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## **The Pop Warner Chronicles: A Case Study in Contextual Adaptation and the Transfer of Writing Ability**

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In this case study, an accomplished academic writer struggles to produce very brief game summaries for a local newspaper as part of the service requirements to his son's community football team. An analysis of his experience demonstrates the universal challenge of transfer regardless of prior knowledge or meta-awareness of rhetorical strategies for writing in new or unfamiliar settings and argues for a more nuanced understanding of existing ability, disposition, context, and genre in the deployment of knowledge for writing.

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**I**n his small but comfortable home study, the shelves filled with scholarly books and his diplomas hanging above his Scandinavian-style desk, a professor—we'll call him Martin—sits at his computer as if in suspended animation, the glow from the screen reflecting from his reading glasses. For over one hour, he has been alternating between these moments of paralysis and bursts of typing activity. The frustration shows as he repositions himself in his office chair, glances out at the garden below, drinks fitfully from a bottle of Dasani water, grimaces, and brushes lint from his screen. A well-published academic

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writer, he is *stuck*—unable to complete a seventy-five-word summary of his son's football game for a local newspaper.

Researchers in the field of writing studies are conflicted about the extent to which people like Martin can “transfer” discursive knowledge and abilities from one context to another.<sup>1</sup> Most of our faith in general writing instruction assumes the portability of such abilities—good writers can adapt easily to new settings and genres. But in spite of large amounts of scholarship on the writing processes of experts and novices across a range of contexts, we know little about the phenomenon of transfer: how fully it happens, the kinds of knowledge writers need to carry it out, and under what circumstances it fails. Over the past decade, scholars have regretted the lack of research on transfer, both generally and in first-year composition (Smit; Wardle, “Mutt Genres” and “What Is”). Although the phenomenon of transfer is now attracting significant attention in writing studies (see Frazier; Lettner-Rust; Nowacek; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak), prompting a multiyear, multi-institutional research institute at Elon University<sup>2</sup> (Anson and Moore) and a special issue of *Composition Forum*, it still remains relatively uncharted territory.

Studies of transfer have also focused mainly on novice academic writers as they face different kinds of tasks in different domains of knowledge. Although this focus is important for the continued enhancement of foundational writing curricula, a preoccupation with novices implies that as writers mature, they leave behind the cognitive challenges of transfer, as if those challenges are mainly developmental and not situational—that what's “inside” the writer can be refined for success, not that success is often determined, even for skilled writers, by what's “outside.”

To further our understanding of transfer in experienced writers, I conducted a case study of Martin as he struggled each Sunday for twelve weeks to produce very brief narratives for a public audience. Primary sources of data were Martin's reflections on his experiences, information about his usual practices and history as a writer, and the artifacts of his work, including editorial changes to his newspaper submissions. Of importance to the study of transfer is this skilled academic writer's difficulty composing texts that most people would characterize as simple, in a familiar genre, for a limited audience, and without need for sophisticated rhetorical strategies, extensive prior knowledge, or specialized lexis. An analysis of Martin's struggles demonstrates the universal challenge of transfer regardless of prior experience or meta-awareness of rhetorical strategies for writing in new or unfamiliar settings, and argues for

a more nuanced understanding of existing ability, disposition, context, and genre in the deployment of knowledge for writing.

### **Team Player: Profile of Martin**

Martin is a middle-aged faculty member tenured in the English department of a large, research-extensive university. In his work, he produces documents familiar to academics: articles for refereed journals, research reports, grant proposals, book reviews, course descriptions and other teaching materials, letters of recommendation, minutes of committee meetings, promotion and tenure evaluations, conference proposals, and the typical plethora of digital texts including abundant emails, contributions to listservs and blogs, and information posted to his course websites. These and many other kinds of discourse demonstrate the wide range of Martin's job-related writing—multiple genres addressing a rich array of academic audiences, including undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, support staff, and administrators at all levels of his institution, and broad readerships in his field of specialization and at its edges. Martin's writing also extends beyond his work, in TripAdvisor reviews, emails to elected officials about issues of concern, blog responses, posts to Facebook, and letters printed out and sent by snail mail to his elderly, computer-phobic parents.

Martin describes himself as someone who “writes regularly.” During the twelve-week period of this study, he logged his formal writing by type and duration of task for six days chosen randomly, four times midweek and once on Sundays in both September and October. There was little variation in the time Martin spent writing on these days (an average of five and a half hours per day including most evenings), with the exception of the Sunday in October when he was trying to meet the deadline for a contribution to an edited collection. He works almost exclusively on the computer, “except when I have an idea during takeoff or landing on a plane, when laptops are verboten. Then I use a legal pad.” During the six log periods, this writing included articles in progress, a program review, a small grant proposal, comments on dissertation chapters and other student work, a blurb for an invited lecture, a foreword for an edited collection, and the football summaries that are the subject of this study. Martin also produces large quantities of less formal (unrevised) writing, including notes for projects, posts to forums and listservs, and dozens of daily email messages, an “ever-growing thicket of text” that he dares not ignore out of fear that he will “become stuck in that thicket and thrash around there for days at a time.”

In reviewing the logs, he reflected that his time-on-task was “fairly predictable.” He was mildly surprised, however, at the large amount of time he spent writing to and for students: “I’m a tenured faculty member with a decent load. I would have estimated less for all the student stuff. I can’t imagine what it’s like for people who have two or three times the students or sections.” Comparing himself to his peers, he characterized his focus on teaching as “generally above average. I know some faculty who don’t do much, you know, the lecture-test types. They avoid assigning much writing, maybe just a midterm exam. But there are others, highly committed teachers, who do more. You see them with students in their offices constantly.”

By professional standards, Martin is a successful writer. He has published dozens of articles and essays in peer-reviewed journals and edited collections, as well as his own and coauthored books, his own edited collections, and textbooks—enough work to have earned him the rank of professor fourteen years prior to this study. Martin also has little trouble meeting the expectations of his academic readers, although essays submitted to journals “usually require some revision.” He is also sought after for his writing, but “mostly for unglamorous things. I get invited to do lots of reviews, you know, all that pro bono sort of stuff, promotion cases and peer reviews of journal articles. But occasionally, you know, ‘Hi, we want you for this special issue,’ or ‘Hey, Marty, how about submitting to our collection?’ I mean, there’s some of that; but it’s more, you know, take some initiative or just stagnate.”

There is much more to say about Martin’s work-related writing. But for purposes of this study, which focuses not on Martin’s successes but his case of inadequacy, it is clear that he has learned multiple discursive strategies required for success in the contexts where he spends most of his time. It would be counterintuitive, then, to expect him to struggle in ways that exceeded the sophisticated challenges of his professional work.

