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Contributing to the Professional Conversation

Consider the following passage from the work of philosopher and rhetorician Kenneth Burke:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponents, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. [Burke, 1941, 110–111]

When Burke used this metaphor to describe what he called the drama of human interaction, he had more in mind than academic

conversations. But for those of us working in academic and professional contexts, the metaphor seems particularly apt. In many ways the books and articles that fill our professional journals and publishers' catalogs are like these "parlor conversations," with each discipline or profession conversing excitedly in one part of the room.

As writers our first obligation is to think about what we are contributing to that conversation—what new information, insight, theoretical perspective, argument, application, approach, or deepened understanding we have to share with others in our field. As we write and revise, it is vitally important to stay focused on that contribution and to make sure that our readers stay focused on it as well.

For our writing to be effective, there is probably nothing more important than this. Yet in the faculty writing groups I work with, it often proves surprisingly difficult.

Scenario 1: Defining Your Contribution

For Sara, two years out of graduate school, the challenge is how to publish something from her lengthy dissertation, which was a detailed analysis of the work of a contemporary playwright. Her adviser, who had liked one particular chapter, has urged her to revise and submit it to a journal that is planning a special issue on the topic.

Because she is having trouble getting started on the project, Sara sets a deadline for herself to bring a draft to our faculty writing group. She knows the piece is too long, she says, but perhaps we can help her cut it.

When we meet to discuss the draft, we begin by doing what Sara asked us to do: editing wordy sentences and chopping paragraphs here and there. When someone suggests radically shortening the literature review section, another member of the group speaks up. He had trouble, he says, determining where the lit review left off and Sara's own ideas began. Could she explain a little for us?

For Sara, it turns out, that is not an easy task. The theory she is applying to the playwright's work is actually a well-known scholar's

theory. And that scholar recently published a book in which he discussed some of this work as well. When Sara wrote her dissertation, the study had not been published. Now that it has been, her own work feels less original, even to her.

For a while there is silence in the room. We are feeling bad for Sara and she is feeling terribly discouraged. Then someone says, "So this guy stole your idea and got there first, eh?" and Sara says, "Yes, unfortunately." Then, almost as an afterthought she adds, "Well, not *exactly* my idea."

In the ensuing conversation Sara explains that the well-known scholar has not done a detailed analysis of the plays. He just mentions them as examples that illustrate his theory. "What I do is use his theory to do a detailed analysis of three plays," she says. "One of them is fairly well known—the play that won the Pulitzer. The others are more obscure, but they are interesting in their own right. When you read them through the lens of this theory, they are far richer and more complex than they may appear."

Again there is silence in the room, but this time it is because we are all thinking about what Sara has just said. "Can't you just say that?" someone finally asks.

"I thought I did," says Sara. But when we go back through the draft, none of us can find a passage that spells out Sara's point so clearly and succinctly. Before we leave for the day, she asks us to help her remember what she just said; she writes it down in exactly those words.

When we next see Sara's paper, it is both shorter and more clearly focused. She has kept the most pertinent references to other critics and given due credit to the well-known scholar's book. But whereas the first version tended to blur the boundary between that scholar's work and her own, this revised version uses his work as a critical jumping-off point. We no longer have to wonder where his work ends and hers begins.

At the beginning of a writing project, writers usually have a good sense of what they are setting out to do. They have researched the subject thoroughly, read what has been written about it, and thought carefully about how their ideas and findings relate to those of others. As the writing goes on, however, it is not at all unusual for writers to lose focus and forget their original intentions. Actually, this is perfectly natural, for as psycholinguists have demonstrated, the relationship between thought and language is extremely complex. We don't simply think, then speak or write. Rather, our speaking and writing are forms of thinking—processes of discovery in themselves.

Sometimes this process of discovery can be a very positive experience, leading us to see connections and relationships we had not seen before. In other instances, however, the writing process can lead us away from our original intentions, blurring our focus and causing us to lose sight of our own contribution to the field.

