers, and vice versa. Working with writers to shape these findings also has the potential to help the writers we work with more fully understand, and see the importance of, their writing practices.

My own writer-informed approach to studying everyday writing asked five writers (most of whom did not even consider themselves to be writers) to define writing as they use it in their daily lives. The writers participated in the selection and collection of data about their writing habits, and they made the decisions about what counts as everyday writing and what does not. This kind of approach attempts to, borrowing from the previous Lifespan Writing Development Group, “more wholly democratize a complex, slow-growing” *definition* of a “human capacity that no longer belongs in the hands of the few” (Bazerman et al., 2018, p. 4) and put it into the many hands of the non-academic and non-professional writers who engage in it.

In this chapter, I will discuss previous research that has shown the value of a writer-informed approach to studying writing. I will then outline the methods used in my own writer-informed approach to define everyday writing. Finally, I close with two examples that illustrate the benefits of a writer-informed approach: first, it can help us strengthen our understandings of writing through the lifespan by pointing out where our scholarly definitions and understandings of writing diverge from those of the practitioners we study; and, second, it can help positively change the way our participants think about their own writing.

## WRITER-INFORMED APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING WRITING

Though the term *writer-informed approach* might be new, the benefits of letting participants guide investigations into writing practices—especially those that span the length or width of our lives—have been illustrated by some scholars in writing studies like Bowen (this volume), Prior and Shipka, (2003), and Roozen (2008; 2012). Looking more specifically at Bowen’s “literacy tours” (this volume), Prior and Shipka’s maps and document curation, and Roozen’s interviews can demonstrate a research tradition similar to what I call a writer-informed approach.

In her chapter in this collection, Bowen discusses “Literacy Tours” as a method for better understanding the material influences on elder participants’ writing practices. Though she does not use the term, these literacy tours are part of a writer-informed approach, since the writer “*leads* the researcher on a narrated walk-through of the physical and sometimes virtual spaces in which they engage in literate activity” (this volume, emphasis added). As Bowen explains, this writer-informed method “interrupts . . . the assumptions that might otherwise be embedded within the interview” and “elicits details about a life story that might not otherwise appear in [them].” Bowen argues that giving the writers the opportunity to lead us to findings, to shape our investigations, and to participate

in the selection and curation of data as much as possible is the major benefit of a writer-informed approach. Scholars like Prior and Shipka (2003) and Roozen (2008, 2012), whose work often looks at the sociohistorical aspects of writing, have also utilized methods that allow the writers to take the lead in helping us better understand the ways that writing practices are materially, socially, and personally situated.

In “Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity,” Prior and Shipka (2003) trace the ways that “literate activity” consists of “dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action” (p. 181). As outside observers, it would be difficult to envision these laminations themselves, so they asked academic writers (students and professors) to take the lead: to draw maps of both their writing processes and the spaces that those processes take place in, to curate a collection of supplemental “material[s] they used in their writing” (Prior & Shipka, 2003, p. 180), and to participate in a semi-structured interview about their maps, artifacts, and writings. Put another way, Prior and Shipka let the writers select what was most important or apparent to them.

This process gave the participants the opportunity to exert more control over the conversations about their writing and, ultimately, inform the results of the research. By letting the writers direct their focus, Prior and Shipka were able to look at a range of writing (from a multimodal assignment, to a dissertation, to a manuscript), spaces (from a dorm room, to a bar, to a house), influential artifacts (from movies, to notebooks, to annotated books), and the interconnections between these factors. Their writers were able to point them towards activities and connections that might otherwise have been missed by more rigid, prescriptive scholar-driven selection criteria.

Similarly, Roozen (2012) has used a writer-informed approach to complicate “dominant perspectives of basic writers’ self-sponsored literacies [that] tend to overlook the important roles such activities can play in literate development” (p. 99). Over five years, Roozen collected texts, conducted semi-structured interviews, and observed writing activities to illustrate how one writer, who was classified as a basic writer in the university, engages in a diverse range of writing tasks outside the university. In composition courses, Roozen’s writer struggled with issues like grammar and sentence structure. Outside of his courses, however, he successfully wrote for the school newspaper, wrote jokes as a standup comedian, and published his poetry. Because he worked so closely with this writer and let the writer’s interests and activities guide the investigation, Roozen (2008) was able to engage in a “complicated, messy, and yet fascinating exploration of the role that non-school literate practices played in [the student’s] development as an ‘academic writer’” (p. 8).

