

I would not like writing here or there—I would not like writing just *anywhere*: Exploring the Materiality of Writing Research

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In this article, Jenn Coletta discusses how she developed a writing research identity by becoming more aware of the spaces and places she inhabits. While she has often completed writing assignments on the floor, she did not realize the significance to her learning process until coming to ISU. Coletta unpacks the ways that space can help or hinder our writing, but more importantly, how analyzing our preferences allows us to grow as writing researchers.

“May I sit on the floor?” I asked.

“Of course! We even have a basket of purple yoga mats in the next room if you would like to use one,” replied Illinois State University’s writing program director, Dr. Walker.

It was the Wednesday of what proved to be a very intense, overwhelming, but ultimately productive orientation into ISU’s writing program as a new PhD student. On that particular day, our coordinator gave us about 30 minutes and asked us to map out our teaching plan on a piece of paper. While everyone else eagerly started working, I was uncomfortable. Yes, I was stressed, but I mean *physically* uncomfortable writing at the desk I was sitting at. So, I quickly asked if I could sit on the floor, and to my delight, was not only given permission, but a yoga mat in my favorite color. I moved to a lovely little piece of floor in the corner and began to write. Three things came from this small change: First, I realized that I was the only one who moved, and so I started wondering if my preference for the floor was weird. Second, one of the more senior writing program instructors came by and asked why I was on the floor. I shrugged and said simply, “I always write on the floor. I don’t know why.” She responded:

“Hmm. You should write about that, you know,” and walked away. I thought about that for just a second, but I quickly put it to the back of my mind. After all, I only had 30 minutes to complete a pretty substantial task. And finally, the last thing I realized was that I wrote, and I was productive. And I don’t mean just kind of productive; despite all of the great activities and assignments they gave us during orientation, that was the single most helpful thing I did and it is what still sticks out to me eight weeks later. It was also the only time I worked on the floor that week. In thinking about this more, I realized this was part of what made up my writing research identity.

According to ISU’s Writing Program, **writing research identity** is basically the ways we think of ourselves as writing researchers. This becomes important when we need to **transfer**¹ our writing skills; if we have a strong writing research identity, we know we can conduct research in a bunch of different ways. They also focus on understanding “how your experiences have shaped you as a writer and as a researcher,” as well as reflecting on our attitudes regarding writing and learning. When I was thinking about this, I noticed a gap: they don’t explicitly talk about our physical bodies or our physical spaces. This led me to consider the impact our bodies and the spaces we inhabit have on our identities as writing researchers. This consideration also fits in with writing research identity insofar as it encourages us to “look closely at the writing process and try to understand all that goes into it” (ISU Writing n.p.). Ultimately, I think it is just as important to consider the physical spaces we take up when writing, and so I set out to discover how these spaces can either help or hinder our writing—and how being aware of our individual preferences will influence and help solidify our identities as writers and researchers.

Fun on the Floor

I guess I’ve always enjoyed working on the floor. While I can’t remember exactly when I started doing this regularly (it was *certainly* by the time I started college), I do have very fond memories of picking out my carpet square to sit on in elementary school when we’d gather in a circle at the teacher’s feet for story time. We kids seemed to love it, but I don’t recall any adults ever joining us on the floor. I’m sure at the time we assumed that, at 25, they were just waaay too old to be sitting on the floor with us anyway. Bad backs from old age, probably. If they sat down with us, they probably would never be able to get back up again.

Fast forward to the first time I can remember specifically and habitually researching and writing while on the floor rather than a desk, my bed, Starbucks, or literally anywhere else. It was my junior year of undergrad and I was taking my first upper-level literature class in which I was required

¹Transfer refers to the (super important) process of taking knowledge we learn and applying it in a new situation.

to write my very first literary analysis that needed to include peer-reviewed sources. Up until that point, it was by far the most difficult thing I'd had to write and I was excited . . . but also low-key freaking out. I found myself not only researching that entire project sitting on the floor of my apartment, but for some reason (the professor couldn't find his keys, maybe?), I ended up talking with my professor about corrections—you guessed it—on the floor outside of his office. That project became the first of many, and in fact, in a long roundabout way, is why I ended up at ISU doing this whole PhD thing.

