

## ISU WRITING PROGRAM

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY



## Welcome to Divergent Uptake

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### What is uptake? And why does it matter?

In Angela rides the bus: A high stakes adventure involving riveting research, amazing activity systems, and a stylish metacognitive thinking cap, published in the [Grassroots Writing Research Journal 5.1](#), writer Angela Sheets explains that “Uptake is the process we go through to take up a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (if we get that far with it -- sometimes we don't!)” (p. 138).

In the ISU Writing Program, we use uptake to mean how new information, ideas, and practices get taken up by individuals, groups, and institutions. Uptake can refer to how people take up writing genres, or things people say, or new information they are trying to learn. In order to make the most of our writing learning, and really our learning in any situation, we need to improve our awareness of our own and others’ uptake. When we and the people around us are learning, what do we do? How do we use our existing knowledge? How do we incorporate new ideas—or not?

**Uptake** refers to the activity we do or experience as we take up new ideas, terms, and/or practices. When we talk about uptake, we might refer to many activities—we process, we document, we map, we trace, we make visible—in relation to our evolving writing practices and writing learning. ([ISU Writing Program website, Our Terms - uptake](#))

When we learn to observe uptake happening in the world, we can learn:

- what practices work for us in particular writing situations over time,
- how to identify when our learning practices aren’t working,
- how to figure out new practices for new writing situations, and

- how to see when the situations or genres we are working with are dictating certain kinds of learning, knowing, and doing that may or may not work for us and/or those around us.

## What is divergent uptake?

One of the most important things to remember about uptake is that we all take up new ideas differently. As Angela Sheets explains, “Our uptakes are highly individual because we all have different past experiences that impact the way we see the world” (p. 138). In other words, everyone’s learning is different because of our antecedent knowledge, our past writing experiences and how we understand them.

**Divergent uptake** is a way to see and understand that everyone’s uptake is highly individuated, different from other people’s uptake of the same idea, term, or practice. When we talk about divergent uptake, we want to be clear that divergence is a norm, that our making sense of new things is necessarily different from other people’s because we each have different past experiences that shape how we understand ourselves and others in the world. ([ISU Writing Program website, Our Terms - uptake](#))

We call this divergent uptake, and we understand that people’s uptakes are always divergent. Different humans will almost always learn differently from each other—and even learn differently than we used to as we change over time. We learn different things even when we are taking the same class, reading the same thing, or writing in the same genre. Sheets gives an example of what everyday divergent uptake might look like:

Say your instructor comes in and says, “There will be an ice cream social for our class on Friday afternoon.” One student thinks, “I bet there will be waffle cones!” Another thinks, “Awesome! Class must be canceled.” Still another laments, “Ugh, forced socialization!” Notice that the instructor didn’t say any of those things, but because of each students’ past experiences or beliefs about ice cream socials, they take up the news to mean very different things. (p. 138)

In other words, two people can be in the same class and be asked to write the same thing about the same topic and produce two very different texts. This is partly because as writers we are always using our antecedent knowledge, all the things we have learned in the past that we bring to any writing situation. Every time that we participate in writing in a situation that’s new-to-us, we’re thinking about what we know about writing that we’ve done in the past that can relate to the writing that we’re doing at that moment.

**Antecedent knowledge** refers to the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations. When we talk about antecedent knowledge, we include our previous writing experiences with particular kinds of writing and prioritize articulating previous knowledge that we are often not required to describe or unpack explicitly. ([ISU Writing Program website, Our Terms - uptake](#))

Whenever we use our antecedent knowledge, learning transfer occurs. Sometimes we know that we're using previous knowledge and are deliberately transferring that knowledge, and sometimes it happens without us really recognizing it. Either way, we do both kinds of transfer all the time.

Uptake is quite often tied to antecedent knowledge and transfer because, in order to think about uptake, we often have to think about what we already know and how we took that knowledge from one situation to another. Being able to do so helps us as writers to identify our specific uptake in specific situations.

