

Epistolary Explorations of Academic Writing: An Open Letter to Student Publication Leaders

Abstract

Inspired by inventive approaches to the epistolary method delineated by Rickard (2024), this open letter to student publication leaders proposes a series of innovations in response to and anticipation of the evolution of digital text communication. First, I reflect on the Socratic method and the power of questions. Next, I describe re-envisioning the future of letters and text communication and the role of student publications in preparing for this evolution. To take strides toward future possibilities, I describe design thinking as a general framework for higher-order cognition, employing morphological analysis and SMART goals as two examples that target divergent and convergent thinking respectively. After describing design thinking, I provide an example of the arts-based tomorrowland storytelling technique, which supports inclusion by valuing “inchoate” ideation. In a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure style section, three specific propositions for student publications are presented to be explored at the election of the reader. Penultimately, I describe how epistolary and arts-based methods can diversify the content of student publications and align with theories of youth involvement in organizational change. Finally, I situate these ideas for student publications in the scholarly ecosystem using a basic framework that draws from dynamic systems theory.

Full Text

Dear student publication leaders,

In this letter, I aspire to prompt you to contemplate major questions about your roles, with particular emphasis on the big picture in the future of academic literature but also text communication more broadly. Writing in letter form has been used as an unorthodox approach to scholarship called the epistolary method. Rickards (2024) conveys how knowledge creation through the writing of a letter serves as a fascinating yet underestimated answer to the call for diversifying academic writing beyond the traditional essay. I am extending this work by adopting an approach to academic writing that not only takes the form of a letter that holds untapped potential, but that takes the letter and analyses additional layers of unconventionality through design thinking and engaged scholarship. These additional layers, I argue, are conducive to authentically and comprehensively pushing the boundaries of text communication in a world with rapidly expanding artificial intelligence (AI) content posing questions about authorship (Doyle & Senske, 2018) as well as writing education (Wang & Tian, 2025). As a result, we must duly explore these considerations in student publications. If you have not yet read an epistolary research work, I encourage you to read Rickards (2024). Regardless, here is what you can expect from this paper: I provide an eclectic synthesis of research, citing in APA style, but using a sometimes informal tone due to the letter style. I frequently use parentheses to insert extensions of my thoughts, as I often do in my personal writing style even though it is less common in conventional manuscript styles (consider it like a director's commentary version of a film). I use tables and figures when necessary, and provide hyperlinks for useful webpages. Without further ado, let's begin.

Infused in this letter is a diverse assortment of intellectual tools that are either new or have been underestimated in the realm of student creative and scholarly activity. While the tools can be applied more broadly, here in this context I am appealing to you primarily to situate the relevance of these ideas to student publications. This is because you, as leaders of these publications, hold influence in the knowledge mobilization universe and the education universe (that's right, not just postsecondary education - don't underestimate youth in K-12!). Your ability

to facilitate innovation can spark motivation for educators to adopt such techniques should they witness that students are competent in and/or familiar with engaging in such “unconventional” activities to effectively cultivate and express their knowledge.

In lieu of a thesis statement, this letter has eight main sections (plus an introduction and conclusion), sharing the underlying theme of empowering student publications for re-envisioning student opportunities that account for the increasing complexity of our world and corresponding complexity of higher-order thinking and its applications. The sections are:

1. Introduction
2. Higher-Order Thinking and the Power of Questions
3. The Future of Letters and Text
4. Design Thinking
5. Underestimation of “Inchoate” Ideation and “Premature” Provenance: The DeLorean Parking Lot and Tomorrowlands
6. Three Propositions for Student Publications: Choose-Your-Own-Adventure
7. Affinity of Epistolary and Arts-Based Methods
8. Youth Involvement in Change
9. Putting it All Together with Dynamic Systems Theory
10. Conclusion

Introduction

First I would like to introduce myself to those I haven’t worked with yet. My name is Ben. I am a PhD student in Applied Health Sciences at Brock University. I also serve as an Associate Editor for *Mind Pad*, the publication by the Canadian Psychological Association’s Student Section.

Furthermore, as president of the Brock Chapter of the Golden Key International Honour Society, I am starting a new student publication inspired by the epistolary method and dedicated to digital minimalism. Hence, student publications have been circling my mind. I have loved writing ever since I was young when I would write stories, poetry, news articles, and now in my budding academic career, writing pieces to contribute to the scholarly literature. When writing my master’s thesis, I knew that I wanted to push the envelope vis-à-vis how graduate student scholarship manifests, knowing that text forms as we know them will continue to change over

time as they always have throughout history. Therefore, I took a few liberties to experiment with (not a randomized control trial, though) some basic ideas. First, I added two “pause and ponder” sections (more on that later): one at the beginning, and one at the end. Second, I added Easter eggs (hidden messages and patterns) throughout the document (try to find them yourself - see Johnson, 2025a). Third, I included a short poem within the synthesis of the literature as a miniature form of arts-based knowledge dissemination (Robinson et al., 2018). Fourth, I included a miniature evidence synthesis table in my literature review section that juxtaposed the methodology and results of highly relevant papers for a closer analysis of their similarities and differences, inspired by the PRISMA protocol in systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009). There were many more ideas that I wanted to explore but were not feasible to do in the timeframe I had. However, I still believe in them and this letter serves as one of the first ways in which I will be testing and sharing these ideas, as I believe they can be implemented into student publications, which is why I seek to bring them forward for your consideration.

Higher-Order Thinking and the Power of Questions

We often underestimate the role of questions - they are more powerful than we think. Questions are not just a certain way of formulating communication, but they are the backbone of human intellect. If knowledge creation were a car engine, then questions would be the ignition that sparks the exchange of knowledge that allow us to make the decisions we need to make in order to function. This occurs even though in most of these moments they do not come together in the form of explicit verbal language. I’ve come to appreciate more and more how questions are not actually bound by the realm of language, though sometimes we perceive them to be so. In my reflections, I’ve noticed that the existence of a question in one’s mind precedes the process of articulation that beckons the language that eventually allows one to ask the question in a social setting (and I am interested in there eventually being a neuroimaging study to investigate this empirically). A question can grapple with all aspects of existence - the concrete and the abstract, the actual and the hypothetical. Thus, in my opinion, the power of questions in writing and text creation has been underestimated, no less in student publications.

Have you ever read an academic article which contains rhetorical questions posed to the reader for reflection? I have come across only a few, yet I believe that they would be suitable in the vast

majority of papers. I postulate that questions have a stigma for two reasons. First, we are intimidated by them due to many years of fearing exam questions, or from interrogation experiences (even interrogations from your parents or the principal). Second, after enough time in the postsecondary setting, we then befriend questions as we've cultivated a skillset to formulate research questions for our papers as well as create our own exam questions, yet in doing so, we've shifted our perspective of questions to now be a helpless, dependent, juvenile entity — an incomplete thing needing an answer to be completed. What I have come to realize is that questions are extremely powerful in and of themselves. Questions are seeds of ideas. Without them, there is no pursuit of knowledge. As scholars, we ought to fully embrace questions, not just statements, as a driving force in our worldviews, just as Socrates did nearly two and a half thousand years ago in a manner that remains highly influential to this day (Greenwood, 2011). This iterative cycle of questions is ideal for cultivating the higher-order, critical, and critical analytic thinking skills that are so valuable to instill in students (Lombardi, 2023).

Higher-Order Thinking: Divergent and Convergent

There are several facets of higher-order thinking (HOT) that I hope to distill for you such that their integration will help with your student publication in form and content. These aspects of thinking are relevant both at the research level and at the applied level. At the research level, methods of HOT are relevant to how you perceive publishable student work in terms of generating new knowledge. At the applied level, methods of HOT are relevant for how you execute innovations to your student publication. With this backdrop, let's start breaking down HOT. First, there is divergent thinking (i.e., brainstorming): at a research level, this may look like deriving various interpretations of collected/analysed data; at an applied level, this may look like generating a multitude of ideas for how to innovate your publication, even though not all ideas will be implemented. Next, there are convergent thinking processes that take said ideas and analyse them according to logical criteria: at the research level, this may look like refining and deducing novel interpretations of data; at an applied level, this may look like refining possible actions generated through brainstorming into a smaller subset of feasible actionable steps. Intersecting with both divergent and convergent thinking are critical and critical analytic thinking (Lombardi, 2023), which are similar constructs that are specific manifestations of higher-order

thinking. In essence, critical thinking refers to the application of relevant background knowledge to judge a concept or situation and self-regulation of the evidence and logic of that judgment (Facione, 1990), whilst critical analytic thinking takes this one step further by specifically drawing from disciplinary knowledge, enabling a deeper analysis. The latter thought process is crucial to the academic sphere as the application of disciplinary knowledge is required to produce effective research questions and interpretations. Thus, critical thinking is more relevant as an applied use of HOT, whereas critical analytic thinking is more relevant as a research/academic use of HOT, although they intersect. An example of their intersection is when completing a research project, navigating logistical situations such as resource management may depend on critical thinking when disciplinary knowledge alone cannot assist in those situations, and more general fluid reasoning skills are needed.