By the time I got to grad school, this was just the norm for me (see Figures 1 and 2). It didn't seem that weird because my friends in my master's institution happened to also be floor-writers. We would regularly get back to the dorms after class and immediately put on our trusty Hollins sweat pants (because you gotta rep your school) and pile into the hallways for writing sessions.

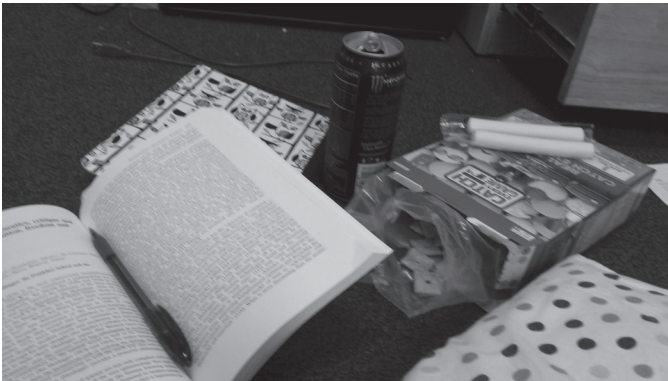


Figure 1: This is what most of grad school looked like for me.



Figure 2: This was toward the end of my final semester of my master's degree. I am standing in the spot where I completed most of the work for my last term paper.

OK, We Get It—You Like to Write on the Floor. So What?

Until I got to ISU, I never thought much about my writing research identity aside from the fact that I considered myself a strictly critical writer. Period, full stop. Even though I engage in numerous different literate activities every day (texting, email, Facebook, and Tumblr just to name a few), I never paid much attention to them. There are many reasons for this, not least of which is how the academy often privileges more traditional forms of writing. I'd never been told that other, nontraditional forms of writing merited attention, so I just blindly continued on my way. On top of that, though, was my **antecedent knowledge**; that is, the things we already know how to do, even if we aren't conscious of having learned how to do them. This hindered me when it came to writing because there were plenty of things, both traditionally "academic" and things more progressive, that I would never be able to explain to someone else.

Someone: "How do you know a comma goes here?"

Me: "Uhh...I just, ya know, kinda...feel it?"

A huge step in learning to embrace your own writing research identity is being aware of yourself! Once I realized that there are myriad ways to be a writer, I was able to be more self-conscious, and look at my own writing and research practices in a new light. In the past, I would have said that I do all of my writing assignments on the floor and would have just left it at that. Now, though, I am able to parse out how my mind and body react to different writing activity systems and genres depending on my environment, location, and/or **ecology**². Understanding that there aren't finite ways to be a writer has allowed me to assess myself and observe some interesting patterns about my writing behavior: When I write critically, or research in order to write an academic paper, I always sit on the floor. Whenever I write creatively, write emails, use social media, read for pleasure, or even read for a class that is not directly connected to writing, however, I sit at my desk or on my couch, or I might lay on my bed; basically, unless it's specifically and traditionally related to academic writing and research, I have little preference for location.

Why Might This Be?

When I started thinking of ideas for a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article, this was certainly not my first idea, mostly because I had no idea where to start. I just assumed I was a little weird, but that it didn't matter much. However, one night in class, the professor offered us the yoga mats to sit on.

²Ecology is a CHAT term that includes the physical and biological forces that exist beyond the text. While this can sometimes refer to weather, it can also mean the environment more generally. So for my purposes, ecology is very important!

I don't think he knew my proclivity for working on the floor, this was likely just a coincidence. Once I excitedly accepted the offer, though, he asked, "Have you ever thought about theorizing this writing practice?" I hadn't. Not really, anyway. But his excitement for the project, along with the support from my classmates, made me think that there might be something here worth exploring. But how would I even start doing something like this? He suggested I look into other studies regarding how our bodies interact with learning, so that's exactly what I did with my good friend Google.