**Antecedent experience** refers to embodied experiences that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations. When we talk about antecedent experience, we include our feelings and embodied responses to particular kinds of writing and prioritize articulating responses that we are often not required to describe or unpack explicitly. ([ISU Writing Program website, Our Terms - uptake](#))

We can also consider antecedent experience as a broader term related to our uptake. Emotions and dispositions are related to uptake because our existing knowledge always has emotional aspects involved. This might include how we felt when we learned something, or how we reacted and felt in situations where we used our knowledge before. Dispositions is a term that refers to the idea that we usually have an existing stance or approach toward new situations that we encounter. We can think of dispositions as a big tangle of emotions and knowledges that impact how we interpret the world and act in new situations.

Ultimately, as writers, it's important that we become more aware of how we learn writing and how others learn writing—and how our antecedent experience influences how we learn writing, especially when we participate in kinds of writing or writing situations that are new-to-us.

### **How can uptake influence our dispositions toward writing?**

In an academic conference talk about uptake called Dr. Nobody's no-holds-barred genre studies and activity theory throwdown: How to create a writing researcher," writer-researchers Joyce Walker, Deb Riggert-Kieffer, and Emily Johnston talked about how the ISU Writing Program

works to create writing researchers. These two images from their talk visualize why thinking about uptake can influence our thinking and dispositions about writing.

Figure 1 illustrates what writing might look like if we think of writing as a product-based process, meaning that writing is about making some kind of text.

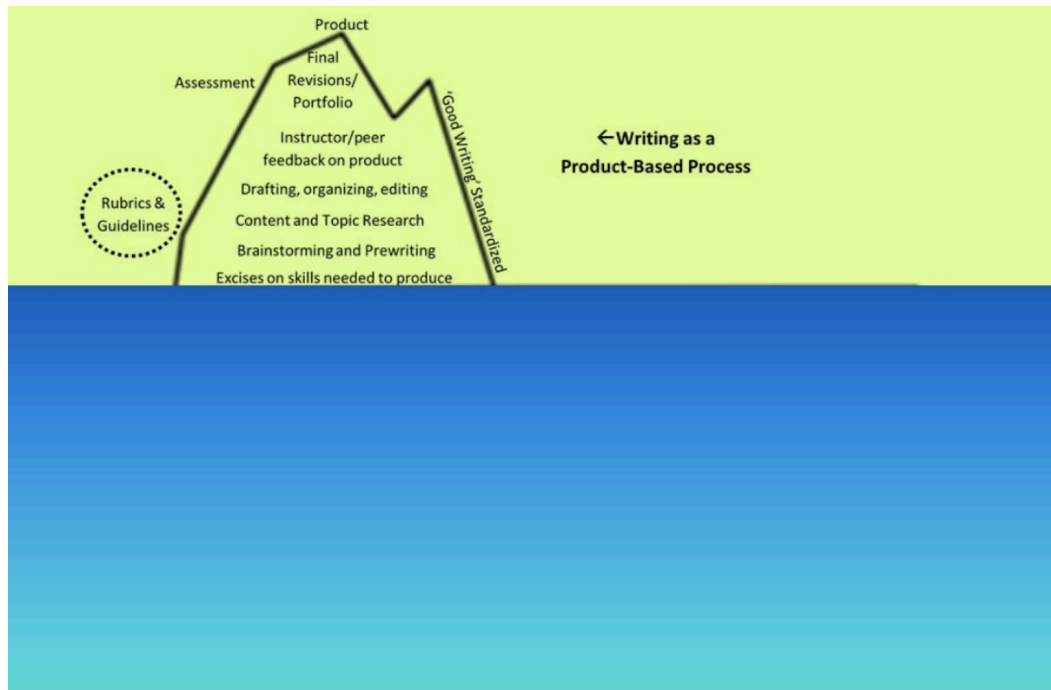


Figure 1: Writing as a product-based process, illustration by Michelle Wright Dottore

By contrast, Figure 2 shows what writing can look like when we think of writing as a research-based activity, meaning we understand that writing is complex and complicated, messy and interesting, with many different kinds of uptake happening.