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### **Preparing the Field: The Context of Transfer**

The occasion for this study arose when Martin was experiencing a “failure to write,” and it became an opportunity to conduct a case study focusing on transfer in a mature writer. Martin had volunteered to write a series of brief texts for

publication in a local newspaper. His son—we'll call him Matthew—had signed up to play football on the local Pop Warner team. Named for legendary coach Glenn Scobie “Pop” Warner, this national youth football league had its genesis in the early 1930s in an effort to provide recreational opportunities to kids in the Philadelphia area and keep them out of trouble. The Junior Football Conference took the moniker *Pop Warner* after the famous Temple University coach was the only invited speaker to show up at a spring Junior Football Conference clinic on a stormy evening. Currently, over 400,000 youth ages 5–16 participate on over 5,000 teams (“History”).

Twelve-year-old Matthew signed up for the local team, the (pseudonymous) Bloomfield Dolphins. The team practiced twice a week on a football field at a municipal park. The playing season, which ran from September through the end of December, involved weekly Saturday afternoon games, which, at Matt's age level, lasted for half the time of regulation football games. Winning teams would move on to regional semifinals and eventually to the national playoffs.

Martin soon discovered that the Bloomfield team was highly participatory. Each family was asked to write a check to the team for \$150. The team administrators kept the checks, uncashed, until the end of the season. Families were expected to volunteer at least fifteen hours by collecting money for game tickets, preparing hot dogs or selling soda and chips at the concession stands, tracking the kids' attendance and participation, or calling the plays over the loudspeakers at the high school or municipal fields. Meeting this obligation earned a family its check back; falling short resulted in the check being cashed for new team equipment. Busy with all his professional and campus obligations, Martin kept forgetting about his important volunteer role. Anxious about this lapse after the team had played two games, he approached the coordinator:

I asked her, “Look, what's left for my family to do?” I really didn't want to sling hot dogs or call the play-by-plays. So she's looking a little skeptical, scanning through the list of duties, when almost as an afterthought, she says, “Oh, we do have one thing left here—we need someone to write the game summaries for the *Bloomfield News*,” which turned out to be these short little articles essentially just describing the game. So I said, “Sign me up!” I figured that since I write a lot, this would be a nice, clean job, and I might even be able to involve Matt and Geoff and Lee [Geoff is Martin's older son, and Lee is his wife].

The coordinator, eager to fill out her roster of duties, and Martin, eager to include his family as “team players” (and get back his \$150), agreed to the arrangement.

**Rules of the Game: The Task and Its Constraints**

On the surface, Martin's writing assignment seemed undemanding. The team coordinator provided some initial guidelines, mostly during their conversation but also in one brief email message. Similar to teachers' practice of "talking through" a writing assignment, this information came in a loose assortment of details, condensed and formalized as follows:

- Name used for the genre: "game summary"
- Pragmatic purpose: briefly summarize each game and its outcome
- Audience: readers of the *Bloomfield News* (a free weekly community newspaper home-delivered to the approximately 135,000 residents of Martin's suburban town of Bloomfield), as well as the team coordinator and editors at the newspaper
- Deadline: Sunday afternoon or evening (approximately twenty-four hours after each game)
- Medium of submission: emailed as an attached file to the team coordinator, who would pass it on to the designated editor(s) at the *Bloomfield News*
- Publication: the following Thursday in the sports section of the *Bloomfield News*
- Tools: a team roster (to identify the players by their jersey numbers while taking notes during the game)

The coordinator also offered Martin some more specific guidelines:

- *Audience elaboration*: Broadly, the audience was the Bloomfield community, but practically speaking the readers were mostly the members of the team themselves and their families and friends; "parents," the coordinator said, "often clip these out and send them to relatives or put them in scrapbooks."
- *Rhetorical constraints (shaping content to audience expectations)*: First, Martin was asked to include every Dolphin in at least one game summary during the season because the players (with their families and friends) like to see themselves in the newspaper. "What we are looking for," the coordinator's email said, "is an article each week listing the highlights (touchdowns, fumble recoveries, etc.) mentioning as many

of the players as possible. The goal is that each player is mentioned in at least one article if not more.” This requirement overrode the boys’ actual performance. No matter how dismally or infrequently a team member played, Martin was admonished to “say *something, anything*, about the kid that could be considered positive.” For this reason, Martin created a grid with team members’ names and dates of the game summaries and then inserted check marks each time he referred to a player in one of the summaries. Second, unlike typical sports reporting, he was asked not to say much about the opposing team or its players, except to name the team and state the final score.

- *Response and editorial process:* The team coordinator would receive the summaries, “look over Martin’s shoulder” by making initial changes, and then convey them to the designated editor(s) at the *Bloomfield News*, who would make any further edits if necessary. All of this would happen without Martin’s input, and the summaries would appear in the paper. Initially, the coordinator suggested finding someone “to step up and help submit the stories to the *Bloomfield News*,” an “easy way to get volunteer hours.” That person would serve as an intermediary between Martin and the paper’s editors, and would need “to be able to edit [the articles] and put them in AP style.” But no one on the team volunteered, and the team coordinator ended up doing it by default.

### **Kickoff and Early Fumbles**

After Martin had signed up to write the summaries for his son’s team, he attended the next game armed with the team roster, a legal pad, and a pen. From halfway up in the bleachers at about the 50-yard line, he watched attentively, at one point even brushing off his older son’s request for snack money.

I felt like I couldn’t miss a moment. I mean, this isn’t NFL slow-mo replays, or, you know, something you can go back to on your DVR . . . you miss a play and bang, it’s gone forever. Plus I had to be sure I got everything down. It’s quite a challenge. Once that ball is hiked, dozens of things happen at once. You’re looking at the QB and you also have to see what the running back is doing, and who’s making a good block. And you’re trying to see the numbers on the jerseys and check the team roster to get the kids’ names and listen to the play calls over the loudspeaker. Then your son whines about wanting a Coke. It’s crazy.

By the end of the game, Martin had filled several pages of his legal pad. Figure 1, with team players’ names masked for confidentiality, shows one page from Martin’s game notes.

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**DOLPHINS vs. [REDACTED]**

**1st / 4**  
**Offense**  
 offensive drive featuring excellent run by [REDACTED]  
 #22 - run for 20 yds. gain, 1<sup>st</sup> down  
 #22 10 yds gain - 1<sup>st</sup> down - 22 [REDACTED] - 7 gain  
 #34 - Touchdown - 5-0 [REDACTED]  
 Penalty backed up to 14 - Q Conversion - 7:13 left in 1<sup>st</sup> / 4  
 Kickoff - downed by 24 [REDACTED] - 2 gain - [REDACTED]  
 other tackle - Q gain - #14 [REDACTED] #12 [REDACTED] tackle  
 Tackle by 24 [REDACTED] do Q gain tackled by # [REDACTED]  
 + 38 [REDACTED] - #34 tackle [REDACTED]  
 15/10 [REDACTED] - 2 gain - #50 [REDACTED] - tackles  
 holding [REDACTED] - loss of yds. - 2/2 [REDACTED] 7/22  
 #42 [REDACTED] 4<sup>th</sup>/22 - SACK by [REDACTED]

