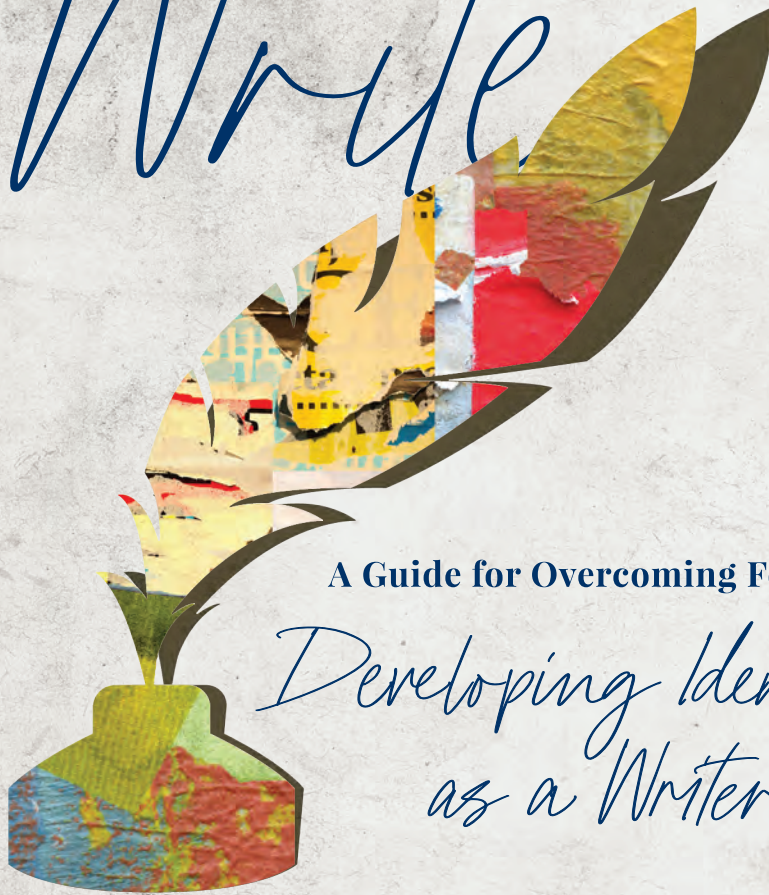


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The Confidence to

Write



A Guide for Overcoming Fear and

*Developing Identity  
as a Writer*

**Liz Prather** | Foreword by Thomas Newkirk

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to  
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&  
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*Credits continued from page iv.*

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# Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Foreword xii

## PART ONE

*The Case for Discovering Writing Identity &  
Developing Writing Courage*

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### **CHAPTER 1 Writing Is Hard 3**

All Writers Struggle 4

Dismantling the Myth of the Master Writer 8

Why Teaching Fortitude to Support Writing Identity Is Necessary 10

What Is Writing Identity? 14

How to Use This Book 17

# PART TWO

## *Discovering Writing Identity*

---

### **CHAPTER 2 Forging a Writing Identity by Writing 23**

Centering the Student 25

Changing the Language We Use to Talk About Writing 28

Four Activities That Lead to Foundational Conversations 31

### **CHAPTER 3 Teaching Writing Is Hard: Unpack Your Own Writing Identity 43**

Why Being a Teacher Who Writes Is Necessary Helpful 45

Unpacking Your Writing History 51

Unpacking Your Writing Attitudes 53

Unpacking Your Writing Identity 57

Starting a Writing Practice 59

### **CHAPTER 4 Examining Writing Experiences and Building Writerly Self-Regard 62**

How Writing Experiences Shape Writerly Self-Regard 63

Five Activities to Examine Writing Experiences 65

Building Writerly Self-Regard 75

Declaring Yourself as a Writer 85

# PART THREE

## *Developing Writing Courage*

---

### **CHAPTER 5 Fear of the Blank Page 91**

What Is It? 92

How Does It Feel? 95

How Does It Manifest in Writers? 97

How to Use the Fear of the Blank Page to Fuel Your Writing 103

### **CHAPTER 6 Fear of Being Exposed 116**

What Is It? 118

How Does It Feel? 119

How Does It Manifest in Writers? 122

How to Use Fear of Being Exposed to Fuel Your Writing 126

We Can Write Hard Things: Why Sharing the Struggle Is Powerful 136

### **CHAPTER 7 Fear of Being a Fraud 138**

What Is It? 139

How Does It Manifest in Writers? 142

How to Use the Fear of Being a Fraud to Fuel Your Writing 147

<b>Epilogue</b>	<i>Feel the Fear and Write Anyway</i>	158
<b>Appendix A</b>	<i>Student MetaWrites</i>	161
<b>Appendix B</b>	<i>Teacher MetaWrites</i>	168
<b>Appendix C</b>	<i>Eleven Reproducible Handouts to Use with Students</i>	175
<b>Appendix D</b>	<i>Suggested Reading List for Writing Courage</i>	189
References		191





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# Foreword

**A**s Dorothy and her cohorts close in on the Great Oz, his voice powerfully warns them away—“Do you presume to criticize the Great Oz? . . . The Great Oz has spoken!” But as we all know, Dorothy’s dog, Toto, pulls a curtain to reveal that Oz is just a short, plump, timid man whose voice is amplified by a microphone—in his own words, once revealed, a “humbug.”

