

[Home](#) » [The Book on TWI](#) » [30th Anniversary Issue \(December 2011\)](#) » **“Process And Intention”:
A Thirtieth-Year Reflection**

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“Process and Intention”: A Thirtieth-Year Reflection

[“Process and Intention: A Bridge from Theory to Classroom”](#) is rooted in a time when intuitive, experience-based awareness that we should “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product” (Murray 3) was bolstered by systematic research into the complexity of writing. Lots of years have passed since those days, so as a reminder, let me mention five 1970s researchers whose work seemed to me then (and still does, for that matter) to suggest a complex idea of writing as a dynamic interaction of brain, hand, and eye.

- Janet Emig’s “Writing as a Mode of Learning” (1977) draws on work in psychology, physiology, education, and other fields to describe writing as a complex activity in which several different means of dealing with actuality—enactive, by doing (hand), iconic, via image (eye), and symbolic, through words (brain)—“are simultaneously or almost simultaneously deployed” (10).
 *Comment: The article casts these ideas as part of an argument for writing’s contribution to learning. But the opening few paragraphs of the section called “Unique Correspondences Between Learning and Writing” speak powerfully about writing processes. “Hand,” “eye,” and “brain” are Emig’s metaphoric terms which I’ll echo in comments on the next few authors .*
- Sharon Pianko’s “Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process” (1979) emphasizes the importance, during writing, of reflection (e.g., pausing to rescan completed text to make changes, to bridge to more writing, to reflect on plans, etc.).
 *Comment: Scanning text is an eye issue, hand produces text being scanned, and brain is at work during pauses. Why do writers pause, and what catches their attention as they rescan? Maybe matters of cues, dissonance, and intention—see below.*
- Nancy Sommers’s “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers” (1980) defines revision not as a separate, final stage of writing but as “a sequence of changes in a composition—changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work” (45).
 *Comment: What are cues? Often, visual signals (eye) of dissonance between the text as it develops and the writer’s sense of what the text should be doing.*
- Sondra Perl’s “Understanding Composing” (1980) explores the concept of projective structuring by which writers measure against possible reader needs their intentions for a piece of writing and the direction in which they sense the piece is developing before them as they write.
 *Comment: Intentions seem like a brain issue. How do writers sense how things are developing--cues maybe?--and do they sense dissonance between developing text and intentions?*
- Linda Flower’s and John Hayes’s “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing” (1981) offers a complex description of writing based on cognitive psychology, the most lasting element of which perhaps is the multi-box diagram a few pages into their article.
 *Comment: The large “Writing Processes” box and the left-side “Long-Term Memory” box involve brain activities. The small “Text Produced So Far” box that is part of “Task Environment” can influence “Writing Processes”—a cues matter*

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involving eye, as well as dawning dissonance from intentions and/or matters of projective structuring—as the hand produces the text to that point. Flower and Hayes present the model as a tool for research and indicate that its various arrows do not represent a rigidly one-way process; lots of critics, however, took it to be a rigid approach to be used in teaching.

Even before such research was much known, or in some cases published, “process” was well-established as a composition context of the day, as is clear in the epigraph to my *Writing Instructor* article, words from a 1978 CCC article in which Joseph Comprone writes that current research and theory

☞ *can be summarized by saying that informed teachers are now considering writing as a complex act including a wide range of stages or sequences, most of which do not follow one upon the other in linear fashion. The traditional pedagogical assumptions are rapidly becoming suspect: one cannot teach writing by ... having students learn skills one by one as if they could be expected to magically coalesce at some final examination; nor can one expect students to learn to write when writing is taught totally as product, as words on a page to be corrected ... ; nor can one teach writing as if it were not intrinsically related to a student's habits of perceiving, thinking, and expressing. (336)*

A related context out of which “Process and Intention” developed is that insights from writing-process research prompted some composition people (I was one of them, of course) to try to expand the influence of this research and theory on teachers still committed to product-centered teaching. This aspect of the late 1970s composition climate is especially clear at the beginning of my 1982 *TWI* article, which builds on the Comprone epigraph:

☞ *[W]hen he writes that “informed teachers are now considering writing as a complex act including a wide range of stages or sequences, most of which do not follow one upon the other in linear fashion,” Comprone implies that there also are uninformed teachers who consider writing to be something else. Richard VanDeWeghe is more blunt:*

