Rewriting

How to Do Things with Texts

SECOND EDITION

Joseph Harris

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For Kate and Mora

to point to at least three or four linked changes at various points in your essay and to name the idea that connects them.

- A copy of the previous drafts of your essay, along with the comments of your readers on those drafts.
- Any revising plans you have created during your work on your essay.
- A brief but specific reflection on how your project has developed over the last few weeks. Drawing on the map of changes you've made, and especially the series of moves in revision you've identified, talk about the aims and strategies that have directed your work in drafting and revising your essay. How did your project in writing evolve over time? How did you come up with and carry through on your plan for revising? What went according to plan and what surprised you? If you have the opportunity to return to this piece, what further work might you want to do on it?

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Remixing

The key to the preceding essay names the source of every line I stole, warped, and cobbled together as I "wrote" (except, alas, those sources I forgot along the way). . . . Nearly every sentence I culled I also revised, at least slightly—for necessities of space, in order to produce a more consistent tone, or simply because I felt like it.

—Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence"

Then I got a copy of the script. . . . I found it breathtaking. I realize that this isn't supposed to be a relevant consideration. And yet it was: Instead of feeling that my words had been taken from me, I felt that they had become part of some grander cause.

—Malcolm Gladwell, "The Picture Problem"

In 2007, Jonathan Lethem published a remarkable essay called "The Ecstasy of Influence." In this piece he offers a view of writing as drawing on and adding to the work of others, and suggests that we look at the texts we write more as gifts to be shared than property to be owned. If you've made it this far in reading this book, such a view will probably seem familiar. What's extraordinary about Lethem's piece, though, is its form, for in it he enacts the view of creativity he is arguing for. Lethem subtitles his essay "A Plagiarism," and reveals near its end that he has copied almost every sentence in it from the work of other writers and artists. (He closes his piece with a key in which he identifies his sources and how he used them.) His essay turns out to be a patchwork of quotations; Lethem's own voice is formed out of those of the writers he is quoting.

Three years earlier, in 2004, Malcolm Gladwell had written an essay about something like the opposite experience—finding out that one of his own writings had been plagiarized. In "Something Borrowed," Gladwell tells of learning that several passages from a profile he had written for *The New Yorker* about a criminal psychologist had been silently inserted into the script of a play then running on Broadway. His first reaction was much what you might expect—a feeling of having been cheated, robbed of due credit. (Unlike Lethem, the playwright had not acknowledged her borrowing of his work.) But after reading the script, Gladwell's response changed. He realized that he admired the play and the uses its author has made of his writing. It would be one thing, he decided, if the author had written a profile piece similar to his—that is, if she had simply tried to pass off his prose as her own. But she hadn't. She had instead incorporated some of his words into a very different sort of work, a play, and in so doing had given them a new kind of life. Like Lethem, then, Gladwell ends up arguing for the creative reuse of other texts, for a style of borrowing that adds to the interest and meaning of what it takes from.

While I don't claim to be the peer of either Lethem or Gladwell as a writer, I do think we share a similar sensibility. Like them, I'm interested in how writers can forge voices of their own through engaging with the texts of others. For thinkers like us creativity lies not just in inventing brand-new ideas or making up new worlds. It also involves an unexpected use of already existing materials. But I've become aware of one of the limits of this sensibility—at least as I have expressed it thus far. For there is often a difference between the kinds of texts I imagine critics and intellectuals as writing *about*—which include not just print texts but films, videos, songs, images, plays, and the like—and the kinds of texts I imagine them as actually producing, which are usually, well, pieces of writing, words on a page. Near the beginning of chapter 2, for instance, I picture myself in a small room, trying to write this book, sitting before a laptop,

Intertexts

Malcolm Gladwell, "Something Borrowed" *The New Yorker* (November 22, 2004): 40–48.

Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," *Harper's* (February 2007): 59–71.

but surrounded by print and paper, by books, notes, journals, post-its, xeroxes. And in chapter 5, I argue that any change you can make in revis a text will eventually come down to some combination of strokes on a k board: *add, delete, shift, rework, reformat.* I consistently imagine, that is, work of a critic as ending with a written text.

