Introduction

This book explains how everyday figures in the discourse of writing work with – and against – each other. It may seem that we already know plenty about our everyday figures for writing, that their very familiarity is what allows them to function. Yet the workings of even our most commonplace figures – *to put thoughts onto paper, to find one's voice, to write clearly* or *forcefully* or *gracefully* – can be poorly understood precisely because we make sense of them so automatically.

I suspect that is one reason that current scholarship has proceeded as it has. With only a few exceptions, scholarly work on familiar metaphors for writing, which is mostly in the field of writing studies, is based solely on introspection. Writing scholars have assumed, because they have an intuitive understanding of everyday writing metaphors, that their interpretations of them – and, more troubling, their interpretations of others' interpretations – require no further confirmation.

Typically, scholars have focused on one metaphor at a time, either pointing out a particular metaphor's strengths or shortcomings (e.g., *voice* or the Conduit Metaphor) or proposing a novel metaphor intended to clarify a particular question (e.g., Writing As Travel or Argument As Aikido). Certainly, these critiques and suggestions are valuable. But the introspective, one-metaphor-at-a-time approach does not take into account the ways that metaphors relate to other metaphors and to other figures. As a consequence, no one has examined the everyday metaphors that apply to writing in light of a corpus of texts and primary research with people, nor has anyone examined the connections between everyday writing metaphors and other rhetorical elements such as categories, stories, and metonymies.

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To understand our most familiar metaphors well, we have to examine something broader: what I call the *figurative rhetoric of writing*. Metaphors are enmeshed in a constellation of relationships that complicate what people mean by them and how they are likely to influence people's writing. We have to consider how our everyday figures for writing are connected to everyday classifications of writers and writing; everyday theories of writing expertise; everyday stories of writers and writing processes; everyday metonymies associated with writing, and more.

Because our metaphors for writing work in coordination with all of these things, they are more organized, more complex, and more contentious than we have so far recognized. And it is this contentious pattern that, I argue, matters most. While this book analyzes many key metaphors, it does not attempt to catalog or provide analyses of all of them – or even all that might strike us as familiar. Instead, it takes up a more fundamental task: to explain what shapes our everyday figures for writing and how they fit together.

The findings presented here will be of interest to two audiences: people who study or have a keen interest in writing; and people who study metaphor from a variety of perspectives, including linguistics, cognitive science, literary theory, and rhetoric. Let me say briefly what the book offers to each of these audiences.

For those whose interest is writing, it can contribute both to writing scholarship and to writing pedagogy. Understanding what shapes our everyday figures gives writing scholars a stronger basis for suggesting new figures and for commenting on figures that are already influential – a task that writing studies has assigned to itself with some frequency. Indeed, some of writing studies' most important contributions are framed as endorsements and rejections of key metaphors. Scholars in writing studies have vigorously endorsed such metaphors as *discourse community*, *contact zones*, and *rhetorical spaces* and just as vigorously called into question such metaphors as *voice* and the Conduit Metaphor. But it has not based those evaluations on a systematic examination of the broad constellation

of figures that shape people's ideas about writing or the rhetorical patterns that guide their use. Consequently, it has often mischaracterized the metaphors it critiques and, equally problematic, underestimated the potential resonance of its proposed metaphors.

That can have concrete implications for the teaching and practice of writing. If we hope for our students to be more thoughtful about their writing, we cannot ignore ideas about writing that they routinely encounter outside the classroom, ideas that are often embedded in figurative language and thought. Otherwise we risk confusion about the aims of our own pedagogies. Students may be confused about what we are trying to teach them. And we may, ourselves, be unaware of the subtle interplay between what we say in the writing classroom and the discourse of writing at large.

This book also contributes to the study of metaphor and figuration. It is a natural extension of work in cognitive linguistics, which has argued for some time that metaphors function as part of metaphor systems (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1996; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Extending that line of thought, it describes the systematic relationships between everyday figures for writing – including categories, stories, and metonymies. Yet it also does more: It argues that everyday figures for writing are constituted not just by systematic relationships but also by a *rhetoric*: a conversation about writing that is, on the one hand, shaped by the cognitive structure of our figurative language-about-language and, on the other hand, accommodates – indeed, relies on – contradictory points of view. Although our everyday figures for writing are by definition familiar, their workings are often surprising when viewed in the light of a larger rhetoric.