As with Prior and Shipka (2003), Roozen (2008) let his participant inform the research by engaging in “open-ended interviews” that were primarily guided by the artifacts the student brought in (p. 9). When Roozen would request artifacts of writing from his student, the student often “volunteered to provide [Roozen] with additional texts that he thought might be useful . . .” (2008, p. 9). As before, the writer was able to exert more influence over their discussions and ultimately shape Roozen’s findings. As a result, Roozen was able to come up with a more robust understanding of the ways that the overlapping academic and non-academic activities this student engages in complicates the rigid understandings of who counts as a basic writer. Without a more writer-informed approach to his investigation, Roozen’s discussions of the permeability between academic and extracurricular writing would have been limited by his own understandings of this participant’s life and experiences.

These three examples point to the benefits of a writer-informed approach to studying writing, and all three of these approaches also, in various degrees, look towards everyday writing—the writing that writers engage in in the course of our daily lives. These examples also illustrate what might be missed if we do not let writers inform our research: the contexts, the practices, the artifacts, the new understandings that would be overlooked without their input. That being said, none of these examples attempt to *define* writing or everyday writing, which means our definitions of writing, and our understandings of how those definitions are shaped by writer’s lives and experiences, lack the nuance that writer-informed approaches add.

Rather than utilizing writer-informed approaches, studies that have attempted to define everyday writing (or a related term) tend to take one of three scholar-directed approaches: 1) deductively, with scholars creating a definition and illustrating it with tasks and/or artifacts (see Nystrand & Duffy, 2003); 2) inductively, constructing a definition after observing the tasks and/or artifacts of everyday writers (see Barton & Hamilton, 1998); or 3) synthetically, constructing a definition from other scholars studying this area (see Lillis, 2013). The writers are certainly integral to these various approaches, but the researchers make the determinations about what does and does not count as everyday on behalf of the practitioners.

Bowen (this volume), Prior and Shipka (2003), and Roozen (2008, 2012) have shown how writer-informed approaches can more fully illustrate the ways that writers’ contexts shape their writing practices, and how they can lead us to new understandings. To that end, the remainder of this chapter demonstrates how a writer-informed approach can also be used to let writers lead us to definitions of everyday writing, and how this process can benefit both the researchers and the writers.

## A WRITER-INFORMED APPROACH TO DEFINING EVERYDAY WRITING

To define everyday writing, my writer-informed approach relied on three sources of data collection: 1) time use diaries (TUDs) that catalog the writers' writing tasks over the course of a week; 2) artifacts of writing that illustrate some of those writing tasks; and 3) discussions with the writers about the TUDs and artifacts and their definitions of, and experiences with, writing. Together, these three data collection methods offer an overarching portrait (the TUDs), a portrait of specific practices (the artifacts), and a definition and its influences (the interviews).

These methods, in particular, have been influenced primarily by two earlier studies of everyday writing: the investigation into the overarching everyday writing habits of American adults by Cohen et al. (2011) in "A Time Use Diary Study of Adult Everyday Writing Behavior" and the investigation into the contextual influences on, and purposes of, adult writing habits in Barton and Hamilton's (1998) *Local Literacies*. The designs and methods of these two studies have been adapted to the goals of this particular approach; namely, using multiple streams of data to give the writers more opportunities to direct my attention towards and away from certain practices and influences on their writing, and more opportunities to insert their voices into the findings.

The TUDs utilized for my writer-informed approach asked the writers to log their writing tasks for seven days and fill out six data points for each entry. The six data points for each writing task are: 1) the date/time of the task; 2) what was written; 3) where it was written; 4) what materials were used to write it; 5) how much time was spent writing it; and 6) for what purpose it was written. The writers were able to decide the level of detail for their responses to these points, which I then asked about during the interview process.

In terms of what counts as writing and what should thus be cataloged in the TUD, the instructions for the writers asked them to

Record any activity in which you have used a keyboard (e.g., connected to your computer, on your smartphone, etc.) or a writing implement (e.g., a pencil, a pen, a crayon, etc.) to compose something. This can include activities like sending a text, writing a journal entry, posting on Facebook, jotting a shopping list, or other related activity.

Although there were some examples of writing implements and activities that could be included, these vague instructions were intended to give the writers more agency in determining what they counted as writing and so, what did and did not get cataloged. For example, one of the writers (Bill) included his Face-

book Likes as a writing task in his diary, which I would not have thought to include as a writing task. These instructions also sometimes encouraged the logging of tasks, like adding books to a reading list (Rose), that the writer indicated they might otherwise have excluded. The writers' decisions about what did and did not get put in their TUDs were discussed in the interviews, which gave them more of an opportunity to explain their definitions of writing and everyday writing.