No surprise, you might say. *Rewriting* is, after all, a book of advice writing; my hope in it has been to reclaim the critical essay as a dyna and versatile form. But the environment of writing has changed dram cally in recent decades. We live and work now in what Lawrence Lessig others have called a *remix culture*, in which we constantly share and tin with texts—sending, receiving, commenting on, and repurposing the ages, videos, and audios that fill the screens of our inboxes and newsfe each day. Whether all this onscreen activity is good or bad has been focus of much noisy debate. My point here is simply that "writers" r routinely work across a dizzying range of media—composing everyth from tweets and blog posts to slideshows, mashups, memes, podcasts, ryboards, GIFs, videos, and, even still, prose meant to be read on the p (like this). I see this explosion of modes not as a sign that the essay is dy but that it is being rejuvenated. The work of a critical writer no longer ways finds its final expression in the form of a Word document or a P And that raises some exciting possibilities for rewriting.

Projects

The excitement of a remix lies in the interplay between the texts you quote and the uses you make of them. Readers need to recognize both the distinctive phrasings of your sources and your perspective on them. This project challenges you to establish such a point of view simply through the ways you edit and arrange your materials—commenting on them in your own voice as little as you can.

An Original Plagiarism

Working in the mode of Jonathan Lethem, construct a brief and original plagiarism of your own.

Of course a key part of your task will be to decide just what it means to work in the mode of Lethem. Let me offer two baseline criteria:

- Your text must in some way remix, appropriate, or tweak several other texts.
- Your text must contain a key to your sources.

I'd also like you to append a brief reflection on your aims as a writer.

Otherwise, the form your plagiarism takes is up to you. You can construct a print, digital, or multimedia text. You can write on any topic or argue any point you like. You can write in prose or verse, and you can work with print, images, audio, or video. Your plagiarism does not need to rival Lethem's in length. A few pages—whatever that means in this context, and not counting your key and reflection—should be fine.

Intertexts

Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

Let me offer an example from my own teaching. A few years ago I asked the students in a writing class to read "The Ecstasy of Influence" and then to compose a piece "in the mode of Lethem"—that is, to write an "original plagiarism." (See the Project box above for the full assignment.) The students took this task and ran with it, assembling texts that, like Lethem's, recycled the work of others to make points that felt distinctively their own. But while "The Ecstasy of Influence" takes the form of a critical essay in a print journal, not one student writer composed anything that looked at all like that. Instead they put together hybrid texts like movie and musical mash-ups, collections of postcards and letters, handwritten journals and notebooks, photographs in shoeboxes, and visual montages. Even those who worked with print did so in ways strikingly different from Lethem, often combining images and words, creating advertising brochures, pages from fashion magazines, illustrated tales for children, film scripts, poems, short stories, and political speeches. Some writers were more techno-savvy than others, but what counted most was that their pieces were driven by ideas—including, for instance, a mock advice column from a fashion magazine that seamlessly combined tips to women written in both the 1940s and the present, a seemingly liberal political speech woven from quotations from fascists and oligarchs, an envelope filled with letters from soldiers at the front that coalesced into an indictment of war, and a movie mash-up critiquing Hollywood standards of beauty that showed one teen heroine after the next learning how to look pretty in much the same way. None of these writers imitated Lethem; rather, all of them took the idea behind his piece, the concept of an original plagiarism, and found new uses for it.

Intertexts

I have more to say about the work of these student writers in "Authorizing Plagiarism," in *Authorship Contested*, Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune, eds., (New York: Routledge, 2015), 192–205.

In that way they offered a clear example of the difference between simply copying the style of a writer and taking her approach and making it your own. Of even more interest to me here, though, is how many of these writers ended up working with an eclectic set of materials and media, composing texts that mixed written (or typed) words with audio, video, and images. Several also played with how the physical form of a text, its thinginess, can shape its meanings—as when the same words somehow acquire a different feel depending on whether they are encountered in a handwritten note, typed on a page, spoken on tape, or scrolled across a video screen. Some students even experimented with unconventional ways of assembling a text, making use of boxes, envelopes, rubber bands, string, clips, post-its, glue, and paper of varying weights, shapes, textures, and colors. Some of this playfulness might be traced to the particular challenges of the plagiarism assignment, since one way for a writer to distinguish his or her approach from Lethem's was to work in a different medium or genre. But I also suspect that there is a kind of affinity between remixing and multimodality. We can now easily quote texts from a wide range of media: cropping and manipulating images and pasting them into keyboarded texts, linking

out to audio and video files, creating mash-ups out of songs and movie clips. A writer at her laptop can now put together multimedia texts that not long ago would have required a production studio to assemble.

