What Do You Mean, "Practice"? Theorizing the Writing-Music Connection

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WHAT DO YOU MEAN, “PRACTICE”?
THEORIZING THE WRITING-MUSIC CONNECTION

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THEORIZING THE WRITING-MUSIC CONNECTION
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Researchers in the field of composition studies have frequently made allusions to musicians when they’ve discussed the role of practice in gaining skill. In doing so, however, they’ve risked making speculative rather than testable claims and separating composition studies from recent insights on practice from other disciplines such as education and music psychology. These fields, I argue, offer testable frameworks with which composition instructors and scholars can teach and study writing practice. Such frameworks are necessary because composition researchers need to supplement qualitative studies of writers and writing with quantitative data to generate replicable tests of teaching methods that may benefit practicing writers.

This thesis draws on prior research in composition studies to illustrate the context of its central argument. It then breaks down some of the key assertions about practice that support this context before introducing frameworks from other disciplines that will allow composition researchers to replicate studies of effective writing practice instruction in the first-year college writing classroom. These frameworks or models of practice instruction include self-regulated strategy development and practice sessions conceived as stages of error and mistake management. Supplementing these models are descriptions of a few key activities built on these frameworks for students to practice writing in and outside the classroom.
Students need more than instruction in crafting better writing products to become more effective revisers and more expert writers. They also need explicit instruction that teaches them how to engage effectively in repeated, structured practice that imparts the tools they learn to solve writing problems with staying power and flexibility. This instruction is about more than handy tips or exercises; it’s about changing students’ and teachers’ assumptions about writing’s purpose outside the classroom.
Prelude: Finding Music

In the seventh grade, I joined the school band. There were no unbroken flutes available, so someone passed me a clarinet. I did just fine. Years of piano lessons had already taught me note names. Just before we departed for Thanksgiving break, my band director, eyes twinkling, asked a momentous question:

“How would you like to play the bassoon?”

“Okay,” I said.

I had no idea what he was talking about.

He sent a battered case home with me for the holiday, and I’ll never forget the way my mother’s eyes widened when I opened the case. It’s a formidable instrument. Three years later, when I entered high school, the vice principal pulled me aside and asked if I was carrying weapons into the building.

The bassoon is a breathtakingly beautiful woodwind and, like its cousin the oboe, a member of the double reed family. Slender, maple, about four and a half feet tall, it resembles a wooden bazooka. You’ve heard it before. You may not realize this, but yes, you’ve heard it. Its haunting voice ranges wide. The bassoon can bumble, tripping comically over itself, and it can weep. It can unsettle and threaten and sing. It’s an underrated but brilliant part of the orchestra.

I still play. Even now, in graduate school for a master’s degree in English, I type this after practicing. Top-notch instruction years ago has stuck with me even as I scrounge for minutes to keep up the hobby. I’ve promised myself I’ll never quit. I need this instrument – and the musical world it unlocks – to stay sane.
1. Reasons for Writing

Studying writing, I’m struck again and again by powerful parallels between learning writing and learning musical performance. But I’m also struck by the differences. Consider two groups of students: both traditional freshmen, both enrolled at a four-year university, both taking classes for credit. One group is taking first-year composition, and the other is enrolled in an ensemble and maybe some lessons on their primary instrument. Both are shooting for the same amount of credit.

Who practices more? In other words, who is more likely to engage with tasks that effectively build the skill? I’m taking about engagement that

1) Has plenty of opportunity to occur.
2) Is motivated.
3) Involves structured tasks in the targeted activity.
4) Receives timely feedback.
5) Repeats over time.

I’ll recap the research later, but here’s the gist: If you’re not doing all of these things, you’re not practicing deliberately. And if you’re not practicing deliberately, you’re not going to build the skill effectively. My question is, who’s more likely to practice well and thus build skill, first-year writers for a comp class or first-year musicians for a performance class?

My money’s on the musicians. They have more motivators, and they have goals for the tasks they practice that are much more conducive to building skill because they encourage starting slow and engaging more frequently over longer periods of time. In other words, they have more effective practice schemas. More on this a little later.
I wrote this thesis because I think freshman composition students can learn a lot from how freshman musician students think about practicing. And I think composition instructors can learn a lot from some of the techniques music instructors use when they teach students how – and why – to practice. Composition classes would benefit from an attitude about building writing skills that embraces immediacy, exposure, and peer dependence as sources of motivation and feedback and that expects writers to generate products when they practice that may be very different from the products they present to an ultimate audience.

In the context of writing, other writers and researchers have advocated similar goals: peer review, publication in class, shitty first drafts, etc. This thesis brings a new flavor to the table because it presents this advice comprehensively through the lens of musical training.
2. A Question of Practice

It’s an accepted fact that years of practice are necessary for a person to become expert at a complex task. In particular, Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer’s 1993 theory of deliberate practice established this idea’s key features in terms researchers across disciplines have since used to study and describe practice. The psychologists’ landmark article “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance” challenged the idea that expertise is simply the result of innate talent. Studying experts in a wide range of disciplines, Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer concluded that expertise was, instead, “the product of a decade or more of maximal efforts to improve performance in a domain through an optimal distribution of deliberate practice” (p. 400). Skim any formal discussion of practice or expert ability, and chances are good this article appears in the bibliography. The “10,000-hour rule,” popularized by authors such as Malcolm Gladwell, has also taken root in more popular conceptions of how effort relates to mastery.

Closer inspection, however, reveals that practice is vastly more complicated than just spending more time on something. Not all practice techniques are effective, and effective strategies for one domain might not hold for another domain, or even from one person to the next. Additionally, the line between practice and activities like work or play is sometimes difficult to define.

Not that experts haven’t tried. Building on Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer’s work, Hyllegard and Yamamoto refined the connection between practice and enjoyment (2005, 2007). More recently, again drawing from Ericsson and his colleagues, Kellogg and Whiteford outlined five primary components of deliberate practice: effortful exertion to
improve performance, carefully tailored practice tasks, intrinsic motivation to engage in them, feedback providing knowledge of results, and high levels of repetition over several years (2009, p. 253-4). Although this scholarship clarifies deliberate practice theory, however, practice’s components aren’t always so clear-cut in real life applications.

Writers in particular have a hard time pinning down the elements of their craft that constitute practice. What is writing practice, after all? What does it look like? A basketball player might shoot free throws; a pianist might run through scales; a writer… copies lines? That can’t be right. Certainly, there must be more to building writing skill than simply copying lines, but it’s difficult to articulate – and thus to teach – because the creative self-generation of complex ideas doesn’t break down easily into composite moves that can be tackled separately.

For those who help others become better writers, knowing why practice is necessary and what makes it effective is essential to doing our jobs because students won’t gain expertise without it. Frequently, though, we assign writing tasks without thinking about them in a practice context; certainly our students don’t. A sophomore walking back to the dorm tells his friend, “I have to go write this essay,” not “I have to go practice writing.” Meanwhile, a student on her way to the music building says, “I have to go practice,” not “I have to go play three pages.”

There’s a telling perspective embedded in this language. When we speak about writing as “type a paper” or “finish this page” or “do an eight-page essay,” the focus is overwhelmingly on the product of our writing rather than the act itself. Put a different way, when we define the writing act as a series of papers rather than a continuous strengthening of our ability to wield words, we divorce ourselves from the larger arc of
improvement over time. We think not in terms of the skill we’re honing but instead restrict our view to what each text accomplishes in its own little sphere.

Writing students and instructors alike would thus benefit from addressing practice explicitly and speaking about it as an assumed component of their assignments. Before voices in composition can initiate constructive dialogue about practice, though, they need a firmer grasp of practice’s role in writing: the activities it comprises as well as its distinctions from practice in other disciplines.

That’s what this thesis provides. It does so by examining and hopefully providing useful answers to the following questions:

• How does practice affect a person’s writing process, and why is it necessary?

• How do the comparisons we make between writing and other disciplines like music affect our concept of practice?

• Are we still practicing if the task is enjoyable? If it’s not enjoyable, how do we stay motivated?

• What can instructors do in the classroom to teach students to practice writing more effectively on their own time?
3. Where We’re Going

I start, in “The Writing-Music Comparison,” by outlining key trends I’ve noticed in comparisons between practicing writers and practicing musicians.

In “Practice and the Writing Process,” I clarify what aspects of the writing process I’m talking about. This thesis focuses on providing self-regulating practice schemas to assist first-year composition students and their instructors, but first we need to know why those schemas are necessary.

“Misconceptions in the Writing-Music Comparison” delves into some of the potentially misleading concepts of practice imbedded in comparisons between writers and musicians. This section also responds to those concepts from a musician’s perspective by offering a more nuanced idea of what effective practice entails.

The next section, “Motivation and the Joy-Judgment Divide” investigates why motivation is an essential part of practice and considers some of the key motivational differences between music and writing contexts.

“Proposed Practice Framework” introduces sections focusing on solutions. The following two sections, “Concept 1: Self-Regulated Strategy Development” and “Concept 2: Practice Stages as Error Management,” each break down a key supporting concept based on a particular model for teaching and engaging in practice. These sections cumulatively address needs articulated in previous chapters by proposing practice schemas that incorporate self-monitoring techniques and instant feedback in a series of specific, teachable strategies. These methods provide students new knowledge with which to adjust existing heuristic systems they use to revise text and respond physically to their writing environment.
I conclude, in “Coda: What Practice Makes,” by outlining this research’s implications, suggesting directions for future investigation and study, and considering some of the challenges composition experts face in continuing to study practice.
4. The Writing-Music Comparison

Writing practice is seldom, if ever, addressed without reference to other disciplines. One discipline in particular surfaces again and again: music. When researchers in both psychology and composition discuss engaging in activity to build skill, they typically refer to musicians practicing their instruments in the same breath that they discuss writers becoming experts.

