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Coding the Common Core: What's Missing from the English Language Arts Standards for Writing

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/ Coding the Common Core/ What’s Missing from the English Language Arts Standards for Writing

by

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Abstract

Since its release in June 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been adopted by more than 40 states. Created by a team led by curriculum specialist Susan Pimentel and College Board president David Coleman, the standards establish benchmarks for what students should learn at specific grade levels. In this project, I examine closely the Core’s writing standards, analyzing the writing values it emphasizes at Grades K, 5, 8, and 11/12. Generally, the CCSS has been lauded for its “Anchor Standards for Writing,” which focus on the production of narrative, informational, and argumentative texts as a broad requirement. Yet ultimately the grade-specific standards prioritize the last requirement, as they expect students to produce well-defended, logical, and formal writing at the high school level. In concert with Common Core critics such as Leslie Burns and Anthony Esolen, among others, this project explores the tensions that exist within the writing standards, analyzing them along with examples of student writing provided in the CCSS’s comprehensive “Appendix C: Samples of Student Writing.”

Unlike Burns and Esolen, whose critiques of the CCSS focus only on what they believe to be the standards’ flaws, I strive for a more balanced approach, noting how the CCSS

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1 Burns claims that the CCSS’s writing standards “privilege a traditional and corporate-friendly lingua franca rather than preparing students for what will be a constantly shifting future society where in the elements of college and career readiness are difficult to predict at best” (qtd. in Polikoff 62).

2 Esolen claims that the CCSS advocates for writing “by formula,” which he believes enables writing that is “dishonest and keeps company with ruffians and fools: vagueness, muddle, ostentation, self-promotion and concealment” (Esolen).
could better prepare students for college or professional writing by expanding on the qualities and components of writing it currently values.

In this project, I conduct a qualitative data analysis of the CCSS, which reveals that the current standards value personal and collaborative writing in Grades K-5, but then ultimately reduce the writing process to an impersonal, formulaic assemblage of practical information by Grades 11/12. Building on this analysis, I rely on Peter Elbow, Anne Lamott, and Judd Apatow – three writers from the discourses of academic research, fiction, and comedy, respectively – as models of working writers who offer three different perspectives on the relevance of personal writing to their professional work. These writers, along with the previously mentioned qualitative data analysis, provide a rationale for this project’s revisions to the writing standards. The revisions, which address the lack of audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, reflection, and collaboration in the standards for Grades 6-12, call on the CCSS to emphasize all three rhetorical appeals, to prepare students for the kinds of college and professional-level writing that aren’t valued by standardized tests like the SATs or ACTs, and to realize the potential of multimodal technologies for collaborative writing. Ultimately, I argue that if the Common Core were to adopt the revisions proposed in this project, then students would be encouraged to discover the value of writing beyond the academic experience, and would thus more readily see themselves as writers, not just student writers.
CODING THE COMMON CORE: WHAT'S MISSING FROM THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS FOR WRITING

A THESIS
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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Chapter One: Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Popularized in U.S. classrooms during the early twentieth century after cultural changes such as a preference for a portrayal of bourgeois life using everyday language and a shift away from divine knowledge towards individual consciousness, personal writing has had a presence in discussions of academic writing for about a century (Spigelman 69). Yet today personal or expressive writing, as it’s sometimes called, appears to be out of fashion in schools. It should also be noted that a pedagogical shift away from expressive writing isn’t a new development, either. Timothy Shanahan notes that a pendulum-like fluctuation occurred first in the 1960s, with James Moffett’s call for “idea writing,” which allowed students to explore their own ideas in diaries or journals (496), marking an apex for personal writing. Today, we are in the other extreme, as Shanahan notes:

If in the 1960s students had little opportunity to explore their personal feelings and to celebrate themselves through their writing, now they have little opportunity for anything more. A careful analysis of the Common Core standards suggests that they seek not so much to redress that imbalance as to reverse it. The emphasis of these standards is definitely on public writing – the writing of the academy and the workplace – rather than on the more personal or private forms that have dominated writing lessons in recent times. (471)

Building on Shanahan’s observations, this project analyzes the current Common Core writing standards in light of the dominant view within writing studies that a balanced emphasis on public and private writing allows students to understand how and why they
write. To narrow the scope of this broad provision, I explore how writing can be considered a way of seeking truth not only about a writer’s subject, but also about the writer’s identity as both a private and a public person. Specifically, I investigate whether minimizing what Peter Elbow calls the author’s “real voice” misses an opportunity for the CCSS to invite students to consider writing as a way to explore their own personal values as individuals and as members of the human community at large.

New-Rhetorician James Berlin claims that writing teachers don’t just “[offer] training in a useful technical skill that is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies of other areas, [they teach] a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it” (776). This idea invites us to see that writers produce texts that shape the world around them by drawing from their interactions with language, reality, and audience. For Berlin, teaching only technical skill is a futile endeavor because it comes with the risk of producing passive writers who don’t approach the act of writing with any kind of exigency. In this way, writing ultimately becomes a tool for uncovering an existing truth, rather than a means through which truth is generated. But technical skill seems to be a priority for the CCSS, which, according to its website, aims to provide “general, cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that must be met for students to be prepared to enter college and workforce training programs ready to succeed.”

Although the Core subjects students as early as kindergarten to a system that values fact-based and argumentative writing over self-expression, it should be noted that the writing standards for K-5 do acknowledge the importance of opinion. The first kindergarten-level criteria, for example, requires that students “Use a combination of

3 "In The New Rhetoric the message arises out of the interaction of the writer, language, reality, and the audience. Truths are operative only within a given universe of discourse, and this universe is shaped by all of these elements, including the audience” (Berlin 775).
drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the
topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference
about the topic or book” (ELA-Literacy.W.K.1). But at Grade 6, the CCSS replaces the
connection between writing and opinion with a connection between writing and forming
a thesis statement, asking students to “Write arguments to support claims with clear
reasons and relevant evidence” (ELA-Literacy.W.6.1). In comparing the development of
the first writing standard across grade levels, we see how the CCSS values opinion-based
writing only as an initial step towards making an argument based on factual evidence.
That is, the opinion-based writing that students do from kindergarten to the fifth grade is
less about self-expression, and more about helping them to reason, perceive, compare,
and organize facts in a way that will help them to conform their writing and writing voice
to the standards valued by the Core.

Berlin, who notes that expressive pedagogy places the author at the center of the
interaction between writer, audience, message, and language, invites us to consider
authorial presence – or what Elbow might call “voice” – even in research-based writing.
Berlin writes: “Truth is dynamic and dialectical, the result of a process involving the
interaction of opposing elements. It is a relation that is created, not pre-existent and
waiting to be discovered” (774). This understanding of a writer’s role in molding a
perception of reality not only helps us to accept the idea that the writing process
heightens our learning experience about our subject matter and about ourselves, but also
allows us to consider the idea that an author can utilize his or her voice as a tool for truth
seeking in a collaborative learning space. In other words, voice allows writers to
construct meaning through maintaining a sense of awareness of themselves in distinction
from or in agreement with others, a notion that is explored further in Chapter Three. Berlin’s take on expressivism encourages students to put forth their own conclusions with support from their peers. This pedagogical approach aligns with Elbow, who values both peer review and the role of the teacher as a coach who functions as an ally by “role-play[ing] the enemy in a supportive setting” (“Embracing Contraries” 63). This idea is at odds with some scholars within the field of writing studies such as David Bartholomae, for example, who argues that expressive writing “makes [students] suckers and...powerless, at least to the degree that it makes them blind to tradition, power and authority as they are present in language and culture” (“A Reply” 128).

But in considering the Common Core’s writing standards, it’s undeniable that subjecting students to a relentless focus on argumentation as represented in the current standards, particularly in Grades 6-12, also suckers and disempowers them. That is, the CCSS misleads students into believing that successful writers are shaped or restrained by academic discourse, rather than by the writer’s own interest in using language and a preferred style to construct meaning. Whereas Bartholomae insists that “the power and authority to determine the correctness (or at least the properly ‘academic’ qualities) of a student’s writing reside solely with the instructor” (Boyd 336), Elbow and Berlin seem to value an educational system in which teachers and students share power and authority by working together to learn about the world within and beyond the classroom walls. And this project proposes that the CCSS can be part of this educational system if it extends throughout all the grade levels the dialectic process that it seems to value only from K-5.

To get a sense of the writing trajectory that the Core advocates for across the grade levels, in Chapter Three I analyze the writing standards using qualitative coding
methods forwarded by Johnny Saldana in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. The analysis, which identifies the values that the Core believes will lead to successful college and professional writing, shows how the CCSS ultimately encourages writing to be diminished to a mechanical and solitary process. For example, the Grades 11/12 standards, which emphasize writing qualities like structure, evidence, and a formal style, seem to focus on preparing students to write the kinds of essays valued by standardized tests like the SAT or ACT — a notion discussed more fully in Chapter Three. It should be noted, however, that the Core supports writing as a continuous process because, even at Grades 11/12, the standards do encourage students to “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5). Yet as noted previously, this standard stresses the importance of peer-review in the early grade levels, whereas by Grades 11/12, it presents writing as a solitary act.

Thus, from the perspective of better preparing students for college, professional and adult writing, it wouldn’t be necessary to overhaul the standards completely because some of the elements of personal writing such as opinion, self-reflection, and personal experience, are already accounted for. Based on the standards already discussed, it’s evident that the CCSS emphasizes the values of self-expression and collaboration as criteria for good writing early on in a student’s education, but then those values are minimized in later grade levels. Ultimately, the effort to understand the CCSS’s shift away from personal writing and the value of collaboration will undoubtedly give way to more questions, which this thesis attempts to answer. Most centrally, I want to ask the
following questions: What would it mean for students to value personal writing and collaboration in middle school, at the very level that the Core de-emphasizes personal writing and collaboration, and expects students to produce strong argument-based texts? What are the implications of the CCSS’s construction of personal writing as only a child’s task? And what is the role of personal writing in adult lives? To answer these questions, this project relies on Peter Elbow, Anne Lamott, and Judd Apatow – three writers from the disciplines of academic research, fiction, and comedy, respectively – as models who offer three different perspectives on the role of personal writing in their work as writers and thinkers. What these three writers teach us about the importance of personal writing provide a foundation on which I argue for components and qualities of writing that build on the Core’s K-5 requirements, such as “drawing, dictating, and writing” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.K.1), which are all skills necessary for true self expression.

In analyzing Elbow’s instructional writing books such as *Writing Without Teachers* as journal entries detailing his own shortcomings as a writer, we see how Elbow expresses his identity as a failed writer to reshape writing pedagogy and become a leader in the field of writing studies. Elbow writes: “My first message [in *Writing Without Teachers*] was a distillation of all those notes about my writing. It was a kind of declaration of independence in writing: independence from care, control, planning, order, steering, trying to get it right, trying to get it good” (xvii). Though relinquishing control, Elbow gained access to his true voice, which became a space of invention, where he drew from and made meaning out of personal experiences and observations before emerging as a renowned scholar. Undoubtedly, students’ writing can only benefit from implementing
what they learn in the opinion-based writing they practice in grade school in tandem with the objective research that the CCSS calls for in Grades 11/12. Moreover, analyzing the standards in light of Elbow’s theoretical approach to writing studies, which centers not only on self-expression, but also on a desire to write in a real collaborative environment, allows us to see how self-expression can lead to social-expression.

To forward the Elbowian concept of writing as discovering one’s true self in relation to others, I examine Anne Lamott’s writing advice in *Bird by Bird* to see how external and internal factors come together in the art of writing as a way to discover truth. At the start of the first chapter, Lamott writes: “The very first thing I tell my new students on the first day of a workshop is that good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are” (3). To understand herself, Lamott looks to the past and to her relationships with other people. In *Traveling Mercies*, for example, she recalls: “I was raised by my parents to believe that you had a moral obligation to try to save the world. You sent money to the Red Cross, you registered people to vote, you marched in rallies, stood in vigils, picked up litter” (5). Despite being raised by atheist parents, Lamott becomes a Christian and identifies herself as a Christian writer. When considering Lamott’s faith, it’s important to note Christianity’s two greatest commandments: love of God and love of neighbor – the latter of which Lamott clearly identifies with. As *Christianity Today* columnist Agnieszka Tennant notes, “To be sure, Lamott is a hard-core liberal…. Yet, deeper within her than her loud liberalism is a reality that has won her many evangelical readers: a zany ardor for Jesus” (Tennant). In other words, Lamott is interested in the historical man and philosopher Jesus, rather than the theological Christ. And so I argue that Lamott, who is more concerned with saving the
human spirit rather than the salvation of the soul, calls our attention to the well being of others, ultimately positing writing as the tool for this process. She fuses writing with morality because, together, they become social survival mechanisms that seek truth. That is to say, she believes that Jesus embodies truth because his teachings align with what she learned from her parents regarding the importance of paying attention to others as a way to do moral good.

To build further on Lamott’s thesis that writing is a way to pay attention to others, I examine truth-seeking and self-discovery in the concepts forwarded in Judd Apatow’s *Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life (and Comedy)*, a collection of interviews with comedians. In a conversation with Garry Shandling, Apatow notes the importance of “getting to the emotional core or the truth of each character” in screenwriting, noting that comedy is essentially about “truth and revealing yourself” (85). This idea of simply revealing the truth can be seen as kind of freewriting, a practice that Elbow and other expressive theorists advocate for, which allows authors to explore their stream of consciousness without being hindered by an audience. This isn’t to say, however, that comedy writing is all about just saying what comes to mind. As Dmitri Nikulin notes: “Not just anything goes in comedy. It uses a wide variety of means and devices to promote human well-being. Yet comedy avoids outright falsity. Nonetheless, it often tells and shows the truth by withdrawing or suspending it…” (89). In other words, comedy writing stems from a logical organization of language grounded in actual lived experiences and relationships with other people, which as discussed earlier, is missing from the Common Core.
Through this study of Elbow, Lamott, and Apatow’s case for expressive writing, in this thesis I examine the CCSS and make a case for revision of the writing standards at the four levels where major shifts in the writing process occur: Grades K, 5, 8, and 11/12. Because the theoretical thread connecting these three writers is the notion that self-expression leads to social-expression, my proposed revisions to the CCSS focus on a student’s ability to argue effectively not only through traditional research methods, but also through the development of rhetorical strategies from personal experiences and self-reflection. This project’s purpose isn’t to persuade leaders of the Core to re-write the standards, but to demonstrate how students subjected to the current CCSS are led to believe that good writing manifests itself only in the form of a traditional academic research paper – a one-dimensional and exclusive form of expression.
Chapter Two: Three Models for Personal Writing

1. Peter Elbow, the Non-Scholarly Academic

Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers*, the author’s seminal work, is a composition studies standard for proposing the “teacherless writing class” based on the idea that the writer in every person is released when he or she unlocks his or her own thoughts. At the time of its publication, Elbow’s book called for innovative process-based teaching methods such as freewriting and peer review. In what follows, I read *Writing without Teachers* as personal journal entries about the author’s struggles with writing. The passages examined in this chapter, which focus on Elbow’s encounters with academic discourse, provide support for this project’s call for the CCSS to encourage students to consider personal experience as a credible resource for academic writing, regardless of the writer’s age. Elbow’s struggles and eventual success in the field of writing studies help us to see that the Common Core can encourage students to use their personal struggles with academic writing as a conduit for meaning making. If personal writing empowered Elbow to hear his own voice and to see himself as a writer after years of seeing himself as a non-writer, then personal writing has value for the many students who don’t consider themselves as writers because the academy has suppressed their voice, teaching them that the person and his or her inquiries and questions have no place in academic writing.

When Elbow introduces the concept of freewriting in *Writing without Teachers*, he shares some of his own freewriting from previous projects. In one example he writes: “I just realized why I’m going crazy. Why I’m starting and stopping in despair. Over and over again. It’s so terrible. Finally realize what I’m feeling. I can’t stand writing when I
don't know what I'm writing about! It feels so insecure. Such a mess…” (31). In this display of anxiety about an emerging project, Elbow shows himself as susceptible to the same hindering forces that his readers might be facing. By examining these kinds of instances in *Writing without Teachers*, I argue that Elbow uses his own writing struggles not only to invite his readers to understand their own writing processes, but also to push his readers to pay attention to the struggles of other writers. Despite his overt emphasis on self-expression, Elbow is also interested in how voice is realized and more fully understood in the context of social interaction.

The journal aspect of the book allows us to see Elbow pouring forth his identity as a struggling writer in an attempt to establish a sense of community with emerging writers outside the context of a classroom. In *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow recalls his experience working on *Writing without Teachers*, saying, “When I wrote [the book], I certainly was an academic, but [the book] didn’t feel academic or theoretical – to me or to readers. I was not writing as an academic but rather as a writer and a teacher” (xv). Distancing himself from academic discourse, Elbow portrays himself as an authority figure who is also a peer, and an academic outsider who is accessible, sympathetic, and practical. At times, the book reads almost like a confessional in which Elbow reflects on his own difficulty with writing to position himself on the same level as his struggling reader. In this instance, Elbow shares about feeling like a “total failure” during his first experience as a graduate student:

I felt wounded and tired of school…Yet ever earnest, I had set my mind on getting a Ph.D. to become a college professor, so I started in at Harvard, still in English, despite my misgivings. People had advised me,
"Just get the Ph.D. out of the way!" I barely managed to write my first-semester papers, and they were judged unsatisfactory, and I knew things wouldn’t get better. I quit in my second semester before they kicked me out. I felt like a total failure. I was having trouble functioning. I never wanted to have anything to do with books or the academy again. (Writing without xiv)

In this critique of himself as a student, Elbow not only indicates the tension between academic and personal writing, but also suggests that the academy bears some responsibility for making the learning process too arduous for him and students like him. Besides showing the author’s frustration with academic discourse, this passage also captures Elbow presenting himself as a vulnerable writer who is honest with himself and with his readers. These personal entries allow Elbow to use vulnerability as a pedagogical tool that enables him to teach struggling writers as a peer, rather than as an authority figure.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Elbow considers the writing process a shared experience that is optimized by feedback centered on the writer’s performance, goals, and expectations. It should be noted that Elbow dedicates plenty of time arguing for non-intrusive feedback, which, based on his freewriting, seems to be a manifestation of his experiences with critical teachers who didn't nurture his voice or help him develop his individual, personal point of view. One peer review activity that Elbow forwards, for example, is “sayback,” which is “an exercise in which a student listens to another student read a passage; then the listener ‘says back’ what she or he has heard” (qtd. in Holt 388). An exercise focused on mirroring the writer, as opposed to redirecting the writer,
“sayback” emphasizes feedback that belies Elbow’s concern about the negative elements of the writing process as a social experience. That is, Elbow seems to be concerned about social critics who have too loud a voice. Indeed, many of the writing techniques that Elbow argues for – re-reading, re-writing, re-thinking – are often done alone, nurturing self-reflection and trust in one’s own capacity for judgment and revision.

Yet by sharing examples of his moments of introspection in *Writing without Teachers*, Elbow broadens our understanding of what it means to be alone during the writing process. Sharing his introspective freewriting, Elbow does not limit introspection to a solitary action, but expands it by contextualizing his voice in relation to others – a notion explored by sociological researchers such as Carolyn Ellis, who argues for “an emotional sociology that describes, embodies, and interprets lived emotional experience” fostered by self-introspection and interactive introspection (123). Ellis writes:

> Introspection as a social process is active thinking about one’s thoughts and feelings...it emerges from social interaction, and occurs in response to bodily sensations, mental processes, and external stimuli as well as affecting these same processes. It is not just listening to a lone voice arising in one's head; usually, it consists of interacting voices, which are products of social forces and roles. As such, it is a valuable process for sociological research. In self-introspection, the researcher makes a conscious effort to be aware of awareness (meta-awareness), to examine self and feelings, and to record systematically self-reflections and their apparent links to social situations and structural constraints. (129)
Ellis's call for "an emotional sociology that describes, embodies, and interprets lived emotional experience" (123) invites us to notice the reciprocal relationship between human emotion and social cohesion. That is, being in touch with our own emotions, which are stirred, suppressed, or sustained by our interactions with other people, enables us to see the act of introspection as a way to understand those around us. Introspection helps us to translate our own understanding of ourselves into a way of understanding of others, which ultimately makes us better suited for knowing how our strengths make up for somebody else's weaknesses, and vice versa.

From reading Ellis together with Elbow, I am persuaded of the importance of recognizing that people change over time as something to account for in a document that is as important to the development of writing as the Common Core's writing standards. That is to say, the standards ought to reflect the fact that students' emotions and relationships become more complex as they grow older and progress through grade levels. Because students are expected to seek the advice of their parents and peers in the K-5 standards, for example, the de-emphasis of peer review as an expectation by the time a student reaches high school indicates the authors of the Core's belief that as students grow older, the value of personal input and exchange of ideas through feedback in the writing process aren't as relevant to writing.

Echoing Ellis, Elbow recognizes the role that emotions play in the process of self-discovery. Rejecting the defeatist argument that the academic learning environment isn't for everybody, Elbow offers struggling writers an alternative to quitting: to discover the kind of writing that best suits their interest, purpose, personality, or style. The process of self-discovery was affected by conflict for Elbow because, while he disliked being a
student, he enjoyed teaching (*Writing without* xiv). Elbow shares about how he overcame the pressures that academic discourse put on him as a teacher who once struggled with the writing:

> My difficulties in writing, my years as an illiterate English teacher, and a recent habit of trying to keep a stream of consciousness diary whenever life in general got to be too much for me – all combined to make me notice what was happening as I tried to write. I kept a kind of almost-diary. There were two main themes – what I called “stuckpoints” and “breakthroughs.” Stuckpoints were when I couldn’t get anything written at all no matter how hard I tried: out of pure desperation and rage I would finally stop trying to write the thing and take a fresh sheet of paper and simply try to collect evidence: babble everything I felt, when it started, and what kind of writing and mood and weather had been going on. (*Writing without* 17)

As a scholar who ultimately overcame the “stuckpoints,” the once “illiterate English teacher” highlights the reality that school-based writing isn’t necessarily the standard of successful writing. Struggling with academic discourse, Elbow reached into his own consciousness in an attempt to stabilize his emotions and his frustrations before pushing forward with the kind of scholarly work he wished to pursue. In this honest display of his own reactions to personal writing struggles, Elbow emphasizes the importance of reflecting on the writing process on an emotional level in order for writers to see what they need “breakthroughs” from. In this particular instance, personal reflection and freewriting led to a bridging of emotions – from “pure desperation and rage” to “babbl[ing] everything [he] felt” – that led Elbow towards what he actually wanted to
say. This experience enabled Elbow, and in turn, his readers, to see how emotions can serve as both a motivational system and a tool of discovery. Elbow’s particular emphasis on emotion in the writing process elevates personal writing’s role in shaping not only what students prefer to write about, but also how they conceptualize their personal — and likely more emotional — writing against their school-based writing.

By de-emphasizing personal writing from Grades 6-12, the Common Core doesn’t account for the ways in which personal opinions can enhance an argument’s ethos. Whereas persuasion requires writers to convince their readers to agree with an opinion, argumentation requires a formal presentation of views that are supported by credible resources for the reader to consider. Thus, one of the goals of Chapter Four’s revisions to the standards is to help students realize that their own experiences, relationships, and preferences can be credible resources for academic writing. The following section turns to novelist and writing instructor Anne Lamott as another example of a writer who relies on personal experience as a source of inspiration. Similar to the way Elbow portrays himself as a vulnerable writer in his mini journal entries in *Writing without Teachers*, Lamott exemplifies how humility in writing can empower writers to respond to the needs of the world beyond the classroom setting. In addition, Lamott draws from her emotions, using them as an orienting mechanism that enables her to find meaning in her relationships with her loved ones and strangers alike. Ultimately, my analysis shows how Lamott’s writing process centers on breaking down barriers between herself and others to achieve self-actualization, as opposed to Elbowian self-discovery.
2. Anne Lamott, the Moral Fiction Writer

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott claims: “The core, ethical concepts in which you most passionately believe are the language in which you are writing...Telling these truths is your job” (103). In this way, anything that a writer believes in passionately becomes truth projected through expressive writing. Lamott advises her students: “To be a good writer, you not only have to write a great deal, but you have to care” (107). Embracing Christianity’s practical and secular concepts allows Lamott to value human interconnections without needing to accept any kind of dogmatic truth.4 Throughout the book, Lamott writes about the connection between her desire to help others by sharing her personal writing experiences not only to help other writers with their craft, but also to pass on her legacy and the legacy of those she cares for. When her father was diagnosed with cancer, for example, Lamott wanted to write short stories about her father to memorialize him. She writes: “My father told me to pay attention and to take notes. ‘Tell your version,’ he said ‘and I am going to tell mine’” (xxiv). In a later chapter, Lamott notes that she draws from writing’s healing power, saying: “Writing is about filling up...when you are empty, letting images and ideas and smells run down like water – just as writing is also about dealing with the emptiness” (171). This issue becomes even more apparent when Lamott rushes to compile journal entries about her dying friend Pammy, while Pammy still had the mental capacity to read. Whereas Lamott was able to get her father’s approval for the stories, Lamott doesn’t indicate whether she was able to get Pammy’s approval. She writes: “Pammy knew there was something that was going to

4 Although it’s evident that Lamott’s Christian faith plays an integral role in her writing process, it’s worth noting that an internet search of Lamott’s name yields many conservative Christian bloggers and forum posters who consider the author a hypocrite for using religion as a way to promote Christian values without any spiritual implications.
exist on paper after she was gone, something that was going to be, in a certain way, part of her immortality” (188).

But to think of Lamott as a self-serving author, who combines personal writing with Christian morals to create a platform for success, diminishes the ways in which Lamott sees her own writing as an extension of those she loves and as a way to cope with the harsh reality of death. In *Signifying Pain*, Judith Harris argues that personal writing is “a means of creating a stable identity and regaining ego strength lost in crisis or infirmity” (xv). Specifically, Harris posits confessional writing as a healing tool that encourages readers and writers not to eliminate painful experiences from their consciousness, but to embrace and grow from such experiences. Discussing Alice Hoffman’s essay about the day the novelist was diagnosed with cancer, Harris writes:

> Writing through and about distress becomes a kind of moral conduct, a sensibility and approach to literary act. Such writing about personal experiences translates the physical world into the world of language where there is interplay between disorder and order, wounding and repair. Gradually, fiction and reality can become tangential realms braided together by the sparsest of translucent threads. This brings writer and life into some state of equilibrium in which life, even divested of hope, can be sustained by the art that has always informed, if not consecrated life. (8)

Writing a personal essay about a personal crisis takes Hoffman away from reality, or a world where she cannot fully control the outcome of her illness, to the world of language, where she has more control. As Harris notes, “When tragedy shifts to herself, she is forced to examine herself to the core...Asking herself who she is (‘Who was I at the
bottom of my soul, beneath blood, skin and bones?’), [Hoffman] can reply only, ‘More than anything, I was a writer.’ As a writer, she can transform the facts of her life into the life of her fiction” (3). Harris’s thoughts on Hoffman’s essay encourage us to acknowledge that the healing power of personal writing lies in self-reflection, which empowers the writer to transform painful and fearful experiences into moments of clarity. Thus, similar to the way that writing sustains Hoffman’s life during her battle with cancer, Anne Lamott copes with the impending losses of her father and her friend Pammy by writing down her memories of them. Likewise, as discussed in the previous section, Peter Elbow overcame his struggles with academic discourse through self-reflective freewriting exercises, which enabled him to discover the kind of writing that best suited his interests, purpose, personality, and style.

Just as Elbow publishes samples of his freewriting in *Writing without Teachers*, Lamott’s memories about her father and Pammy are meant for sharing. Although she writes these stories alone, Lamott makes clear that writing is not ultimately a solitary process. Lamott notes: “Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake their heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored” (237). The myth that writers work in isolation implies that writers are at work only in the literal act of writing, which undermines the influence that their life experiences have on their writing. If we accept the notion that art imitates and sustains life, then life constitutes much more than simply being in a room, typing on a keyboard. Thus, because the Common Core ultimately advocates for the kind of depersonalized, non-social writing valued by standardized tests,
a notion explored more fully in the following chapters, it limits students’ understanding of writing as an artistic process that takes place over time. As seen in the next chapter, by Grades 11/12, the CCSS emphasizes writing’s technical elements like sentence structure and formatting over expressive qualities like truth-seeking and vulnerability.

Keeping in mind the goal of deliberating working against the myth that writers work in isolation, I turn to writing with technology as one strategy to think about when proposing revisions to the Common Core’s writing standards, despite the fact that writing socially can happen without these newer technologies. Currently, the Core’s “Anchor Standards for Writing” characterizes computer and web-based technologies as “production and distribution tools” that allow students to “Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6). Suffice it to say, the computer technologies that students interact with regularly are more than just production and distribution tools. Because multimodal interaction between students and texts is an inherent part of today’s culture, it behooves the writers of the Core to revise the standards to reflect the ways in which technology continues to redefine the writing experience, emphasizing the social aspect of writing. As a starting point, audience is clearly an aspect of writing that the Core values, as it’s mentioned three times in the “Anchor Standards” and numerous times throughout the grade-specific standards. By not accounting for the ways in which technology affects students’ writing and audience perception, the standards risk falling behind today’s fast-moving technological trends. Although Lamott doesn’t address technology specifically in *Bird by Bird*, her writing
principles suggest that she would consider today’s multimodal interaction as another way for her to carry out her moral obligation to “pay attention” to others. Because Lamott believes that love of neighbor empowers her to do good deeds that keep the human spirit alive, I believe that she would value the increased sense of community that today’s media technology enables. That is, technology creates a social context through which we can not only produce and distribute content, but also develop our writing through interactive communication.

The following section turns to comedian Judd Apatow as another example of a writer who relies on personal experience as a source of inspiration for his writing. As I’ve argued throughout this chapter, the Common Core appears to deny the value of the personal, despite the clear place of the personal in developing as writers for Elbow, Lamott, and as will be shown, for Apatow. Just like Elbow, who presents himself as a vulnerable writer in his mini journal entries in *Writing without Teachers*, Apatow in *Sick in the Head* considers being “vulnerable and open to telling [his personal story]” as “a lesson that has proved absolutely vital in [his] career” (130). As a successful comedy writer who continues to be curious about other comedians’ writing processes, Apatow shares Lamott’s drive for self-actualization because he believes that comedians are part of a “tribe” in which members benefit from the sharing of interests, ideas, and techniques.

3. Judd Apatow, the Comedy Freak

Just as Anne Lamott values writing’s healing power, self-proclaimed “comedy freak” Judd Apatow sees writing as a coping mechanism that enabled him to fill a spiritual void caused by his experiences as a socially awkward high-schooler caught in the middle of his parents’ embattled divorce case. But what can a writer, producer, and
director whose work includes *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and *Freaks and Geeks* tell us about the importance of personal writing for an emerging writer? Apatow recalls:

> Early on, someone said to me, “The greatest gift you can give is your story,” and that, for me, was the turning point. That became the premise of my work. That’s when I realized that maybe the things that I think are boring about myself are interesting to other people. Hearing what’s in your mind truly makes people feel less alone and gives them hope for things that they want to do and get through things that are difficult. (274)

For Apatow, comedy writing is essentially a personal endeavor for which a laughing audience is an award or a proof of success. Although comedy was a way to escape the world around him as a teenager, Apatow realized later that successful comedy writing involves letting go of the anxiety over public perception. That is, he was going to have to embrace his identity as a misfit both in life and in his writing. Besides incorporating elements of his own story into his work, Apatow also values other peoples’ stories, and has spent a good portion of his lifetime recording conversations he has had with fellow comedians about their creative processes. Since working at his school’s radio station, where he would schedule interviews with yet to be iconic comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld, Apatow continues to interview comedians today. In reviewing some of these conversations, which occurred between 1982 and 2015, we see how successful comedy writing requires a blend of Elbowian self-expression with Anne Lamott’s notion of paying attention to others.

Apatow’s regard for comedy writing as a personal endeavor is shared by many of those interviewed in *Sick in the Head*, especially Lena Dunham, who says: “For me, the
seeds of what I do were planted by sitting in my room, reading confessional poetry, and listening to [singer-songwriter] Alanis Morissette and thinking, I need to find a way to translate all these feelings, which are so like explosive inside of me, into something else” (274). This aspect of Dunham’s writing process touches on the idea that external factors such as music can draw out our personal feelings and our creative energy. Similarly, Mel Brooks shares that his writing is inspired by playing piano and composing musical pieces (342). Although these aspects of Dunham’s and Brooks’s writing processes may seem like spiritual exercises, neurological research has shown that human interaction with art engages both sides of the brain, which is important to the learning process. M.A. Davies, who studies music’s impact on the cognitive process, notes: “Optimal learning occurs when the two hemispheres of the brain work together and music taps both hemispheres...Any teaching strategy such as music that integrates the function of both hemispheres uses the natural design of the brain to make learning easier, faster, and more fun” (148). Davies’s research findings not only give us a better understanding of Dunham’s and Brooks’s writing process, but they also invite us to consider how the Common Core could encourage educators to use pedagogical methods that engage both hemispheres of the brain.

Instructional technology scholar Sylvia Smith explains that the cognitive process is “closely linked to personal experiences,” adding, “Expanding students’ ability to think and learn based on their understanding of the inter-relationships of the core skills inherent in reading, writing, and language development provides a strong cognitive framework to more easily interpret new information, merge it with learned information, and develop new insights or approaches to problem solving” (2). Smith’s explanation, which
heightens the case for personal writing across all grade levels in the CCSS, invites us to envision a classroom in which teachers enhance the learning process by implementing simple adjustments like playing music during writing exercises. Needless to say, openness to methods that engage both sides of the brain would likely add enjoyment to the current standards, which many students consider a routine requirement.

In addition to showing how the CCSS overly favors the brain's logical side, Apatow's personal approach to writing allows us to see the Common Core's limited understanding of how ideas are exchanged in the writing process. For example, the eighth "Anchor Standard" states: "Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8). In the world of the Common Core, textual evidence from credible sources is the primary, if not sole, way to bolster writing, whereas in *Sick in the Head*, Apatow shows us that, as a writer and thinker, he gains valuable insights from many methods, including through interviews, discussions, live feedback, and even his own childhood journal.

Recalling the moments of his childhood during which he would write jokes in a journal by imitating his favorite comedians, Apatow considers his childhood journal entries, which were written in the early 1980s, an integral part of his writing career. He writes: "I idolized the new generation of observational comedians...I related to them and imitated them, and even began to write really bad jokes of my own in a notebook I hid in a small metal locker in my room" (ii). Although imitation is thought of by some as a childish behavior that undermines the development of an individual's voice, Apatow seems to have discovered his comedic voice through intertextuality, which Tony Schirato
and Susan Yell define as "the process of making sense of texts in reference to their relations with other texts" (92). That is, Apatow was ashamed of his "really bad jokes" and hid them in a locker because, in his opinion, they paled in comparison to the work of his favorite comedians, which he had internalized as producing good writing. In this way, Apatow allows us to consider imitation as the initial step towards appropriating another person's work in ways that become "original" work. Because imitation involves transforming and developing source material in different ways, imitation doesn't undermine voice, but supports it.

Although writing studies scholars generally consider imitation a valuable pedagogical tool, one that has been proposed since the times of classical rhetoricians, Karen Handley and Lindsay Williams, reflecting the dominant contemporary view, note that there are risks involved in using model texts to aid student writing. Responding to assessment scholar D.R. Sadler's notion of exemplars, or ideal examples of students' work, Handley and Williams note: "The term *model* reminds us of the idea of model answers used as targets which students should aim for. Models often work through observation and imitation – and here there may be problems: firstly, that imitation is not the same as learning; and secondly, that imitation may lead to plagiarism." Although Handley and Williams' points are arguable, they do capture what I believe to be a central characteristic of teaching academic writing: the way many teachers explain plagiarism as a clear cut issue of right or wrong produces a learning environment in which students are pressured into writing "original" content. The Common Core affirms this notion, as the

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5 "Exemplars are key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence. The exemplars are not the standards themselves, but are indicative of them; they specify standards implicitly" (Sadler 200).
standards address plagiarism briefly by warning students to simply, “avoid plagiarism” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8).

In contrast to this dominant view, arguing that the line between plagiarism and inspiration is inherently blurred, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber call on educators to acknowledge that students live in a “remix culture,” where the line between authors and their sources are blurred accidentally or deliberately (380). That is, much of the material students encounter in the digital world is the product of recycled content. The authors suggest “remix” as an effective genre for writing classes because it focuses on developing multimodal assemblages to support arguments rather than on thinking of something “original.” Ultimately, Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s assemblage model aims to foster community and collaboration in writing pedagogy by noting that writing, and language more broadly, builds on past material, thereby rejecting the possibility that any text is truly original.

Although struggling with originality is a reoccurring theme in Apatow’s Sick in the Head, many of the comedians interviewed aim to distinguish themselves from other comedians through a collaborative process that involves peer reviewing their material with other comedians. Despite being in competition with one another, members of the “tribe of comedians,” a collective term Apatow uses for the industry’s successful comedians, can become a useful resource during the writing process. In his own experience, Apatow identifies Leslie Mann as his “muse,” noting: “When I have an idea for a movie, [Mann] is the person that I kick it around with…Many of the scenes I’ve written were Leslie’s idea, but I won’t get more specific than that here because I want people to think they were all my idea” (277). This aspect of Apatow’s creative process is
a poignant example of remix because Mann doesn’t usually receive official credit for her ideas in Apatow’s final products, despite her contributions to the work. By no means is this an indictment on Apatow, but rather a call for further expansion into the way the academy educates students about plagiarism and the importance of collaboration.

Although there is no excuse for blatantly copying another author’s work, scholars like Kathryn Valentine have noted that plagiarism is more complicated than deliberate passage stealing. In “Plagiarism as Literacy Practice,” Valentine notes that plagiarism viewed through cultural binaries like moral/immoral inhibits us from considering plagiarism as a “literacy practice” of academic discourse. She continues: “Plagiarism policies and many administrators and teachers involved with plagiarism cases often don’t recognize plagiarism as connected to a discourse, as taking on an identity that can’t be taught or acquired just through textual features and teaching of those features or conventions” (105). Using an international student who failed to cite sources properly as an example, Valentine writes about the importance of contextualizing the understanding of plagiarism, noting: “Given that plagiarism involves social relationships, attitudes, and values as much as it involves texts and rules of citation, I think that we can better recognize the work that our students present to us if we also recognize that this work involves negotiating social relationships, attitudes, and values” (90). For Valentine, teaching plagiarism as a “literary practice” would invite writing teachers not only to review with their students what constitutes as plagiarism, but also to explore the more complicated process of judging whether one’s writing community shares academia’s notion of plagiarism. That is, the notion of plagiarism as a “literary practice” involves
more than adhering to MLA guidelines; it involves paying attention to “values, attitudes, and social relationships” (89).

Valentine’s understanding of plagiarism allows us to contextualize the writing relationship that Apatow has with Mann, in which Apatow incorporates Mann’s ideas into his screenplays without giving her official credit. That is, the mutual understanding between the two comedians, which centers on bouncing ideas off one another, is a product of what is acceptable in the writing community that they’ve created. This isn’t to say that students in a classroom setting should be required to develop the kind of writing partnership established between Apatow and Mann, but to note the tension that exists when students feel they have to create original ideas, while stressing the need to learn from and cite experts of a subject area. In other words, Valentine’s research enables us to see that the cognitive dissonance produced by academia’s notions of plagiarism, and the way it’s often taught through the moral/immoral binary, has a limiting effect on a student’s voice.

Going Forward

Identifying what personal writing means to Peter Elbow, Anne Lamott, and Judd Apatow allows us to see that the development of voice is an individual experience and a social experience. Because these three writers enable us to see personal writing used effectively in a wide range of discourses and for different purposes, it’s not difficult for us to believe that the Common Core is remiss in de-emphasizing personal writing on the grounds that scholarly and personal writing are unrelated. Thus, Elbow, Lamott, and Apatow present us with a backdrop to the following chapter’s qualitative analysis of the Common Core’s construct of writing, and in particular its de-emphasis of audience
awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, reflection, and collaboration in the standards for Grades 6-12. To that end, we’re able to see gaps within the writing standards that can be filled by developing and forwarding the Core’s construction of personal writing in the K-5 standards. As a starting point, it’s noteworthy that while Elbow, Lamott, and Apatow experience personal writing in ways that align with the Core’s K-5 standards, the 6-12 standards represent only one major aspect that Elbow, Lamott and Apatow speak to: audience awareness. By Grade 12, for example, the writing standards require that students be able to “Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1). Although I have no argument with the Core’s stress on the ability to write arguments based on reason and evidence, the standards ultimately construct audience as a closed community of scholars, researchers, college-educated professionals, and college admissions officers. In the world of the Common Core, it behooves students to relinquish aspects of their voice that wouldn’t be welcomed by the scholarly community, or the scholarly community as constructed by the authors of the Common Core.
Chapter Three: Qualitative Data Analysis of the Common Core Writing Standards

This chapter investigates the ways in which the Common Core’s English Language Arts Standards for Writing compel students to produce the kind writing valued by the Core, which ultimately de-emphasizes audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, reflection, and collaboration. My investigative method is content analysis, which Bernard Berelson defines as, “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (18).

In evaluating how the Common Core constructs writing, I use Johnny Saldaña’s “codes-to-theory” model for qualitative inquiry, which posits that qualitative data analysis is a “cyclical act,” which requires coding and re-coding to define and refine themes and categories that emerge from the data (9). Thus, coding for this study involved two cycles, the first of which analyzed the writing standards by identifying and coding the broad themes established by my research question: What are the values that the Common Core posits will lead to successful college and professional writing? Looking for these values produced a comprehensive list of codes that I separated into six categories of writing concerns about which the Common Core revealed a value: Genre, Modality, Writing Components, Writing Qualities, Social Interaction, and Types of Processes. The second cycle of coding merged and reconfigured some of the original, uncategorized codes from the comprehensive list produced in the first cycle that were similar enough to be assigned one code, and for which clear distinctions could not be made. Examples include the merging of “reason” with “logic,” “point of view” with “opinion,” and “definitions” with “clarity.” The entire set of codes is listed in Table 3.1.
For a more focused analysis, this investigation covers the writing standards at four separate grade levels: Kindergarten, Grade 5, Grade 8, and Grades 11/12. These specific grade levels are chosen because they indicate the kind of writing the Common Core values for students in the nascent stages of writing (Kindergarten), in preparation for middle school (Grade 5), in preparation for high school (Grade 8), and in preparation for

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Table 3.1: Set of Codes

⁶ Writing parts that can be quantified

⁷ Writing characteristics that cannot be quantified
college (Grades 11/12). This chapter traces the trajectory of the authors of the Common Core’s construction of writing, and includes charts where necessary to indicate, by percentage, which of the values listed in Table 3.1 are emphasized by the standards. This analysis of the Common Core reveals priorities and areas of deprioritization, shown most clearly by how frequently some areas are addressed in comparison to others. This analysis informs the following chapter’s proposed revisions to the writing standards because it indicates where students might benefit from a greater emphasis audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, reflection and collaborative writing.

The Kindergarten Standards

Apart from its emphasis on opinion-based writing and other modes of communication besides alphabetic text, the kindergarten writing standards distinguish themselves from the other grade levels by encouraging more interaction with others during the writing process. Figure 3.1, which breaks down the Common Core’s construction of interactive writing at the kindergarten level based on the frequency of references to adult guidance, collaborative projects, and peer feedback, indicates that adult guidance is the most emphasized value at the nascent stage of writing.
Mentioned three times throughout the kindergarten standards, adult guidance exceeds collaborative projects, which is mentioned twice, and peer feedback, which is mentioned once. Although the emphasis on adult guidance shouldn’t come as a surprise considering the grade level, the high percentage of adult guidance that the Common Core advocates for seems to be an early indicator of guidance by an authority figure as an important value for the standards going forward. And while this particular value encourages students to see writing as a collaborative process, the Common Core doesn’t clarify how much influence the adult should ultimately have on student writing. In one instance, the standards encourage adults to help students recall memories to write about (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.K.8). And in another, adults take on a supervisory role, helping students to “explore a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing, including in collaboration with peers” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.K.6). Although clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be interesting to do actual case studies that explore tensions between student voice and the voices of the adults guiding the student.
Despite the limitations of my project and its focus on looking at the presentation of the Common Core rather than studying its implementations, the examples presented in Appendix C of the published Common Core\(^8\) clarify how the "Interactive Writing" values identified above relate to the Common Core’s valued components of writing. At the kindergarten level, the Core identifies three "Valued Components": evidence, memories, and personal reactions, each mentioned once. In one example of kindergarten-level informative writing provided in Appendix C, the student writes: “Today we had writing groups. Mrs. John read us a story about frogs. We have a tadpole in the Science Center. It has two back legs and when it has two front legs its tail disappears...Then the skin gets too little and the frogs pull off their skin” (7). The Common Core notes that this is an exemplary piece because the student “establishes the topic in a title and goes beyond the title to create a context for writing about frogs, supplies some information about the topic, uses additive (adversative and temporal) linking words, provides a sense of closure, and demonstrates command of some of the conventions of standard written English” (8). I would add that the essay shows the student learning how to write by describing his or her own process of gaining knowledge through writing groups and listening to a story, which is a concept philosophers call metadiscourse.

Scholars who study metadiscourse and its role in writing instruction, note that it can be a vehicle through which self-reflection enables the writer to place him or herself within the context of social relations. Ken Hyland writes: “Metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text,\(^8\)

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\(^8\) The Common Core provides only a minimal amount of detail about the circumstances under which the writing samples in Appendix C are produced. The Common Core annotates each sample, noting specific reasons for its inclusion in the appendix. Writing prompts and assignment instructions are not reproduced.
assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Metadiscourse 25). In this way, Hyland not only acknowledges personal writing’s self-reflective and social nature, but also clarifies how language helps writers to project themselves in the text by indicating their attitude towards their content and their audience. By writing about his or her learning process, the student in the example above addresses a perceived audience beyond the realm of school, engaging them with his or her own experiences in science class.

In light of Hyland’s work on metadiscourse, one component of writing valued by the Core that’s worth highlighting here is references to personal reaction, the only coded value unique to the kindergarten level. One sample provided in Appendix C reproduces a student’s response to an in-class assignment, which asks for a narrative piece about a recent vacation. The student begins: “I went to Disneyland… I had fun on vacation. I saw lots of rides. I went on the Matterhorn. I went on a Ferris wheel. I went on a merry-go-round. I went my house” (6). Since the authors of the Common Core note that this writing exercise encourages students to use their own reactions to personal experiences as a source of inspiration, students are able to construct a story – one with a clear beginning, middle, and end – using the “I” pronoun. In this way, students not only practice writing first-person narratives, but are also empowered to take personal responsibility for what they want to say.

In his study of the use of first person pronouns in academic writing, Hyland notes that the “views, actions, and personality” of the writer constitutes his or her voice, adding, “A writer’s identity is created by, and revealed, through the use or absence of the ‘I’ pronoun” (“Options of Identity” 352). Using the “I” pronoun, the student in this
sample seems to understand that he or she is choosing a position by describing a memorable experience, while becoming more aware of his or her own thoughts and preferences. That is, the “I” pronoun enables the student to recognize that writing involves not only stating facts or describing events as they occurred, but also developing an argument for what constitutes a “fun” vacation with the support of evidence.

This isn’t to say that the authors of the Common Core discourage the use of “I” at later grade levels. As discussed later in this chapter, some Grade 12 student samples provided in Appendix C highlight students’ use of personal pronouns to make a strong claim. But what Hyland allows us to consider is the idea that “I” doesn’t necessarily indicate a writer’s dominant authority over a claim, but rather establishes the writer in an ongoing conversation. In other words, the use of “I” empowers writers to maintain awareness of themselves in distinction from or in agreement with others. Later in his argument, Hyland writes that an understanding of how different disciplines use “I” helps struggling students to discover voice amidst conflicting instructions and expectations. He writes:

If we simply assume that academic writing is universally impersonal then we disguise variability and may prevent our students from coming to terms with the specific demands of their disciplines. Instead of equipping learners with the linguistic means to achieve their rhetorical invisibility then, we need to guide them towards an awareness of the options that academic writing offers. ("Options of Identity" 352)

Hyland makes clear that at the university level, students continue the process of discovering their voice within their own disciplines, despite the fact that the Common
Core would consider this process of discovery beneficial only for children. Thus, Hyland informs my proposed revisions to the Core’s writing standards because he acknowledges the importance of personal writing as a valued component of academic research.

**The Grades 5 and 8 Standards**

By the time students are ready to enter middle school, the Common Core begins to take noticeable shifts in pushing students’ writing processes from a shared experience to a more structured, individual one. Some of the Core’s valued writing components from kindergarten remain, including the use of evidence and personal memories. Students are still encouraged to write with the guidance of adults, draw inspiration from shared memories, and use multimedia technologies to collaborate with their peers digitally. In comparing the coded data between Kindergarten and Grade 5, the most noticeable change occurs in the “Valued Qualities” category. Whereas coding for “Valued Qualities,” or writing characteristics that cannot be quantified, returned 0 mentions in the Kindergarten standards, it returns 23 mentions in Grade 5. The break-down for these 23 mentions in Figure 3.2 indicates that organization of thought is the top quality of writing that the Common Core values at the fifth-grade level, as it is mentioned eight times. With seven mentions, clarity is a close second, followed by structure, which is mentioned four times. The remaining three values – audience awareness, format, and logic – are dispersed almost evenly.

With clarity, organization, and structure being the most emphasized values, it’s clear that Grade 5 marks a turning point for the Common Core, in which the standards begin to diminish writing to a mechanical and solitary process. It’s also worth noting that audience awareness is mentioned just once, which suggests a reluctance to encourage
students to create their own context with which to design their work. That is, the
Common Core's lack of emphasis on audience awareness seems to advocate for teachers
as the primary readers and assessors of student writing, which would mean that teachers
have final authority over their students' work. The negative effects of writing solely for
the teacher on students' voice and on students' ability to see writing as a tool for
engaging the world beyond the classroom are well documented in the field of writing
studies. And the lack of emphasis on audience awareness in the middle school standards
certainly contributes to the problem.

Figure 3.2 Grade 5 Valued Qualities
The notion that the standards begin to diminish writing to a mechanical and solitary process at the fifth-grade level is supported by the data for “Valued Components,” or writing parts that can be quantified. Indicating a shift away from personal writing, Figure 3.3 indicates memories as the least emphasized component. Yet the examples of student writing in Appendix C suggest that the Common Core continues to value personal writing at this grade level. In one example, a student writes an informative essay about a favorite author. The student begins:

Roald Dahl is a very interesting author to me. That’s because he knows what a kid wants to hear...He is the only author that I know that makes up interesting words like Inkland, fizz wizard, and gobble funking. Roald Dahl uses a lot of similes. Some similes that he used that I like are: Up he shot again like a bullet in the barrel of a gun. And my favorite is: They were like a chorus of dentists’ drills all grinding away together. In all of
Roald Dahl’s books, I have noticed that the plot or the main problem of the story is either someone killing someone else, or a kid having a bad life.

(30)

The Common Core notes that this is an exemplary piece of informational writing for a fifth grader because the student “introduces the topic clearly, provides a general observation and focus, and groups related information logically,” adding that the student “develops the topic with facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples related to the topic” (30). Unlike the metadiscourse writing of the kindergarten level, the focus here is clearly on analyzing another writer’s style, instead of his or her own. Yet at the same time, the student has been allowed the flexibility to write about his or her own preferred writer, which provides an opportunity to balance personal preference with academic requirements. While personal writing is de-emphasized even more after the fifth-grade level, these standards do at least encourage students to identify and write about aspects of another author’s work that they admire and can learn from.

Although there aren’t any significant differences between Grades 5 and 8 in terms of “Valued Qualities,” or writing characteristics that cannot be quantified, the data indicates that the Grade 8 “Valued Components, or writing parts that can be quantified, build on the Grade 5 standards, without detracting from the aspects of writing that encourage students to explore personal voice and to interact with others in the writing process. Though personal memory is no longer valued at this level, in its place are three new values: analysis, claims, and intertextuality.
From a personal writing perspective, I would argue that intertextuality is the most significant of the three newest valued qualities since it encourages students to develop their own understanding of their subject matter by actively seeking connections between and among texts, including their own. Although the authors of the Common Core do not use the word “intertextuality,” they encourage students to “Use technology, including the
Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between
information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others”
(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.6). These collaborative efforts enable students to consider
intertextuality as a part of an ongoing process, as they’re expected to find connections
between their own work and the work of their peers. In this way, this particular standard
also helps students to recognize that intertextual practices not only clarify connections
between texts, but also affect the ways texts are constructed. That is, analyzing or
creating a text for a school assignment is inherently an exercise in intertextuality because
each student approaches the work from a different perspective culturally, academically,
or economically. Thus, although personal memories are no longer explicitly stated in the
CCSS as a valued component for writing at the eighth-grade level, the introduction of
intertextuality acknowledges implicitly that it’s almost impossible for a writer to detach
previous knowledge when authoring a text.

The Grades 11/12 Standards

![Figure 3.6 Grades 11/12 Valued Qualities]
One small yet significant change occurs in the Grades 11/12 standards, which is the introduction of “complex ideas” as a valued quality of writing. The CCSS states that by the eleventh and twelfth grade, students are expected to “Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2). In reviewing the examples of student writing in Appendix C, it becomes clear that the Core’s articulation of complexity has more to do with the organization of complex ideas than a thoughtful exploration of complex concepts through writing. In one essay about the construction of violins, for instance, a twelfth grader writes: “The violin is arguably the most cherished and well-known orchestral instrument in the world. Many are moved by its unique quality of sound; it is known as the only instrument close to the sound of a human voice” (94). Regarding the student’s detailed attention to the intricacies and the challenges that are part of the violin-making process later in the essay, the Core’s annotation states: “The
information is sequenced logically. The writer provides a carefully sequenced explanation of how a violin is made through detailed descriptions of the various parts of a violin and their purposes and steps in the process of building a violin” (96). Of course, as an explanatory essay, this kind of matter-of-fact and impersonal style is both expected and necessary for the development of a student’s writing mechanics. But in looking through the samples of student writing presented in Appendix C for Grades 11/12, it is surprising that explanatory essays outnumber argumentative essays seven to two, with no examples of narrative writing. In fact, the final time a narrative example appears in Appendix C is at the eighth-grade level.

The significance of these numbers is twofold, with the first being that the Common Core de-emphasizes the genres more closely associated with personal writing – opinion and narrative – at the end of high school. Secondly, from reviewing the Grades 11/12 examples, it’s evident that the writing standards emphasize preparing students for writing the kinds of essays valued by standardized tests like the SAT or ACT. This notion is strongly affirmed by the two argumentative pieces presented in Appendix C, one of which is a five-paragraph essay on the pros and cons of dress codes, with a central claim stating, “I believe that it would be beneficial for our schools to adopt dress codes” (76). From a personal writing perspective, this statement allows us to see that, while the student uses the “I” pronoun to establish an argument, the pronoun is used simply to take an existing stance on an issue, rather than to explore that stance through more focused personal or social experiences. In the conclusion, for instance, the essay ends on a less personal tone by using general experiences to support the claim. The student writes: “Lastly, with all the peer pressure in school, many students worry about fitting in. If a
dress code (or even uniforms) were required, there would be less emphasis on how you look, and more emphasis on learning” (76). The shift from “I” to “we,” which creates a more generalized reading and writing experience, enables the writer to consider common knowledge as a primary resource for establishing ethos. A more personal approach to this essay might have encouraged the student to complicate the issue by including specific cases of peer pressure in school, allowing the student to realize that there are more than just two basic stances in a debate about school uniforms.

Of course, complexity isn’t just about raising more questions and exploring different solutions. Complexity theorists in the organizational sciences, for instance, study “patterns of dynamic mechanisms that emerge from the adaptive interactions of many agents” (Marion 5). I would add that one of these “many agents” for organization is writing, and that the CCSS’s writing standards are a way of organizing the complexities of language to fit patterns that limit the dynamics of language. That is, although the Core presents a solid understanding of the mechanical aspects of organizing complex ideas through writing or editing text, it falls short of presenting the intellectual aspects of constructing complex ideas. Although a fuller understanding of complexity theory is beyond the scope of this thesis, a basic understanding of the theory allows us to see that developing complex ideas through writing is essentially an invitation for both the writer and the reader to realize that, in some way or another, all ideas are interconnected.

Because writing allows us to make sense of ideas by connecting a wide range of voices, reflecting a range of cultural beliefs to political issues, the CCSS ought to indicate an appreciation for the construction of “complex ideas” as a phenomenon, driven by interactions and associations. To that end, my analysis of the CCSS ends with the one
standard that represents a glimmer of hope for the Core to build on. The standard states: "Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.6). Although the Core considers computers and web-based technologies as "production and distribution" tools, it's evident in this standard that it also acknowledges technology's potential as a tool for collaborative writing. However, in considering this standard together with the samples of student writing in Appendix C and the trajectory of the coded components and values of writing throughout the CCSS, it's clear that the Core doesn't account for the ways in which web-based technologies have expanded and complicated the ways we construct and experience text. That is, in the world of the Common Core, web-based technologies seem to be just another means of producing alphabetic text instead of multimodal texts such as web pages, videos, and sound bites.