**2nd / 4**  
**Offense**  
 34 yds line Dolpho possession - 3 mins. 1<sup>st</sup> / 4 - small gain [REDACTED]  
 2<sup>nd</sup> / 4 - fumble - loss - 3<sup>rd</sup> / 6 #7 [REDACTED] - Big gain  
 fumble - [REDACTED] recovers - 2 gain - incorp - end 1<sup>st</sup> / 4  
 SACK - loss 4 - 7/19 - 22 [REDACTED] turnover

**3rd / 4**  
**Defense**  
 42 [REDACTED] tackle + 52 [REDACTED] 4 gain - fumble - Q gain  
 4<sup>th</sup> / 2 - 22 [REDACTED] tackle - loss

**4th / 4**  
**Offense**  
 22 yds line - 1<sup>st</sup> / 10 - [REDACTED] QB - fumble on snap - 2 gain  
 [REDACTED] run for gain - 7/22 - [REDACTED] gain 1<sup>st</sup> down  
 #22 [REDACTED] gain - 2<sup>nd</sup> / 4 - [REDACTED] to 1 yds line [REDACTED] goal  
 QB sneaks [REDACTED] TD Dolphins - 12-0 blocking  
 conversion - goal - [REDACTED] - 13-0

**5th / 4**  
**Defense**  
 Kickoff - good kick + tackle #55 - [REDACTED] + [REDACTED]  
 34 - Block - [REDACTED] - Q gain - [REDACTED]  
 Q gain 8<sup>th</sup> [REDACTED] tackle - 3rd down  
 Q gain - 22 [REDACTED]

**6th / 4**  
**Offense**  
 SACK - 4<sup>th</sup> / 7 - incorp pass - interception [REDACTED] tackle  
 1<sup>st</sup> / 10 - 4 gain - incomplete pass - 3/5 - 12 gain  
 by #22 [REDACTED] for 1<sup>st</sup> down -

➔

Figure 1. A page of Martin's notes from Dolphins vs. Grizzlies game.

The day after attending this game, Martin “slept in” until about 8:00 a.m. and then enjoyed his family’s usual relaxed Sunday morning. Later, he remembered that he had two deadlines to meet by midnight, and retreated to his study to begin writing. His first task was to create a proposal to deliver a paper at an international conference, which he started at about 1 p.m. The

task required a brief abstract followed by a more detailed, five-hundred-word description. For this conference, the usual acceptance rate is fewer than 20 percent of submissions. “I knew this would be a bit of a challenge,” he mused, “but I’m pretty familiar with the landscape of this conference and I could guess what the reviewers would be looking for, you know, offer some context, set up the problem, show how the paper will provide something new or innovative, demonstrate a bit of authority, hint that the talk will be engaging . . .” He estimated that from the start of the proposal to its submission, his total composing time was about thirty minutes. (Two months later, he would learn that the proposal was accepted.)

After a four-mile run and a shower, Martin was back in his study to meet his next deadline: his first Pop Warner game summary.

So I opened a fresh Word file, created a title, and then saved the document in a folder that I called “Pop Warner Game Summaries.” The title seemed pretty easy; I wrote the date, then “Bloomfield Dolphins Crush Baywood Grizzlies.” I did think a bit about “crush”—was it too harsh or dramatic. But then I thought about what Paula [the team coordinator] said about how the stories are read by people who favor the Dolphins, so they might like that word, *crush*. And then I started writing the first sentence. I figured I had to start broadly, with the outcome, you know, “In a game marked by X, Y, and Z, the Dolphins defeated the Grizzlies 6-0,” or something like that, then backtrack and give the details. That seemed like the right structure, anyway. But then as I tried writing, I just froze. I kept looking at the legal pad, back and forth between the pad and the screen, but nothing happened.

**For Martin, this was the critical moment when he began to realize a “failure to write.” Although it wasn’t unusual for him to hesitate a little at the start of a writing project or “write his way in,” nothing in his recent memory paralyzed him quite like the Pop Warner summary.**

For Martin, this was the critical moment when he began to realize a “failure to write.” Although it wasn’t unusual for him to hesitate a little at the start of a writing project or “write his way in,” nothing in his recent memory paralyzed him quite like the Pop Warner summary. Paralysis,

however, wasn’t just about the challenge to begin writing. Every sentence he produced immediately failed his own test of adequacy, “as if this little guy on my shoulder was cringing at each word and throwing his hands up in protest.” He further speculated about the source of his struggle:

I think it was a combination of things. The notes were OK, though it was hard to reconstruct the game from them. It was partly trying to get the details right, you know, the kids and parents would not take well to wrong information. And

the pressure to get as many kids named as possible, even if they just blocked or tackled someone. It was also the style, and maybe word choice, and how much to include, and *what*. What's most important? And to try making it interesting and punchy. And where to start, how to structure the thing. The last weeks of *Bloomfield News* were recycled so I couldn't just look . . . I just didn't know if it was typical. I couldn't *believe* I was having such a hard time, you know, just writing something a chimp could probably do.

After laboring for over ninety minutes on this brief task, Martin finally reached a point where he felt he had captured the highlights of the game:

9/13

Bloomfield Dolphins Crush Baywood Grizzlies

In a game highlighted by a spectacular touchdown and robust defense, the Bloomfield Dolphins overpowered the Baywood Grizzlies 6-0, securing their third consecutive victory.

The first quarter, which ended scoreless, saw especially spirited defense by Tyrone Chambers, Todd Rhiel, and Matt Powell. A dramatic interception by Hunter Robinson shut down the Grizzlies' chance for a touchdown about halfway through the quarter. The second quarter featured impressive first downs by Derrick Smith and Evan Polk and some fine blocking by Zach Pullen and David Frank. After a valiant but fruitless effort against the indomitable defensive line of the Grizzlies, quarterback Deshawn Sutton powered a long, sailing, 31-yard touchdown pass to the waiting arms of wide receiver Paul Wilson, nailing six points to the board with 23 seconds to play. The extra point was unsuccessful.

The second half again highlighted the Dolphins' sturdy defense with excellent tackles by Michael Brown and David Frank. After the Grizzlies had still managed a drive to the Dolphins' red zone, an intrepid fumble recovery by Matt Powell put the ball back in the Dolphins' hands. Unable to score again, the Dolphins ceded possession back to the Grizzlies, but a spectacular interception by Derrick Smith thwarted the Grizzlies' chances with only 1:52 left to play in an exciting game marked by close calls.

Still uncertain about the summary, Martin decided to print out what he'd written and show it to his sons Geoff and Matt, who were downstairs playing a video game. After all, Matt was on the team, Geoff had seen the game, and although they were only twelve and fifteen, both knew plenty about football and regularly read *Sports Illustrated*. "I guess I was just looking for an OK," Martin reflected.

Fortunate as this decision was from a research perspective (because unlike all Martin's other game summaries, it yielded the printed record of a first draft), for Martin it produced an especially humbling moment.