This ease of quotation can change the stance you take toward not only your materials but also your readers. For if you want to write about—and perhaps with—not just alphabetic text but sounds and images too, then it makes sense to think about composing for the screen rather than the page. A print text can only describe a video or audio clip; a digital text can reproduce and sample it. And once you've started to write for the web, you've opened up the possibility of having your readers respond to your work in excitingly direct, immediate, and visible ways—indeed, of making their comments seem almost part of your text. A good blog often reads more like a conversation among voices than a collection of separate pieces. Our sense of where one piece leaves off and another begins starts to blur. It's the *interaction* between posts and comments—or between the texts being quoted, archived, and tweaked in a Lethem-like remix—that most draws our interest.

In this chapter I offer some thoughts on rewriting in this new digital age. One of my impulses in doing so is to argue that not all that much has changed, that rewriting and remixing involve pretty much the same kinds of work, just with different materials. Writers have always built on the work of others; a digital culture simply expands the ways we can do so. But I also suspect, on the other hand, that something *has* changed, or is in the process of changing—something that has to do with how we now imagine what it means to compose a new version or *draft* of a piece. Let me begin, then, by trying to describe this changing sense of drafting, before returning to say a little more about *remixing* as a distinctive form of rewriting in a digital age.

Drafting 2.0

In chapter 5 I admit that I have little advice to offer about drafting, moving from nothing to something, getting words on a blank screen or paper. But even if the process of coming up with ideas and turning them into prose remains mysterious, I still feel I ought to be able to say something about what a "draft" is—about the sort of thing I'm asking students to produce when I tell them they have a piece due the next week.

So what I tend to say in my classes goes something like this: A *draft* is an open and approximate version of the piece you want to write. It is not simply a set of notes, or an intro, or an outline, or ideas toward an essay. Rather, it is an attempt to write the actual thing, the piece itself, even while knowing that you are not quite yet in a position to write that thing, that you still have more work to do. An analogy might be to a sketch or study that an artist makes of a painting, or a demo that a musician makes of a song. The attempt in each case is to offer a sense of what the final version might look or sound like—even if all the details haven't been worked out or filled in, and even if key parts of the piece are still open to change. I'm a little hesitant to use the metaphor of a *rough* draft, since I don't mean to suggest something hastily or sloppily done, but in a sense that is what you want to do—to rough out your essay, put together an approximate version of it as a whole. The next step is to get feedback from readers. A good way of doing so is by participating in a writing workshop—a small group of writers who trade drafts and offer one another advice about their work in progress. There is an ambiguity to this moment. On the one hand, you need to bring a serious and considered draft to a workshop. Otherwise you will fall behind in your work and waste the time of your readers. On the other hand, you need to be open to making real changes to your writing. The paradox of drafting is that you have to work hard to get a piece right, while still being ready to add, rethink, and sometimes discard large parts of it.

While this seems to me useful advice, I think it is limited by a tendency to imagine a draft as a printout. A writer comes up with something to say, types it up, prints it out, and brings it to a workshop. Draft one. She gets some feedback from her readers, makes some changes to her text, prints out the new version. Draft two. And so the writer continues, taking a piece through a sequence of drafts and revisions, one after the next, each marking a new stage in its development, until at last the essay reaches its final form.

This sequence seems intuitive, and is indeed written into the schedules of most university writing courses, as they list first drafts due one week, second drafts due the next, and so on. But like many things that may at first seem obvious and natural, this view of drafting and revision turns out to be connected to a particular time and culture. The literary scholar Hannah Sullivan drives this point home in her 2013 book *The Work of Revision*.

Sullivan wants to understand why revision, which until the late nineteenth century had not been much discussed by either authors or teachers, became such a highly valued stage in the writing of so many Modernist novelists and poets. She points to several different styles of revision: James Joyce adding pages of text to the proofs of *Ulysses*; T. S. Eliot cutting out large swaths of *The Wasteland*; Walt Whitman, Henry James, and W. H. Auden tinkering with words and phrases in republished editions of their works. But she also notes two larger shifts in the culture. The first was ideological: Modernist writers tended to set art against commerce. One way to prove you were more committed to your art than to making money was to revise well past the point at which it made any economic sense to do so.

