A woman born in a Wisconsin mill town in 1968 said her earliest memory of writing was making marks and scratches on the door of a bedroom she shared with four sisters. She did it, she said, "Because I wanted my mom's attention. She was constantly reading, and I think I wanted her to see my writing." Another young Wisconsin woman, raised as an adopted daughter on a small and sometimes struggling dairy farm, recalled picking up the evening newspaper to read and finding her father's budget calculations penciled all over the margins. A third woman of similar age, raised in the suburbs of Chicago, remembered during a visit to an aunt's house secretly taking from her mother's purse an envelope on which her mother's signature was written. Alone, she began to copy the signature, "trying desperately not to get caught." She was, in fact, discovered by family members. But, she said, "Instead of being punished for practicing my art of forgery, my beautiful and skillful penmanship was celebrated."

These three brief anecdotes stand out for me because they say complicated things about writing-reading relationships that typically have not been treated in literature on the subject. While various researchers and pedagogues have argued that reading and writing are deeply related language processes, their conceptions typically stress the cognitive similarities and interdependency of the two processes, how both involve the marshaling of particular kinds of prior knowledge or prior experiences with texts and how both involve fusing personal visions and intentions with the
constraints of public contexts and conventions. Researchers have considered, for instance, the readerly dimensions of writing or vice versa (Tierney and Pearson; Langer; Bartholomae and Petrosky; Haas and Flower; Spivey). Others have explored how reading can enhance writing and vice versa (Petrosky; Petersen; Salvatori; Elbow). Or how writers and readers envision each other's motives and moves (Flower; Vipond and Hunt; Nystrand; Brandt; Hatch, Hill, and Hayes). Or how people read to write (Smith; Bereiter and Scardamalia; Greene; Flower et al.). Or how they write to read (Chomsky; Ferreiro and Teberosky; Harste, Burke, and Woodward).1

Such studies have been useful for enriching conceptions of literacy and literacy development and for encouraging more conscious pedagogy in English classrooms. Yet the conceptions of reading and writing that underlie these studies do not often begin with the ways that reading and writing actually enter people's lives. These investigations have mostly focused on reading and writing as processes of meaning-making, emphasizing the role of textual language in those processes. The interest is in how people make meaning through reading and writing. Only incidentally might these studies consider how people make meaning of reading and writing. In fact, even ethnographic studies about the functions and uses of literacy in households (for instance, Heath, Ways; Fishman; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines) could not wholly do justice to the complexities involved when a preschooler takes up writing to displace her mother's reading, or when a daughter decodes her father's burdens along with the nightly news, or when a child's first attempt at imitatio begins with the guilt of theft.

Studies of children's literacy development typically assume the salutary effects of seeing parents reading or writing at home. But the stories above ask that we consider how parental literacy, at least at times, can be a sign or source of trouble for children. They ask us to consider how writing might develop in rivalry to reading. Above all they draw our attention to the fact that what motivates and brings meaning to acts of reading or writing may not always be texts. Instead, much of learning to read and write involves learning the possible attitudes that can be taken toward these two activities—which are often more separate and competing than we may sometimes want to admit. In this essay I explore relationships between writing and reading as they emerge in autobiographical accounts of literacy development. My discussion will focus on the differences in cultural attitudes and affective circumstances surrounding people's memories of their literacy experiences. In 1992–93 I conducted audiotaped interviews with forty residents of Dane County, Wisconsin, people who represented a broad cross section of the population in terms of age, race and ethnicity, place of birth, educational level, and occupation.2 Volunteers
came from nursing homes, housing projects, social service agencies, schools, senior citizen centers, unions, and religious groups, as well as through informal networks of associates. They included adults with PhDs and adults who did not finish grade school. They ranged in age from 96 to 10 and represented, among others, teachers, farmers, bus drivers, sales people, maintenance workers, technicians, poets, journalists, government workers, homemakers, secretaries, lawyers, artists, postal workers, executives, home health aides, students, the retired, the disabled, and the un- and underemployed. I spoke with people from one to three hours, usually in their homes.

