

Writing Identity: Putting a Stop to Cookie-Cutter Essays

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In this article, Dakota W. Zientek will explore the inner machinations of his mind to find the jack-in-the-box that is his specific writing identity. Comparing his process for writing tweets with writing essays, Zientek examines the amount of work it takes to do something that seems informal, fun, and like it took no work. He analyzes this through CHAT, specifically through production, representation, reception, and socialization.

A Lil' Background About My Writing

Now, before I start, let me get something out of the way: I have *not* mastered the art of writing. Before junior year of high school, the highest grade I earned on a paper was a C+ (it was hanging on my fridge for like three weeks). That being said, once I found my niche for writing, my writing identity, I couldn't get enough. For the sake of not talking about every little thing I write, I will focus on the two main outlets I have for writing: Twitter and essays, or papers, the kind students often write in classes in middle school, high school, and college. On the surface, these couldn't be more different. One is for fun; the other is for a grade. But what unites these genres for me is my writing identity.

According to the ISU Writing Program, writing identity is defined as follows: "you are able to think beyond just acquiring skills and begin to understand how all of your skills (and the skills you haven't yet acquired) change what you can and can't do as a writer." Now, my definition for a writing identity is not only who you are, but who you are as a writer, and how it is a malleable identity, since it changes all of the time in some ways,

but maybe stays the same in others. When I started writing this article, I had a hard time because I felt that writing comes pretty naturally to me. Like in my early drafts, I described my process as taking no work, that I could just think of a sentence and it will come out funny, which is nice and easy. But as I was writing this article, with the ideas just popping out of my brain, I started to find what was popping out was actually describing a process, one that it turns out is kind of elaborate, and while I wouldn't recommend *everyone* use it or anything, I have to tell you, that complex process doesn't *feel* like work because it's part of my writing identity, which I will be exploring in this article.

Disclaimer: if you ever see the initials "DWZ," that will be me being lazy and abbreviating my name. Wanna know why I can do that? Because *I* am the author. See? Having power is pretty fun.

You Know, CHAT! Wait, You Don't?

CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory). So, I know what some of you are thinking: what is CHAT, and why should I care about it? Well, as Angela Sheets writes in her article, *Angela Rides the Bus*, "Activity Theory is an exploration of how people, objects, and ideas work together to carry out objectives. . . . But the 'Cultural' and 'Historical' part talks about how the objects, ideas, and genres we use reflect certain cultural values at a certain point in history" (134). Now, how does this relate to essays and tweets? Very good question, my friends.

Well, there are many ways that CHAT can be used to study how people do and learn things in the world, but the ISU Writing Program's CHAT terms are specifically designed for studying literate activity. There are seven terms, but the ones that I want to focus on are **production, representation, reception, and socialization**. The CHAT term that I want to spend most of the time on is production; I want to do so because, as I started to uncover my writing identity, the production of the writing was what opened my eyes to different conventions of different genres of my writing. Production, when it comes to CHAT, is basically how a piece is created. The production of my tweets and essays is very similar. I usually like to be in a familiar environment when I write *anything*, especially essays. When it comes to tweets, I can do them anywhere, really, since I write them on my phone, but I prefer to be at a desk or some sort of environment that allows me to be able to think without too many distractions. I like to do this because if I get distracted, it is game over; I will not write a quality piece that I am proud of. I am someone that

can be distracted by something as simple as a red pepper flake that fell off of the pasta I was eating earlier.

Additionally, when it comes to production, the character difference that all users of Twitter are allotted makes a big difference. When writing a tweet, you only get 140 characters, but when writing an essay, if I turned in 140 characters, I would probably get kicked out of that class and get used as an example by that professor in every class that followed. But even though the character number in my tweets and essays varies by a lot, the thought process is still the same. I think, “How do I say this without sounding super-duper lame?” Usually, I will just write the first thing that comes to my mind, and then after that I will look for ways to add my informal twist to it. The reason I like to make some humorous breaks in an essay is because if someone is reading a boring, dry essay for too long, I assume they’ll be bored reading the essay and lose interest. I like it when people read my writing and actually *enjoy* it. Having fewer characters in tweets makes it a little bit more difficult sometimes to get my point across, but being versatile is a very important aspect when it comes to writing in general. It makes me learn to get to the point and not ramble nonsense. When I was a little bit younger, I thought all that mattered in a well-written piece was length. I would try to get in these giant sentences with a huge variety of words, but I soon realized that that wasn’t who I was as a writer. I like to speak my mind. That was kind of my first glimpse into my writer identity. I became aware of a writing style that I thought was a convention (writing long, boring sentences) and learned that there was more flexibility. If I get wordy now, it’s for the sake of doing something I think is entertaining, not because I think that’s what “good” writing is.

