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R. Joseph
Rodríguez

FOREWORD BY
Jacqueline
Woodson

Youth

Teaching a Love of Writing

Scribes

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*to the youth scribes among us
and the teachers who guide them
with care, ideas, knowledge, love,
understanding, and words . . .
(and to you!)*

“What are you
scribbling or
scratching
over there?”

—Ezekiel, student

“I’m going
to write
what I
want to
write.
Stop
looking!”

—Katherine, student

“Raya, mi’jo, raya.”
 (“Draw some
lines, my son,
draw them.”)

—Papi

I’ll make you love
scribedom
more than your
mother!

I will place its beauties
before you.

It’s the greatest of
all callings.

There is nothing like
it in the land!

from *Satire on Trades*
(or *Instructions of Dua-Khety*),
c. 1800 BCE

“Escribe lo que
imaginas.”
 (“Write what you’re
imagining.”)

—Mami

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Foreword by Jacqueline Woodson

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National Book Award Winner and
MacArthur “Genius” Fellow

Many decades ago, I walked into a writing class at a college in New York City. About a dozen young adults sat around a long table, their notebooks open, their eyes nervous and eager. I was as nervous as they were. As a young writer (and even younger teacher), I didn’t know if I had anything I could teach them. And yet, they had elected this class and chosen to work with me. They had made a choice to trust me to help shape their stories, poems, and minds. Because of this, I felt they deserved my best self. That best self came with nervousness, yes, but it also came with the knowledge that, about this one thing, at this point in time, I knew a little bit more than they did. And my work was to pour what I knew into them with the hopes that not only would they tell their stories but that they would one day pour what they know into someone else.

With Dr. R. Joseph Rodríguez’s work, this dream has come true again and again. In the thirty years I’ve known him, I have watched him grow from a young adult into a lovely writer. From a lovely writer into a passionate teacher. And from a passionate teacher into a writer again with the publication of this glorious book, *Youth Scribes: Teaching a Love of Writing*.

What comes through so clearly here is Joseph’s infectious passion for both writing and teaching and seeing *all* students exactly where they are—across lines of race, gender, class, and ability. *Youth Scribes* reminds us as teachers (and writers) that there is story in all of us. Our only work is to help ourselves, and by extension, our young writers, move it to the page.

In *Youth Scribes*, you’ll meet teachers who write and students

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who teach us. You'll gain so much amazing knowledge about your own ways of teaching and helpful exercises for getting your students' (and your own) stories on the page.

In this book, Dr. Rodríguez will pour into you all that many years of living as a writer and a teacher have shown him. Have fun scribing and pour it on.

x

Jacqueline Woodson is an award-winning writer of many books for young people and adults including *Brown Girl Dreaming*, *Miracle's Boys*, and *Each Kindness*. She served as the Young People's Poet Laureate from 2015 to 2017, as the Library of Congress National Ambassador for Young People's Literature from 2018 to 2019, and was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2020. In 2018, she founded Baldwin For The Arts, an organization that provides no-cost artistic residencies and fellowships for artists of African, Asian, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e, and dual-heritage backgrounds. She lives in Brooklyn, NY. She can be reached on X at @JackieWoodson.

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Introduction *Students as Scribes*

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My earliest teachers made sure I could hold a pencil in my hand when I preferred other things to do. I wanted to play, sing, and socialize. But there was writing to do! I needed to keep going across the page with the pencil, making marks and scribbling my way to words in the two languages of my life: Spanish and English. My classmates were also scribbling and could tell many stories about what they had scribed on the page. Together we described what we were doing in joyful conversation with our teachers. Our teachers anticipated our best, which seemed to be their mantra when it came to creating and writing, and we were guided by their instruction and encouragement.

As the years progressed in my schooling, I learned how to use more tools: crayons, paste, jumbo pencils, scissors, chalk sticks, maps, markers, Apple® IIe computers, pens, ten-key calculators, typewriters, and keyboards. Each of these tools allowed me to transform language into something for myself and also for an audience—something with a purpose and message of my own. Writing became more joyful and livelier when I was invited to write, encouraged to imagine, and supported to create. In these moments, I became a scribe.

