

Sound Writing: Reclaiming Authorship in the Digital Age

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In 2009, literacy scholars Denis G. Pelli and Charles Bigelow made the startling claim that “nearly universal literacy is a defining characteristic of today’s modern civilization; nearly universal authorship will shape tomorrow’s.” Thanks to the advent of blogs and social media, many people are now authoring texts reaching audiences of 100 people or more (Pelli and Bigelow’s defining criterion for authorship). Yet, despite the democratizing implications of Pelli and Bigelow’s widely circulated claim, the influence of most digital age authors remains slight relative to the influence of those who utilize traditional publishing processes.

This disparity is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the publishing of reference books, which remain largely the province of for-profit publishers and exude a cachet and influence qualitatively distinct from content published by social media authors (Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, etc.). Reference books for writing – dictionaries, writing handbooks, grammar handbooks – are often marketed, and subsequently received as prescriptive manuals, with rules handed down on high for writers meekly to learn and follow. Though some social media authors certainly have significant influence, their credibility pales in comparison to that of “the dictionary.”

The credibility of these books is in inverse relationship to the prominence of the authors. Unlike social media authorship, which is dependent on individual authors’ social identities, modern reference publishing practices obscure authorship – to the extent that reading publics forget, for instance, that *Webster’s Dictionary* began as the cultural work of Noah Webster, an eccentric American nationalist in favor of remaking English, or that Ludwig Reiner’s *Stilfibel* builds on material acquired through the questionable wartime use of Jewish author Eduard Engel’s work.¹ The seeming authorlessness of reference guides suggests that the authors’ advice on writing is universal, rather than historically specific. This erasure of authorial presence ironically disserves new writers, who may perceive the guides’ esoteric rules as barriers to rather than avenues for their successful integration within an academic community.

In this essay, we reflect on how our experiences of creating *Sound Writing*, a born-digital writing reference guide, enabled us to interrupt modern print reference publishing practices, to reclaim the authority and ownership so often passed off to others in a commercial publication process, and – to the benefit of ourselves as writers and our audience as readers – to refigure the notion of “correctness” itself.

1 Thank you to Daniel Spielmann for pointing us to this history of *Stilfibel*.

Sound Writing: A Guide

Regardless of a person's linguistic and educational background, academic writing is strange territory, with distinctive customs and ways of communicating. This strange territory can provoke acute disorientation for newcomers to academic writing in small liberal arts college contexts like ours, where students specialize in one or more major fields of study but are also required to take courses across the disciplines. A student majoring, for instance, in biology might also need to take a course in Romantic English poetry, a course in 20th-century music criticism, and a course in comparative politics – and to produce academic writing in all of those courses. Faculty in all disciplines are expected to assign and grade writing and to familiarize students with the conventions of writing in that discipline. In traversing academic writing, as in literal traveling, it can be useful to have a guide.

Like many other institutions in the United States, the University of Puget Sound (a small liberal arts university of about 2600 students) uses a campus-wide writing handbook to assist students and faculty in navigating academic writing. *Sound Writing*, unlike the handbooks at other institutions, is the collaborative product of student authors (and one faculty author). To be sure, it offers the same things that commercially produced handbooks offer – resources and advice on writing, reading, and research processes; composition and organization; sentence-level mechanics; writing in the disciplines; citation practices; and oral presentations – and it has the same objective, namely, to help students develop a range of techniques for success as academic writers. What differentiates *Sound Writing* from its conventionally produced cousins is its institutional specificity. Rather than addressing the collegiate academic community at large, the handbook is tailored specifically to the University of Puget Sound community: we have embedded institution-specific examples into the text, including writing samples from student papers, videotaped interviews with our faculty about their personal writing advice and experiences as writers, and advice on using the book in our curriculum. *Sound Writing's* title embodies the handbook's combination of local focus and playful but serious attention to language: it both puns on our university's name and attempts to offer rigorous, “sound” advice on writing.