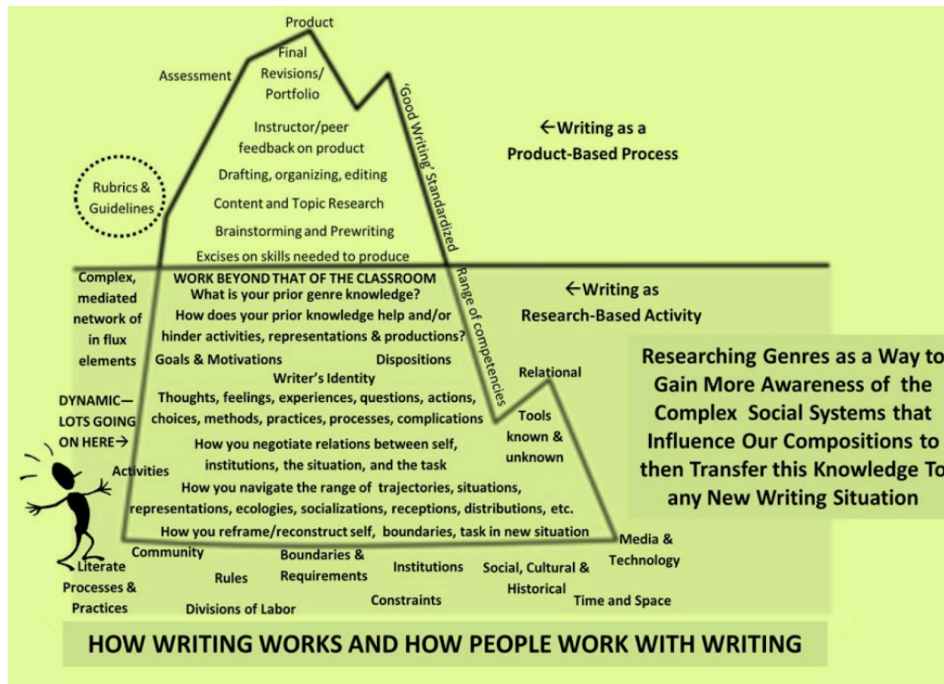


Figure 2: Writing as a research-based activity illustration by Michelle Wright Dottore

In Figure 1, writing seems straightforward. This is likely how many of us were taught to think of writing and learning new kinds of writing: as a simple process. But. Writing is complicated, whether we want it to be or not (or learned about it that way or not). So Figure 2 shows more of how writing is actually really complex.

When we realize how complex writing actually is in practice, we recognize that:

- We bring our antecedent knowledge and experience, including emotions and dispositions, to every writing situation we encounter.
- We navigate new-to-us writing situations in all kinds of ways based on what we believe is the best activity for that situation because of our antecedent knowledge.
- We process this information—divergent uptake somehow always happening—sometimes explicitly thinking about how we might use our writing ideas in yet other situations.
- We might (hopefully!) transfer our new writing ideas based on how we feel about the writing we did. Do we think we were successful or not? How and why could we have done things differently? What actually worked for us and for others?

At any point in the research-based activity of writing, we can be stopped by our limited or insufficient knowledge, be energized by new thoughts and practices, or veer off in a new direction as we bring in yet other writing ideas. The activity might seem straightforward, like learning how to fill in a brief form, or it might meander all over the place. The activity of

learning about difficult or important kinds of writing can take years, and our knowledge—and dispositions toward writing—can change over time as we add new experiences.

### **Could uptake be about other kinds of learning, too?**

Yes! Uptake, transfer, antecedent knowledge, dispositions—none of these terms are relevant only to writing. Every time we learn something new, we’re going through the activity of uptake.

Thinking about all of this complexity might seem overwhelming at first, and maybe not always useful. But as we learn how to increase our awareness of our uptake, we can learn how to apply our knowledge and experience in specific situations when we need to. We don’t necessarily need to think about the complexity of writing to send a text to a friend, but we can use our knowledge of complex uptake in:

- situations where something has changed: we know how to do something, but now the circumstances have made us unsure about whether our methods will work.
- situations where we’re starting something completely new-to-us: we need to start at the beginning to try to understand what’s required.
- situations where we feel like something needs to be different: something we are being required to do doesn’t seem appropriate for our goals, and we want to make changes. But we need to understand more fully the “why” of the situation in order to make our suggestions for, or arguments about, change.