The second shift was technological: The advent of typewriting made it much easier to *see* a draft. If you have ever tried to revise a handwritten piece, you know how messy and tedious the process can be—with cross-outs and scribbled additions vying with each other for space on the page. In contrast, Sullivan quotes Henry James remarking on "the fierce legibility of type." From about 1900 on, it became increasingly routine for an author to compose a draft in longhand, type it up (or more likely, have it typed by a spouse or secretary), make corrections in ink or pencil to that typescript, have a new draft with those changes retyped, send that draft to an editor, who would suggest yet more changes, and so on, until eventually the author was sent typeset proofs of his work, ready for yet one last round of edits and corrections. While this process was not always, or perhaps even usually, quite so neat and tidy, it did tend to result in a series of discrete, identifiable drafts of a piece (which in turn provided plenty of materials for scholars studying those authors to collect, organize, label, archive, and write about). Indeed many writing teachers now ask students to curate their own work in much the same way— assembling a portfolio that tracks the growth of an essay through its successive drafts, comments, and revisions. (My own version of such a portfolio assignment appears at the end of chapter 5.)

Intertexts

Anish M. Dave and David R. Russell, "Drafting and Revision Using Word Processing by Undergraduate Student Writers: Changing Conceptions and Practices," *Research in the Teaching of English* 44 (2010): 406–34.

Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). The quoted line from the correspondence of Henry James appears on p. 83.

The point I want to make here is not that this understanding of drafting and revision is wrong, but that it is tied closely to a particular era in the history of writing—one that we now appear to be moving away from. For example, in their recent study of how word processing is changing habits of revising, the writing researchers Anish Dave and David Russell note that while, in a 1991 survey, 94 percent of undergraduates reported printing out hard copies of their essays in order to revise, in 2007 only 47 percent of students said they always or often did so. This dramatic shift stems no doubt both from technical improvements—screens are larger, fonts are sharper—and the increasing levels of comfort that most people now feel with writing onscreen. But that's the point. The environment of writing has changed. Many writers nowadays make all kinds of changes to a text, both large and small, without bothering to print out a new copy of it, or even without marking the last-saved version of a document as a new draft.

But if a draft is no longer simply the next printed version of a document, then what is it? Dave and Russell say that for many of the student writers they surveyed, a draft marked a new stage of *thought:* "a new approach to a problem, a new organizational strategy, or something memorable beyond specific edits." Those are hopeful words. They suggest that the ease of making changes onscreen may also encourage writers to distinguish between merely tinkering with a text and actively developing a line of thought. With that in mind, let me turn to some emerging forms of working with texts onscreen rather than on the page.

Remixing

"When all words fail she speaks / Her mix tape's a masterpiece." So sings the smitten Ben Folds about the girl he adores in his 1997 song "Kate." And surely the mix tape, mash-up, and remix have become signature forms of our age, ways to speak through the songs and words of others. I began this chapter by talking about a literary version of a remix, although Lethem preferred to call his writing a "plagiarism." But the principle is the same. Our voices emerge out of the ways the texts we quote rub up against each other. Remixing is a way to create new insights out of old materials.

Intertexts

Ben Folds Five, "Kate," *Whatever and Ever Amen* (550 Music/Caroline, 1997).

Adam Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Digital Age* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).

There is an appealing conservatism to the way in which the author of a remix places herself in a line of influences from the past. The writing scholar Adam Banks compares remix authors to *griots*, West African bards who draw on traditional stories and songs to comment on current issues. The griot bridges the past and the present, keeps the old stories of a culture alive by relating them to contemporary politics and events. In *Digital Griots*, Banks shows how generations of African American writers, orators, musicians, and DJs have made much the same move, recycling the words and riffs of other artists in their own works. He then argues that digital technologies have made these forms of remixing ever more accessible and powerful. I agree. Indeed, it seems to me that the impulse to creatively reuse texts runs across most if not all cultures. I'd thus like to build on his work, hoping not to simply appropriate the idea of the *griot* from Banks, or from its original West African contexts, but to borrow it—with thanks—to describe what all authors do in sampling, quoting, tweaking, and reworking the texts of others.

Intertexts

Kirby Ferguson, "The Song Remains the Same," *Everything Is a Remix* (everythingisaremix.info, 2011).

Everything Is a Remix is an example of an open digital text—a series of video essays centered around the idea of remix, but that Ferguson has continuously added to, revised, and polished since 2011.

The object of Ferguson's critique in "The Song Remains the Same" is *Led Zeppelin*, the eponymous 1969 debut album by Led Zeppelin (Atlantic Records).