What's more, *Sound Writing* is a digital handbook using the online hosting repository PreTeXt, a free and collaborative platform developed by University of Puget Sound's own Professor Robert Beezer. PreTeXt has a more student-friendly interface than traditional writing handbooks, offering many features that suit their web-based writing and researching preferences: the platform offers optimized accessibility for computer, smartphone, and tablet devices; a printable PDF version for hard-copy use; a table of contents with scroll and “jump to” capabilities; embedded hyperlinks for easy reference to different sections; drop-down “knowls” that present additional, optional information; shaded boxes to highlight critical reminders or pieces of advice; and capability to include color and graphic elements (Figure 1). Additionally, in its malleability, PreTeXt endowed us a higher degree of control over content presentation and customization and, consequently, worked to enhance the handbook's institutional specificity.

Figure 1

In this image, “Standard American English” is the “knowl.” If a reader did not know what “Standard American English” was, they could click on the “knowl,” and a blue box with a description of Standard American English would appear below.



The Path to *Sound Writing*

Though *Sound Writing* has been the official writing guide of the University of Puget Sound since September 2017, the story of *Sound Writing* is much longer and reflects the conceptual contrasts between print and digital texts. In response to faculty requests for additional assistance with writing instruction, Julie Nelson Christoph led in 2011 an exploratory study of commercial writing guides. In 2012, after piloting a range of commercially published handbooks with our students and faculty, the exploratory group received the full faculty's endorsement of a customized edition of a commercially published writing handbook.

While that customized handbook was certainly better than no guide, annual student and faculty surveys about the handbook revealed that it posed a number of problems. Students complained that the handbook was too expensive (at a university-subsidized price of \$35, down from a list price of \$50) and that, at 576 pages, the book itself was unwieldy and difficult to navigate. Faculty complained that the handbook did not include information specific to writing in the disciplines at our university. Moreover, students' activism around diversity and gender identity made the advice in the handbook about linguistic "correctness" and gendered pronouns seem increasingly outdated.

Having exhausted available commercial publications, we realized that if we were going to find a handbook that fits our needs, we would need to create that handbook ourselves. *Sound Writing* is the university's response to student and faculty desire for a writing resource that is easily accessible and that reflects the writing objectives, expectations, and experiences of our campus community – ultimately, a handbook written for us, by us.

Though we turned to a digital format, initially, as a cost-saving measure, the digital platform supported our overall goals in unexpected ways: 1) writing digitally leveled traditional publishing and interpersonal hierarchies and enabled us to develop new skills as writers, and 2) writing digitally enabled us to take more risks, both with the content and the format of the handbook.

Writing *Sound Writing*

Sound Writing was written jointly by the four authors of this article. Now-former peer writing tutors Cody Chun, Kieran O'Neil, and Kylie Young acted as content producers and editors, and faculty member and writing center director Julie Nelson Christoph acted as fourth editor and administrative wizard. We also received programming support from undergraduate computer science student Jahrme Risner. The project began in April 2016, when we formed a provisional outline and timeline for the project.

During the first couple of months, we worked on the handbook in the same physical space (our writing center) and could thus check in informally about questions that arose. Completing this period of residency gave the handbook direction and momentum in its formative stages and helped the four of us to develop a system of production intimately connected to the personal relationships we had built. As the summer progressed and our individual research and personal commitments took us to different places, composing digitally and in the cloud became essential. We increasingly relied on technologies such as Google Docs and Dropbox to collaborate, working asynchronously and using the comment feature to exchange ideas. The use of digital technologies allowed us to continue working "locally" despite our physical remoteness from each other in three or more time zones (Pacific Time, Hawaii Aleutian Time, Central European Time) and enabled us to extend our hours of productivity at several crucial points in the composing process. (Of

course, this is not to understate the importance of working locally; as a substitute for that local connection, we connected weekly via Skype video-conferences.)

Use of a digital mode of production provided us with the benefit of simultaneous and transparent composition; by working within the same physical space, we had become acquainted with each other's writing styles and strengths and, thus, were better equipped to identify specific areas of individual contribution. For this reason, our transition into a digital mode of production proved efficient. Attuned to each other's personal and discipline-inflected voice (Cody's philosophical discourse, Kieran's scientific precision, Kylie's anthropological curiosity, Julie's administrative perspective), we generated content in a dialogical movement between production and revision. For instance, when working on the content for any given chapter, the primary content producer, say Kylie, could write a couple of paragraphs and continue drafting while a first reader, say Kieran, could edit what Kylie had just written and then pass the torch to a second reader, say Julie, who could then do the same; or, if the need lay elsewhere, say in research, Kieran could locate and consult a reference while Cody read what Kylie had written. The use of digital technologies primed *Sound Writing* to become a truly collaborative project, the refinement of multiple voices into one distinctive voice.