One thing that can easily discourage academic writers is the sense that what they have to offer is no longer new or original, and this is one sense in which the conversation analogy can be helpful. Clearly, there is no point in simply repeating what others have already said about a given subject, but that doesn't mean each speaker must introduce a new topic. Writers are perceived to be making useful contributions to the conversation in their disciplines when they expand on or clarify what others have said, offer alternative perspectives, or make connections with related subjects.

In Sara's case her contribution affirmed the usefulness of an idea that another scholar had contributed by showing how it could illuminate a topic few had written about previously. However, even if the plays she was interested in were well known and frequently mentioned in the literature, her analysis would constitute a useful contribution if it made a connection others had not yet made.

Another complicating factor can be the writer's level of confidence. Although some writers are eager to join in the conversation in their disciplines, others hang back, nodding at what previous scholars have said and whispering in muted voices that are difficult

to hear. This may have been the case with Sara. Because of her admiration for the well-known scholar whose work she was drawing on, she could not quite imagine herself "interrupting" the conversation to get her own point across. Although the work she had done had clearly earned her a place in the conversation, she could not yet see herself in that distinguished company.

Getting Feedback from Others

In our faculty writing groups, we often ask the writer to explain what is new about the work he or she is doing. In most cases the explanation is very helpful, even though it doesn't appear anywhere in the paper itself. In these instances we urge the writer to "write that exactly the way you said it just now."

Unless your readers come from your discipline, you can't expect them to know whether what you have to say will be regarded as news by others in the field. But you can ask them to read your draft and give you some helpful feedback.

- If you think you have made your point clearly but just want to make sure, ask your readers to put an asterisk next to the passage that they believe captures the gist of what you are saying. If all or most of your readers agree (and if you agree with them), you know you're on the right track. If only one reader out of several misses the mark, it may be that reader's problem, not yours. But if several intelligent readers identify several different "main ideas" in your writing, you probably have some additional work to do.
- If you're in the early stages of the project and are having trouble figuring out where you're going, ask your writing group, a colleague, or a friend to just talk it through with you. Describe what attracted you to the topic, how you started working on it, what you learned as you did your research and background work. As you talk, have your listener (or listeners) take notes on what you say and then try to come up with a clear articulation of the main ideas.

- If you have a draft prepared but fear you may have wandered off course, ask your readers to see if they can write down, in their own words, what the central point is. If they miss it, tell them what you were trying to do and ask them why it didn't come across.
- In the cases described, the idea is to come away with a sentence or two that sums up what you want to say. When you go back to your study, try writing the key sentence out on a note card and posting it above your computer or writing desk. Later, if you lose your way again, glance up at the sentence and read it aloud to yourself. Use it as your compass, and you may find your way out of writing difficulty.

Writing on Your Own

If you don't have the luxury of a writing group to work with, or if your deadline is looming and there is no time to ask a friend to read your draft, you can train yourself to see your work as others see it.

- Before you begin to write, jot down your central idea: the point, the gist, the angle, the insight, the argument—whatever got you excited enough to want to write this piece. Keep what you have written posted above your computer or writing desk and refer to it often. Revise it if necessary.
- If you discover that you can't really name the central idea in the beginning, that might not be a problem. Perhaps you would say, as novelist E. M. Forster is quoted as saying, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" If so, don't worry about having the central idea defined when you start out. Just start writing. After a while, you may find that the idea emerges, unlooked for. All you need to do is recognize it when it comes.
- Instead of sitting at your desk or computer, try writing in a personal notebook or journal for a while. Use a comfortable voice rather than striving for an academic or professional voice, and write about what drew you to this topic or area of research. If you can find a way to say it to yourself informally, it shouldn't take too much work to translate your ideas into more formal language.

- But what if it doesn't come? What if, like Sara, you find that you have written a six- or sixteen- or twenty-six-page draft that still feels unfocused and confused? First, don't be surprised. Professional writers regularly report having to throw out whole drafts and start over from scratch. Your best move at this point is to set the project aside. If you can afford to do it, let it rest for a week. If you are trying to meet a deadline, you may have to settle for an hour or two. The important thing is to *not think about it*.
- When you come back to your desk, don't reread what you have written. Open a blank screen or get out a clean sheet of paper and write: "What it all boils down to is this: _____." Then fill in the blank, in one sentence if you can. Now open up your completed draft and see if this sentence, or one like it, appears there. If it does and if it's near the beginning, that's good. If it's buried in the middle, move it forward. And if you can't find it anywhere, put it in. Your future readers will thank you.