The main purpose of the interviews was to explore literacy learning as it has occurred across the twentieth century. Toward that aim, the interviews focused on what people could remember about learning to read and write across their lifetimes, particularly the occasions, people, materials, and motivations involved in the processes. I also asked about the uses and purposes of literacy at various stages of people’s lives. As I began to sort out the interview material, I was struck by pronounced differences between the ways people remembered early reading and early writing. They discussed them differently and seemed to value them differently. Differences especially pertained to the settings in which early reading and writing were remembered to have occurred, as well as the personal and cultural significance assigned to each. Further, while many people thought reading inspired and informed their writing development, it was not the case for everybody. In fact, in few cases did discoveries about the connection between reading and writing proceed smoothly. In the following discussion I will attempt to explain the patterns of differences that emerged in the interviews, speculate about the causes and effects of these differences, and then say something about the implications for research and teaching in writing.

Cultural Dissociations of Reading and Writing

What most surprised me in the interviews was how differently people described the settings of early reading and writing and the feelings surrounding their early encounters with each. Although there were some exceptions, people typically remembered their first reading experiences as pleasurable occasions, endorsed if not organized by adults. On the other hand, many early writing experiences, particularly those set outside of school, were remembered as occurring out of the eye of adult supervision and, often, involving feelings of loneliness, secrecy, and resistance. Further, whereas reading with children and encouraging them to read was regarded as part of normal parental responsibilities in many working-class and
middle-class families, teaching or encouraging writing (beyond showing very young children how to form letters or checking the spelling on homework assignments) was nearly unheard of and sometimes actively avoided by many of these same families.

The Prestige of Reading

Three quarters of the people I spoke with said that reading and books were actively endorsed in their households. Mostly this endorsement took the form of being read to by parents (usually mothers), grandparents, or older siblings, usually at bedtime or naptime and often in the presence of other family members. The vividness of early reading memories suggests their importance and their association with pleasure and family intimacy. For instance, Betty MacDuff, a 68-year-old retired journalist, whose father's education had ended in third grade, recalled her mother reading to both her and her father, whether it was from Hans Brinker and Five Little Peppers and How they Grew or the "A" volume of the 1936 Compton Encyclopedia.3 Blanche Hill, a fifty-year-old Oneida, who led an otherwise stressful childhood, has pleasurable memories of her widowed mother reading to her and her older brother. She recalled:

She used to have a big, old storybook. I kind of wish I had it today but I don't. My brother and I would jump into bed and that would be our entertainment. She'd read stories from the book. And it was just like they were alive. I can still see some of the pictures even now.

In several households, reading religious materials was part of a family routine or holiday ritual. There was only one book in the house of former Missouri sharecropper Roderick Ames, who was born in 1950. The book was the Bible, from which his grandmother would read parables to her children and grandchildren. Another Missouri man of similar age, this one from a St. Louis suburb, remembered having to remain at the supper table after the meal was over to listen to his father read from a book of Bible stories. A 20-year-old rural Wisconsin man recalled that his mother cut out Christmas stories that appeared in serial form in the local newspaper, pasted them into book-form, and read the stories to the family each Christmas Eve thereafter.

In other homes secular reading predominated, and reading storybooks or comics books was regarded as a form of entertainment or relaxation. Reading to preschool children cut across class, race, and generation, and included families in which parents had less than eight years of schooling or had emigrated from non-English speaking countries. (Absence of read-
ing to children, however, did seem concentrated in poor households where parents were not native speakers of English, had scant education, or were self-employed in primarily outdoor occupations, such as farming.) In a few cases, parents did not read to children but did give them books. A 23-year-old Hmong man, now a college student, recalled his father instructing him to read an English picture dictionary that had been purchased by their American sponsors. A 33-year-old Chicago-born woman, the daughter of a single mother who worked as a cook, remembered her mother dropping off her and her siblings in front of a downtown library and urging them to go inside.

All parents were perhaps not as conscientious as the mother of 18-year-old Rebecca Howard who, when she went to the hospital to give birth to her first-born, packed children’s books to read to the baby. Nevertheless, reading and the teaching of reading were widely considered as a normal part of responsible care of young children in many households. The heavy hand of mothers in organizing book-based activities especially indicates the close association between reading and child rearing. Buying books, particularly children’s books, was another indication of the value that surrounds exposing children to reading. Among the 40 people I interviewed, buying books and magazines was actually more common than going to a library. Where bookstore prices could not be afforded, used books were purchased at garage sales, Goodwill-type shops, or library discard sales. Books were frequently kept in prominent locations around a home. Recounting the contents of a room in his house called “the library,” Jan Holstrom, who was born in 1958 in Madison, Wisconsin, said:

My parents had a lot of their college manuals left over, technical manuals. Mom had her x-ray books and a few of the classics. There was Huckleberry Finn. You could find him pretty easy. And they are all still there. I don’t think they ever threw a book out or gave one away.