In particular, this book examines (1) the categories *writer* and *to write*; (2) three major stories that "license" our everyday metaphors and metonymies; (3) familiar metonymies such as *voice* and *self*; (4) familiar metaphors such as the Conduit Metaphor and Language Is Power; and (5) imaginative scenarios commonly associated with what I call the "other" Conduit Metaphor. The book's aim

is simple, if broad: Once we understand the rhetorical contours that
inform everyday writing metaphors and metonymies, we can better
understand all of the figures we use to think about and talk about
writing, even those that are not discussed extensively – perhaps even
not mentioned.

The chapters that follow describe a patterned, yet flexible,
conversation in which individual metaphors and other figures take
part. That is, I do not describe the structure of familiar figuration
per se. "Structure" suggests the relationship among familiar figures
is fixed. But the figurative rhetoric of writing is not fixed; rather it
is characterized by patterns of disagreement that allow us to shape
figures to suit varying viewpoints and purposes.

Part of the book's argument is that we can describe metaphors
and other figures better if we use more apt research methods: what
we find depends very much on where and how we look. I ground
my description of the figurative rhetoric of writing on three kinds
of data: popular texts that comment on writing and writing pro-
cesses; interviews with people whose careers depend significantly
on writing; and focus groups with technical writers and teachers of
technical writing.

I consider these texts, interviews, and focus groups to be
sources of "everyday" language and thought about writing. But I
want to be especially clear about what I mean by "everyday" and
synonyms such as "ordinary" and "commonplace." This is *not* a
study of what linguists sometimes call folk models or folk theories;
it focuses neither on uninformed talk from so-called people on the
street nor on what cognitive scientist Donald Norman (2002: 36)
calls the "everyday misunderstandings" that people rely on when
they have no claim to specialized knowledge. It is also *not* a study
of expert opinion such as can be found in academic journals and in
scholarly monographs. Instead, I have proceeded from the assump-
tion that what matters most crucially in the discourse of writing are
the texts and talk of people whose lives and livelihoods depend on
writing – people for whom writing makes a difference every day and

who have ideas about writing that we are likely to encounter if we have an everyday, as opposed to a scholarly, interest in writing. That judgment about what counts as everyday discourse about writing underpinned my selection of data throughout.

For textual data, I collected numerous texts, books, articles, and websites that discussed writing from a variety of perspectives, including creative writing, non-fiction writing, technical writing, and academic writing. In particular, I collected texts that discussed the process of writing, described the role or importance of writing, or evaluated written products. Bookstore shelves are lined with how-to books for student writers, professional writers, and aspiring fiction and non-fiction writers. Many of these were helpful resources. I make no claim to have consulted works randomly; indeed, I tried to balance my reading among various kinds of texts. However, I avoided texts directed chiefly at a scholarly audience.

I also interviewed eleven people for whom writing is an important component of professional life. They are as follows: Peter Bohlin, a freelance technical communicator; Russell Friend, a senior technical communicator for Siemens Corporation; Dirk Johnson, a freelance journalist who has written for the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* and is the author of *Biting the Dust: The Wild Ride and Dark Romance of the Rodeo Cowboy and the American West*; Betsy Maaks, a technical writing specialist for Tellabs, Inc.; Sean O'Leary, a web designer and writer of trade-magazine features, advertising copy, and technical material; Cheri Register, a memoirist and writing teacher who is the author of *Packinghouse Daughter* (winner of the American Book Award); Robert Sharoff, a freelance journalist who has written for the *New York Times*, *Chicago Magazine*, and numerous other consumer and trade periodicals; C. Joseph Sprague, a bishop of the United Methodist Church (retired) and the author of *Affirmations of a Dissenter*; Neil Steinberg, a *Chicago Sun Times* columnist and the author of numerous non-fiction books including *Hatless Jack: The President, the Fedora, and the History of American Style*; Christine Worobec, a historian and the author of three books,

including *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (winner of the Heldt Prize); and Eric Zorn, a *Chicago Tribune* columnist.