There is a caveat. The pleasure and meaning of a remix stems from the stance an author takes toward the texts she is quoting and arranging. So the sources of a remix need to be clear—somehow cited, visible, or heard. If they are instead masked or hidden, we are left with something closer to plagiarism in its most ordinary, uninteresting, and unethical sense. For example, in "The Song Remains the Same," the first video in his *Everything Is a Remix* series, Kirby Ferguson shows how the rock group Led Zeppelin recycled the work of both American blues and English folk musicians in several of the songs in their famous, self-titled debut album. The recycling itself doesn't bother Ferguson; what troubles him is that the members of Led Zeppelin claimed to be the authors of music and lyrics they had lifted from other artists. That is piracy, not remix.

And so the remix as form turns out to hold much in common with the critical essay, since the authors of both need to make the sources of their work apparent. You'll recall my suggestion in the opening pages of this book that "the visible traces of other texts" are a defining feature of intellectual writing. The same holds for the remix. While the griot or DJ may not necessarily document her sources in a conventional, academic format, if the piece she is creating is to succeed *as a remix*, their presence needs to be felt and acknowledged. The lines between popular and academic forms of intellectual work thus begin to blur.

Which leads me once again to argue that teachers of academic writing need to move away from a focus on documenting citations—which the librarian Barbara Fister has aptly described as "laboriously-coded, extremely slow hyperlinks"—and toward a concern with what writers *do* with texts. Show us what you're working with so we can see what you're adding to it. If the way to do that is through creating a collage of images, a mash-up of songs, a re-captioning of a video, a curated series of tweets and links, or any of the other forms of remixing now available on the web, then that is the form your writing should take. The point is not to learn to write to the specs of a particular genre, or to compose in a particular print or digital mode, but to work with texts and ideas in whatever form best suits your ambitions in writing.

Intertexts

Barbara Fister, "Decode Academy," LOEX (Nashville, May 2013).

The script for this brilliant talk is posted on Fister's website at http://homepages.gac.edu/~fister/.

Versioning

I take the idea of versioning as a form of writing from Kathleen Fitzpatrick, who writes about the concept in *Planned Obsolescence*, her 2011 book on the future of print in a digital age. Business people use versioning to refer to marketing alternate forms of the same product—as when, for instance, the same book is published in hardcover, paperback, and ebook editions.

Fitzpatrick is interested in how a writer can, in effect, remix her own work by creating new versions of it in different modes and media. She argues that multiple versions of the same text can offer a sense of both how a writing project has developed over time and how readers have contributed to its development. A "versioned" form of a text can show where and how a writer has responded to the comments of readers, as well as suggest paths and possibilities not explored. Rather than simply being presented with a piece of writing as a finished product (as is the case now, as you hold this book or e-reader), versioning can offer readers a glimpse into the process of developing a project. Indeed, one of Fitzpatrick's most intriguing ideas is that a writer might continue working on a text after having published a version of it on the web. As she observes, all texts exist on the web anyway in a kind of "perpetual draft state, open to future change."

So why not take advantage of that fluidity? As Richard E. Miller, another digital writer, has observed, publishing online offers an author the simultaneously frightening and exhilarating chance to "learn in public," to share the experience of thinking through a question with your readers in an almost "live" sense. As a consequence, Miller says that he felt the need to adopt a livelier approach as a writer online—leading to experiments not only in prose style but also with other media: podcasts, graphic novels, and videos. Still, the digital essays that Miller publishes on his website, text2cloud, continue to have a critical and intellectual aim, exploring questions of privacy in a digital age, the future of higher education, and changing practices of writing. The thrust of the work stays the same; it just gets done in a more vibrant and personal voice and a wider range of modalities.

Fitzpatrick offers a quieter but more interactive example of digital writing in a versioned form of *Planned Obsolescence* that she published online in 2009 at media-commons.org. The text that appears online is actually quite close to the print version brought out by the NYU Press in 2011. (One thing no one will miss as we move from a print to digital culture is the glacial pace of academic book publishing.) What lends the online version its particular interest, though, are the comments made on it by readers, sometimes with responses back from Fitzpatrick, which run alongside the main text of the book in a separate column. The result is something that feels a little less like a monologue and more like a conversation. It's not quite a collaboration, but it is a loosening of authorial control—like offering readers permission to comment on if not edit a document you have shared with them in the cloud.

Intertexts

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 72.

