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## Preservice Teacher Writer Identities: Tensions and Implications

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## Preservice Teacher Writer Identities: Tensions and Implications

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Although the NCTE/NCATE Standards for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts (2011) require that preservice English language arts (ELA) teachers have a robust knowledge and facilitation of writing, it neglects to consider the importance of developing a writer identity. As recently as a decade ago, (Alsup, 2006) indicated that teacher identity work was not common among English methods programs. Recent research has indicated that English methods have focused on English teacher identity (Pasternak et al, 2014). However, much literature calls for increased attention to teacher identity development as identities are dynamic and influenced by context, experience, and personality (Izadinia, 2013, p. 695). Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) noted in their review of teacher identity research that despite the growing popularity of teacher identity research, the profession still lacks a clear definition of terms, attention to context, and professional teacher preparation. Attention to the specific parameters of a professional *writer* teacher identity might be one way of considering how professional preparation during college coursework and the context of an English teacher's classroom practice affect the developing professional self.

Professional teacher identity is important—and we argue necessary—in the spaces of teacher education because a strong professional identity can enhance a teacher's intellect by “successfully incorporat[ing] their personal subjectivities into the professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher” (Alsup, 2006, p. 27). We define professional identity as “a subjectivity or situated identity relevant to an individual's professional life and necessary for the successful meeting of her or his professional responsibilities” (Alsup, 2006, p. 206). For example, Alsup (2006) argues that identifying as a teacher means to merge the personal and professional identity. In addition to teacher professional identity, teachers can also develop identities as content experts, which might sometimes seem at odds with their teaching selves. For English teachers, one content expert identity could be that of writer, in addition to that of writing teacher.

After a review of the literature, we found two camps of work related to writing, teaching, and identity. One camp implements the conceptualization of the teacher as writer, where the teacher models acts of writing in front of a classroom of students as a content expert. These teachers have a strong identity as writers and are willing to write unscripted in front of their students; however, they may not have habitual patterns of writing outside of the classroom (Hicks, personal conversation). The other camp is the teacher-writer camp, which argues that having an identity as a teacher-writer means that the teacher uses personal writing experience as a pedagogical tool (Whitney, 2017) or for professional growth (Dawson, 2017). In regard to the former, ELA teachers' writing pedagogies can be informed by their personal writing practices and values. This camp argues that such an identity is not only beneficial to the secondary student (e.g. greater empathy and an ability to share how one overcomes writing struggles), but also to the professional identity of the teacher (Whitney, 2017; Whitney et al., 2014b). This study, in which we illuminate the writer identity of two preservice teachers (PSTs), sheds light on the importance of examining PSTs' teacher-writer identities and implications for secondary writing instruction.

### **Benefits of a Teacher-writer Identity**

The benefits of a teacher-writer identity are backed by research. For instance, Dawson (2017) identified multiple benefits for teacher-writers: (a) teacher-writers have a well of examples from their personal writing to draw from that they can then implement in the classroom as part of their writing instruction; (b) teachers can reflect on their practice as teachers through writing; and (c) teacher-writers who publish their work both create and share information. This typically translates to a greater sense of authority in the classroom. Additionally, Whitney et al., (2014a) noted how the teacher-writers with whom they collaborated were able to command greater impact both in and outside of their classrooms. For example, Whitney (2017) suggested that teacher-writers can enhance not only their own instruction, but the instruction of their colleagues. Whitney et al. (2014b) suggested that enabling teachers to better understand the professional writing of teachers may influence the field at large, giving a stronger voice to teachers.

Additionally, teacher-writers who have viable writing groups can build their authority not only on matters in their writing, but also in their professional identity. For example, Dawson (2017) found that teachers who participated in a writing group created identities as writers *and* teachers. Further, Whitney (2009) shared an anecdote in which a teacher who, after having enhanced her writer identity by participating in The National Writing Project (NWP), conducted workshops at schools other than her own, sought a graduate degree, wrote for publication, became

a leader at her local NWP site, presented at national conferences, and ultimately transitioned to leadership roles within her school district.

### **Participation in the National Writing Project**

The NWP is a space where teachers of all disciplines convene for multiple weeks of writing and learning to enhance the writing lives and writing pedagogy of teachers (National Writing Project). Whitney (2008) outlines four distinct benefits of participating in a summer institute: (a) opportunity to write daily professionally and personally, (b) sharing of successful writing practice, (c) space to observe demonstrations by respected scholars in the field of education and writing, and (d) discussion about the principles of writing that underscore those demonstrations (p. 144).