Both the individual TUDs and the collated TUD data helped to illustrate the relationship between the writers' definitions and the writing they actually engage in, which we were then able to more concretely discuss in our interviews. In these discussions, the writers looked over their TUDs and looked for patterns in the data; they then used these insights to inform their definitions of everyday writing and offer illustrations of the kinds of tasks that fit, or did not fit, in their definitions. As will be discussed in more detail, the writers' definitions of everyday writing were mostly based on its functions, and this was corroborated by the data in the TUDs. For example, the writers emphasized communication as part of their definition of everyday writing, and their TUDs illustrated that most of their writing is for communicative purposes. Similarly, the writers who emphasized organization as part of their definition logged a large number of organizational tasks (e.g., lists and planning documents) in their TUDs and pointed to them in our discussions as illustrations of that function.

While the TUDs are intended to provide one picture—in broad strokes—of the writers' writing habits, the artifacts they selected were able to provide a more detailed illustration of that writing. The writers were asked to select ten artifacts of writing that had been recorded in their TUDs, and these instructions were also designed to let the writers curate their selections. These artifacts provide more information, and opportunities for questions, about the specific ways these writers were composing, what the compositions look like, and what factors—either immediate or distant—have influenced the artifacts they selected. These artifacts also aided in understanding the participants' definitions of writing and looking for connections/disconnections between definitions and practices.

Finally, after collecting the TUDs and artifacts, I conducted semi-structured interviews, or discussions, with each of the writers to talk about their writing practices (both generally and in the TUD/artifacts) and their definitions of both writing and everyday writing. The TUD can only attend to the range of writing tasks the writers are engaging in, and the artifact collection can only attend to the specific composition. The interview, on the other hand, can attend to the more contextual factors—like the social, historical, and/or personal factors—influencing the writers' practices and understandings; these can, in turn, illustrate the information from the TUDs and artifacts. The interviews also provided the opportunity for the writers to define both writing and everyday writing in their

own words. While this aspect of data collection certainly had the most scholarly intervention, the questions were open-ended and provided many opportunities for the writers to guide the discussion.

These three sources of data were then read across holistically and inductively in an attempt to find similarities and differences among the writers' practices and definitions. The definition was the result of finding similarities and repeated references to definitions of writing in different parts of their interviews, and the TUDs and artifacts were used to illustrate those definitions in our discussions.

## THIS WRITER-INFORMED APPROACH

As this study is a writer-informed approach, selecting a group of writers who would inform it was particularly important. This group consisted of five self-described "non-writers" each representing a decade between 20 and 60 years of age and who are each quite different from one another in terms of demographic and personal factors such as race, occupation, location, level of education, and individual interests. They are:

- **Rose:** a white woman in her mid-20s, who at the time of study was living in Tallahassee, Florida after having driven across the country camping in her van. She has some college experience, mostly in the field of nursing, but no degree. She has worked primarily in the service and hospitality industry and was in between jobs while participating in the study.
- **Alison:** a white woman in her early 30s living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She has a BA in art history, which she finished in her late 20s. She spent many years working in retail, although she is currently self-employed and running an Etsy store selling vintage/antique home goods.
- **Danny:** a white man in his late 40s living in Clinton, New York. He has a BA in studio art, which he finished in his early 40s. Since graduating, he has overseen the day-to-day operations related to the studio art workshop at a small liberal arts college.
- **Laura:** a black woman in her early 50s living near Chicago, Illinois. She has a BS in psychology and pre-med, which she completed at age 22. She is a manager and compliance analyst at a large insurance corporation in Illinois, where she oversees casualty and loss reporting and training.
- **Bill:** a white man in his early 60s living near Akron, Ohio. He has a BS in engineering and started, but did not finish, an MBA. He

worked at a large aircraft manufacturing company as an engineer, manager, and internal educator for two decades and is now “semi-retired.” He has recently patented a plane/boat/car hybrid, which he is designing and building himself.

This group of five was deliberately selected for this investigation based on two major factors: 1) their lack of professional/scholarly experience with writing and 2) the range of demographic factors the writers represent. The reasoning behind the first criterion was to ensure that the writers’ contributions to this study would not be swayed by professional or scholarly expertise. The second criterion is connected to Dippre and Smith’s chapter in this collection, which highlights the importance of context in the development of writing.