Above all, it's important to trust your intuitive sense that *there is something here worth writing about*. If it was interesting enough to get you started writing, it is likely to be a subject worth pursuing.

Scenario 2: Getting into the Conversation

Although a clear sense of focus is crucial, it does not guarantee that others will read or value our work. Therefore, one of the most important things every writer needs to learn is how to get into the conversation in his or her field.

For those writing on a topic of current interest or responding to a recently published book or article on a given subject, finding an opening in the ongoing conversation may be fairly easy. But what if you are trying to introduce a topic that others in your field aren't familiar with? Or what if you are working in an area that people tend to resist or devalue? In this case the question becomes how to

interest readers in your topic, how to persuade them that what you have to say is worth their time and attention.

When Eric began work on his current project, he knew he might have trouble getting it published. That's because both his research topic and his methodology fall outside the mainstream of his discipline. However, Eric sees this as a great opportunity. If he can get published, he will be breaking new ground, establishing himself early in what could be a hot new field of research. So far though Eric has not had great success in getting others interested in his research area. Two editors have returned his manuscript with lukewarm reader reports. One reviewer, who was unfamiliar with qualitative research methodology, complained that Eric's sample size was too small. The other dismissed his topic as "narrow."

When he brings the reviewer comments to the writing group, Eric is understandably discouraged. He knows his topic is important and his methodology sound, but he also knows he is going against the grain of his professional journals. "If you're an established name, they'll publish anything you write," he says, "but if you're unknown, you're better off playing it safe."

What would that mean in this case? Eric himself isn't sure. He can't suddenly broaden his "sample," run statistical correlations, and satisfy the one reviewer, nor is he optimistic about convincing the other that his topic has rich implications for the field. Maybe he should just send it to a lesser journal and hope it gets a better reception there.

At first we find ourselves agreeing with Eric. Perhaps his study is not a good match for this journal, and we all have encouraging stories to tell of articles that were rejected by one editor, only to be accepted by another. Still, Eric is reluctant to give up on this particular journal. Not only is it more prestigious but he thinks his work really belongs there. Despite the one reviewer's skepticism, he is convinced that his topic is relevant to larger issues in the field, and the editorial

statement says the journal welcomes research in a wide variety of methodological traditions.

When we hear this, we start asking Eric more questions. Does he read this journal regularly? Have they published qualitative studies before? Not that he can recall, he says, though the editorship has recently changed, and there is one prominent qualitative researcher on the new reviewer board. "What is *her* work like?" we ask. Maybe if he brings in something she has published, we can see what she did differently.

As it turns out, Eric doesn't need our help to learn something from the comparison. One significant difference is in the methodology section, where the other researcher takes some time to explain her choice of methods, showing how her research can deepen and enrich what has already been learned using more traditional methods in the field.

But the biggest difference is probably in the introduction to her study. She begins, as Eric did, by identifying a research question and citing relevant work in the field. But unlike him, she also uses the introduction to explain the significance of her work. Although it focuses on a tiny segment of the population, the introduction reveals some things about that population that raise questions other researchers will find interesting. When Eric sees this, he realizes that he has made a similar argument but not so explicitly and not until the discussion section at the end of his article. To create an opening in the conversation, he needs to establish the significance of his research earlier, connecting it to the ongoing conversation and to questions his readers see as important.

Some people may be reluctant to accept the notion that academic and professional writers have to strategize in order to be heard. If the writer does his research and supports his claims with evidence, shouldn't his arguments stand on their own merit? In an ideal world perhaps they would, but this isn't an ideal world. Editors and

manuscript reviewers, like the rest of us, are busy people. They may not have time to read thoroughly every manuscript that comes across their desks. And unless the purpose and significance of a piece of writing is clear from the outset, they may not have the patience to keep reading.

For writers like Eric who want to shift the focus of conversation in their fields, the challenge of getting heard is even greater. It doesn't work to simply interrupt and change the subject altogether. You have to look for an opening or make one for yourself, usually by finding creative ways to connect your own work to questions that interest others in the field.