Scribes vs. Writers

The ancient Egyptian word for *scribe* contains the duality of “to write” and “to draw” and has had varied interpretations throughout time periods. Niv Allon and Hana Navratilova explain that “the term invites a greater variety of interpretations, including author, copyist, literati and literate” (2017, 1). Over the years, I have read about the role of scribes in civilizations and cultures that started with the apprenticeship of boys and girls in early adolescence and reached a revered or royal status for many. Scribes held a significant role in many civilizations that formed in Mesopotamia, Africa, China, India, and Mesoamérica. Scribes possessed multilingual versatility and were held in high respect based on their education, profession, and status, such as the *tlahcuiloh* in Mesoamérica. Their knowledge across disciplines also influenced the study of holy prayers, scriptures, and texts and informed additional responsibilities. As a teacher of language arts, I think about the multimodal literacies my students possess with acumen and versatility and how their practices today resemble the role of scribe.

When I use the word *scribe*, I am referring not only to the ancient practices that predate the printing of writing and the creation of manuscripts and maps, but also to modern forms of communication that call for editing, transcription, and interpretation to show understanding across various audiences, cultures, disciplines, modes, and situations. Writing is the act, while scribing is in the purpose behind the act. For instance, scribes and cartographers, or mapmakers, appear in civilizations and societies across time—from BCE to CE. As teachers, we can cultivate our students’ scribal identities by inviting them to engage in conversations about their choices, doubts, ideas,

and questions with a necessary and valid purpose. Teachers of youth scribes bring students' literacies and their knowledge and meaning-making to the forefront of their lives to gain justice, learning, and understanding.

Why not then just use the word *writer* or *mapmaker*?

There are habits of writers we use daily, and there are also ancient habits and practices we know from various civilizations and cultures that honor and value the role of the scribe in society. Examples of the pivotal roles of scribes surround us and appear in some of the earliest communities. We can invite, access, and value students' backgrounds, prior knowledge, and experiences—inside and outside of our classrooms.

As teachers, we can guide our students to a love of writing that is cultural, essential, just, necessary, and timeless. As we teacher scribes compose beside our youth scribes, we can guide scribal acts, behaviors, and habits that can build our students' scribal identities. In *Teaching: A Life's Work*, Sonia Nieto and Alicia López Nieto explain, "Writing also helps us learn about our students [. . .] to look into our students' hearts and minds and learn what's important to them" (2019, 112). But how do we get scribes to believe in their discoveries, ideas, and ingenuity?

Making the Marks

In *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*, Donald H. Graves declares, "Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils . . . anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, 'I am'" (2003, 3). Graves reminds us that children write and, by doing so, claim their being, existence, and imagination. As children, they mark their human inventiveness that they then display to an audience that begins with themselves and also extends to their classmates, friends, teachers, and families.

"The child's marks say, 'I am.'" These words are my mantra.

My earliest memories of my public schooling in Houston, Texas, begin in bilingual classrooms, where I made my marks in two languages. In fact, I recall scribbling messages; I memorized words; I told and retold stories; I scribed all I could on paper and even in the sand in our school playground

during recess. As I grew older and continued on to my secondary studies, some of my teachers noticed my writing interests, but I also lost a lot of my stamina to write when my writing production became more quantifiable, standardized, and determinist—solely based on my measurable abilities, intellect, circumstances, and potential. The writing values that took priority became detrimental to what I wished to cultivate in my life guided by my teachers: my emerging voice as a youth scribe and observer. Nieto and López confirm: “The benefits of writing for teachers hold equally for students: it can help them learn about themselves and their realities, develop confidence, and find and nurture their voices” (2019, 110). Today we must amplify the benefits among our students and our teaching colleagues.

