When Writers Aren't Authors: A Qualitative Study of Unattributed Writers

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When Writers Aren’t Authors: A Qualitative Study of Unattributed Writers

“I put my life into this, and no one will ever know that I had anything to do with it,” says Julia, describing her work writing sales proposals on behalf of a software company in a mid-sized Midwestern city. “Honestly, this job is soul-crushing.” When asked why she connects the rigors of her job and the lack of personal attribution for her writing to the state of her soul, Julia responds, “Writing is my identity—it’s the only thing I do—and if it doesn’t matter then my life doesn’t matter.” Julia identifies powerful feelings of dissatisfaction and disillusionment with her work at least in part because it is deeply ingrained in her that her writing is her—or that, ideally, it should be.

Julia’s sentiments are reflective of a pervasive ideology of writing, perpetuated in many of our own composition classrooms: that “good” student writers deeply, personally, and emotionally identify as writers. Even as writing studies scholars have decentered expressivist views of writing in recent decades, the relationship between writing and expression remains a “tacit tradition” of the field (Burnham and Powell; Goldblatt). A blog post recently shared on Twitter by the National Council of Teachers of English, for example, claims that one of the top 5 reasons why students should write every day is that “writing is essential for self-understanding” (Walker). During Kathleen Yancey’s address at the opening general session of the 2018 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Kansas City, she said that when we read student writing, we read them. And in a recent issue of College Composition and Communication, Eli Goldblatt draws a distinction between the goals of writing instruction and “preparation for remunerative work,” saying: “What I am suggesting is that when we focus so much on professional and theoretical understandings of writing instruction...we can forget the importance of two impulses that compel writers: the desire to speak out of your most intimate
experiences and to connect with communities in need” (442). While writing is an undoubtedly powerful tool for self-reflection and self-understanding, and while the compelling impulses that Goldblatt identifies are, indeed, compelling, an overemphasis on writing’s inextricability from the selfhood of the writer can set professional writers like Julia up to feel inadequate and dissatisfied with the writing they are tasked to do at work. This is not because that writing is inherently lacking in value or importance, and it is not because these writers lack opportunities to assert agency. Rather, this kind of self-assertion is not only not feasible in professional writing contexts where writers are denied authorial status and legally severed from ownership of the texts they produce (Barry; Brandt; Fisk; Rose), but, I find, it is often not even desirable, as writers seek to mitigate potential economic, professional, and emotional risks in a fraught writing marketplace that leaves them vulnerable. While Deborah Brandt, in *The Rise of Writing*, finds that professional writers experience what she calls “the residue of authorship” (27), or “they experience an authorial stake and intellectual ownership over the words that they write and at times derive pleasure, status, and growth from this writing” (34), I seek to understand the experiences and tactics of writers in moments when they do not necessarily derive pleasure, status, or growth from their work.

To do this, I draw from qualitative data collected across semi-structured interviews, participant observations, sample workplace texts, and writing reflections with four professional writers—Julia, Mary, Paige, and Rudy. In order to get at the vulnerabilities inherent in writing for pay without attribution, this essay focuses on the experiences of these writers as they write *on behalf of* or *as* the person or entity who controls their professional advancement, salary, and overall livelihood. This is not because other kinds of workplace writing—emails, task lists, internal reports, etc.—are inconsequential or unworthy of close study, but because the act of
writing on behalf of an employer brings issues of writerly identity, vulnerability, and status into sharp relief. The juxtaposition of these issues illuminates the need for new frameworks—aside from authorial status and textual ownership—around which to orient our scholarship and teaching about writing. In this essay, therefore, I identify and examine two real-life tactics of writers—what I call writing to hide and strategic (dis)connection—both of which are rooted in the multiplicity of the writer rather than in their capacity to necessarily translate and reflect their own identities in writing. Instead of asking how professional writers seek out a sense of authorial status and textual ownership in the workplace—how they persist in asserting themselves in their writing—I ask instead how professional writers assert agency through their position as non-authors and non-owners, including leaning into the anonymity of unattributed writing (writing to hide) and deftly performing varying levels of investment in their writing, depending on context, genre, and audience (strategic (dis)connection).

Valuing Writing Over Writers

This essay builds on Brandt’s study in The Rise of Writing, which traces the trend of mass literacy in our current knowledge economy, where writing functions as the medium through which ideas and information are bought and sold (3). The vulnerabilities that professional writers face are evident in Brandt’s extensive interviews with writers who, like Julia, spend a significant portion of their workday writing, often on behalf of an employer and without personal attribution. Brandt’s study highlights pervasive and often contradictory systems of value that shape the experiences of professional writers, emphasizing the “tensions between the high status of consequential writing and the low status of the hired writer” (13). Even as written texts circulate with economic force—determining the sale of goods and ideas, communicating new innovations, and composing the foundations of our technologies and platforms—it would seem
that writers themselves do not experience economic and professional benefits in proportion with
the commodity they produce. For example, again, professional writers are not granted legal
ownership of the texts they compose in the workplace (Brandt 20), they are often required to
produce writing which contradicts (or at least does not necessarily represent) their own values,
ideas, and writerly voices (24); and they are largely “considered [to be] interchangeable” (27)—a
categorization that has implications for salary, promotion, and job satisfaction. Put more simply,
writing is valued in a way that writers are not.