This scene has always been for me a metaphor for writing. Any printed text looks so authoritative, so Oz-like. One word follows the next in beautiful order, unhesitatingly, in this case in Sabon Roman type. Paragraph after paragraph, no pauses, no scratch outs, no images like those below to indicate either a pause for caffeine or indecisiveness or confusion.

This text—any text really—is an act of deception, or at least a performance with all the backstage, rehearsals, and false starts hidden from view, not to mention the doubts, anxieties, and insecurities of the writers themselves, who are, after all, only fallible humans.

In *The Confidence to Write*, Liz Prather pulls back the curtain on writing, and, with surgical precision, takes on the myths, doubts, inhibitions, and avoidances that get in our (and our students’) way.

The central barrier has to do not with skills, but identity. For most students, their primary school identity is, well, student. Their job is to be compliant, to understand what is expected of them, and to do the work—all for the reward of a grade. Teachers can



provide what I call pseudohelp by providing rubrics that describe what needs to be in a piece of writing that is scored highly.

But this isn't how writing works outside the classroom. The issue is not about what writing has, but what writing does, and the effect it has on a reader. The driving force is not compliance but purpose, action, and the desire "to disturb the universe" (Eliot 1963, 3). This desire itself is rooted in our life stories, the complex of passions, beliefs, grievances, and life experiences we bring.

Liz works from the principle that all students have the life material to be writers, yet they need to reset their writerly self-regard. Teachers themselves need to write and share their own anxieties and missteps. And we all must confront the voices and cultural myths that trouble the sleep of even accomplished writers. After all, writing is about exposure, "putting yourself out there" as the saying goes—and we would be emotionally deficient if we were entirely calm about this. The question becomes, how can we use (or at least manage) the inevitable anxiety associated with writing and not be disabled by it?

Maybe the biggest trap is entitlement, that voice that says, *Who are you to want to write this? Don't you know that (a) it has been written about before; (b) there are better educated, more skilled, just plain smarter people out there who can do a better job than you; and (c) this is so obvious that no one will care?* Sound familiar?

In this book, Liz demystifies writing. Drawing on her own experience as a writer and teacher, and drawing extensively from writers' commentaries, she names the psychological impediments that inhibit even accomplished writers—perfectionism, procrastination, the imposter complex, memories of negative feedback, fear of failure, or steady negative self-talk. These, to some degree, go with the territory. But there are ways to mitigate them, and, for Liz, the primary way is to confront them through MetaWrites.

The *meta* refers to *metacognition*, thinking about our thinking. A major thread of this book is composed of invitations to



write about writing. For example, she poses this question about writer's block:

Contemporary novelist Jodi Picoult dismisses the idea of writer's block. "Think about it—when you were blocked in college and had to write a paper, didn't it always manage to fix itself the night before the paper was due? Writer's block is having too much time on your hands. If you have a limited amount of time to write, you just sit down and do it" (Charney 2017a). Do you agree or disagree that writer's block is just a matter of having too much time on your hands? What personal experience with writer's block informed your answer?

Or this one about perfectionism:

Essayist Rebecca Solnit writes, "So many of us believe in perfection, which ruins everything else, because the perfect is not only the enemy of the good; it's also the enemy of the realistic, the possible, and the fun" (Gilbert 2015, 166). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Do you or someone you know suffer from perfectionism? Has it ruined the real, the possible, and the fun you might have had with writing? Why or why not?

These prompts push students and teachers to write theory, to describe their experiences of writing, and as we all know, when we can name a fear, we are well on the way to dealing with it. Liz puts students in conversation with practicing writers. When we recognize that we are not alone in having inhibitions about writing and that others have ways of working through them, we can overcome the shame we feel in experiencing difficulty.

Liz names the mental obstacles that can invade the writing process. She invites us to join the ranks of the uncertain, the fearful, imposters all, creating texts that seem surer than we are. We will never be the mythological Writer, with Oz-like authority—but who would want that anyway? It's better to join the society of the fallible, who may struggle to talk down the demons, who fail but persist, who never feel comfortable claiming the title of writer, *but who write*.

Liz ends her book on this note of modesty:

So here we are. The epilogue is written. I started this book not knowing exactly how the writing would work, but I performed the acts of writing until the writing emerged. . . . I acted like someone who is a writer.

In short, I wrote *in doubt* and figured it out.