The benefits were not always visible, though. When I was in my teacher preparation courses, there were few teachers of color who taught writing or who wrote about the teaching of writing, similar to what Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza reveals in the epigraph about an expressive writing life with Dante Quintana. (Their voices were unheard and underconsidered, not underrepresented!) The writing artifacts of students of color in many writing pedagogy books were limited to caricatures, clichés, and stereotypes presented by White author majorities. Some of the depictions appeared in foundational texts, while others were presented by speakers in national conferences as professional learning sessions on the teaching of writing for a select student population. As I taught more adolescents in secondary schools, these **guiding questions** informed my thinking and reflection:

- Who are the scribes among us, and who nurtures them to persist as scribes?
- What keeps students and teachers writing together?
- When can I squeeze in writing as a habit for thinking—from bell to bell?
- Where can I find the teachers of color who possess scribal habits?
- Why must we persist as teachers of writing?
- How can I connect concepts and content that value the civilizations, communities, and societies informed by scribes, *dubsarne* (Sumerian), *griots* (West Africa), *soferim* (Jerusalem), *seanchaithe* (Gaelic, Irish), *tlacuiloque* (Indigenous Mesoamérica, Aztec), and other thinkers?

As a teacher of writing and youth scribes, I needed to adopt a scribe stance that favored what students can do as they make meaning and create new ways of knowing, learning, and understanding. I believed this was possible and considered the words of the novelist Gish Jen, who reminds us, “One must live in order to have something to write about. That’s the commonplace wisdom, and to be engaged with the world is no bad thing; it is essential” (2000). The words of the character Aristotle from Sáenz’s young people’s literature novel that appear in the epigraph above and Jen’s words both tell us that there is something that drives our scribal lives and existence, which is to declare this: “I am.”

As teachers, we can invite our students to continue to make their marks as scribes—even as adolescents. Nieto and López say that they “believe there are a multitude of reasons that people write. [. . .] In the cycle of teaching and learning, the power of writing should never be underestimated” (2019, 123). As a teacher at a public high school in Austin, Texas, and as a teacher educator of language arts education and action research at a local university, I believe in my students’ scribal abilities to create.

A Principled Way Forward

As I wrestled with concepts and perspectives to frame this book, I thought it best to find something to declare out of practice and experience with my own youth scribes and teacher colleagues. Writing can be a scribal act, behavior, and habit that can be accessible, emancipatory, honored, valued, and life-changing. Some of my thinking opened, shifted, and grew as a result of conversations with students, teachers, teacher scribes, librarians, and administrators. Lorena Escoto Germán advises, “Take notice of your students, and allow your practice to be driven by your values, held by their communities” (2021, 21).

The five **principles** presented here are from my own classroom, a kind of scribe-led laboratory in action that I call The Scribe’s Studio:

1. **Every student is a scribe in our changing world.** Students write daily in various modes and media. Their awareness about the world keeps growing, and they adapt daily to a world that inspires and also startles them.

- 2. Scribes develop their selfhood as they discover, explore, and research.** Students are becoming each day as they form their sense of self and belonging. They search for answers and research daily to make meaning or launch new inquiry.
- 3. Scribes experience affirmation, confirmation, hope, joy, justice, and love as they write.** Beside their teachers and peers, students experience various emotions and build on connections that relate to their lives and writing identities.
- 4. Scribes can gain an awareness of their unique responsibilities and future contributions in a democratic society.** Students can gain knowledge of what changes the world, and they can learn the power of free will in a representative democracy and how to exercise their freedom in their lives and communities.
- 5. Scribes read widely and gain readership through their knowledge, literacies, and writing journeys in action across various audiences, cultures, disciplines, and situations.** Students possess an awareness of how literacies and modes keep changing to communicate, and they must be ready to join and sustain the conversation in their scribal journeys.

Teacher scribes can make a mark beside their students. We can learn about students' convictions, ideas, intentions, and inventions through the languages they know, adopt, and adapt to create and communicate by.

In addition to the five principles, I propose what I call the **Scribal Identity Theory of Expression**, which is a philosophy of writing that recognizes and applies concepts about identity formation and socially responsible literacies to the teaching of writing with youth. I argue that a scribal identity is influenced by communicative, cultural, economic, employment, governmental, language, literary, media, political, practical, and social factors and processes—inside and outside of school settings. The Scribal Identity Theory of Expression challenges the status quo about who writes, for whom authors write, whose works are publishable and accessible, and who reads works of literature such as US, borderlands, and world literature texts, including most recently banned and challenged books and stories.

Two influential texts for this book are the article “Freedom for Literacy” (Parker 2020) and the position statement “Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing” from the National Council of Teachers of English

(NCTE) (2016). Overall, various authors and thinkers appear in this book; the ideas they present merit reading in their entirety and practice with our students and teaching colleagues.