As scholars and teachers of writing, this tension ought to alarm us. We recognize that
writing is powerful, that words matter, and that texts have material value and material
consequences. We understand the intellectual, emotional, and physical labor involved in writing,
and we train our students to perform this labor as effectively as we know how. But the problem
of undervaluing a certain kind of writer (the unattributed professional writer), while perhaps
overvaluing others (the attributed and self-expressive author), is subtly reflected and reinforced
in some of our own scholarship. Many scholars in technical and professional communication
(TPC) and writing and literacy studies have considered the relationship between writing and
work, as well as the implications of writing’s increasing entanglement with the transactional
sphere and the resultant commodification of texts, skills, and human capital (Brandt; Crowley;
Graff; Howard; New London Group; Spinuzzi All Edge; Watkins; Yancey, Writing in the 21st
Century). However, research about professional writers, especially those who write anonymously
or pseudonymously, often examines the writer’s position only insofar as it relates to their
employer or customer, and to the power dynamics of the transactional sphere. For example, the
unattributed professional writer’s most fundamental task is framed as “accurately” conveying the
identity of another (Bruss; Seeger) while masking their own (Boesky). Moments of
empowerment or resistance are typically characterized in terms of a writer’s efforts to claim a kind of co-ownership over their writing; Brandt’s research participants, for example, talk about feeling a sense of ownership while occupying the role of “producer-director,” helping to “make people smarter” (36), having knowledge expertise, and being a “ghost thinker” (38). I argue that this scholarly emphasis on the collaborative and co-authorial roles of professional writers illuminates the pervasiveness of frameworks of ownership and authorship, which tend to be the systems of value within which we so often research, teach, and value writing, and which are antithetical to the actual experiences of professional writers. Since professional writers do not own texts, they are shown to actively engage with the owners. Since professional writers are not granted authorial status, they are shown to work alongside authoritative figures. Theorizing professional writing practices as collaborative and co-authorial, while undoubtedly useful and resonant, moves too quickly past the work of the actual writer—the material impact of the one putting the words on the page—and reinscribes the systems of ownership and authorship which support the exploitation and undervaluing of professional writers in the first place.

Instead, I find that writers deploy the tactics of writing to hide and strategic (dis)connection in order to proactively eschew authorship and ownership in proportion to the level of economic, professional, and emotional risk with which they are faced. Using these tactics, unattributed professional writers assert agency through anonymity, not in spite of it; they deftly perform a multiplicity of writerly selves—none of which are necessarily them, but are also not merely imitative—in an effort to protect their own identities from commodification. Taking the multiplicity of the individual writer as a framework for studying professional writers is not a return to a romanticized notion of the author-genius or a reiteration of the notion that good writing is always rooted in the identity of the writer. Rather, it is about acknowledging the
indispensability of the writer to the act of writing while also attending to the writer’s capacity to take on a variety of positions and personae. This attention is particularly urgent given writing’s entanglement in an economic system which tends to obscure the identities, vulnerabilities, and contributions of the individual worker. Establishing additional frameworks through which to consider the work of writing and value of writers, and attending to the complex tactics deployed by professional writers who are not authors or owners of the texts they write, serves to reframe the role of the 21st century writer—not as an individual author-genius, nor as a mere scribe, technician, or impersonator, but as a dynamic rhetorical and economic force.

**Designing a Study of Workplace Literacies**

Since this study is rooted in the experiences and tactics of writers, I draw upon qualitative research methods—including semi-structured interviews, participant observations, textual analysis of workplace texts, and writers’ reflections on these sample texts. In order to manage the scope of the project, this study is designed to mimic Brandt’s in *The Rise of Writing* in many ways: the interview script, for example, is a modified version of Brandt’s script for workaday writers in *The Rise of Writing*, and the study participants were chosen, like Brandt’s, because they spend a significant portion of their workday performing writing tasks. It is worth noting that Brandt refers to her participants as “workaday” writers, while I refer to mine as “professional” writers. Brandt explains her choice of terminology, saying,

> [Workaday] is meant to denote those who write as a routine part of their work, whose pay depends to some degree on their writing literacy, who often write anonymously and ephemerally, and who may not necessarily feel the designation of writer is even appropriate to their situation, given their place in a culture where
that term is usually reserved for published professionals associated with a few, highly regarded genres. (12)

I use the term “professional” writers because I see it allowing for two key distinctions from the term “workaday” writers: (1) the four participants featured in this essay all work(ed) as writers—\textit{writer} is (at least part of) their job title rather than writing being a key literacy they need to perform a job that may or may not be that of \textit{writer}; and (2) my participants do, in fact, identify as writers not just in terms of job title but in terms of designation or identity—they have been trained to see themselves as writers before ever accepting a position as such, and trained in the “tacit tradition” (Goldblatt) of the field that emphasizes writing as a means of self-expression, self-discovery, and self-constitution.

While the data collected from the four participants highlighted in this essay is drawn from a larger study—with a total of twenty research participants working across a variety of professional contexts, genres, and platforms—I analyze these four professional writers together because they represent a particular type of writing for pay, similar, again, to the ghostwriters featured in Brandt’s study. They are all employed to write fairly typical workplace genres—such as proposals, executive overviews, cover letters, reports, etc.—and their work is based out of a more traditional brick-and-mortar workspace (although they each have the choice to work remotely for a percentage of their time).\textsuperscript{2} While Brandt’s study asks what “day-in-day-out writing [does] for—and to—the people who carry it out” (7), I ask how writers proactively navigate and mitigate what writing is doing for and to them. In other words, I ask \textit{what is the writer doing?} rather than \textit{what is writing doing to the writer?} These slight variations on familiar questions in familiar territory are meant to make it more manageable to parse out what is distinctive about the \textit{writer} in these familiar moments, where the writer is putting down words on
a page—but not necessarily in the ways composition instructors typically theorize and teach this act. Not quite in the pursuit of authorial status or textual ownership. Not quite collaboratively. And not quite as themselves.

I initially recruited participants from among my own acquaintances and former coworkers—since I, too, worked for a number of years as a professional writer—and then used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. When recruiting research participants, I was regularly told, “If only you were recruiting people who used to write—I know a lot of people that fit that description.” I was intrigued by the seeming large numbers of former professional writers and what that might illuminate about the ways writers are (not) valued. Because of this experience, I opted to recruit a small number of former professional writers for participation in this study—two of whom are profiled in this essay—to try and get at ways that individuals reflect on their writing experiences in hindsight in addition to how they reflect when they are actively working as writers.