Finally, in collaboration with Dr. Christine Abbott, I conducted six focus groups (three with practicing technical writers and three with college teachers of technical writing) that explored discussants' ideas about good technical writing (Eubanks and Abbott 2004; Abbott and Eubanks 2005). We supplied discussants with examples of procedural and report writing and asked them to mark up copies in advance of the focus-group meeting. In the groups, we encouraged discussants to explain what they liked about the texts (marked with a plus sign) and what they did not like (marked with a minus sign). The discussants not only used figurative language to explain their assessments of the texts, but they also explained the implications the figures had for them.

Taken together, these three sources of data provided a rich sampling of what writing professionals say and think. Naturally, this data has limitations. Further research may uncover other important figures and additional ways that people use and interpret these figures. But the data used for this study exhibited persistent patterns that, in my estimation, cannot be ignored if we hope to make sense of our everyday way of thinking figuratively about writing.

My examination of the data might best be called rhetorical analysis. The rhetorician Jack Selzer (2003: 283) explains that rhetorical analysis focuses on "particular rhetorical acts as parts of larger communicative chains, or conversations" in an attempt to understand "the conversation that surrounds a specific symbolic performance." In this study, I did not consider a single performance but rather a set of utterances that are related thematically. Moreover, in contrast to many rhetorical analyses, I did not have chiefly in mind means of persuasion such as logos, pathos, ethos, or identification. Instead, I paid close attention to metaphors, metonymies, categorizations, and stories that were prominent and recurrent in the texts and transcripts that I examined. I marked major figures, made notes about persistent ideas that were expressed,

and – in the end – tried to describe the overall picture that emerged from my examination.

I do not suggest that this approach to analyzing figures should be used to the exclusion of other methods of research. Indeed, we will learn the most if we use a variety of methods in order to see what converges and what does not. However, rhetorical analysis has clear benefits for understanding conceptual figuration. Most obviously, it permits a broad and relational view of data that other methods – including experimentation, quantitative analysis of corpus data, and close reading of selected examples – simply cannot. It is especially useful when it comes to noticing patterns across texts and subtle implications of phrasing or argument.

As I have said, much of my analysis is rooted in conceptual metaphor theory and related cognitive-linguistic work on metonymy and conceptual blending. In particular, cognitive-linguistic studies of "metalinguistic" figures have helped me frame questions about the range of categories, metaphors, metonymies, and stories that make up ordinary ideas about language and communication (e.g., Sweetser 1992; Reddy 1993; Goossens 1994; Goossens 1995; Vanparys 1995; Grady 1998; Goossens 1999).

Conceptual metaphor theory and related work has a number of advantages that I fully embrace (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Gibbs 1999; Kövecses 2000). To begin with, it adopts a constructivist view of language. Far from accepting the mechanistic or algorithmic approach often associated with early cognitive science, conceptual metaphor theorists agree that figurative thought arises from experience. And no experience can be more universal or more influential than our brain-limited, embodied perceptions of front-back, in-out, up-down, source-path-goal; of movement, constraint, energy, fatigue; of pain, pleasure, difficulty, ease. Such perceptions motivate our most familiar metaphors: Life Is a Journey, Problems Are Burdens, Words Are Weapons, Ideas Are Sources Of Light, Morality Is Cleanliness, Desire Is Hunger, and many more.

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Yet conceptual metaphors are not just a matter of physically motivated mappings. Conceptual metaphor theorists point out that all experience is construed in the context of a particular culture. Although some metaphors such as Knowing Is Seeing (e.g., *I see your point*) are found across the globe, figurative constructions are necessarily informed and sustained by the habits and values of a particular time and place.

Those two aspects of conceptual metaphors – embodiment and cultural entrenchment – provide an important basis for analyzing patterns in all varieties of figurative thought. This cognitive-linguistic perspective accords well, I suggest, with a rhetorical view of figuration. Conceptual figures are profoundly intertwined with the way they are expressed in words: the timing and manner of their expression, the broad allegiances they reveal, and the particular motivations that attend them.