As youth scribes in formation, students can sometimes wonder how literacy comes together. How does each piece fit into my learning and also help me gain understanding? To put into practice *all* the elements of literacy, I designed a taxonomy, **A Scribe’s Elements of Literacy**, that is presented here (Figure I.1). Later, I will elaborate on each of these actions and demonstrate them in practice in the secondary language arts classroom in sections I call **The Scribe’s Studio**.

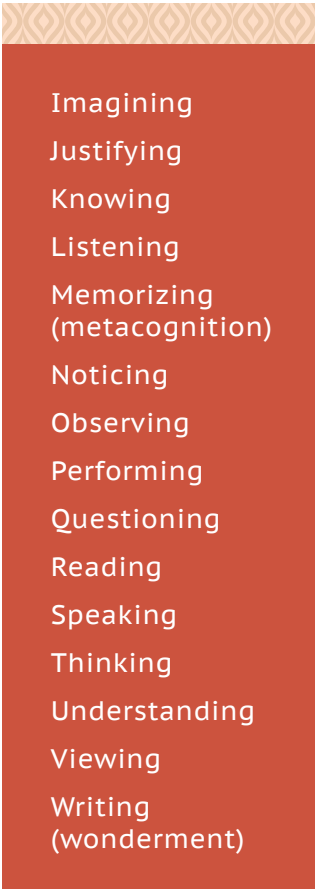


Figure I.1 A Scribe’s Elements of Literacy

Often, my students share how overwhelmed they feel about the social factors and forces in their lives that keep them from being themselves or expressing their full sense of selfhood with their families, among their friends, and at home and work. They tell me that time races rather quickly in their lives, and these achievements seem beyond their grasp. As I listen, I am committed to making the classroom an extension of my students’ lives and to creating connections, possibilities, and hope in the changing and challenging world we face daily. Through a scribal stance, adolescents can counter erasure and invisibility. Such a scribal stance is not easily gained, but it is possible through our teaching of writing for deeper awareness and questioning.

Paulo Freire reminds us that love is part of the dialogue for learning and naming one’s existence. He adds, “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (2000, 89). Freire also values the need for humility to remain open and teachable as professional adults.

Our Journey in This Book

“Writing is a process.” I hear this often, but what does it mean for the student scribes and teacher scribes in a community? We talk about the process, but sometimes we overlook how the process can unfold in various contours, journeys, and junctures. The three **focal areas** to note in the book are as follows: (1) writing as a scribal act; (2) circulation of scribal ideas; and (3) formation of scribal identities. The principles found in the Scribal Identity Theory of Expression and the focal points guide the presentation of concepts, content, and practices.

The five principles appear in the chapters, which are presented as a blend of writing exercises and assignments with writing samples, model sentence stems, scribe-led voices, and literary texts and passages (English and multilingual). In **Chapter 1**, I explain the Scribal Identity Theory of Expression and A Scribe’s Elements of Literacy, which both focus on the youth scribe and writing cultures and structures often underconsidered in schools, academia, and society. We need adolescent students to gain emancipation through the practice of scribal behaviors, and these approaches notice and honor their selfhood for affirmation. A scribal stance advances the idea that erasure and invisibility can be countered through scribal action. **Chapter 2** features the Scribal Identity Theory of Expression in practice and shows that adolescence is a social construct that requires careful examination and relationship-building with our youth scribes. I present ideas on how teachers can honor youth identities through writing inventions and norms. Writing is used to welcome and encourage the entire scribal repertoire of youth, so their repertoires become visible and more relevant through a variety of writing instruction (descriptive, expository, narrative, and persuasive), inside and outside of the school setting. In **Chapter 3**, I consider the cultures of students as sources for scribal histories and action. Specific examples demonstrate the inclusion of *all* our students’ backgrounds, cultures, and realities to create a community of scribes for a variety of audiences. **Chapter 4** features student cultures and portraits from the classroom that cultivate what I call students’ scribehood toward self-affirmation and awareness. **Chapter 5** is about discussing how socially just and equitable practices in the writing classroom are interconnected with civil and human rights

movements. A movement can uplift youth through the intentional inclusion of their scribal repertoires and voices so that they experience democracy in action. In **Chapter 6**, selected literary works are presented that complement the habits of youth scribes. The habits promote the elements of literacy despite mandated curricula that can regiment—and even stifle—students’ joy and pleasure as scribes. **Chapter 7** considers how teachers engage students to write letters, to correspond, with their peers and teachers in the vulnerable scribal act to write, read, and also to be heard, listened to, and understood.