Not only has NWP afforded teachers opportunities to grow their writing pedagogy, but documentation also shows the transformational nature that the NWP can have on writer identity. For instance, Whitney (2008) described five teachers who fully participated in an NWP site not only enhanced their pedagogy, but the NWP influenced them to identify as writers. Drawing from the previous study, Whitney (2009) highlighted Laura, who felt like an “imposter” upon arrival at the summer institute because she struggled to merge her professional and personal identities. She initially believed that writing about her personal life did not exemplify meaningful writing. However, through working with the NWP participants, she was able to understand how her two identities can work in harmony.

Alsop (2006) described the merging of personal and professional identities in what she termed “borderland discourse.” Neither the situated identity of the individual nor that of the teacher is completely erased, and they can live in tandem in ways that encourage productive professional work. In other words, the personal and professional remain alive, and they live harmoniously together. Some parts of each may be lost, but overall, the identity that emerges is more complex, reflective, and meaningful. Whitney (2008) offered support for this concept: “writing and learning on personal topics and on professional topics happened in tandem; all of the teachers in the study intertwined personal and professional themes both in their writing and in their reports of change” (p. 178).

### **Absence of Writer Identity**

Although we have discussed the merits and benefits of having a positive writer identity, previous research underscores an absence of a strong focus on writer identity development in writing methods courses. Morgan and Pytash (2014) created a literature review from 1990-2010 to explore how PSTs in general are taught to teach writing. The empirical evidence they found was limited, discovering

only eight studies that emphasized PSTs' understandings of who they are as writers and writing instructors, and how their beliefs evolved through coursework. Considered together, these studies suggested that "PSTs' writing identities might influence future instruction; therefore, knowing their past experiences, views of themselves as writers, and beliefs about instruction provide insight into how best to prepare them to become writing teachers" (p. 11). Even though research dedicated to PST writing pedagogy is starting to appear more frequently, there is a need to focus on teacher-writer identity. Two California studies underscore this concern. Hochstetler (2007) and Norman and Spencer (2005) found that preservice teachers generally lack strong writing instruction training. Norman and Spencer (2005) found that preservice teachers generally receive significantly more reading instruction and theory than they do writing instruction and theory. Moreover, Norman and Spencer (2005) discovered that former classroom teachers had powerful influence over PSTs' perceptions of their writer identity, both for good and bad. The classroom teachers who positively influenced PSTs' writer identities were "encouraging, supportive, and caring" (p. 31) and who afforded opportunities to write informally and creatively. The classroom teachers who had a negative influence on PSTs' writer identities were perceived as "insensitive, critical, uncaring, and ineffective" (p. 31).

Ultimately, the absence of explicit writer identity development in university methods courses may preclude secondary ELA PSTs from deeply reflecting on and developing their identities as writers and that of a "teacher-writer." Morgan (2017) illustrated the challenges within the teaching of writing when teachers do not identify as writers. Street (2003) found restrictions that include a demonstration of a poor attitude towards writing, a lack of clarity within writing instruction, and an inability to teach beyond technical aspects of writing. However, teacher educators are in a position to enhance the writer identities of teachers (Morgan, 2017) and especially that of PSTs. To that end, we echo the sentiment of Street and Stang (2017) that an unrelenting analysis of the methods in which teachers are taught writing and the teaching of writing is necessary. We add to that by suggesting the same is imperative specifically for ELA preservice teacher education programs.

## Methods

This qualitative study was conducted as a multiple case study (Stake, 2000). The research was conducted as part of an undergraduate adolescent literacy course. Shea was the instructor of record and David acted as a graduate teaching assistant for the course in consideration. Both were interested in engaging deeper into the unit on teaching writing so PSTs could reflect on writer identities and to relate their identity to their beliefs about teaching writing at the secondary level. Given the lack of research studies that explore writer identity for teachers (Cremin and Baker,

2010), the purpose of this study was to examine ELA PSTs' writer identities and to answer the call from Morgan and Pytash (2014) by exploring how they "learn about writing instruction, how they [intend to] enact this learning when teaching, and obstacles they may face" (p. 7), specifically related to writer identity. We recognize that there are multiple ways teacher educators can help preservice teachers reflect on and understand their writer identities, and the strategies we employed are but only a few possibilities. The research question was as follows: how does the writer identity of ELA PSTs in our course influence their perception of writing pedagogy in the secondary ELA classroom?