The next CHAT term that I use when creating all of my written pieces is **representation**. The definition of representation according to Joyce Walker is, “the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it), as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this” (75). Now, if you’re anything like me, you might not completely understand what that means. I think of representation as simply the way a writer starts thinking about the building blocks of their writing. I like to have a humorous/informal

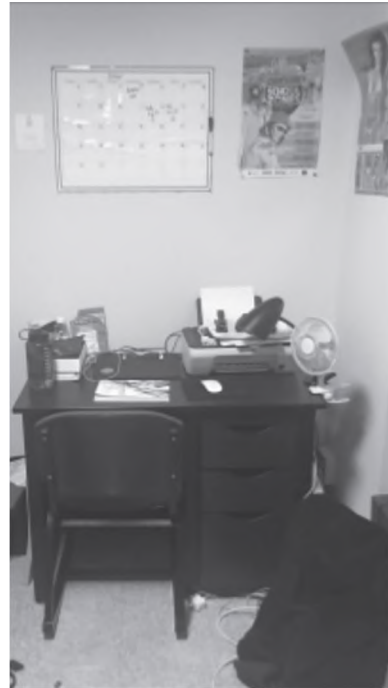


Figure 1: The familiar environment I write in.

tone to infuse into my writing. This lets me come across as a casual and fun, which is why when I started writing this article I had a hard time breaking down my process; I was just focusing on being fun instead of thinking about how I write.

For both essays and tweets, my thought process starts with what I want the piece to be about. That sounds a bit vague, but my process is a top-down process: starting out with the main idea and then inserting finer details around the piece to tie it all together. After that part is done, I think of how to write in the language that I use in everyday life: humor. The last edit I make to a tweet is a glance over to make sure I did not make any silly errors, but my last edit for essays is a little bit different. What I do is have my rubric in one tab and my essay on a different tab. Once I have that, I go through the essay as if I am the one grading the paper. I do this because the rubric is not necessarily on my mind when I write. It doesn't initially factor into my representation of the text. I know, throw me into writer's jail. After I give my piece the a-okay, I tweet or submit the piece of writing that was just completed and hope that I become Twitter famous (that really is a goal of mine . . . seriously).

Then comes the CHAT term **reception**. Reception, in my own words, is how people react to a certain text, although it can also involve things they do with texts or what they use them for. When I write something, I try to think of how I would react if I were the one grading the paper, or the one scrolling down and seeing the tweet. I realize that's a bit biased, but it is my way of proofreading and making sure what I write is what I want it to be. I also do that because I am very prone to doing stupid things in my writing, like saying things that make me sound like I was half-asleep while writing. For example, my roommate is a true friend because he actually has my tweet notifications on. That means he gets a notification every time I tweet something. He is usually my first wave of defense, as he corrects me if I make a boneheaded mistake, which is probably a third of the time. My mistakes usually aren't too major, but having mistakes is not what I want to be known for! If I realize there is a tweet that I submit with some boneheaded mistake, I will try to take action before anyone has liked or retweeted it. If I catch it before then, I will completely delete the tweet and rewrite the tweet before anyone can "flame" me. If you're unsure what "flaming" means, it is when someone "puts you over a flame" with their comments; they expose your flaws and make you look bad. With that, I would say having someone to proofread your work is something that is very important. Luckily, I haven't ever made a critical error in a project that is important because I know my audience has higher expectations, which causes me to be more detail-oriented. Since I can't have my roommate be notified when I send my essay

to a professor, I have to take more time for the “proofread” aspect of my total writing process. This includes me reading the whole essay from start to finish with the rubric next to me, and once I think it is good, I usually send it to a trusted person, usually my mom, to read over it. I have found out over time that when I read something that I write, I will sometimes read it how I *want* it to sound rather than what it *actually* says. This can be a very bad habit to get into, so I recommend reading it out loud. If you do that, you’ll have a greater chance of catching mistakes.