In other families, preservation took the form of passing books to younger children in other branches of the family or saving the children’s books of one generation to be given eventually to grandchildren.

Books also were given as gifts. Several rural people recounted especially how urban relatives—usually of a higher economic station—would send them fine books on birthdays or at Christmas. Mavis Perkins, born in the South in 1942, remembered that one Christmas as a young girl she was given two identical copies of a desk dictionary, one from her father and one from her adult brother. Olga Nelson, born in rural Wisconsin in 1896, told me how, each Christmas, she and her sisters would find an orange and a book in their stockings:
That great big, long stocking, I can see it up there now. And in the toe was an orange. And in those days oranges were scarce, don't you know. And [my mother] would always give us an orange and a book. It was always that. And maybe something else but not a lot of stuff. We didn't have a lot. But we had good stuff.

For Olga Nelson, books and reading were clearly part of the good stuff, part of the way their finishing-school mother taught Olga and her sisters to distinguish themselves as a little more refined. "We were," she explained, "a reading family."

In general, reading was remembered as an activity, indeed a ritual, that was knitted into holiday celebrations as well as into the ordinary routines of daily life. There was a reverence expressed for books and their value and sometimes a connection between reading and refinement or good breeding. Reading was most typically remembered and described as a deeply sanctioned activity in the culture. Jack Wilitz, whose Texas family disintegrated in 1940 when he was ten years old, went on the road alone as an itinerant farm worker for the next thirteen years. He always carried a book or two with him to read at night in hobo camps or during breaks. "If you were reading," he said, "people generally left you alone."

The Ambiguity of Writing

While it must be said that the ability to write was regarded as extremely precious to virtually everybody I interviewed, their accounts suggest that writing develops in situations and out of psychological motivations that are saliently, sometimes jarringly, different from those surrounding reading. These differences surfaced in the memories that people had of their own early writing, their memories of how writing was used and modeled by adults in their households, as well as the uses they have made of writing at various times in their lives. Compared to reading, writing seems to have a less coherent status in collective family life, and much early writing is remembered as occurring in lonely, secret, or rebellious circumstances.

The difference I am trying to convey is perhaps most drastically captured in this early memory of a 43-year-old South Dakota man, Harry Carlton. "I wrote all the bad words that I knew," he said, "on a blackboard that was on an easel while my mother was having card club. I was at one end of the room and all the women were there in the room for cards." Asked to explain his motivation, he continued, "I think it was just a wild juxtaposition, that I could be writing all these nasty thoughts with all these people in the room and they didn't know."
While there was a certain thrill retained in Mr. Carlton’s memory, more typically, the feelings surrounding early self-sponsored writing are described as lonely. In stark contrast to cozy bedtime reading, a fifty-year-old disabled woman remembered her first writing occurring in a hospital bed when she was four years old and feeling abandoned. Eleven-year-old Michael Murdoch told me he wrote his first story at five when his family moved to a new neighborhood. The story was about a pig who was having trouble making friends. Carla Krauss, a 60-year-old midwestern woman, remembered her first poem was inspired by sitting alone on the front steps of her house waiting for her older sister to arrive home from school.

It is, of course, likely that these young authors of stories and poems used technical knowledge derived from their reading to make their compositions, but it is noteworthy that the motivations for the writing in these cases were not books and the motivators were not adults. Rather, the occasions and impulses to write emerged from the children’s immediate circumstances and feelings. Whereas people tended to remember reading for the sensual and emotional pleasure that it gave, they tended to remember writing for the pain or isolation it was meant to assuage. People’s descriptions of the settings of childhood and adolescent writing—a hospital bed, the front steps of a house, and, in other cases, a garage, a treehouse, and a highway overpass—were degraded versions of domesticity, in marked contrast to the memories of pillowed, well-lit family reading circles described in so many of the interviews.

In another twist on writing-reading relationships, several earliest writing memories involved defacement, including, ironically, defacement of books. “I remember writing in little kids’ books,” recalled a 22-year-old Wisconsin woman. “We had those hard covered books . . . and I just remember writing ‘Brendas’ all over the covers.” Jan Holstrom, the man I referred to earlier who remembered the contents of his family’s library, also remembered getting caught by his displeased mother while he was writing on the library wall. An eighteen-year-old farmer, Susan Parsons, remembered that at three years old she wrote the word “apple” (learned, she believed, by watching Sesame Street) on the wall of her grandparents’ house on the afternoon of her brother’s birth.

