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## Authoring

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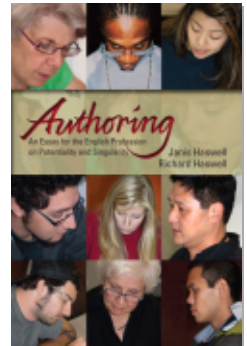
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# 1

## AUTHORING ACCEPTED

*A word on Academies: Poetry has been attacked by an ignorant & frightened bunch of bores who don't understand how it's made, & the trouble with these creeps is they wouldn't know Poetry if it came up and buggered them in broad daylight.*

Allen Ginsberg, "Notes for *Howl* and for Other Poems"

Writing in 1959, the poet Ginsberg was angry at the initial reaction of literary scholars to Beat literature, especially "Howl," and both his intemperate dismissal of their kind of knowledge and their temporary dismissal of his kind of poetry can be chalked up to the passing historical moment. Still, Ginsberg's charge that university scholars don't know how poetry is *made* carries some lasting weight. How much do English teachers know about the inner workings of working authors? In the academy, the project called English largely consists of students taught to read creative literature by teachers who do not regularly write creative literature, and taught to write essays by teachers who do not regularly write essays. No wonder that authoring, as we say in the Introduction, may be the one discursive concept from the toolkit of their trade that teachers of writing and written discourse use least.

Not that English teachers are unaware of the distance between them and their disciplinary subject. Sometimes they have argued that the distance itself is necessary to their scholarly business. As we have noted, radical postmodern scholarship brackets the act of authoring in order to concentrate on contextual input and textual output. English teachers may have other reasons why they tend to keep authoring under the shelf. In many ways, the act of authoring does not fit the shape of their teaching practice, either pragmatically, ideologically, or temperamentally.

What if the phenomenology of authoring, the reported felt sense of how it is made, were pulled out from under and placed on the counter,

“in broad daylight”? In the eyes of the profession, how alien would it appear? Does real-world authoring look like something English teachers and scholars could live with?

### APPROACHES TO AUTHORING

The English profession approaches the act of authoring in five basic ways. On the literature side, the most familiar approach treats it as part of the biography of well-known authors. Tillie Olsen snatched what moments she could as a working-class mother, sometimes writing on the city bus, standing up if she had to. Thomas Wolfe actually preferred to write standing up, with the top of the refrigerator as his table. On the composition side, the most common approach offers teacher-sanctioned guidelines for composing. Keep your audience in mind. Make sure each paragraph has a clear and circumscribed topic. Invent first, edit last.

Two other approaches to authoring emphasize the instrumental: focus on tricks of the trade and focus on the study of authorship. With the first, composing habits are offered as literary history. By luck, novelist Kent Haruf acquired six reams of pulpy yellow paper—no longer manufactured, but a stock paraphernalia of his writing ritual. Or composing rituals are offered as advice to student writers. Set aside a time of day for writing, and write every day. With the focus on authorship, acts of composing are reduced to their social, cultural, or historical causes and effects. Literature students are told that Coleridge kept his borrowings from Schilling unacknowledged in the *Biographia Literaria* to uphold the “Romantic” notion of the writer as original and self-inspired. Composition students are told that their reader will know them not as they imagine themselves, individual “writers,” but instead will construct them as “authors” according to the persona they project through their words, perhaps an image of the honest scholar or the empathetic caseworker.

The fifth approach to authoring does what these other four do not; it asks or surmises how authors *experience* authoring. Writing behavior, composing guidelines, tricks of the trade, and authorship can and usually do stand free of that felt sense, which includes drive, mood, proprioception, recollections, irritation at the barking dogs next door, and an endless wealth of inner life. Theoretically, of course, literary studies have long dismissed the phenomenology of

authors as unreliable, ephemeral, even chimerical.<sup>1</sup> On occasion literary biography may provide some of this side of authoring, inferring it from letters, journals, anecdotes, and elsewhere. Another source is the author interview, although that genre does not register very high on the discipline's scale of prestige. A major curiosity is that the phenomenology of authoring attracts composition studies even less.