How the Digital Writing Environment Mattered

The use of a digital writing environment by a four-person team was practical, but it was also ideal in the sense that it preserved our distinct social positioning: we were a team of historically specific writers offering guidance to other historically specific writers. Had we produced *Sound Writing* through a typical print process, we would only have been the "content" experts and would have written our text and then sent it off to be edited by editorial experts, to be typeset by typesetting experts, to be illustrated by line art and photography experts, and to be printed by print experts. Perhaps, if the market for our book was sufficiently large, we could have also worked with video experts and educational technologists to create extra resources like videos or interactive exercises. Each of these phases would have been done efficiently, with an eye toward using expertise to minimize costs and capital outlays and to maximize profits for the publishing house. While the end product ultimately might have preserved our content, our intentionality with regard to language and form likely would have been diluted through the mechanized and hierarchical infrastructure of traditional publishing processes.

In using a digital mode of production, we actively controlled and participated in every step of *Sound Writing's* ideation, construction, and distribution – and we, ourselves, benefited as writers from understanding publishing processes better. As the authors, editors, designers, illustrators, publishers, distributors, and supplemental material developers of our product, we had to learn a host of new skills and techniques, developing our own sustainable writing and editing process via Google Docs and Dropbox; using Skype as a

means of talking through challenges, dividing responsibilities, and setting deadlines; experimenting with Canva design software to produce aesthetic and informative graphics; practicing videography techniques and iMovie editing to capture and stream faculty advice online; learning the intricacies of the lightweight PreTeXt XML GitHub application to convert Microsoft Office Word source files to a plain text format; and honing marketing strategies to conduct focus groups, develop effective advertising, and host interactive workshops for our audience. This degree of control enabled us to approach each phase and aspect of the production process with an eye toward democratizing writing instruction rather than prioritizing expertise or capital efficiency.

Our intimate involvement in each decision throughout the production process enabled us not only to illustrate and disseminate pre-existing content but also to continue making revisions based on what we had learned. For instance, we originally organized the citation chapter (as most handbooks do) by citation style (APA, Chicago, Harvard, MLA, etc.). But, unlike many handbooks, we had added images of actual sources with the critical information highlighted. Duplicating that information for each citation style made the entire section messy and difficult to use, so we reorganized it by source type (Figure 2). When we talked with focus groups of faculty and they requested additional source types, our deep familiarity with the content and the process enabled us to take their suggestions and make revisions not just to textual elements that faculty had noted explicitly but also to other, related parts of the text.

Figure 2

Each source type has an image of an example text, followed by clickable links to citations in the styles most commonly used on our campus. This example is for a book with one author.

The screenshot shows a digital handbook interface. On the left is a sidebar with a 'Contents' menu. Under '8 Citations', 'Book with One Author' is highlighted in red. Below it are other citation types like 'Book With Multiple Authors', 'Edition Other Than the First', etc. The main content area is titled '8.2 Book with One Author'. It features a diagram with a central box for 'THE ROAD' by 'Cormac McCarthy'. Arrows point from this box to 'Vintage' (Publisher) and 'New York' (City of Publication). Below the diagram are three sections: '8.2.1 APA', '8.2.2 Chicago', and '8.2.3 MLA'. At the bottom of the sidebar, it says 'POWERED BY MathJax'.