Each chapter will engage readers to practice journaling through the text boxes named **A Scribe Reflects**, which invite interaction with the principles and focal points. The purpose is to invite reflection by readers and also social interaction in support of scribal identities and teaching a love of writing. The feature titled **A Scribe in Action** presents microessays to demystify the scribal identities and lives of students, teachers, and authors in dual or multiple roles. The microessays are by (a) youth scribes speaking about their writing lives and offering *consejos*, or advice; (b) teachers of secondary language arts speaking about their writing practices and publications; and (c) authors of young people’s literature in the classroom as teachers who write and publish for youth. The Scribe’s Studio is introduced to further advance scribal identities in action by both teachers and students.

You will notice that the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) from CAST is embedded in this book to support all our students who participate in special education services, experience neurodiversity, receive learning accommodations, value belonging and caring interactions, and/or identify as emergent bilinguals. In addition, UDL is complemented by multimodal literacies that can transcend learning by gazes, gestures, images, listening, movements, speech, typing, and varied forms of writing. Also embedded in the writings and assignments is Carol S. Dweck’s determination to “understand the kind of mindset that could turn a failure into a gift” (2016, 4). All students *can* learn, and we welcome them into our classrooms daily. Overall, youth scribes must experience a variety of rhetorical situations and writing circumstances that involve academic, creative, technical, and future writing and that are occurring across the country and around the world today.

My purpose is to make scribal identities more visible and to demystify the writing abilities, interests, possibilities, and processes of adolescents. I also wanted to make known their adolescent lives that include struggles and triumphs regardless of their backgrounds, income levels, spoken languages, and residential zip codes. To advance a scribal stance, I recommend inviting students' home languages to complement their scribal identities. Their world languages are interconnected to our teaching of English language arts, since language arts education possesses a fountain and well of cultural knowledge and human imagination in all our world languages for communication. English is one world language among many more used by scribes—then and now.

The world of reading is significant and complements writing. Consider the reimagining of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain as told from Jim's point of view by author Percival Everett in the novel *James*. Jim, a person who is enslaved, writes, "But my interest is in how these marks that I am scratching on this page can mean anything at all. If they can have meaning, then life can have meaning, then I can have meaning" (2024, 55). In Everett's novel, Jim possesses deep learning and understanding—as he did in Twain's novel—that reflect A Scribe's Elements of Literacy, which we now can hear and read in *James*. Note the marks mentioned by Jim that are significant for scribehood, declaring "I am."

Reaching in the Journey

Even in my sleep I find myself reaching out to connect with students. I am recalling what they shared so freely in their digital and nondigital journal writings that often include the challenges, choices, dilemmas, dreams, goals, and joys in their lives. In my dreams, we carry the conversations from our journals and scribe conferences to infinity. Yes, even in my sleep I am listening to them, and then I rehearse what I want to say to them. In *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall observes, "We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories" (2012, xiv). We are mapping so much as scribes, and maybe even as cartographers,

as Sáenz notes through his novel's characters, in the classroom and in our journeys. I want to achieve so much beside the youth scribes I meet; I want to encourage them to persist as scribes who can possess a love of writing today.

In Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, protagonist Esperanza Cordero recommends to us that we "do not forget to reach" (1991, 75). She imagines that is what the energy of trees must be saying to us if we are to pause and notice. Indeed, we can gain so much from Esperanza's words—and also from Sáenz's adolescent characters Aristotle and Dante—if we are to reach beyond ourselves in our scribal and teaching journeys by noticing the labors, literacies, and lives of our students. We must do so with our abilities, hope, and power as scribes in the journey.

A SCRIBE REFLECTS

Every person is a scribe with abilities, interests, and skills. What is your earliest memory of yourself as a scribe or of possessing a scribal identity as described above? How is that memory connected to the present in either a daily practice of your own or with your students?

What do you remember about your adolescence—inside and outside of school?