If early urges to write were frequently associated with ambiguous and complex motives and feelings, including self-assertion, violation, jealousy, and guilt, adult relationships to youngsters’ early writing efforts could also be ambiguous and unpredictable. As we have already seen with the opening signature-copying episode, a young forger was surprised when her handwriting was praised. After Susan Parsons’ grandparents reprimanded her for writing on the wall, they took a picture of her markings, a picture
that became part of the legend of Susan's precociousness. And, as a postscript to the card-party story, Harry Carlton's mother later would point out to him that the word "but" is spelled with two t's. These accounts further demonstrate the mixed messages that can encase literacy memories. In these examples, lessons about the proprieties of language correctness or adult delight in literary precociousness are remembered in connection with misbehavior or rebellion.

The ambiguity that surrounded memories of writing actually began at a more fundamental level: with the definition of writing itself. Reading was usually recalled as a clearly demarcated activity; the names of first books, even, in some cases, the first lines of first primers, surfaced in people's descriptions. Memories of writing were decidedly more vague. "It's difficult to remember writing as a separate activity," remarked a 68-year-old Wisconsin man about his growing-up years. "I don't have memories of people actually sitting down and writing," said a 31-year-old man about his household. More often than not writing went under the rubrics of "work" or "doing the bills," "doodling," or "homework." Vague definitions of writing posed an interesting problem in the conduct of the interviews. In asking people to describe in general how they learned to write, I deliberately left the term "writing" undefined at the start of each interview. Many people assumed the topic was handwriting, while others equated writing exclusively with literary or creative composition. Many of the latter group initially reported that they did no writing when, in fact, with more probing, I found they used writing for an array of ordinary purposes. This mundane writing was practically invisible to them because in their estimation it did not qualify as writing.

A dual association of writing with the invisibly mundane and the creatively elite probably helps to account for the lack of parental endorsement or specific teaching of writing to offspring. Roderick Ames, mentioned earlier in connection with Bible reading by his grandmother, said he had no recollection of writing anything as a boy, even though his grandmother, who he said taught him everything he knew, wrote in connection with her work. Probing, I asked:

Would you have seen your grandmother writing?

Yea, I saw her write.

What would she have been doing?

Well, see, my grandmother's job was to hire people to pick cotton, fill out, do all the figures. She had to put the name of the people, how much they worked, how much they picked a day. Every time they picked she had to weigh the cotton and tally it up at the end of the day. take it to the gin, get
it weighed, get the money, pay the people off and take the money and turn it in. She had to keep books for the person she worked for.

Would these books be in your house? Would she do this at home?

Right.

Did you help her? Would you be hanging around?

I'd always hang around. Where she went, I went.

OK, but you don't remember . . .

It was nothing encouraged. There was no encouragement of writing . . . in my household when I was coming up. It was just a necessity for her to do that . . . I saw her do it, I understood why she was doing it, but there was no encouragement for me to do that.

For Mr. Ames' grandmother, writing was just a necessity for her job and not thought of as a separate activity or skill to be passed along for its own sake. Judging from the interviews as a whole, Roderick Ames' experience was not all that unique. While adults in many households, as we have seen, considered reading with children to be part of their parental responsibility, they didn't seem to extend that responsibility quite so articulately to writing. Hope Moore, a college graduate who married a college professor and wrote extensively herself while involved in the League of Women Voters, remembered her only child, a daughter, as being "kind of a writer":

Oh, she was really a writer all the way through. She had a long saga about some imaginary girl she wrote.

So these were things she would do on her own?

Oh, yes. And she did sort of a novel. She called it a novel.

But you didn't teach that explicitly to her?

No.

You didn't encourage her to do it?

Well, I encouraged her because it kept her busy and it was something to do sometimes. And I thought it was nice that she had that interest. But I never would have said, Go, write something on your novel. I would never have thought of it.

Carla Krauss, a woman who wrote creatively as a child and went on to attend college, read regularly to her two sons. But she rejected the idea that writing could or should be actively encouraged by parents. She explained:
I think the idea that you must be creative is sort of wrenching it out of the natural. It always seemed to me that it was a natural thing if it was going to come. And the idea of psychologizing it and thinking, now, if a person can express themselves well they'll have a bigger sense of themselves and this is good for them is nonsense to me, frankly.

Another mother of three, herself a journalist, echoed the reluctance to intervene in what she believed to be a natural and mysterious process. "The ones that had the creative spark did it," she said of her children's writing. Martha Wilcox, who at 89 was organizing a lifetime of journal entries, said she always kept the writing her children did at school or home. "But," she said, "I didn't push it."