— Tom Newkirk



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# PART ONE

The Case for  
Discovering  
Writing Identity  
& Developing  
Writing  
Courage



# 1 Chapter

## Writing Is Hard

I teach about fifty student writers at Lafayette High School, a large, urban high school in Lexington, Kentucky. Students audition as eighth graders to get into the Literary Arts program, and we work together for four years on the art and craft of writing. It is, without a doubt, the most fulfilling professional job I've ever had.

When I was hired, I entertained certain notions about the students I would have—they would be gifted, creative, expressive, curious. Having now completed my tenth year, I can declare my students are all these things. Yet I discovered they also share something with all other students I've ever taught: a nagging doubt, a crippling fear, an overwhelming anxiety about their writing abilities.

Prior to coming to Lafayette, I taught in a range of English classes—reading intervention, collaborative English, Advanced Placement Lang, Advanced Placement Lit. I also taught composition and creative writing at Morehead State University, and for ten years, I was codirector of the Morehead Writing Project, working with teachers pursuing their master's.

With middle-aged teachers, undergraduates, or fifteen-year-old sophomores, the fears were the same. In every class I taught, I heard some version of “I'm not a good writer” or “I don't like to write” or “I don't have anything to write about.” Yet, they all possessed the essentials to be a writer, to wit: thoughts about their life and a language to express those thoughts.



Of course, there's more to writing than that, but that's the start: an idea and the means to express it. Whether the writing is imaginative or rhetorical, the form, style, tone, and structure stems from that initial spark: I am a human who thinks, and I want to communicate something to another human in writing.

When I arrived at Lafayette, I figured I'd finally meet writers confident of their abilities. I wouldn't have to convince these students they had a story to tell. I wouldn't have to assure them they were good enough. They'd auditioned and gained acceptance into a gifted program for writers, after all.

Of course, I was wrong.

I heard all the moans and objections about writing from my gifted writers that I'd heard from everyone else, except with a larger degree of angsty melodrama: "I suck at writing." "My drafts are trash." "I don't even like to write."

In a 2019 survey of my incoming students, only 10 percent reported they felt confident as a writer. Sixty percent said they were somewhat confident as a writer. And a whopping 30 percent reported they were not confident as a writer. These kids had had many writing successes and had been told since elementary school they were gifted at written expression.

You could argue that trying to live up to the gifted label created these fears and doubts. You could argue their self-assessment was a sign of maturity or modesty or that they'd confused confidence with mastery. But the survey confirmed for me what I've often reckoned in my own writing life. Writing confidence is unstable. No matter how long you've practiced it, writing is an evolving skill that only a fool would claim to have mastered. That we use the word *mastery* to assess student writing is a disservice to the work of writing and a lie to students everywhere.

The bottom line: all writers struggle.

## All Writers Struggle

Fear and struggle are twin companions of the writer. Disquiet is the constant reminder that you are, in fact, a writer. The fear of being exposed—of not being good enough, of not measuring up—is the writer's perennial writing partner.

In the 2019 Associated Writing Program conference keynote address, Colson Whitehead talked about his own uneasiness while working on *The Underground*

*Railroad*. Plucking Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Edward P. Jones’ *The Known World*, and Charles Johnson’s *The Middle Passage* off his bookshelf, he settled in to “learn something from these great artists”(24). The result? “I was very glum for a time, and paralyzed. And then I told myself, no matter what you’re writing about—slavery, or war, or family—someone smarter and more talented than you has already written about it” (24). If a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner is paralyzed and glum, is it any wonder our students approach the task of writing with less than gleeful enthusiasm?

When our school’s writing committee decided to launch a writing lab, we wanted to find out about our students’ attitudes about writing. We knew the research showed that positive writing attitudes decline as a student advances through middle and high school (Kear et al. 2000, 23). Lack of choice and positive feedback as well as the monotony and lack of self-expression associated with on-demand writing tests are cited as reasons for this decline. But we were also interested in what kinds of writing students were doing in school and out. In our survey (Figure 1–1), 366 students, grades 9 to 12, answered the survey and provided us with interesting data.

Sixty percent of the respondents were in some kind of accelerated English class. Fifty-two percent were most confident with narrative writing. Sixty-six percent were least confident with poetry. Thirty percent said they enjoyed writing, 15 percent said they didn’t enjoy writing, and 55 percent said their enjoyment depended on what kind of writing they were doing.

Although the survey delivered what we expected in terms of attitudes about writing, it was still disheartening that so many students did not identify writing as a positive experience or identify themselves as writers, even though they indicated they were doing some form of writing in seven out of the eight classes they were enrolled in.

Frequency of participation often leads to the formation of identity. If you hike every day, you think of yourself as a hiker. If you commute to work, you’re a commuter. But here were students who were participating in writing for nearly 88 percent of their classes but not identifying as a writer. The survey showed even students who enjoyed writing had their doubts about claiming an identity as a writer, evidence that there was a clear disconnect between doing and being.