### **Participants and Course Context**

The participants included 19 undergraduate students enrolled in an ELA preservice teacher education course at a large public Midwestern university with limited experience as teachers in a secondary classroom (i.e. practicum hours). The 16-week course included a 15-hour field component in local secondary schools. Each unit was devoted to an adolescent literacy concept, such as literacy identity, culturally responsive literacy instruction, digital literacy, and supporting readers labeled as struggling. The course was designed as an adolescent literacy methods course with an emphasis on reading in secondary ELA classrooms. Course objectives included three items: (a) to explore research-based instructional strategies to support the literacy growth of diverse adolescent learners, (b) to support pedagogical competence in literacy through continued work with issues related to teaching and learning and reflection on these issues, and (c) to integrate theory into practice through discussion and classroom-based field experiences. Students in this course completed an ELA methods course on writing the previous semester.

Specific to this study was the teaching writing unit. Drawing on the framework of Yagelski (2011), we invited students to open select classes with informal writing, at times presenting an opportunity to leave behind outside distractions and become "present" within class (Yagelski, personal communication). To illustrate, we opened one class by inviting students to write about their progress on an inquiry project and what they were learning about themselves thus far. We also invited participants to consider their identities as teacher-writers as we read relevant research (e.g., Whitney and Badiali, 2010; Woodard, 2015) and asked students to identify a visual metaphor from the VoiceThread database to underscore their writer identities. Students engaged in group work during face-to-face class hours to negotiate ideas, followed by a whole class discussion.

## Data Sources and Procedures

Each data point collected was part of the greater course requirements. The three data sources are as follows: (a) a visual metaphorical representation; (b) participant-generated reflections in class; and (c) participant-generated reflections on their practicum.

***Visual metaphorical representation.*** Our rationale for employing visual metaphors was based on the Synectics model of instruction (Kerkhoff & Spire, 2015), in which participants selected an image as an analogy for their understanding of their writer identity. We invited participants to select one picture found in a VoiceThread database that best represented their writer identity. This activity took place at the commencement of the semester (1/8/18). We elected to use visuals as metaphors because, as Ben-Peretz et al. (2003) note, it is a way “to reveal teachers’ underlying assumptions and beliefs concerning education” (p. 278). Participants composed a short response beside the selected image, indicating their reasoning for choosing that image.

***Participant-generated reflections in class.*** We included multiple participant-generated reflections to allow a space for PSTs to express their thoughts uninterrupted. Throughout the semester (3/26/18; 3/28/18; and 4/25/18), we invited participants to reflect on their identity as writers and teachers of writers. Participants responded to the questions on Google Forms (3/26/18; 3/28/18) by hard copy or email (4/25/18). Sample questions included: “why do you write?” and “what about writing made you want to be an English teacher?”

***Participant-generated reflections on practicum.*** Per course requirements, each student was required to spend at least 15 hours in a designated secondary ELA classroom. Students were encouraged to observe lessons and engage with students in various literacy activities. Students were required to write three reflections based on their experience by 2/16/18, 3/9/18, and 3/30/18. Students were specifically asked to consider “writing identity” in their concluding reflection.

***Ethical considerations.*** There were 19 students who consented to participate in the study and approximately five students who declined to consent. David explained the study to the class in early January of 2018, emphasizing that he, Shea, and Janet would not know who consented to participate in the study until after final grades have been submitted following the completion of the semester. In working with the university’s Human Research Protection Program, we felt this helped to remove undue influence on students. Further, we recognize that using coursework as data may lead participants to compose responses reflecting the teachers’ orientations.

For instance, the reflection question to which we invited all students to respond, “what about writing made you want to become an English teacher?”, reflects our bias in writing and writer teacher education. We believe that PSTs’ facilitation with writing and writing instruction played some role in wanting to become English teachers. It is reasonable to think that if PSTs did not consider writing or writing instruction as a possible reason, they may have composed responses oriented towards the instructors’ beliefs.