Panning for a working definition of practice, I was struck by the number of times writers and musicians are presented together – sometimes interchangeably – in psychology studies about skill acquisition through practice. A good starting point for the trend is Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer’s article, which examined measures of typing competence and habits of successful authors along with records of musical and athletic training when it defined deliberate practice and its connection to expert performance (1993, p. 371). Citing Ericsson’s 2006 proposition that novices become experts through practice whether the tasks are cognitive or physical, Kellogg and Whiteford claimed athletes’ and musicians’ training share the same form of practice even though they differ in content (2009, p. 253). Writers must practice, the researchers concluded, “[j]ust as high school and college musicians and athletes must practice intensively to compete effectively” (Kellogg & Whiteford 2009, p. 251).

This trend of comparing writers and musicians continues in the writing-composition world.¹ When Charles Bazerman contextualized his stance on revision in A

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¹ For references beyond those examined here, see Donald H. Frantz’s 1952 article “Music and the Writing Experience,” Nancy Sommer’s music composition analogy in her 1980 “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” Linda Stone’s 2013 interview with James Fallows, and Michelle Navarre Cleary’s observations of a student in her 2013 article “Flowing and Freestyling.”
Rhetoric of Literate Action, he observed that “professionals in any domain constantly work on their craft and monitor what they do to improve performance” and gave examples from music (2013, p. 144). Revisers can take a professional view of their writing, Bazerman said, just as musicians balance practice and critique with attachment to their performances:

Musicians, though driven by a love of music, practice their technique, do exercises, listen to tapes of their performances, and play before coaches and instructors to find out where they need improvement. Then they do appropriate exercises and self-consciously monitor their performance to ensure they are incorporating the new skills and avoiding bad habits […] they know the value of accepting any criticism, no matter how painful, that helps them recognize an area of weakness that could use work. (2013, p 144-45)

Two key concepts Bazerman affiliates with musical practice in this passage are appropriate exercises – as opposed to exercises that lead nowhere – and self-conscious monitoring that is aware and evaluative. These distinctions are key, but they can also be difficult to apply to writing. More on this difficulty in a moment.

One music-writing comparison was especially interesting. In 2004, Colomb and Griffin asserted “every thoughtful sports coach, dance or music teacher, and writer knows” that “it’s the conscious work people have done […] that makes possible moments of difficult, unconscious achievement” (293).² Peter Elbow responded to this assertion in

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² This assertion and the response to it is imbedded in a larger conversation about Mikhail Csikzentmihalyi’s concept of flow and its connection to deliberate practice. This connection will be discussed in detail starting on page 29.
his 2012 book *Vernacular Eloquence*. He challenged Colomb and Griffin’s statement that flow, or deep absorption without self-consciousness, is available only to well-trained individuals. At the same time, he proposed an eye-catching alternate claim: Colomb and Griffin’s assertion is true for instrumental musicians but doubtful for writers and singers:

This claim holds up for many skilled activities. You can’t play a single decent note on a violin or oboe without good training [...] But I doubt whether research has “unequivocally shown” what the two scholars claim when it comes to producing language [...] It’s obvious that people without special training sometimes speak or write or sing in a state of deep concentration, relinquishing conscious control, yet produce excellent work” (p. 176)

Elbow thinks Colomb and Griffin’s claim ignores people like some singers and writers who lack training but can still experience flow states and produce high-quality work. He points out a potential counterargument to this view as well; one could claim that the informal, everyday speaking and singing people do is a kind of training (p. 176).

Here we return to this thesis’s central issue. Experts in composition are making claims about how practice functions for writers and musicians; however, although they make these claims as though they are self-evident, the statements are in fact quite speculative. We keep referring to writing practice, but what does this training actually look like? We acknowledge that flow happens during writing, but how does practice affect it? Researchers in composition studies need to identify a common framework for practice – not just a qualitative theory, furthermore, but a research-backed framework that can be tested.
I’m interested in another vacuum, too: Researchers who study writing keep making references to musicians, but we haven’t stopped to examine the implicit assumptions about practice bound up in this comparison. We haven’t drawn out the ways in which it might limit as well as expand the discoveries we can make about writing practice.

Yet composition scholars have observed that the comparisons we draw between concepts very much affect how we comprehend and articulate our ideas. Barbara Tomlinson, discussing metaphors for revision frequently used by writers, argued that figurative expressions “are an important part of our socially shared knowledge of composing” and, as such, influence how we think about the task and even use certain composing behaviors (1988, p. 58). “At the same time,” said Tomlinson, “these metaphorical stories focus attention on aspects of revising that we may have overlooked, challenging our current ways of classifying revision” (1988, p. 58). Tomlinson points out that using metaphors or analogies doesn’t just shape our view of the thing we’re describing – in this case, the writing process – but also potentially obscures aspects of the experience from our view. Michelle Navarre Cleary noticed a similar impact on comprehension based on the analogies students used to describe their writing process. She found that students used analogies more precisely when they had more varied process experiences (Cleary 2013, p. 667).

While writers’ and musicians’ frequent comparison isn’t quite a metaphor of the type Tomlinson or Cleary studied, it has the same influential power over our language and composing behavior. For instance, when researchers compare writing practice to

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3 The metaphors Tomlinson examined include acts such as casting, sculpting, painting, and sewing that writers referred to when they described the revising process (1988).
practicing a musical instrument because both are complex, creative tasks, they risk glossing over the fact that most musicians start with written cues from a complete piece. Writers, on the other hand, must simultaneously conceive, generate, transcribe, and respond to jigsaw pieces of an incomplete puzzle that will not be readable until the performance is over. This might seem like a minor difference at first glance, but these distinctions accumulate in composition dialogue to stunt deeper discussions about practice techniques.

Informed by Tomlinson’s insights on metaphors in writing and of their power to inhibit as well as shape discussion, I think we can break down concepts about practice contained in the music-writing comparison: concepts it obscures and oversimplifies as well as those it clarifies and facilitates. Analyzing this comparison is important because imbedded in it are implications about practice that affect how composition instructors teach students to monitor the ways in which they build writing expertise on their own time and in the classroom.
5. Practice and the Writing Process

Practicing writers face a unique challenge because composing is one of the most cognitively demanding tasks the brain can perform (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987; Kellogg 1988; McCutchen 1996). Even when writers revise existing text, this is not simply a matter of rehearsing a set of motions to be carried into performance. Revision starts when the writer detects a problem in existing text. Writers then revise by planning a solution, sometimes in writing, to the problem they detect (Hayes 2012, p. 376). Being able to plan a solution, though, doesn’t mean the writer automatically solves his writing tangle. Writers must also translate the planned solution into language and eventually transcribe this language into new text to replace the old (Hayes 2012, p. 376). At any point during this process, writers face potential roadblocks that might stall or derail the creative process. These include – but are not limited to – language barriers, inadequate knowledge, insufficient memory, distractible surroundings, low motivation, and physical difficulties with transcription (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987; Kellogg 1987; Bourdin & Fayol 1994; Beaufort 2007).

This is complicated enough, but there’s another point to emphasize about the writing process. Its subprocesses don’t progress linearly in neat, clearly divided stages. In other words, writers don’t simply switch from a distinct “planning mode” or “generating mode” to an obvious “revising mode” over the course of a writing session. Older models of the writing process sometimes give this clear-cut impression (Torrance & Jeffery 1999, p. 5). Flower and Hayes’s 1980 model, for example, neatly divides the reviewing process from planning and translating (1981, p. 370; see figure 1). Flower and Hayes

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4 Spontaneity, of course, is also very important in music; I address it on pages 24-25 along with the common misconception of practice as mere repetition.
clarify that actions such as reading, editing, and correcting mistakes in existing text re-activate planning, translating, programming, and executing when the writer forms revisions (1981, p. 374). Although these processes are labeled separately, they still depend on each other and interrelate.

Figure 1: Flower and Hayes’s 1980 model

More recent models are noticeably different. Advances in psychology and neuroscience over the past few decades have dramatically increased what researchers know about cognitive functioning, especially components like attention and working memory. Those working to accurately represent the writing process continue to refine their models as new research sheds light on the task and as researchers acquire more sophisticated tools to monitor, simulate, and describe it.

This thesis draws from Hayes’ 2012 model of writing to depict and define
interactions among writing subprocesses because it reflects the most recent insights into those processes at the time of this writing (p. 371; see figure 2). Revision’s role in this model looks a little different from previous writing models and needs some clarification. Previously, revising and evaluating were considered subcomponents of reviewing. In Hayes and Flower 1981, reviewing was a broad concept that applied to both planned and unplanned readings of both generated text and plans for future text – with or without the intent to change anything (p. 374). Meanwhile, evaluating was the part of reviewing that formed judgments about existing or planned text. This concept of evaluation resembles Kellogg’s description of editing in Torrance and Jeffery’s The Cognitive Demands of Writing: “flagging errors in the output of planning, translating, programming, and execution and signaling feedback to the appropriate process” (1999, p. 45).

Figure 2: Hayes’s 2012 model
Hayes’ 2012 model, importantly, does not distinguish among planning, revising, and evaluating as distinct writing processes like earlier models did. This is because Hayes considers them *applications* of the writing model – specialized writing activities – rather than separate writing processes parallel to others (2012, p. 376). Neither planning nor revising can be isolated from the other. Revising, for example, requires planning solutions to detected problems. Hayes’ point is that writing needs to be understood as an interaction among subprocesses, none of which does the whole job of writing on its own.

This research focuses on the recent model’s control level and, more specifically, on how writers’ possession of self-regulation schemas may improve their ability to practice generating and revising text. Writing’s phases interrelate and comingle, which means the whole elaborate system is highly interdependent and extremely variable. How, then, does deliberate practice affect this system?

Practice streamlines composition because systematic repetition and self-assessment of the writing act, writing goal, and written product automatize writing subprocesses to some extent. Now, the word *automatize* might sound ominous in this context; for some, it brings to mind robotic monotony. That’s not what I mean here. Rather, I’m saying practice reduces a writer’s need to form a conscious, explicit thought about *how* to engage in a particular writing act when she’s already occupied with deciding *what* that act is going to be.

By reducing this need, deliberate practice also reduces cognitive load. That is, it constrains the extent to which writers spend their executive attention verbalizing and rehashing information as their subprocesses interact to plan, generate, and review sentences (Kellogg & Whiteford 2009, p. 254; Flower & Hayes 1981, p. 369). The
central executive or executive process is a component of working memory, and working memory is simply a more recent and accurate term for short-term memory (Baddeley 2007, p. 6-7). Working memory allows a student to hold the information she reads at the beginning of a sentence until the end of the sentence so she can understand the whole statement (Dietrich 2007, p. 156; Baddeley 2007, p. 144-46). This holding power, however, is limited since it only has the capacity to handle a few pieces of information at once.