I used a grounded theory approach to structure my data analysis (Charmaz). This means that I systematically coded the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, text samples, and reflections across multiple rounds of coding, especially taking note of experiences, practices, or phenomena that extended across all four data collection methods—showing up in the interview, observation, textual analysis of writing samples, and the reflections. Through multiple rounds of coding, several themes emerged, including the writerly tactics examined in this essay—writing to hide and strategic (dis)connection. The recursiveness of this coding process and the privileging of fine-grained analysis that is the foundation of a grounded theory approach pushed me to move past my own expectations for what the data might tell me and instead—by looking and looking and looking again—to see what else was really there.
Shifting Scholarly Focus to the Writer

Situated at the nexus of technical and professional communication (TPC), composition pedagogy, and sociocultural theories of literacy, this study considers how writers who experience a sense of vulnerability in the workplace do so at least in part because of the ways they are trained to conceptualize what counts as writing and their own status as writers. While composition is often taught as a means of personal expression or civic participation, the actual work of writing for pay on behalf of someone else frequently demands an erasure of writerly identity and—as I find in my study—often a sense of dissatisfaction or devaluation because of that erasure. It is worth noting that TPC courses designed to prepare students for professional writing contexts very often do not invoke the same system of values perpetuated in first-year composition courses, where writing is often tied to the selfhood of the writer through common genres like personal narrative and opinion editorial, etc. Still, questions of authorship and the value of the writer pervade TPC scholarship (Johnson-Eilola; Petersen; Slack et al.), and the writerly tactics furthered in this essay have potential pedagogical implications across both FYC and TPC courses. In the remainder of this section, I focus on three key tasks: (1) tracing theories of authorship in TPC, writing studies, and literacy studies scholarship to get at some of the ongoing implications of the aspirational status of authorship; (2) clarifying how this essay’s emphasis on writerly tactics and multiplicity squares with the field’s turn to a poshumanist networked agency; and (3) situating the tactics of writing to hide and strategic (dis)connection within composition and TPC scholarship.

A key tension at the heart of this essay—where unattributed professional writers are not highly valued even as the texts they write are indispensable to the knowledge economy—is rooted, in part, in the mystification and disembodiment of authorship and especially of certain
kinds of writerly identities. The preoccupation with and abstraction of authorship in TPC and writing and literacy studies scholarship is the offshoot of efforts to disrupt the Enlightenment notion of the individual author-genius. Numerous scholars (Griffin; Henry, *Writing Workplace Cultures*; Laquintano; Rose; Slack et al.; Wells) invoke Foucault’s “What is an Author?”—a 1969 lecture wherein he retheorizes authorship not as rooted in a genius/person but instead as the “author-function” (306), a status granted to some discourses and writers but not to others. The implication of this turn, as articulated in a study of technical writers, is that “authorship empowers certain individuals while at the same time render[ing] transparent the contribution of others” (Slack et al. 25). In fact, Slack, Miller, and Doak find that technical writers who seek a sense of authorship find instead “a kind of negative power” where they are unacknowledged when the writing they produce is deemed successful, but are on the hook when the writing they produce is deemed unsuccessful (31). As the role of authorship shifts amid the cultural, economic, and technological changes of recent decades, there is a tendency either to try and resuscitate traditional authorship or to assert an abstract “authorial status” (Foucault) for undervalued writers by emphasizing the collective, collaborative, and ecological nature of contemporary authorship (Lunsford and Ede; Solberg; Wells). For example, TPC scholars use terms like “distributed writing” and “distributed work” to invoke the ways that writing work is bound up in networks of human and non-human agents (Clayson; Paretti et al.; Slattery; Spinuzzi “Guest Editor’s Introduction”). Susan Wells, too, develops the concept of “distributed authorship” to categorize writing contexts where “the writer is not an individual, but a group...The voice is personal; *the writer is not a person*” (62, emphasis added). But the writer is, of course, always a person. Even in the case of machine-generated writing, the machine performing the writing is programmed by a writer of sorts. Yes, there may be multiple people,
multiple writers engaged in the composition process, and yes, they are inextricably bound up in networks of context, ideology, technology, materiality, audience, institution, etc. But over-asserting an abstracted notion of authorship can serve to obscure the writer actually putting the words on the page in a given moment, the rhetorical choices the writer is making in that moment, and the material consequences they experience while writing and because of their writing. Even when a writer reuses text—as is the case, for example, in Jason Swarts’s study of professional writers reusing content from one writing task to another—there is still a writer selecting the text to reuse, copying and pasting it, making strategic choices (“Recycled Writing”).

Emphasizing that the writer is always a person may seem to overdetermine the agency of the individual writer. By asserting the indispensability of the writer to the task of writing and focusing my analysis on writerly tactics, I do not intend to disregard contemporary, posthumanist views of distributed, networked agency—including actor-network theory (Latour; Hallenbeck; Spinuzzi; Swarts “Recycled Writing”; Swarts “Technological Literacy”), activity theory (Kain and Wardle; Spinuzzi), and cultural-historical activity theory or CHAT (Prior and Shipka)—but only to reorient them slightly. Current theories of agency, after all, do not discount the role of the individual human actor. Prior and Shipka, for example, propose an emphasis on chronotopic lamination in part because it draws attention to the writer—their feelings, tactics, and experiences. They write, “CHAT and Writing Studies could both benefit from a greater awareness of chronotopically laminated chains of acts, artifacts, and actors that are woven together and unwoven in polyvalent moments of being; from greater attention to sense, affect and consciousness, to the messy ever-moving interactions of individuals being-in-the-world” (231, emphasis added). In Clay Spinuzzi’s analysis of a telecom company through the dual lenses of ANT and activity theory, too, he considers a benefit of activity theory to be that it
allows for a consideration of the individual human actor as a key factor in an analysis of workplace knowledge production (*Network*). Sarah Hallenbeck, too, does not eschew the human actor in her discussion of ANT, saying:

Within ANT, agency is not the possession of any one individual, human or otherwise, but instead is located within a vast and varied network of humans, objects, and discourses that constantly evolves in response to changing linkages among disparate elements. These linkages...result in the constant emergence of new meanings where none had previously existed...Within this formulation, the capacity to make meaning, like the capacity for agency, is not the sole property of humans and their texts but is produced through the articulation of different relationships among all elements. (19)

This view of agency does not “usurp” the human or assert the autonomous power of inanimate objects; instead it “extends” agency, providing a more nuanced view of the actual, complex interactions that factor into any given rhetorical or writerly exchange (19). A writer, for example—while certainly a sentient, material, and powerful force—writes in concert with so many other forces: the institution which employs them, the literacy sponsors which grant or deny them particular access, the platforms on which they write, the tools they use to write, the space in which they write, the people with whom and to whom and as whom they write, and on and on. An attunement to posthumanism serves to expand and complicate notions of agency in productive ways, turning away from problematically self-centered notions of individualism and acknowledging even the ideological, constructed nature of human-ness. Attending to the agentive tactics of the individual writer, however, is not about returning authority to the human actor, but about paying a particular kind of attention to writers within the networks in which they
write. It is also about acknowledging the multiplicity of the writer: a writer is not just themself but many selves. A writer invents, absorbs, constructs, articulates, sells, and performs their own network of personae. A writer—even an individual writer—always already navigates a complex, distributed agency even before non-human actors are factored in.