What's more, critical analytic thinking can be broken down based on the different types of knowledge to which it is being applied: factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Factual knowledge refers to basic facts, such as terminology, details or elements one must know in order to understand a discipline or situation. Conceptual knowledge refers to theories/models, classifications, principles, or other structures created for or adapted to a particular discipline. Procedural knowledge is defined as action-based knowledge that helps people to perform specific tasks such as conduct a lab experiment. Finally, metacognitive knowledge is one's awareness of their own cognition and knowledge that enables them to reflect on their understanding in addition to their biases and limitations.

Before I continue, let's reflect on our mission as student publications. In CPA's *Mind Pad*, one guiding value from the editorial policy is the following: "Content is encouraged that are unique, innovative, and may catalyze discussion and debate among members and affiliates of CPA, as well as within the psychological community." (<https://cpa.ca/students/mindpad/editorialpolicy/>) This sounds great. How can we facilitate this discourse? Are we just copying what we see in mainstream journals and clinging to that based on the desire to conform? Do we have the courage to be one of the first to take more creative approaches to knowledge dissemination?

As alluded to earlier, I came across papers with reflection prompting questions. This happened when reading in a journal called *The Reading Teacher*. They situated these questions usually at the beginning of the paper to help their readership reflect on their own knowledge to stimulate thinking and support the process of translating understanding of the paper's content to one's teaching practice (See Figure 1). The audience is composed of teachers or education professionals who were not as frequently engaged with research. However, can you honestly think of any reason why this practice wouldn't be relevant for all scholarly papers, even if in a minor way? Sure, rhetorical questions are in fact used in many research papers sparsely. With that being said, in my view there are far more instances where the potential use of rhetorical questions for prompting reflection by the reader is neglected. Do we erroneously assume that the author is supposed to prompt reflection in the reader through persuasive statements alone? I believe so. Think about it for yourself. Have you ever read a paper with rhetorical questions and thought - 'there are too many questions and not enough statements'? To me, there seems to be the opposite problem. Not that there should be more questions than statements, but simply that a paragraph could've been written to prime readers' thinking by beginning with a rhetorical question, especially at the start of an article.

Figure 1

Example of Pause and Ponder Section with Questions for the Reader

PAUSE AND PONDER

- What is the purpose of education?
- If we were to ask students why it is important to grow as a reader, writer, and speaker, what reasons would they likely provide? How closely would their responses reflect our own goals for them as future stewards of our communities?
- In what ways does our reading curriculum reflect, or perhaps fail to reflect, the needs of our communities? Do our students see connections between these needs and the work they do in the classroom?

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Likewise, providing actionable steps for readers at the end of an article is also a practice in *The Reading Teacher* (See Figure 2). I appreciate how this component of an article bridges the gap between dissemination and translation, and I believe it should be duly considered in student publications. Endowment of such actionable steps is in the spirit of engaged scholarship, particularly the value of citizenship, through connecting researchers to their role as a fellow citizen (Beaulieu et al., 2018).

Figure 2

Example of Pause and Ponder Section with Actionable Steps for the Reader

Take Action!

1. Develop and teach students to play a memory-style matching game that encourages application of their SfV.
 - a. Print 5–10 sentences containing a target word that encourages the use of SfV on a set of index cards, one sentence per card with each target word underlined. Provide a matching picture for each sentence on a different index card, one picture per card.
 - b. Place cards in two columns on the table, with sentences and pictures facing up.
 - c. Taking turns, a student will read a printed sentence using SfV as needed. The student may use the provided pictures to support and confirm the decoding attempt of the target word. If the student is able to accurately decode the word, the student keeps the sentence and picture cards, and another student takes a turn. Provide support as needed and remind the student to use the provided strategy list.
 - d. When all matches are complete, each student practices reading the words aloud again to promote automaticity. The cards may be placed face down on the table to play the game as in a memory/matching style in additional rounds.
2. Make the game available for students to play on their own or with a partner, replacing the sentence and picture cards to match current instruction as needed.

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When teaching about essay writing, do we not encourage students to open with a hook that can be in the form of a rhetorical question? We teach this, so why do we not do it more frequently in our research papers? One might identify the distinction that in teaching essays we are instilling communication skills in our students such that we want them to engage the reader as these skills are useful in their career. In the context of research articles, the purpose of the text is different. The audience is supposed to be familiar with the topic and should be intrinsically motivated to understand because the paper concerns their own discipline, so optimizing reader engagement in theory is not technically supposed to help with comprehension. However, I believe this too strictly considers the average reader, not the entire audience. Yes, it is pragmatic to consider the average reader, but if we are able to provide a more customized reading experience, should we

not consider all readers? Therefore, next, I wish to present to you some dilemmas regarding the future of text before further discussing applications of higher-order thinking to student publications.

The Future of Letters and Text

Have you ever wondered what the implications of AI might be on writing and text? Once upon a time, human communication was strictly oral besides scratching on wood and stone or painting on surfaces. Eventually paper was invented, then the printing press, and then electronic communications, most recently in the form of computers that can create and disseminate complex digital texts (excuse my highly simplified version of text history). Surely student publications have immense potential in terms of evolving what is considered a scholarly manuscript, whether it be through leveraging digital technology or simply creative communication. Perhaps we have been too meek to make such changes, too pressured by the weight of the traditional essay to which we have spent so many years proving ourselves. With the rise of AI, I believe it is time to take strides to see what we can become, to maintain a robust enterprise proving the value of student publications. We must operate with the future of academic publishing in mind, as future practices will soon transform from hypothetical ideas to the concrete future reality faced by the current student population as they progress throughout their research career (Ahmed et al., 2023). Please note that some ideas may not be feasible for student publications but are still worth contemplating, whereas other ideas may be more feasibly implemented. And always remember that even though there are some exciting opportunities, you need work-life balance. We need to look in front of us to make sure that we don't trip and fall, but we must also look to the horizon to ensure we are truly moving in a purposeful direction.

Digital texts already contain various interactive features. For example, drop down boxes can be toggled such that you click to open and read when relevant but you can click again to hide it. Similarly, some texts enable one to scroll through a gallery of pictures. Many texts have embedded audio or video, and some even have games built into them. Even so, we don't always make use of these customization - have you thoughtfully considered which cookies to allow when visiting a webpage, or do you just click whatever button rids you of the pop-up as fast as possible?

Regarding the future of text, I have a twofold proposal for you. First, I anticipate that digital texts will be increasingly created with interactive and dynamic capabilities, such as modulating content based on length, style, etc. (see morphological analysis section for greater detail). The second part to this is that some aspects of these dynamic texts can even manifest in cases where the digital features are not available, whether due to insufficient knowledge of the programming required, lack of access to a platform, or in situations where you are writing on paper. I wish to propose some ideas about text structure (choose your own adventure; optional sections, etc.), serving to innovate the structure of the letter that may be applicable to those who wish to access/provide tailored reading experiences, but it exemplifies innovations to text structures more broadly.

Some of these ideas came from reflection upon writing my thesis. You see, my favourite film is Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (some think it's a trilogy but technically it's just one film released in three parts). Like many fans, one thing that I love about it is the extended edition. Because some ideas I had for my thesis were repelled by time and space constraints, I wanted to have an "extended edition" of my thesis that I would finish after defense (I still may work on this). This idea arose from divergent thinking conducive to a short thought experiment. You see, one day I was thinking: what if I were to create a 5-page version of my thesis that could be understood by fifth graders? Of course that led to the question: what about a 4-page version for fourth graders, etc. This led me picturing myself sitting in front of a gigantic bookshelf, each with a version of my thesis that is exactly one word less than the previous one (which would mean roughly 15,000 versions!). This scenario sounds absurd (as is a hallmark of thought experiments), but can be used to scaffold critical thinking surrounding a particular question: if we had to hypothetically reduce our thesis to a shorter version by one sentence, how exactly would we decide which sentence to remove each time to ensure that the thesis is maximally intelligible at any given length? This thought experiment is relevant beyond a thesis - it translates to all text forms. Consider a future where a news article is not in fact worded in a single version, but instead the exact language can be modulated through toggling a few buttons or scales, such as making the length longer or shorter, the vocabulary easier or more challenging, etc. As you

can relate to, this creates a nightmare for editors! However, how long do we pretend that AI summaries are sufficient?