It's interesting to note how a cultural ideal that could have been derived from literary reading—the romantic writer as natural genius—plays out in parents' hands-off attitudes toward children's writing development. Even further, negative stereotypes of the creative writer sometimes translated into active or at least passive discouragement of an offspring's literary pursuits. Heddy Lucas, an 84-year-old emigree from Poland, told me that she read to her only son Benjamin every night before he went to sleep. In an interview later with Benjamin Lucas, who was born in New York in 1936, I learned that he not only read voraciously but also wrote poetry and plays as a young adult. I asked him what kind of encouragement there was in his household for writing. He explained:

Not only did I not get encouragement at home but I got a lot of discouragement because this was something that was so totally an anathema to [my family]. First, they didn't understand it but what they thought they understood about it was something they identified with poverty and wastefulness.

Similarly, Yi Vong, whose father encouraged him to read an English dictionary, recalled becoming enthused about writing after a semester of journal keeping and creative writing taken under a particularly supportive high school teacher. He tried to keep the momentum going on his own during the summer. "I thought maybe I wanted to be a writer," he recalled, "so I would write my stories and it went pretty long. But after a while you ran out of ideas and there was nobody there to help you. There was nobody there to acknowledge you were doing a good job."

It is not surprising, given the ambivalence and vagueness that surrounds writing as an activity, that developing an identity as a writer is rather difficult. Many people took pride in calling themselves an "avid reader" or "quite a reader" or "always reading." Yet there was reticence among the people I spoke with—including a well established, published poet—to regard themselves as writers, despite the obvious avidity of their pursuit of
writing. Some of this reticence had to do with not seeing writing as an end in itself. Sixty-six-year-old Carla Krauss, who, as I have mentioned, wrote poetry and plays as a schoolgirl and now writes philosophical essays that she shares with close friends, said of her childhood writing: “I enjoyed it. I really had no sense of it as writing at all. It was almost for another purpose.” Benjamin Lucas, now a writer and critic, remarked, “I think I never had a sense of myself as a writer. I think I had a sense of myself as wanting to do something that my peers and my family just weren’t doing.” Bernice King, a former telephone operator who has written fiction and poetry intermittently all of her life, was working on a series of short stories when I interviewed her. I asked her when and how she began to develop an identity as a writer. “I don’t think I ever thought about it,” she said.

In documenting the ambiguity that seems to surround writing and parental involvement in promoting writing, I do not mean to imply that writing was regarded as unimportant among those I interviewed. In fact, many memories suggest that the products of writing, at least, are highly valued. Even more than schoolbooks, children’s writing is a tangible medium that links home and school. Many people recalled bringing home written projects from school for parents to read and, if the report received a high grade, to display on refrigerators or bulletin boards. When Michael Murdoch wrote his story about the friendless pig, he showed it to his mother who in turn showed it to a teacher for whom she was doing babysitting. Many adults I talked with still had in their possession research papers, family genealogies, and other papers they had composed in grade school and high school. Nor were all early memories of writing charged with ambiguous or difficult feelings. A few individuals indeed described scenes of intimacy and adult sponsorship of writing that resembled accounts of early reading. Ted Anderson, an 18-year-old Wisconsin farmer, recalled that he would sit next to his mother as she wrote letters to relatives and pretend to write himself in a small notebook that she had given him for just such occasions. Fifty-year-old Chicago native Bernice King, who now writes fiction, remembered her early interest in a cloisonné pen owned by her schoolteacher grandmother. Her grandmother promised her she could use the pen if she learned to write certain things. “The first time she let me use it was on my fifth birthday,” she recalled, “and it was great, and I’ve grown to love cloisonné.”

Writing (at least as it translated into school success or economic gain) also appeared to be encouraged through the giving of gifts. Typewriters were widely purchased by parents and given to offspring (most commonly, the first born) before they went off to college or when they enrolled in secretarial courses. Two women I interviewed remembered as teens being given diaries for their birthdays, one by her mother and another by her
aunt. Another recent high school graduate was given a journal as a graduation present from her German teacher (in anticipation of the student's planned trip to Germany). But, all in all, diaries and journals were more frequently self-purchased than received as gifts, and writing-related gifts seemed much less prevalent and much less strongly associated with holidays than book giving.