### **Could uptake be a writing superpower?**

The ISU Writing Program's bottom line on uptake is that, if we learn to be aware of how uptake is working in various kinds of new writing situations, we’ll be better able to figure out how to learn new stuff about writing that we actually need for our everyday lives. As writers, our goals and our learning will be divergent, but our awareness of uptake—our own and how we observe and understand others’ uptake—will mean that we use our uptake knowledge to make our writing whatever it needs to be in a particular writing situation.

So actually, learning to be aware of uptake is a little like having a writing superpower. Just as Thor needs Mjolnir, Iron Man needs a super suit, and Women Woman needs a Lasso of Truth, understanding our own uptake lets us work through any writing situation. Which, if we’re honest, can kind of feel like something that requires a superpower sometimes.

### **Visual Coda: What does uptake look like?**

Joyce also wanted to share some drawings she did that illustrate a visual uptake of what she thinks she might know about how uptake works (see Figures 3, 4, and 5).



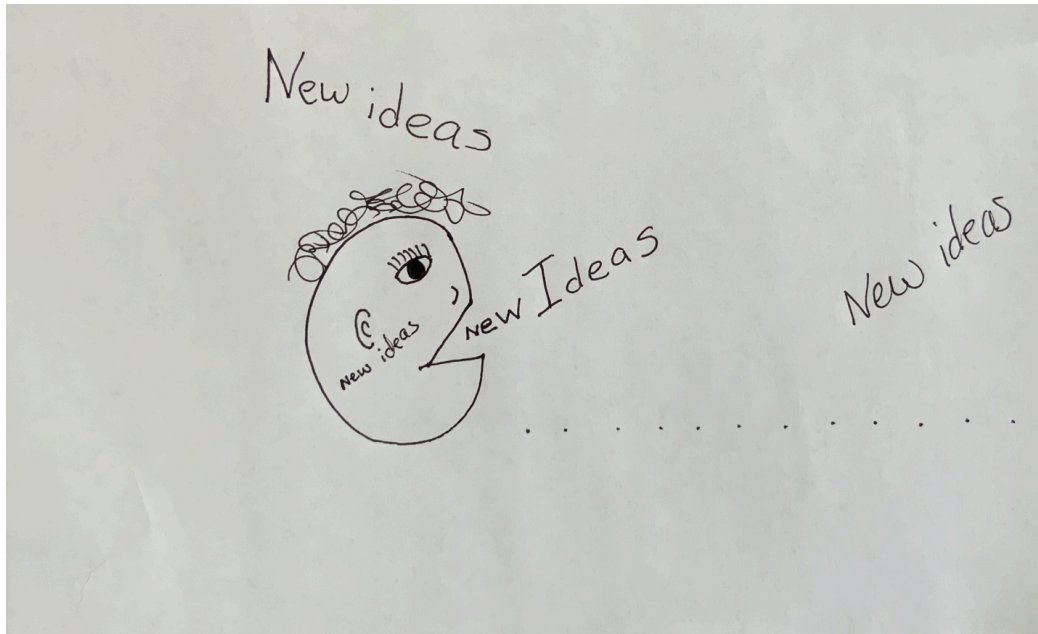


Figure 3 Joyce's drawing of how new ideas work

"If uptake happens when people are incorporating new ideas, does this mean that uptake is always happening?"