☞ *Despite nearly a century of empirical research in composition, most writing teachers and many directors of writing programs either ignore the findings or do not even know they exist. Teachers continue to teach, directors to direct, and writing programs to change—with little or no attention given to the wealth of information readily available in composition research. [28] (135-36).*

To explore why such a situation might exist, the next eight paragraphs of “Process and Intention” work briefly with articles and books published between 1975 and 1981 by Ann Berthoff, James Britton, Lisa Ede, Jeannette Harris, Mike Rose, Mina Shaughnessy, Nancy Sommers, and others. “Critics of the gap between sound theory and classroom practice,” I noted, often blame teachers for their “ignorance of current research,” their “skepticism toward theoretical matters,” or their confusion “of the writing process with the completed, written product” (136-37). But I saw the situation differently: “Rather than being misled by ignorance, skepticism, or confusion about the complex nature of writing,” teachers may “adopt an oversimplified idea of writing” because of the pedagogical imperative “to provide instructions students can understand and directions they can follow” (137). So the first half of the article ends by calling on “writing teachers and researchers [. . .] to find ways to make [. . .] teaching approaches do justice to the complexity of writing” (139). “How can we,” I asked, “mediate between the dynamic complexity of the writing process and the understanding, prior writing experiences, and motivations of students in introductory writing courses” (139)?

To this point (the fifth of eleven pages), my key audience—so I sense today—was composition specialists who might develop conceptual articles, textbooks, and teaching materials to effect this mediation so that writing instruction could better reflect the complexity of writing. This audience remained important when I moved from a call for action to my suggestion that one way to help students

☞ *develop a usable sense of the writing process [. . .] is to clarify the terms we use when we think about writing and when we talk with students about writing so that we emphasize that the complex cognitive and physical behaviors of the writing process are different from the motives or intentions that guide people as they work on a writing project.*

To be more specific, I would like to suggest that terms like “prewriting,” “writing,” and “re-writing” do not indicate separate stages in the writing process, though they may be useful ways to refer to conscious intentions a person has at various stages in a writing project. (139)

I hoped that other rhetoric and composition scholars might reflect on that principle. But it was a teacher audience which most concerned me when I tried to illustrate the principle with two overhead- or handout-like tables—“Stages” in *A Writing Project* and “Processes” of *Writing*--and

followed them by several paragraphs about ways to use the tables in the classroom. I had *both* audiences in mind, later, when I recommended a dozen or so sources for readers to consider as they adjusted my charts for their own use, and when, at the end, I invited them to

 *modify my idea of writing processes as you think composition theory and research demand. But as you teach about the composing process, try not to mix it up with any idea of stages. Do not throw out the stages, but offer them to students as motives or intentions writers have as they work. And then, if all goes well, students may come to understand that writing is a complex activity in which brain, hand, and eye all work together, whether a writer intends to generate and focus material, needs to draft for a purpose and audience, or plans to revise a draft to make it more effective. (145)*

Evolutions in My Thinking and Teaching

The two core ideas emphasized in the previous quotation and in my *Writing Instructor* article as a whole have continued, with various adjustments and enrichments, to be part of my thinking and publishing as well as my teaching over the past few decades. Of the two, the more stable has been the view that prewriting, writing, and revision do not define “writing process” but point to intentions writers may have while working on writing projects and so to strategies teachers may emphasize in service of those intentions. This, for instance, is a core element in the 1989 textbook *Writing: Processes and Intentions*, the first chapter of which includes a revision of the “Stages” table from *Writing Instructor* into one called “The Life of a Writing Project” (as well as a virtual re-run of the article’s “Processes” table). And this idea has persistently informed how I have worked with student writers for most of my career.

Greater evolution has taken place, since publication of “Process and Intention,” in my view of writing as “a complex activity in which brain, hand, and eye work together”—predictable perhaps, considering how recent the writing-process research movement was when I was developing the piece. Some ideas in the 1982 article reach back several years, to research I was doing as I wrote a paper to give at the summer 1979 Wyoming Conference, later revised as an article in the spring 1980 *Freshman English News*. Indeed, the writing-process research I highlighted in the *Writing Instructor* article (143-44) was being published even as I was fumbling to understand and use it in my own teaching and writing: Emig on eye/hand/brain interaction (1977); Sommers on revising as part of drafting (1980); Perl on projective and retrospective structuring in writing (1980); and Flower and Hayes on cognitive process theory (1981). So looking back at the *Writing Instructor* article today, it seems quite understandable that my ideas on writing process became more complex as I built out from “Process and Intention” and continued working with writing-process research and theory in “Initial Plans and Spontaneous Composition: Toward a Comprehensive Theory of the Writing Process” (1982), “Writing Processes, Revision, and Rhetorical Problems” (1983), “Changing and Editing: Moving Current Theory on Revision into the Classroom” (1984), and “Computer Writing and the Dynamics of Drafting” (1986).