As practice reduces more basic retrieval’s demands on the brain, the brain’s working memory can then accommodate a wider spectrum of knowledge. This improved spectrum yields more mature writing because the saved space can then be used for, say, considering your text’s audience in a more stable and nuanced way (McCutchen 1996; Kellogg 2008).

Ronald T. Kellogg, building on a foundation Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia established in 1987 with The Psychology of Written Composition, proposed that over a period of at least twenty years, developing writers progress through three stages from the time they begin to learn to write to the time they gain an advanced level of skill.

The first stage, knowledge-telling, occurs when beginning writers, typically in elementary and middle school, simply reflect known information (2008, p. 5). They consider mainly their own perspective: the author’s perspective. So much of their effort goes into retrieving, translating, and physically representing their ideas that they have limited cognitive space with which to plan, review, and reconsider their writing from multiple perspectives.
The second stage, knowledge-transforming, occurs when intermediate writers, typically in high school and college, alter known information for their own benefit. They consider their text’s words and meanings as a separate entity from their own intended ideas and thus maintain two perspectives, the author’s and the text’s, in their working memories as they write. At this point, they have the capacity to plan and partially review their writing, but they do not have the capacity to juggle what their writing represents to a reader’s point of view (2008, p. 5). Though the writer’s developing audience awareness may help her choose certain words at the moment she transcribes her ideas, her awareness of prospective readers is too unstable for her to maintain it in her working memory when she revises her text (2008, p. 5).

The third stage, knowledge-crafting, occurs when advanced writers, typically graduate and professional writers, recreate and revise known information for their reader’s benefit. At this point, they have written often enough to use less working memory space when they compare their ideas to a text’s representation of those ideas. A writer who crafts knowledge has thus developed a working memory with the capacity to imagine a reader interpreting his text (2008, p. 5). Not only does he imagine this reader, but he also balances his imagined interpretation with what his text conveys and his mental ideas express.

In the most advanced stage of writing, therefore, a person can juggle the subprocesses required for revising with three alternative representations of the writing’s content. She has compacted high-level writing processes to the point that she can also sustain awareness of three different perspectives on her writing as she composes: her view, her text’s view, and her reader’s view (Kellogg 2008, p. 11). Experts can compare
what they want to say, what their text says, and what their readers will interpret all at the same time.

Kellogg and Whiteford define the expert writer as seen from the perspectives of both the social approach and the process approach to composition (2009, p. 253). Those considering writing as it exists in a social context would say experts possess the localized knowledge of a specific domain required for effective communication in a specific discourse community (Kellogg & Whiteford 2009, p. 253). In terms of process, the expert writer has mastered a wide range of general problem-solving strategies or heuristics (Kellogg & Whiteford 2009, p. 253). McCutchen observes that the expert’s writing subprocesses are interactive and recursive, more prone to splicing translation with editing and planning than novices’ are wont to do (1996, p. 304).

The novice’s writing processes are less sophisticated. Kellogg and Whiteford define the novice as a basic college writer who has not yet gained proficiency in a discourse community – including any of the communities required for success in an undergraduate core curriculum (2009, p. 253). It is important to note, though, that a writer’s novice or expert level is determined not so much by age as by the degree of cognitive resources they possess and the amount of deliberate practice experience they’ve undergone, which necessarily increases with age but doesn’t necessarily start during youth.

That so much of writing requires verbal, explicit, transcribed thought is what makes this process so savagely difficult from the brain’s perspective. Putting thoughts and impulses into conscious, physically formed strings of words – and evaluating these words based on abstract concepts like genre and audience – requires every bit of our
conscious cognitive real estate (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987; Kellogg 2008; McCutchen 1996).

Musicians simply do not grapple with the same kind of challenge when they sit down to practice. This is not to say practicing a musical instrument does not require explicit thought or is not an incredibly complex cognitive task. It does and it is. Musicians verbalize game plans for practice session, goals for shaping a phrase, note names, rhythms, and their own responses to the sounds they play (Hallam 2001; McGill 2007). But instrumental practice still does not require sustained verbalizing to the same extent that writing does, and research suggests the processes by which these two activities draw on working and long-term memory may feature important differences (Schendel & Palmer 2007; Williamson, Baddeley, & Hitch 2010). ⁵

Furthermore, writing is incredibly diverse; although assignments might specify a particular genre or audience, I think students probably require a more extensive knowledge base from a wider spectrum of domains to fully address a college essay’s demands than they do for a sonata’s (Beaufort 2007, p. 18-20). ⁶

One key insight the music-writing comparison rarely addresses is the developmental range within practice itself. Novices and experts have different concepts of revision, but research from music psychology shows they also have different concepts of what it means to engage in practice in the first place (Leon-Guerrero 2008; Hallam 2001). For example, novices may perceive a lack of concentration as a sign that the task

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⁵ The same could be hypothesized of other activities like sports that require extensive physical activity and implicit response but less sustained verbalizing and transcription than writing.
⁶ As a student who has prepared a few sonatas as well as a few essays, I freely admit this is a personal hunch, not a tested claim.
is inherently boring – a reason to stop practicing – whereas experts are more likely to see this lack as a process problem to be solved (Hallam 2001, p. 20). Another key difference is that novices may ignore recurring problems or react to them in ways that hinder rather than help their progress; experts “develop a positive and relaxed attitude to errors taking challenging and creative tasks” (Kruse-Weber & Parnutt 2014, p. 9).

Writing educators will be able to help students improve their revision processes much more effectively if they also address misconceptions students might have about engaging in a task repeatedly to build skill. For instance, in addition to telling students to revise globally instead of locally (Wallace & Hayes 1991), instructors could enhance this information by advising students on how long to spend on a global revision task before evaluating results, moving on, or stopping altogether. Student revision processes are, of course, highly individualized – but so are the practice methods of student musicians. Practice strategies aren’t about imposing uniformity. Rather, they’re about providing students with a grab bag of tools they can consciously rummage through to zero in on problems and solve them.
6. Misconceptions in the Writing-Music Comparison

The word *practice* has some negative connotations, and these need to be addressed before we apply the term to writing. For many, the word brings to mind unsettling notions like drudgery, repetition, and automated toil. In composition, we might think of doing lines or copying writing structures in a way that suffocates creativity and individual expression. Kellogg and Whiteford mention this impression of practice in their article “Training Advanced Writing Skills” when they describe social constructivist arguments against training exercises for writing during the 1970s and 1980s (2009, p. 254). Interestingly, they also tie this idea of practice as uncreative regimen explicitly to musical training:

Attempts to automate component processes of written composition through exercises and dummy runs were seen as counterproductive. These were and are valid sentiments. Exercises can be drudgery and do seem unnatural. Yet, we would point out that these downsides also apply to practicing scales on a piano […] Pianists […] nevertheless undertake such exercises to master their skills. (254)

Kellogg and Whiteford clarify that writers’ skill training need not involve drudgery, just the training techniques known to be effective. Yet the overwhelmingly negative language they use to contextualize practice – *automate, dummy runs, counterproductive, drudgery, unnatural, downsides* – is ominous and unspecific in a way that tempts readers to think about practice activities the way seven-year-olds think about forcing down Brussels sprouts: as a necessary evil, a matter of muscling through misery to reap unknown benefits.
Take Elbow’s description of that same ominous term *exercises* in the following passage from *Vernacular Eloquence*: (I have omitted his parallel comparison to sports to focus on the music examples. The italics are mine.)

Exercises have an interesting paradoxical relationship to goals. They are “pragmatic” and “useful” and yet they often feel as though they have no goal. For the goal is in the doing. When we practice musical scales […], the goal is not to make music […]. The goal is to improve our ability to make music […]. And sometimes the goal of an exercise is oblique. (154)

Here again is the view of practice as somehow detached from the “real” business to which that practice will lead, whether this business is turning the notes of Mozart’s bassoon concerto into music or turning writing exercises – whatever those are – into complex insights both readable and pleasurable.

Yet where is the musician’s voice in these comparisons? What does she or he have to say about scales as an “unnatural” activity divorced from actual music making?

Take, for example, David McGill’s insights on the subject. McGill was principal bassoonist of the world-class Chicago Symphony Orchestra for seventeen years and, at this time of writing, teaches at Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music. In his 2007 book *Sound in Motion*, McGill reflects a very different attitude about music’s role in those dreaded “exercises.” Students, he says, often feel they must practice “the notes” first and then add “the music” later. This disjointed concept only prolongs the practice session. It divides the mind between “technique” and “music,” leaving one to accomplish half as much in twice as much time. *Always practice musically* [italics
In other words, practicers are better musicians when they engage in musical tasks – practices, rehearsals, or performances – with musical intent instead of trying to divorce technique from expression and simply incorporate them later.

Be cautious, however, because this idea is easy to misunderstand. McGill is not saying here that practicers will not or should not make mistakes; neither is he saying practice sessions should be identical to performances. Rather, when he gives advice such as “Always practice musically” and “Do not make sounds in your warm-up that you would not want to be heard in concert” (272), he’s saying musicians should not divide their playing mentalities into a subpar, run-of-the-mill practice mode and a fully engaged performance mode that strives for excellence.

This complex understanding of musical practice doesn’t translate easily into neat parallel advice for practicing writers, which might help explain why it’s been partially glossed over in composition research. For example, writing students could take McGill’s advice to mean their writing in every draft should look as finished as possible when, in fact, they should be focused on writing freely without trying to sound polished. Many freshman students already cling to a harmful habit of banging out papers in one go, revising within every sentence along the way (Perl 1979, p. 326; Sommers 1980, p. 381; Rose 1984, p. 76).