The versioned form of this book was published in 2009 on mcpress.media-commons org, which also features several other examples of open web scholarship.

Media-Commons uses a two-column version of WordPress called CommentPress to engineer the exchange between author and readers. More recently Medium.com has created a platform that allows authors to incorporate the comments of readers in the finished form of their pieces.

Miller's text2cloud.com, a site which he has maintained since 2010, illustrates the wide range of texts a talented digital writer can compose, including graphic novels, videos, and podcast interviews as well as more conventional prose pieces. I quote from the About page of his site.

Projects

In ordinary usage, *remediation* is a word with mostly negative connotations—pointing to something that needs to be fixed or to a person who somehow needs to be caught up. But for theorists of digital culture, it is a term with positive uses, referring to the work of translating a text composed in one medium into another: writing into graphics, audio into script, images into video, and so on. *Re-mediating*. Even reading a piece aloud or creating a set of slides to support a talk are forms of remediation. And anyone who has ever sat through a dull lecture or slideshow understands how much care and imagination it takes to move effectively from one mode of expression to another.

Remediating

Find a text you've created that you'd like to play with some more—perhaps to recast for a different occasion or audience. You don't need to translate the entire document

into another medium, but you should try to recast a significant part of it, or to add to it in some substantial way. The challenge, if you decide to move from writing to images or audio or video, will be to do something more than merely illustrate what you've already said. Similarly, if you move from audio or video or images to writing, you'll want to do something more than simply transcribe your previous work. Your goal should be to somehow add to or inflect what you said as you shift the mode in which you say it, to revise as well as remediate.

Indeed, to post a text to the internet is pretty much to assume—or at least to hope—that it will become part of other online conversations, documents, and remixes. In the age of print you couldn't really reproduce someone else's book unless you had access to a printing press of your own. But copying and circulating files made by others—writings, movies, songs, images; some small, some huge—has become routine. The question is how to do so in open and ethical ways. And so when I ask students to post texts to the Internet, I insist that they create a license for their work at Creative Commons.org. The premise of Creative Commons is that work posted to the Internet is meant to be shared, used, and remixed. The site asks authors to identify their work by name, title, and URL and to answer two yes/no questions: (1) Do you allow adaptations of your work to be shared? and (2) Do you allow commercial uses of your work? Depending on your answers, the site then generates a license, represented by an icon, that tells readers who might want to share your work whether they can make changes to it and whether they can make money from sharing it. Since I tend to be more interested in seeing my ideas circulate than in making money from them (although both are nice), when I post work online I usually select what is known as a CC Attribution Non-Commercial license. This license says that so long as you identify me as the author, you may adapt and share my work in whatever ways you like, provided that your uses of it, like mine, are noncommercial.

The Creative Commons site also has a second feature that allows users to search for CC-licensed content on the web. This features mirrors the licensing function by helping you as a writer attribute and use texts in the ways their authors intended. All in all, then, Creative Commons strikes me as a remarkable experiment—an attempt to imagine an intellectual and artistic culture based more on the sharing of ideas than their marketing.

Affordances and Constraints

As a teacher and writer, I have long been fascinated by craft, by strategies for working and reworking a text in order to make it more precise, nuanced, and expressive. Even when I am not sure what its final form will turn out to be, I tend to imagine a text I am working on as something with clear borders, self-contained, an artifact that I can shape and reshape until it is ready to send out to readers. I suspect that one reason I am drawn as a writer to the essay and short book is that their brevity helps me grasp the form, the structure, of the piece I am trying to construct.

But there are many less bounded, more open forms of writing: diaries, journals, exchanges of letters. Such texts tend to be written not to a conclusion, but until the author grows tired of them, or circumstances change. You would be surprised, and perhaps a little suspicious, if a published diary turned out to have a neat conclusion wrapping up the narrative of the author's life as you'd expect a biography to do. Conversely, when authors (or their editors) collect their papers and letters into a volume, they often feel a need to bind it with an introduction or conclusion that makes what might otherwise seem a grab bag feel more like a coherent whole—a book, something with not simply a duration but a beginning and an end. Some kinds of writing are composed, imagined from the start as wholes. Others aggregate. You *keep at* a journal or diary; you don't construct it with a particular end in view.