Figure 1-1 ~ Lafayette Writing Survey

1. In what grade are you currently?
2. In what English class are you currently enrolled?
3. In how many of your classes are you required to write?
4. How would you rate your confidence as a writer?
  - I am very confident as a writer.
  - I am somewhat confident as a writer.
  - I am neither confident nor unconfident as a writer.
  - I am not confident as a writer.
  - I am very unconfident as a writer.
5. What part(s) of the writing process are you confident in? (Check all that apply.)
  - Coming up with good ideas to write about
  - Getting my ideas down on paper
  - Expressing and developing my ideas
  - Knowing how to arrange my ideas once they are down on paper
  - Visualizing an audience for my writing
  - Having a good vocabulary to express my ideas
  - Revising my writing (knowing what to take out and what to leave in for clarity)
  - Editing my writing (understanding how to apply the rules of spelling, capitalization, and grammar)
  - Finding a place to publish or perform my writing
  - Other
6. What part(s) of the writing process are you least confident in? (Check all that apply.)
  - Coming up with good ideas to write about
  - Getting my ideas down on paper
  - Expressing and developing my ideas
  - Knowing how to arrange my ideas once they are down on paper
  - Visualizing an audience for my writing
  - Having a good vocabulary to express my ideas
  - Revising my writing (knowing what to take out and what to leave in for clarity)
  - Editing my writing (understanding how to apply the rules of spelling, capitalization, and grammar)
  - Finding a place to publish or perform my writing
  - Other
7. What form of writing are you the most confident in writing? (Check all that apply.)
  - Poetry
  - Narrative (short story or personal narrative)
  - Argumentative (opinion or persuasive writing)
  - Informational (lab reports, summaries, historical reports, etc.)
  - Drama (stage play, screen play, video games, etc.)
8. What form of writing are you not the least confident in writing? (Check all that apply.)
  - Poetry
  - Narrative (short story or personal narrative)
  - Argumentative (opinion or persuasive writing)
  - Informational (lab reports, summaries, historical reports, etc.)
  - Drama (stage play, screen play, video games, etc.)
9. Do you enjoy writing?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Depends on what kind of writing it is
10. Have you ever said any of the following about yourself as a writer? (Check all that apply.)
  - I always have a lot of good ideas for writing.
  - I never have any good ideas for writing.
  - I am good at writing.
  - I am bad at writing.
  - I'm excited when other people read my writing.

- I'm afraid someone will make fun of me when they read my writing.
- I'm logical, so I'm not good at creative writing.
- I'm creative, so I'm not good at analytical writing.
- What I have to say matters.
- What I have to say doesn't matter.
- I am the best person to write about this topic.
- I am not the best person to write about this topic.

**11. Do you prefer writing for school assignments or for personal reasons?**

- School assignments
- Personal reasons
- Neither school nor personal reasons

**12. At school, what kind of writing do you like to write? (Check all that apply.)**

- Writing speeches
- Writing argumentative essays
- Writing stories
- Writing blogs
- Writing plays
- Writing analytical essays
- Writing novels
- Writing songs
- Writing poetry
- Writing informational essays
- Writing letters
- Writing summaries
- Writing lab reports
- Writing in a journal from a prompt
- Other

**13. Outside of school, what kind of writing do you like to write? (Check all that apply.)**

- Writing speeches
- Writing argumentative essays
- Writing stories
- Writing blogs

- Writing plays
- Writing analytical essays
- Writing novels
- Writing songs
- Writing poetry
- Writing informational essays
- Writing letters
- Writing summaries
- Writing lab reports
- Writing in a journal from a prompt
- Other

**14. What kind of writing would you like to learn more about either in school or outside school? (Check all that apply.)**

- Writing speeches
- Writing argumentative essays
- Writing stories
- Writing blogs
- Writing plays
- Writing analytical essays
- Writing novels
- Writing songs
- Writing poetry
- Writing informational essays
- Writing letters
- Writing summaries
- Writing lab reports
- Other

**15. What was your best writing experience, either in school or outside of school?**

**16. What was your worst writing experience, either in school or outside of school?**

**17. What three words describe you as a writer?**

One of the most heartbreaking results of the survey were the answers to #17, “What three words describe you as a writer?” More than a quarter of respondents answered with something negative:

*Bad at it*

*Not very good*

*Not a writer*

*Bad at writing*

*I don't know.*

Maybe they thought writing talent was a gift given to the chosen few, a divine bestowal. Or perhaps they didn't see themselves as writers because they'd never published anything or won any prizes. Or didn't see their process as one that produced the kind of writing—neat, orderly, sitting on a library shelf—they associated with being a writer. They sensed their stumbling efforts didn't match up. Maybe they hadn't been told yet that struggle and stumbling was an essential part of the process.