Yet conflating practice with drudgery and divorcing improvement at an activity from doing the activity are potentially misleading. Practice without thought or presence has no more place in music – scales or no scales – than it does in writing. If Kellogg and Whiteford’s pianist isn’t practicing scales with engagement, presence of mind, and
musicality, then she’s not practicing properly. This holds true on the opposite end of the spectrum, too. If she’s feeling the music but has no plan of action for its development – no understanding of why she’s repeating it or what she’s targeting – then that practice isn’t useful either (McGill 2007, p. 17). For writing instructors to implement training techniques appropriately and to foster constructive practice attitudes among students, therefore, they need a clearer idea of the boundary between deliberate practice and dull drudgery. They need a more specific articulation of the roles repetition, emotion, and automation play in the kinds of practice that count.

I propose they supplement Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer’s theory of deliberate practice, which strictly divides practice from work and play activities and denotes constant conscious monitoring, with practice frameworks that acknowledge how sources of student motivation range wide, fluctuate during a single practice session, and transcend simple desire to improve. Students need concrete advice on how to monitor this ebb and flow. They also need to understand low motivation is a mental state they can actively tackle and overcome instead of a sign that writing should not or cannot occur.

Before delving into some useful practice frameworks that meet these goals, I first need to address motivation’s relationship to practice and the role enjoyment potentially plays in that relationship.
7. Motivation and the Joy-Judgment Divide

Motivation increases students’ attention, effort, and persistence and makes them more likely to choose particular tasks to practice (Zimmerman 2011, p. 50). Students are more likely to be motivated to engage in a task when they perceive a purpose for the task, have some control in choosing the task, and feel a personal connection or preference for the task. They are also more motivated and more flexible in adjusting their performance for the better when they have higher levels of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a student’s belief in her own competence and capability (Zimmerman 2011, p. 53). She doesn’t necessarily expect a successful outcome, but she does have confidence in her own ability to handle information and execute a response in a way that allows her to improve.

Psychology researchers studying goal orientation in the 1980s distinguished between engaging because one strived to learn something and develop skill and engaging because one strived to demonstrate competence and compare well instead of poorly to others. The latter orientation is a key motivator for the musician who hits the practice room because she doesn’t want to appear dumb in front of her friends during the next rehearsal. It also applies to the student who emails his professor instead of posting to Blackboard – or doesn’t post at all – because he doesn’t want his classmates to compare his writing to theirs. Performance orientation plays a key role in deriving motivation from social context and competition, but it also runs the risk of driving less secure students to avoid the task altogether.

When students’ orientation is a learning goal, on the other hand, their chances of overcoming insecurity go up. When students believe not only that change is possible but that they have the power to alter their actions’ results and increase what they know, their
achievement improves dramatically (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck 2007 qtd. in Zimmerman 2011, p. 51). This holds true for at-risk students as well as academically competitive ones.

One challenge for educators is providing external motivators like positive feedback and a supportive environment while also providing students with resources for regulating their own learning and tapping into intrinsic motivation to engage. Barry Zimmerman defines intrinsic motivation as “one’s interest in, enjoyment of, and satisfaction with a task or activity” (2011, p. 52). Intrinsic motivation, along with a student’s personal valuation of a task and her schema for combining internal and external information into a locus for action, allows a student to sustain her own learning (Reeve, Ryan, Deci, & Jang 2008 qtd. in Zimmerman 2011, p. 52).

Without concrete strategies for increasing their motivation, though, students frequently stall or quit when they have no inclination to write. Expert writers differ in that they have tricks for tackling low initiative: revising previous sections, making outlines, freewriting, hashing out ideas with others, and reading or revisiting notes (Elbow 2012, p. 64; Bazerman 2013, p. 151).

Let’s consider what connections to motivation and enjoyment bubble to mind when we think about someone practicing writing. We also need to determine what kind of role these factors play during sessions of what Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer defined specifically as deliberate practice.

Writing can occur during a writing conference, in the composition classroom, or during an individual writing session outside the writing center and classroom without the presence of a tutor or teacher. Writing can also happen collaboratively with a peer.
In any of these writing contexts, the writer may experience a state of flow as described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues. Summarizing Csikszentmihalyi’s findings for a writing context, Leahy observes that flow involves aware, active engagement in an appropriately challenging task, immediate feedback, total concentration, a sense of clear goals and control over performance, immediate feedback, loss of self-consciousness, and an altered sense of passing time (1995, p. 153-54).

Interviews with writing center staff members and Leahy’s own experiences support the idea that both expert and novice writers can experience flow, and the experience extends to technical writers as well as literature, composition, and creative writing specialists. Neither is this experience limited to private writing sessions. Writers, Leahy says, can certainly experience flow during writing conferences (1995, p. 156).

But is flow – if it occurs at all during a writing session – limited to a particular writing phase? Leahy and Elbow suggest it is not. Both have experienced Csikzentmihalyi’s description of a flow state during episodes of freewriting and getting initial words on the page as well as moments of planning, revising, and editing (Leahy 1995, p. 155, p. 160; Elbow 2012, p. 176). In fact, I’ve encountered this myself. I’ve also experienced something with flow’s components during hours set aside for deliberate practice on my instrument.

Some research, however, suggests that if I was feeling flow, I wasn’t actually practicing deliberately. That’s because when Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer articulated their theory of practice in 1993, they clearly separated work, play, and practice activities from each other. Play could not be practice, and work could not be play, because the three kinds of activities had three separate motivators. Doing something for
external reward made it work; doing something for its own sake made it play; doing something for improvement at a task made it practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer 1993, p. 368).

Researchers examining the psychologists’ theory have made additional distinctions. Finding practice inherently enjoyable, for example, is not the same as finding certain aspects of practice enjoyable (Hyllegard & Yamamoto 2005, p. 285). The difference is that inherent enjoyment does not depend on a person’s experiencing improvement. When practicers say an activity was enjoyable because its result made them happy or because it involved pleasant social interaction, they are enjoying the products and context of practice, not practice itself (Hyllegard & Yamamoto 2005, p. 292). From this perspective, people disengage from deliberate practice whenever they disengage from assessing the results of their actions.

Practice, for some, is also distinct from rehearsal. Hyllegard and Yamamoto claim the two differ in that “deliberate practice is used to learn new skills, while rehearsal is used to refine already mastered or nearly mastered skills” (2007, p. 442). Although the theory of deliberate practice doesn’t specifically address rehearsal’s relationship to improving performance, Hyllegard and Yamamoto posit that rehearsal affects how reliably one performs and, unlike practice, requires less effort and is inherently enjoyable (2007, p. 443).

At this point, we have to ask a tough question: How do we define deliberate writing practice if all the moments outside self-improvement – moments of flow, of joy, of “losing oneself,” of engaging with the task for its own sake – are disqualified? What does deliberate writing practice look like when only the critical and self-conscious
moments count?

I think it looks disjointed, unhelpful, and frankly fishy, like a complex machine deprived of its moving parts. Not because I want rose-colored lenses, mind you. I understand that the sweaty, self-critical, “but it can be better” evaluations are just as critical to writing as the sweet flowing moments that feel more like play. For me, in fact, the former is much more common.

I just think theorizing deliberate practice as a process separate from moment-to-moment enjoyment is impractical when we’re talking about on-the-ground strategies for helping students gain writing expertise by engaging with it more effectively and frequently on their own time as well as in the writing center and classroom.

Why? Because interspersed moments of enjoyment and losing oneself in an activity are critical for maintaining students’ willingness to engage in writing tasks, the disheartening, laborious periods as well as the glimmers of discovery and delight. Furthermore, writers simply don’t have the cognitive space to compose sentences, consider purpose and audience, consciously assess their performance, and form goals for improvement all at the same time. Aware self-assessment and adherence to improvement goals must alternate with absorption in the task and composition goals. If they didn’t, words would never make it onto the page.

This brings me to my next point. Sometimes – in fact, quite frequently – the thing students need to exercise to improve performance is not assessing, not correcting. Freshman writers have a terrible habit of trying to knock out an entire piece of writing in its finished form from the first sentence. Eye-opening research by Perl, Sommers, Elbow, and others has shown that it is very difficult for less experienced writers to generate first
and revise later instead of editing constantly as they go (Perl 1979 p. 378; Sommers 1980 p. 381; Elbow 2012, p. 162). The former course, though, is more desirable because it gives the writer a more solid starting point for refining complex ideas in clear, readable language.

It’s a pretty paradox for Ericsson and his colleagues. To improve their writing performance, student writers need to practice losing themselves in the task. They need to learn to repress their internal editors and allow themselves, as Anne Lamott said in “Shitty First Drafts,” to “just get it down” (1994). But if one avoids thinking about improvement in order to improve, does the activity still count as deliberate practice?

If we’re including moments of generation within writing practice tasks, then it does. For revision to occur, moments of generating must be included before the writing process can move beyond recognizing errors and addressing mistakes. Note, furthermore, that language fields such as linguistics and TESL draw an important distinction between the two. Whereas errors refer to a language deviation that results from not knowing the correct rule or application – from a gap in knowledge – mistakes refer to a deviation in the learner’s language that results from failure to apply knowledge the learner possesses – that is, from a processing slip up (Corder 1967). Again, though, this distinction can be difficult to pinpoint in composition studies because identifying areas in which the student can more effectively appeal to an audience or more efficiently structure a paper are more subjective than, say, identifying errors and mistakes in language processing or grammar use. At the same time, students’ understanding of language structures remains a critical part of how they perceive the words they conceive and transcribe.

The final difficulty with applying Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer’s
deliberate practice theory to writing, at least in terms of enjoyment and motivation, is the
challenge of separating what, in writing, is an inherently enjoyable task and what is
merely an enjoyable result. Consider an instructor teaching writing students to repress
their internal editors and “speak onto the page” (Elbow 2012, p. 147). In this scenario,
“improved performance” could refer to a variety of results, some of which might prevent
others: more coherent ideas, clearer sentences, better grammar, faster writing, fuller
pages, fewer pauses, less stressed students… the list goes on. The situation also blurs the
distinction between practice and rehearsal. In writing, when does learning a new skill
evolve into easy rehearsal of something already learned?

Certainly speaking onto the page requires effort. Although students might feel that
the process of writing becomes easier when they use this technique, they are also
deliberately putting forth extra effort not to edit themselves as they write. For some, this
conscious restraint is so difficult that they need additional assistance: disabled
spellchecking, a black screen, special software, etc. (Ittersum & Ching 2013). Even
expert writers experience difficulty in resisting the urge to agonize over details (Elbow
2012, p. 64).