Selecting based on age groups yielded a group of writers who could speak to a range of different age-related experiences that happen through the lifespan, for instance, adapting to new writing technology, moving to new locations, and embarking on different careers (see Bazerman et al., 2018; Bowen, this volume; Dippre and Smith, this volume). The other demographic factors were also helpful in generating a portrait and definition of writing that speak to a range of experiences, interests, and contexts. Interestingly, despite the writers’ age differences and the differences in their individual writing practices, their definitions of writing were quite similar.

The data collected from the five writers provided interesting insights into what writing looks like for, and how it is defined by, a diverse group of writers. With the constraints of space, however, I will focus on two findings that illustrate the usefulness of writer-informed approaches as we continue our research into writing through the lifespan. The first finding focuses on the disconnections between the writer-informed and the scholarly definitions of everyday writing as a way to highlight how scholarly concerns do not always align with those of the writers studied. The second finding focuses on how this kind of approach can also result in new understandings for the writers who inform our studies.

## A WRITER-INFORMED DEFINITION

In their article, Cohen et al. (2011) define “everyday writing” as “any writing that is carried out in the daily lives of an individual,” which “can range from writing a formal multipage academic paper to jotting down a phone number or making a list” (p. 4). This definition is especially capacious and includes *all* writing under the umbrella of everyday writing. While this term does direct our attention towards *not just* academic writing, it does not necessarily emphasize the more mundane tasks that writers engage in. In order to specifically highlight these mundane writing tasks, I, with colleagues, have defined everyday writing

as “the ubiquitous self-sponsored writing typically operating outside the regulation and oversight of an institution or representative of an institution.”<sup>1</sup> The explicit exclusion of writing that is sponsored (Brandt, 2001), which tends to happen in school and at work,<sup>2</sup> was a deliberate choice made to more fully orient discussions towards the unsponsored writing tasks that, in our view, make up the bulk of writing. While we appreciated the common goal of turning scholarly attention to non-scholarly writing, we thought that existing definitions of everyday writing and related terms (see Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hauser & McClellan, 2009; Nystrand & Duffy, 2003; White-Farnham, 2014) did not go far enough to separate the everyday from the academic and the professional, which are already more commonly studied. These concerns, however, are scholarly; a writer-informed approach to defining writing can help us discover what the actual practitioners believe everyday writing is and what possible benefits, if any, the term everyday writing can offer them.

Although there were small distinctions across the writers’ definitions of everyday writing, there was one common thread that linked them: an emphasis on the functions of everyday writing, particularly communication and organization. While the definition informed by this group of writers was more closely aligned to Cohen et al.’s (2011) definition than it was to my own, it was also not as capacious as Cohen et al.’s. At the same time, the writers’ focus on the functions of their writing, as opposed to genre or location, was also quite different from others who have defined terms akin to everyday writing (Hauser & McClellan, 2009; Nystrand & Duffy, 2003; White-Farnham, 2014). The writer-informed definition was, perhaps, most similar to Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) functions of vernacular literacies, though these scholars identified four more functions than this group of writers did. These differences illustrate the ways that a writer-informed definition can help to fill in the gaps of our own scholarly ones.

The emphasis on communication was evident in almost all the writers’ definitions of everyday writing. Rose, for example, explained that she sees everyday writing as including basically any writing task that does not involve introspection or payment, but when she discussed the value of the practice, she said it provides the “opportunity to *connect* with people” (emphasis added). Danny’s definition of everyday writing was simply “communication,” and Laura similarly defined everyday writing as writing that is used “for communicating.” Bill said that he sees everyday writing as writing that deals with “emotional stuff: relationships or

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1 This definition was crafted with Kathleen Blake Yancey, Joe Cirio, and Erin Workman as part of an early draft of a manuscript arguing for Everyday Writing as a means of categorizing seemingly disparate scholarship in Composition research.

2 Where we are most often in the presence of “agents . . . who teach, model, support, recruit, extort, deny, or suppress literacy and gain advantage by it in some way” (Brandt, 2001, p. 19).

keeping people happy,” which he explained later in the interview (and illustrated through his artifacts and TUD) is primarily enacted through communicating.

The data collected in the TUDs helped to illustrate this primary function of everyday writing: 76 percent of the tasks logged by the writers were for another person, and the remaining 24 percent were for the writer him/herself.<sup>3</sup> The artifacts, however, were much more evenly divided among these two categories, with 54 percent being written for others and 46 percent for the writer him/herself. This disparity slightly complicates their collective definition of everyday writing, which is primarily focused on its communicative function, though it also helps to highlight the second major function they identified.