Getting Feedback from Others

If you expect your intended audience to be resistant or uninterested, it is especially important to get readers who can help you strategize.

- If you haven't submitted the piece yet, tell your colleagues you need them to read from the perspective of the skeptical audience. Chances are they will need some preparation for this role, and it will be your job to help them. Once you have explained the possible sources of resistance, ask them to assume the role of the intended audience, marking passages where they react negatively as they read.
- If the resistance you're facing comes in the form of reviewer feedback, bring in the comments and ask your colleagues to help you respond to them.

Writing on Your Own

It is often said that the best conversationalists are good listeners. And this is just as true of academic and professional conversations as of social ones. Whether you listen literally, by attending professional conferences and participating in research colloquia, or figuratively, by reading widely in your field, it is vitally important to know what others are saying. If you are a careful listener, paying attention not only to big ideas but to the subtleties and nuances of others' voices, you will undoubtedly hear things that relate to the work you are doing. Then your task is to draw out those connections, making them explicit in your writing.

Scenario 3: Maintaining Your Vision

In casual conversation it usually isn't necessary to have a complete sense of what you want to say before you begin to speak. In academic and professional contexts, though, it is important that the writer have a vision of what he wants to accomplish. This means more than doing careful research on the subject. It means having a sense of the whole project and an appreciation for any obstacles that may stand in the way.

Nick and Colleen are working on a textbook for a class they have both been teaching regularly for several years. The original idea for the book came from Nick, who always finds it hard to work with existing textbooks in this area. Often he finds himself assigning chapters but never discussing them in class, and the best moments in his classes seem to come from activities he has designed.

When Nick first suggests to Colleen that they coauthor an alternative textbook, Colleen is skeptical. But after a particularly frustrating semester in which nothing seems to have worked in her section, she decides Nick is right. They do need to write their own book.

The big question for both Nick and Colleen is how to get started. Colleen wants to contact a couple of publishers first to see if anyone will be interested. Nick says it's too early for that. He suggests that they write up what they have been doing, test it out in their own classes this semester, and have something to show a publisher next summer.

Because it was Nick's idea to start with, Colleen agrees to go along with his plan. To divide up the work, they decide that Nick will

draft an introduction to the textbook and write the first major chapter. Colleen will work on another chapter and gather some supplementary readings that they can include.

As the semester progresses, Nick and Colleen meet occasionally to compare notes on their classes and update each other on their work. They set a deadline of mid-January to have completed drafts to show each other and make a few notes for future chapters as well.

By the time January rolls around, they are feeling committed to the project. The writing has gone well for both of them, and they are eager to read each other's draft material. When they do, however, they see that problems have arisen.

Nick's introductory chapter comes as a surprise to Colleen. It is far more theoretical than she had imagined and much broader in scope. Does Nick really think they need to cover all these approaches to the subject? The slim, practical handbook she has been seeing in her mind would have to triple in length to include all this material.

Nick sees no problem with what Colleen has written, but the task of writing the introduction has made him take a broader view of their subject area. The course they teach may work fine for them, he thinks, but it won't work for every teacher. Their former colleague Donald, for instance, wouldn't even consider using a text like this one. If they want their text to sell, they will have to consider a much wider audience.

For a while Nick and Colleen seem to be at a stalemate. With a new semester just getting under way, they decide to put the text idea on the back burner and come back to it during the summer.

Meanwhile, however, it is Nick's turn to bring something to the faculty writing group. When he signed up for this date, he expected to have nearly finished versions of the chapters he has been working on, but now the whole project seems to have stalled. When he distributes copies of the introduction, he includes a cover sheet that explains the situation, alluding to the conflict between Colleen and himself. He doubts that we can solve the problem in this case, but at least we can see what we think of the chapter.

When the group meets, we begin with our routine first question: "Does everyone understand what we're reading here? Any questions we need to clear up before we can respond to the piece?" This time, it turns out, there are many questions. What kind of class is the text intended for? How is it different from the text you're using now? Why would a teacher be attracted to the approach you're taking? What are the other chapters going to be? Will there be a separate book of readings, or will they be built in? Are the sample assignments the heart of the text or just examples of the kinds of assignments teachers might use?