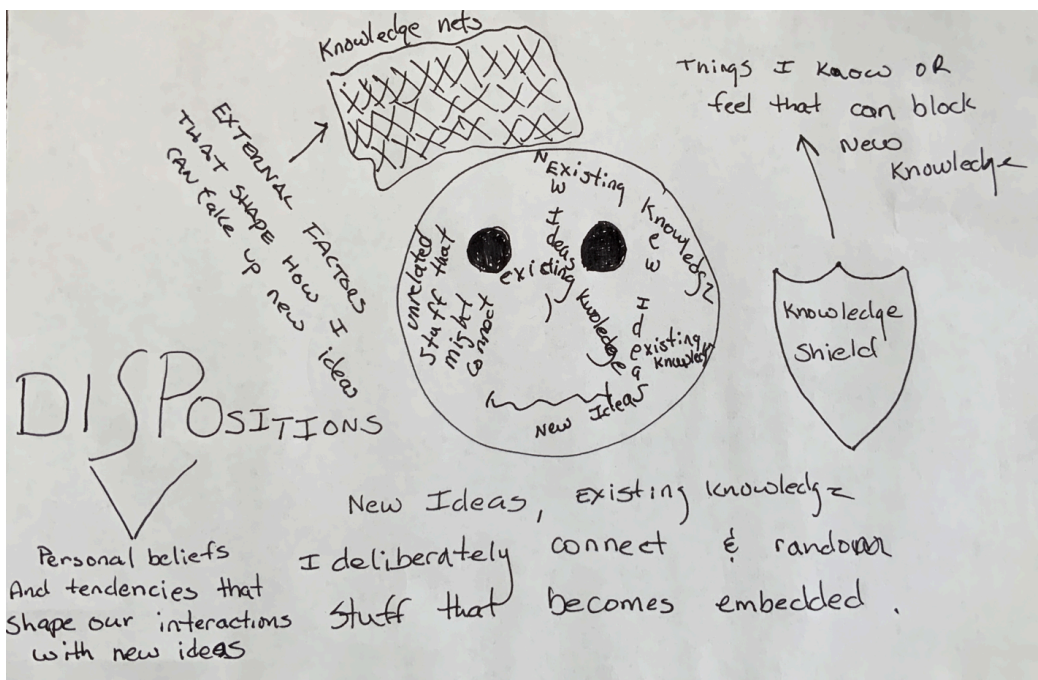


Figure 4 Joyce's drawing of how dispositions work

"I feel like the moments when uptake is happening are really complex. Not only because new ideas are coming in and getting combined with what we know, but because there are so many factors that can impact what/how we take up, and even whether or not we take up anything."

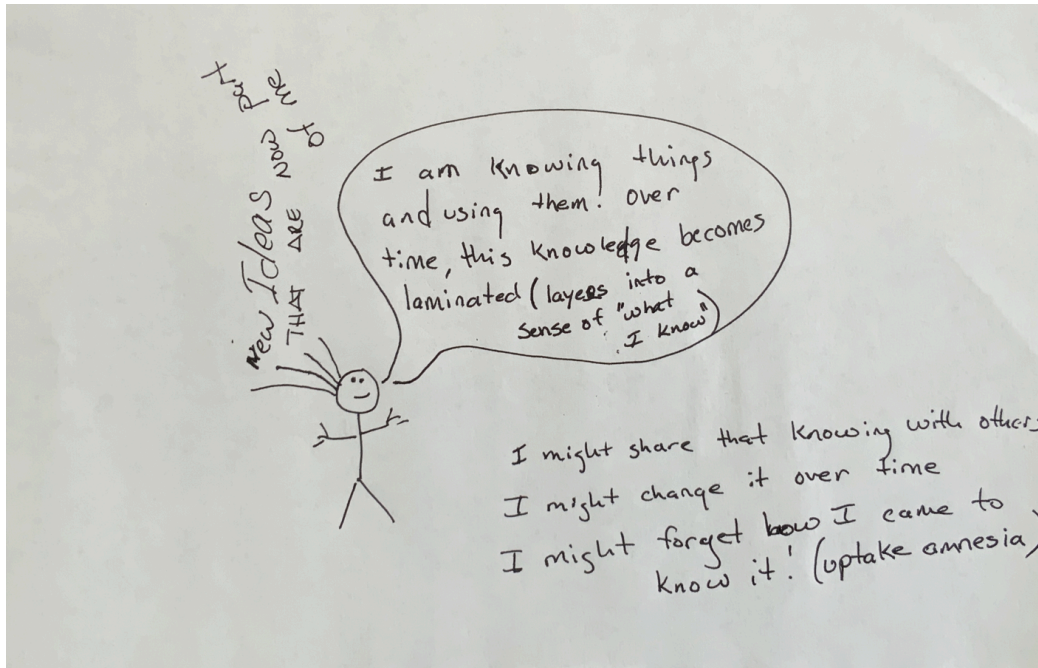


Figure 5 Joyce's drawing of how uptake becomes a part of us

"Of course, to uptake is really an action verb. It's not just that we learn new things. It's that these new ideas become part of what we know—part of what we understand about the world. And, in turn, we can use them to do things in the world. Over time, we tend to forget the moment when knowledge was new. It becomes obscured as the ideas become part of us, and we can't always see how they shape our actions."