So I gave it to Matt first, since he was in the game and also on the sidelines. He skims through it and then literally falls down in exaggerated hysterics, and the piece of paper has floated out of his hands and onto the carpet. Geoff picks it up and reads it, and pretty much the same thing happens; they're crying with laughter and high-fiving each other. I think they saw the look on my face, but every time they tried to pull themselves together to say something they just broke up again. Long story short, they called it "total English professor speak." I asked them how, since all I'd done was summarize the game. From what I could gather, it was two things, the length of the sentences and some of the "big words," which they said were ridiculous. I'd tried hard to make the thing punchy, but obviously it was a total failure, at least by their standards.

Hearing the commotion, Martin's wife Lee appeared and read the draft. As Martin recalled the scene, Lee chided the boys for tormenting their father. "Be nice to Dad," she said. "He works really hard." Then: "I think this is a good start, Marty, but why don't you pare it down a little. It looks a little long."

After returning to his study and staring at the summary onscreen for a while, Martin checked the word count and discovered to his surprise that the text was nearly three times the recommended length. He decided to take his wife's advice.

Energetically working for almost another hour, he finally produced a version that all three members of his family hesitantly approved. "I just hacked away at it. Just the facts. I actually felt as if it took the life completely out of it, but *c'est la vie*."

9/13

Bloomfield Dolphins Crush Baywood Grizzlies

The Bloomfield Dolphins won their third straight victory of the season Saturday afternoon, defeating the Baywood Grizzlies 6-0 in Bloomfield. A scoreless first quarter saw excellent defense by Tyrone Chambers, Todd Rhiel, and Matt Powell, clinched with an interception by Hunter Robinson at the Baywood 38 yard line. Impressive yardage gains by Derrick Smith and Evan Polk in the second quarter opened the door to quarterback Deshawn Sutton's 31-yard scoring pass to Paul Wilson with 23 seconds to play, putting the Dolphins up 6-0.

Strong defense by Michael Brown and David Frank and a fumble recovery by Matt Powell held the Grizzlies from scoring in the second half. Derrick Smith ended the Grizzlies' chances with a spectacular interception at 1:52 to play.

Frustrated that he'd spent most of his afternoon on this otherwise simple project, Martin finally emailed it to the team coordinator, breathed a sigh of relief, and began to prepare for his class the next day.

Over the next four days, neither the newspaper editors nor the team coordinator responded to his submission. Instead, the summary appeared that Thursday in the sports section of the *Bloomfield News* under the heading “Pop Warner Football, Saturday, Sept. 13.” The published version is reproduced below; words eliminated from Martin’s submission are crossed out, while additions made by the editors and team coordinator appear as shaded text.

**Bloomfield Dolphins 6,**

**Baywood Grizzlies 0**

**Bloomfield Dolphins Crush Baywood Grizzlies**

The Bloomfield Dolphins ~~won~~ posted their third straight victory ~~of the season~~ Saturday ~~afternoon~~, defeating the Baywood Grizzlies 6-0 in Bloomfield. ¶

A scoreless first quarter ~~saw~~ was highlighted by excellent defense ~~by~~ from Tyrone Chambers, Todd Rhiel, and Matt Powell; ~~clinched with an interception by~~ Hunter Robinson also contributed an interception. ~~at the Grizzlies’ 38 yard line.~~ ¶

Offensively, the Dolphins’ ~~impressive yardage gains by~~ Derrick Smith and Evan Polk ~~in the second quarter~~ broke big gains ~~opened the door to~~ for quarterback Deshawn Sutton’s 31-yard ~~scoring~~ touchdown pass to Paul Wilson with 23 seconds ~~to play~~; left in the first half ~~putting the Dolphins up 6-0.~~

Strong defense by Michael Brown and Derek Frank and a fumble recovery by Matt Powell held the Grizzlies ~~from scoring~~ scoreless in the second half. A ~~spectacular interception by~~ Derrick Smith ended the Grizzlies’ chances ~~with a spectacular interception at~~ with 1:52 to play.

Martin’s response to the published version acknowledged the distance between his idea of an acceptable submission and the expectations of team coordinator and editors at the *Bloomfield News*. First, he continued to feel that the summary had become “lifeless”: “Personally, I liked some of what I originally wrote, the first version. This is so matter of fact. It just lies there.” However, he felt that a few changes were effective. “There’s no question that some of these are good edits, I mean, I can see the logic in cutting stuff like ‘of the season’ because that’s already assumed. But it’s also about space. I just don’t work in such a small box.” (Compared with Martin’s 123-word submission, the changes yielded a 104-word summary, 20 percent less but still a little longer than the 75-word target). Reflecting on any unusual or interesting changes, Martin pointed to the word *posted*: “If they want straight-up language, then ‘won’ is better, frankly. I’d never have used that word, ‘posted.’ But it also confuses me because some of my fancier language had to go. How come ‘posted’ is better than ‘won’ but ‘clinched’ is worse than ‘also contributed’?”

The published version of Martin's summary clearly reflects certain specialized textual conventions of news writing as well as the preferences of the team coordinator. Where Martin's usual contexts of composing tolerate long, elliptical sentences, with modifying clauses or appositives, here he was syntactically constrained. Where usually he could use clever turns of phrase or creative word choice, here he had to keep to basic language. Where usually he could use rhythm, repetition, or other stylistic devices for effect, here he had to

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be "choppy." Where his academic contexts allowed for the elaboration and development of ideas, here he had to stick to the point. He knew his writing had to be more constrained than usual, but there was little opportunity for "seepage" of these habits into the summaries.

As Martin continued to write Pop Warner summaries, he spent similar amounts of time on them and struggled "way beyond what's normal."

Because game summaries from other local teams appeared alongside his own in the *Bloomfield News*, Martin soon found himself studying these almost obsessively, "to see what the other summarizers were doing, what sort of style they used and whatnot." Martin also found that even as he became more accustomed to writing the summaries, the amount of editing done by the team coordinator and editors didn't lessen: "If anything, they got more heavy handed, until I thought, what the heck am I doing wrong?" Textual comparisons of the submitted and edited versions supported his intuitions. For example, Martin started his summary of the fifth game with, "In their fifth straight win, the Bloomfield Dolphins shut out the Prescott Lions 13-0 on Saturday," which appeared in the paper as "The Bloomfield Dolphins rolled to their fifth straight win with a 13-0 victory over the Prescott Lions Saturday." Especially frustrating for Martin were word-choice contradictions: "Every time I use something just a tad fancy, it gets knocked back to plainness. But when I use something plain . . . like here, 'Excellent defense by Matt Powell, Hunter Robinson,' et cetera, which is pretty direct, gets changed to 'Meanwhile, a *strong showing* by the Dolphins' defense, led by Matt Powell,' blah blah. I mean, there's got to be an underlying reason here. These folks [the editors and team coordinator] are far too busy to dink with these things just out of personal preference." Unfortunately, Martin had little opportunity (or time) to learn about these reasons.