Finally someone says, "You probably answered all these questions in your book proposal. Maybe you could just give us that."

"OK, but first we need to write it!" says Nick. He still sees the publisher's proposal as something that comes later in the writing process.

We understand Nick's reluctance to talk with publishers at this point, but we still think a proposal would be worth writing, especially in a collaborative project like this one. Just writing the proposal will force Nick and Colleen to deal with some crucial issues that might not come up otherwise, and having to compare the book they are proposing to other books on the market will help them define their focus more clearly.

When we put it this way, Nick can see the point. He decides to call Colleen this week and suggest that they get together and draft a proposal that makes sense to both of them. They may be able to save the project if they do more planning up front.

At first glance this scenario seems to highlight the difficulties of collaborative writing. And there is no doubt that those difficulties are present. Collaborators may begin with a common sense of purpose but soon find themselves moving in different directions, sometimes because of intellectual differences but just as often because of different work habits and personal styles—not unlike a couple who

come to the party together but get involved in separate conversations and lose each other in the crowd.

But the basic problem here has less to do with collaboration than with a problem all writers share: the need to think about fundamental issues in the initial stages of a writing project.

For Nick and Colleen the fundamental issues had never really been discussed. They wanted to write a textbook that instructors could use in a course like theirs, but that was as far as they had gotten in the conceptualizing process. What would be the basic rationale for the book; that is, what features would distinguish it from others? Who would be likely to use it? Would it have a broad enough appeal? As they wrote, it became clearer and clearer that they had conflicting assumptions about some of these questions. And the conflicts weren't just between the two coauthors. They were within each individual as well.

One piece of advice commonly given to writers is to outline a project before they begin working on it. That's not bad advice, though it oversimplifies the relation of thought to language. Because many of us do our thinking and writing simultaneously—unable to know what we think until we see what we say—outlining before writing is not always a reasonable option. And even writers who like to work from outlines may run into trouble of the kind Nick and Colleen faced. That's because the conventional outline focuses attention on organization at the expense of more fundamental issues.

Although the outline Nick and Colleen were working from sketched out a basic structure for their textbook, it left unanswered some important questions that might have been addressed in a book proposal. The form of such a proposal may vary from one publisher to another, but the basic idea is to get the writer thinking about fundamental questions like these: What is the target audience of the book? What is the rationale behind it? What kinds of competing books are already on the market? What niche will this book fill?

From the publisher's perspective the proposal is a useful screening device. Like the pre-proposal process in a major grants program, it helps the publisher or sponsor determine which projects may be worth pursuing, that is, which are likely to repay the investment of time, money, and attention that they will require. From the writer's perspective it is useful for other reasons. By addressing such questions early in the process, writers are forced to see their work in its larger rhetorical context, which may save them considerable time and intellectual energy later on.

Getting Feedback from Others

Starting a major writing project is a little like preparing for a political debate. You need to know your stuff, but you also need to be able to think about it from the perspective of others. And you especially need to anticipate objections and reasons for rejection. This is where test readers can be especially helpful.

- If you're involved in a large project such as a book or a grant proposal, plan on writing a proposal in advance of the actual project. Even if you don't know yet exactly where you will submit the book or grant, draft a short pre-proposal that will answer the basic questions any publisher or funding agency is likely to ask. (See Appendix B for one example of a fairly typical set of book proposal guidelines.) Once you do make a decision about where to submit your work, it should be relatively easy to adapt the generic proposal to the specific questions the publisher or sponsoring agency wants you to address.
- Once you draft a generic proposal, ask a friend or writing group to play the role of the intended audience. Tell them as much as you can about the publisher or sponsor, and make copies for them of any guidelines you have been given. If you want really constructive feedback, ask them to play devil's advocate with the proposal, keeping an eye out for anything that might cause the publisher or sponsor

to reject it. At this stage it is still early enough to reconceive the project if you need to.

Writing on Your Own

If you're working on a journal article, review, or report, you probably won't be asked to submit a proposal beforehand. Still, it can be useful to think in terms of a proposal, even when you're starting a shorter project.