At the same time, the experience of speaking onto the page is liberating and
generates feelings of relief and pleasure compared to the experience of writing without
making a deliberate effort not to edit constantly. In making the change to write “more
freely rather than perfect on the first try,” one of my students told me, he “has drastically
reduced the amount of time it takes me to write long documents.” I had asked students in
my English 100 class to reflect on how using techniques to resist editing had impacted
their writing. This student reflected feedback from most of the others in my sections
when he emailed the following: “Before I started to use the ‘just get it down’ method, I found myself always spending hours and hours on my writing and seeming to get nowhere, but now it seems to come a little more freely.”

The students’ relief, however, seemed to come more from the actual act of freewriting – at least for novices in the technique – than from its results. To writers used to constant self-correction and copyediting, the unchecked effluence of speaking onto the page often appears rough, mistake-riddled, and frankly crappy. “If I were to improve on anything in this essay it would probably have to be my grammar,” another student emailed, “I am sure there are probably some improvements that could be made that maybe I could not see.”

The difference between an old skill and new skill might be easy to spot in athletes when they swap a double jump for a triple jump (Hyllegard & Yamamoto 2007, p. 442) or in musicians when they swap a beloved excerpt for a thorny new passage (Kruse-Weber & Parncutt 2014), but individual skills are not so clear-cut in writing. Language competence connects with one’s ability to read, type, and scribble. Audience and genre awareness connect with subject knowledge. The writing process is creative; it depends on constant newness and on interdependent, constantly developing cognitive abilities.

The writing procedure, furthermore, is typically farther removed from the product it produces and from the audience experiencing it. How and when writers expend extra effort to improve is more difficult to spot than when a skater falls on the ice or when a musician misses a note.

Language helps focus and organize people’s orientation to a situation in real-time, physically embodied rhetorical moments: sports communication on the field among
teammates, as Bazerman mentions in *Literate Action*, or chamber musicians speaking through eye contact, motion, and inflection during a performance, as comes to my own mind. Bazerman says these observable conditions can help people produce “shared social facts upon which all will act” (2013, p. 71). They are readily interpretable, immediately effective speech acts, and the consequences of these acts evolve rapidly.

Writing, on the other hand, is generally more private and less immediate. It is more removed from its participants and consequences in that its writer and reader are usually separated by time and not visible to each other (Elbow 2012, p. 69; Bazerman 2013, p. 71). This distance contributes to students’ difficulty with identifying audiences, though Elbow has noted part of the problem stems from cultural attitudes that only impersonal writing is “good” or “serious” (2012, p. 69). One notable hindrance for composition instructors is encouraging students to adapt to diverse audiences when these audiences play no evaluative role (Sommers 1980, p. 383; Connors & Lunsford 1993; Elbow 1993).

Bazerman notes that because texts are usually displaced temporally and geographically from the time and place they mediate, writers and readers alike usually lack immediate, intense motives for action:

we are less likely to have events unfolding in front of our eyes to excite, move or frighten us into writing – as the fire racing toward us will induce us to yell help. Similarly we have fewer immediate means to align our readers to an urgent here and now in which they must attend to our texts – let alone in the spirit and orientation and roles we would hope. (2013, p. 73)
This lack of physical immediacy, Bazerman says, is why intertextual systems are often structured in ways that create exigencies for people to write and read: penalties, rewards, deadlines, etc. The urgency within these and similar structures comes from a gap in knowledge the writing must set up and eventually resolve by outlining its relationship to the writing before it (Bazerman 2013, p. 73).

It is possible, then, for an intertext to create exigency simply through the way it is structured. Writers and readers reap penalties and rewards from engagement with the text based solely on how long they spend with it and how much input they deliver. However, people also need a motive for engaging with the text in the first place. When this motive becomes increasingly abstract and increasingly removed from the here-and-now penalties of physical experience, intertextual sources of exigency may not be enough to promote immediate physical engagement with a text.

There are, of course, exceptions to writing’s general lack of immediacy. Some include scenarios like coaches presenting chalkboard messages from sidelines and text messages among people sharing a common experience at a common physical location: people texting at a restaurant about the food or at a concert about the performance (Elbow 2012, p. 70; Bazerman 2013, p. 71). Texting as well as online realms like email, chat rooms, and public tweets and posts have also dramatically enhanced writing’s capacity for immediate communication.

To recap: Writing blurs the lines between play and practice, inherent enjoyment and external enjoyment, mistake and improvement, practicer and audience. Writers, especially novices, need training to suppress conscious evaluation as well as training to use it effectively and appropriately. They also require sources of motivation beyond self-
improvement to sustain engagement during writing. From an expert perspective, students’ concept of self-improvement is frequently inadequate, but students still need to be able to engage in practice sessions with erroneous or uncertain ideas about what “good” or “improved” writing looks like because the discovery of what this will be is embedded in the act itself.

The bottom line: Writers need more than Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer’s theory of deliberate practice.

The solution: Use a hybrid theory of practice that draws from music and education psychology – a hybrid that sees practice as a complex, multi-staged activity that oscillates between conscious evaluation and non-evaluating absorption. This theory allows for moments of flow during practice. Crucially, it also goes beyond stating simply that intrinsic motivation is necessary for practice by acknowledging periods of low or absent motivation. By incorporating instances of play as well as fluctuating motivation levels, this revised theory better prepares students and instructors for the realities of writing practice sessions and the unique challenges they present.
8. Proposed Practice Framework

This hybrid theory of practice draws from several ideas about repeated engagement with learning tasks from a variety of fields, including education and music. These ideas overlap in that they emphasize teaching students how to structure, monitor, and respond to their own thoughts and actions before, during, and after practice sessions.

The conceptual framework I here propose for writing practice draws from models such as self-regulated strategy development from education research and error management practice stages from music psychology. It is also informed by strategies from disciplines outside composition that specifically target the beliefs and attitudes underpinning human behavior. This framework for practice should help writing instructors train students to monitor how they practice writing, specifically revision, in first-year composition courses:

- Writing sessions outside the classroom are necessary and expected. Complete papers generated during single writing sessions should automatically be considered of lower quality and less desirable than writing occurring over multiple sessions.
- Students should be actively and repeatedly discouraged from focusing on local errors and mistakes when they generate initial text. Informal writing is legitimate. This idea needs to be addressed explicitly, modeled, and discussed, but students also need to confirm and accept it for themselves. For some, learning to repress their editing impulses will be an uncomfortable process carrying deep-set emotional ties to personal worth and judgment that instructors and peers will need to help them unpack.
• Students and instructors must acknowledge that individual writing sessions consist of stages in which students may experience oscillating moments of high focus and low focus, pleasure and displeasure. At the same time, students need to know they can actively influence how this oscillation occurs if they can recognize when the low ebbs happen and react to the change in themselves. Students who practice more will be able to take an additional step forward; they can figure out why low ebbs happen for them and try to prevent them before they develop.

These key concepts ground the practice activities and self-monitoring strategies discussed in the latter portion of this thesis. The first concept is fairly straightforward and reflects a shift in attitudes and expectations about practice instructors should encourage when they teach. The second and third concepts, however, require more unpacking.
9. Concept 1: Self-Regulated Strategy Development

Students should be actively and repeatedly discouraged from focusing on local errors and mistakes when they generate initial text. Informal writing is legitimate. This idea needs to be addressed explicitly, modeled, and discussed, but students also need to confirm and accept it for themselves. For some, learning to repress their editing impulses will be an uncomfortable process carrying deep-set emotional ties to personal worth and judgment that instructors and peers will need to help them unpack.

It’s well established in composition research that novice writers tend to focus more on local revisions rather than global changes; it’s also difficult for many of them to insert distance between initial generating and nitpicky reviewing when they sit down to write and revise. Sondra Perl’s revelatory research in the 1970s and 1980s shed light on these and other crippling trends among novice college writers. Her 1979 article “The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers” observed that novice writers’ generating and revising processes included a heavy focus on copyediting without actually making papers more correct (p. 326). Nancy Sommers corroborated these findings in her research on novice and expert writers’ revision strategies, adding that students tend to think of revision as a kind of static checking, not an opportunity for modifying their ideas or perspective (1980, p. 382). Mike Rose, studying writer’s block, outlined some reasons for this premature, largely ineffective editing: poor confidence in grammar skills, inadequate planning styles, writing just one draft, rigid or negative attitudes about composing, and inappropriate assumptions about how changes will affect comprehension of the text (1984, p. 73). Having effective strategies to counteract these behaviors is one
hallmark of advanced writing skill. It is, therefore, one of writing practice’s critical goals.

There are plenty of reasons for this nasty trend of trying to generate finished prose during every writing attempt. For one, spacing writing out in short spurts of unpolished prose over longer periods of time looks incredibly inefficient to inexperienced writers from a distance. It means more time writing, the student thinks. And writing, for the student, is an agonizing process – agonizing because the cognitive processes writing requires are more difficult to juggle and because they use ineffective schemas governed by black-and-white rules to stamp their words with simplistic judgment values. Finally, it is completely possible, though certainly not pleasant, for many students to stick to these schemas through college and still achieve the results they want: passing grades.

To less experienced writers, composing without self-editing as harshly, at least at first, feels wrong. It just does. To your callow ear, you sound ignorant and inarticulate. You have a sense of losing forever profound ideas just on the edges of consciousness when you turn your back on them to nail down in naked type one complete thought. Then you finish the sentence, period pounded, and must abandon it to start the next. Meanwhile, the ghost of every grammar exercise you’ve ever suffered begs you to patch that sentence’s potholes. You try to resist. Sometimes, though, you have to look back to scan what you’ve written so you can regain some train of thought. On your way to make the train, you have to leap over those distracting mistakes to hop aboard. This is assuming you aren’t sidetracked mid-jump by a tantalizing addition to the thing you just typed that derails the whole endeavor.