When I begin any research project, I often start the cursory search on Google. This time, I searched all kinds of things, trying to find studies regarding reading, writing, and/or studying in various locations. What I discovered from my cursory search was interesting: there have been many studies done about studying at a desk, especially juxtaposed with working on a bed. Even more articles discuss the need to do away with traditional classrooms that still have 32 desks in single-file rows. Overwhelming, though, was the amount of information—some from credible, scientific studies and some from the sages of wisdom that can only be found via Yahoo Answers—about posture and how your body's position affects your ability to concentrate, learn, and recall knowledge. Very little was said about the floor, except a few articles and the occasional nods to elementary classrooms. What little I did find, though, was fascinating.

Will the Floor Heal Me or Kill Me?

In the midst of my research into how our physical bodies respond to the environments in which we work, I was encouraged to find an article titled "5 Reasons Sitting on the Floor is Good for Your Health." (Yes! My hippie ways are finally paying off.) This article purports that sitting on the floor will contribute the following five things to our lives: naturally improved posture; a connection with how human bodies evolved; improved strength and flexibility; a longer lifespan due to said strength and flexibility; and finally, humility (*Alternative Daily*). That's right, folks. Humility. While this made me laugh a bit, it didn't answer my question. I still wanted to know how our bodies interact with spaces to influence our learning and the development of our identities as writers. To be clear, I didn't realize that I was actively seeking out floors to work on until I started reflecting on my own writing practices—it just felt normal. That said, even though it wasn't very relevant, this article had me feeling pretty strong about my life choices. This thing that I was going to do regardless is actually good for me? That's like realizing that you actually enjoy the taste of broccoli without all the butter and cheese.

However, this excitement was short lived because I soon came across a concept I'd never heard of: active/dynamic sitting vs. stagnant sitting.

According to Wikipedia, active sitting encourages the person seated to move (think rocking chairs, those chairs with the medicine ball in the middle, etc.). Stagnant sitting, on the other hand, is when the seat is “rigid and results in sustained mechanical tissue loading” which is “widely thought to contribute to negative health effects” (n.p.). Admittedly, I don’t know what “sustained mechanical tissue loading” means, but it certainly doesn’t sound good. And since my floor isn’t exactly flexible, I found myself back at square one. Is it good for me, or devastating for my posture, bones, and muscles? Did it really matter? If I knew without a doubt that it was bad for me, would I stop? To be honest, I’m not sure that I would. There is something about writing and researching on the floor that is so deeply engrained in my writing research identity (even if I’m just now ascribing these words to it), that I would certainly not give it up without a fight.

Let’s Talk Writing Research

By reading “The March of the Llamas: Or, How to be an Effective Note-Taker,” in the 7.1 issue of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, I realized that, rather than continuing down the rabbit hole I was in, I needed to focus and find more reputable sources. It can be very easy to get lost in the sheer amount of information that is available to us, particularly online. While it can sometimes be useful to explore these tangents, being a PhD student doesn’t exactly afford you all of the time in the world. So, I quickly decided that I should be looking for what other writing researchers have said about embodiment, location, and environment. Like Nathan Schmidt in “The March of the Llamas,” I turned to Paul Prior and Jody Shipka, two experts in genre studies and activity theory, to start. They explain that “self structuring is achieved through environment structuring” (n.p.). They argue that “literate activity is about nothing less than ways of being in the world” and more specifically, “the ways we not only come to inhabit made-worlds, but constantly make our worlds—the ways we select from, (re)structure, fiddle with, and transform the material and social worlds we inhabit” (n.p.). According to them, the way that we take up space in the world is directly related to our literate activities. Furthermore, how we structure our spaces might very well affect how we structure ourselves. In short, our environment matters! How we position ourselves in our environment matters!

But it was the last part of their quote that I was most taken by: I have a world in front of me that I didn’t have much control in choosing. Yes, I bought my house, but I was limited by budget, distance from campus, the fact that I needed yard space for my dogs, what was on the market at the time I was looking, etc. And yes, I bought most of my furniture and did so because

