

## CHAPTER NINE

# Conclusion: Writing Continuum, Language Exploration

## Acknowledging the Myth Glasses

In the past eight chapters, we've seen the myths and metaphors we are up against. We've seen the ideas in Table 9.1 appear subtly and explicitly, in the past and today. Before considering what it means to take off the myth glasses, we'll recount what shatters the view in Table 9.1.

**Table 9.1** *Correct writing* myths and metaphors

<i>Correct writing</i> is...	Anything other than <i>correct writing</i> is...
... a sign of a good person	... a sign of a bad person
... a national bond	... a threat to national unity
... superior	... inferior
... a standard for excellence	... a threat to standards
... controlled	... careless
... proof of <i>intelligence</i>	... proof of lack of ability
... testable in narrow tasks	... not important enough to test
... learned by college	... disregarded by college
... rarely used by students	... commonly used by students
... the key to college	... unwelcome in college
... a path to a good job	... a path to unemployment
... under threat	... on the rise

## 9.1 Looking Through the Myth Glasses

### 9.1.1 Myths Are What We Are up Against

Bolstered by tests, headlines, and schools, the myth glasses make *correct writing* the only writing that counts. This mythical view is real. It is not a figment of our imagination, but a reality we have constructed for

ourselves. Within that reality, language regulation mode is the only viable way to approach English.

### 9.1.2 But We've Seen Alternatives

We've seen that English spelling is an awesome mess that must be memorized, and that writing and spelling knowledge are not the same thing. We've seen that *correct writing* is explicitly taught and gets easier with practice: It is not natural, and it is no one's mother tongue. We've seen that many tests are based on timed, limited writing tasks that do not represent untimed, varied writing tasks.

We've seen that tests and criteria change over time, even though claims about *correct writing* and student writing remain similar. We've seen that standardized exam scores do not predict how students will write in other circumstances. We've seen that secondary and postsecondary writing are different, and postsecondary and workplace writing are different.

We've seen that written English is not changing terribly fast, even though it can feel like it is: Writing choices that stand out to us can overshadow unchanging patterns shared across the continuum – especially if we are seeing them through the myth glasses. We've seen that many students make a conscious effort to avoid informal patterns in formal writing, and we've seen that informal language entails language knowledge and creativity.

We've seen that writing is 3-D: It depends on contexts and tasks. We've seen multiple reasons that people don't use *correct writing* – to connect with others, prioritize personal reactions, attract readers or clients. We've seen that writing across a continuum shares purposes related to cohesion, connection, focus, stance, and usage, and we've seen diverse language patterns for fulfilling those purposes. Different patterns in informal digital writing, workplace email, secondary and postsecondary student writing, and published formal writing create a continuum of informal to formal, interpersonal to informational, and personal to impersonal writing.

We've seen that even though we have inherited language regulation mode, it is possible to approach writing as a continuum for exploration. We have seen that explicit attention to similarities and differences creates bridges to new kinds of writing.

### 9.1.3 We Don't Have to Regulate First, and Explore Second

We've therefore seen why we don't need language regulation first, and language exploration second. We don't need to use *correct writing* rules before breaking them. Three reasons include:

- **Writing is already diverse**

Even in the basic writing continuum we have been using, we can see a range of writing familiar to most grown students and other adults. In the world outside schools and tests, writing diversity is a boon rather than a bane. It allows us to fulfill diverse writing purposes with a range of available language patterns.

- **Correct writing rules are often confusing and vague**

*Correct writing* rules can be vague and can also change. Undefined expectations like *elegant* (early Harvard and Cambridge examiner reports), *lucid* (“Why Johnny can’t write”), and *careless* (“The Internet is Making Writing Worse”) are common, as are references to *grammar* that mean spelling and capitalization. By exploring language patterns, we can learn more about writing, and be more precise when we describe it.

- **Language exploration means more writing knowledge**

Analyzing diverse writing means more writing knowledge, and more metacognitive bridges across the writing continuum.

#### 9.1.4 All Grammatically Possible and Meaningful Writing Is Correct

Exploring a writing continuum means thinking about correctness in terms of what is possible and meaningful in a language, according to a range of contexts, tasks, purposes, patterns, and norms.

All the writing on the continuum is linguistically equal: It all follows norms and responds to purposes and contexts. We’ve seen, for instance, how informational, impersonal patterns fulfill college writing goals, while interpersonal and informational patterns fulfill workplace email goals.

This doesn’t mean that everyone values different kinds of writing equally. After a century of myths, *correct writing* is attached to educational and socioeconomic opportunity: It influences college admission and employment decisions as well as assumptions about character. This means that even though a continuum of writing is possible and meaningful, only a small part of that continuum is conventionally valued in schools and job applications. It follows that only a fraction of *writers* are valued in schools and job applications, even though existing their writing knowledge and other abilities may never have been rewarded in schools or tests.

To shift to language exploration, we have to recognize myths and their power, as well as treat diverse writing in terms of what is possible and meaningful. If we can understand differences across the writing continuum and know they do not mean differences in capability, we are closer

to the truth. If we can use more accurate terms in our talk about writing, we are closer to the truth.