As a systematic research effort, of course, the phenomenological approach to authoring thrives in psychology, where investigative paths have been richly sustained into motivation, self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-therapy, working memory, and other aspects of the inner life of authors. The phenomenology of authoring, if we may be allowed to keep this term, is one of the mainstay approaches of this book, in part because so far the English profession has shown only piecemeal interest in it.<sup>2</sup>

#### WHAT AUTHORS SAY ABOUT AUTHORING

If composition studies of late have contributed little to the phenomenology of authoring, it may be due in part to a stubborn and—to our minds—enigmatic contradiction in the field concerning students and authors. The issue is whether students in composition classes are authors. Maybe they are just writers, or just student writers. An older position (e.g., Harste, Short, and Burke 1988) is that students are maligned and disadvantaged when their teachers do not treat them as bona fide authors. Teachers assign and treat course writings as exercise work not worthy of publication, or when they do publish students' work,

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1. An important dissenter from this critical tradition is Francis-Noël Thomas, whose book *The Writer Writing* (1993) reaffirms author intention as a legitimate element of literary analysis. At the other extreme is Jacques Derrida, who argues that the act of inscription involves an aporia, a "secret," that no mode of analysis can explain (1995). Derrida's notion sets a limit to our use of author testimony about authoring in this chapter, since even the inscriber cannot explain the secret. But that also sets a limit to what teachers can know of student authoring, as we argue in Chapter 14.
  2. Not that we will present or apply a systematic philosophical or psychological account of phenomenology. Such a project would be germane, and books could be written on the concept of potentiality in Heidegger or singularity in Husserl or authoring in Levinas. Instead, we will apply a fairly pedestrian notion of phenomenological description that involves, in compositionist Louise Phelps' words, "not only intuiting, analyzing, and describing particulars of composing in their full concreteness, but also attempting to attain insight into the essence of the experience" (Waldrep 1985, 243).

they neglect to get their students' permission.<sup>3</sup> This argument now runs concurrent with the opposing position that students are maligned and disadvantaged when their teachers *do* treat them as authors—when students are expected to be autonomous or original, for instance, or held to published-author standards and models they, as apprentices, are unable to meet, and the students thereby become marginalized (e.g., David Bartholomae 1986). We can appreciate efforts to explain and dissolve this contradiction over student authorship through analysis of the historical, political, and material conditions of disciplinary splits within English departments, and within the academy or society in general (e.g., Susan Miller 1993; Bruce Horner 1997). We would point out, however, that both the contradiction and these proposed resolutions tend to cut students and their teachers off from the *experience* of being an author. To our minds, the “student/author binary,” as Horner calls it, cannot be resolved fairly unless we ask different questions. Do students share the inner life of working authors? Can English teachers find ways to help their students not only navigate authorship but experience real-world authoring as well?

This book says yes to both questions. In doing so, it follows in the footsteps of Donald Murray, whose contrarian composition textbook *Shoptalk* consists largely of quotations from working authors testifying about their craft. Murray believes, as we do, that of course students are authors: “My students discover that their natural responses to writing are often the same as experienced writers” (1990, xiv). He also sees that the experience of the experienced sometimes runs counter to the teaching of the teachers. “The testimony of writers often contradicts the beliefs of nonwriters and that, unfortunately, includes many teachers of writing from kindergarten through graduate school” (xiii). It bears noting that Murray worked as a writer before he worked as a teacher. He was a freelancer and journalist who won a Pulitzer for his editorials in the *Boston Herald* before he signed on with the University of New Hampshire's English department.

For our purposes, *Shoptalk* has some problems. It is dated, a commonplace book begun when Murray was in junior high in the 1930s.

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3. Peter Elbow (1987) strongly advances this older position. Elbow argues that when teachers fail to read student writing as *readers* (rather than as teachers, evaluators, or editors), they reinforce the students' sense “that writing means doing school exercises, producing for authorities what they already know—not actually trying to say things to readers” (65). They undermine, as we would say, authoring itself.

His snippets mostly come from fiction writers who were publishing before the 1980s. Also, Murray's own interests keep the focus of the testimony largely on craft rather than on psychology, and his categories chiefly deal with writerly strategies such as audience awareness, composing habits, beginnings, endings, maintaining flow, finding form, playing with language, and revising. Our own survey of author testimony—think of it as an excursion taking off from Murray's last chapter, "The Feel of Writing"—serves more as a synopsis than a commonplace book. Our selections and categories are equally intuitive, but tap more recent writers, achieve more of a balance between fiction and nonfiction, and center on what writers say about the phenomenological experience of authoring.<sup>4</sup> The testimony we found, however, is not less divorced from English department pedagogy than is Murray's.

From our survey we construct a dozen most common traits of the experience of authoring according to working authors.