Don’t worry, I won’t be discussing those four articles in detail. Notice, though, how their titles suggest a shift in subject from overall concerns with what writing process is or is not (the broad focus of “Process and Intention” and “Initial Plans and Spontaneous Composition”) toward revision’s key role in the dynamic thing called writing. This concept grew out of my reflections on research I was re-reading and writing about and from efforts to develop teaching materials based on my evolving ideas.

That revision takes place throughout writing and not just at a final “revising” stage was important, as background for and argument support, in both 1982 articles (“Process and Intention” and “Initial Plans and Spontaneous Composition”). But while those articles were awaiting publication, and over the next couple years, this concept moved closer to the center of my interests and concern. So “Changing and Editing” begins with my conclusion that recent research “clearly identifies the terrain of revision as the whole writing process, rather than one small enclave of refinement at the end” (80), and, more specifically, that “drafting is a kind of growth that can only occur as writers sense the need for change, incorporating change into the developing text as they write” (81). I had come to these conclusions while trying to incorporate into my teaching a few ideas that struck me strongly in writing-process research:

- Nancy Sommers’s definition of revision as “a sequence of changes in a composition—changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work” (45).
- Sharon Pianko’s emphasis on the importance of brief mid-drafting pauses for rescanning and reflection. I saw this connected to Sommers’s “cues,” since something would need to cause a writer to pause and rescan.
- Sommers’s list of revision operations (her term)—Deletion, Substitution, Addition, Reordering—and objects of revision (my term)—Word, Phrase, Sentence, Thema [larger chunk of text, my term again]. I saw Sommers’s changes as things that happen during brief

pausings/rescannings but also extrapolated an eight-cell matrix that could be used as a Revising Grid. Then I also started adapting and augmenting the approach to have conceptual matters (e.g., ideas, thesis) as even “higher” possible objects of change than multi-sentence statements.

All of these ideas were obvious (and cited) in *Writing: Processes and Strategies*, a booklet I wrote for class use in 1982, showing up in the sections on “Strategies for Drafting” and “Strategies for Revising a Completed Draft.” They were important, too, as I drafted in 1983 toward “Changing and Editing,” which quoted at some length (at 82-83) from the “Strategies for Drafting” section of the classroom booklet to suggest approaches teachers might use to stress change during drafting—ideas elaborated under these headings:

- Extend Rapid Writing [AKA free writing];
- Don’t be Afraid to “Stop to Think” in the Middle of Your Writing; and
- Expand the Range of What You React to During Your Pauses.

After my 1981-1982 drafting on the *Writing Instructor* article, revision-equals-change ideas evolved for me as I developed more teaching materials and also when, around the end of 1982, I replaced my Smith Corona electric typewriter with a Commodore 64 and started to see—literally—changes by which drafts developed on the screen. So “Changing and Editing” advocates not just that we teach “drafting and re-writing [. . .] as applications of the same underlying process of growth-through-change,” but that we should “do this through traditional sorts of classroom approaches and with the help of [. . .] the word processing computer” (82). This point is even stronger in “Computer Writing and the Dynamics of Writing,” which sees computers as “powerful tools to help students understand—and use—the dynamics of drafting” (195). I quote from that article, here, to suggest how far my writing-process concerns had shifted by 1986 from general concepts of process toward revision’s role at the heart of writing. Revising a draft involves many kinds of changes, I said early in the article, for instance

🔗 Reordering, Adding, Substituting, and Cutting, in such things as Ideas, Organizing Principles, Connections, Sentences, Words, and Punctuation. *But such changes also take place during initial composition* of a draft—in the eye-blink long pauses, brief rescannings, and moments of reflection that have interested Sommers, Perl, Pianko and others. During such times (and even as their hands continue to move across paper or keyboard), writers can see how their drafts are developing, intuitively compare the results with their intentions, and try to make adjustments. (194, emphasis added)

Change as the heart of writing has remained important in my teaching, for instance in the 1989 textbook *Writing: Processes and Intentions*—especially its “Drafting: Growth Through Change” chapter and the “Computer Writing” thread running through the book—and in a Sommers-inspired Revising Grid that students and I have continued to tweak over the years. But so as not to drift too far from the intellectual climate in which the *Writing Instructor* article was written, let me turn to a very different development in my view of writing.