Further comparisons of Martin's summaries and the printed versions show that in addition to the team coordinator's and the editors' numerous lexical

substitutions and work on syntax, Martin never really gained control of the logic for paragraph breaks. Martin's breaks generally followed the periods of the game, and his paragraphs usually contained two to three sentences, whereas the revised breaks were based on length: the resulting paragraphs were almost always one sentence long. Although the length and complexity of Martin's sentences also diminished over time, even by the end of the season, the editors and team coordinator still chopped them up and simplified his syntax. Reporting on a mid-October game, Martin wrote, "The Tigers' determination to score in the second half was continuously thwarted by the Dolphins' powerful defense, including blocked passes, fourth-down tackles by [five players], and an interception by Matt Powell." The printed version read, "The Tigers' scoring efforts were stopped throughout the second half. Passes were blocked and drives halted by [five players]." Reflecting on these and other comparisons, as well as his writing experience over the entire Pop Warner season, Martin gently shook his head and mused, "I'd give myself a C+ for the term. I mean, I did improve somewhat. But that's about as far as I really got, and I think it's an accurate assessment of my overall performance."

At this point, we're confronted with the question at the heart of this study: how could a successful academic whose professional life involves copious amounts of writing—and who had already far exceeded Malcolm Gladwell's "10,000 hour" threshold of practice for qualifying as an expert—encounter the kind of composing challenges usually associated with inexperienced writers? And given the extensive intellectual resources and literate experience at his disposal—the "things he carried" into the game summaries (Yancey, Dowd, Francis, and Nash)—why did he achieve only a self-determined level of C+ by the end of the season, corroborated by the editors' and coordinator's continued changes? Clearly, Martin's summaries demonstrated a high level of writing competence *independent* of their context: the resources of a sophisticated vocabulary, expert control of syntax, a penchant for smart phrasing, organizational skills, rhetorical savvy, impeccable grammar. But in this context, such ability was beside the point: writing is deemed successful by the standards of a particular community of practice or group of readers. Martin was a "highly successful writer" in his usual contexts but turned into

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a “struggling” or “less effective” writer in a context where he had little prior experience. Improvement was incremental and glacially slow to arrive.

### **Monday-Morning Quarterbacking: Theorizing Martin’s Experience**

To explore Martin’s “frustrated transfer” (Hayes, Ferris, and Withaus), it is important to consider his preparation and expertise for writing the summaries. Based on her case studies of college writers, Anne Beaufort’s conceptual model of discourse knowledge offers a useful heuristic for an exploration of Martin’s struggles relative to his existing ability. In this much-cited model, Beaufort draws on work in sociocognitive and rhetorical scholarship on writing expertise to argue that five overlapping and interactive knowledge domains are required to write effectively in a context: *writing process knowledge*, *subject matter knowledge*, *rhetorical knowledge*, and *genre knowledge*, all of which are enveloped and informed by *knowledge of the discourse community* (*College* 19). For Beaufort, these knowledge domains are “integral to writing expertise” (18). Of interest here is the possibility that Martin’s struggles arose from his lack of knowledge or experience in one or more of these domains.

*Martin’s Rhetorical and Writing Process Knowledge.* A foundational principle of writing transfer equates ability with various forms of conscious awareness. Beaufort joins many writing researchers (e.g., Devitt, *Writing*; Negretti; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi; Wardle, “Mutt”) as well as cognitive researchers in arguing that what D. N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon call *mindfulness*—a “generalized state of alertness to the activities one is engaged in”—is essential for success in any “far-transfer” situations, especially when learners must explicitly abstract prior knowledge and experience in a new setting (“Transfer”). Transfer is said to be facilitated when writers can create connections between a current task and their prior experience (Perkins and Salomon, “Cognitive”; Reiff and Bawarshi), which requires a kind of “reflexivity” (Lea and Street; Negretti). These beliefs support instructional programs designed to teach metacognition, process knowledge, and genre awareness (Devitt, “Teaching”; Downs and Wardle).

For Beaufort, rhetorical knowledge involves “considering the specific audience and purpose of a specific text and how best to communicate rhetorically in that instance” (*College* 20). These considerations are further affected by context: “material conditions, timing, social relationships, etc. within the discourse community” (20). Rhetorical and other aspects of the writing context

influence the writer's "procedural knowledge" associated with the writing process, such as understanding when and where to begin, what strategies to use in drafting, or what to do with outside information. Writing process knowledge is "knowledge of the ways in which one proceeds through the writing task in its various phases" (20).

As should already be clear, Martin brought high levels of conscious rhetorical and writing-process knowledge to his game summaries. As an English professor, he was fully acquainted with principles of rhetoric and strategies for audience analysis and knew his own composing processes intimately. He had sufficient declarative knowledge at his disposal, knew how to apply concepts and strategies based on specific tasks, and was skilled at judging his own writing. As a member of the Bloomfield community, he had a good sense of its demographic and understood the more specific needs and desires of his target audience as defined by the team organizer. As he reflected on his struggles to meet the demands of his rhetorical situation, Martin exemplified a high degree of rhetorical dexterity (S. Carter), meta-awareness, and reflective capacity, or what L. Lee Forsberg and I have called "being able to *read* a context" (Anson and Forsberg 225). But there is little question that these metacognitive and other capacities did not offer him a sufficient fund of operational knowledge to write the Pop Warner summaries without challenge.

While it might be argued that these capacities enabled Martin to move *more quickly* toward success than less aware or experienced writers, it may be equally true that immersion in his own professional context created a kind of ossification or sedimentation rather than dexterity (Anson, "Habituated"). Commonly theorized as one possible reason for the failure of transfer (Thorndike and Woodworth 249), discursive entrenchment is most often associated not with experts but with novice writers who have overpracticed certain genres such as five-paragraph themes (Anson, "Closed"). In spite of this possibility, Martin did not *expect* a context involving "low road transfer," which draws on processes that are "automatic, stimulus-controlled, and extensively practiced" (Salomon and Perkins, "Rocky" 124). Throughout, he recognized his new chal-

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lenge and appeared to be using “high-road” strategies to meet it, consciously deploying writing practices that he thought would be effective. It could not be said, then, that he lacked sufficient meta-level awareness of his decisions as might an inexperienced writer.

*Martin’s Subject-Matter Knowledge.* A number of researchers have demonstrated the importance of prior discourse knowledge in successful writing, including awareness of genre (Reiff and Bawarshi) and abstraction from experience (Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey). Less studied but of equal importance is the role of *subject-matter knowledge*—the domain of information the writer is addressing. This domain includes both existing or background knowledge and the critical thinking required for “producing” or transforming knowledge (Beaufort, *College* 19). For example, in their case studies of student writers, Mya Poe, Neal Lerner, and Jennifer Craig as well as Elizabeth Wardle and Nicolette Mercer Clement show how a lack of background knowledge posed significant challenges in the context of unfamiliar academic genres. The idea that writers need to know what they are writing about is hardly controversial but has played an important role in the construction of cognitive models of writing (McCutchen, Teske, and Bankston) and the relationship of content and rhetorical knowledge, or “knowledge transformation” (Bereiter and Scardamalia). In turn, these concepts have helped us understand the struggles of novice writers, especially as they move across contexts (see Faigley and Hansen; Herrington and Curtiss; Sternglass; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak).