1. *Drivenness*. Authors cannot not write. In high school biographer and poet Muriel Rukeyser promised a friend to stop writing poems, but couldn't keep the promise because of "the pressure and the drivenness" (Sternberg 1980, 221). "There's the blank page," says Margaret Atwood, "and the thing that obsesses you" (Sternberg 1991, 156). The compulsion is so strong that sometimes it seems to come from outside: "I couldn't help myself; it was done to me, so to speak," explains Cynthia Ozick (Wachtel 1993, 13). Or else it is an internal drive so natural it can't be turned off—like a walnut tree putting forth leaf and fruit (William Saroyan), a silk worm producing silk (Doris Lessing), a baby letting out a squall (George Orwell), an adult sneezing (E. B. White), or a guerrilla never giving up the fight (Walter Mosley). Basically, writers experience writing as primal and therefore always first. Alice Hoffman tells how she put off an operation for breast cancer because she was compelled to finish a book: "More than anything, I was a writer" (Darnton 2001, 97).
2. *Pleasure*. Drivenness can be seen negatively, felt as an obsession, a subjection, a *bête noire*, a disease (Patrick White), a form of insanity (Charles Bukowski), a "quirk or virus" (Ken Donelson, Waldrep 1988, 53), "an addiction" (Lil Brannon, 22). But as with many addictions, the composing itself is felt positively as a pleasure. The

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4. Along with adventitious finds, our quotations and categories emerge from a systematic reading of interviews and essays collected by Janet Sternberg (1980, 1991), Tom Waldrep (1985, 1988), Eleanor Wachtel (1993), and John Darnton (2001).

pleasure may derive from other qualities of the phenomenology of authoring described below, such as the surprise of unplanned discoveries (Alice Munro), the exhilarated feel of a creation taking shape (Seamus Heaney), the joy of mental concentration (Donald Hall), the satisfaction of achieving something difficult (Joseph Heller), or the “pleasant sense of anticipation, like starting off on a journey” (Muriel Harris; Waldrep 1988, 105). Authors also describe writing as a relief from social demands or private frustrations. “How I think about my work,” explains Diane Johnson, “is indistinguishable from the way I think about my needlepoint or cooking: here is the project I’m involved in. It is play” (Sternberg 1991, 141). The experiential bedrock of pleasure, however, again seems to rest on the feeling that writing is a natural and needed exercise of the whole person. “I write,” says compositionist Toby Fulwiler, “because if I don’t, I cannot sleep” (Waldrep 1988, 88). In a recent interview, Irish novelist Martin Waddell put succinctly what many other authors have said about composing: “It’s what I want to do and I’m happy when I’m writing and not happy when I’m not writing” (2002). Working authors, like everyone else, love having written; but they also love writing.

3. *Preparedness*. Although the writing is compulsive and pleasurable, that does not mean it is spontaneous. The consensus seems to be that writing emerges from a feeling of readiness, and readiness emerges from material, or things to say that have long been experienced, collected, internalized, and finally are poised for the saying. Novelist and literary critic Kaye Gibbons puts it in one short sentence: “I write about what I know best” (Sternberg 1991, 60). To prepare an idea, a character, a plot, an intellectual position may take years. Books “come very gradually,” says Michael Ondaatje, “It’s really a case of lugging something around for about five years, and leaving things behind in somebody’s house and having to go back and pick them up again, building an arc situation” (Wachtel 1993, 56). Writing is a matter of waiting, with E. B. White like a surfer looking for the “perfect wave on which to ride in” (Murray 1990, 77), with Richard Ford in “galvanic repose” (Wachtel 1993, 67), with Virginia Woolf “holding myself from writing it till I have it impending in me: grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear; pendant, gravid” (2003, 136). Writers’ block is not writers unable to scribe ideas, but rather ideas that are not ready to be scribed, premature (Joyce Carol Oates), inadequately understood and in need of more research (Barbara Tuchman), not yet settled until the inessentials have been forgotten (Jonathan Raban).

4. *Concentration*. The sense of being prepared is accompanied, however, by the opposing yet complementary physical and mental state of concentration. There are many names and phrases for it, including “heart and mind open to the work” (Walter Mosley; Darnton 2001, 163), “intensity and attentiveness” (Susan Sontag; 223), centering, meditation, focus (“fierce and pointed”; Marge Piercy 1982, 17). What writers describe is not a sudden raptness of attention, such as a hunter might experience when a covey flushes, but a habitually heightened state of alertness, “a temperament that accepts concentration over the long haul” (Ward Just; Darnton 2001, 116). Donald Murray himself describes the author’s concentration as one of the great gifts of life: “In the act of writing I experience a serene, quiet joy, a focus of all my energy and knowledge and craft on the task” (1990, 189).
5. *Uncontrol*. In part, the preparing and the concentration are a controlled practice with the aim of losing control. Writers associate uncontrol with different names, shapes, and feelings: dreaming, the subconscious, the unconscious, the irrational, demon, trance, disembodiment, kinesthesia, magic, the “inner teacher” (Doris Lessing; Wachtel 1993, 243).<sup>5</sup> But they all describe basically the same thing—the way the drafting or the drafted sometimes takes control away from the author and assumes a “Ouija board will of its own” (Diane Johnson; Darnton 2001, 113). The experience of uncontrol is not contradictory to the state of concentration. It’s like the Zen art of archery, when the archer is so focused the arrow releases itself. Nor does uncontrol mean the author relinquishes the work. Jonathan Raban describes how writers, who “are in some sense secretaries to their own books,” must take control over the writing that is generated. “If the book has any real life of its own, *it* begins to take control, *it* begins to demand certain things of you, which you may or may not live up to, and it imposes shapes and patterns on you; it calls forth the quality of experience it needs” (Wachtel 1993, 120).
6. *Unpredictability*. Obviously uncontrol leads in ways authors cannot predict. When authors find themselves writing things they had not set out to write, they feel surprised, delighted, self-affirmed, proud. They find they are more than they thought they were. The usual term for this authorial experience is “discovery,” and Murray includes pages of testimony to it. The way writing turns out unpredictable, “a journey of discovery and exploration for the writer” (Marge Piercy;