Composing will not feel any less like pulling teeth if writers keep trying to carve out a finished product every time they generate a sentence. Students need to be able to
generate without editing text to pieces. Elbow and others advocate a more spread-out writing process in which students generate by freewriting, thereby suppressing the internal editor, and save superficial copy editing until the very last stage before they stamp the piece finished (2012, p. 156; Lamott 1994). But simply telling students not to procrastinate or not to be perfectionists isn’t enough to combat ingrained urges. They need repeated encouragement to adopt a completely different mindset about writing. They also need plenty of opportunities to wield this new attitude and come to terms with the products it generates in a structured, supportive environment.

Resisting the urge to edit is not a passive activity, a simple switching off of urges to judge and revise. Rather, students need concrete strategies for allowing themselves not to revise, and instructors need to address explicitly the downsides of this impulse to pick apart and write well the first time. As Elbow, referencing the Alexander Technique, explains, “freewriting is an exercise in not trying – avoiding ‘end-gaining’ – learning to move or behave not toward an end or goal. The goal is going-through-the-motions” (2012, p. 154). Teaching students to deliberately suppress the urge to revise is itself an active revision strategy.

Writing instructors can target students’ resistance to “just get it down” with exercises that assist students in generating writing for longer stretches before they revise. Following is an activity, inspired by Anne Lamott’s essay “Shitty First Drafts,” I introduce at the beginning of my semester-long Introduction to College Writing course (see figure 4). The activity allows me to address students’ attitudes about sitting down to write, tackling mistakes, acknowledging errors, and using informal language in class in a way that provides them with more effective generating strategies en masse. It also invites
them explicitly to take notice of and respond to their writing inhibitions and critical habits as they engage in writing tasks outside the classroom.

Use one of the “just get it down” techniques we discussed in class to write a 250-300 word Blackboard discussion post in response to the following prompt:

When you left high school, what conceptions about writing and arguing did you possess, and how have our readings this week influenced those conceptions? Have your ideas about the writing process or act of argument changed? Feel free to use personal examples to describe influential past experiences and “Aha!” moments. Explore what comes to mind without editing yourself or trying to restructure your sentences to look more academic. Use one of the techniques below, and mention in your post which one you used:

**Basic method:** Answer the prompt without allowing yourself to edit mistakes. Even if the sentences sound childish to you, leave them alone and focus on moving forward to the next thought. Pause when you need to, but don’t go back.

**Invisible method:** Cover your computer screen, turn it away, or look down so you can’t see the sentences you’ve already typed. If you’re writing by hand, cover as you go with your hand or a piece of paper. This prevents you from nitpicking every sentence as you write it.

**Speaking method:** Answer the prompt verbally and record yourself speaking aloud. Then, just listen to the recording and write what you hear. Download a free recording app or use software already installed on your computer.

**Buddy method:** Form a posse! Share the task with a friend. One person starts, and when their thought runs out, the next person takes over and starts typing or writing where their friend stopped. Build on each other’s ideas until you’ve covered all angles of the prompt.

Figure 4: Excerpt from my 2016 course prompt “Learning to Love the Shitty First Draft”

I include this particular activity not just because it provides an opportunity for students to freewrite, but because it also embodies core components of self-regulated strategy development, a model from education research I think college writing instructors can use to form a clearer standard for determining whether a writing activity also makes a
good practice exercise. The latter provides students with more than just a reason to write; it also provides opportunities for them to consciously monitor, assess, and respond to the strategies they use to regulate their own writing experience.

Self-regulated strategy development, or SRSD, is an education model for promoting self-regulated learning that has been developing since the early 1980s. Originally applied to struggling writers in elementary, middle, and high school, SRSD had the strongest impact of any strategies approach in writing according to Graham and Perin’s meta-analyses of a broad spectrum of studies in 2007.

This model is an ideal foundation on which to start building more refined, usable stratagems for college writing instructors to teach first-year students how to practice generating and revising text. There are three reasons for this. First of all, the model has been extensively tested and reviewed among students in elementary through high school with overwhelmingly positive results (Harris & Graham 2009, p. 116-17). Furthermore, SRSD focuses on students’ abilities to monitor and regulate their own writing processes rather than on the products they create; although students’ texts still play a crucial role, more important is the students’ ability to respond constructively to aspects of their own creative processes, including their social and environmental influences (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Ianetta 2015, p. 856). Finally, because SRSD constitutes an instructional method rather than a set of requirements for specific writing activities, it can adapt to multiple levels of writing instruction and to a wide range of potential practice assignments.

Self-regulated strategy development involves six general stages of instruction, here adapted from Harris and Graham:
1) Develop students’ background knowledge, including knowledge of self-monitoring strategies.

2) Discuss students’ current self-regulation abilities and attitudes about writing.

3) Model self-regulation strategies, including ways for students to handle their own errors (application resulting from gaps in knowledge) and mistakes (incorrect application of knowledge they possess), monitor their focus, and encourage themselves while writing.

4) Confirm that students have memorized the strategies.

5) Support the strategies by collaborating with student and discussing how they will maintain and extend self-instruction techniques to other situations.


This thesis and the activities it includes target two critical gaps presented in recent literature on SRSD. First, the model’s effects have not been studied among average college writers in the composition classroom and have rarely been studied among adult learners (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Ianetta 2015, p. 856). Second, the field requires further investigation on incorporating peer review into SRSD (Harris & Graham 2009, p. 129; MacArthur, Philippakos, & Ianetta 2015, p. 856).

My prompt “Learning to Love the Shitty First Draft” targets the first gap by presenting an individual activity whose impact on student writing process could be measured to help determine SRSD’s effects on college writers. Following are two
variations of a peer review activity modeled after the concept of a master class, an activity common in the music world where peers and a mentor exchange feedback on a peer’s performance and playing adjustments. These peer review tasks also adhere to SRSD’s six stages of writing instruction and thus target the second gap referenced in education research.

For students to practice revision in a way that builds expertise, they need to engage in structured tasks that account for revision’s subprocesses: detecting problems, planning solutions, translating solutions, and then transcribing them. These tasks must also lend themselves to consistent performance over time, spur immediate and frequent feedback, and support student motivation to perform the activity.

Musicians offer a solution: the master-class scenario. In this context, an instructor’s feedback on an individual’s output provides instruction for multiple observers. Instead of tailoring feedback to every student, who then experience this feedback and make adjustments privately, the instructor can save herself valuable time and effort by making feedback public and inviting active observation and adjustment from others that all stem from one common experience.

Others have advocated similar scenarios in the composition classroom, but writing – and being willing to slip up and compose messily – in front of students remains an underdeveloped topic. Beth L. Hewett makes a similar observation in her 2010 book *The Online Writing Conference*. Inspired by what she calls “Zoellner’s dare,” or Robert Zoellner’s 1969 urging for classes to see instructors engaged in all the wandering, hesitating, backtracking glory of the scribal act, Hewett began writing in front of her students (2010, p. 65). This writing took place in spans of 20 to 30 minutes at least once
per semester, and afterwards she and her class would discuss revisions to the text and make changes (Hewett 2010, p. 66). According to Hewett, taking Zoellner’s dare humanizes the writing instructor and shows students they are not alone in feeling stuck sometimes while writing. More importantly, the display shows them expert-level strategies for circumventing those writing obstacles.

Master-class solutions for revision practice in the classroom could take many forms: group chat rooms, whole-class workshops, class discussion of drafts posted to online tools like Blackboard, etc. Here I offer two variations, what I call the one-on-one master class and the single-group-class master class. The latter strategy includes more exposed writing on the instructor’s part.

1. One-on-one master class

In this scenario, an instructor meets with a student in a one-on-one coaching situation while the rest of the class observes how and why the writer and reader deliver, receive, and respond to feedback on a text. In an alternate but similar scenario, the class observes a peer review session between two students while the instructor offers guidance during or at the end of the session by pointing out trends and encouraging response about the effectiveness of possible peer review moves.

This method for practicing revision while receiving feedback is used very effectively in the music world when a student meets with an instructor for a lesson in front of a group of peers. At the lesson’s conclusion and sometimes during the lesson, the instructor will address observers to point out trends they might notice in their own playing and measures they can take alone and with instructors to strengthen their performance and improve practice sessions. Importantly, the master class also provides
an opportunity for the instructor to provide pedagogical insight on why some responses may be more appropriate than others and how a person giving feedback forms goals for making their input more effective and lasting.

I’ve noticed student desire for exactly this kind of scenario in my own teaching experiences. During one peer review session in which students formed pairs to give guided feedback on each other’s papers, one group expressed a desire to watch me or a confident student go over a paper with another student to illustrate concepts I had explained through a slide presentation and handout but not with an active in-class demonstration. Other students sitting around this pair immediately agreed with them, and they echoed their sentiments weeks later when I prompted the class for written feedback on the peer review process I had introduced in class.

Some instructors and students might balk at the idea of one person making mistakes in front of an audience, but it is precisely this risk that makes the exercise so effective. Rolf Norgaard, in his essay “Embracing Uncertainty,” points out that working with student texts on the fly “places a premium on our improvisational readiness to engage the unexpected and seize its opportunities” and that instructors’ open approach to drafts “can send a message that all writing worth reading grows from a willingness to take risks” (2010, p. 230-31). Working with students in such an exposed context creates valuable modeling and feedback opportunities that would not otherwise be available to all of them in such a short span of time.

Furthermore, risk motivates. One reason musicians feel an enormous amount of pressure to practice outside rehearsals and lessons is because, quite bluntly, they want to save face on a personal level. They don’t want to sound bad in front of their friends, and
they don’t want the conductor to call out their section for sounding incompetent in front of the whole ensemble. At the same time, master classes aren’t effective motivators just because students want to look like they know what they’re doing in front of their peers. They’re effective because they embrace the fact that mistakes are necessary to growth, and the best way to deal with errors is to acknowledge, examine, share, and learn from the context in which they occur, not to cover them up or be threatened by them (Hallam 2001; Leon-Guerrro 2008; Kruse-Weber & Parncutt 2014). Master classes are about sharing an experience – identifying and empathizing with the individual – not judging or isolating him.