Though not a “rabid sports fan,” Martin admitted to an interest in NFL and college football as well as college basketball. Beyond these, he enjoyed “just vicarious other sports—the usual Olympics coverage, maybe an occasional tennis match, Wimbledon, golf, the US Open, World Cup, stuff like that.” Humbly reflecting on his youth as “less than ‘jock-oriented,’” he’d still been on his junior high school soccer team and played tennis on both his high school and college teams, had enrolled his two sons in a number of neighborhood sports opportunities, and had taken his family to professional and college football, basketball, and hockey games. He usually skimmed the sports pages of the larger city newspaper, delivered seven days a week to his home. At his sons’ request, he also subscribed to *Sports Illustrated for Kids* until they were old enough to want the regular version, which he read from time to time. Whenever a sports category appeared on *Jeopardy*, it almost always triggered fierce competition with Matt and Geoff. Reflecting on the depth of his knowledge of football, he rated it as “strong. I don’t know every name for fancy plays, but I’m very famil-

iar with the sport and its rules, and its terminology, and also the history, back at least to my teen years and the first Super Bowl.” Changes in his submitted game summaries rarely reflected problems in his understanding of football or its rules and terms. What we can determine, then, is that Martin had enough subject-matter knowledge about football that it generally “fit the new situation” (Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey) and did not contribute significantly to his struggles.

*Martin’s Genre Knowledge.* On the surface, a seventy-five-word game summary may seem “easy” because of its brevity. Yet length presents a poor criterion for genre complexity. The “game summary” still required Martin to assume an authorial position, construct a complex audience with a wide range of backgrounds and purposes for reading, and consider interwoven lexical, structural, rhetorical, and stylistic decisions. When writers are confronted with the need to make such decisions even in brief but unfamiliar and unpracticed genres, they may find themselves, rhetorically, in a “foreign country” (McCarthy 260).

Although a complete genre analysis of the Pop Warner game summary is beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that it represents both a familiar kind of general sports reportage—a “macrogenre” (Swales) or “metagenre” (M. Carter)—and a unique variation or subgenre of local children’s sports reporting, further socially shaped by various constraints such as the team’s interests and the nature and circulation of the *Bloomfield News*. Before his Pop Warner assignment, Martin had “certainly been exposed to enough sports reporting to know what it looks like in general, and what it’s about.” From the coordinator’s description of his task, he determined that the Pop Warner game summaries had to be entirely factual—no editorializing—but with a selective bias toward the Dolphins and an orientation toward the social and familial importance of linking specific team members to moments of good play.

Based on his struggles and the team coordinator’s and editors’ changes, Martin had the most trouble rendering generally accurate observations of the games into prose that employed appropriate terminology in an acceptable style and structure. Although it may seem from the changes to his summaries (mostly heavy line edits and paragraph restructuring) that he “came close” to getting it right, even his own assessment of the distance between his submissions and the final published versions shows that he was still developing a representation of the genre and a capacity to produce it, much as a student continues to approximate some discipline-based academic genre and develops expertise only in fits and starts. Martin’s submissions “missed the target.” But the target itself

appeared to move around, a phenomenon that many contemporary genre theorists have documented. Catherine F. Schryer, for example, has pointed out that genres are not defined by formal characteristics but are constantly in motion, only “stabilized for now” (“Records” 204); they are “amalgamations of rhetorical strategies, content, and form that mediate ongoing activities, social relationships, and systems of activities” (Kain 376). Even microtexts such as Tweets or brief Facebook posts can violate the social norms under development within specific online communities—norms that are “ever-changing sets of socially acceptable strategies that participants can use to improvise their responses to a particular situation” (Schryer, “Investigating” 34). To know a genre is also to know the community that produces it—the “target context” (Hayes, Ferris, and Whithaus). If Martin couldn’t “hit the target,” his shaky aim seems less related to his genre knowledge than what he could understand about the community where the summaries were created and consumed.

*Martin’s Knowledge of His Discourse Community.* For Beaufort, the “discourse community” subsumes the other forms of knowledge; it establishes norms for genres and is the purview of specific subject matter (*College* 19). Early theories assumed that discourse communities are relatively stable: a “group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated” (Porter 38–39), or “who share certain language-using practices” (Bizzell 222). As Beaufort puts it, writers must “develop knowledge of genres whose boundaries and features the discourse community defines and stabilizes” (*College* 20). But recent theoretical and empirical explorations have further extended and complicated discourse communities, mainly through critiques of assumptions about their stability and normativity. Several scholars have suggested that the concept of the discourse community be extended to include distinctions between, for example, “thick” communities, whose conventions may be isolated and then codified, and “thin” communities, or “chorus[es] of polyphonous voices” (Kent 425). Citing Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s conception of “communities of practice,” Donahue suggests that the more fixed models of the discourse community “might not fully account for individual roles and layers of knowledge as well as for the fluidity of ‘community’ boundaries.” A more fluid model depicts participants in “dynamic flux . . . entering, working through, and perhaps exiting a community as sometimes novice, sometimes expert, and sometimes in-between, depending on the activity, the stance, and so on.”

Martin’s experience with the Pop Warner summaries provides an interesting test case for the assumption that writers can adapt more readily to a new

setting when they bring to it an ability to analyze their discourse community (see Hazlett's critique of Beaufort, par. 8). Scholarship on communities of practice is just beginning to explore how writers conceptualize transient, overlapping, unstable communities. And it is just starting to account for the degree of unity and fragmentation within such communities and the extent to which their actors are situated within multiply configured spaces, each with its own shared assumptions and knowledge.

What was Martin's "community of practice"? It was not a "grouping of people who share common language norms, characteristics, patterns, or practices as a consequence of their ongoing communications and identification with each other" (Bazerman, "Issue," par. 1). Rather, it was a fragmented social collective (the Dolphins' microculture in the geographical area of Bloomfield, including Martin's own family) overlapping an ill-defined public/professional community (one or more unknown editors at the *Bloomfield News*). In one sense, Martin shared "membership" as a newspaper reader and citizen exposed almost daily to bits of sports reportage and other highly conventionalized media communication. But the more specific constraints of the Pop Warner system and the evolution of the league's game summaries, and the conventions of a local suburban newspaper, complicated this community's coherence. Additionally, the ephemeral nature of the Dolphins team, which relied on contributions by transient groups of parents, coordinators, and children, compromised any set of institutional practices that might have modeled effective rhetorical, stylistic, structural, and informational decisions as Martin composed. Team traditions, routines, roles, and features of communication were simply passed along, shaping and reshaping the genre of the game summary. Stabilizing this genre somewhat was the *Bloomfield News* and its editors (some of whom were young interns). But even in that institutionalized context, the summaries themselves had evolved: two years before, there were no summaries, and the Pop Warner teams had persuaded the paper to include them. The coordinator's emphasis on naming team players was likely invisible to the editors, who may have seen it as necessary for accurate reporting, yet for Martin it had to be a focal point of his summary writing.

Martin was obviously producing discourse that involved shared schemas of production and interpretation, but he was hardly inhabiting a discourse community as this has been commonly assumed in theories of transfer—as

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communities whose conventions may be isolated, codified, and learned. Rather, Martin's transfer difficulty may have been exacerbated by the existence of several production sponsors loosely tied together, each inhabiting a different professional or public discourse context with only temporal, situational goals to

**Martin's transfer difficulty may have been exacerbated by the existence of several production sponsors loosely tied together, each inhabiting a different professional or public discourse context with only temporal, situational goals to unite them.**

unite them rather than continually reinforced sets of practices as might be seen in a busy nanotechnology lab. His family served as an initial, humbling litmus test. Thereafter, there was no collaboration. There was no response beyond edits. There was no opportunity to be mentored or advised. Instead of a cohesive group of readers and writers within a shared

domain of practice, adhering to discursive conventions both solidified through collective activity and in slow evolution over time, we have a situation in which fragmented bits of discursive and situational knowledge flowed into and out of overlapping contexts populated by different but tangentially connected groups. Looking back on his first game summary, Martin mused

that the editor tolerated my use of "spectacular" not because it's good editorial practice, but that he or she didn't quite know the full story about the Pop Warner context or the full purpose of these summaries. I mean, *I* knew that the thing's supposed to be slanted, at least in its focus on the Dolphins team and players, but maybe the editor thought, "I don't have the information I need here, so whatever—we'll let it go as long as it's in AP style."

Martin continued to write game summaries until the Dolphins lost after two games in the playoffs. His volunteer check was mailed back to him uncashed, and soon his family put the Pop Warner season—the only one in which Matt played—behind them. According to many transfer theorists, Martin's experience writing game summaries should have been "correlational" or "relational" or "consequential," leaving him a changed writer with greater rhetorical awareness and even with enhanced skills (Nowacek; Beach, "Developmental"; Beach, "Sociocultural" 120). But beyond the memory of his challenge (and a new appreciation for his own students' challenges), Martin had little need to take whatever he learned as a writer of game summaries back to his familiar academic setting. Instead, the summaries were soon a receding memory. The need to deploy the strategies he had consciously learned for writing them was now moot.

**Two-Minute Warning: Conclusion and Implications**

Beaufort's knowledge framework offers a helpful way to analyze Martin's transfer struggles. Its components are individually and collectively necessary to explain his struggles. But they are also insufficient. What was "in" Martin, or his "adaptive expertise" (Hatano and Inagaki), should have catalyzed his writing: rhetorical, writing-process, and subject-matter knowledge, high levels of metacognitive awareness, strong writing skills, an ability to "read" a rhetorical context. For Martin, none of these concepts or skills were "troublesome"—that is, alien, counterintuitive, tacit, inert, or conceptually difficult (Perkins; see Adler-Kassner, Majewski, and Koshnick). From a psychosocial perspective, Martin's struggles seem to have their origin in more nuanced dimensions of what's "in" the writer that interact with what's "outside": the idiosyncrasies of the summary genre; the disjointed activity system in which it was produced; Martin's altered levels of self-efficacy; his family's initial response; his prior authority and experience writing in a known context; and his identity and "habitus" relative to his vexed community of practice (see Nowacek 23–24; Hayes, Ferris, and Whithaus; Wardle and Clement). Our conceptions of transfer must understand writers' experiences as involving much more than knowledge of genre, content, rhetorical situation, or process. To them we must add less explored writerly factors such as language preferences, the degree to which certain habits and practices have become sedimented, and aspects of writers' identities, cultures, and prior experiences in particular communities (Wardle and Clement). These writerly aspects of transfer may be brought to bear in troublesome writing contexts that are not easily "known" because of the fragmentation of actors, a lack of response or collaboration, partially settled or moving genres, and highly idiosyncratic purposes layered over otherwise familiar kinds of texts.

From a research perspective, no scholar of transfer believes that writers effortlessly and immediately perform well in new, foreign contexts. Transfer theories are always "negative," in the sense that writers in unfamiliar settings rarely succeed without significant cognitive effort and some degree of learning occasioned by responses to their (usually imperfect) first attempts. Rather, disagreements focus on the extent to which the writer's prior knowledge can ease or speed up adaptation to the new context. "Weak negative transfer" theories acknowledge that transfer is not easy or automatic, but such theories are sanguine about the possibility that writers can carry various kinds of procedural, linguistic, rhetorical, and metacognitive knowledge into new settings and begin

to succeed without much support. “Strong negative transfer” theories argue that in spite of a high level of metacognitive awareness, writers will always have difficulty moving across communities of practice and must always learn anew in unfamiliar settings. This learning cannot happen autonomously but is “bound up” with the activity system where the writing is produced (Russell 56). Graham Smart’s analysis of employees at the Bank of Canada, for example,

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showed that when writers habituated to multiple kinds of discourse were presented with a new task to write articles for an internal publication, they struggled to adapt to their new persona and more public audience. Smart concluded that “making a successful transition to the genre . . . involves adjusting to a complex array of new rhetorical constraints, textual forms, and social relations” (245). In my own analyses of highly successful senior

English majors enrolled in writing internships in local nonprofits, corporations, and small businesses, these “adjustments” were preceded by almost devastating failure (Anson and Forsberg).

For Doug Brent, the differences between these positions show up in the scholarship as “glass half-empty” studies and “glass half-full” studies. Working from the nexus of rhetorical genre theory, activity theory, and situated learning theory, scholars in the first category assume that transfer is “deeply bound with particular exigencies” (“Transfer” 399), and they are “deeply skeptical of people’s ability to apply what they have learned in one activity system to the job at hand in another” (401). In contrast, scholars who view transfer from a “glass half-full” perspective believe that certain strategies and abilities can, “if not be transferred neatly to, at least be reapplied to other situations” (403).

Taken by itself, Martin’s case supports strong negative-transfer theories, demonstrating the challenges of his “particular exigencies” regardless of the extensive strategies and abilities he possessed. However, it also suggests that we must see every writer, and every context into which the writer moves, as a unique amalgam of situation and human agency. Some contexts may appear at first glance to involve relatively “near-transfer” situations (who would think that an accomplished writer would flounder over a simple summary?) but on closer inquiry surprise us with their complexity. Other contexts may predict

initial failure for a neophyte but deliver such rich support and mentorship, such helpful dialogue and collaboration, such stable and replicable genres, that acclimation and acculturation soon follow.

It is not the purpose of this article to reach fully across the divide into the realm of struggling student writers and try to stretch Martin's experience into implications for instruction there. Unlike most students, Martin had already "become," not in the sense that he was no longer a learner but that he was normally already an expert. The extensive fund of knowledge and experience he brought to the task made him qualitatively different than the subjects of many transfer studies. But some observations about learning still beg to be made.