This development in the way I thought about writing—though not one I expressed explicitly enough over the years—involves social elements that began to context my thinking and teaching in the late 1970s. From 1978 to 1980, the same time that I was starting to write about writing-process research, I was studying collaboration and growing dissatisfied with how its use in writing instruction was limited to peer response to drafts, a late-in-the-game “revision” application with no (or at best little) concern for the social environment of a class that could support and assist writers when their intention was to get something on paper for writers to read. In 1978, I wrote *Teamwork: A Student Guide to Collaborative Writing*, which emphasized collaborative classroom approaches for “generating ideas and finding a focus,” “developing attitude,” and “defining audience.” Writing and teaching with this booklet pointed me in a direction that led eventually to a 1980 *College English* article which argued that collaboration is as appropriate early in writing as it is after the completion of a draft and that students should work with “sympathetic allies while they are generating ideas, jotting down notes about possible theses, running up against dead ends in research, trying to make sense out of their texts’ instructions about discovering a topic, developing a rhetorical stance, supporting generalizations, and so on.” It is important to broaden “the range of problems upon which collaborative writing works,” I concluded, “since this can help de-isolate students and give them moral support as well as *bring them wider points of view* throughout the writing process” (74, emphasis added).

The social orientation of “Teamwork and Feedback: Broadening the Base of Collaborative Writing” may be a modest one: awareness that the perspectives of students in a class have value while implicitly acknowledging that writing need not be individual work. Looking at the article now (with general ideas of social constructionism, discourse community, and post-process pedagogy in mind), I wish I had teased out the social orientation and elaborated it more in 1980. That’s not a reasonable response, I know, since the article was written before *the social* became the force in composition

that it started to be a few years later. (For example, very few sources in the Collaborative, Cultural Studies, and Critical Pedagogies chapters of *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* (Tate, Rupiper, and Schick) were published before the mid-1980s, and most of those came out a couple years after “Teamwork and Feedback.”) But I do have some regret about how the social orientation I had by 1980 has evolved in my professional life since then.

The implicit social perspective that was part of my approach to first-year writing in 1978 continued in my teaching and is reflected in the “Teamwork Writing” thread running through the 1989 textbook *Writing: Processes and Intentions*. Since then, social tendencies *increased* in my teaching because of things I was reading in the 1980s (Kenneth Bruffee’s 1984 “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” and Marilyn Cooper’s 1986 “The Ecology of Writing” are two that come to mind) and because of a “*duh*, of course” moment that I had late in 1988 or early 1989 while, as CCC Editor, I was working with a submission to the journal, “Cognition, Context, and Theory Building,” in which Linda Flower advances and illustrates two complementary principles:

1. *Context Cues Cognition*. “[A]s we shed the romantic mythology of the isolated writer, we see the ways other people, the past, and the social present contribute to the production of a text, through cultural norms, available language, intertextuality, and through the more directly social acts of assignment giving, collaboration, and so on” (744).
2. *Cognition Mediates Context*. “Context [. . .] does not produce a text through immaculate conception. [. . .] Context in its many forms is mediated—at all levels of awareness—by the cognition of the individual writer” (747).

Advocates of social theory and practice in writing instruction will not, I know, be impressed by my efforts to enhance the social in my classes: multi-author collaborative writing (even whole-class projects with the group responsible for all kinds of strategizing and sub-group work assignments); adjustments in how I talked about the writing processes to foreground cultural and discourse-community elements; efforts in some classes to follow James Reither’s recommendation that, since “academic writing, reading, and inquiry are inseparably linked” courses should be set up “as a workshop in which students read and write not merely for their teacher, but for themselves and for each other” (145). But there were changes, some evolution, in my teaching, even if—and this is the source of the regret I mentioned earlier—they did not really influence what I published about writing processes.

What Ifs . . .

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the modest social orientation of my work with collaboration did not register for me in a way that impacted what I was writing about the processes and teaching of writing. And by the mid-1980s, I’d moved to other things, such as establishing CCC as a refereed journal and, as an outgrowth of my editing experience, I think, writing about the nature of scholarship in our field and its role in faculty work and evaluation.