2. Single-group-class master class

This exercise transitions over the course of a class from a student’s individual, private engagement with a text to group discussion and then class-wide discussion of the same text. Here, the text is a student’s paper. I recommend an example paper that responds to a prompt with which students are familiar but that does not come from a student in the class. This exercise maintains the components of a master class in that students witness input on an individual’s piece of work as well as possible ways of responding to that input. In this case, levels of feedback and response progress from a single reader to a small group of peers to the instructor and the remainder of the class. Meanwhile, each level of response corresponds to phases of the revision process: detecting problems, planning solutions, translating solutions into language, and transcribing that language into new text to replace the old text.

Every student in the class receives the same paper and begins by engaging in detection of problems to find starting points for revision. This activity can be structured
with prompts for components to check for or evaluate. Some students, in identifying and thinking about the problems they detect, may start to plan solutions.

After a period of reading over the text and detecting opportunities for revision, students consult with others in small groups about the problems they detected. With prompting from the instructor or other sources of scaffolding, the groups begin to plan and articulate solutions for the weaknesses they see. Through a combination of discussion and written engagement with the shared text, the group collaborates in planning solutions and transcribing them into language. Through collaboration, the group can limit the revision task by targeting the areas of improvement most frequently identified in the group. Planning and translating solutions as a group also breaks the task into more manageable chunks for each individual by spreading effort across the group.

At this point, the instructor assists students with transcribing their language for revision solutions into new text that the class as a whole helps dictate. I did this in my class by projecting my computer desktop on the board and manipulating the example essay through the word processing program as they gave me their input. Jane Mathison Fife advocates a similar strategy in her essay “Bringing Outside Texts In and Inside Texts Out,” where she explains her practice of spotlighting individual student texts for whole-class moments in draft workshops (2010, p. 225). These strategies give students a chance to experience the detection, planning, and translation phases of revision from their instructor’s perspective and to compare it with theirs as they share responses. Students are prompted to speak aloud their ideas for new text as I change the old text in the projected document. We consider the results and discuss why some changes might be more effective than others given the text’s goals.
More than the peer review or coaching session, this scenario encourages more collaboration as a group. It parallels ensemble participation in music in which group members combine their individual perspectives to break a large task into manageable chunks and work together to form better developed solutions to the problem or problems they identify. This exercise also reflects, on a small scale, the progression from individual engagement with a text in practice to group engagement with that same text during sectionals and finally rehearsal with the full ensemble under a conductor’s guidance.

Like the one-on-one master class, this exercise is effective because it harnesses the immediacy of feedback in music performance for the writing classroom. By limiting focus to one student’s text and making feedback a public forum, instructors allow their efforts to travel beyond the end comments on one student’s paper to reach the ears of many.

These assignments constitute a few helpful examples of how composition instructors can implement self-regulated strategy development in a classroom context. Using this model, instructors who lack resources to work one-on-one with students can still teach first-year writers the crucial self-awareness and self-monitoring skills they’ll need when they generate and revise texts outside the classroom.

More important than simply assigning exercises like this, however, is articulating and encouraging the attitude behind them that supports students’ concept of practice. This attitude is complex. To gain expertise, it must embrace mistakes and, at the same time, strive to improve. To sustain motivation, it must allow for playful wandering and focused flow but also value the critic. It must accept both pleasure and pain. It must consider
obstacles part and parcel of practice, but not unmanageable. Finally, this attitude must consider practice completely necessary – not a single act to generate pages but a journey in which one takes ownership of a progressing skill.
10. Concept 2: Practice Stages as Error Management

Students and instructors must acknowledge that individual writing sessions consist of stages in which students may experience oscillating moments of high focus and low focus, pleasure and displeasure. At the same time, students need to know they can actively influence how this oscillation occurs if they can recognize when the low ebbs happen and react to the change in themselves. Students who practice more will be able to take an additional step forward; they can figure out why low ebbs happen for them and try to prevent them before they develop.

Instructors should make clear from the start of a first-year writing course that students will probably need to rethink the way they approach writing tasks and form expectations about the creative process. Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns, discussing writing applications for cognitive behavioral coaching, point out that targeting writers’ behaviors without also targeting their underlying beliefs leads to sporadic, short-lived results (2012, p. 250-51). Some students, for example, might assume the sensation of flowing words or writing ease is negative: a sign they’re missing something or not thinking hard enough. It’s crucial to tease out assumptions like this that might inhibit students’ engagement with writing tasks before they start tackling those tasks. If instructors don’t explicitly address them, then students will continue to enforce these assumptions when they complete assignments. This risk remains no matter how well designed those assignments – sentence combining, emulating other texts, summarization exercises, prewriting, collaboration, goal-setting – might be (Kellogg & Whiteford 2009, p. 258).
Students are more likely to implement information learned in the classroom successfully if they possess a systematic way to orient themselves mindfully in a writing environment and can predict and distinguish among various writing results as an effect of different writing behaviors.

Before discussing concepts like mindfulness or attention, we need to unpack a few terms associated with them. Awareness, here, is used as a more general term that encompasses both judgmental and nonjudgmental kinds of attention. Attentional involvement describes the degree to which a person’s attention is devoted to the task at hand (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi 2012, p. 258). This discussion also distinguishes between decision-making, or judgmental attention, and mindfulness, which is nonjudgmental and present-centered (Davis & Thompson 2015, p. 46). Finally, executive attention refers to people’s capacity to regulate their own behavior and direct cognition to accomplish goals (Tang & Posner 2015, p. 82). 7

Students’ mindfulness of their composition practices comes into play when they are consciously orienting themselves in a writing environment. Their ability to direct executive attention becomes crucial when they are faced with a new situation and must determine how to apply existing knowledge to it – assuming they recall existing knowledge in the first place. As Anne Beaufort explains in College Writing and Beyond, students may possess domain-specific knowledge about a particular subject, genre, rhetorical act, writing process, or discourse community, and any of these may be employed during composition (2007, p. 18). Yet context-specific information does little good when writers lack self-prompting strategies to recall, repurpose, and extend the

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7 See page 18 to recall executive attention’s relationship to working memory.
information in novel ways.

Accounts of student writing practices from Kevin Roozen and Michelle Navarre Cleary clearly demonstrate learners’ need for adaptive strategies and self-regulation skills. Roozen, examining a graduate English student, showed students are much more flexible problem solvers if they can assemble new strategies piecemeal from bits of older methods instead of imposing one rigid problem-solving technique on every new scenario (2010, p. 346). Cleary observed another key point: the most adaptable learners have also had many opportunities to practice this repurposing. Writers who have used several perspectives to tackle a problem before are better at applying their skills to new writing scenarios than students who haven’t (Cleary 2013, p. 664; Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000, p. 66).

For students to respond more flexibly to new writing contexts, the schema they use to analyze these contexts must also incorporate structured attentional shifts among separate stages of practice. Conceptualizing practice as a series of shifts and stages is necessary because, as discussed in previous sections, the writing act drives students to oscillate between periods of ignoring mistakes and errors and correcting them, consciously evaluating text and also embracing non-conscious, nonevaluating periods of flow.

An ideal framework for understanding and conveying practice’s complex fluctuations comes straight from music education psychology. This is Silke Kruse-Weber and Richard Parncutt’s 2013 “interdisciplinary conceptual framework” for modeling constructive error management during practice sessions. Although the model targets music practice, it provides an almost eerily convenient method for writers to visualize
how monitoring and shifting their focus on error during practice can increase their ability
to gain expert skill. Kruse-Weber and Parncutt present the following stages of practice in
terms of how those gaining expertise handle error and creativity as they engage:

1) Deliberate play: errors tolerated, motivated by enjoyment
2) Declarative learning: errors assumed, mistakes accepted, knowledge
   acquired, feedback received
3) Procedural learning: errors targeted, mistakes avoided, knowledge and
   skill acquired through evaluation and repetition, motivated by desire to
   improve
4) Creative exploration: errors accepted, risks taken, changes made,
   motivated by curiosity (2014, p. 9)

The next few paragraphs describe how the goals and activities characterizing each stage
would apply to phases of student writing during effective practice sessions. These stages,
like writing subprocesses, do not necessarily progress in any strict or linear order.

Stage one, deliberate play, parallels speaking onto the page or freewriting to
generate text. Less experienced writers may devote some conscious thought to
deliberately repressing their internal editor, which requires knowledge about strategies
for monitoring and responding to excessive editing. Errors at this point are tolerated, not
corrected (Kruse-Weber 2014, p. 9), and students are motivated primarily by a desire to
engage, curiosity about what they’ll write, and, for some, inherent enjoyment of the task.
This is a stage during which flow states may occur.

During the second stage, declarative learning, practicing writers would acquire
knowledge from their own experience or from a mentor about the what, where, and when
of the task at hand. Errors at this point should be regarded as crucial learning opportunities and play a constructive role in providing feedback (Kruse-Weber 2014, p. 9). Students benefit here from monitoring their emotional responses to making mistakes and articulating the criteria by which they identify errors.

This monitoring, through instruction, should take place at an explicit or declarative level – particularly for less experienced writers. For novices, effective schemas are underdeveloped and thus require more conscious deliberation to implement correctly. Because these schemas are less automated for students who have practiced the strategies less, these students will probably benefit from articulating learned schemas again before starting revision and periodically during the task. Novice students can help build these reminders into practice sessions by having a prompt, mnemonic, or assistant present to reference whenever they lose their train of thought or experience confusion about the writing goal. Confusion or forgetfulness thus becomes a trigger for re-articulation and repetition.

Students with more self-monitoring practice under their belt – first-year writing students at a later point in the semester, say – will continue to re-articulate the criteria by which they identify errors as they acquired a more refined vocabulary for doing so. Depending on how instructors scaffold students’ practice experiences, this refinement – an increasing ability to articulate complete, abstract thoughts about the text’s effectiveness – stems in part from the student’s saving space in working memory through repetition. Declarative learning thus increases the students’ ability to describe learning goals and conditions explicitly and to enact those learning goals implicitly at a level below their conscious awareness (Kruse-Weber & Parncutt 2014, p. 9).
The third stage, procedural learning, most closely resembles Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer’s original criteria for deliberate practice. These are the times in which students strive to avoid mistakes and allocate most of their conscious thought to evaluating results and comparing those results to particular goals. Writers’ engagement in this stage overlaps more significantly with the declarative learning stage than it might for musicians simply because musicians’ errors and mistakes are more quantitative and require less verbalization for correction. Musicians may repeat passages and compare results like pitch, tempo, and dynamics to measurable ideals (Kruse-Weber & Parncutt 2014, p. 11); writers, on the other hand, continue to create new text rather than repeating the same transcrip tive act, and they lack objective measuring sticks with which to measure output. For writers, repetition within practice sessions means repeated engagement using desirable self-regulating strategies, not repeated attempts at one specific task.  

