LEARNING TO WRITE CONTINUUM

Expertise in writing has long been difficult to define, and the reason is that writing is a rhetorical act, involving achievement of purpose determined as much by the reader as by the writer. The writer might believe she has achieved her purpose, while her reader might conclude that she has not. One reader's masterly text can be another reader's utter failure. For example, some readers of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* experience Atticus Finch as a rich, heroic character, displaying unwavering ethical behavior, while other readers of that novel find this character as simply the static voice of the author's idealism and a flat foil against which other characters' behaviors are to be judged.

Perhaps the best way of defining expertise is to think of it as *mastery*, defined by Ambrose, et al., in *How Learning Works* as "the attainment of a high degree of competence within a particular area" (p. 95).[1] Competence may best be defined as a state of being able to do something with relative ease and comfort and have it perceived by others as evidence of mastery. If those definitions seem circular, we shouldn't be surprised.

One trait of writing expertise and mastery that is not in doubt is the fact that achieving mastery in writing is an incremental process, usually occurring over years. Certainly, we know that developing mastery in academic writing, one goal of a college education, generally takes the full college career of a student.

Susan Peck MacDonald has identified a set of milestones in the development of a student writer, moving from learning generalized academic writing into novice approximations of disciplinary writing and ending with expert, insider discourse.[2] And it is clear that probably most student writers do not fully achieve expert, insider discourse as undergraduates—maybe not even as graduate students. I can attest that I did not become relatively at ease with my writing until well out of graduate school.

On the following page, you will find a graphic representation of this "Learning To Write Continuum," based on MacDonald's milestones. Understanding this incremental progress in development of writing mastery is important for our understanding of student plagiarism, for it supports the reasoning that students patchwriting is probably due to students' efforts to imitate and approximate the language and writing conventions of the community they are seeking to enter—the academic community generally and then their majors and ultimately, their academic disciplines and their professions. This ongoing progress to mastery supports the idea that patchwriting may well be a defining feature of writerly development—that is, an almost inevitable by-product of (maybe even a conscious strategy used in) student efforts to transition from outsider to insider.

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[1] Ambrose, Susan A., Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, Marsha C. Lovett, & Marie K. Norman. *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
[2] MacDonald, Susan Peck. *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1994.

THE LEARNING TO WRITE CONTINUUM[3]
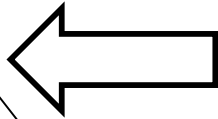
Nonacademic generalized prose with little connection to disciplinary ways of writing

Initiation into general academic discourse community and its institutionalized norms of knowledge making and communication
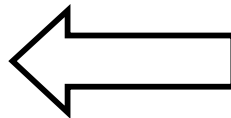
Generalized academic writing, such as that done in 1st-year composition courses
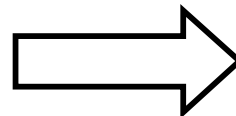
Initiation into disciplinary discourse community and its institutionalized norms of knowledge making and communication

Novice approximations of particular disciplinary ways of making knowledge
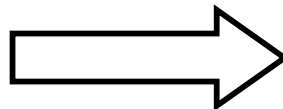
Continued experience approximating disciplinary discourse with incrementally increasing mastery

Expert, insider discourse

Indicated by comfort the writer has with discourse production and mastery of composition perceived by readers of that discourse

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[3] Based milestones identified by Susan Peck MacDonald in *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (SIU Press, 1994),.