I think this open-ended quality characterizes much digital writing. *Archive, curate, edit, collect.* These are keywords in digital culture—and for good reason. They refer not only to how we bookmark and comment on pieces composed by others but to how we present our own work as writers and intellectuals. Indeed, as Rebecca Blood points out, *blogs* began in the 1990s not as online journals or diaries but as *weblogs*—lists of interesting links with comments and notes. From its start the Internet has been a space for listing, collecting, and interpreting.

Intertexts

Rebecca Blood, "Weblogs: A History and Perspective," *Rebecca's Pocket* (http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html, 2000).

Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic, 1988).

Martin Oliver argues against deterministic views of affordances in "The Problem with Affordance," *E-Learning 2* (2005): 402–13.

Norman has himself cautioned against reductionist uses of the term. See his online article on "Affordances and Design" at http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/affordances_and.html.

People speak of creating an online *presence*. The term strikes me as apt. While there is certainly such a thing as a well-constructed post or tweet, a good blog or Twitter feed accrues force and interest over time. We *follow* online writers to see where they will take us from post to post. When I began some years ago to ask students to design and keep their own blogs, they quickly saw the need to define a generative theme or idea for their work. It's one thing to locate a subject for an essay, or even for a handful of posts. It's quite another to find a subject that you can return to and write more about over a span of months or even years. And if followers of your blog have already read and perhaps commented on a post you've made public, you probably don't want to go back to rework what you've said. The impulse is instead to respond, to continue the conversation, to revise by adding to what you've written. The next draft is the next piece.

Another way to think about this is to say that the affordances of writing shift when you move from a print to a digital environment. *Affordance* is a tricky term, first made popular in 1988 by Donald Norman, who used it to describe how everyday objects can be designed to encourage certain ways of interacting with them. A simple example is that a round knob on a door invites you to pull it open, while a flat plate invites you instead to push on it. Similarly, while you turn the pages of a book, the cursor on a laptop encourages you to scroll and click through an onscreen document. What some critics rightly object to, though, is the idea that objects can determine how they are used. That is clearly not the case. It's more accurate to think of affordances as helping to shape the situations in which we interact with objects and technologies.

Here's how the media scholar danah boyd puts it:

> The design and architecture of environments enable certain types of interaction to occur. Round tables with chairs make chatting with someone easier than classroom-style seating. Even though students can twist around and talk to the person behind them, a typical classroom is designed to encourage everyone to face the teacher. . . . Understanding the affordances of a particular technology or space is important because it sheds light on what people can leverage or resist in achieving their goals. For example, the affordances of a thick window allow people to see each other without being able to hear each other. To communicate in spite of the window, they may pantomime, hold up signs with written messages, or break the glass. The window's affordances don't predict how people will communicate, but they do shape the situation nonetheless.

I am drawn to boyd's idea of affordances as features of the environment that "people can leverage or resist in achieving their goals." A writer in a digital environment needs not only to manipulate new technologies but to connect with readers in new ways. And so, for instance, inserting an image into a document may do little more than prettify it, unless that image adds to your project in ways that words cannot. Similarly, it could be useful to add a sound or video recording of an interview to a profile you're writing, if there is something to be learned from hearing the actual voice of your subject, their accent or cadences of speech, or from observing their physical expressions or manner. But if you want the focus to be on their exact words, quoting them in print may do the job better. Or it might seem convenient to provide hyperlinks to the texts you're quoting in an online essay, if doing so does not actually distract readers from what you have to say, literally send them away from your piece. In all these cases you need to respond to a situation that is shaped both by the capacities of the media you are working with and your own goals in writing.

Intertexts

danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 10–11.

So what affordances can you "leverage and resist" as a digital writer? Clearly you can expand the range of media you work on and with—both

through finding and embedding images, video, and audio into your text, and through creating images, audio, and video as part of your own writing. You can reach out to different groups of readers through different platforms: Facebook, Twitter, WordPress, Tumblr, Medium, Instagram, Snapchat, and others. You can write both small and large—from the 140 characters of a tweet to the potentially endless expanse of a blog. And you can write in either more open-ended or more bounded forms. (I close this chapter with some ideas for writing a digital essay that is conceived, much like a print essay, as a stable and coherent whole.)

