



School of Liberal Arts

University Writing Center

"Because writers need readers"

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W131 Goal 1: Think like a Writer

When W130 and W131 students write their reflective essays/retrospectives/portfolio writer's statements, many instructors ask them to discuss their achievement of course goals. Some students hit an immediate roadblock at goal #1: "Think like a writer." Sometime their cries are heart-rending: "But I'm not a writer. I just have to take this course!"

Instructors try throughout the semester to convince their students that they are indeed writers, just less experienced ones than William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, or James Joyce. Instructors also usually try to "unpack" this goal for their students. (To understand "unpacking," think of trying to rummage through a suitcase full of clothes and other necessities. You can't find what you want until you throw the jeans onto a chair, toss the socks on the floor, put shirts in the closet, and set the travel iron and shampoo on the bed.) In order to shed further light on the subject, the University Writing Center sought explanation of Goal #1 from a variety of writers. Below are some of their answers to the question, "What does it mean to 'think like a writer'?"

1) *(from a beginning student tutor)*

To think like a writer is **to reflect**:

- to reflect upon ideas and connect them into a cohesive whole (clarify connections),
- to reflect upon ideas, sparking a new tangent (more ideas to consider including),
- to reflect upon ideas and root through all their layers.

2) *(from a beginning student tutor)*

Writers to me are people who take the ideas in their head, be they guided by a professor or just totally random, and express them on paper. It naturally takes an amount of freedom to just let go and write, which I think develops over time and with writing experience. To think like a writer means to not get caught up in the thought that what initially goes on the page is the final say. Writers accept that there will be **many drafts** to their work and do not get tied down by this thought, but embrace it. Writers think about language, emotion, and expression in their words and choose them carefully, because writers are trying to get their point across and convey meaning in what they are saying.

3) *(from a beginning faculty tutor)*

To think like a writer is to think like your reader – to put yourself in the reader's shoes so that you can write what that reader needs to read.

4) *(from an experienced student tutor)*

A writer **collaborates** with other writers and readers through documented facts and experiences, and then further discussion from different viewpoints on selected themes. Writers can shift during **multiple revisions** in a piece.

5) *(from an experienced student tutor)*

"Think like a writer," to me, means that you have considered **audience**, especially in regard to word choice, pace, and possibly format (if these are not specified in the assignment). It also means that you have control over what you are producing. Your work is consistent and well reasoned and clear. Possibly you can demonstrate a process of development and consideration.

6) *(from a W130 writer)*

Think like a writer. Think about **audience**. Think about the subject matter. Think about what kind of piece I want to write. Who am I addressing? What kind of form is this writing? Open or closed form? Where's my thesis statement? Is it a strong thesis statement? Is what I have to talk about boring or interesting? Is there an element of surprise in my piece? Is the element of surprise my thesis statement? Is there enough detail in order for the reader to be interested in reading on?

7) *(from an experienced faculty tutor)*

Thinking like a writer is **questioning** . . . it's paying attention to details . . . to use *Allyn and Bacon's* terminology, it's "wallowing in complexity" . . . it's making decisions about what to write based on your reader's needs and your purpose.

8) *(from an experienced faculty tutor)*

Thinking like a writer means being aware of the "rhetorical situation" or "rhetorical context" – the purpose for which the document is being prepared and the audience for which it is intended. All these involve a writer thinking like a writer in terms of being aware of the **decision-making** that goes into creating a piece of writing – whether an academic essay, a scientific document, a poem, whatever.

9) *(from an experienced faculty tutor)*

Since *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing* makes use (like everyone else) of the rhetorical model, writing gets involved with the notion of **audience**. But that rhetorical model is, at its foundation, a model of speech. Readers don't have an audience in the same way that speakers do, so when speaking of the difference between writers and scientists, purpose and the "how" of communication seems to rest at the core of the differences. For scientists, the clear communication of the structure of the discovery is paramount. Other writing that negotiates the world of ideas – the less concrete notions – needs the development of evidence and the making of connections across time, disciplines, and/or differences (culture, age, nationality, etc.). Both are dependent for their success on **clarity of expression**.

The writer cannot watch the reactions of the reader to see if he or she is "getting it." A writer has to know something of what makes writing work for both reader and writer and implement those skills and ideas. **Making connections** within the writing that show the reader the writer's train of thought becomes essential to getting the reader to the end of the piece. The argument for such connections can span the range from common courtesy to absolute necessity, depending on how a tutor wants to present them or on how much a tutee can take in. Writers – both scientific and otherwise – shape their language for maximum effect. A writer who doesn't risks his or her whole endeavor.

10) *(another comment from #8)*

Yeah! **Writers REALLY need readers** during the drafting process because writers do not get immediate feedback as speakers get from listeners (the eye contact or lack thereof, the body language, the questions, etc.). Writing is harder (for most people anyhow) than speaking . . . writers work "blind."

So, there you have it! Thinking like a writer has many definitions. Writers realize they need feedback to help guide their inevitable revisions. And they know that writing is not magical or a genetic gift that some people have. Instead, writers make lots of decisions, choosing the better of two options here and brainstorming a few other possibilities there. Writers recognize that the success of the project is guided by deliberate choices they make.

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