On the whole it must be said that the status of writing in everyday literacy practices is decidedly more ambiguous and conflicted in comparison to reading. Except for the dutiful thank-you notes or letters home from camp that some people recalled being required to write as children, writing does not appear to play a standard role in the activities or rituals of families, especially in the communal way that reading is. Nor is writing so readily identified as a separate activity. Rather, writing seems to be experienced more as an embedded means than a demarcated end in itself. Writing does not seem to be as broadly sponsored and endorsed by parents; nor does the identity "writer" seem as unproblematically available as the identity "reader."

Reading and Writing across Generations

Looking more closely at the functions of writing and reading in households reveals how much more stratified writing is than reading, by which I mean there seem to be more natural opportunities to share reading and knowledge about reading across generations than is the case for writing. People I spoke with tended to associate their parents' reading primarily with learning, relaxing, and worshiping—all activities that are equally available to children and adults and that often take place in communal settings. On the other hand, parents' writing was mostly associated with earning money, paying bills, and maintaining communication with distant family relations—activities more strictly in the purview of adults. As we have already seen, people were aware, as children, of the functions of their parents' work-related writing, but that kind of writing usually remained out of the realm of most children. Eighty-three-year-old Hope Moore did recall helping her grocer father sort and record checks at their kitchen table, and twenty-year-old William Bussler had close-up memories of his father's dairy delivery records because he used to ride along on the route. But in most cases children were not really invited to participate in their parents' writing nor were they ready or natural audiences for it. The woman who inadvertently had become an audience of her father's writing left on the daily newspaper said she mostly ignored her parents when they were doing figures or writing letters to relatives. It was not unusual for children of professional fathers to say that their fathers' work-related
writing went on behind closed doors in studies or offices that were off-limits to children.

While it was rare for children to read their parents' writing, it was quite common for children to read their parents' magazines. *Saturday Evening Post, Look, Reader's Digest, Ladies Home Journal*, as well as farming and hunting magazines, were standard reading fare for many children and adolescents. But there was nothing really comparable on the writing side. Parents may have read to children but parents seldom wrote to children.4 One woman did tell me that when the oldest of her seven siblings was drafted into the army during the Vietnam War, her mother organized a letter-writing effort by which mother and children took turns writing a weekly letter. Overall, though, writing appeared to be more segregated and stratified between adults and children than was reading.

The link between writing and adult work was not the only cause for this segregation. Rather, the secrecy and privacy that surrounded many forms of writing diminished occasions for teaching and learning. Two people I interviewed reported that their parents wrote poetry (one a day-laboring mother and the other a dray-operating father), but, interestingly, neither of these people were aware of their parents' creative writing until they had themselves become adults. Thirty-six-year-old Anthony Brugnoli told me when I interviewed him that his father had just been sent a journal that had been being kept by Anthony's grandfather in Italy and that he and his father were arranging to have it translated. An 84-year-old retired garment worker, who rarely has written throughout her life, confided to me that she was writing a long, autobiographical letter to her grandchildren but that she did not wish the existence of the letter to be revealed until after her death.

The writing mentioned above all may have been kept secret as a kind of legacy meant for eventual disclosure, but many of the people I interviewed had at some time in their lives written things explicitly meant to be kept from others. Miles Murphy remembered a retreat he made as a teenager in the 1930s out of an old car seat set up in a barn where he wrote thoughts and plans in a notebook. Diaries were almost always explicitly associated with secrecy. Carla Krauss said that at nine or ten-years-old she became "intrigued by the idea of having secret diaries." Blanche Hill, the woman with warm memories of storybook reading with her mother and brother, recalled: "There was an old, dilapidated garage in the back of one house we lived in and the ceiling was coming down. I used to keep my diary up there. I'd write in there and keep it up there so nobody would see it." Alison Wilhem, the girl who copied her mother's signature in secret, went on, as a grade schooler, to write stories in secret. "I rarely told anyone about my private writings," she said, "and kept them hidden in a special
folder under my mattress." Several people mentioned that diary-keeping or private writing ended bitterly when a sibling or someone else discovered and violated the secrecy of their writings.