But there are also constraints. One of the pleasures of composing a written text is the almost infinite malleability of prose. If a passage isn't working, there's little to stop you from playing around with it until it does: substituting words, rethinking the structure and order of sentences, adding new materials and ideas, or simply starting over from scratch. Time and energy are the only real limits on revision. In contrast, many of the materials of digital writing are more intractable. You can't reshoot the video of a one-time event you recorded yesterday; you just have to work with the footage you've got. In posting or recirculating texts you've found on the internet, you need to consider issues of copyright and privacy. Our moms all know how to google. And while it is simple enough, at least on a technical level, to excerpt a word or phrase from a print text and incorporate it into your writing, it can be much harder to isolate and integrate a similarly brief yet meaningful snippet from an audio or video file. You still need to offer context, to explain what it is you see or hear in the clip. And so it turns out that, in many cases, the new media do not replace writing. They create texts that require more writing.

Writing for the screen can offer you quick and direct access to a wide range of readers and a diverse set of tools to use in connecting with them. But the goals of intellectual writing remain much the same: to respond, to add to what has been said before, to make your own voice heard among others. I also suspect that how writers learn to do things with texts has not changed much either. While I am excited by the possibilities of expression opened up by digital media, I am not an advocate of teaching writing online. My friend Eli Goldblatt has observed that *we teach writing by hand.* I take him to mean that we teach and learn best in the company of others, through the kinds of conversation you can only have face to face. In the afterword, I offer some thoughts about how I try to nurture such talk in the writing courses I teach. While I address this section to my fellow teachers, I hope that this sketch of the pace and rhythm, the feel and tone, of my work in the writing classroom will interest student readers as well.

Projects

What new possibilities might writing a digital rather than print essay open up? Clearly, one thing you can do as a digital writer is to combine modes of expression, mix your prose with images, hyperlinks, videos, and audio files. You can insert written text into a video or slide show, or write the script for an audio file, or layer writing over images. You can also experiment with structure. Many web texts appear less linear than print ones in that they seem to invite readers to choose their own paths through the materials they present rather than follow a single consecutive route through them. The task of a digital writer, then, is to put these new possibilities of expression to imaginative use.

A Digital Essay

In this final project I invite you to compose a digital essay—a piece of writing meant to be read on the screen rather than the page. Please note that I am not asking you to abandon writing for some other medium: audio, video, graphics. Rather, I am asking you to think about what it might mean to work *as a writer* in a digital environment.

Here are some thoughts I would offer:

- A digital essay is centered in writing. While I expect you to make strategic use of links, images, video, and audio, your work as a digital writer should be rooted in, well, writing. Again, your task is not to make a video or podcast or mash-up or infographic, but to write an essay

that draws on and responds to the affordances of the web.

- A digital essay is a coherent whole. Unlike the open-ended form of blog, to which you can always add a new post or page or link, the elements of a digital essay need to work together as parts of a cohesive structure. Its final version should feel planned and complete.
- A digital essay is idea-driven. The job of the essayist is to comment and interpret. I want you to ground your digital essay in response to other texts, but not to imagine yourself as simply writing an online version of a standard academic research paper. Aim less for comprehensiveness than craft, voice, insight. Your task is to experiment with a new form of critical writing, not to have the last word on a subject.

But one thing a digital essay should probably not be is a Word document or PDF. I encourage you to experiment with other formats. You might repurpose a blog platform like WordPress or Tumblr, or a slide program like Prezi or Storify. You might consider crafting a piece for a social platform like Medium. You might experiment with video, audio, animated text, or graphics as elements of an essay. You might consider how to incorporate the responses of readers into your text. You might work collaboratively. Whatever mode or format you choose, your challenge is to make thoughtful and creative use of the affordances of digital writing.

Afterword

Teaching Rewriting

We will teach our twisted speech
To the young believers
We will train our blue-eyed men
To be young believers.

—Joe Strummer and Mick Jones, "Clampdown"

But I'll teach my eyes to see
Beyond these walls in front of me
And someday I'll walk out of here again.

—Jimmy Cliff, "Trapped"

I began this book by arguing that academic writing is characterized by a responsiveness to the work of others and went on from there to offer students a set of moves for making strong and generous use of the texts they read in their own work as writers. What I have not tried to do in this book, though, is to sketch a plan for a specific sort of writing course. I have instead imagined this as a book that might be read *alongside* a wide range of other texts, that might inform a particular aspect of the work of a writing course without dictating its overall shape or focus. Indeed, I hope that this book might find use in courses in critical reading or criticism as well as composition, and at more advanced as well as introductory levels. Nonetheless, I suspect there are some things that have to go on in any course that aims to teach the practice of rewriting, of making active use of the work of others. Specifically, I think you need to: