

SOME PEOPLE ARE JUST BORN GOOD WRITERS

Jill Parrott

The author-god, according to mid-20th-century language theorist Roland Barthes, embodies the Romantic notion of the artist to whom brilliant epiphanies come to be written down. In fact, at times throughout history, the best authors were believed to have been chosen and directly inspired by God Himself. Because of this cultural paradigm, many of us are deeply and psychologically invested in the idea of individual genius authorship, as discussed in Dustin Edwards and Enrique Paz's chapter elsewhere in this collection. But, Bruce Horner writes in *Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition* that the genius idea separates us from the real world. By seeing authors as genius artists only, we remove ourselves from the activity of writing, which is social and contextual, and are distracted by the product itself. When struggling writers consider writing a piece of art, they become frustrated because they cannot force their writing to look like what they expect art to be, and they have no clue where to begin to make themselves the genius writer they believe teachers, bosses, and readers expect.

Some of this idea—that writing is a talent set in stone—can be directly correlated to the history of writing instruction itself. At the end of the 19th century, proponents of a so-called literacy crisis claimed that students entering American universities needed to become more familiar with their own language and coincided with a push to use our education system to build a uniquely American intellectual identity, which ended up relegating writing instruction to first-year courses. Many critics have attached this literacy crisis to cultural anxiety over the growing pluralism of American society as immigration increased with the Industrial Revolution. This anxiety could also be seen in the approaches taken in these new

writing-focused classes. In a narrative all writing studies scholars are familiar with, much of the teaching of writing in late 19th- and early- to mid-20th-century America focused on the *object* produced by writing, not the process of writing a text. This focus on the product of writing reinforced the idea of writing as a skill some people just had. Essays were usually written once and were done, for good or ill. Students who were privileged to be of the right socioeconomic, national, or ethnic background already wrote to the university's standards because they were part of the group in power who set the standards. Therefore, their perceived talent perpetuated the author genius idea because these desirable students were already seen as good writers while the less desirable students were not.

Now, however, our cultural situation is quite different. Because computer-based composition is quicker than pen to paper and because the Internet allows us to share what we have written so quickly, our composition happens quickly, often as a reaction to what someone else has written or posted. One of the effects of word processing and subsequently web publishing is that authors are not just authors; they are also editors and publishers, broadening the individual's daily interaction with language. In other words, while the idea of the individual author genius is theoretically problematic, it is also practically problematic because our everyday authorship practices are socially situated, collaborative, and interactive. People *can* and *do* read and write (and read and write again) all the time. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others offer daily opportunities for reading, creating, and responding to texts. Many people are experts at those activities but then lack the experience and facility to recognize the rhetorical requirements of other contexts or genres.

Unfortunately, many discussions of authorship tend to ignore these interesting aspects of language and focus on what writers should not do: don't plagiarize, don't use "I," don't use Wikipedia. The practices needed to become adept at writing are criminalized, and inexperienced authors are often punished *for being inexperienced*. Sometimes when I hear colleagues complain about student writing, my response is "But isn't that why we're here? Is it not our job to teach them?" But a power differential between inexperienced writers and professional authors perpetuates the idea of learners as helpless children. We paint narratives of new writers negatively, researchers refer to them by first name only in publications rather than last names as we would real authors (in other words, "Julie writes" as compared to "Faulkner writes"), we construct writers

as passive rather than active, and we negatively compare them to professional writers. In doing this, as Amy Robillard asks, “How can students *not* come up lacking?” particularly in their own minds.

As a reaction to these cultural forces at play, process-focused teaching uses the steps taken as the writer creates the text—more clearly connecting the *act* of writing with the product in the minds of those participating. Since that shift in the 1960s, writing theorists have been truly frightened to refer to our teaching as skills-based for fear that it might undercut all the work done to challenge those previously held assumptions of product-focused writing. But skill is not a word we should fear if we define skill not as natural talent but as a set of habits of mind and practices that can be taught and learned.