- If you're working on a scholarly article, imagine that you are writing a proposal to a particular journal. First, ask yourself some questions: What is the article about? What contribution does it make to the field? What will be its basic structure? Who are you trying to reach with it? Why is it appropriate for this particular journal? Then try writing a one-page memo to yourself, detailing the answers to these questions; keep it close by as you write.
- If you're writing a report, imagine writing the proposal to the person who has commissioned it. What is the purpose of this report? Who will read it and for what purposes? What can they expect to learn from the report? What kind of response would you like?
- Regardless of the project you're working on, imagine questions that are key to that particular project. Then jot answers to those questions in a memo directed to yourself. If they're good questions, and if your answers are clear and succinct, you may find yourself using this material later when you write a cover letter to accompany the final written project.

Working with a Collaborator

In many academic and professional contexts, collaboration is not the exception but the norm. In the writing groups I've worked with, we rarely have two members working together on a project, but we have reviewed work that half of a collaborative team brings in for us to read. In some cases our colleague has been in conflict with a coauthor, and we have tried to offer support. In other cases we've been

able to mediate conflict by helping our colleague understand where his coauthor might be coming from. Or we may help him smooth out and blend together a chapter that reads like a pastiche of styles.

If you are working on a collaborative project, your first obligation is to your coauthor, but that doesn't mean you can't use feedback from others as well. Here are some suggestions:

- If you sense conflict brewing between yourself and your coauthor, suggest a time-out from writing to talk through the project together. It's always best to do this sooner rather than later, before anyone has too much invested in a particular approach to the project.
- Learn to recognize where your coauthor has a strong investment and where she might be more easily persuaded to see your point of view. For instance if she plans to include several references to her thesis adviser's work, she may be doing it out of professional loyalty. Or she may be doing it simply because it's the work she is most familiar with. If you prefer to cite someone else's work, you need to know how strongly she feels about the matter.
- If you begin to lose faith in the project, do a little "cost-benefit analysis." Make a list of all the strengths you bring to the project. Then list the strengths your coauthor brings that will make it better in the long run. If the benefits outweigh the costs in time and mental energy, hang in there. If they don't, it may be time to consider a split.
- If you want feedback on a collaboratively written piece, ask your coauthor if he or she would mind your sharing the project with a colleague or writing group. If your coauthor is uncomfortable with doing that, you probably need to talk to each other more first.
- When you bring a coauthored piece to a group or a colleague, ask for comments that you can share with your coauthor. (If you have a writing group, you might even designate a chair at the table for the absent writer.) This way, both you and your colleagues can be positive and constructive instead of blaming your absent coauthor for problems in the writing.

Effective academic and professional writing is writing that makes a significant contribution to the ongoing conversation in the field. For the writer this means defining what you have to say and saying it clearly, concisely, and early enough that the reader cannot miss the point. It also means doing a certain amount of professional strategizing: looking for (or creating) an appropriate opening in the conversation and having a positive, persuasive vision of how your work fits into the big picture.

3

Meeting Readers' Needs and Expectations

In a classic and influential essay addressed to writing teachers, Wayne Booth argues that all good writers have one thing in common: they know how to adopt and maintain a "rhetorical stance" (1963, p. 141). By this he means that they focus not only on what they are writing about (the subject) but on why they are writing (the purpose) and on whom they are addressing (the intended audience). In Chapter Two the scenarios illustrate one important aspect of this balanced rhetorical stance: the need to be clear about purpose, about what the writer has to contribute to the ongoing conversation in the field. But if a clear sense of purpose is crucial to the writer, just as important is a keen sense of audience. Who will be reading this piece of writing? What will they be looking for? How does the writer take readers' needs and expectations into account without compromising his or her own intents and purposes or the obligation to do justice to the subject?

In some professions, especially those that deal directly with the public, it may be second nature for writers to keep their readers in mind. In these situations excesses of audience awareness can result in a certain kind of rhetorical imbalance that sacrifices content to delivery. Booth calls this "the advertiser's stance" (p. 143). In most academic circles, however, writers tend to err on the other side of the balance, focusing so intently on content that they ignore the relationship of speaker and audience. When this happens, says Booth,