The last CHAT term that I realized informs a lot of my writing is **socialization**, which generally involves all the ways that people influence and are influenced by the texts they interact with. The way I think of this term when I write is that now on Twitter there is a part of the page called “Impressions” that shows how many times people interact with or view your tweets. That has been pretty useful to me since I am someone that always wants to know everything. If I spend the exhausting minute and a half to write a tweet, I want to know who is looking at it! I didn’t just write the tweet for my own enjoyment. There is also an Impressions section that shows how many times my page has been viewed, and seeing the number of impressions I’ve made get close to 10,000 is always a pretty satisfying thing. For example, as I write this, I looked at my Twitter page, DecodeMcBuckets, to see what my impression on my viewers has been. This month, November, I have made 29,478 impressions on people; that is pretty nice to see. The coolest part about that is that it shows what day was the most impression-filled and even the time of day I made the most impressions on people. With this same time frame in mind, I have the most impressions on Fridays and Saturdays. That makes a good amount of sense since I am a freshman in college and usually the most “tweet-worthy” things happen to me on Friday or Saturday. Since I am such an in-depth person, I am going to be analyzing my Twitter page and comments that I have received on past papers to see what actually goes into each aspect of those types of writing and how I was able to find my true inner writing self.



Figure 2: Example Tweet impressions.

Twitter: An Open Notebook for Ideas

When it comes to my Twitter, I have a persona of being a very casual, funny tweeter. This hasn’t always been the case, though. I used to just write “#swag” and call it a day. Now, after I found my identity as a writer, I found my niche. I

will have wrong punctuation, improper spelling, and uncapitalized “I”s; that is just kind of my style. Now, you might be thinking, “doesn’t this contradict what you were saying with your roommate proofreading your tweets to make sure they’re *not* flat out not English?” Well, no. An example of what I mean by having wrong spelling would be to say something like, “da bears are gonna win da superbowl.” Now, if I turned something into my professor like that, it probably wouldn’t be very successful. That is what I mean by my style. If I were to say, “da beasr are going to win da suprebowl”, that is something my roommate would laugh at me for and have me change. I do not do this because I love being a rebellious college freshman, but because I just write what is on my mind and have kind of adopted that style as my own. In terms of reception, it makes the tweets seem like they just pop out of my brain rather than me methodically crafting them/asking my roommate to review them, etc.

Twitter is my place to dump ideas; sometimes it is just nice to empty my brain to let new ideas form. Even though it is something I wouldn’t turn in as part of an essay for a grade, it is still a very important aspect to my writing identity. This is in part because, as a young boy in a small elementary school named Maplewood Elementary, we once had a guest speaker by the name of Dan Gutman. You might know him! He is the author of books like *The Homework Machine*, *Honus and Me*, and the *My Weird School* series. He came into our library, and even though this event went down in the same year of the movie *UP* being played in theaters, I still remember what I took away from that guest speaker. He said if you ever want to be a writer, always keep something to write ideas in. I remembered him talking to me, which caused me to actually reach out to him via Facebook later in life. When I reached out to him, I asked him what his best advice would be for someone trying to get into the field of writing, and he said, “Keep track of every idea you ever have. You never know what idea will turn into a great book or series of books.” I, as you can tell by my explanation of writing all of my ideas down, took that to heart. I have always, except for my fourteen-year-old rebellious stage (don’t ask), taken advice from elders. So, Twitter is both the place where I keep track of my ideas and also put them out into the world. It’s a weird balance of like a private notebook and a published document, which might be part of why I like using the informal persona I’ve cultivated; it allows me to keep it like a dump place but without fear of getting flamed.

Drafts: An Endless Wonderland of Blossoming Thoughts

In Twitter, I take advantage of the “Drafts” function. Drafts is where you can write something down and tweet it later. The reason I like this is because

ever since I was a boy, I have always had a *horrible* memory; it is probably my dad's fault (damn gene pools). Anyway, one of the reasons I use it is simply because it is kind of a Twitter violation for someone not famous to post more than a couple times a day. You get put into Twitter jail or something. The place sucks; trust me.

Another reason I like to use Drafts is because if I feel like an idea is decent, but not as good as it could be, I can just keep it there for a few days to mature into a great idea. So, say I have a decent idea. I don't want my followers thinking I am decent; I want them to think that I'm *the man!* That being said, I will keep the tweet in my Drafts for a few days, and then when I go on Twitter, I look at my Drafts to see if I can add anything to the tweet to make it a ten out of ten. If I cannot, in the Drafts it stays. This is actually a very important lesson that I've learned. I would never want to turn something in that I do not think is a great piece of work to a professor. Those same expectations stay constant in my tweets. This is something that I like to do that I use in my everyday writing. It is a good habit for me to get into in both the genre of Twitter and the genre of essays because it teaches me to make sure to not just be okay with turning in average writing.



Figure 3: My drafts as of now. I can't let you all see my secrets, though, so they're blocked out.