The tactic of writing to hide—where writers write so as not to be personally identifiable through their writing—has implications for writing studies scholars’ discussions of the role of expressivism in contemporary writing pedagogy (Burnham and Powell; Goldblatt), furthering an approach to writing and writing instruction that extends beyond self-expression and instead emphasizes the writer’s capacity for a multiplicity of expression. Writing studies scholars in recent decades have shifted away from expressivist approaches to writing instruction (Elbow; Hairston; Murray) and instead characterize writing as a “self-constituting...act” (Herrington and Curtis 5), and a medium through which writers “invent themselves” (Royster, Traces of a Stream, 65). Still, though, expressivist views of writing persist as a “tacit tradition” (Goldblatt 440) across writing studies research and in the day-to-day practices of writing instructors (Burnham and Powell). Writing instruction continues to privilege writing tasks rooted in self-expression and identity-assertion. For example, students in first-year composition courses are very often asked to write personal narratives and opinion editorials that reflect their own experiences and values. Students are encouraged to select topics for research projects that they care deeply about and feel a personal connection or commitment to. In a typical FYC course, writing is often characterized as an extension of the self and inextricably tied to the writer’s “true” identity. This instruction, however, does not reflect the realities of writing for pay. Professional writers—especially those writing in an institutional voice or on behalf of an employer—invent, construct, and perform a multiplicity of identities, personae, and selves. This
is, in fact, what they are paid to do. Asserting the multiplicity and hybridity of the writer aligns with and builds upon the work of scholars who assert that “all my voices are authentic” (Royster, “When The First Voice You Hear,” 37, emphasis added); that “we are all...not a single who, but a great many, different whos” (Gee 56); that individuals enact and experience “multiple lifeworlds” (New London Group 71) in the current technological and economic landscape; and that “the networked self” is made up of “simultaneous lives” (Bolter and Grusin 232).

Contextualizing these scholarly theories of multiplicity in the actual experiences and tactics of writers who write for pay extends the concept of multiplicity beyond expression of a writer’s multiple identities to also include identities that are not their own.

Finally, the tactic of strategic (dis)connection—where writers perform varying levels of investment in their writing, depending on context—has implications for our understanding of literacy and its fundamental performativity. Or, to reorient this claim slightly, a close examination of this writerly tactic serves to illuminate these writers as *performers* of literacy/ies, rather than mere practitioners. Many scholars have drawn connections between writing and performance. In a 2005 essay in *College Composition and Communication*, for example, Fishman et al. theorize what they call “writing performances: students’ live enactments of their own writing” (226). Jim Henry looks particularly at the connection between performance and the work of technical communicators, building on the concept of writing as an “organizational performance,” or a type of work evaluated in terms of performance (i.e. performance reviews) (“(Re)Appraising the Performance,” 11). Still others invoke Judith Butler’s notion of the performativity of the self—an assertion of the constructed nature of identity—to conceptualize the kind of self-building that goes on through writing in the composition classroom (George 322). Andrea Lunsford’s entry in *Naming What We Know* is as straightforward as it gets: it is
titled, simply, “Writing is Performative.” She explains the ways this is the case: first, that students perform through writing, that they “might adopt a role or persona—of the ‘good student,’ for example” (43); second, that the act of writing can perform the work of generating new knowledge; and third, that, as Burke says, words are symbolic action, that writing acts and performs work in the world. Reorienting these assertions around the writer, though, offers a subtle but valuable shift. Writers act. Writers perform work in the world. Scholars have identified the ways writing is “situated in the material world” (Haas 4), the ways it is embodied (Miller), and the ways it is mobile and mobilizing (Vieira), the ways it asserts a material and “radical withness” (Micciche 502). These sociomaterial theories of literacy and writing acknowledge the nuanced relationship between literacy as a material product, and also as a practice (Vieira 4), and this invariably ties it to a literate practitioner. In other words, writing is always already tied to writers. Just as writing has material effects on those who write (Brandt 28) and those who read what is written, writers have material effects both on their writing and through their writing; the writer is a material entity that exerts material force.

Another key distinction between previous work on the performativity of writing and the implications for performativity explored in this essay is that previous assertions of writerly persona-building and performance typically remain rooted in the writer’s own identities. A student, per Lunsford’s example above, plays the role of a better student—the least lazy, most dependable and intelligent version of themself. The writers discussed in this essay, on the other hand, perform identities that are not at all their own, they construct personae on behalf of people, institutions, and entities that are quite separate from them, and, in fact, they often times proactively work to sever their own identities from the identities they are performing through writing. The work of these writers is fundamentally performative in ways that serve to broaden
our conception of what it means to write and be a writer and how else we might measure the value of that work.

**Understanding the Tactics of the Professional Writer**

Julia, Mary, Paige, and Rudy—the four current and former professional writers featured in this essay—work(ed) for a variety of employers, including two different software companies, a government agency, and a healthcare system, in either a mid-sized or large Midwestern city. They range in age from their mid-twenties to mid-thirties; all of them have at least three years of experience writing for pay, while one participant (Paige) has nearly ten years of experience. All of the participants have college degrees, majoring in English, journalism, and physics; two have obtained advanced degrees in writing-related fields, and three are currently pursuing (additional) advanced degrees in writing-related and clinical fields. They are all white monolingual English speakers; the gender breakdown is three women and one man. Rudy is a former journalist who now works as a gifts proposal writer for the research fundraising branch of a leading healthcare system. Mary invokes both past and present writing experience in her interview; when I first interviewed her, she worked as a sales writer for a software company, and she now edits online curricular materials for a large Midwestern university system (about which I conducted a follow-up interview and observation). Julia, too, is a former professional writer. She spent four-plus years writing sales proposals at two different software companies—one where she was part of a 20-person team, and another where she was one of only two writers tasked with writing sales documents. She is currently pursuing an advanced degree in a clinical field—an abrupt shift from her background as an undergraduate English major and poet. Paige is the most experienced professional writer among the individuals featured in this essay: she took her first freelance copywriting job as a college undergraduate. Paige currently works as a technical writer and
editor for a government agency, and she is simultaneously pursuing a doctoral degree in a writing-related field.