Many people I interviewed reported using private writing to purge feelings, primarily anger or grief. Much of this writing was never shown to anyone and was in fact destroyed (certainly another obstacle for the passing along of knowledge about writing). Using writing as a "purge" or "vent" (frequently used expressions) was especially common among white and black women and among black men that I interviewed. This writing tended to occur at times of crisis: death, divorce, romantic loss, incarceration, war, and other forms of social upheaval. Sixty-seven-year-old Eva O’Malley remembered writing a lot during her divorce and still resorts to writing "to get-through a lot of feelings of family situations . . . I just write it out and when I’m done I throw it away because it’s down." “I was having a problem coping with different things happening in my family,” said Susan Parsons about her parents’ divorce when she was nine. “I would write them down as to how I felt and it seemed to help.” Forty-six-year-old Darinda Scott, sometimes in the company of her friends, would write down her experiences with job discrimination in the form of protest letters that she would not mail. Charles Randolph, born in 1948, was the son of a pastor of a Methodist church in Tennessee. The church was the site of much organizing of civil rights protests in the 1950s and 1960s. “It was an emotionally charged time and you had a lot of things to say,” he explained. He said he wrote constantly during this period as "a vent," as "an alternative to hitting people." Roderick Ames, who left school after eighth grade functionally illiterate, spent seventeen years in prison, where he taught himself to read and write and earned an associate’s degree as a paralegal technician. He said he started writing regularly after he moved from a maximum to a minimum security prison. “I saw things that didn’t set right with what I felt,” he explained. “I’d write my feelings about that and throw them away.”

In focusing so heavily on connections between writing and secrecy, I do not wish to overlook that much reading does go on in secrecy and privacy, and that the history of censorship and punishment around reading is at least as long and as volatile as it is around writing. In a handful of cases, people I interviewed were at least as apt to associate reading with escape and resistance as others did writing. Sometimes people’s choices of reading material got them in trouble at home or in school. Charles Randolph, for instance, remembered a minor inquisition occurring when his father noticed a book with the word “murder” in the title among the books that Charles, as a young teen, had brought home from the library. A 42-year-
old Eastern woman recalled that while in high school her paperback copy of *Naked Lunch* was confiscated by a study hall monitor.

But what I want to emphasize is a salient and inescapable disparity that arose in the interviews having to do with the way children and adults relate to each other through reading and writing. It appears that what gives writing its particular value for people—its usefulness in maintaining material life, withholding experience for private reflection, and resisting conformity and control—are the very qualities that make writing a problematic practice for adults to pass on to children or for children to share easily with adults. Paradoxically, writing remains more invisible than reading, both because of how it is embedded in mundane, workaday concerns and because of how it is surrounded by privacy, secrecy, and suspicion. Consequently, parents and children have fewer ways of seeing, naming, and talking about writing than appears to be the case for reading. We can say, then, that not only do people spend considerably more time reading in their lives than writing (a fact that has been used to account for differentials in people’s reading and writing abilities), but also that opportunities for learning about the acts and activities of writing are usually fainter in comparison to reading.

**Writing and Reading Relationships in School**

The story of writing-reading relationships changes somewhat when memories turn to literacy practices in school, where prestige around reading and ambivalence around writing play out in a somewhat different and somewhat paradoxical configuration. Historical accounts of writing-reading relationships in school typically stress their structural dissociation (a split that goes back to the earliest beginnings of literacy teaching in churches and schools). Writing almost always plays second fiddle to reading in terms of the time and resources spent on each. For the most part, specific memories held by people I interviewed across the generations suggest that reading and writing were actually often linked in school assignments but usually in a way that subordinated writing and in a way by which students could not necessarily appreciate underlying similarities in the two activities.

As most people recalled school assignments, writing seemed to be introduced in order to induce, support, or verify reading. Harry Carlton, schooled in South Dakota in the 1950s and 1960s, remembered doing no writing through junior high school save for making elaborate outlines of assigned reading. Among those who do recall writing, book reports were the most ubiquitously remembered assignments. A 50-year-old rural man
spoke for many when he described how, in third or fourth grade, students "used to get a certificate if we read so many books. But we did have to write a report on these books to get our star." Expository reports, usually on animals or states, were also commonly remembered across the generations. Students began by going to the school library, reading on their subject, and then producing an essay that usually resembled the texts they had read, primarily encyclopedia entries. A man born in 1945 and schooled in a university community in Missouri recalled reading Dick and Jane stories in kindergarten and then receiving a lined sheet of paper with printed prompts inviting him to invent simple stories making himself, his family, and his pet the protagonists. Charles Randolph, educated in segregated schools in Arkansas and Tennessee during the 1950s and early 1960s, remembered a major poetry project in high school. The unit began with extensive lessons on the technical vocabulary and conventional forms of poetry. Next was a trip to the woodwork shop or home economics room where students designed and produced book covers. After that, students filled their books with five or six poems by white poets, five or six poems by black poets, and, then, in the back of the book, a number of their own poems in the different forms that had been studied.