Boring Writing—I Mean Formal Writing

When you think of formal writing, what do you think about? Persuasive essays on whether or not Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a dynamic character? There are many things that could be formal writing, but formal does not always mean boring; it rarely means boring if you get *really* good at writing that genre. It all depends on your writing identity. For me, a major part of my writing identity is that I used to be a suspect of cookie-cutter essays. *What's a cookie-cutter essay, Mr. Zientek?* Ah, great question, imaginary student. A cookie-cutter essay is one that follows a formula of one topic sentence, one piece of evidence, and three sentences of analysis. I was always taught that this was the way to do it and there was no way around it. During this time I absolutely *hated* writing, but that's because I was taught that there is only *one* way to write an essay, and that is the “blah blah blah” method. No, the “blah blah blah” method is not a scientific method that I researched, but that is what I

am going to call it. Remember, I am the author. I make the decisions around here, slick. Anyways, formal writing was what I was talking about, right? Yes, yes. So, if I were to ask you for the first example of a formal writing piece that you can think of, what would it be? I am sure all of you picked a right answer, but did any of you say this article? This, at least to me, is a formal piece of writing; my definition of formal writing is writing that gets graded or published. This article started as a piece that I was going to be graded on by my amazing English professor (brownie points?). It may not sound like a formal piece of writing, but that is because I found a way to make formal writing fun for me. Can you guess how? You (maybe) guessed it: my identity as a writer. Now, formal writing is not *all* fun and games. You cannot just write whatever you want. Your writing has to have some sort of academic structure, but within those confines, you can make it more of *your* writing by finding your writing identity. As you've probably figured out by now, for me, making formal writing fun means including humor, one of the major parts of my writing identity that I used to think wasn't allowed in formal writing—like essays—thanks to the “blah blah blah” method. But when I stopped to actually think about my writing process and my writing identity, I realized that I could bring some of the things I love about Twitter and the ways it allows me to express my writing identity into my formal writing.

I remember a conversation I had with my senior year (high school) English teacher. The conversation was regarding a paper I had to write covering the topic of main themes written about in the book *Kite Runner*. I remember telling him I didn't want to write the paper because I was imagining such a boring paper. He told me that there is almost always a way to make something boring interesting. I slept on that idea and realized that he was absolutely correct. The next day, I went into his class, still recovering from the sleepless night I had before caused by the binge watching of *Chopped* on Netflix. We were talking about the conversation we had the day prior, and I came up with what I thought was a good idea; the idea was that I could write the paper as if I were a news reporter going into the country and time in which the book had taken place. I felt dumb at the time because when I first asked, he didn't really give me an answer. I saw that he was thinking pretty hard, but I couldn't tell if he thought it was a good idea. He told me he was going to think about it and that I should just start getting quotes and stuff so that I wasn't just wasting my time waiting for him to give me the a-okay. Once the class ended, and with my notebook full of a whopping zero quotes for the paper, my teacher called me over and said that he really liked my idea and was making sure I didn't steal it from the Internet. That was the day I started to find my writing identity. The reason I was able to make it fun was because I realized that as long as I meet the requirements for whatever the project was in the class, I could have a lot of freedom. I could cover the

same content and do analysis/research through a different format. No more cookie-cutter essays from me, said I. From that day forward, I never wanted to turn in a piece of writing that was completely lifeless and boring.

Let's Recap, Shall We?

Ah, yes. Fancy seeing you here again, reader. No, I'm just joking. So, the main focus of this article is to see how I, Dakota W. Zientek, found my writing identity and how I was able to make the back-breaking work of writing into a hobby for me. I want to assure you that I am not trying to convert you to Zientekism (that sounds awful—who would want to join that?), but I am trying to teach you that *you* can find and embrace your own writing identity. It doesn't come right away to many people; it took me eighteen years! Life is just one big trial and error; you have to experiment to find out what works and what doesn't work for you. But keep experimenting (or start experimenting)! Just keep on writing, tweeting, note-taking, novel-writing, Facebook-statusing, WHATEVER. See what gets good feedback. But also see what work you like to do and are proud of. As you start to find your writing identity, those two things will (hopefully) come together.

Now that my Oprah Winfrey speech is out of the way, I can finish this article off. What I want to leave you all with is that there is not only one single way of writing one thing. You can, and should, make your writing what *you* want it to say and how you want to say it. But you do need to figure out how to fit those things within the parameters provided, which could be a rubric, or conventions of the genre, or even the rules set out by the people who would want to flame you. For me, finding my writing identity has been an oddly convoluted process, and, as I write it here, I realize there is a lot of work that goes into it, but the important thing is that it didn't *feel* like a lot of work, and the important thing for my persona is that it doesn't *look* like a lot of work.

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The Man, The Myth, The Legend: **Dakota W. Zientek.**