## Dismantling the Myth of the Master Writer

To be honest with students about the struggle of writing might scare them off, but it's more ethical than advancing, even unconsciously, the myth of the master writer. Anne Lamott (1994) describes this myth as writers who “sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter” (52).

When I was about seventeen, I saw a television special on romance author Danielle Steel, who, according to *Forbes* (2021), has published over 170 books in the last forty years. In full-face makeup, a coiffed updo, and pink pant suit, Steel sat down at a gilded table in her spacious Parisian office.

With a manicured hand, she slid a piece of paper in her Olympia standard typewriter and began “Flight of the Bumblebee” typing. We cut away to an interview with her, then when the scene resumed, Steel pulled the paper out of the typewriter and laid it on top of a stack of similarly typed papers, which, presumably, was the finished manuscript of her next novel ready to be shipped off to her publisher.

A writer that knows exactly what to say and how to say it is often the image our students have of what a writer is supposed to be. This mirage has the trappings of privilege, leisure, education, plus long stretches of time to spend writing. Recently my student Kate wrote about this fantasy in her notebook: “I always pictured a writer as someone who would wake up in the morning, make a cup of coffee, and curl up with an old-fashioned typewriter in a cozy blanket by the fireplace and tap away at the typewriter all day.”

This concept of The Master Writer is pervasive in popular culture, yet at odds with the struggle involved in bringing forth even the most basic of drafts. In my process, there’s a lot of pacing, staring out the window, and wasting time. Even some groaning and wringing of hands. Writing makes me feel isolated in my own incompetence, but it’s a practice I submit to over and over because the results are rewarding. Most of our students don’t experience the reward that offsets the struggle. To them, writing is torture, and the result is shame.

The Master Writer myth began to crack for me when I pursued a Master’s in Fine Arts degree in fiction. I worked closely for three years with very talented writers, and their struggles, habits, and self-loathing mirrored my own. We had a robust visiting writers series, and all the visiting writers, many legends of American letters, recounted stories of writing frustrations as well.

My MFA colleagues and I had a writing identity. Whitehead and all those writers in Murray’s book also had an identity that helped them forge past the anxiety and fear that accompanies writing. However, for the students who do not have one, when the words don’t flow and their fingers don’t magically play over the Chromebook, they may believe they don’t have what it takes to write at all. Maybe they think writers are born, not made.

When there’s a misconception about how writers work, students misinterpret the normal struggle as part of their own damage. And especially if they look around the classroom where everyone else seems to be merrily typing away.

## Why Teaching Fortitude to Support Writing Identity Is Necessary

We rarely talk about the social-emotional resilience needed around the act of writing. I've always been fascinated about how important identity is to the development of literacy skills, yet how infrequently identity is addressed or discussed in the classroom.

Think about what we ask of students when we ask them to write: look inside your life and yank out a significant event, interpret that event, and then communicate its implications with clarity to a make-believe audience. Or form an opinion strong enough to argue a claim while building credibility, weaving in research, and touching the hearts and minds of nameless, faceless readers. And if the technical demands of writing aren't hard enough to master, we're also asking them to forge past the voices in their heads saying *You're a bad writer*.

All these tasks require more than just knowing the rules of writing. They require agency, writerly decision making, an authoritative stance. They require, in short, a consciousness separate from school and teacher, an autonomy born from self-identity and social identity and from their ability to make effective writing happen. In short, they require a writing identity.

Think about how different the year would be for students if we started by asking students not just "Who are you?" but "Who are you as a writer?" That question taps a self-concept, letting students know you already regard them as writers, yet you're asking them to skill up their writing game. For this reason, teaching students their fears are normal and even necessary during the writing process is not only important, but essential. Teaching students strategies to subjugate their fears in the service of their writing goals is giving them not only the gift of fortitude, but a means to define, expand, and declare their writing identity.

"Trying to deny, avoid, numb, or eradicate the fear of writing is neither possible nor desirable," writes Ralph Keyes (1995) in *The Courage to Write*. "Anxiety is not only an inevitable part of the writing process but a necessary part. A state of anxiety is the writer's natural habitat" (13). The goal, then, is not to master the anxiety or shutter the fear, but to learn to write *with* the fear and anxiety present. When students have practiced this over and over—feeling

the fear that writing produces and overcoming it with healthy strategies—their writing identity soars, and they are fortified to face the next writing task with a greater degree of independence and power.

It's essential to have anxiety when you write, just as it is essential to be nervous before you go on stage. In this sense, the page is a kind of stage where students perform as a writer. If an actor doesn't feel nervous and keyed up before the lights go up, the performance will be flat. Yes, stage fright can be debilitating, but the positive energy of excitement and anticipation gives a stage performance its vitality. Our goal is to help students harness what Keyes calls "the power of positive anxiety" (14) in a way that augments their writing, not diminishes it.