For instance, we can clarify what labels such as *concise* and *informal* mean according to language patterns – that *concise* often means “uses dense noun phrases,” while *informal* often means “uses interpersonal punctuation conventions.” We can clarify several common writing terms by using *grammar* to refer to what is grammatically possible and meaningful in English; *conventions* to refer to norms of spelling and punctuation; and *usage preferences* to refer to grammatical and conventional choices that might be preferred in a task but are not inherently *correct*.

## 9.2 Taking Off the Myth Glasses

### 9.2.1 We Can Use a Continuum Metaphor for Writing

A writing continuum reflects different possibilities, rather than *incorrect* and *correct* options. It emphasizes the inevitability of writing similarities and differences, and the value of metacognitive bridges across them. The writing continuum in Table 9.2 consolidates details of the continuum we have seen throughout the book in order to illustrate how all parts of the continuum illuminate the others. This consolidated continuum is representative of what is already true of written English in the world – it has the shared purposes of cohesion, connection, focus, stance, and usage as well as informal to formal, interpersonal to informational, and personal to impersonal patterns. But this is an aspirational writing continuum for education, because it accounts for all parts of the continuum.

### 9.2.2 We Can Shift to Language Exploration Mode

With a change from language regulation to exploration, we focus more on learning and less on judging. We gain explicit, conscious knowledge of similarities and differences across the writing continuum. We see how writing diversity and change are meaningful, and we see that writing across the continuum still follows many of the same fundamental rules. We avoid false separations between informal and formal writing, which are connected on the continuum, even as they have some useful distinctions.

In schools, this means making English writing classes what they sound like: courses that explore writing in English, including students’ own diverse writing, on a continuum like Table 9.2. Then, we make writing about more than *correct writing* errors. Then, a range of writing and language knowledge such as the details becomes fodder for learning. Then,

**Table 9.2** Writing continuum language patterns

	<b>Continuum Patterns</b>			
	Informal Interpersonal Personal			Formal Informational Impersonal
<b>Continuum Purposes</b>				
<b>Cohesion</b>	Pragmatic markers, emojis, hashtags, reactions, new posts and messages	New paragraphs or bullet points, transition words, moves such as greetings and closings	Transition words, introductory moves such as opening “hook” and closing generalization, templates such as 5-paragraph essay	Diverse transition words, introductory and development moves, sections such as intro, research review, methods, discussion
<b>Connection</b>	Retweets, text external 1st person  2nd person direct address	Greetings and farewells, questions, 2nd person and text external 1st person	References to general experiences and common knowledge, sometimes sources, text-external 1st person	Directives, citations and references to other sources, text internal 1st person
<b>Focus</b>	Simple sentence or phrase subjects, emphasizing people, events, experiences, active verbs	Simple sentence subjects, may emphasize people and events, active or passive verbs	Simple sentence subjects, emphasizing broad phenomena, experience, active and passive verbs	Dense noun phrase sentence subjects, emphasizing ideas and processes, active and passive verbs
<b>Stance</b>	Boosters, generalizations, punctuation, vowels and capital letters, emojis	Hedges, boosters, punctuation marks, capital letters	Boosters, generalizations, hedges	Regular hedges, some boosters, rare generalizations
<b>Usage</b>	Flexible, adaptable spelling, punctuation	Usually <i>correct writing</i> conventions and usage preferences, with some flexibility in punctuation and spelling	<i>Correct writing</i> conventions and usage preferences and spelling	<i>Correct writing</i> conventions and usage preferences and spelling
<b>Full continuum</b>	subject-verb-object construction open and closed lexical categories morphological rules of English			

**Table 9.3** Language exploration don't's and do's

Language exploration don't's and do's	
Don't	Do
Don't acknowledge only part of the writing continuum in school	Do address and analyze multiple kinds of writing
Don't imply that studying literature in English is the same thing as studying English language	Do address different genres explicitly
Don't use hierarchical metaphors	Do use continuum metaphors
Don't interpret standardized test results as general indications of ability	Do recognize that writing responds to tasks, and a test only tests what is on the test
Don't treat writing development as linear or finite	Do treat writing development as ongoing
Don't imply only one kind of writing is <i>controlled or intelligent</i>	Do emphasize that diverse writing is possible and meaningful and acquired with practice
Don't imply <i>grammar</i> and conventions are the same	Do refer to conventions as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization norms on a continuum
Don't imply that norms for grammar and conventions are always the same	Do refer to grammar according to what is grammatically possible and meaningful in a language

we support more of the writing experiences and resources people already have, and we support informed choices in students' writing.

Language exploration shifts what we do, and how we talk about, writing, toward the right column of Table 9.3.

With language exploration mode, we expect and study a continuum of writing. We recognize writing myths and look for answers closer to the truth. We support the human rights of language diversity and language knowledge, using a continuum metaphor and language exploration, to move ahead differently.

### 9.3 Concluding

We have good reason to hope that we can, in fact, change common approaches to writing. We have language patterns and subconscious language knowledge to help us. We have plenty of possible and meaningful

writing for exploration. Even the persistence of language regulation is a reminder that language diversity persists, too.

But hoping is not our task. So said the scientist David George Haskell when asked about whether he was hopeful about the future of nature.<sup>1</sup> It is up to future generations, Haskell said, to decide if there was reason to hope. Our job in the present is to get to work.

Let us get to work exploring. Later, let us say we had grounds for hope for a more open, knowledgeable approach to writing.