As I have argued elsewhere with respect to metaphors of trade, metaphors are constituted by a rhetorical give-and-take in which speakers' utterances are accented by their political, philosophical, social, and economic commitments (Eubanks 2000). Each time a metaphor (or other conceptual figure) is put into words, that utterance necessarily enters into a rhetorical conversation – a debate within the relevant discourse. Metaphors and other figures are responsive in the way that Bakhtin (1986) claims that all language is responsive. For example, in the early 1990s, the metaphor Trade Is War was persistently used as an epithet by US critics of Japan's trade policies, and it was just as persistently answered by figures such as Trade Is A Journey, Trade Is Friendship, and Trade Is Peace, which were favored by proponents of free trade.

Moreover, the metaphors people claim for themselves or ascribe to others are bound together with broader judgments about the world and its workings. Those assessments are frequently encapsulated in what I have called *licensing stories*. If we believe, for example, that Trade Is War is a "true" metaphor, that it expresses how trade operates or should operate, we do not say that simply because of its

unnoticed pervasiveness or the neatness of the mapping of war onto trade. Rather the metaphor aligns with our stories of *how the world works* or, more specifically, *how trade works*.

Figures in the everyday rhetoric of writing are perhaps not as obviously contentious as those in the discourse of trade. But they are no less rhetorical in character, and they are no less complex. The everyday rhetoric of writing is characterized by a patterned give-and-take among prominent metaphors, metonymies, categories, stories, and other conceptual blends. The broad contours of that rhetoric are not only influenced by the figures; the figures are influenced by the broad contours of the rhetoric.

The chapters are arranged as follows:

Chapter 1 (In search of the figurative rhetoric of writing) argues that though writing studies has contributed valuable commentary on a number of metaphors that apply to writing, it has not fully considered the conversation that our most familiar metaphors enter into. That has led often to mischaracterizations of metaphors that may be more flexible, indeed more useful, than scholars recognize; it has also weakened claims for new metaphors for guiding and conceptualizing writing. We need to understand better the conversation among metaphors and other elements of writing discourse that inform our everyday figures, a conversation that includes everyday categorizations of writers and writing, entrenched stories we tell about writing, metonymies that help to motivate and shape metaphors, and conceptual blends that give our familiar figures additional force and meaning.

Chapter 2 (The double bind of *writer* and *to write*: graded categories) points out the persistent tension between the most basic words associated with writing: *writer* and *to write*. Each word names what would seem to be a straightforward everyday category. But, as cognitive linguists and scientists have shown, categories have a graded structure. Some examples of *writer* are more central than others, and some acts of writing are more central than others. These *prototypes* of *writer* and *to write* do not align well and thus exert a persistent influence on each other.

Chapter 3 (Bind upon bind: the general-ability and specific-expertise views of writing) explains additional complications that vex the categories *writer* and *to write*. Everyday discourse about writing does not negotiate just the contradiction between proto-types, but also must navigate two theories of writing that align imperfectly with the prototype of *writer* and the prototype of *to write*. The *general-ability view* says that a *writer* possesses wide-ranging skills, that someone who can write well can write anything well. The *specific-expertise view* says that the ability to write one kind of text does not imply the ability to write another, that each genre and perhaps each writing situation is singular. For most cur-rent writing scholars, the question has been settled in favor of the specific-expertise view. But in everyday discourse the debate is more persistent and is shaped differently.

Chapter 4 (Three licensing stories: the literate inscriber, the good writer, and the author writer) describes three stories of writ-ing that license everyday writing metaphors and metonymies. These stories are related hierarchically: Authors are ordinarily presumed to have all of the writing abilities of good writers (that is, educated peo-ple who write correctly and competently); good writers are ordinar-ily presumed to have all of the writing abilities of literate inscribers (people who read and write and are, thus, employable in a literate society). However, the relationship between the stories is more com-plicated than mere nesting. The author story tells of people who have exemplary writing capabilities but whose designation as *writer* is as much a matter of social position as it is a matter of writing ability. The good-writer and literate-inscriber stories have to do both with writing abilities and with societal roles and expectations that can be far different from those emphasized in the authorial story.

Chapter 5 (Writing as transcription, talk, and voice: a complex metonymy) demonstrates how conceptual metonymies of writing and speech are complexly and contingently related to their licens-ing stories and to each other. Indeed, conceptual metonymies are not just matters of convenient substitution (as with "all *hands* on