First, the principle of situational uniqueness applies as readily to how we research transfer as how might teach it. If Martin struggled to write outside his usual communities, it's not difficult to imagine individual students moving across the disciplinary ecosystems of higher education, each trying to cope uniquely with alien-looking assignments that must be particularized with complex information just learned or still being learned. Students are required to write well from context to context in almost chameleonic ways, taking on expertise in completely different domains of knowledge, lurching from one style to another, radically transforming their self-representations from "personal" to "highly objective" to "thoughtfully analytical." If Martin's case teaches us anything, it is that we can't expect students to effortlessly and uniformly transfer writing ability just because a foundational course has introduced them to process knowledge or audience analysis or metastrategies for analyzing their context. Adaptation and success require continued situated practice and gradual enculturation. These processes often take place mostly tacitly, but clearly it helps novices to receive the kind of mentoring that is sensitive to individual knowledge and experience as well as considerations of linguistic diversity, identity, and learning styles. Such support, however, moves well beyond the usual trial-and-error model that obtains in most academic writing.

The principle of uniqueness also suggests the dangers of simplifying and mechanizing the kinds of knowledge that facilitate transfer. Well-designed courses that "teach for transfer" (Salomon and Perkins, "Teaching"; Yancey,

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Robertson, and Taczak), or focus on enhancing rhetorical and genre awareness (Bawarshi; Downs and Wardle), or use internships, simulations, or links to discipline-based courses (Brent), certainly give students foundational concepts for success across the vast topography of discourse. This helps to prepare for transfer, but it does not create new, situationally determined knowledge. Of course, students may write certain recognizable metageneric papers whose features crisscross and overlap (“develop a main point,” “support assertions with evidence,” etc.). But students also routinely encounter highly specific academic and professional genres in different disciplines (see Anson et al.). Even similarly named genres in a specific major are defined by the idiosyncrasies and fetishes of particular instructors (see Graves, Hyland, and Samuels). Students must also navigate “conditional rhetorical spaces” (Anson and Dannels 56). These spaces represent complex hybrids between instructor preferences, how the instructor conceptualizes the expectations of communities outside the classroom that students may be addressing, and what those communities actually value. Like the Pop Warner context, the information may be troublesome: fragmented, indeterminate, or changing. And like Martin, students equipped with plentiful metacognitive and rhetorical skills may still fall short (or fail, or even regress) without appropriate help (Haswell). As Bazerman et al. remind us, improvement is usually slow and highly developmental; “learning to read and write in academic settings occurs through extended experiences in those settings, by meeting the expectations of those situations, and gaining from the opportunities for participation they offer” (8).

Third, preparing students to write in different contexts often focuses on the importance of deliberate instruction in either foundational courses or courses across the curriculum. Too little attention has been paid in higher education to processes of articulation between the two. Developing common language, invoking the same rhetorical concepts across curricular contexts, and scaffolding students’ writing experiences within, between, and among courses will work better than offering students a few ideas in sixteen weeks and setting them free (Adler-Kassner et al.; Anson, “Crossing”). In addition, writing-across-the-curriculum programs need to move into much deeper considerations of pedagogy than designing effective assignments and creating clear evaluation criteria. Making explicit what is often tacit knowledge about discourse (Brent, “Crossing”) represents a beginning. But faculty in all disciplines can only gain from understanding much deeper and more challenging ideas about interrelationships between students’ existing knowledge or experience and the nature,

constraints, and activity systems of the writing they are asked, often for the first time, to produce.

### **Coda: Game Plan Revealed in Overtime**

As Martin's experience demonstrates, one final implication of this study concerns the concept of resistance in the process of transfer. Several case studies have shown that writers may repurpose or remediate genres they routinely practice when they confront new tasks, often "invisibly" to others, sometimes successfully and sometimes not (Davis; Roozen, "Fan-Ficing," "From Journaling," "Tracing," "Journalism"; McCarthy). In addition, academics are usually assumed to "achieve novelty" within their fields by accessing their fund of consensual knowledge and then deciding how to employ or repurpose it (see Kaufer and Geisler). Or they may engage in what John Schilb calls "rhetorical refusals." But for Martin, such resistance would have conflicted with his perception of the strict requirements of genre and task—requirements he was still trying hard to understand and meet. Unlike some of Roozen's case-study subjects, Martin felt *decreasing* freedom to apply his experience, identity, or favored habits as a writer to his new situation. His need to "know"

the genre of the Pop Warner summary—to duplicate some set of features, anchored and determinate—demonstrates the psychological construct of genre stability in the face of most contemporary genre theorists' claims

about the fluidity, indeterminacy, social construction, and varied discursive manipulations of genres in practice. Genres evolve, in part, because writers with authority in a community and command of its genres may knowingly deviate from them for strategic reasons. But this resistance to convention depends on how each writer constructs his or her relationship to that community and its established levels of authority (Donahue; Ivanič; Lillis; Scott).

For Martin, the need for genre stability was a psychological precursor to and enabler of textual formation, an assumed guide for his composing and attempts at self-assessment. Without authority and prior experience, deviation was too great a rhetorical risk, in spite of the low situational risk (his hours of writing would easily earn back his check, and the quality of his summaries would have no effect on his professional reputation). Bound by an "excess of rhetorical decorum"—an "over-deference to precedent or to authority" (Miller and Shepherd 284)—he couldn't bend the Pop Warner summary genre to fit

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his typical flexibility and creativity. His audience, for its part, might not have allowed him that opportunity.

For Martin, who it must now be disclosed is the author of this article, the need to “toe the line,” to play by the “rules of the game” (McCarthy 234), arose from his evolving construction of both his rhetorical situation and his audiences’ expectations and feedback. Tacitly following prescriptions for successful transfer, he positioned himself as a novice. As a result, he was unwilling to do what he sometimes does in his own professional settings: strategically deviate from the expectations of a genre because he had earned the confidence and authority to do so. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for him to repurpose the case-study genre into a reflective analysis of a completely personal experience, with himself and family as middle-name pseudonymous subjects, giving it the semblance of greater objectivity that it did not, in any case, require for the truthful and entirely accurate support of its conclusions and implications.

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### **Notes**

1. Used to describe the ways that writers deploy prior knowledge about written discourse when they move between contexts, the term *transfer* has been contested because it implies the simple mapping of previously learned skills rather than the active construction of the interplay among the rhetorical, social, and situational features of an unfamiliar activity system (see Hager and Hodkinson). Other terms such as *adaptation*, *enculturation*, *repurposing*, and *transformation* have been proposed (Wardle, “What”), but because the term *transfer* is now so widespread, it will be used here in spite of its semantic limitations.
2. This two-year research seminar (2011–2013) was called “Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer.” Information is available at [http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/teaching/ers/writing\\_transfer/default.xhtml](http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/teaching/ers/writing_transfer/default.xhtml).

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