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5. Uncontrol is the essence of Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “genius” or “daimon” (see Chapter 14) and related to William Butler Yeats’s concept of daimon (see Chapter 6).



Darnton 2001, 180), is one of the most commonly reported experiences of authoring. Discovery happens so consistently that authors use it as a motive to write. Cynthia Ozick says of her plan to write an essay on Henry James' novel, *The Awkward Age*, "I don't know yet what I'm going to say, what I'm going to discover, and I will surely make discoveries" (Wachtel 1993, 15). The sense that writing is "a voyage of discovery" (Nadine Gordimer; 178) turns the usual academic assumption, that one writes out of a topic understood, on its head. "In fact," writes Amy Tan, "if anything, I write about it because I *don't* understand it" (283).

7. *Shaping*. Uncontrol and unpredictability also seem to turn on its head the standard notion of writerly craft. How can an author shape a work through materials and tools such as diction, syntax, revision, and knowledge of audience if the work takes directions of its own? In the phenomenology of authoring, however, craft plays a secondary role. Authors take craft as something they apply in response to more primary motives. But there is a felt sense of the application, one that embodies the experience of uncontrol and unpredictability. It is the sensation, almost tactile, of a body of discourse taking shape, "the actual pleasure of feeling something under your hand and growing," as Seamus Heaney put it (Clines 1983). Imagine home builders standing on the backyard deck they are in the process of constructing. Not surprisingly, the most common metaphor for shaping discourse is carpentry: "I'm just trying to make this thing fit right, the way a carpenter likes everything square and plumb, even if it won't show" (Robert B. Parker; Murray 1990, 40).
8. *Truth-finding*. Even if it won't show. Author after author describes the same experience, of forgetting about the opinion of readers and using the composing to test his or her own observations and beliefs in a search after some individual truth. They have no squeamishness or compunction about using that word, "truth." "While I'm writing," says Andre Dubus, "that's when I face the exposure, that's when the right word comes, or the temptation to use the wrong word and duck out, the temptation to skip something. That's when I always have to bear down and try to write as closely to what is the truth as I can feel with my senses and with my heart" (Wachtel 1993, 127). This kind of truth-finding necessarily proceeds with a strong sense of resistance to received notions, and sometimes with a hope to change them. "This matters, the remaking of an untenable world through the nib of a pen," insists Carol Shields, and "it matters so much I can't stop doing it" (2002, 137). Usually such truth-finding proceeds with an aware-

ness of its difficulty: “A harder truth. How to explain that?” asks Amy Hempel. “I want to say something truer than the obvious observation about a person—go deeper” (Wachtel 1993, 206).<sup>6</sup>

9. *Poaching*. It also proceeds with a complex, even ambivalent sense involving the author’s position vis-à-vis private and public. Over and over, authors describe themselves as solitary beings who spend hours every day working alone to achieve a personal truth, yet extracting that truth from the outside world in order to direct it back toward the world outside. The feeling of both taking and giving, of transgression, transformation, and transference, comes close to Michel de Certeau’s notion of “poaching” (1984), by which he means tactics of the disempowered to improve their conditions by stealing and adapting hegemonic cultural practices, perhaps thereby changing them. Joyce Carol Oates says that writing is “a species of exploration and transgression,” and “to write is to invade another’s space, if only,” she adds, “to memorialize it” (Darnton 2001, 168-9). Conrad got it right. The author feels like a double agent. Cynthia Ozick describes half of her writer’s self as “Jewish” and the other half as “a wild animal” (Wachtel 1993, 8). Doris Lessing, raised in Zimbabwe and living in England, says, “I have this double vision of absolutely belonging and absolutely not belonging, which is extremely valuable for a writer” (Wachtel 1993, 251).
10. *Potentiality*. Lessing’s double vision extends to her phrase, “for a writer.” She means the phrase two ways: for the accomplishment of the writing, but also for the self-protection of the writer. With her own use of the phrase “for a writer,” Nadine Gordimer spells out this double meaning:

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6. Hempel’s metaphor of going “deeper” is shared by most authors. They may compare truth-finding to peeling an onion to its core, or excavating an archaeological site, or digging a well into their own psyche. “When I described this as falling from layer to layer,” says Nadine Gordimer, “I meant falling through layers of illusion and coming slowly, stage by stage, to certain truths” (Wachtel 1993, 178). In her book analyzing the figurative language in author interviews, *Authors on Writing: Metaphors and Intellectual Labor* (2005), Barbara Tomlinson has no truck with this inner search for truth, which she shelves along with the illusions of “the Buried Life of the Mind,” a myth or mystification of writers who are deluded into thinking they possess “the special selfhood of the heroic author” (2). When authors think they are looking inward for individual truth, she explains, they are actually participating in an outward social praxis. In her analysis of mining imagery, Tomlinson says that “writing and mining both involve searching in an *external* world for something of great value” (55; our emphasis). So when novelist John Gardner describes the unpredictable discoveries authors make in the act of writing as “poking your pick into a piece of respectable earth and silver shows up in an iron-ore vein and God knows where you’re heading” (which Tomlinson quotes), or as “your unconscious pushing up associations” (which she doesn’t), he is getting his direction wrong.

“I have fought to retain that freedom to write what I like, how I like, and not follow any line, because I think that the first imperative duty, if one wants to use that word, for a writer is to be true, to preserve the integrity of whatever talent he or she has. This is the one thing you have that matters, and your first duty to yourself and your society is to develop it.” (Wachtel 1993, 180)

Preserving the integrity or continued capacity of one’s talent expresses the gist of what in this book we mean by *potentiality*. As Chapter 2 will explain, an author’s potentiality is not something that is acquired and then used up like a wad of money. It is an ongoing capacity for creative work that needs to be constantly protected and nurtured. Working authors are driven not only to complete the work, but also to maintain the drivenness. They are thoroughly attuned to their potentiality, though that is rarely the word they use for it, and in our commonplace book on authoring we have more cites under *potentiality* even than under *discovery*. Gish Jen faces it directly: “I knew that I was not written out, something for which I have perhaps morbidly always watched: I have long vowed not to keep on past the point where I ought best stop” (Darnton 2001, 104). In the process of writing, authors show their awareness of their potentiality in many ways, by switching genres when blocked (Marge Piercy), deciding to lie fallow (Richard Ford), taking up writing that is more challenging or different (Amy Tan), admitting present failure to increase the chances for future success (Mary Gordon), defending the freedom to write any way on any topic (Cynthia Ozick), accepting as natural and motivational the knowledge that one does not really know how to write the next work (Wendell Barry), resisting the impulse to save material for a future work (Annie Dillard), not overdrawing one’s internal battery (Norman Mailer), not spreading oneself too thin through self-imitation (Elie Wiesel). Writers are all alike, says poet and nature writer Diane Johnson, “in their sense of having the work inside them in some potential form. The analogy to gestation is very exact” (Sternberg 1991, 147). Chapters 2-7 explore this fertile ground of potentiality and authoring for English teachers.

11. *Singularity*. Potentiality, and the unpredictability of the writer’s work that keeps potentiality alive, lead without fail to a trait that all authors share, the sense of themselves and their work as unique. The sense of individual singularity, that no one else is exactly like me, is a normal and healthy intuition, of course (see Chapter 8). With authors, it assumes a reason and motivation to write. Singularity empowers writers. “I felt a kind of entitlement,” as Amy Hempel describes her

climb out of a personal slough of writer's despond: "I am entitled to tell this particular story in a way no one else can—which is a kind of power" (Wachtel 1993, 207-208). "To find your own characteristic way of narrating and insisting," Susan Sontag argues, "is to find your own inner freedom" (Darnton 2001, 225). Deaf to postmodernist conclusions that language is never original, working authors extend singularity from their sense of self to their sense of their work under construction, all aspects of it right down to the sentence. "My material," A. S. Byatt insists, "is my own and unrepeatably my own" (Wachtel 1993, 84). Rick Bass' experience of the covey flushing, "the thunderous explosion of wings," is his alone, he swears, and although another person might be there, "that person would not be me, would not be inside me" (Darnton 2001, 16). "A page of mine," Gail Godwin insists, "will never be mistaken for a page of Jane Austen or Elmore Leonard or Margaret Atwood, however much I admire and relish their voices" (Darnton 2001, 75). "One never puts down a sentence," writes John Cheever, "without the feeling that it has never been put down in such a way" (Murray 1990, 191). Chapters 8-13 explore how English teaching can be changed by the acceptance of this fundamental experience of the author, even the student writer, "as distinctly—exhilaratingly, uncomfortably—singular" (Gish Jen; Darnton 2001, 107).