In what follows, I articulate two key writerly tactics deployed by Julia, Mary, Paige, and Rudy: writing to hide and strategic (dis)connection. These tactics illuminate the multiplicity and deeply performative character of the writer, with writers strategically constructing, hiding, and shifting across levels of investment in their writing—depending on factors such as audience, genre, and economic or emotional risk—in order to assert control over the stakes of their writing. These tactics are simultaneously protective—shielding the writer from undesirable or risky attention or scrutiny—and powerful—providing opportunities for writers to resist, to play, and to control the stakes of their investment in a professional role that is often exploitative, and where, again, writing is valued in a way that the writer is not. To borrow a phrase from Mary, these tactics are the “coping mechanisms” that writers develop to reorient themselves to writing in contexts where the traditional ideologies of writing that they bring with them—often ideologies developed or reinforced in their undergraduate composition courses—leave them open to dissatisfaction or exploitation. These tactics are hardly comprehensive—undoubtedly there are a wide variety of tactics that professional writers deploy to assert agency across contexts, genres, and platforms. Digging into these and other tactics is essential to writing instruction more broadly, not only to prepare students to critically navigate workplace literacies, but because of what these literacies illuminate about writing and about the potential economic, political, and civic power of writers—even when writers are not writing as themselves.

Writing to Hide

Each of the writers I interviewed demonstrated both a self-consciousness about their own value as a writer—stating that they are not the ones making the big decisions in their workplaces
or shouldering much power or status—as well as a matter-of-fact acknowledgment of the power they do have, the power inherent within the act of putting words on the page. They used words like “sneaky” and “surreptitious” to describe the power they have, though, as if asserting a kind of underground agency through the act of writing. For example, after describing the brainstorming meetings that Rudy has with the fundraising executives at the start of each new proposal project—where higher-ups in the organization give him a direction to take when writing his next documents—he goes on to say:

> My job is not just to be a writer...I ask leading questions. And I put it down on paper, and once it’s down on paper, it’s a starting point. It’s tangible. Yeah, I write...But it’s a little surreptitious. I quietly have some agency. Once you’ve documented something...It’s how I perceive some of these things. We have a conversation about a [project], but it’s all ideas, it’s all nebulous, until someone puts in the labor of getting it down on paper and defining it. There’s a lot of...power in that, in being that person.

Here, Rudy identifies the very act of writing as something more than writing—it is not mere writing, it is “put[ting] it down on paper,” where “it” means the actual words but also Rudy’s own ideas and perceptions of the project. The power of this act is “quiet” and “surreptitious”—Julia characterizes a similar moment of agency, saying, “It’s like being a spy”—but regardless of the fanfare, or lack thereof, it is an agentive moment.

A sense of the quiet, surreptitious power of being the one putting down the words was evident while observing these writers, too, and while discussing the sample texts they shared with me. I observed Mary, for example, reviewing feedback that she received on a document she was writing. While she scrolled through comments from her supervisor—who does not work as a
writer but, as Mary put it (while rolling her eyes), “more of an ideas man”—she encountered some suggestions that she said were “just plain wrong.” Mary’s use of the phrase “ideas man” stood out in particular because the supervisor who had left the comment was not a man, but a woman. This gendered phrase highlights how workplace hierarchies that contribute to the undervaluing of writers are deeply interwoven with other such power dynamics, including the gender disparity reflected in Mary’s use of this phrase (and the company’s use of it more broadly). Mary’s employer, she said, promoted “ideas men,” and writers were subordinate to them. Mary narrated her thought process for me while reading this feedback, saying, “I can just delete that comment. She must be, I don’t know, thinking of another project or something. Like she’s mixing them up.” The implication here is that even though “an ideas man”—someone in the workplace with higher status and invariably a higher salary—might come up with the vision, own the project, or get the ultimate credit for its successful completion, they are not connected to it in the same way that Mary is because she is, as Paige puts it, “the one in charge of the words.” Rudy, too, when showing me a sample proposal he had written on behalf of a doctor seeking research funding, demonstrates his own closeness to the text while indicating that the other stakeholders—including the doctor that the proposal was attributed to—were quite distant from it. I asked him how much the doctor reviewed the proposal before sending it out to potential donors, and he said, “Really, not at all. This is totally anonymous, right? [Here Rudy is seeking reassurance that he will be unidentifiable in my research.] I mean, this sounds bad, but I doubt he even read it. I think he’s just like, ‘You’re the writer, so you take care of the writing.’”

While these assertions of agency on the part of the writers may seem like attempts to establish authorial status or intellectual ownership, it is the surreptitiousness of these acts that illuminates the tactic of writing to hide. “I’m not trying to be noticed,” says Mary, when
describing how she approaches writing for her various workplace audiences. “You don’t want to attract undue attention because that would just mean more work.” Mary clarifies that this applies to both negative and positive attention—that even if she’s being praised, it will likely result in more work for her. Julia, too, describes an experience writing an executive memo on behalf of her previous employer only to be called out in a meeting for making changes that the CEO did not like and fearing that she might lose her job. “I learned really fast that I wasn’t trying to, like, be unique or make things ‘my own,” she says. “The best writing is when it doesn’t get noticed.”

Even as the writer asserts a unique agency over the text, they are undeniably vulnerable. Yes, the writer “owns” the writing of the text, but in contexts when writers do not legally own the documents they produce and when their livelihoods hinge on their ability to produce writing on behalf of and acceptable to an employer, ownership is not necessarily something that writers even aspire to. Instead, they write to hide.

There are, of course, exceptions to this tactic—moments when the writers did not write to hide but, instead, either described or demonstrated a desire to be seen. These moments of exception were most common for Rudy, who talked about asserting himself in planning meetings and actively seeking out additional input on his writing from higher-ups in his workplace. “I’ve never been afraid to speak up,” he says. “[Some people] might call it male privilege, but whatever. I mean, this is my career.” Rudy’s reference to the gender dynamics at play in a workplace meeting, where men might feel more comfortable speaking up than women, illuminates again how writerly surreptitiousness is bound up with other power dynamics in the workplace. Rudy, too—more than any of the other writers featured in this essay—expressed a long-term investment in his career as a writer, while Mary, Paige, and Julia are all pursuing
alternative career paths now or in the near future. It would seem, then, that these writers write to hide in proportion to their level of long-term investment in a given act of writing.