Indeed, the key to improving novice writers’ experiences is improving how they think about their work, a process called metacognition. Opening up cognitive space that allows for metacognition and reflection is essential to experiential and practical improvement. One particularly powerful concept in the current metacognitive conversation is persistence: Persistence emphasizes that experience is more powerful than unchangeable ability, and challenges help move writers forward rather than delaying their progress. Good writers build these habits of mind. A successful writer—whether someone working alone or with a community group, or as a university student, professional writer, or any other way—is not one who necessarily writes more but one who persists and reflects on the work done as a means of improvement. Instructors work not to reward the talented genius and punish the unlucky, but to provide opportunities for writing, feedback, reflection, remixing, and revision of that work as socially located activities with rhetorical awareness. When a previously bad writer sees improvement, sees the value of persistence, and feels the satisfaction of the metacognitive recognition that they have gotten better, they will know that good writers are not born but come to fruition in the social act of writing itself.

To alleviate this disconnect between what culture believes writing is and what the activity of writing involves, many writing studies professionals agree that we should emphasize the contextual aspects that shape writing. We should emphasize writing as a socially located activity and reject it as idealized art object. One potential way to do this is to take writing out of the sole context of the classroom. Traditional essays that are only seen by a teacher (or perhaps a teacher and a peer reviewer) do not build writers’

concepts of themselves as authors because they can see those assignments as acontextual hoops to jump through. Writing experiences that broaden the writer's audience or provide real contexts such as blogs or service learning placements in the community can help new writers' see themselves as real authors with real audiences and see the act of writing as a socially located activity.

I will not deny, however, that certainly some authors are naturally more comfortable, more experienced, or more confident than others or may have more practiced facility with certain writing situations. Natural talent exists. Sometimes I compare writing to sports: I am not a naturally talented athlete, but I have trained for and run in dozens of races, from 5Ks to half-marathons. I am a runner. A person may not be naturally strong, but how could they gain strength? Lift weights. Need more flexibility and balance? Practice yoga. Likewise, it is with writing. We are all authors, and all authors can become better authors.

Indeed, research in writing studies shows that improved writing *can* be taught to writers at all levels, but we must first debunk the deeply held idea in the collective psyche that only some lucky people are good writers. If a person thinks their writing ability is stuck in place, improvement is incredibly difficult, further solidifying as a self-fulfilling prophecy the belief that they are a hopeless cause. This idea that some people are good writers while others are not can be truly crippling to a writer. Good writing instruction—either in a classroom setting, a tutor session, or informally with oneself—can only occur if the person believes they can become a good writer with practice and focused feedback, which can only happen if they have debunked the myth of the genius author. All writers can improve their own writing by discovering which strategies work for them and where their strengths and weaknesses lie. We are not bound by an inborn, set level of writing talent. Good writers are not born. They are learned.

Further Reading

For more about authorship theories, see Roland Barthes's famous essays "Authors and Writers" and "The Death of the Author" or Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" Sean Burke's collection *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* is a great resource for historical perspectives of authorship, which have changed dramatically over time. For alternative views from the single genius author, see Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's work *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*

or Amit Ray and Erhardt Graeff's "Reviewing the Author-Function in the Age of Wikipedia."

To better understand the struggles and anxieties of inexperienced writers, see "Inventing the University" by David Bartholomae, Peter Elbow's widely read *Writing Without Teachers*, or Rebecca Moore Howard's *Standing in the Shadows of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators*. Further, Jeff Goins's blog post, "The Difference between Good Writers and Bad Writers," aptly gets to the crux of my argument here for helping inexperienced or unconfident writers expand their experiences and confidence: It's mostly practice. Because much of the idea that a person is a bad writer comes from anxiety about being unable to produce that art-product text as some kind of genius, simple exercises such as those found in advice from The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill, which advises new writers to think of themselves as apprentices, or a psychological approach to conquering fears and insecurities, such as that found in Katherine Brooks's "Writing Anxiety and the Job Search" from *Psychology Today*, can be helpful.

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