In the concluding chapter, which proposes changes to the CCSS based on voice and personal writing lessons learned from chapters one through three, a major part of the revisions advocates for more collaborative writing through computers and other web-based technologies based on the notion that these devices complement and enhance writing practices. Although Internet language conventions like hashtags, emojis, and tweets have been traditionally considered lower forms of communication, recent scholarship on multimodal writing invites us to consider these elements as another way of sharing information. This isn't to say that the Core should encourage the use of such language in an academic assignment, but to emphasize the disconnect between the
current way the Core requires students to use technology versus the students’ personal experiences with technology in their daily lives.
Chapter Four: Proposed Revisions to the Common Core Writing Standards

This concluding chapter proposes revisions to the Common Core’s English Language Arts Standards for Writing based on Chapter Three’s qualitative data analysis and on Chapter Two’s perspectives on personal writing from Peter Elbow, Anne Lamott, and Judd Apatow. In my view, the Core has strengths and value, but it is too limited, and that relatively small revisions to further emphasize audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, reflection, and collaborative writing, would allow teachers and students to more fully engage with the writing process. One of the goals here is to help students realize that their own experiences, relationships, and preferences can be credible resources for academic writing. From a rhetorical perspective, these revisions, which essentially advocate for more pathos across the CCSS grade levels, would not only allow students to draw from their own personal experiences in their writing, but also to consider what emotional responses they would like to evoke from their audience. In this way, the CCSS would empower students to consider writing as a tool for interdependency, since students would be encouraged to make connections between their personal stories and the broader human narrative. Although the current writing trajectory of the CCSS implies that emotion offsets logic, these revisions show how logic and emotion can complement one another in a way that makes school-based writing a means to achieve not only practical knowledge for work or academic research, but also social awareness that connects the classroom experience with the community at large.
The Kindergarten Revisions

The highlights of these standards include an attention to dictation and drawing as modes of writing, an emphasis on opinion writing, and an appeal for interaction with others during the writing process. But as discussed in the previous chapter, references to interactive writing at this level are ambiguous. In particular, the term “adult guidance” can be interpreted multiple ways in the three times it’s used, as shown in Table 4.1 below.

| Standard 5 | With guidance and support from adults, respond to questions and suggestions from peers and add details to strengthen writing as needed. |
| Standard 6 | With guidance and support from adults, explore a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing, including in collaboration with peers. |
| Standard 8 | With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question. |

Table 4.1 Adult Guidance in the Kindergarten Standards

In each of these instances, the CCSS regards adults as key components of the production and planning stages of the writing process. Standards 5 and 6, which seem to advocate for a supervisory role for adults, emphasize that a child’s writing should be affirmed or directed by an authority figure. Considering the age group, this isn’t surprising. But depending on whom the child asks for guidance, whether it be a teacher, a tutor, or a parent, the level and the quality of guidance will vary. Perhaps then the Common Core should clarify what it means by “guidance” to ensure that collaboration isn’t entirely defined by an authority figure. Although “guidance” implies an underlying choice by
which the person being guided doesn’t have to necessarily follow the guide’s advice, the Common Core doesn’t seem to account for the fact that kindergarteners might not want to challenge the advice of a trusted adult. By noting the implication of choice in the word “guidance,” the Common Core would invite adults and students into a collaborative writing process where students are encouraged to write with their own voice, while being supported by others within and beyond the classroom. The proposed revisions, written in italics in Figure 4.2 below, reflect a clearer sense of adults as collaborators. Standard 6, which encourages students to incorporate technology into the writing process, isn’t revised because digital literacy skills vary from one person to another.

| Standard 5 | Complete writing assignments with guidance and support from writing collaborators, both adults and peers, responding to their questions and suggestions from peers and adding details to strengthen writing as needed. |
| Standard 6 | With guidance and support from adults, explore a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing, including in collaboration with peers. |
| Standard 8 | With guidance and support from writing collaborators, both adults and peers, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question. |

Table 4.2 Proposed Kindergarten Revisions (Edits in italics)

The Grade 5 Revisions

Although the Common Core begins to take noticeable shifts in defining students’ writing processes as including collaborative elements to a more structured, individually focused one at the fifth-grade level, it still includes some elements of the role of the personal in writing. Similar to their kindergarten counterparts, fifth graders are encouraged to write opinion-based essays, draw inspiration from shared memories, and
they are asked to use multimedia technologies to collaborate with their peers digitally. But as seen in Figures 3.3 and 3.4 in the previous chapter, the writing qualities and components associated with personal writing—audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, and reflection—are either underrepresented or excluded in the Grade 5 standards and beyond. As a result, there’s a noticeable tension in the Core’s language for the fifth-grade standards as it attempts to account for both personal and formal academic writing. The first standard, for example, states: “Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which ideas are logically grouped to support the writer’s purpose” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.1.a). Standards like this allow students to explore personal writing, while practicing the more formal aspects of academic writing.

Despite this attempt to balance academic and personal writing, the elementary school standards begin to expose the limitations of the Core’s emphasis on just three writing genres. Since there’s a wide range of genres available to writers besides opinion, informative, and narrative, my concern is, in the Core’s authors’ attempt to adhere to the standards, educators might overlook the genres that students will use in their college or professional careers, such as literary analysis or expository writing. The genre limitation is essentially a microcosm of the problems associated with “teaching to the test” because students learn only what is included in standardized tests, while other forms of writing that students will encounter in their college or professional careers remain unaccounted for. Moreover, the Core doesn’t account for the fact that some forms of writing, such as Peter Elbow’s notion of freewriting, don’t fit a definite category or purpose. As discussed
more fully in Chapter Two, freewriting enables writers to find their purpose, attempting to work through their frustrations with the writing process.

From a personal writing perspective, perhaps the more effective revision would be to have an open genre inclusion, which would allow students to practice genres of writing besides the ones valued by the Core. In “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller defines genre as, “an active social process that is, like other forms of human communication – interpretable only against the context of situation and through the attributing of motives” (152). For Miller, genre centers on how a work’s substance becomes a conduit for social action; they represent the ways messages are framed in different rhetorical situations, in the hope of enticing a desired response from certain audiences.

To be clear, Miller does not argue that all writing is about social action, but she does invite us to realize that an author’s personal experiences can contribute to or re-define the genre in which he or she writes. The audience reads about these experiences, and then applies the knowledge gained from the text to a different rhetorical situation – a notion well understood by the three writers discussed in Chapter Two. Peter Elbow shares his personal struggles with academic writing through the self-help genre to inspire a change in the way the academy teaches writing to emerging writers. Anne Lamott’s first novel, *Hard Laughter*, which is inspired by her own experiences with a cancer-stricken father, was written to cheer up those caring for terminally ill loved ones. Lamott notes that shortly after her father’s death, she realized that there weren’t many novels that aimed to make readers laugh while detailing the challenges of having a cancer-stricken relative. She writes: “There didn’t seem to be any. A book about our experience, showing one family’s attempt to stay buoyant in the face of such a potentially flattening process,
seemed like it might be a welcome present to other people with sick relatives” (Bird 187). Similarly, Judd Apatow uses his high school experiences as a socially awkward high-schooler caught in the middle of his parents’ embattled divorce case as a frame for making others laugh through television shows and films. In sum, Elbow, Lamott, and Apatow exemplify how the standards don’t account for teaching students how to turn to and use written language to navigate and cope with the realities of life.

If an open genre inclusion in the standards is impractical, then the notion that writing can be used to navigate and cope with the realities of life strengthens the case at least for literary analysis to be valued by the Core. Currently, the Core’s understanding of literature seems limited, as indicated by the ninth standard, which states: “Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.9). Instead of considering literary analysis as a genre of writing, the Core assumes literature to be the equivalent of “informational texts,” which implies that literature is not about engaging with stories to explore personal connections between the reader and the lives of literary figures. Put more simply, the CCSS desensitizes and depersonalizes literature, taking away its capacity for teaching moral lessons or for being a source of leisure starting at the elementary school level. Instead, the CCSS categorizes literary analysis under “Research to Build and Present Knowledge,” as if to say that literature’s main purpose in the writing process is to help students increase their acumen for reading comprehension, comparisons, and other practical writing skills. Thus, the proposed standards in Table 4.3 reflect the notion that the CCSS should expand its idea of literary texts beyond its association of literature with informational texts by formally considering literary analysis a genre of writing.
The Grade 8 Revisions

As discussed in the previous chapter, personal memories and opinions are no longer valued components at this level of the Common Core, and in their place are four new values: analysis, claims, style, and intertextuality, the latter of which is most closely associated with personal and collaborative writing. Since intertextuality represents just nine percent of the valued qualities of writing at the eighth grade level, these revisions indicate how the Core might approach adding more intertextual practices in the CCSS. Not mentioned explicitly, the concept of intertextuality appears three times throughout this grade level. For example, the sixth standard states: “Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.6). Although this standard, which is under the “Production and Distribution of Writing” category, acknowledges that intertextual practices can occur through online media, it doesn’t clarify how they occur during the writing process itself.
Below, Table 4.4 shows how an attention to intertextuality might enhance the second Grade 8 standard, which requires students to write informational or explanatory texts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard 8.2</th>
<th>Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content. <em>Acknowledge how and by whom this topic has been explained or discussed in the past or present, noting the reasons for which the topic needs to be revisited today.</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard 8.2A</td>
<td>Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories. <em>Address different perspectives about the selected information, and explain why they are relevant to past, present, or future conversations about the topic.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 8.2B</td>
<td>Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples. <em>Consider other mediums through which the topic has been or might be discussed, experienced, or explained.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4 Intertextuality in Standard 8.2 (Edits in italics)

An emphasis on intertextuality in the CCSS’s writing standards would encourage students to understand that their schoolwork is inherently interactive and part of a larger, ongoing conversation. And as discussed in Chapter 2 through Judd Apatow’s experiences as a comedy writer who incorporates personal experiences in his screenplays and actively seeks out writing partnerships, intertextuality is not limited to traditional academic writing practices. That is, intertextuality is not only achieved through citing and responding to the works of past or present scholars, but also through constructing texts in a collaborative way with peers. The CCSS ought to encourage students not only to incorporate intertextual practices into their work, but also to suggest that intertextuality is the work of writing. As noted in the previous chapter, writing is inherently intertextual.
because all writers draw from or are inspired by the works of other writers. Put more
simply, no text exists in isolation.

Through their interactions with peers, teachers, and others who contribute to their
writing processes, students learn both about themselves and the topics they explore.
Working with others ultimately enables students to develop their own style and cultivate
their own writing voice. Thus, the authors of the CCSS expose their own limited
understanding of the significance of intertextual practices when they encourage students
to use web-based technologies as collaborative tools, but then ultimately suggest in
Appendix C that an essay on how to construct a violin is an exemplary piece of writing at
the eighth grade level. In other words, why ask students to tap into a collaborative, multi-
modal tool like the Internet if they’re just expected to produce simple five-paragraph
“how to” essays?