**Data Analysis**

The researchers employed open-coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) with a focus on writer and teacher-writer identity to analyze the three data sources for each participant. The researchers formed conceptual labels and then categories from those labels grounded in the data from participants. For the next round of coding, data was reread and salient ideas which repeated across participants were identified and deconstructed. These codes included standardized testing, value of writing, writing for self-expression, writing only for academic purposes, and prescribed writing forms. The researchers further reduced the data by identifying “rich points” within the themes. Agar (2000) describes rich points as places “the researcher looks for surprising occurrences in language, problems in understanding that need to be pursued” (p. 94). Upon examination of “rich points” within the themes, two participants surfaced, and as one was from the developing writer identity theme (Susan) and one from the utilitarian theme (Elaine), these two participants were selected as illustrative cases for each theme (Stake, 1995). We organized the codes into themes that delineated a *developing* writer identity and a *utilitarian* writer identity. Table 1 shares these definitions along with an exemplary quote for each category. The data for these two participants, Susan and Elaine, were then reread to ensure all “rich points” in the data were analyzed (Agar, 2000).

Table 1

Student	Writer Identity	Definition of Writer Identity	Example Sentence
Susan	Developing	Seeing oneself as a writer both inside and outside of school and valuing writing as part of one’s life.	“I write for enjoyment, and to have a creative release.”
Elaine	Utilitarian	Someone who acknowledges that they write for extrinsic purposes, such as assigned class writing, instead of writing for pleasure or for personal reasons.	[I write for] “academic benefit: showing what I know.”



## Findings

Data were collected from multiple sources throughout the spring semester of 2018 that ultimately led us to notice a tension of competing paradigms in writing by two participants. One participant, Susan, valued the process of writing. In other words, her identity as a writer arose from drafting, redrafting, and redrafting again, having ample time to organize her thoughts and make decisions as a professional writer. The other participant, Elaine, valued a prescriptive writing scaffold that afforded confidence as she followed the model.

The remainder of this section shares insights that have informed the writer identities of Susan and Elaine. First, we highlight Susan's writer identity, including the tension she felt with standardized testing. We then illustrate Elaine's proclivity toward formulaic writing.

## Susan

Throughout the course, Susan was thorough in her writing activities, demonstrating sufficient clarity, thought, and detail. Susan attended class regularly, and, though she was reserved, willingly participated in both individual and small group class activities.

***Susan's writer identity.*** Susan's writer identity emerged throughout the semester in various ways. In one activity, we asked students to select an image found on VoiceThread that best represented their writer identity and to elaborate why they felt that image best represented them. Susan selected a figure with Lerone Bennett (White, 1973; see Appendix A) writing at a desk stacked with papers because she felt that best represented her desire to revise: Susan wrote, "Whenever I write, I have to constantly rewrite and reorganize myself before I reach writing that I am satisfied with" (Voicethread 1/8/18). Susan's desire to revise her writing underscores her belief that writing is not an activity to be completed in one moment, but over time she can come to compose a satisfactory piece. Consistent with her paradigm of developing over time as a writer, she wrote: "I write to improve myself as a writer—the more practice I get, the better I can become" (Reflection, 4/25/18). Susan recognized that her ability to write—and subsequently her writer identity—is not static, but subject to change (see Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Moje and Luke, 2009). Susan appears to place value on the process of becoming a writer, noting that she develops as a writer *by writing*. For instance, she writes, "I am super excited about teaching writing, and having the ability and opportunity to experience the development of writing with my students. . . ."

***Standardized testing.*** Susan's emphasis on developing as a writer is consistent with her belief about the teaching of writing to secondary students, but distinct to

Susan's case is her stance toward standardized testing. Susan reflected on her field experience where she observed secondary students in pressured writing situations. Susan noted how unsettled the secondary students were when practicing a timed writing for an upcoming standardized test. Describing her reaction, Susan wrote:

I also felt frustrated with standardized testing in general, because I saw first-hand the stress that it was putting on the students, while not really enhancing their academic experience. . . . I felt that the rigid structure expectation that was being drilled into the students was not helping them (Reflection, 3/30/18).