12. *Hospitality*. Authors sometimes extend this inescapable intuition of singularity to their sense of audience, sometimes to their dismissal of audience. "My only readership is me," Graham Greene once said to an interviewer, and added that authors who write to an unknown audience are just short-order cooks (1983). More common, and it is very common, is the sense of writing to a single person or to a select group of people. Compositionist, biographer, and novelist Richard Marius says, "I write especially for my editor and for a few other good friends. I respect them and want them to respect me" (Waldrep 1988, 152). Naturally, authors are aware that their publications will also be read by strangers, not just by acquaintances. Thus, the underlying frame for the sociability of authoring is hospitality—hospitality in the traditional sense of entertaining a limited number of strangers. This authorial *experience* of audience is complex, since it involves establishing an intimacy (Maureen Howard), a sharing (Muriel Rukeyser), or an epistolary correspondence (Saul Bellow) with people one doesn't know. Authors intuit "rules for sociability, how to be a friend to a reader so the reader won't stop reading, how to be a good blind date with a total stranger" (Kurt Vonnegut Jr.; Darnton 2001, 243). What working authors never find attractive is a Benthamesque audience

calculus, writing to please the greatest number of readers, which would reduce their authoring to propaganda, demagoguery, or, as Margaret Atwood puts it, “cavorting about on the stage” (Wachtel 1993, 195).

For these twelve traits, every one of them, it is easy to find working authors who experience something quite different, sometimes almost the opposite. But taken together, the traits form a fairly dependable categorization of the authoring experience. If your ambition is to become an author, what then should you expect as the central inner experience of writing that you will share with most other authors? *You will feel compelled to write about a subject you know uniquely and fully and are ready to explore, ready to find perhaps unpopular truths and to shape them in new ways for readers who are friendly and receptive—an act of writing so intense and focused and pleasurable and full of surprises that you take care you do not spoil your desire and ability and compulsion to keep doing it.*

Is this how English teachers construct the authoring experience for their students?

#### THE CLASSROOM ACCEPTANCE OF AUTHORING

That question is answered with a simple comparison of these twelve authoring traits with customary college-teacher expectations of student authoring.

<i>Author Experience of Authoring</i>	<i>Teacher Expectation of Student Authoring</i>
<i>Drivenness</i>	Most students will not write assignments unless required to do so.
<i>Pleasure</i>	Students don't get pleasure from composing, but rather from the rewards of having written the assignment and receiving a good grade on it.
<i>Preparedness</i>	Typically, students get two or three weeks to prepare an assignment, and will put off writing it until the last day unless drafts are required; topics are better teacher-selected than student-chosen.
<i>Concentration</i>	Whether students focus while writing does not seem of much interest to teachers and may even seem an antiquated concern, given today's glorification of multitasking.
<i>Uncontrol</i>	Students are taught to take charge of all aspects of their writing; the ideal is a rational and even meta-discursive control over the composing process.

<i>Unpredictability</i>	Although “discovery” is sometimes offered as a purpose for writing, the academic ideal is a kind of composing in which ideas and forms are preset (“writing with a purpose”).
<i>Shaping</i>	The essay-as-a-whole will be grasped by students as the product of set logical or generic patterns, rarely of growing organic forms.
<i>Truth-finding</i>	Writing is done to communicate or to learn established truths—that is, when “truth” is admitted in the English department door to begin with.
<i>Poaching</i>	Students are expected to rely on public knowledge, but there is only a lukewarm expectation that they will transform it into a new knowledge that they can call their own and that might be useful to the public.
<i>Potentiality</i>	It is assumed that completion of written assignments is good for students in that they will have learned something useful for their future, but rarely is it asked whether that task might turn them away from writing itself.
<i>Singularity</i>	The emphasis is upon students writing out of group identities according to widely held conventions of usage and genre in order to convey received knowledge.
<i>Hospitality</i>	In the end, the student addresses written assignments not to a stranger but to a known individual, a teacher who will not receive it with personal generosity but judge it by impersonal standards.