Many of the self-directed artifacts and writing tasks in the diaries enacted the function of organizing the writers’ lives. Alison’s definition of everyday writing as “putting words on a page—be it meaningless or not” does not necessarily exclude everyday writing’s communicative function, but her definition was the only one that does not specifically point to that communicative function. Instead, Alison’s discussion of her own writing, and the illustration of that writing in her TUD and artifacts, focused on everyday writing’s value for memorializing and organizing her life. Many of the artifacts that Rose selected also pointed to this function of everyday writing, though she did not emphasize it in the definitions she provided in her interview. The artifacts that Rose and Alison selected for this study were primarily organizational writing tasks like shopping lists, Bullet Journal plans and pages, a planning document for a trip, and so on. Danny and Laura also logged these organizational tasks in their TUDs, and their discussions of their writing practices included references to this type of writing task.

For Danny and Laura, these organizational tasks, and most of their writing, occurred at work, which also highlights the role of function in their definitions. As they expanded on their definitions of everyday writing, these two writers—the only two who have full-time jobs—specifically included their work-related tasks that were used for communicating with others and organizing their days, like sending emails and writing notes. Their TUDs and selected artifacts also indicated that this is the primary purpose of their writing: 67 percent of Danny’s writing tasks were work related, as were 79 percent of Laura’s. The other three writers—Rose, Alison, and Bill—did make a distinction between everyday writing and work writing, but they did so in different ways. Rose used the promise of payment as a factor to separate them. Alison used the relative length of workplace documents, in terms of word count and time devoted, to delineate them. Bill said that workplace writing is not everyday writing because it does

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3 Although there were some writing tasks, like shopping lists, that were initially composed for personal reasons but might later be shared with another person.

not, or should not, have an emotional aspect (his evaluative criterion for everyday writing).

Taken together, the writers' definitions of everyday writing are primarily shaped by the writing they regularly engage in, which includes writing used for communicating and/or organizing. Although this group's definition of everyday writing is similar to Cohen et al.'s (2011), since it, too, focuses on the "everydayness"—or regularity—of the writing, this group's definition is much more restrictive. While Cohen et al. included everything, this group of writers excluded tasks such as writing for pay, writing for introspection, and writing for academic purposes. At the same time, though, the writers' definitions of everyday writing were much less restrictive than mine, and they did not use sponsorship to delineate writing and everyday writing. Since Rose, Alison, and Bill do not write for work, they excluded workplace writing in their definition; conversely, since Danny and Laura write primarily for work, they specifically included it in their definition (though they do not see themselves as writing for pay).

These findings, and the ways that the writer-informed definition does not wholly align with the scholar-informed definitions discussed here, highlight the relationships between writers' lives and their definitions of writing and thus the usefulness of a writer-informed approach: working closely with the writers allows them to map connections for us, and allows them to show us what is most influential. Though we may not fully agree with the writers' definitions, this approach points to how our understandings as scholars can become more nuanced by including the opinions of the writers themselves. Rather than including as much as Cohen et al. (2011) have, or excluding as much as I have, the writer-informed definition of everyday writing in this study is a kind of middle ground focusing on function, and a more limited set of functions, rather than just regularity or sponsorship as other scholars have posited.

## **A WRITER-INFORMED PERSPECTIVE SHIFT**

Working with this group of writers to develop a definition of everyday writing resulted in a second finding about a writer-informed approach: it can help the writers we study see themselves as writers and help them see the value of their writing. As scholars of writing, especially those of us interested in lifespan writing, we tend to see a wide range of writing, if not all writing, as valuable. The writers who informed this study of everyday writing did not come to the study with the same belief, but their roles as co-researchers informing this study helped to shift that.

While their definitions of everyday writing, discussed above, were quite expansive, the writers' definitions of what they considered to be "real" writing was

quite restrictive. These five writers view “real writing” as what they did in school or what “real” writers—like journalists, novelists, and poets—are paid to do. Even Danny and Laura, whose writing tasks were primarily connected to their occupations, did not see themselves as writers, nor did they see the tasks they logged in their diaries as writing. Because of these assumptions, all five of the writers were concerned that their participation wouldn’t be useful to this study, since they believed that they did not write—or did not write enough.