As Susan is one who enjoys writing, the process of writing, and values the opportunity to teach writing to secondary students, the stress of high-pressured formulaic writing required of students gave her pause. Susan's perception that standardized testing can harm students' writing development further underscores her identity as a writer. The data we collected for Susan suggest that she does not believe that writing should follow a formula. Thus, her belief in a strong approach to writing was dismantled when she observed her students writing as part of a practice for a standardized test with limited time. Susan explained that students were instructed to follow a specific writing format: "I felt nervous as I watched them try and work . . . I felt pretty distressed when I realized that a lot of the students may not pass the test . . . I feel that the rigid structure expectation that was being drilled into the students was not helping them" (Reflection 3/30/18). She noted how many students pushed back on this approach, but Susan, following instructions from the classroom teacher, advised them to write in the prescribed formula. Ultimately, the standardized testing and accompanying prescribed writing formulas did not align with Susan's writing beliefs and discouraged her as a teacher. Susan expressed multiple concerns about writing and the teaching of writing because of this experience. Even though each doubt is warranted, most concerning was her failing confidence as a teacher of writing. Though Susan did not expound on this thought, she did mention that this experience made her "apprehensive for teaching in [her] own classroom" (Reflection, 3/30/18). Given Susan's writer identity and her plans for teaching writing, it is unsurprising that this experience challenged Susan's understanding of the teaching of writing. Ultimately, the prescribed model of standardized testing that was prioritized in her field experience contradicted her writing beliefs.

**Elaine**

Elaine was a conscientious student who demonstrated a strong work ethic both in and outside of class as she worked a full-time job in addition to taking a full course load. Elaine attended class regularly and came prepared to each class.

***Elaine's writer identity.*** Elaine participated in the same activity in which we asked that she select an image that best represented her writer identity. Elaine chose a figure of two people rock climbing (Beecroft, 2008), writing, "I identify with this photo as a writer because I see writing as a learned skill. I am able to grow and overcome challenges to become a better writer" (VoiceThread Journal, 1/8/2018). Elaine's response is similar to Susan's in that Elaine sees herself as a growing writer with an identity that is subject to change. Elaine also recognizes that writing is challenging; yet, she believes that she is capable of, say, implementing strategies to become a stronger writer over time. When we asked, "why do you write," she included a number of reasons: (a) "argue my [point of view]; (b) communicate/connect with others; (c) creative expression; (d) summary: to reference in the future; and (e) memory" (Journal, 4/25/18). As evidenced by her response, Elaine's reasons for writing vary across utilitarian and personal motivations.

***Writing with a prescribed formula.*** Elaine's experience with writing was much different than Susan's. When asked to respond to the question "what about writing makes you want to become an English teacher," Elaine responded:

I hated writing until I started high school. I struggled with simply getting words on the page. At some point my [high school] began utilizing a strategy known as Collins Writing (CW). For me, CW transformed my relationship to writing because I felt that it empowered me and "gave me permission" to just *start* writing and go from there; and "showing what I know." (Reflection, 4/25/18, emphasis in original)

This quote sheds light on Elaine's identity as a writer. We find it especially intriguing that she felt freedom to write from a program that school districts must purchase. This statement also reifies the previous statement that Elaine made earlier in the semester regarding her understanding that writing is a learned skill (Voicethread, 1/8/18). On the one hand, Elaine recognized that her identity as a writer was not static and that there are opportunities for growth. On the other hand, she suggested that the five-paragraph essay can be taught in a certain way that transcends topics and audiences. Considering her experience as a writer utilizing the five-paragraph model and the scores she earned on standardized writing tests,

it is understandable why she has such optimistic feelings about employing similar approaches in the teaching of writing.

Further, Elaine echoes this perspective as a teacher. For instance, she is comfortable teaching the formulaic five-paragraph essay for testing purposes. She believes these structures can be helpful for struggling students on specific occasions (e.g. during a standardized writing test). In fact, Elaine described the teaching of the five-paragraph essay as “a benefit to our students’ test scores that we teach them to write in this way” (Reflection, 3/30/18). She further noted, “these formulas can be helpful in guiding students who struggle with expository writing and may need assistance in organizing their work” (Reflection 3/30/18). Elaine’s disposition to the teaching of writing in a way that follows a series of formulas and structures echoes the positive experiences she had as a secondary student following similar structures. Elaine wrote that her ability to follow standardized writing formulas enabled her to score highly on “a series of tests” (Reflection 3/30/18).