But *what if* I had consciously seen the connection and my *Writing Instructor* piece had—in 1982—tried to conceptualize the social as working within and around the complex interaction of brain, hand, and eye when people write? Might it have helped moderate the scholarly critique that research-based writing process faced from scholars committed to social perspectives by encouraging other people to imagine *hybrid* social/cognitive theories and teaching approaches? I’m tempted to answer with Jake Barnes’s closing words in *The Sun Also Rises*: “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” But I’ll be more direct and say, no—for reasons I’ll sketch in this conclusion.

First of all, I wasn’t smart enough to develop a blended cognitive/social approach (the idea never occurred to me, in fact), though it is probably more accurate to say that I lacked a grounding in social perspectives from which to develop a hybrid theory or to think of doing so. In a sense, I had my scholarly hands full trying to understand, and draw connections between and conclusions from, writing-process research that was coming out while I was working on early elements of the *Writing Instructor* article. And, of course, I was intellectually committed to ideas in that research and to the connections and conclusions I was drawing.

By contrast, scholars who critiqued systematic writing-process research that I found interesting and useful tended to be well-grounded in social perspectives which motivated their critiques and the theoretical and teaching approaches they advanced. They may or may not have understood the systematic writing-process research of the late 1970s well enough to develop hybrid social/cognitive theories. But their intellectual commitment to social perspectives (like mine, at the time, to process research) undercut the likelihood that they would try to blend or fuse social and cognitive insights into theory or teaching approaches.

A related reason blended cognitive/social approaches were unlikely may be the scholarly impulse to have one’s point of view prevail—to critique an earlier perspective in the process of establishing one’s own theory or approach. This is such a bedrock strategy in scholarly writing that it is hard not

to think it was part of the reason composition turned so emphatically toward the social before many in the field had reflected on, let alone tried to utilize, ideas from systematic writing-process research that was being published late in the 1970s and the early 1980s.

Would it have been possible, in 1982 and 1983, for scholars grounded in social perspectives to make the left-side box in the Flower and Hayes model of the structure of writing

The Writer's Long-Term Memory

Knowledge of Topic,

Audience,

and Writing Plans (278)

the object of analysis and elaboration about *how* knowledge gets into memory for the writer's use? Clearly, knowledge grows from a wide range of things cultural, social, economic, gender-based, and educational that the social critics of cognitive research cared about intellectually and personally. And the same sort of sources and influences would be at work in various parts of the Flower and Hayes large "Writing Processes" box—planning, organizing, evaluating, and the like. *What if* scholars who reacted negatively to the Flower and Hayes model back in the first half of the 1980s had analyzed and elaborated it to show the embedding of the social inside the cognitive model? Such social/cognitive hybridization *might* have given our field a richer and more productive view of writing to use in teaching and research for the past quarter century. Instead, the general tendency of social scholars at that time was to stress the simplicity and assert the rigidity of the cognitive model, while critiquing the assumptions behind it.

Of course, I don't know whether the kernel of alternative history in the previous paragraph ever would have come to fruition, so I'm not saying that the rapid turn from the cognitive in the 1980s left us with an impoverished view of writing. But I do think that it prevented process research's critique of simple stage models from circulating through the field, as it deserved to, and so contributed to the persistence of such models for student writers into the twenty-first century. Consider the opening of a 2002 article:

 *Recently, "post-process" theories of composition instruction have suggested that process (prewriting, writing, rewriting) is no longer an adequate explanation of the writing act. Many post-process scholars, largely influenced by postmodernist and anti-foundationalist perspectives, suggest that the process paradigm has reduced the writing act to a series of codified phases that can be taught. (Breuch 97)*

Just when was prewriting/writing/rewriting discredited as an adequate explanation of writing—and by whom? As the early pages of this article suggest, a good answer would be the late 1970s. Then, writing-process researchers offered descriptions of "process" which implicitly denied that writing involves a series of stages and sometimes explicitly critiqued the common stage model of prewriting/writing/rewriting. *What if* the field had spent more time really exploring, thinking about, and trying to apply the complexity of "process" suggested by that research—eye, hand, and brain in dynamic relationship? Might stage models and other over-simple directions about how students should write have died off, or at least become less robust, in the past quarter century? Maybe—or at least I'd like to think so.

Composition history took a different road, of course, and now there are lots of people in our field with little appreciation of the writing-process research of the 1970s and early 1980s. Maybe I've always had too much appreciation for it. But I am glad for the invitation to return to "Process and Intention" for *Writing Instructor's* thirtieth-anniversary issue since it has given me a chance to reflect on that research, to think about how it resonated in my career, and, through that, maybe to interest some of you in reflecting on it, too.

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