The Grades 11/12 Revisions

Based on the coded data for Grades 11/12 in the previous chapter, these proposed
revisions suggest alternatives to the CCSS’s overemphasis on the technical components
and qualities of writing, a vague definition of “complex ideas,” and a limited
understanding of web-based technologies as collaborative tools. First, I would suggest
that the Core’s emphasis on writing technicalities like diction and format is a reflection of
its authors’ refusal to wholly acknowledge the multiple modes of communicating ideas in
today’s world. That is, the CCSS emphasizes alphabetic text over any other modality, a
notion that is discussed more fully in previous chapters. One simple way for the Core to
acknowledge technology’s impact on students’ writing is to indicate within the standards
for the three specific genres – argumentative, informative, and narrative – that alphabetic
text is just one way to communicate ideas. Table 4.6 below illustrates an approach to revising three of the argumentative writing standards to account for multiple modalities.

To show that multimodal approaches to the CCSS revisions aren’t limited to the three genre-based standards, Standards 4 and 5, both under the “Production and Distribution of Writing” category, are included below in Table 4.7. The revisions to Standards 4 and 5 are also included here to exemplify how the CCSS might incorporate more guidelines for collaboration among peers.

| Standard 1C | Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims. |
| Standard 1D | Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. |

Table 4.5 Current Argument Standards 1C-1E

| Standard 1C | Create cohesion and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims. Textual components may include words, phrases, and clauses to link major sections of the text. Multimodal components for cohesion and clarity might include well-timed and relevant video or audio edits, charts that clarify sets of data, or a blog entry that incorporates hyperlinks to secondary sources. |
| Standard 1D | Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone according to the modalities used, while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. |

Table 4.6 Revised Argument Standards 1C-1E (Edits in italics)

| Standard 4 | Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. |
| Standard 5 | Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on |
addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Table 4.7 Current Production and Distribution of Writing Standards 4 and 5

| Standard 4 | Produce clear and coherent thoughts through alphabetic or multimodal text in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, audience, and modality |
| Standard 5 | With the support of peers through in-person or digital meetings, develop and strengthen thoughts as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. |

Table 4.8 Revised Production and Distribution of Writing Standards 4 and 5 (Edits in italics)

It’s noteworthy that accounting for multimodal writing in revising these standards requires de-emphasizing some of the technical components and qualities of traditional writing that are currently maintained by the CCSS. In the revised Standard 1C, for example, the use of phrases, clauses, and syntax become just one aspect of clarity to account for in constructing an argument, instead of being the significant part of it. And the revised Standard 1D would enable students to understand that the heart of writing doesn’t lie in its technical components or style, but in forming relationships between people and ideas of various discourses. Thus, a fuller embrace of technology would bridge personal and academic writing, and would also allow students to draw from personal experiences in constructing an argument. In response to these revisions, teachers would have to change their curricula to account for multimodal work. These changes might range from simple adjustments, such as requiring students to post personal blog entries instead of formal response papers, to more complicated projects, such as making a digital argument through video. Encouraging students to use computer or web-based technologies as tools for writing would enable students to see that their everyday
interactions with multimodal technologies can enhance the ways they construct arguments in an academic context.

Besides incorporating more modes of communication into the CCSS, the Core would also benefit from broadening its conception of “complex ideas,” which currently stresses the clarification of technical and mechanical processes, rather than the actual construction of complex thoughts. For example, the second standard states: “Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.A). As discussed in the previous chapter, the Core mentions complexity as a valued quality of writing four times, all within its standards for explanatory writing. Table 4.9 proposes revisions to the Core’s understanding of “complex ideas” in a way that might invite students to go beyond the requirements for technical writing. In other words, instead of requiring students to produce essays about how a violin is constructed, such as the example in Appendix C discussed in the previous chapter, the CCSS could encourage students to ask “why” questions more often. That is, why is it so important to explain the construction of an object?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Standard 2</strong></th>
<th>Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. Consider the significance of this informative/explanatory text either from your perspective or from someone else's, why it's important to write about, and whom it benefits.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 4.9 Grades 11/12 Informative/Explanatory Revisions (Edits in italics)

In making the explanatory writing genre less impersonal, these revisions would encourage students to incorporate opinions and personal anecdotes to justify the
importance of writing about their chosen topic. That is, encouraging more audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, reflection, and collaboration in explanatory writing would motivate students to inform others about a topic that is important to them personally, while changing their perception of school-based writing in two ways. First, these revisions would provide an alternative to fact-based explanations, allowing students to focus on larger ideas, opinions, or attitudes that they might explore with their peers through collaborative projects. And second, by juxtaposing their own interests with those of their peers, explaining topics, and listening to others’ explanations, students would see the value of learning from multiple perspectives.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

The proposed revisions to the Common Core’s English Language Arts Standards for Writing in this project reflect the notion that audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, reflection, and collaboration are integral elements of writing, regardless of the writer’s age. In phasing out these elements of writing, while emphasizing the mechanical and solitary aspects of traditional academic discourse, the CCSS devalues students’ sense of belonging with their peers, teachers, and the community outside the classroom walls. Perhaps the CCSS’s most significant misconception about life beyond high school is that personal writing doesn’t play a significant role in college or professional writing. In the world of the Common Core, the writer’s ethos is established at first by pathos, and then shifts heavily towards logos. But as this project has posited, a balanced approach to the CCSS writing standards, centered on the formation of all three rhetorical appeals, can empower students to be more motivated, confident, and creative in their approach to writing.

Working on this project has triggered childhood memories of my father and I reading nursery rhymes together to develop my English speaking ability. As a first-generation American whose first language was Tagalog, I learned how to speak English through poetry’s rhythms, identifying connections between verse’s cadences and Tagalog’s lyrical quality. Although reading became my escape from playing outside with friends, watching television, or doing schoolwork, as I grew older, I realized that reading isn’t an escape from reality, but rather a way to understand my relationship to the world around me. Growing up in Queens, NY, my favorite book was Arnold Adoff’s Street Music, a collection of poems inspired by the sights and sounds of urban life, which
invited me to think critically about everything I came across as a child. Describing the sounds of cars, trucks, and busses as “vocabularies / of / clash” (13-15) and “hot metal language / combinations” (18-19), Adoff’s poetry encouraged me to find beauty in the discordant sounds I heard while living in a street-level apartment. As I would listen carefully for rustling leaves and chirping birds amidst the sirens of emergency vehicles outside the living room window, my mind would wander as I wondered how people traveled before cars were invented or why musicians performed in subway stations.

Because of these early experiences as a reader, I discovered language’s ability to shape my identity, personality, and worldview. In the third grade, I began to feel the same way about writing, as my classmates and I were required to keep a journal in which we would respond to a daily prompt written on the blackboard. Encouraging us to draw from personal experiences, the journal assignments allowed me to realize that writing can be a tool for self-discovery, creative expression, and originality. In response to a prompt that asked us to write and share about a favorite vacation, many of my classmates wrote about visiting Disney World, while I wrote about a trip to the Philippines. The class seemed more genuinely interested in my story than those about Disney World, curious about the tropical island country where some of the world’s most beautiful beaches are within walking distance of families living in poverty. At the same time, my peers seemed confused about how a small island country could be the home of – at the time – Asia’s largest and most modern shopping mall. Through this experience, I became aware that my writing could affect the ways others perceived me, and that through writing I could expand others’ understanding of the world at large.
Almost two decades since coming to the realization that school-based writing can engage an audience besides the teacher, I continue to draw from personal experiences in my writing, and I remain curious about how personal experiences affect the work of other writers. Thus, this thesis was born out of one central question: What are the components and qualities of writing that I value, and how do they affect my work? Then I began to wonder how my favorite authors would answer the same question, ultimately narrowing the selection to Peter Elbow, a non-scholarly academic, Anne Lamott, a moral fiction writer, and Judd Apatow, a self-proclaimed comedy freak. The Common Core made its way into this thesis because it allowed for a broad understanding of how a student might answer my central question, and presented an opportunity for me to implement the qualitative coding methods that I developed an affinity for as a graduate student. By juxtaposing the personal writing processes of Elbow, Lamott, and Apatow with the writing process that the CCSS advocates for, I hope to have contributed to the debate about the Common Core in a fair way. That is, instead of either praising the standards, or calling for their repeal, this project posits that the standards can be significantly improved by emphasizing the values of audience awareness, personal memory, personal reaction, and reflection across all grade levels, not just from K-5.

Considering the writing trajectory valued by the Common Core, it’s no surprise that in April of 2011, David Coleman, College Board president and co-writer of the CCSS, claimed that personal and opinionated essays have no place in American high schools; he stated, “The...problem with those two forms of writing is, as you grow up in this world, you realize people don't really give a shit about what you feel or what you think” (Furman). This statement reveals that the exclusion of personal writing isn’t just a
matter of space or emphasis, but a real vendetta against personal writing. Reflecting on my work in this thesis, I’m troubled by the Common Core’s goal of preparing students for writing the kinds of essays valued by standardized tests like the SAT or ACT under the guise of ensuring that students are prepared to succeed in “college, career, and life,” according to the CCSS’s mission statement. As discussed throughout this project, writing in the world of the Common Core is ultimately an exercise in summary, which takes place after research, whereas for Elbow, Lamott, and Apatow, research occurs during writing. Turning to and using written language to navigate and cope with the realities of life, these three writers engage their readers with personal memories, personal reactions, and reflections. At ages eighty-one, sixty-two, and forty-eight respectively, as of May 2016, Elbow, Lamott, and Apatow embody what is missing from the Common Core’s writing standards because they understand that personal writing is not a child’s task, but a human task that enables us to discover, convey, and clarify our thoughts.
Works Cited