What is the message of English teachers to students about authoring? *As student writers, you will be required (however reluctantly) to take a topic teachers know well and locate received notions about it that you will turn, ready or not, into conventional academic discursive forms for strict evaluation; this will be an instructional exercise much pressured yet so imbued with opportunity for learning that you should look beyond the unpleasantness of doing it and expect more such writing throughout your college career.*

This crude comparison stands as a tempting platform on which this book could hang an injunction concerning English instruction in college: Students will learn more of what English courses in literature and composition hope to teach when the courses promote the working authors’ accounts of authoring rather than the teachers’ accounts. That injunction would misrepresent, however, our intentions in this book. We want to treat the comparison as a hypothesis or trial, with the traits of non-academic authoring used to critique current academic

pedagogy.<sup>7</sup> As we say in the Introduction, we want to entertain some new terms and—for the nonce adopting the language of working authors—see if we can find in them some new truths. That we have the space to explore only two of the traits—potentiality and singularity—is a clue that we will find a good deal to support our hypothesis.

But surely not over a nearly consensus objection from English teachers. Our witnesses are working authors, to be sure, but don't they represent a small and select group? They might be called freelancers, whereas most authors earning a living are technical or professional writers. Non-freelancers write because their jobs demand it, and that conditions a different set of authoring traits. Non-freelancers aren't driven from within to write, but driven from without. They don't enjoy the act of composing any more than restaurant workers enjoy washing dishes—the only pleasure in the chore they might feel is getting it over with. For professionals, a model author of more pertinence would be Ken Donelson, editor of the *English Journal* and author of over a hundred articles in refereed journals, as well as several books (one called *Inspiring Literacy*): “I hate the act of writing. . . . I've heard more writing instructors than I care to admit tell students about the *joy* of writing, but how can anyone who writes think of writing as joy? Only people who do not write can talk with a straight face about the *joy* of writing. Writing can be, and often is, necessary or demanding, maybe even satisfying, but never joyful” (Waldrep 1988, 55-56). Doesn't Donelson's testimony fit the majority of writing done by English teachers—writing, scholarly and administrative, that is also unpleasant, pressured, conventionalized, and strictly evaluated? And doesn't it fit the kind of authoring the great majority of college students will continue doing in their technical or professional careers?

Consensus or not, this objection bears two assumptions worth reconsidering. One is the either/or fence it erects between “freelance” and “professional” writing, or between belletrist and functional, voluntary and obligatory, leisurely and workerly, or private and public. But just as the same language potential operates on both sides of the fence, so may the same phenomenology of authoring. Donelson, who said he never met a writer who enjoyed writing, might have been surprised

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7. By “non-academic” we mean writing not done to fulfill school or university course assignments. When English teachers author their own pieces (and comment on that authoring, as in Waldrep 1985, 1988), they join our non-academic testimony. See Footnote 9, however.

to find about half of the contributors to the anthology where he said it (Waldrep 1988), English department colleagues all, averring explicitly that they enjoy writing, or experience something much like joy. We just are not ready to concede that these authoring traits are specific to a minority of authors and would like to leave open the possibility that many of the traits (for instance, concentration, unpredictability, shaping, poaching, singularity, hospitality) might enliven the writing and the writing life of any professional, student or otherwise, where they don't do so already.

Also worth reconsidering is the assumption that the job conditions the authoring. The inner life of writers is not so passive. Who says that the act of authoring, in the right frame of mind, can't be a pleasure to do under work obligations? Or that the compulsion to write can't fall on both sides of the belletrist/professional fence? The students whom teachers have required to write their research paper may still be driven within to author other kinds of writing. Look at text messaging and twittering. So it is not a question of will or capability. They are the same people whom teachers have to test in order to get them to read Shakespeare, yet, as Chapter 14 will show, who follow their own compulsion to read other kinds of literature. How much of our authoring phenomenology is not experienced by technical/professional writers because they have been taught a limited, purely academic image of authoring from the first grade through graduate school?<sup>8</sup> Perhaps authoring itself is amenable to instruction—another hypothesis this book intends to test out. As it is, the book will skip the more obviously controversial of the real-world authoring traits, such as drivenness or pleasure, and work with the two that may be the most universal and least understood, potentiality and singularity.

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8. It is worth noting that many of the authors we surveyed have been primarily non-fiction authors, and the ones who write both fiction and nonfiction often deny any essential difference in authoring the two modes. "I don't think they are two kinds of writing. I think they're one. I don't think one changes hats," writes Jonathan Raban (Wachtel 1993, 116). "I write both fiction and nonfiction," avers Richard Marius. "The process is somewhat different for each, but there are probably more similarities in the two than differences" (Waldrep 1988, 148). When an author testifies that "There is in writing the constant joy of sudden discovery," we shouldn't assume this is a writer of fiction. In fact, the declaration comes from H. L. Mencken (1917, 27), who camped about as far from fiction as he could. How differently a selection of technical writers would describe their authoring shouldn't be presumed until we hear from them.