To further examine the tactic of writing to hide, I focus in on my interviews and observations with Mary as she worked in two different professional writing roles. Her experience demonstrates the impact on writers and their writing when anonymity—not ownership or authorship—is the goal, functioning as a type of economic, professional, and emotional safety net for the writer. During Mary’s first interview, while she was still writing sales proposals for a software company, she expressed a very practical attitude about her position. Since multiple writers were contributing to a single document, they needed to sound like each other in order to maintain cohesion. When asked if Mary felt a sense of ownership over the things she was writing, she scoffed. “It’s not about ownership,” she says. If it were, she’d be in for a lot of frustration. She talked about how others at the company regularly took credit for things that she wrote, even internal documents. In a document she worked on the day of our first observation, for example, she showed me how one of the reviewers—a technical expert at the company—commented on a section using language that Mary sent to him in an email. The technical expert was praised by other reviewers for his “smart approach,” and there was no mention that the wording and the thinking were Mary’s. “If I got upset over this,” she says, “I’d be upset all the time.”

Desiring or claiming ownership of her own writing was classified by Mary as a sign of “vulnerability.” She says, “When I let myself be vulnerable [by trying something unique or creative] it just leads to criticism, panic, and extra work.” Instead she writes with the intention to not be noticed. While writing, Mary spends most of her time looking up previously used language in a database of old proposals that she and her team of writers all have access to. She
spends almost the entirety of the writing time that I observe simply copying and pasting text from this database. She is not trying out new, clearer language. Even if the old wording is confusing, it’s better, she says, to parrot it than to possibly draw attention from the people who will review her writing and are familiar and comfortable with what has been said before. She uses phrases like “standard text” to describe the type of writing she typically does, pulling language that’s been approved in the past from a shared database and reusing it—a phenomenon that is well-documented in TPC scholarship (Batova; Batova and Clark; McCarthy et al.; Mirel; Swarts “Recycled Writing”; Swarts “Technological Literacy”). What is somewhat unique to Mary’s situation is how she characterizes this kind of writing, given the vulnerability she identifies in producing new, original, or innovative text: her job is not so much writing but hunting down others’ words and, she says, “hiding behind them.” After she receives review, she’ll save off separate copies of the section with each reviewer’s comments so that if one of the company’s responses is called into question during contracting or implementation, she can identify which reviewer approved the language and pass the blame to them. “We have to constantly cover our tracks,” she says.

In our second interview, after Mary had moved to her new position writing and editing curricular materials, I asked if her relationship to writing had changed much—either from one job to the next or even since she was in school, studying creative writing. She says,

If anything, I am less confident in my writing than I was when I was in school...In the beginning, I sometimes felt proud of my writing because someone would tell me it was good. But over time I learned that it was completely arbitrary. I stopped feeling pride and ownership for my writing and mostly felt like I was
regurgitating things that had already been said...or really just trying to stay under the radar.

It is worth noting that as I identify Mary’s intentionality and agency evident in the tactic of writing to hide, Mary ties this tactic to her loss of pride in her own writing. I would argue that this loss of pride is significantly tied to the expectations Mary developed about writing and herself as a writer when being trained in composition and creative writing courses in English departments. She says, “I was always taught that real writers have something unique to say.” Mary describes how she continues to write in order to avoid attention—whether positive or negative—because attention typically leads to more work or to heightened levels of scrutiny. “The people who review my writing aren’t writers,” she says, “so it’s never clear how they’re deciding if something is good or not. So I just learned that if something had worked in the past, to, like, stick with it until it didn’t.” Though Mary certainly expresses a sense of disillusionment here, I argue that the process she describes is evidence of a complex writerly tactic—writing to hide—that Mary developed and deployed to navigate the incongruity of her experience writing for work, her expectations of what writing should be, and the risks involved in writing for pay. She developed systems of tracking reader responses, tailoring writing to very specific audiences—typically just one or two (often fickle) people. She had routines for storing and finding old writing, choosing which pieces of it could be reused and how to subtly change it enough so that it wouldn’t trigger attention by its familiarity while still remaining familiar. What she describes as relinquishing ownership of her writing actually is something different, something more than that (since, again, she did not own it to begin with). Rather, like the others, Mary strategically and intentionally wrote in order to eschew ownership—she wrote to hide—thereby asserting a kind of agency over her writing and her position as a writer.
Strategic (Dis)Connection

What I am calling strategic (dis)connection is a tactic adopted by each of the writers highlighted in this essay, who shifted between positions of deep investment in and thorough detachment from their writing, performing and/or inhabiting these seemingly disparate positions depending on the audience, genre, or economic stakes of their professional writing tasks in order to mitigate the potentially fraught consequences of writing for pay. Rudy, for example, says, “I drink the Kool-Aid. I think you have to.” The implication of this phrase, typically used in reference to people who join cults, is that Rudy uncritically buys into his job, flaws and all—that he has decided not to scrutinize or resist or find fault but instead to be fully invested. Rudy demonstrates his investment in his work by using the pronoun “we”—what he calls “the organizational we”—when describing the institution's mission and the work of himself and others. The clinical research performed by doctors and researchers at the healthcare system, for example, is research that “we” perform, just as the writing that Rudy produces is characterized as what “we” write. “The proposals we write fund research that saves lives,” he says. “I find a lot of personal satisfaction in that.” Seemingly in contrast, Mary describes “actively not caring” about her work. She calls this intentional detachment “a coping mechanism,” explaining, “I think apathy is rewarded...It makes me feel like I am controlling the stakes. If I lower the stakes for myself, then I can minimize how it [the work of writing] affects me...There is a kind of power in controlling your personal investment in what you’re creating so that you can determine how you’re going to let it affect you.” Again, Mary’s word choice is interesting here. Just as “drinking the Kool-Aid” in relation to his work as a writer implies Rudy’s willful acceptance of a problematic position, referring to her relationship to writing in terms of “coping mechanisms” implies that Mary has experienced some kind of trauma with which she needs to cope. In both
cases, Rudy and Mary are strategically choosing whether and how much to personally connect to their work. In Rudy’s case, he has decided that this will be his career, so he is choosing to invest in a way that Mary—who eventually left the position with which she was “coping”—did not or could not.

For Julia this tactic involves performing enthusiasm for superiors who demand it while remaining detached from the actual writing tasks she is required to perform. She says,

I’d go to a meeting with [a company executive], and she’d throw around all these big, crazy ideas about how we should change a bunch of our documents and totally revolutionize everything. She’d be, like, drawing diagrams on the board and practically shouting. And I’d….be right there with her, you know. I’d be like, “Yeah, let’s shorten this and rewrite this and get rid of this.” And then I’d go back to my office and do the same thing we always did because I knew she’d, like, forget or...not follow through.

Julia intentionally matches the level of enthusiasm of her superior, the reader who will eventually have to approve her writing. She calibrates her performance in hopes that it will spare her extra scrutiny later on; if the executive leaves the planning meeting feeling like they are on the same page, she is less likely to dig as deeply into the document that Julia will eventually create. Performing a particular connection to the writing in the moment allows Julia to navigate a tricky writing scenario and hopefully come out of it unscathed—or at least less scathed than might have been the case if she had seemed disconnected, uninterested, or resistant to the ideas communicated in that meeting, however far-fetched they might have been. Rudy, too, describes asking lots of questions in brainstorming meetings and demonstrating curiosity about others’ ideas and commitment to incorporating them into the texts he produces. In the act of writing,
though, he says, “I make the decisions.” Strategic (dis)connection is deeply performative. Writers are not just performing a detachment from or love for their work in order to make it more bearable for them but also to assert themselves (or not) among their colleagues, to both passively resist exploitation and actively engage with workplace structures for their own benefit.

Mary uses the term *passing* to describe the tactic of strategic (dis)connection. “Like, the goal was to pass,” she says. “You got to the point where you didn’t want to excel, because excelling meant that you got additional attention, additional arbitrary scrutiny. But if you did want to excel at something, you had to pass as being tough as nails, even if you didn’t feel that way.” For example, all of the writers describe performing an ability to calmly receive criticism without taking it personally as a way to move up in their roles at work, to receive more money or advance to leadership positions. Mary explains, “I presented myself off the page, like, that I don’t get frustrated easily. I think that’s why I got [promoted].” Paige describes getting “angry at writing” when words aren't coming to her but says, “you never let them see you sweat.” Julia says, “I cared way too much about my job. It was, like, my whole life. My identity was basically this job, but when I’d get [screwed] over I had to act like I didn’t care too much. Can’t rock the boat.” Rudy says, “I’m in this for the long haul. This is gonna be my career. So I can’t take things personally.” Passing as someone who calmly receives criticism is a way that each of these writers, through their appearance and affect, through their writing and writerly routines, performs a certain level of investment in their writing based on the stakes and context of that writing.

Mary’s use of *passing* here is significant, considering how this concept is used across disciplines and contexts to describe the work of a marginalized individual or group to perform their place in a dominant group, including passing as a race, gender, religion, ability, or ethnicity different from their own. Disability studies scholars, for example, use the concept of passing to
understand the power dynamics at work for individuals who pass as nondisabled (or not) (Samuels); literacy studies scholars, as another example, identify how developing particular literacies can allow practitioners to pass—in some cases, to quite literally pass across borders and through bureaucratic hoops (Vieira). Mary explains further what she means about passing in a professional writing context:

Because writing is coming from your brain, it’s natural to associate it with you—to take pride in it, to care about it, to be embarrassed by it, whatever—but, like, I think it is a learned coping mechanism or skill to get to a point where you’re just like, “I want to pass.” I think about it in terms of, like, getting a passing grade but also other uses of the word. Like, I want to pass as someone else. I want to pass as someone that this group deems acceptable as an employee, as a writer. I want to pass as someone whose writing is acceptable but without garnering enough attention—negative or positive—that there are any follow-up.

The tactic of strategic (dis)connection serves to highlight not only the deeply agentive efforts of professional writers to navigate, calibrate, and control the work of writing, but also the realities of exploitation and vulnerability inherent in writing for pay. This tactic is not merely a mind game that writers play to “trick” themselves into detaching from writing when they are overwhelmed or vulnerable; rather, it is a writerly persona that they both construct and inhabit and that has implications beyond the writer’s own personal relationship to their writing or to a writing task. Through strategic (dis)connection, writers assert authority over writing beyond frameworks of legal ownership and authorial status—categories of authority that simply are not granted to them. This tactic can be both a form of resistance and a means to advancement. In
general, it is illustrative of writers’ capacity for multiplicity—both in terms of the personae they construct through writing and the orientations they perform toward writing

**Conclusion: The Multiplicity of the Writer**

The tactics of writing to hide and strategic disconnection draw attention to the multiplicity of the writer—a productive framework through which to understand the ways that a writer is not just *themself* but many *selves*. I argue that a writer invents, absorbs, constructs, articulates, sells, and performs a whole network of personae—rather than seeking a kind of textual ownership through a mere assertion of their own selves—and that unattributed professional writers are a particularly clear example of this.

Establishing the multiplicity of the writer as a framework through which to understand, study, and theorize the writer similarly marks a subtle shift from typical frameworks of ownership and authorship. Research about writers who write on behalf of employers and institutions—typically anonymously or pseudonymously—often characterizes this work as either collaborative or imitative (Bruss; Lunsford and Ede; Seeger). This is undoubtedly true, at times. Writers writing on behalf of an employer, for example, undoubtedly take note of commonly used phrases or stylistic trends in the speech or writing of that person and reflect those trends in written texts. Mary, for instance, explains that when she used to write for a particular executive at her company who loves jargon, “I intentionally kept the jargon in so that I would sound like her.” Writers writing on behalf of a company, too, undoubtedly collaborate with colleagues in order to brainstorm strategies, represent the company brand, and understand products, technologies, and functionalities. However, an over-emphasis on imitation and collaboration reflects and propagates a view of professional writers as lesser, non-agentive, powerless—
playing into frameworks of ownership and authorship wherein professional writers are perpetually and irrevocably at a disadvantage.

But the work of these writers is not always or merely imitative and collaborative. I find that professional writers often create personae rather than merely imitating them, that they often make strategic decisions in the act of writing as opposed to simply reflecting the decisions made by company higher-ups. The writerly “voice” of an institution, for instance, does not simply exist abstractly or independently—a company’s style is not its own autonomous force. Rather, institutional voice is written and rewritten by writers. This reality is evident in data collected from the participants highlighted in this essay, even as they talk about company voice as though it were an autonomous thing. When asked about her role in developing the voice of the company at which she worked, for example, Mary says, “I had a sense of the [company] voice because I read so many...user guides and training materials.” By implying that the company voice was one she imitated rather than constructed, Mary draws attention to the role of professional writers like her in its creation and dispersal: professional writers, of course, wrote the very user guides and training materials that she looked to as reference. Julia, too, is humble about her contribution to the voice of the company at which she worked, saying, “The company thinks of its voice in very particular ways.” By referring to the company as a sentient entity with preferences about style, Julia highlights that the company is not that, and that a company’s voice is a construction, not a pre-existing thing. The voice that these writers claim to imitate is truly a voice that writers have created.

Again, this is not to say that there are never elements of imitation and collaboration in the work of these writers, but that over-emphasizing these modes stops us short of recognizing the role writers play in creating, directing, and deciding rather than simply taking orders and
reflecting a pre-existing persona. Julia mentions that opportunities to create a persona, voice, and style when writing on behalf of an employer/company are particularly present when new technologies and innovations are created or requested, or when an employer chooses to move in new directions. This becomes evident as I observe these writers: Paige, who works for an established agency with its own extensive style guide (a thick, decades-old tome), regularly consults a style guide while writing and editing, while Mary, who is working on text for a new project pilot, does not consult any company materials—not even notes from planning meetings or emails from other project stakeholders—for guidance while establishing the tone of the project’s written materials. She is developing it on the fly. Mary explains that some writers are put into positions where they create and inhabit multiple writerly personae that then trickle down to other writers; these writers, she says, are tasked with certain projects and genres with particular overseers and audiences that lead to these opportunities. The point is that with some frequency, amid various contextual factors, it is the professional writers who define the voice(s) of the companies for which they write. Rudy explains, “When you’re writing on behalf of an institution, you develop institutional voices and, you know, I don’t necessarily write in the first person, but I think the style of writing isn’t always the way that we were taught.” Here Rudy highlights two key distinctions: (1) that writers develop rather than merely invoke institutional voices; and (2) that the voices they develop are not necessarily representative of them but are also not mere reflections of some other autonomous entity. Writers create and inhabit a multiplicity of personae, a reality that has potential to help refigure the ways we understand the act of writing and the positionality of professional writers—not as always collaborating subordinates nor as wannabe authors seeking to express their own identities and values through writing, but as always already creative and agentive rhetorical actors.
Ultimately, attending to the multiplicitous tactics of the writer rather than their authorial status or textual ownership acknowledges both the agency and vulnerability of the writer. Deborah Brandt writes, “Writing risks social exposure, political retaliation, legal blame. It requires a level of courage and ethical conviction rarely cultivated in school-based literacy and rarely measured in standard assessments of writing ability” (133). Understanding the complex tactics that writers deploy when faced with the vulnerability and inequity of the writing marketplace offers potential avenues for reorienting the ideologies of writing that underlie current approaches to literacy and composition pedagogy. We would do well to ask: What are the disconnects between the ways writers are taught to write and the ways they are paid to write? And how might we reorient pedagogical practices in order to mitigate some of the pain points that writers face in our current writing marketplace as a result of these disconnects?

This work of pedagogical reorientation might take the form of assignments and activities in our composition classrooms that de-emphasize attributed authorship and writerly self-expression and instead reflect the capacity of writers to express a multiplicity of perspectives and personae. For example, we might ask students to write from positions with which they disagree or are disinterested, to write on behalf of a client or other external entity, to actively mask their own writerly “voice” in the service of a unified, collaboratively written voice, or to proactively create a writerly persona with specific investments and personality traits and then practice writing as that persona. More fundamental, though, is the importance of interrogating the ideologies of writing that we perpetuate and the systems of value that are reflected in our composition classrooms. While my goal here is not to say that composition classrooms should be conceptualized as mere training grounds for future workers, the question of whether workers are equipped to navigate the demand for writing in the knowledge economy—and the implications
of that demand for their personal, professional, and civic identities—has material and humanistic consequences that should not be understated. The multiplicity of the writer provides a framework for reorienting our attention to these writers, for reconsidering their tactics and experiences and perhaps seeing them more clearly or in new ways altogether, and then, ideally, for reviewing the ideologies of writing we espouse that might be doing a disservice to the growing numbers of workers whose livelihoods hinge at least in part on their ability to write—but not necessarily as themselves.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.

2. Examining these four participants together based on where and what they typically write is representative of my larger study design, which draws from three case studies: first, professional writers in typical brick-and-mortar workplace settings; second, writers-for-hire on Twitter; and third, code-writers. Collecting and analyzing data from participants who work in a range of workplace environments and use a variety of writing technologies serves to illuminate an array of experiences, orientations to writing, and technological affordances and limitations.

3. It is worth noting the racialized context in which Royster is making this assertion, and the important differences between the incidents Royster is citing here and the multiple voices of the [white] professional writers featured in this essay.

4. One of the student participants in Fishman et al.’s study—Beth—begins to move toward performing a writerly persona that is strategically not rooted in her own identity. Beth, who is trained as an actor, explains:
My paper got written, largely because of the help of an adopted character, who was just an elevated form of myself, but a character, nonetheless: someone with a voice different from my own and more like the ‘eloquent’ voice I thought my erudite professor was looking for. In the end, equipped with the authoritative voice of my assumed character, I was able to hush my hyper-active internal editors. To do that, I had borrowed the tool of character assumption from my acting experience in order to aid my writing process…By presenting myself either to the stage or to the page as a character, I can distance myself from the very personal editor-audiences, who can be so debilitating that they cause either writer’s block or stage fright. (236-37)

Beth’s training not in writing but in acting leads her to perform the task of writing in a way that more closely reflects the kind of literacy performances enacted by the writers studied in this essay—strategically constructed as distant from the “self” of the writer.
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