When I conceived this book, I struggled with my main aim: Am I arguing for the necessity of teaching courage to students or am I arguing for the necessity of teaching writing identity? Midway through writing the first draft, I discovered the answer was *Yes!* Writing courage is necessary for discovering one's writing identity, and writing identity generates tenacity. The two states are interdependent.

Students who have a writing identity are just as likely to fall prey to the fears that beset students who are only writing for a grade, but they have a greater fortitude to write *with* the fears instead of letting the fears shut down the process. The more students recognize their identity as a writer, the greater degree of control they have over the writing fears that formerly would have sidetracked their goals. Because they write from ownership and not from compliance, writing becomes a pronouncement of self onto the world, a reward larger than any grade on a report card. Developing a writing identity helps to shift writing away from a teacher-directed activity to a student-pursued one that lasts a lifetime. Here are four more reasons teaching writing courage and writing identity are powerful.

### *Students Feel Less Isolated*

Truth telling about one's own experience is liberating to all those who identify and see their own struggle in that truth. If we share our own stories of writing anxiety, this admission allows our students to relax. It's OK. It's normal. Teaching kids courage to write their stories will liberate and invite the shyest, most timid voice.



In my first book, I wrote about an activity I use in my classroom called Firepit, where we sit around a construction paper fire in the middle of the room and tell stories (Prather 2017, 50). It's one of the single best things I do. Kids tell funny, heroic, embarrassing stories about themselves. The shyest person in the room sees the fears she treasures up in her heart are not solely her own, but property everyone in the room owns. She feels less alone, less isolated. Talking about our own writing fears, sharing our anxieties, and reading about published authors crippled by years of writer's block or devastated by rejection helps a student understand these fears are *part of* being a writer.

When I share my writing process with students, I show them drafts of articles or blogs I've written to illustrate that writing is a hard and rocky. Two years ago I wrote a feature article about a local sportscaster for *Kentucky Living* magazine (Prather 2018). I brought in my interview notes, my research notes, and nine drafts I had printed out to show students the vast differences between the first and last draft. I also shared my process, describing how the first two drafts were wooden and "list-y," just one fact after the other. Sharing that I had no clue how to organize the piece helped students see that initial confusion was legitimate and realistic, not evidence that the writer is flawed. Sharing my frustrations normalized their anxiety.

## *Students Take the Necessary Risks*

Living authentically is risky. Thinking is risky. Standing up for what you believe in, going against the crowd, taking a stand—all these virtues we want to cultivate in our students start with courage. And all these things are necessary for writing too. Speaking truth instead of relying on clichés or speaking plainly instead of ironically requires a risk. And anywhere there is risk, bravery is a must.

Teaching courage may sound very touchy-feely, like asking students to practice trust falls off cafeteria tables. But there's nothing touchy-feely about students examining, for example, the logic of a long-held belief about themselves or about the world. In fact, this kind of investigation requires focus and will. This kind of examination requires questioning everything, possibly rejecting the beliefs of a parent or someone they love. That's where the risk lies: in alienating themselves and others by examining a belief that might crumble upon intense scrutiny. That's why developing writing identity and nerve is essential.

Taking risks is the essence of writing. Putting a thought down for someone else to read exposes you in a way not many other activities do. If we want to sustain students in this process of writing, teaching courage comes first. Student writers who become more authentic in their writing risk exposure, but speaking their truth is worth it. In addition, they become part of a larger community of writers who also face the same fears.

### *Students Tell Their Own Story*

I want my students to write their stories before someone else does. To challenge stereotypes. To speak in their own voice and language. Developing that voice starts with an embrace of their own identity and intentional instruction on writing bravely.

In an economically poor but culturally rich state like Kentucky, some students think their own culture is deficient or nonexistent. Some of them are aware that their story has been co-opted by outsiders who attempt to interpret and explain our state and its culture. Writing is a means of taking back that power because writing *is* power. As Kentucky writer Robert Gipe (2019) observed in a recent writing conference, “In Appalachia, people narrate their way into the meaning of their lives.” Courage to write their own story is an essential practice for students who live in these underrepresented populations. They must write their own story, getting the details true to their own experience, especially if that vision challenges a stereotype.

### *Students Honor Their Selfhood*

Every writing teacher recognizes students who have forged an identity for themselves. Some may call it a quality of voice; some may call it flow, but it is the boldness with which a writer steps onto the page, the authority with which she speaks a truth. It’s a sure-footed progression of thought. It’s a pronouncement of personality, of selfhood.

As a writer with identity grows and encounters different writing tasks, he faces these tasks independently and owns them more deeply. When I ask students who don’t have a writing identity why they are writing something, they will say, “Because you told me to” or “Because it was assigned” or “IDK.” When I ask my students in conferences, “Why are you writing this?” students who own

their work and see their work as personally satisfying will tell me. They say things like, “Remember that short story we read last year where the bank robber shoots the guy, and as the bullet goes through his brain, he remembers his whole life? I’m trying to do something like that.” Or “I follow this Instagram called ‘Humans of New York’ and I want to interview people here at school and find out their stories and call it ‘Humans of Lafayette.’”