English teachers will raise four other objections that may tempt them to reject out of hand our hypothesis that the experience of non-academic authoring provides a useful critique of English pedagogy. In due course, this book will cover all four objections fully, so here we will merely ask for a little forbearance. First, don't English teachers everywhere find ways to transport the non-academic model of authoring into their instructional model? They find readers for student writing other than themselves, for instance, or they allow students to choose the literary pieces they will interpret and write about. How much do such teaching strategies alter, though, the basic classroom presumption about the core experience of authoring, that rather than a self-compelled pleasure, it is an other-imposed exercise (no pain, no gain)? How much more of that instructional core can teachers change?

The second objection is that, however appealing and convincing, the non-academic experience of authors simply cannot fit into the material ways of the academy. Any teacher would like to imagine first-year students postponing English courses until they had the experience and the knowledge that would give them the preparation and drive to poach fruitfully. But the first-year composition requirement cannot be postponed, nor core courses in literature delayed until students have senior-level knowledge. Our answer to this objection is that the academy, as an institute of *learning*, is not built with brick, stone, and concrete. Maybe it is time to reinstate the senior thesis as a graduation requirement (some schools have never abandoned it). Maybe it is time to rid the first two undergraduate years of mandatory writing courses (some schools already do that). Maybe it is time writing assignments were shaped to encourage discourse genres less antipathetic to non-academic ways of authoring.<sup>9</sup> And even if the present curriculum is written in something akin to brick, stone, and concrete, there is wisdom in knowing the exact ways it walls out non-academic realities.

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9. In 1998, thirty-two winners of the Braddock Award, given every year for the best article published in *College Composition and Communication*, were offered the opportunity to write a commentary on their article. Only two describe the act and feel of composing the piece. Both describe exploratory essays that broke with academic conventions. Nancy Sommers said of her piece, "This was a new kind of writing for me, and I found it liberating, engaging, and surprisingly fun" (Ede 1999, 320). Ellen Cushman said that hers was written with a "recklessness" that "took shape from a deep seated need to do something with my scholarship, to go beyond the university classroom, to remember where I've come from" (Ede 1999, 388-389). So genre, profession, and attitudes toward authoring are entwined.

Third, literature teachers will point out that the realities of working authors pertain more to composition courses than to literature courses, which study published works in terms of history and critical interpretation. But how would knowledge of a famous writer's authoring change a student's interpretation? As Francis-Noël Thomas and other literary critics have been arguing for over a decade, authors are personally responsible for their own works, and that "authorial agency" imbues their texts with particular meanings. The text is a result of their actions, and those actions—much like our authors describe them—are essentially open and unpredictable, and cannot be totally explained by non-authorial agencies such as culture, language, and institutions (1993, 4). Thomas points out that Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* as a compulsive act of personal atonement and Shaw wrote *Saint Joan* as a poaching act of political reform, and knowing this should shape how we read the works.

The last objection is at once the most uncompromising and the most problematical. This contends that our traits describe a phenomenology of successful and experienced authors. Teachers, almost by definition, teach amateur and inexperienced authors. The kind of writing expected of students by teachers seems more like practicing or exercising than authoring because that is what it has to be. But does a novice or an amateur experience the act of writing much differently than does an expert or a professional? According to the language, all writers "practice" or "exercise" their arts and skills, and the ambivalence of the terms may point to an essential equivalence. It seems a little hasty to assume that a grade-three pianist experiences none of the phenomenology of playing experienced by the virtuoso.

Differences of opinion often stem from differences in the point where lines of argument start. Begin with the way teachers observe their students writing, and it seems reasonable to argue that real-world authoring doesn't fit, and therefore the students are not real authors yet and should not be treated as such. Begin with testimony of real-world authoring, and it seems reasonable—at least we are so inclined—to argue that since it doesn't fit our current academic conditions and objectives, the academy therefore is keeping students from experiencing real authoring. Or begin with the ways authoring is currently taught in college composition and literature courses, and it is hard not to end with the ways students don't muster. Begin with the experience of authoring that students do have, and it is hard not to end—at least

this is where we end, in Chapter 14—with the ways much of it is denied by the academy.

So we begin with traits of authoring as experienced by successful, working authors. As we say, we select two experiences that strike us as universal dynamics of any act of writing, outside or inside the academy: potentiality and singularity. If they are accepted as legitimate for college-student writers, even as student-author rights, if you will, how might the teaching of English courses be revisioned?