This leads me to one of the biggest questions that has infected my mind in recent years. Why are research papers only presented in one form without the ability to customize? Well, I say presented in one form, but technically there are two forms: the abstract and the full text paper. Yes, the abstract is a remarkably relatable example of an alternate (in this case, summarized) version of a text that is highly useful (e.g., abstract screening in a literature review, whether systematic or not). But the dilemma remains that we only have the two - the full-text paper, and its one-paragraph summary (the abstract) - and they are static. Now, with AI, you not only have the ability to get a text summary, but you can ask it questions to elaborate on specific points as well as rephrase it in language you prefer, and you can even ask it to make its own custom examples or analogies for you to improve your comprehension. To me, this is a largely deceptive opportunity. Not only can the AI make factual mistakes (Atkins et al., 2024), but it has to infer the author's intentions. If instead, authors wrote their own summaries of their texts, we could avoid this gamble of factual accuracy. However, this procedure gives the author more work. One possibility to take some of the burden off the author is if they are presented with the AI-created summary and they have the ability to correct it. This process could also be done with the reviewers/editors as they are expected to understand the main ideas of the text anyways. here are evidently feasibility constraints based on the current state of generative AI, competition in the sector as well as the potency and diversity of its applications means that its capabilities are evolving at a considerable rate (Trigka & Dritsas, 2025). Thus, if the errors of AI can be curbed, might this process of instantly customizable text length be beneficial to readers if it enables a wider dissemination of knowledge and scholarship?

What I have observed both as a consumer and creator of scholarship is that generative AI has engendered irreversible possibilities in the realm of media creation, especially text (at least in 2025, although AI generated graphics and video are proliferating as well). As many of you may have experienced, despite the inaccuracies that can be produced, the level of quality that can be generated with a simple prompt was astonishing to me. I found that the advent of ChatGPT and its contemporaries came at a time **before** we have had a chance to explore many of the diverse

non-AI opportunities for expanding digital text content. For instance, consider interactable digital content, like a 3D model that can be spun around by dragging one's cursor. Or the classic graphics interchange format (GIF - forget its use in meme culture). I'll be honest that I'm unsure why we have not used these more commonly in research articles, as more dynamic representations of content can be beneficial to understanding aspects of a given research project, such as tools used during data collection (e.g., consider the opportunity to pan a 3D image of the lab setting that has a particular layout, just as you can pan a 3D rendering of a home for sale or rent; for more, see Jovic, 2025) or in the results, such as a 3D scatterplot (e.g., Papaphilippou & Hederman, 2025) that can depict the correlation between 3 variables of interest instead of 2. Of course there could be a 2D image of a 3D graph, but the ability for readers to manipulate the viewpoint is crucial for a detailed interpretation of the dispersion of data points. For some reason, I find that we still act like static PDFs are the best we can do when creating text even though a lot of the time they are disseminated purely online anyways (who reads paper articles anymore?) and thus it is entirely conceivable that the readership would be more engaged to interact with 3D models. Yes, it is helpful for research articles to be available in PDF form to support dissemination, but many articles are increasingly using supplementary digital content, almost like bonus content.

I will concede that we have not fully remained in the realm of static texts to which most physical texts were limited. We currently integrate many digital features such as in-text highlighters and pop-up dictionary entries that can support comprehension (Hare et al., 2024). Web texts like Wikipedia feature drop-down sections where you can fold unwanted text into a single line, being able to skip to the parts that we want to read. However, these texts are primarily educational and commercial applications as opposed to knowledge dissemination applications, like research articles found in our very own student publications.

Now, the present question is of scholarly publishing and knowledge dissemination more broadly, as the technological infrastructure required to provide interactive or dynamic digital content above is no small feat for a publication, especially due to the complex process of peer review. What I posit here, then, is merely to prompt your consideration as consumers of scholarship as well as potential future editors of reputable journals (not that student publications can't be

reputable, but the expectations are different). Do not underestimate the agency you possess! Not only in engendering opportunities for your peers, but igniting greater interest in such methods of discourse and dissemination across all text - newspapers, educational activities, books, etc.

This lends itself to a question about texts in general. Picture this: a journal platform provides the opportunity for readers of the journal to slide a node that modifies the length of the text (and automatically adjusts the estimate, with a decent amount of precision, of how long it will take to read the text). Let's say we want to have a paper with 5 versions (full text, 75% length, 50% length, 25% length, and 1-paragraph abstract). This can easily be created by AI. However, let's consider that we wish to rule out these being created by AI for the sake of principle. Well, if accuracy regarding the background details that are known only by the author(s), then that means authors have to put in extra work to create more versions of the same text. This scenario would not be well received by scholars due to the extra labour. This resistance is convincingly justified due to the fact that it has not been expected of authors before - why fix what ain't broke? I concur that research articles across the board do not all of a sudden need to be submitted in 5 different versions of various lengths. Rather, we can take this idea and zoom in on a specific application.

Let us look at this idea primarily from a pedagogical standpoint such that creating multiple versions of a text is part of a graduate students' academic journey in writing their thesis. Yes, the prospect of writing more than one version of one's thesis appears dumping more work on graduate students. If done strategically, however, then the process could be highly productive in refining the students' communication skills by having them make thoughtful decisions regarding which parts to add in and which to cut out for each version. This will prepare them for the thesis defense plus any other avenues of knowledge dissemination such as presenting at a conference. Moreover, possessing a critical understanding of the range of importance of information in a given paper can help one critically appraise AI summaries due to elevated fluency in questioning why certain information is kept and why some is removed. Cultivating this critical analytic thinking can prepare graduate students to be pioneers in new forms of dynamic digital texts that feature options for modulating aspects of the text (i.e., toggling reflection prompts on and off),

which ought to be increasingly considered as technology becomes increasingly flexible and customizable.

Not only can the above mentioned ideas create a customized reading experience, but they may also produce benefits beyond the experience by providing accessible and sustainable consumption by having an option to read a shorter version with less figures and that uses less data and thus less bandwidth (for accessibility to those without strong internet connection, whether rural or another reason) and less electricity (for sustainability).

The best analogy I have of this vision of future texts revolves around video players such as YouTube, where you can modify various settings: volume, video quality, video playback speed, presence of captions, and so on. We can sometimes toggle settings of a given digital text, such as text size, but generally speaking we do not have as much automatic customization as we do in video playback. However, what if we did start to write texts in a way that could provide customization? Now that we have surveyed HOT and grappled with the future of text, I will be sharing with you specific applications of design thinking that leverage HOT to address the future of text.

Design Thinking

Have you ever heard of design thinking? How would you define it? As this letter is primarily a means of communicating a number of innovations to consider implementing into your student publication, I would also like to offer you a practical framework by which you can assess the implementation factors custom to your context. If you haven't heard of it, design thinking is used in both research and applied projects (Dunne, 2018). Design thinking considers the following cycle of design:

1. Empathizing with users of the product/service
2. Define the problem
3. Ideate solutions
4. Prototype for feasible solutions
5. Test and refine the prototype
6. Implement and repeat

In a single letter, I do not have the space to delineate all the ways design thinking can support improvements to a publication. Instead, I will offer a sample of both divergent and convergent thinking that hopefully will inspire you to investigate design thinking further. For divergent thinking, I will share with you the morphological analysis technique (although it involves convergent thinking as well). For convergent thinking, I will discuss SMART Goals.

Morphological Analysis

A technique often used in design thinking is morphological analysis, also known as general morphological analysis. It is a solution-generating technique where you consider as many different components and layers of the situation at hand and modify their properties individually and in combination with other modifications (Ritchey, 2018). A tool to help accomplish this is the morphological table. Let us do so where the product of interest is a hypothetical student article. The rows represent the attributes that can be modified, added, or eliminated. Relevant attributes of a student paper are listed in the first column of the following morphological chart:

	Conventional Form	Innovative Forms	
Reflection prompts*	Rhetorical question embedded in the text (uncommon).	Add priming questions at the beginning, middle, or end (e.g., “Pause and Ponder”)	
Total Length	Stipulated length based on journal	Option to modulate between short and long	
Sentence Length	Based on author’s style	Option to modulate between short and long	
Vocabulary choice	Based on discipline and author’s style	Option to modulate between low and high complexity	Option to modulate vocabulary themes (e.g., more literary terms, more scientific terms, etc.)
Examples, illustrative anecdotes, metaphors, and analogies	Written based on the author’s choice	Option to modulate between a multitude of themes based on personal preference (e.g., cooking analogies, sports anecdotes, etc.)	
Graphs and figures	Done based on the author’s decision	Option to modulate between a multitude of styles based on personal preference (e.g., aesthetics of	

		graphs; boxplot versus histogram, etc.)
Tables	Done based on the author's decision	A multitude of styles could be devised, providing the option to modulate based on personal preference (e.g., expand or simplify labels of rows and columns)
Lists	Paragraph form or bullet points	Option to modulate between paragraph or bullet point form, or visualized form (the kind you see in PowerPoint presentations)**
In-text Citations	Direct quotation or paraphrased statement based on the author's decision	Option to toggle between a paraphrased statement and the direct quotation upon which it is based
Introduction	Big picture hook, sometimes with a captivating quotation	Big picture hook that is tailored to the reader's background
Literature Review*	Content based on author's approach, in didactic form	Include search for evidence syntheses Disclosure of search terms and basic results (e.g., no umbrella reviews have been conducted on this topic) Option to visualize timeline of studies, or other forms of ranking (e.g., based on sample size, etc)
Methods	Contains standard details, in didactic form, sometimes with additional digital supplementation	Access to supplementary material in customized form (length, visualization style, etc.)
Results	Same as Methods section above	
Discussion	Contains standard details in static, didactic form	Option to include a list of actionable steps (e.g., "Take Action!") that can be tailored to specific contexts Can include a "further reading"
References	Presented based on format (e.g., APA)	Option to modify the order and presentation of references. For example, the section could shift from alphabetical order to chronological order, or categorize based on publication type (e.g., empirical studies versus conceptual papers).
Appendices	Used typically for data visualization, relevant figures, or statistical tables	Can be used for sharing a journal-like account of one's research affairs while completing the study, or providing behind-the-scenes information like the story behind how the research questions were conceived, etc. - these stories are often shared in

		conference presentations, so why not in article form too?
Supplementary digital content	Additional graphs, tables, and figures	Option to customize form (length, visualization style, etc.)

*The reflection prompts and literature review will be unpacked in depth later on in the form of specific recommendations for student publications.

**As an example of creating a visualization of a list (using the explanation of SMART Goals in the next section), consider the following graphic generated with the help of PowerPoint:

Specific • yes, as the editorial policy outlines the consequence for a specific condition.	Specific yes, as the editorial policy outlines the consequence for a specific condition.
Measurable • yes, one can measure whether the policy has been established or not.	Measurable yes, one can measure whether the policy has been established or not.
Achievable • yes, as the policy language is not terribly difficult to craft and can always be revised if unforeseen problems are encountered.	Achievable yes, as the policy language is not terribly difficult to craft and can always be revised if unforeseen problems are encountered.
Relevant • yes, as it promotes engagement by introducing a tangible mechanism that incentivizes discussion or debate which will make the publication more dynamic and interactive.	Relevant yes, as it promotes engagement by introducing a tangible mechanism that incentivizes discussion or debate which will make the publication more dynamic and interactive.
Time-bound • yes, as it will be achieved by the end of the year.	Time-bound yes, as it will be achieved by the end of the year.

SMART Goals

Have you heard of SMART Goals before? Have you actually used them in practice? Where, and how helpful were they? The acronym stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound and this method of goal refinement has been applied to postsecondary learning (Murray et al., 2022). Let's say you wish to implement higher-order thinking questions into your publication. With critical thinking and reflection, this broad objective can be converted into a SMART Goal:

By the end of the year, an editorial policy will be established that gives priority to papers submitted that have at least 3 HOT discussion questions supplementing their article.

Specific: yes, as the editorial policy outlines the consequence for a specific condition.

Measurable: yes, one can measure whether the policy has been established or not.

Achievable: yes, as the policy language is not terribly difficult to craft and can always be revised if unforeseen problems are encountered.

Relevant: yes, as it promotes engagement by introducing a tangible mechanism that incentivizes discussion or debate which will make the publication more dynamic and interactive.

Time-bound: yes, as it will be achieved by the end of the year.

SMART goals catalyse convergent thinking and evaluation-based HOT because they prompt one to make judgments about discrete details of one's plan, rather than keeping them broad.

Furthermore, they tap into an interplay of factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge. Factual knowledge is applied critically in order to make the goal specific and time-bound, since facts about the situation are important to ascertaining specificity and how long the plan might take. Conceptual knowledge is important for understanding the relevance because it synthesizes operationalized yet abstract aspects of the goal (in the example above, the relevance is elevating engagement with the publication).

There are a diverse assortment of design thinking approaches that also hold potential for innovating our publications (e.g., stakeholder mapping, SWOT analysis, journey planning, etc.), but I am wary of making this letter too long. I will explore these connections in a future work. In summary, design thinking consists of processes and tools that can unlock greater innovation and productivity in your group, which in this case is a student publication. It may be useful to explore these design thinking tools with your editorial team to help envision how to move forward.

Underestimation of “Inchoate” Ideation and “Premature” Provenance: The DeLorean Parking Lot and Tomorrowlands

I have presented you with the background context of the impetus for fostering higher-order thinking amidst a time of volatile shifts in technology. I then shared with you frameworks related to divergent and convergent thinking. One bump in the road you may encounter is that how can we improve students' opportunities to demonstrate their higher-order thinking, if we accept the premise that the traditional academic paper is not the only way to do so? To address this, I will share with you the DeLorean Parking Lot and one of its techniques, the tomorrowland.

Have you ever been in a meeting or workshop where they use a metaphorical “parking lot” to track questions or thoughts to be addressed later? I have come across this technique several times. Facilitators will have chart paper to the side, and whenever a question comes up that is relevant for a future topic, it is put down in this “parking lot.” Recognizing that people, especially youth and neurodivergent people, have ideas that are against the grain and dismissed as irrelevant, I conceptualized an extension of this parking lot idea into programming beyond chart paper. Thus, I developed the concept of the DeLorean Parking Lot (DPL) as a theory in education, research and organizational change (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/THXQW>). The “DeLorean” part of the term is an allusion to the DeLorean car in the *Back to the Future* series, as the DPL method primarily employs future thinking as a way to uplift ideas that challenge the status quo. In essence, DPL promotes techniques like storytelling, letter-writing, and time capsules to facilitate engaging ways to capture creativity to be used at a later time period without dismissing an idea due to assumed irrelevance. To do this, I am working on a full research paper that satisfies greater expectations of academic rigor in a manner that incentivizes further exploration in future research projects. Nonetheless, the rudimentary concepts are more than ready to be expressed here as highly relevant to the re-envisioning of student publications. There are many techniques of applying the DPL approach, but the one I will share here is a short story anticipating potential future circumstances which I call a “tomorrowland.” Before I share about tomorrowlands, I will explain foresight analysis, the method that the tomorrowland is based on.

Foresight Analysis

Foresight analysis is a method in futurology (typically qualitative) where one or more possible future states are envisioned that each contain a particular set of details (e.g., certain economic circumstances, certain technological advancements, etc.) that are inspired by critical and/or critical analytic thinking about the factors related to those outcomes (Bishop et al., 2007). This method is often used in order to prompt planning for those potential future states, known as scenario development. However, predicting the future is not restricted to researchers in futurology. We all make predictions about the future, even if for fun. Yet it is (supposedly) the lack of an **analysis** why we are not published scholars in futurology. I must ask, though: does lacking a thorough analysis actually equate to a lack of higher-order thinking? If you undertake highly reflective insights to generate a creative prediction, then you are engaging in HOT, even if

simply leaning more towards the divergent side. However, I think you would agree that the construct of “highly reflective insight” exists on a spectrum. What about ideas that leverage higher-order thinking, but whose articulated analysis is not quite at the level generally seen in academic work? Consider it like a p value of 0.06 - close, but no cigar. This is inchoate ideation - all it needs is a little bit of a “push” to become an idea worthy of sharing in formal academic circles. Formulating one’s ideas in the form of a short story may be one way to theorize one’s ideas. In fact, short stories have been explored as a way of remembering and disseminating information from a formal foresight analysis study (Schroeder, 2014). Based on traditional expectations for analysis, however, a short story as a portrayal of insights as the method itself, rather than a supplement, remains one step away from being a publishable conceptual framework. Even so, I argue that such a work is still publishable because the piece synthesizes creative arts-based thinking to articulate informed hypotheses (constituting creative and critical analytic thinking), positioning it to be subject to extensive analysis in future work.

Tomorrowlands

Writing a tomorrowland is a narrative-based approach to foresight analysis, emphasizing the production of questions for personal reflection as well as discussion and debate. It contains the following four ingredients:

- 1) The plot must situate one or more unique ideas about the future in a manner that creatively synthesizes various concepts;
- 2) A narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end.
- 3) The narrative voice must be formal, but can be stylistic as long as it is not over the top;
- 4) There must be a preliminary analysis that discloses the theoretical ideas used to generate the foundational ideas of the narrative and ideally provides discussion questions.

My main postulation here is that student publications are an excellent venue to pilot tomorrowlands. Students are often bearers of inchoate ideation because they are still developing in both their analytic thinking skills and communication/writing skills, which may not have yet caught up to their imaginative capacity. Thus, the opportunity to creatively express one’s ideas without yet needing to thoroughly articulate an analysis of said ideas is highly valuable for students. Do you hesitate to endorse this idea? Perhaps because, as student publication leaders,

we feel compelled to be as close to “real” publications as possible. Well, there **is** a lot of truth to that. Learning how to ensure rigour and academic quality is crucial to the existence of our journals. However, consider student publications as a stepping stone into the vast world of publications. I believe we should also provide the chance to write in a more quixotic fashion. Quixotism has a place in our publications as it provides an opportunity to recognize higher-order thinking disproportionately on the creative end, understanding that, in due time, students will be able to convey a comprehensive analysis of their ideas by matching their creativity with the level of lucid critical analytical thinking expected in traditional papers. Again, it is not that the critical analytic thinking is lacking. It is simply that there is not as much of a focus on a comprehensive articulation of that thinking. After all, scholarly literature is an unending discourse, so getting to the point of comprehensively analysing one’s ideas may just be a matter of time and mentorship needed to elaborate upon their imaginative insights. We should not hold these constraints against them, and celebrate their creativity instead. Let me be clear: publishing creatively produced inchoate ideation is **not** the same as being willing to publish poor quality work! Rather, so long as a creative paper leverages higher-order thinking of synthesis and hypothesizing, that even if ideas presented therein only have a limited scope of analysis, then they may still be worth publishing. Another way to justify sharing these ideas is through framing it from a pedagogical lens. By publishing a tomorrowland, you are generating new content, provenance that may be seen as premature due to a lack of comprehensive analysis, but I believe holds inherent value to be gleaned by fellow students and even established scholars. Proof of its value derives from the logic that the tomorrowland content should be at least intellectually valuable enough to be used pedagogically as the basis for exploring concepts in a class. For example, a class or seminar activity could involve reading a tomorrowland short story and then, in class, analysing its connections to the relevant academic theories. As an example, here is a tomorrowland on the topic of the future of digital text communication:

Story:

Eleventh grader Peter was on his laptop writing a written response to a reading for school. He had been dreaming of getting a good mark in the class, but the readings were challenging. The written response was not only an assignment but served to prepare students for class discussions. He opened the article on the website, where he was presented with a small menu with a multiple

choice question. The menu was straightforward and not overwhelming, and he was used to these customization questions before reading an article. At first, he was asked about personal background/interests, like if they preferred sports or the arts, and how much he likes humour in academic articles from a scale of 1 to 5. At the bottom of the menu, there was a “surprise me” box that could be checked instead, in case they wanted an exposure that is not tailored to their interests. Low and behold, as he got to the article, its content was presented in a more customized way by including more jokes than the version his friend was reading, who was less patient than him and had checked “surprise me” to more quickly get through the menus. In class the next day, the teacher led a discussion on the paper, but since students’ versions of the article were not the same (i.e., the page and paragraph numbers were not universal), they discussed text using reference to quotations or information based a system of highly structured subheadings (which could be hidden from user view if they were too distracting when reading). That way, if one was referring to a specific quotation, they could easily navigate to it. Furthermore, as sometimes quotations would vary based on the version the student was reading, students would use their critical thinking to ascertain the most important meaning from the text, filtering out aesthetic or stylistic differences. This critical thinking had been cultivated through a system of standardized testing focused on paraphrasing and comprehension inference. Over the next few months, Peter got better at following along with class discussions even when there was no exact page reference due to variation in length. On the other hand, his friend did not. At the end of the term, Peter ended up getting an A, but his friend got a C.

Preliminary Analysis:

This story demonstrates some logistical factors of implementing customizable texts in the classroom. For example, it demonstrates how customized articles may create a situation where different students will not always be able to refer to a given idea with reference to a specific page or paragraph number as is done with non-customized texts. Also, due to the process of selecting choices to access customization of the article content (e.g., liking sports), this naturally opens up a can of worms of user data collection, posing privacy and ethical concerns (Smith & Shade, 2018).

Discussion Questions:

Is there a specific age when it is most appropriate to introduce customizable texts? Why?

To what extent will teacher education programs need to adapt to facilitate discussions on class readings when the texts are customizable?

How might students' reading experiences differ from when texts are non-customizable?

I hope this example of a tomorrowland exemplifies the value of presenting ideas in a quixotic manner, without a comprehensive analysis of the accuracy of each detail of this prediction about the future. This work duly synthesizes my understanding of interactive digital texts from the current literature and hypothesizes, which means that it constitutes higher-order thinking, which should award points to its adjudication as a rigorous academic approach. I suggest that a fully fleshed out analysis is not necessary to maintain rigor, because the tomorrowland method synthesizes ideas that demonstrate a unique contribution to the literature, implicitly posing questions - between the lines (and perhaps with the accompaniment of discussion questions), it is acknowledging that the idea should be subject to deeper critique in future pieces (as I allude to when mentioning the logistics and can of worms regarding data collection). Consider the fact that review papers often make judgements about the body of literature without using methods commonly believed to be more rigorous, namely systematic reviews, meta-analyses, scoping reviews, or umbrella reviews. Yet we still publish these papers and deem them as academic provenance - original contributions to the literature.

Do you see the tomorrowland concept as a reasonable method of academic writing for student publications, or do you see merely it as a short story with comments and questions attempting to disguise itself as quality academic material? To what extent do you see it making novel contributions vis-à-vis literature reviews that you publish in your journal?

Tomorrowlands and Letters as Amplifying Voices of the Marginalized

Through academic writing, whether traditional or untraditional, the author is afforded the privilege of "being heard." When overly stringent traditional approaches impede a student from doing their best work because of unnecessarily rigid structure, the student is subsequently not heard. To be published is a privileged affair (and to be cited, as evidenced by citation politics). Many important voices are lost due to a cold and calculated filter that is the traditional academic essay. Let me be clear: the structured essay is incredibly useful in scaffolding critical and critical

analytic thinking. However, one issue is that only a certain amount of ideas fit into an essay because of the expectation to go into sufficient depth with each idea. This is the problem with neglecting unconventional methods. You see, an author may have an incredibly profound assortment of ideas. The typical way, however, for these ideas to be heard is through conformity to rigid structure. And conformity is not something that everybody is particularly good at, especially neurodivergent individuals. When an author is personally connected to these insights, there has already been a considerable degree of analysis that has gone into their thinking, even if the degree to which their critical thinking is non-disciplinary eludes the lucidity that can be attained by way of deploying discipline-specific vocabulary. This discrepancy between depth of analysis behind an idea and the intelligibility of an idea is why I posit that critical analytic thinking does not just build valid argumentation from disciplinary knowledge, but also thoughtful reflection on lived experiences (in both cases, you are an ‘expert’ - either of a discipline, or of your own life). When bound to rigid structure, however, the fullness of these analytical thoughts are often lost through the arduous process of articulation. Therefore, often the problem is not because of a **lack** of analysis. Rather, it is because there is such a cumbersome process of articulation necessary to meet expectations around **communicating** the analysis. Don’t get me wrong: communicating the underlying analyses is crucial. But we must be careful not to make counterproductive assumptions about the manner by which this communication occurs. In particular, sometimes perceived intelligibility of ideation is based on problematic assumptions. In their thesis, Bisht (2018) explores how storytelling can offer a culturally inclusive method in foresight analysis, using Kaavad storytelling tradition of India as an example. Once again, we should not underestimate the value of a question, nor the manner by which non-texts (and by extension, unconventional forms of texts) can suggest a profound question (like a painting). However, knowledge creation is part of a conversation, a discourse. We think that we always have to answer the questions that we ask right away. But, aligning with the Socratic method, the generation of highly relevant questions is itself knowledge generation because the questions can uncover useful questions. Such critical problematization reveals, rather than conceals, possible paths forward to solving complex problems. When discussing the letter as a method, Rickards (2024) maintains that academic writing has adopted a military-like rigidity to the point where procedure becomes the main goal as opposed to quality of transmission of ideas. A similar type of knowledge is created here through epistolary method and, within it, a glimpse of the

tomorrowland method, although these methods identify gaps in a new way - they stitch together new ideas that are still distant from receiving attention by others (researchers and non-researchers alike). Now that we have discussed the Socratic method, the future of text, divergent and convergent thinking, and the DeLorean Parking Lot, all of which are strung together by the impetus to unleash innovative approaches to higher-order thinking in academic writing amidst technological change, I would like to share with you some specific ideas to incorporate into student publications.

Three Propositions for Student Publications: Choose-Your-Own-Adventure

This section of the letter is dedicated to two propositions which you read based on your answers to the questions below. This approach is inspired by the Choose-Your Own-Adventure (CYAO), which originated as a fictional book series in the 1980s (Cooke, 2021), but has been applied in teaching and professional practice (Abbott, 2024; Jenkins, 2014). I use a miniature CYAO approach here for two main reasons. First, this approach may tailor the reading experience slightly as student publication leaders come from several backgrounds with several types of preferences and career trajectories, a diversity that lends itself to benefits of a customizable reading experience. As the research and praxis of CYAO has been in teaching and professional practice contexts, as opposed to research articles themselves, the application I present you here is a novel extension of the original idea. Note that this is a miniature version of the CYOA format for example purposes, as opposed to being a primary method of this paper. With digital texts, one can use hyperlinks to jump to different sections. Even so, as discussed previously, digital texts have the potential to expand and contract, and even morph in their style and content, especially with AI technology. Thus, a dynamic manifestation of CYAO is for texts to update themselves in real time in response to the reader's choices, as opposed to jumping to different sections of a static text. I digress. The second reason I use a miniature version of CYAO here in this letter, is because through this letter I seek to not just explain, but embody and exemplify the potential for the CYOA style within an academic text (which will be elaborated below). Here is the question that guides which section(s) you will navigate to:

What is the most concern to you in knowledge dissemination within and beyond your publication?

- a) replication and adequately synthesizing a large body of existing findings** (if so, jump to “Proposition on Evidence Syntheses”)
- b) accessible documentation** (if so, jump to “Proposition on Accessible Papers”)
- c) fostering reflective and metacognitive knowledge dissemination** (if so, jump to “Proposition on The Socratic Aura”)

Proposition on Evidence Syntheses

Today’s scholarly landscape is becoming increasingly complex. With new wicked problems to be studied (for a typology, see Alford & Head, 2017) and new methods being developed, empirical research is becoming more and more diverse. While studies seek to answer their research questions, the result often introduces several more questions left unanswered. It may seem like there is too much noise and not enough signal. To help reduce the noise and increase the signal, evidence syntheses (e.g., systematic reviews, meta-analyses) craftily amalgamate findings from a large number of sources (Murad et al., 2016). These can be further elaborated on in the form of evidence mapping (Wang et al, 2016) as well as umbrella reviews, which comprehensively aggregate evidence syntheses (See Figure 3). These methods are based on metaresearch and metascience, referring to research about research and research about science, respectively (Laynor & Stevens, 2024). As these methods offer ways to enrich the literature review in papers, they should be encouraged by journals. This encouragement is especially beneficial for student publications where authors are often seeking publication for the first time and there is a lot of learning within the process. Without any structure, the only way for evidence syntheses to be encouraged is when individual reviewers might make a suggestion to consider a systematic review, or if the author does include a systematic review and the reviewer offers positive feedback explicitly for its inclusion. However, this practice is highly inconsistent, which I anticipate corresponds to the examination of evidence syntheses taking place not nearly as often as it should. If you were to see all the papers that could’ve included an evidence synthesis, but didn’t because there is no structure to entice this reflection. Listen, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve read a systematic review or umbrella review and seen something along the lines of “and most studies didn’t evaluate quality” - I mean, what? We know these standards are very helpful in evaluating the validity of the studies. So why aren’t we more consistently following them? Well our role in student publications is to promote these habits as students begin their

research career, hopefully causing a ripple effect for their research career - not only for them, but whomever they teach, mentor, and collaborate with. Consider that commitment to evidence syntheses is also a way of promoting equity in research as this allows for the consideration of marginalized groups that may be overlooked if looking only at individual empirical studies. Empirical studies draw a sample from the population that is never perfectly representative, often employing exclusion criteria for practical reasons. Evidence syntheses can critique patterns across a body of empirical studies to elucidate critical gaps in representation.

Figure 3

Pyramid of Evidence



A practical solution? We can use structures that scaffold expectations that pursue rigour without creating an unfeasible goal. Currently, as is likely the case with other student publications, Mind Pad has a specific checklist for authors to submit and another one for reviewers to follow. Here I present proposed ideas for these checklists, prompting authors to declare and reviewers to examine relevant evidence synthesis items:

- Searched for umbrella reviews on the topics of interest
- Searched for systematic reviews on the topics of interest
- Searched for scoping reviews on the topics of interest
- Searched for meta-analyses on the topics of interest

- Searched for evidence mapping on the topics of interest

Literature Search terms:

[authors insert their database search terms]

Not all topics have published reviews as above, but requiring the author to at least disclose the search terms one used makes a more replicable literature review, promoting scholarship that is more transparent, trustworthy, and draws conclusions based on a more substantive body of evidence than one that neglects evidence syntheses. Given your interest in promoting replicability and, I hope you can make use of these insights.

Now is the time for you to continue on in your adventure. Do you also have an interest in **accessible documentation** (if so, jump to “Proposition on Accessible Papers”) or **fostering reflective and metacognitive knowledge dissemination** (if so, jump to “Proposition on The Socratic Aura”)?

Proposition on Accessible Papers

Have you ever created a document and written alternative text for your images? Not enough people do. It is not that difficult to create alternative text (just a Google search away!). Let’s commit to making the world accessible one student publication at a time. Here is what I propose regarding accessible papers. What you should introduce within your editorial policy is a stipulation that all graphics submitted to the publication must include alternative text. This practice requires a trivial increase in work on the part of the author, but it not only makes your publication more accessible, it also promotes the habit of making alternative text that will hopefully translate to future document creation.

Here is an example of alternative text from this paper. In the most recent Figure, the pyramid of evidence, I gave the following alt text:

A pyramid with four layers, and a dividing line between the bottom layer and the upper three layers, distinguishing the bottom, "primary research," from the top, "secondary research." The bottom level is labeled "individual studies." The second level is labelled "systematic reviews."

The third level is labelled "meta-analyses." The fourth and top layer is labelled "umbrella reviews."

Now is the time for you to continue on in your adventure. Do you also have an interest in **replication and adequately synthesizing a large body of existing findings** (if so, jump to “Proposition on Evidence Syntheses”) or **fostering reflective and metacognitive knowledge dissemination** (if so, jump to “Proposition on The Socratic Aura”)?

Proposition on The Socratic Aura

Have you gotten sick of reading rhetorical questions in this letter? Hopefully not. If so, let me know your thoughts. I believe certain texts could use more rhetorical questions. Although they are not a necessity, consider the following: 10 years in the future, we may be writing using advanced digital platforms that enable the reader to toggle a multitude of settings, including the use of rhetorical questions. This means that the author (perhaps with the help of an editor or AI tool) will write rhetorical questions entangled in their prose (there will need to be some mechanism by which they indicate that a specific part of the text falls classifies as a removable rhetorical question). Intriguingly, they do not have to worry about the reader not liking it because they can customize their reading experience. Regardless of whether this becomes a reality, I believe that we should practice writing that includes rhetorical questions and discussion questions, because they are part and parcel of broader communication skills. Nowadays, we **really** need to improve the quality of dialogue, especially with those with whom we disagree, and the largest contributor to that, besides improved active listening, is its counterpart: being able to ask thoughtful questions to better understand your fellow interlocutor. In my mind, there is no better role model than Socrates, the Greek philosopher who exemplified a method of continual question-posing to seek gaps in an argument and ascertain truth. The Socratic method is used far and wide as a catalyst of critical thinking (Lee et al., 2014). Therefore, not only should we find inspiration from Socrates when preparing students for the future of text, but we should do so because of the transferable communication skills beyond writing. I propose that the Socratic Aura of an academic paper constitutes three ingredients:

1. Relatively frequent rhetorical questions (they do not have to be all over the place, but they should be used multiple times throughout the piece);

2. Uses multi-layer comprehension questions infused in at least one point in the text (see example below);
3. Discussion questions featured at the end of the text;

For ingredients 1 and 3, refer to the Pause and Ponder example shared previously. The difference between the two is that rhetorical questions (ingredient 1) can either be featured in a paragraph, or within its own panel as it is in the Pause and Ponder example. Rhetorical questions are featured at the beginning or throughout the text, but not at the end, as that is where discussion questions are situated. In contrast, discussion questions (ingredient 3) are not merely for momentary reflection, but are designed for deeper reflection by prompting a more granular, analytic thinking. In particular, they should balance divergent (open-ended thinking) and convergent (requiring decisiveness) as well as balance the four types of knowledge: factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

For ingredient 2, here's what I mean by a multi-layer comprehension question. Imagine you read an article and it provides a quotation from another source that has highly relevant and wise wording. Instead of explaining the quotation immediately afterward, it probes the reader's understanding by asking a multiple choice question. But then, inspired by the Socratic method (dialogue of continual questioning to confront potential contradictions in a given postulation; Delić & Bećirović, 2016), a subsequent question (or more than one) is asked immediately afterward, challenging the reader's reason for choosing the answer they gave on the previous question.

For an example of a multi-layer comprehension question, I will test you on the content of the letter so far. Previously, in the section on HOT, I said:

“Surely student publications have immense potential in terms of evolving what is considered a scholarly manuscript, whether it be through leveraging digital technology or simply creative communication. Perhaps we have been too meek to make such changes, too pressured by the weight of the traditional essay to which we have spent so many years proving ourselves.”

Fill in the blank: *this quotation refers to the hesitancy to ____ academic papers.*

a) *improve*; b) *innovate*; c) *democratize*

Which factors did you account for when making your decision in the previous question?

a) *the theme of change*; b) *the undertone of participating voices*; c) *the undertone of addressing shortcomings of tradition*

Texts can have a full Socratic aura (all 3 ingredients) or they may be “approaching” a Socratic aura by having 1 or 2 ingredients. I propose this aura as an ideal, although it may not be appropriate for all contexts. The most applicable ingredient, due to its ability to specifically catalyse highly engaging discussion activities that translate well to a truly dialectic social context, is the section on discussion questions. The provision of discussion questions in particular constitutes a form of open practice. What do I mean by open practice? There are many open practices that embody participation and transparency. The publication I currently am involved with, *Mind Pad*, currently has digital badges as a form of open recognition and open science (<https://cpa.ca/students/mindpad/editorialpolicy/>). There is also the concept of open educational practices (OEP). However, discussion questions that cultivate engagement do not directly pertain to shareable skills or transparency in science, nor does it fall under credit-based education in a curricular sense, but more so under extracurricular engagement. This aligns well with open co-curricular practices (OCP), the term I coined for the co-curricular (or extracurricular) version of open educational practices (Johnson, 2025b). One way of categorizing OCP is by the co-curricular activity’s relation to curriculum: a *para-educational* activity provides a sense of belonging unrelated to curriculum but in a manner that invigorates students’ motivation to continue their academics (e.g., through socialization); *educational* means it provides direct reinforcement of classroom learning; finally, *meta-educational* means it provides advocacy opportunities to shape the curricular delivery or to improve learning conditions at the institution (e.g., student representatives in academic governance). Student publications and the dynamic practice of facilitating HOT discussions based on the publication articles can align with the first two categories: para-educational and educational. I am finalizing a paper on the typology and conceptual framework right now. Admittedly, my inner perfectionist has gotten the best of me, as I have found the process of articulating my ideas in the optimal way to be highly cumbersome. This is particularly because the conceptual framework has originated not only from

synthesis and hypothesizing from the scholarly literature I reviewed, but also reflection upon a lifetime of engagement with extracurriculars (ever since starting cross country in third grade). The interconnection with my personal experiences makes it more difficult to find the right words. It may be no surprise for you to hear then, that the format of this manuscript is a traditional research paper - the rival of the present letter (I do not consider it an enemy, as it serves its function well, but is a fellow competitor in the league of dissemination methods). As much as I appreciate traditional papers, I am not as fond of actually writing them compared to more arts-based forms of dissemination or presentations where I can facilitate interactive engagement or undertake aesthetic exploration; thus, to my dismay, the traditional paper is the ideal approach as the materials that I postulate are a typology and conceptual framework that will hopefully be the inspiration for a new practice and corresponding subfield of research, necessitating a more direct, predictable format. Conveying them in a more creative form is suboptimal - at least until the original publication is out and knowledge mobilization becomes the next step. I digress.

The connection to open practices is also because of the renewableness of discussion questions.

Now is the time for you to continue on in your adventure. Do you also have an interest in **replication and adequately synthesizing a large body of existing findings** (if so, jump to “Proposition on Evidence Syntheses”) or **accessible documentation** (if so, jump to “Proposition on Accessible Papers”)?

Affinity of Epistolary and Arts-Based Methods

Evidently, both epistolary methods and arts-based methods diverge from the conventional academic writing whether of conceptual or empirical variety. They both set aside the rigidity of an essay and embrace the diverse ways of human expression. There is something to be said of this affinity, in particular how we have underestimated them as a format of potential contributions to our publications. In literary arts, there are many subgenres of fiction (Novakova & Siepmann, 2019). Of these, creative nonfiction is one of them. Letters are generally written with a much more specific audience. However, when in the form of an open letter (including epistolary papers like the one you are reading now) those not in the intended audience can

witness the discourse to benefit from this unique form of generating knowledge. Moreover, epistolary techniques are used in many fictional works. Therefore, the epistolary method is closely related to creative non-fiction.

In my master's thesis, I had a spontaneous creative moment where a short poem entered my head when I was writing about the various models of executive functioning (Johnson, 2025). Some models conceptualize EF as a single construct, whereas others view EF as multiple related constructs. The literature also discusses differences between hot and cool EFs as well as low-level EFs (e.g., inhibitory control) and high-level EFs (e.g., planning and problem-solving). For reasons unbeknownst to me, Dr. Seuss' *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* popped into my head and I decided to parody it a little bit:

*One function, three functions,
Hot function, cool function
Some functions are high, some functions are low
Some things about these functions we just don't know (yet)!*

What's wrong with having some spontaneous creativity? Does it actually dilute the rigor and seriousness of the work? I would disagree. Rather, I propose that it is pedantic to view "micro" forms of knowledge mobilization as diluting rigor or seriousness, even arts-based ones in an otherwise traditional-style paper. Further, I believe this pedantic view impedes a written work like a thesis from becoming an authentic creation that not only motivates the student to do their best, but also share ideas beyond the rigidity of convention, even if in fleeting moments amidst the core sections of the literature review, methods, results, and discussion. After all, to create the parody, I synthesize key points about the extant literature. Therefore, I encourage you to investigate epistolary and arts-based methods of writing for both your own development as a scholar but also for the publications in which you are involved.

Youth Involvement in Change

If you are still not convinced of the potential for student publications to support the process of innovating knowledge dissemination, I have two more tricks up my sleeve (i.e., relevant

theories). First is the topic of youth involvement in organizational change. This field examines the role of youth voice and active contributions to their community and to fostering organizational change (Zeldin et al., 2005). Youth involvement has been associated with the desire to make a legacy impact for future generations as well as a motivation for one's increasingly immersive experience of their activity involvement (Lawford & Ramey, 2015). For student publications, the opportunity to establish innovations serves as a potential legacy not only for the publication, but for the wider scholarly ecosystem; likewise, engaging in innovations affords increased immersion in your current involvement.

When student publications move forward with any of these innovative methods or any of your own, such actions can inspire non-student publications, and even non-scholarly publications to consider adopting such methods themselves. In this way, your actions are amounting to organizational change beyond your publication by serving as a role model for other outlets. Youth voice and involvement, manifested through innovation in student publications, also connects well with the increasing importance of self-directed learning in informal settings (i.e., outside the classroom). This impetus within student holistic development has been discussed by scholars such as Mishra et al. (2013) who postulate how our increasingly information-saturated society due to technology demands that students have the opportunity to access elevated independence and self-directed learning to develop the necessary skills to tackle the problems we will face. Students authoring works to submit to your publication fall under self-directed learning and should be more formally recognized by the institution you are at. If you feel you do not receive enough support, use the above mentioned theories to outline the role of youth voice in forging the future of academic discourse!

Putting it All Together with Dynamic Systems Theory

Finally, there is one more important theory that I wish to share with you: dynamics systems theory (Thelen & Smith, 1994). I have tremendous respect for dynamic systems thinking as a scholarly method (although it is also an applied method used by businesses and governments) due to its unembellished realism by way of foregrounding core functional structures within a situation of interest. Here is the way this method works: you look at a situation as a system where components responsible for specific processes within that system (called throughputs) are

modified by feedback loops. The components are connected to each other in the form of inputs and outputs. There have been several related theories, such as the developmental theory of ecological systems by Bronfenbrenner (1977), which has been applied to postsecondary education in several studies (Butcher & Lane, 2025). While Bronfenbrenner offers fascinating insights, here I will focus on dynamic systems theory, and its applied method, system dynamics. According to the University of Bergen, “System Dynamics uses simulation modeling based on feedback systems theory that complements systems thinking approaches. It applies to dynamic problems arising in complex social, managerial, economic, or ecological systems” (n.d.; <https://www4.uib.no/en/research/research-groups/system-dynamics/what-is-system-dynamics>). Consider that student publications are a component of a system (the scholarly ecosystem). Here I will breakdown some of my reflections regarding the components, throughputs, inputs, and outputs:

System Attribute	Description
Components	the student publication editorial team (editors and reviewers), the institution(s) you are affiliated with (including faculty advisors), individual students as readers and authors, and other scholarly journals from whom you draw inspiration (and who can draw inspiration from you).
Throughputs	The throughputs would consist of the acts taken by you to adopt various best practices or exploratory practices for the publication.
Inputs	The inputs to the publication component of the system would consist of information about these practices (e.g., from reading this letter) as well as resources required to make the changes (e.g., faculty support). How do feedback loops modify these processes? For example, while student publication leaders may already be attempting to incorporate similar ideas to those presented in this letter, the act of reading this letter may provide a feedback loop which may reaffirm, or introduce for the first time, these ideas. Moreover, the opinions of other stakeholders, such as

	faculty advisors, may influence which ideas are integrated and which are not, as well as how the ideas are integrated.
Outputs	Let's consider the output of a publication opportunity affecting students' academics. The enticement of prompting the use of evidence syntheses in one's paper may help the student become more familiar with analysing evidence syntheses which will help them in their future studies. They may go to write an essay on a certain topic, and, due to their experience going through the evidence syntheses checklist for the student publication, they now have a habit of checking evidence syntheses in their current topic in order to see at a high level patterns in methodology, results, and implications.

Evidently, a more comprehensive analysis using dynamic systems theory can help more vividly conceptualize the role of the student publication in the scholarly ecosystem. I may undertake this endeavour in a future paper. Nonetheless, I hope this shows you the relevance of this method, which I originally came across as an MIT lecture by renowned scholar Jay W. Forrester in 1988 when researching systems theory (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rP839_OhIr8).

With (mostly) all said and done, I present here a table that situates HOT and its related sub-constructs as I've described previously with corresponding questions that can function in support of feedback loops:

Branch of Higher-Order Thinking	
Divergent Thinking	Convergent Thinking
<i>Morphological analysis:</i> How can the underlying components of this entity be creatively modified? Please note that morphological analysis is a specific approach falling under the umbrella of critical thinking, where the application of background knowledge	<i>Morphological analysis:</i> What are the underlying components of this entity? Please note that morphological analysis is a specific approach falling under the umbrella of critical thinking, where the application of background knowledge enables one to

enables one to identify modifications to the entity's relevant components . When the relevant background knowledge is disciplinary in nature, then that act of morphological analysis can be recognized under the umbrella of critical analytic thinking.	identify the entity's relevant components. When the relevant background knowledge is disciplinary in nature, then that act of morphological analysis can be recognized under the umbrella of critical analytic thinking.
<i>Systems thinking (dynamic systems):</i> What potential changes can be made to the current set of entities/components, recognizing the dynamic interaction between components through feedback loops (inputs and outputs)?	<i>Systems thinking (dynamic systems):</i> What entities/components constitute the system, and what are the dynamic interactions between components through feedback loops (inputs and outputs)?
<i>SMART Goals:</i> What goals can I conceive?	<i>SMART Goals:</i> Are my goals specific? Are my goals measurable? Are my goals achievable? Are my goals relevant? Are my goals time-bound?
<i>Real-world application:</i> What various applications are there to the real world or beyond the given context?	<i>Real-world application:</i> What question can I ask the reader that will prompt their reflection about real-world applications based on what they read in my paper?
<i>Critical analytic thinking:</i> [For authors] How can my paper use discipline-specific ideation to produce solutions or interpretations of problems?	<i>Critical analytic thinking:</i> [For editors/reviewers] How does and how well does a given paper apply discipline-specific structured analyses to dissect problems?
<i>Design thinking:</i> [2] How can I address users' problems? [3] How do I transform my ideas into a prototype? [5] How can I improve the prototype based on its tested effectiveness?	<i>Design thinking:</i> [1] What problems are faced by the user? [4] How effective is the prototype? [6] How well is the improved prototype?

Penultimate Note for Application of These Ideas Beyond Student Publications

I wish to make this note for the students who are not just involved in the student publication, but are involved in other co-curriculars or intellectual opportunities. If you are not involved in any other co-curriculars, then take this note as encouragement to do so. However, if your work-life balance situation necessitates restraint from additional opportunities, then the rest of this section may not apply to you, so feel free to skip it.

Not only might these solutions address the issue of stagnation of engagement and learning potential in student publications, but the innovation and divergence from convention may spark possibilities in other co-curricular spheres. Always remember, there is a time and place for everything. Just because it is hypothetically possible to implement a CYOA meeting agenda in a non-profit board setting, does not mean it is wise to do so, because of social subcultures, politics, and constraint of time and resources (this is why I shared morphological analysis and SMART goals). That being said, that does not mean that we should permanently dismiss these prospective engagement strategies. We build our communities stronger through the symbiosis of bold creativity and diligent critical thinking - higher-order thinking. While achieving a sense of belonging and career preparation/advancements are certainly reasonable benefits to being involved in a student publication, never forget how, now more than ever, development of higher-order cognition is the master of them all, as it is a profound way to realize our full potential. Optimizing these opportunities through diversifying ways of engagement is my call to action for you all.

Conclusion

Before we finally conclude, I will stop you and check for your understanding through a one-question comprehension quiz:

True or false?

I proposed that we have adequately explored expanding digital text content in research papers, such as 3D scatterplots and drop-down text (See Appendix for the answer and more).

When was the last time that you read a letter and then were quizzed on the content of the letter? Oh wait, you probably haven't, because it's a bizarre idea. But here is the place to challenge the supposed irrelevance or futility of eccentricity in knowledge mobilization, in the spirit of design

thinking. By the way, the comprehension check does not have to come in the form of quiz-like questions, it could even be in the form of even more unconventional antics, such as including a word search where the target words are based on a riddle that requires the reader to synthesize their understanding of the text they read (Svoboda et al., 2015). Do publications have to expect this approach from its authors? Absolutely not. But if it engages the author to make a more customized, engaging experience, why not be open to it as an option? Or at least start the discussions that can enable its feasibility in your context?

With that final idea shared with you, I will conclude. Traditional methods of academic writing have been created for a reason, and those reasons still stand today. Academic writing can be a tedious process but plays a crucial role in our scholarly ecosystem as it facilitates the dissemination of ideas in a structured, predictable way. Notwithstanding the enduring significance of such methods, innovative methods such as epistolary methods, non-linear and dynamic texts hold high potential and are waiting for you to unlock them, even if you just take one step at a time.

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Appendix

Comprehension quiz answer: false. We have **not** sufficiently explored the aforementioned possibilities.

In this appendix, I canvass related ideas that extend my thinking from the above notes but in a way that is elective, not compulsory - it is an extracurricular part of the letter. That is because I have a diverse audience and respect both their time but also their levels of curiosity. I enjoy watching the “behind the scenes” of movies, and for my favourite - The Lord of the Rings - they did a particularly meticulous job. Peter Jackson and company created a comprehensive multi-part documentary of their film making process, naming it “The Appendices” as an homage to Tolkien’s Appendices in his three-volume novel wherein he would expand upon the history of Middle-earth in a manner that supplemented the main narrative but was optional for readers. Can academic articles feature “behind the scenes”? In the average published study, there may not be much to share. Authors should not be forced to do this, either. In certain papers, however, this could be an interesting addition. This practice does exist in some form, namely an account of practice (Freeman et al., 2007). The existence of this practice does not mean, however, that all useful permutations of the method have been realized. Appendices in an academic letter could serve numerous underexplored options, especially when considering an “eccentric” letter such as the present one which uses unconventional approaches such as the CYOA.