Writing identity creates ownership and voice, which starts with self. When you help students find strategies to manage their anxiety, you give them the freedom to declare the truth about who they are and what they believe.

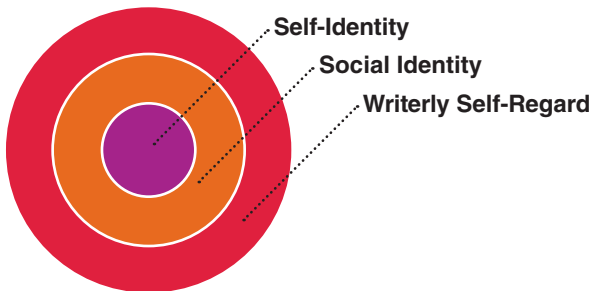
## What Is Writing Identity?

In this book, we will explore the idea of writing identity, but briefly defined, it is the merging of a student’s social and self-identity with her writerly self-regard (Figure 1–2). That last element—writerly self-regard—is key. It is a student’s ability, as my student Karsten said, “to know your way around a piece of writing.” It’s the degree to which students value their own abilities or esteem their own choices over the choices of others. It’s a student’s awareness that her life, voice, stories, points of view, sense of humor, memories, style of writing, vocabulary, syntactical choices, and organizational strategies are primary when she approaches any writing task.

Writerly self-regard is fluid and also relational in that it connects both to how you see yourself as a writer and also to the act of writing. From an educational standpoint, it’s the most elastic. It’s a student’s belief he can make independent writing decisions that result in both effective and ineffective writing and maybe

not die from it. It’s a multifaceted construct that captures everything a writer brings with him when he picks up a pen, including his mentors and influences, his healthy and unhealthy writing habits and attitudes, his positive and negative writing experiences, and his emotions about the act of writing and himself as a writer.

**Figure 1–2** ~ *The Elements of Writing Identity*



Of course, if a student has low self-regard, it will be difficult to forge writerly self-regard, but not impossible. In fact, centering a student's selfhood in his writing will do both simultaneously. Writerly self-regard is the element that I, as a writing teacher, want to serve as a catalyst for. I want my classroom to be the place where writerly self-regard is centered, to support students' belief that their voices and skill sets can deliver their aims effectively. We will spend the rest of this book ruminating on these ideas, but let me briefly break down these three elements of writing identity with a single student, Zoya, as an illustration.

### *Self-Identity*

As a writer, our sense of self or selfhood is formed by how we define who we are. Self-identity is the inner place of our core values, attitudes, and beliefs about ourselves and the world. Psychologically, our sense of self emerges from our belief system, our memories, and our experiences. And these are largely formed by our parents and family, our background and neighborhood, maybe even our faith system. One's perception of self is the oldest and often most concretized of the identities that will be brought into the service of writing, even as it shifts and grows through childhood, adolescence, young adult, adult, and so on.

Here's how Zoya, a ninth grader in my Literary Arts 1 class, described herself: "The first thing that comes to mind is my heritage. My Indian nationality and Asian ethnicity are the biggest parts of my self-identity. Secondly, my identity as an immigrant is also very important to me because it is a part of my identity that I interact with the most. Along with that, my role as a woman, a teenager, and a student are a part of my self-identity."

As a social construct, Zoya's self-identity is fluid and progressive yet has properties, such as her heritage and autobiographical memories, that are stable. It's the deep, soul seat from which she as a writer will step into the world. Her story begins with who she sees herself to be.

### *Social Identity*

A writer's social identity is constructed by the groups we participate in, formed primarily but not solely by our socioeconomic status, our race or ethnicity, our gender, our sexual orientation. Another fluid social construct, social identity sets

us in relation to other people, deposits us inside and outside communities, and follows both the social, cultural, and political changes we experience throughout our lives.

Social identity might also be formed by our culture, the geographical place we come from or currently live in, or the clubs and organizations that we have joined. Social identity is the awareness of ourselves as a self within a community within a world.

Zoya writes, “I consider myself a part of several social groups. My culture as Indian and the religions I grew up around, Hinduism and Islam. My status as an immigrant. Along with those, I am a progressive, so I align with the Democratic party. In school, I am a part of academic groups and my creative writing class. Lastly, my affiliation with the agnostic religion is also very prominent in my social identity.”

Interestingly, awareness of what groups we’re a part of, what groups we reject, and what groups reject us is a powerful and never-ending well of writing fodder. Think of all the great personal narratives that boil down to “I once thought I was an X, but now I realize I am a Y, and here’s what I’ve discovered from that journey.”