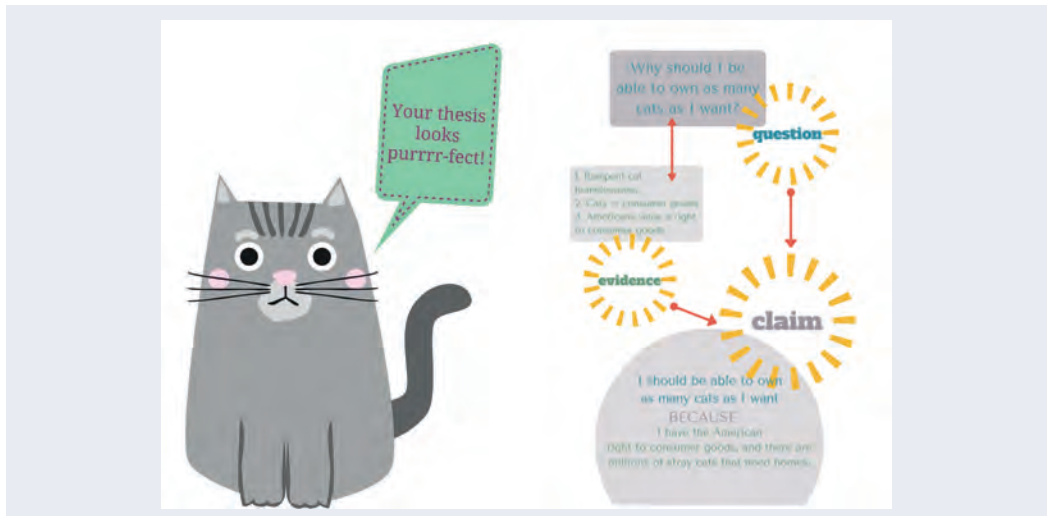
Collaborative Writing Rather than a Text Written by Committee²

Our digital method of composition enabled us to consider our audience while producing a text that has the benefits of being composed collaboratively, without the drawbacks of being “written by committee.” In using different types of digital media, we were able to think creatively about our writing instruction examples – many of which are grounded in familiar student experiences. These examples serve to customize and render accessible writing conventions that are often laid down as law in commercial reference books.

Often, our examples are silly. Reflecting many of our undergraduates’ fondness for cat memes and their homesickness for family pets, cats appear with surprising frequency throughout the book (Figure 3). While we recognize that not everyone may share our affinity for felines, the creative liberty we took in using them and other common student enjoyments (coffee, sleep, weekends) in our examples was an intentional step towards democratization, emboldened through the use of a collaborative and student-managed platform. Whereas the cat theme might not survive scrutiny at a major press, it has had nothing but sanction at the hands of four pet-loving millennials (Julie has been dubbed an honorary millennial by her co-authors). Based on the feedback we have received thus far, we believe that our unconventional yet familiar approach has been successful in meeting our audience’s needs.

Figure 3

Example graphics containing cat illustrations, puns, and references. The degree of control we had in crafting *Sound Writing* allowed us to integrate an element of fun into our content.



² “Written by Committee” has no equivalent in German but is similar to the effect of having “too many cooks in the kitchen” (“zu viele Köche verderben den Brei”); it describes a text that lacks coherence because individual members of a committee („Ausschuss“) have made isolated revisions and corrections without an overall sense of purpose.

Thin Hierarchy and Progressive Content

More significantly, writing within this kind of horizontal organizational structure with a relatively thin hierarchy enabled us to enact socially progressive editorial policies more quickly than we could have within traditional handbook publishing with a more traditional organizational hierarchy. Because each author had the ability to exercise their³ own judgment in consultation with a small team, we were able to respond quickly to our readers' needs.

For example, starting in 2015, students on our campus had become increasingly interested in gender-inclusivity and had advocated broadly for increased awareness of gender as a continuum rather than a binary. Like German, English does not have a gender-neutral singular third-person personal pronoun, and that linguistic gap makes it difficult to write inclusively of people who identify in a range of gendered ways. In the context of campaigns for gender-neutral bathrooms and awareness of transgender identities, the faculty advice in the custom pages of the commercial handbook about not using “they” as a singular pronoun felt increasingly outdated.