***Limitations of structured writing.*** Even though Elaine finds value in standardized writing, she also recognized how these structures limit the writer, expressing tension about formulaic writing beyond testing purposes. Elaine wrote, “On the other hand, these formulas can stifle student creativity in their writing” (Reflection 3/30/18). This comment is consistent with her emerging identity as a writer in that her purposes for composition are utilitarian and personal. She elaborated that not only can a structured approach to writing hinder student creativity, but that “it is extremely difficult to build students’ identity as a writer when [they] are forced to create most of their writing under one specific formula” (Reflection 3/30/18). She further mused that her writer identity was constructed as a result of opportunities to respond to journal prompts posed to her by a middle school teacher. As a classroom teacher, Elaine hopes to build student writer identity by “incorporat[ing] journaling as a medium of self-expression for my students. Like my teacher did, I plan to simply ask students to make a certain number of entries or write a certain number of pages” (Reflection 3/30/18). Even though Elaine hopes to build student writer identities by providing many opportunities to write freely, she also views this type of writing as a functional part of students’ grades. Elaine said, “That way [journaling as instructed by the teacher], my students can receive an almost guaranteed participation grade while not being held accountable for following any sort of formula” (Reflection 3/30/18).

***Across case analysis.*** Looking across the two cases, we see two distinct writer identities from Susan and Elaine that represented the range of writer identities across the 19 participants in the larger study. Susan has a positive writer identity, grounded in the belief that she needs flexibility in her writing. She also recognized

that she needs time to grow as a writer by practicing frequently. Susan's writer identity is reflected as a future teacher of writing through her disposition that secondary students will also need opportunities to develop their writing and their identities as writers. This perspective contrasts Elaine's writer identity. Elaine believes that structures and formulas are appropriate instructive writing tools in certain situations, especially that of preparing students for standardized tests. However, Elaine also recognizes the tension that this approach causes in that it can limit students' creativity and ability to establish a writer identity. While Susan demonstrated a developing writer identity and Elaine a utilitarian writer identity, both reported wanting to help their future students develop writer identities and saw the potential value for their students to identify as writers. In addition, though their writer identities were different, both questioned their own ability to teach writing effectively in the future.

## Discussion

By analyzing the data of Susan and Elaine side-by-side, we were able to zoom in on a tension in the field between teaching students the strategies to pass standardized writing assessments and process-based writing instruction that rejected formulaic writing (e.g., Delpit, 2005). This section will first explore the writer identities that both Susan and Elaine demonstrated, connecting the data from our study to the extant literature surrounding this tension.

## Writer Identities Defined

One of the questions we wrestled with within this study is how to appropriately determine the writer identity of both Susan and Elaine. Since we did not directly ask them to state their identity, we drew on the work they submitted and the understandings they had. First, we begin by deconstructing Susan's writer identity and then we examine Elaine's writer identity.

**Susan's writer identity.** Susan struggled with the inconsistencies that standardized writing tests teach students about writing. Particularly, Susan showed tension in the time constraints that precluded students from redrafting. Susan recognized that secondary students whose days are spent learning the five-paragraph essay with "a certain (limited) kind of writing competence" (Yagelski, 2011, p. 46) do not have opportunities to learn about writing as a meaning-making activity (Beach et al., 2016) or to examine beautiful mentor texts and then compose with a coach beside them (Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015). Further, such writing stands in contrast to authentic writing practices that may include "[making] decisions in the process of composing, such as a selection of topics and audiences" (Skerrett & Warrington,

2018, p. 425) and “writing that makes something happen . . . whether that’s action, a change in attitude, or even simply enjoyment on the part of the reader” (Dean, 2017, p. 53). Focused on form over content, PSTs may miss the opportunity to understand that “the serious teaching of writing and thinking must go hand in hand” (Hillocks, 2002, p. 6). Ultimately, Susan’s foremost identity as a writer was dismantled during the practice standardized writing test. Rather than building on and enacting her writer identity in ways that promote development and revision as part of her pedagogical repertoire, Susan observed students in the classroom struggle to write in a mandated genre, which, ultimately, discouraged her as a teacher (Reflection, 4/25/18).

Susan’s concern over standardized testing underscores an important aspect of her writer identity in that “writers need flexibility and, they need time to allow the subprocesses to cycle back on each other” (Dyson and Freedman, 2003, p. 975). Susan observed that this preparatory timed writing exam did not afford students the flexibility they needed to compose a thoughtful piece of writing, and that was challenging for her to witness, creating a sense of apprehension for her future classroom (Reflection, 4/25/18). Beyond her identity as a writer and a teacher of writing, Susan demonstrated a perspective similar to Amrein and Berliner (2002) in that “high-stakes testing policies have worsened the quality of our schools and have created negative effects that severely outweigh the few, if any, positive benefits associated with high-stakes testing policies” (p.11). Although Amrein and Berliner refer to a collective effect on high-stakes testing, its potential harm on students’ writer identities was not lost on Susan. Susan questioned both the influence that a standardized writing test had on her students and on their identities as writers.