As it turns out, their trepidations were closely connected to their definitions of “real” writing. This was especially evident in my discussion with Rose, who said that she didn’t know if her participation was “going to be helpful to, because [she was] not even writing” during the week she logged in her TUD. Rose explained that “real” writing (or “*writing* writing,” as she called it) “is intentional,” it is “[p]utting . . . pen to paper. Like an introspective kind of a release . . .” that involves making an effort “. . . to sit down to really take the time [to write].” When I asked Rose whether or not she thought of herself a writer, she said, “I guess, no,” because, she explained, she was not engaging in the intentional, introspective tasks she includes in her definition of “real” writing. Jokingly, Rose said that looking over her TUD “made [her] feel like a shallow bitch,” because the week of tasks showed that all she “did was text people.”<sup>4</sup> The rest of the writers, with the exception of Bill, reported similar feelings of perceived inadequacies: they logged writing tasks in their TUDs, but they weren’t “*real*” writing tasks. (Bill’s concern was that he did not log enough writing tasks).

Although it is true that some of the writers do not write very much, their TUDs illustrate that they do at least some writing during the course of a week. Their initial definitions of “real” writing, however, caused them to basically ignore the writing they actually engage in. This, in turn, caused the writers to overlook the importance of this writing in terms of the functions that they ultimately included in their definitions of everyday writing (communicating and organizing). After they looked over their TUDs and constructed their definitions of everyday writing, however, some of the writers’ feelings about their writing tasks changed.

After looking over their TUDs and constructing a definition of everyday writing for themselves, three of the writers—Rose, Alison, and Danny—indicated that term helped them see that they *are* writers and they *do* write.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, this new term helped all five of the writers see that the mundane writing tasks they engage in are actually a valuable part of their lives. Rose, who was so dismissive of her own writing at the outset of our discussion, directly addressed

4 51 percent of the tasks Rose logged were texts.

5 Laura reported that she still didn’t feel like she was much of a writer, and Bill said that, although he does not write much, he still believes he is a writer.

this, saying “in the very beginning [of the interview] I talked about how I was like disappointed in myself for my lack of valuable writing—or writing that I saw as valuable. Whereas . . . my perspective has changed now.” After seeing the previously overlooked writing tasks that were logged in her TUD—like texting, posting on social media, and keeping lists—and discussing the *functions* of that writing, Rose now “think[s] that [everyday writing] is just as valuable” as *writing* writing, since it allows her to communicate with friends and keep track of her life. Alison also said that many of the tasks she logged in her TUD and selected as artifacts were tasks that she basically “did without even thinking” and did not think of as writing. After studying this writing and thinking about how it functions, however, she said she now thinks this kind of writing is “more valuable than people probably realize.”

This change in perspective seems to suggest that a writer-informed approach can not only help us better understand writing through the lifespan, but it can also help writers better understand what writing is, what counts as writing, and who they are as writers. After their participation, this group of writers seems to have a more robust understanding of how writing functions as a part of their lives and a better understanding of its value—even the seemingly mundane “words on a page, be [they] meaningless or not” that would have previously been overlooked.

## CONCLUSION

As we attempt to more fully understand writing through the lifespan, it seems important that we do more to include the writers in our research so that they too can benefit from their participation. Writer-informed approaches to understanding writing through the lifespan are one way to give those who engage in the practice(s) we study more of a role in shaping our research and findings. As these two examples from my own writer-informed approach to studying everyday writing indicate, these methods can help to augment, and add detail to, both our scholarly conceptions about writing phenomena and those of the writers we work with.

While I went into the study with my own definition of everyday writing that focused on sponsorship as the criterion for in/exclusion, this writer-informed approach has helped me see that this distinction is not important to actual everyday writers. For these writers, the *function* of their writing—for communication and organization—is much more important, and these definitional functions are directly tied to the writing they engage in—rather than to a more abstract understanding of the practice. Writer-informed definitions of other lifespan related writing phenomena may

offer insights that complicate some of our commonly held assumptions. At the same time, utilizing writer-informed approaches in studying writing across the lifespan can also help us share our results with the writers we study. Simply studying writers has the potential to increase the knowledge that benefits the field of writing studies, but working closely *with* writers as part of our studies has the potential to benefit the field, the researchers, and the writers. This study, for example, complicated my own understanding of what everyday writing is, but it also changed the ways that the writers who constructed the definition think about their own writing. Rather than seeing the mundane tasks logged in their diaries as meaningless, the writers, through collecting data and discussing their findings, now see that these tasks serve important functions in their lives. Adopting this approach to other areas of lifespan writing research may help other writers see the value of their writing and/or the value of studying that writing.

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