As linguistic scholar Dennis Baron has noted, publishers and other gatekeepers of the English language have resisted use of “they” as a singular pronoun, despite its vernacular usage in English since the 1300s and its popularity and convenience over the many alternative gender-neutral singular pronouns (such as “ne” or “ze”) that have been proposed since around 1850 (Baron 1987 and 2015). Conventional usage has been to use both masculine and feminine pronouns (“he or she” or “he/she”) to signal inclusivity even though, as Puget Sound students have argued, this usage reifies a gender binary and excludes transgender people. Students on our campus were not alone in questioning conventional usage; in March 2017 the Associated Press multinational news cooperative announced adoption of the use of “they” as a singular pronoun in limited circumstances.

In *Sound Writing*, we deliberately chose to use “they” as a singular pronoun in our own writing. That was a calculated choice; we knew that not all faculty would embrace the idea, but we wanted to put into action our handbook's democratic, contextually appropriate approach to writing, amplifying the students who were speaking out about how the supposedly “correct” top-down advice in standard handbooks was affecting them in their own lives.

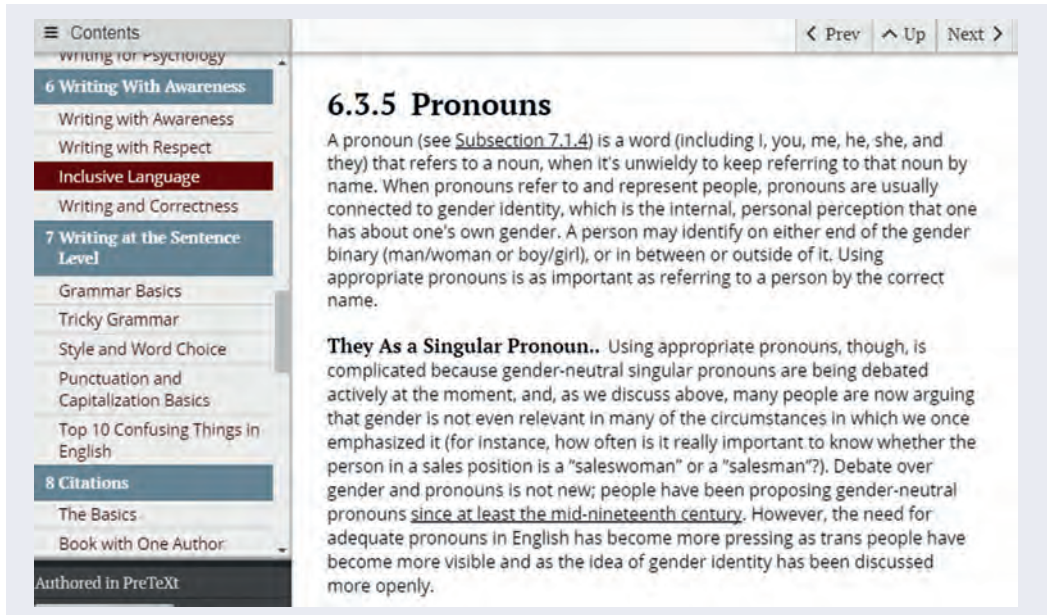
For Cody, Kieran, and Kylie, the choice to use “they” was relatively simple. Students on campus had been making that choice en masse for at least a year, and it didn't feel like much of a risk at all. For Julie, who knew she would be the person receiving faculty complaints about the handbook's official sanction of an “ungrammatical” practice, the choice was more fraught. Our honest conversations led us to boldly use “they” as a singular pronoun, but also to explain our reasoning, as we do in this article (Figure 4), and to include

3 For more on our choice of pronoun here, see <https://soundwriting.pugetsound.edu/subsection-33.html#singular-they>

information about that editorial choice in our public informational sessions on the handbook.

Figure 4

In the “Inclusive Language” section of our handbook, we offer a section on pronouns and the appropriate use of “they” in referring to individuals. This was an intentional act to make our book more gender-inclusive and socially progressive while also catering to our specific audience.



Thus far, our choice appears to have been met with approval: we have heard no criticism of that aspect of the handbook, even though our campus audience has been forthcoming in suggesting new material and alerting us to problems. Publishing online enabled us to discern what we felt it was right to do and to act on it fairly quickly – certainly more quickly than the commercial handbook we formerly used, which has published two new editions since we decided to write our own handbook in 2016 but which, at the date of this writing, has not changed its stance or commentary on “they” in the context of gender inclusivity.