it was stuff I liked at the time. (And I still do—mostly.) But more deeply and significantly, there are a ton of forces at work, which are out of my control, that put me in my current space—a space that I then exert a modicum of power over by, as Prior and Shipka say, (re)structuring, fiddling with, or transforming it. Basically, the idea is that our own consciousness is tied up in our ability to manipulate our material spaces. Maintaining control over these spaces can look very different depending on our varied preferences, but it is nonetheless significant in the formation of our writing researcher identities. For me, it's the floor. For you, it might be that you need music playing, Netflix in the background, a special pen, or any number of things. The important thing to note is that, according to Ernest Boesch, it's this control that converts *spaces* into meaningful *places* (157, emphasis mine). While this might seem to you like a silly semantic difference, in spatial theory, the difference between space and place is actually kind of important (and cool!): space is typically thought of as abstract, while place is more concrete. Place is the goal, I think, for conducting all sorts of literate activity—we want somewhere real, somewhere we can get our proverbial hands dirty. (And, let's be honest. Where better to do that than on the floor?) My deviation from the norm of sitting at a desk, therefore, is theoretically my way of managing and creating my identity through a personalized, important, and (hopefully) productive place.

On a related note, Prior and Shipka also discuss Environment Selecting and Structuring Practices, or ESSPs. As I mentioned above, structuring your environment can help you structure yourself, but Prior and Shipka actually go on to say that these ESSPs are “the ways writers tune their environments and get in tune with them” (n.p.). This all goes into the different literate activities in which we each participate daily. I like to think of it as a feedback loop: my writing environment affects me *and* I affect my writing environment. And this happens largely because writing is a material activity and I am a material person. (Think “real”/ “tangible” here, not Madonna.) All of these real-life things act on and impact other real-life things, and we all interact with different real-life things differently depending on our real-life perspectives. And, if your head is spinning, let's just boil it down to a common quote from YouTube personality Hank Green: “All simplicity is a lie!” Things are complicated and messy, but I think it's a pretty beautiful thing when we take something that so many people blow off as meaningless and realize that maybe this is worth looking into after all.

Let's Wrap This Up

Vera John-Steiner posits that “sustained, productive work requires more than mind for sheltering thought. It requires a well-organized and well-

selected workspace” (73–74). Through my investigation of my own writing research practices, I have realized that the way I select and structure my workspace is not only unique, but vital to the construction of my writing research identity. Prior and Shipka say that these choices can either “promote or impede our actions,” so we should take care to choose wisely. For me, the choice is clear: sitting at a desk, on a bed, or on a couch impedes my action as a writer. I become distracted, uncomfortable, or sometimes fall asleep. On the other hand, my preferred floor location promotes productivity. Even though I’m not sure exactly when or why I started this habit, at this point, I have imposed meaning onto the floor as both a productive, abstract space and concrete, controlled place—when I sit down with my books and/or laptop, my consciousness somehow understands that it’s time to get busy.

If you’ve made it this far, I want to reiterate something I said earlier: you don’t have to replicate my writing research environment. Rather, I hope this encourages you to pay attention to the places that you inhabit. Do you have a consistent spot to conduct writing—specific kinds of writing, or all kinds of writing? What about research? Does this spot promote or inhibit your activity? Remember that there are innumerable ways to exist in and change your materiality and even more ways to be a writer. The key to being a good writing researcher and establishing a solid identity is being self-aware—aware of not only your writing space, but everything about your writing process.

P.S. – A Few Pitfalls

I want to quickly give you a few warnings and/or tips, one writing researcher to another:

1. When I was in undergrad, I developed a slight back problem which prevents me from lying on the floor on my back. As I mentioned earlier, it probably wouldn’t have stopped me from working on the floor unless it was extreme. Luckily it wasn’t, but it became a factor nonetheless. I mention this only to say that whatever your preferred writing environment is, make sure you are keeping yourself healthy and comfortable.
2. If you’re going to be on the floor, take this opportunity to do some stretches and mini-yoga sessions! Be well, friends.
3. One final caution—if you work on the floor and have pets, this could be your fate (Figures 3 and 4):



Figures 3 and 4: My baby, Harper, taking over my work space.

She's such an adorable, adorable spot thief!

Also, sometimes she just comes over and stands on me. And other times she and my other pup wrestle on top of me. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Works Cited

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Jenn Coletta is a PhD student at Illinois State University focusing on gender, sexuality, and trauma in children's literature. In her spare time, she does slam poetry and plays with her two perfect pups, Harper and Piper—often after they've plopped down on top of her books, which are spread out all over the floor.