**Elaine’s writer identity.** Elaine represents a different case than Susan, especially given that one of the instructional approaches Elaine found helpful as a student is one that most worries Susan. Elaine’s proclivity towards formulaic writing was constructed when she was a secondary student. As a writer, she was not comfortable until she was given scaffolds for how she could approach academic writing. This approach to writing laid the foundation to her identity as a writer and as a teacher of writing. Elaine is not alone in thinking that the structured approach to writing can be helpful. Anecdotally, Frey et al. (2009) report finding writing templates and providing students with sentence starters to benefit students’ writing practices. Conceptually, Graff and Birkenstein (2009) contend that authors throughout time have used formulas.

However, a structured approach does not always produce healthy writing habits. Elaine expressed a desire to teach an explicit structured approach for “the benefit of the students’ grades,” even though she recognized that such a structure

can stifle student creativity. This tension poignantly echoes Kohnen's (2019) findings that PSTs "may find themselves caught between visions of what kind of teacher they can and should become" (p. 372). Though Elaine thought that she *should* focus on developing students' positive writer identities, she wondered if she would be able to do that based on the realities of schools' needs for children to pass standardized tests.

Though we echo the concern about helping students pass standardized tests, we worry that standardization values form over content. In other words, some are quick to copy the structure and thus forego an emphasis on the deep critical and creative thinking that authentic writers undertake to develop in-depth understanding, including prewriting, drafting, redrafting, and conferencing to name a few. For example, Hillocks (2002) shares an example of one student who composed an "antigenre" essay, which was lauded for its beautiful writing by the state; however, it was in reality a chorus of contradictions. Dean (2008) explains, "the student saw through the role he was expected to play and used the genre for his own purposes: to poke his finger in the eye of the testers" (p. 85). In this instance, like many others on standardized testing, the form was valued over the content. When the form is valued over the content, the writer's ability to wrestle with complex thoughts is lost and the writer identity is not developed. Similar to the lesson learned within the antigenre essay, a strong writer identity cannot be reduced to a formulaic response or to fleeting moments where students recall the one way they were taught to write. Instead, we argue that a strong writer identity is more aligned with that of Susan's—one in which the writer can grow over time with an opportunity to be flexible and without prescribed methods, but a "vocabulary for talking about the nature of writing—planning, revising, editing—and insight into how these processes work for particular writers in particular situations" (Dyson & Freedman, 2003, p. 974).

## Conclusion

Specific to ELA preservice teachers, who are responsible for teaching reading, writing, and language, a related identity to a professional teacher identity is identity as a writer or that of a teacher-writer. Identifying as a writer leads teachers to provide meaningful experiences for their students. In other words, strong teachers of writing often identify as writers (e.g. Woodard, 2017). Susan's desire to have a flexible writing approach is supported in the research (e.g. Freedman and Dyson, 2003) and underscores precisely what Gere (2008) emphasized in that writing is not linear—it must reach a variety of audiences and serve a multiplicity of purposes.

Though Susan arrived at class on the first day with her writer identity in motion, we feel confident that providing Susan a space throughout the semester to

reflect on this identity helped to deepen her understandings of who she is as a writer and who she hopes to become as a writing instructor. Similar to Street's (2003) study, we found that Elaine and Susan's attitudes about writing influenced what they valued about the teaching of writing, which may influence how they plan to teach writing in the future. The implications of such discoveries suggest that teacher educators can ask students to narrate and interrogate their own writer identities and then contrast those with the research on writing-teacher education to examine if any change need take place. In reflecting on such findings, students need not feel they have "correct" or "incorrect" writer identities, but could recognize how their internalized narratives about the nature of writing influence their future writing instruction. They might be intentional about choosing to teach writing in ways different from the ways they were taught and in ways that better align with current research. They might become not only writing teachers, but "teacher-writers" who see themselves as writers and strive to help their students see themselves similarly.

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**Appendix A**

(White, 1973)



(Beecroft, 2008)