Beyond this one example of pronoun usage, our publishing format also enabled us to foreground language usage as an evolving construct that requires attention to sociopolitical and cultural context. Research on translingualism (see, for example, Horner, Lu, Jones, and Trimbur 2011; Canagarajah 2013) and cross-language writing (Horner, Lu, and Matsuda 2010) recognizes that languages change as a result of cultural exchange and argues that multilingualism should be seen as a resource to be employed rather than as a problem to be managed. Informed by this research, we framed *Sound Writing* as a reference

point for writers to use within their specific contexts and histories, rather than as a universal rule-book to which they must inflexibly adhere. As part of that framing, *Sound Writing* describes Standard American English (SAE) while simultaneously addressing relationships between language and power; we recognize the privileged status of SAE while acknowledging its role – both historically and in the present – as a mechanism of oppression in academic, professional, and social settings.

Our campus audience is considerably more divided on the validity of translanguaging and cross-language writing than on the topic of the singular “they,” and our work to promote what we’re calling “Writing With Awareness” is ongoing. Our digital platform was perhaps most important here, for it is here that we made significant revisions based on audience feedback. Pilot versions of the handbook included a long section on African American English (AAE), as an in-depth example of our larger point that there are forms of English that have regular grammatical rules that differ from those of SAE. Only a few days before the launch of *Sound Writing*, after a year of seeking feedback on the pilot edition, we heard back from a faculty member who had read only that chapter and expressed their concerns that bringing attention to AAE unfairly spotlighted a stigmatized variety of English. We chose to write about AAE in depth because of its prominence in American culture and the robust body of AAE scholarship. We did not feel that writing about AAE in depth was necessarily a problem in the context of the entire handbook; however, though we had designed *Sound Writing* to be read in sections rather than in its entirety, we had not considered the potential effect of a reader reading only that one section on AAE. We decided to pull the section in question from the handbook, at least until we could develop more fully the section on varieties of English. That decision might have been harder to make if there had been printed books in a warehouse. However, the cost to us, in the long run, was minimal; we had complete freedom to remove a section until we could do it justice.

Difficulties of the Digital

Our digital format enabled collaboration, content creation, and collaborative responsiveness with our audience, but it has also presented challenges. Though the text is somewhat stable now, it is not – and never will be – complete. This incompleteness is both a strength and a weakness. In mainstream publishing, the ending is defined: the books get printed, bound, and shipped, in order to be read, swapped, and stored on their readers’ bookshelves. Although the author may offer corrections and additions in a later edition, the original continues to exist. But our book lives on the internet: it can always be revised.

While the ability to change the content of *Sound Writing* based on student needs, requests, and culture has been one of its most desirable qualities, the unstable nature of the text creates a new relationship between the authors and what is authored. There is no final product, only drafts, and we do not know who will continue to revise our initial

draft. Furthermore, the book does not legally belong to us, its authors, but rather to our university (as we, the authors, agree it should). We will be invested in the project as long as it exists, but Cody, Kieran, and Kylie have moved on to new adventures (and, in Kylie's and Kieran's cases, new countries), with little time and no funding to continue working on *Sound Writing*. Julie will continue to do her best to be a successful leader of the ongoing project, but she, too, will one day entrust it to the care and revision of those who succeed us.

We hope that those who work on *Sound Writing* in the future will continue to serve our original audience, the University of Puget Sound community, in keeping with the book as a university-owned resource; however, broadening our audience is in keeping with our intentions for the book as an accessible writing guide, an example of intentional and informed writing by which writers can challenge and disrupt oppressive ways with words.

Moving forward, our wish is that *Sound Writing* will become an open source book, which anyone in the world can take and use, with attribution, to adapt to their own needs. Knowing how valuable our face-to-face relationships with each other and with our campus have been to the development of the book, we hope that as the text goes forward, other users will be able to revise it in ways that are specific to historically situated writers and audiences. We hope that *Sound Writing* will serve in new contexts as an example of how universal authorship can become a reality, and how language usage guidelines themselves can serve the many, rather than the few.

To become involved with *Sound Writing*, follow the links in Resources at soundwriting.pugetsound.edu.

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