

Part One

Why Read This Book?

from Eric Hayot,
*The Elements of Academic Style:
Writing for the Humanities*
(NY: Columbia UP, 2014)

Writing is not the memorialization of ideas. Writing distills, crafts, and pressure-tests ideas—it *creates* ideas. Active, engaged writing makes works from words. And these works belong, in turn, to the means that made them. They emerge from a process; they represent their becoming, and that emergence, in their final form.

Writing is, therefore, a kind of learning. I say so to oppose writing to dictation, to a conception of writing as a necessary but tedious step in the distribution and fixation of ideas. Conceiving of writing as the process whereby you put down thoughts you already have will give you a bad theory of what writing does and can do. As an idea of writing's purpose, it tends to make for mediocre writers and mediocre prose. Writing as though you already know what you have to say hinders it as a medium for research and discovery; it blocks the possibilities—the openings—that appear at the intersection of an intention and an audience, and constitute themselves, there, as a larger, complete performance. Active writing should not involve saying things you already understand and know, but instead let you think new things. And that is why, this book will argue, you cannot know what your ideas are, mean, or do until you set them down in sentences, whether on paper or on screen. It is also why the essay or the book you write will not be, if you are open and generous and unafraid, the essay or book you started with. To understand that process as a good thing and to develop a writing practice that helps you inhabit it: those are the two projects of this book.