## *Writerly Self-Regard*

Writerly self-regard rounds out the triad of elements and is the most important. It’s the fuel that drives the car of writing identity. Formed from the writer’s writing experiences and their skills and attitude toward writing, writerly self-regard is the element that teachers and a writing classroom can influence the most profoundly.

Zoya writes: “My identity as a writer has grown a lot over the years. While I started off as an amateur poet and short story author, I have grown into a more serious and mature writer. I have taken on the role of an opinion journalist and screenplay writer, both roles have affected my writing persona in their own ways. Unfortunately, I am also a ‘procrast-writer’ or a writer who delays writing down any ideas they might have into actual writing. As bad as that is, it is still very important to my identity as a writer.”

Already Zoya has witnessed and claimed an identity as a writer that names several modes she likes to write and takes into account a delay mechanism that

is part of her process. Although she understands that procrastination might be an unhealthy practice, it *is* part of who she is as a writer at the present moment in her development.

The successes and practices in a writing community, such as one formed in an ELA classroom, are foundational in developing a student's writerly self-regard. In a classroom where student voice is centered, a writer's level of skill can also be amplified and healthy habits exercised. Students can also participate in giving and receiving feedback, discover peer mentors, and practice rhetorical problem-solving as a collaborative, inquiry-based process. All these activities strengthen students' writerly self-regard, which strengthens their larger writing identity.

## How to Use This Book

Every writing task is a puzzle with complex problems to solve. By the time a student reaches the sixth grade, she should have been introduced to and practiced the basic technical, grammatical, and mechanical knowledge to be a writer. From that point on, writing is an ongoing practice of cracking new rhetorical and narrative problems in the form of assigned and self-selected writing tasks. (Eighty percent of the writing tasks in my class are self-selected, and 20 percent are assigned.) Writing instruction from seventh to twelfth grade, then, should be hundreds of low-stakes puzzle opportunities to practice, practice, practice coupled with a number of larger student-directed projects that run from conception to publication.

Because writing is a skill taught in school, it is erroneously perceived by many students as an academic performance rather than a representation of self. But thinking, reading, and writing are not purely academic pursuits any more than breathing, running, and walking are purely athletic pursuits. A student with an awareness of her own writing identity moves beyond mere slavish compliance to an academic grade and finds an entry point even on a state-issued assessment. During middle and high school, a student's identity as a writer begins to change and takes on greater postures of autonomy. Writing identity becomes both a grounding wire and launching pad for every writing task, from a business proposal to a research paper to a love note to an Instagram post.

This book is designed to help students launch into a rich self-investigation by naming and examining their writing identity through practical writing activities.

Several of them are included in the appendixes as reproducible copies to use with your classes. They have no special order and could be used at any time during the school year. Think of these as an analytical, social-emotional curriculum that augments your existing instruction. I use most of these exercises during the first six weeks of my school year to lay the groundwork for conversations we'll continue having all year. The concept of writing identity—specifically asking students to make their own writerly decisions and to do the hard work around writing production—is a running undercurrent in our writing community that allows me to get to know my student writers.

You'll notice short writing prompts about writing throughout, called MetaWrites, some designed for teachers and some for students. By examining our own writing experiences, we will be in a place to share and reflect those lessons with our students. These prompts ask a writer to (a) pay attention to the practice of writing by (b) writing about (c) the practice of writing itself. You may write with your students during these MetaWrites to be vulnerable and to connect through the shared experience of writing, but there's no expectation to share what you write with anyone unless you want to. You may want to share some of your insights with your students, either in readings, conversations, or demonstrations, or you may not.

Here in Chapter 1, I briefly define writing identity and argue that teaching writing courage is an essential part of any ELA classroom. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I dive into writing identity proper, providing tools to help teachers and students unpack their writing history to address any residual narratives that no longer serve their growth. In these chapters, teachers and students also claim their habits, mentors, and ideas as the social and emotional capital from which they write. These examinations lay the groundwork for the kind of vulnerability, reflection, and personal exploration helpful in declaring a writing identity.

Chapter 3 is mostly targeted toward the ELA teacher who teaches, among dozens of other things, writing. Knowing yourself as a writer and knowing how you process writing tasks will be critical when conferencing with students, for example, or when you help them solve a particularly knotty rhetorical problem. Examining the kinds of assumptions, preconceptions, injuries, and thrills you experienced as a writer in elementary through high school will help you develop a personal philosophy around writing and writing instruction. Sharing stories about your own writing identity and your approach to writing tasks creates an authentic communal experience with your students.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, we name the monsters that threaten to shut down the identity of the writer. By naming and disarming our fears—imposter syndrome, perfectionism, procrastination, and so on—we provide students strategies they can use the rest of their lives. We break down those logjams in a few ways: we write about them, of course; we try to name how these obstructions feel and where they come from emotionally; we give ourselves permission and grace to remember and analyze how we have overcome them in the past; and we look at how professional writers experience these same barriers and use these anxieties to fuel their work.