The fourth and final stage is a phase of creative exploration. During these periods of the practice session, students take risks while engaging in challenging tasks. They change routine behaviors even if these changes result, initially, in more errors. As in the declarative learning stage, students are open to errors and even expect them as a necessary part of pursuing new knowledge or discovering a new ability. Creative exploration may occur as students become conscious of common reactions to certain stimuli and deliberately change their response. It may also be an implicit act they perform attentively but without articulating the risk as they take it.

Rather than trying to avoid or constantly correct mistakes for the duration of

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8 The latter applies to copying lines. Copying is still a form of practice, though, especially for younger writers trying to hone transcription skills.
practice, students benefit more from embracing error and making mistakes for at least half of the stages, tolerating them for one stage, and purposefully avoiding mistakes for one stage. Additional research is needed to delve more deeply into strategies by which students can recognize and act on gaps in knowledge, perhaps making explicit the context for confusion or uncertainty rather than the error itself. Studying, proposing, and testing such strategies provides an exciting direction for future research in composition practice and practice instruction.
Coda: What Practice Makes

Not perfection – not in writing. Practice, in writing, does not mean repeating correct answers. It does not mean that a writer constantly and consciously evaluates every move on a scale of right to wrong. It does not disqualify actions performed without explicit desire to improve. This is because practicing writers in freshman composition navigate terrain in which improvement can be a nebulous term, a matter of hacking abstract ideas from a mercurial medium rather than tallying objective mistakes. Teaching writers to practice thus means teaching them techniques to spot, harness, and transcribe ideas, not just to evaluate whether or not they’re good. Teaching practice means giving students a mirror with which to see and react to their own attempts – giving them, that is, a means to reflect.

In Reflection in the Writing Classroom, Kathleen Blake Yancey defines reflection as the dialectical process by which people develop learning goals, strategies for reaching them, and strategies for assessing the extent to which goals have been met (1998, p. 6). Reflection’s dialectical component is critical for understanding how students may craft knowledge by practicing a creative, recursive act. For Yancey, this component stems from a dialogue between projection (looking forward) and review (casting backward) that helps us compare and determine causality among past, present, and future actions; dialectical also describes the interplay among cognitive, affective, and intuitive processes that influence this dialogue (1998, p. 6).

Reflection’s role in writing practice highlights another source of dialectical tension, one that goes beyond the dialogue between criteria and accomplishment. In writing practice, reflection also applies to the interplay between what is knowable and
what is not, and even between what should be known (discovered, made explicit) and what should not. Independent practice frequently requires students to arrive at knowledge by reflecting on and reacting to their own lack of it. In writing, as in other creative acts, sometimes the most effective reaction is accepting gaps in knowledge – and identifying and remembering the context for those gaps – rather than groping for evaluation criteria to fill the nameless unknown with solutions.

Lynda Barry pinpoints this need to reflect on dialectical tensions between determining progress and progressing with no other goal than to act. In her autobiographical comic “Two Questions,” the protagonist grapples with two impish queries that cripple her artistic output: “Is this good?” and “Does this suck?” (Barry p. 57; see figure 5). Figure 6 shows how relief – “that strange floating feeling of being there and not being there” – returns only when she discovers that the answer to both is “I don’t know” (Barry p. 68). “So much is possible,” Barry says, when a person can relinquish these criteria, can “stand not knowing long enough to let something alive take shape!” (p. 68).

All who strive to improve writing through practice face a confusing dilemma. Writers juggle two essential but competing needs: the need to embrace error – indeed, to throw evaluation criteria out the window for a while – and the need to carefully compare their words to a wide, complex spectrum of goals encompassing everything from language to audience to genre to their own responses while writing. This dilemma arises from the push and pull between spontaneity and self-control, between a risky creative impulse that sees only after it leaps and a surveying cartographer who needs to make sense of the route.
Unforeseen discoveries catalyze this delicate push and pull. Richard Leahy, writing in 1995, posited that surprise, or sudden awareness of a new idea or complication, is an important aspect of feedback during creative activities (p. 153). “Is there a tension between surprise and the sense of clear goals?” he asked, “I imagine there might be” (Leahy p. 153). I think so, too. For students to practice outside the classroom, feedback – a critical component of skill building – must apply not just to a mentor’s reactions but also to the student’s responses to his own performance. Leahy notes that surprise can change writers’ goals on the fly, can confuse them, can even be unpleasant for them, but at the same time, he thinks the opposite effect is more likely: sudden awareness of a new insight or tangle actually energizes the writer, enriching her attempt to meet certain goals.
even as it complicates that attempt (p. 153). The conviction grounding this thesis is that training instructors to train students in practice will make the second outcome more likely and more attainable.

The group on whom I focus, traditional first-year composition students, generally do not enter the classroom knowing how to navigate the relationship between creating and correcting in a way that primes them to build skill as effectively as possible. I wrote this thesis for the people who teach and talk about these students. Following are the key points I hope to drive home.

Those fueling conversations in the composition field need to consider possible misconceptions they might hold about repeated engagement in skill-building activities: practice as pure drudgery, for example, or simply a means of generating an “improved” product by the instructor’s standards. Practice is in fact a necessary, highly complex activity that builds students’ independence as they monitor their own engagement with a writing task. They do so, furthermore, not just to meet a series of goals for the text but also to streamline and better articulate their own process so they can apply their problem-solving strategies to other contexts. Writers becoming better practicers don’t necessarily generate more pristine papers.

Instructors need to think very carefully about how they communicate the concept of practicing and engaging outside the classroom on students’ own time. Not only is this activity to be expected and encouraged, but it also needs to be framed for the student in language beyond “Walk into class next time with X number of pages or words.” Students and instructors need to share a common framework for practice sessions, one that acknowledges oscillation between attentional involvement in pleasing aspects of the task
and attentional involvement in monitoring oneself through self-critique. Models such as self-regulated strategy development and phases of practice determined by error management provide valuable guidelines for how instructors and students can talk about what practice feels like, how it progresses, and what it accomplishes.

Having a more sophisticated concept of the frustrations learners might face during practice as well as concrete strategies for tackling them empowers students tremendously. Communicating these practice tools to students helps them realize they can take their development as writers into their own hands. They own this skill; the messy process of writing is just a matter of leveling up.

There are, as always, many gaps left to fill and many areas left to investigate in this realm of writing practice. One of the most promising is the effect of self-regulated strategy development on writing effectiveness among college students and other adult writers measured through experimental and quasi-experimental studies. I reference experimental and quasi-experimental methods very deliberately here because I agree with researchers such as Portanova (2014) that the composition field needs to return to cognitive studies of writing as a practical approach (p. 141-42, 147).

John Hayes, at the 2012 Conference on College Composition and Communication, displayed sobering findings from his examination of Written Communication articles from 1985 to 2010: publications on cognition that included both statistical data and a primary researcher from an English department had declined dramatically (qtd. in Portanova 2014, p. 146). It is imperative, however, that composition researchers gather measurable data through methods other instructors can replicate – not to disqualify or discredit qualitative studies, but to expand the tools available to us for
charting trends, testing teaching strategies, and communicating our results. This is necessary because when composition researchers restrict their view primarily to qualitative, local studies, they inhibit the ease with which they can pool their findings with those from other disciplines: fields oriented in psychology or education research, for example. Yet as I’ve demonstrated with reference to SRSD and error management models, disciplines outside composition grounded in experimental and quasi-experimental studies offer writing researchers critical insight on techniques they can test and tools they can use to identify and replicate methods that consistently yield beneficial results for students.

Concepts introduced in this thesis that would be fruitful areas for quantitative research include the following:

- Do students following a curriculum based on SRSD reflect significant gains in motivation and/or affect when compared to students following a curriculum in which instructors have not been trained to stress SRSD?

- Are students who have been exposed to instruction that explicitly frames practice as a series of phases determined by error and mistake management more likely to repress their internal editors for longer periods of time than students who have not? Likewise, are treated students more likely to exhibit characteristic expert views of errors and mistakes or to take creative risks than control students?

- Do students who receive instruction specifically in SRSD or error management exhibit higher-quality writing as a result of practice than those who do not receive this enhanced instruction?
• To what extent do college composition teachers successfully implement instruction methods for SRSD or error management strategies based on professional development techniques implemented in education or music psychology research? Do they exhibit altered attitudes about the role practice plays in composition instruction and in students’ time outside the classroom when compared to teachers without this professional development?

In short, composition studies would benefit enormously from embracing interdisciplinary studies of practice and practice training techniques; it would also benefit from working collaboratively with researchers in other fields to test these techniques’ effectiveness using experimental and quasi-experimental studies in addition to qualitative and single case studies.

The key is for composition experts to realize they can do this without ignoring or glossing over key differences that distinguish writing – and writing practice – from other fields. Trying to “level up” composition skills on his own time will expose a student to territory that is always, to some degree, unknown and unpredictable. As he practices writing by generating and revising new text, he will craft ideas his instructor cannot fully foresee for him. A writing instructor cannot point to the difficult measures and say, “This section. These notes.” She cannot point to the chessboard and say, “This move. These outcomes.”

Instead, a writing instructor points to passages that might resemble what the writer will create. She provides the writer with language for articulating the complexity of the challenges he will face and the solutions he must concoct. She gives him suggestions for
the attitude and mental state with which to tackle that mashup of processes we call writing. She breaks this mashup down into phases he can more easily recognize and prepare for on his own. She says, in effect, “There will be hard passages. You will find a way. You are not alone.”

“This,” she says, “is writing.”


Hayes, John R. “Modeling and Remodeling Writing.” Written Communication 29.3