We might say in these assignments text structures were highlighted and students were invited to occupy positions of authorship. But Shirley Brice Heath has conjectured that the emphasis in the schools on literary and expository writing, with a stress on individual authorship and professional models, was actually a way of imposing elitist values and domesticating amateur, popular forms of writing that had flourished in earlier times ("Toward an Ethnography"). Linking writing to reading, then, was a way to curtail or control writing, not necessarily to develop it. Certainly an emphasis on writing to pay homage or writing to validate one’s reading may be a reason that, as we shall see below, few people attributed their writing development primarily to the reading that was done in such explicitly linked school assignments.

But before taking up that matter, some attention must be paid to a complicating factor in memories of school-based reading and writing—namely, the many unofficial literacy events and literacy lessons that people vividly and sometimes painfully recalled. In this unofficial curriculum, so to speak, writing once again seemed to separate significantly from reading as a sub rosa activity. Several people I spoke with remembered writing satires and spoofs of poetry and other texts assigned in school. One man remembered writing satiric newspaper accounts (including unflattering items about his teacher) and passing them furtively around his fourth-grade classroom. Several people, like fifty-year-old Charlie Smith, associated note-passing in school with "big secrets," some remembering that they
resorted to pseudonyms or secret codes in case notes were apprehended by teachers or otherwise fell into the wrong hands. Writing also was discussed as more highly censored (at least, more directly censored) than reading. Rebecca Howard, for instance, recalled her high school principal closing down the student newspaper on which she had been serving as one of the editors because of a controversial article that the students had insisted on printing. The mixed messages that can surround memories of writing in school were perhaps best captured in the memory of Michelle Friedman, who will never forget that “horrible moment” in sixth grade when she was caught passing a note about one of her classmates, a note that “was not very nice.” “Mrs. C______ seized the note from my hand,” she said, “and after class warned me gravely, ‘Never write things down, Michelle, never!’ ”

A lot of the research on reading-writing relationships has focused on the role of reading in learning to write. Intuition suggests that writing ability correlates with reading ability, but the findings are mixed (Tierney and Leys). Other researchers have focused on the use in writing of rhetorical or genre knowledge acquired in reading (Bereiter and Scardamalia; Spivey; Greene). Self-reports tend to confirm intuition and research—but only to a degree. One third of the people I interviewed identified reading as one of the factors in their learning to write. Several people reported being inspired by their self-sponsored reading (or radio listening) to imitate mysteries, detective stories, true romance stories, poetry, and songs. And they reported looking on their own volition to text models for guidance when they wrote in new or unfamiliar genres (especially on the job). However, only seven people I spoke with regarded reading as the principal means by which they learned to write. One of the seven was an autodidact who spent seventeen years in prison and another was a man who left school in the fifth grade and traveled alone for the next ten years as an itinerant farmworker. Four of the remaining five were older, college-educated women with strong literary inclinations. In contrast, thirteen people said they principally learned to write by being forced to write in school, mentioning especially handwriting lessons, essay writing, and teachers’ corrections and response to their writing. Ten people said they principally learned to write by imitating family members or other people around them or by being inspired by people around them. Six said they principally learned to write by writing on their own. And four women treated writing simply as a natural extension of speaking, feeling, or thinking. If anything, these accounts indicate that people learn to write through many different avenues and that being around other people who write may be at least as important for some learners as experience with reading.
Compelling Literacy

Much of the research that has been done so far on writing-reading relationships has been inspired by the scholarly enterprise, in which reading and writing about one's reading occupy a prominence probably unmatched in any other context. Understandably, this research has focused on underlying reasoning and interpretive strategies common to both reading and writing. The emphasis has been on abilities to handle textual language in ways peculiar to academic tasks, such as writing from sources or rendering literary interpretations. "Prior knowledge" in such studies is usually restricted to semantic or textual representations, not to cultural experiences and attitudes. This bias in the research no doubt foregrounds a certain similarity between writing and reading processes and suggests a kind of swinging door between the two sets of skills and experiences. However, when reading and writing development are examined from a more contextualized, cultural perspective, they appear to develop in sometimes drastically different conditions from each other and may occur together in antagonistic rather than mutually supporting ways. The actual conditions in which people encounter writing and reading are important to consider because they influence the meanings and feelings that people bring to the two enterprises and can influence the ways people pass on literacy to subsequent generations. They may also help to explain why a clearcut relationship between reading and writing in literacy development is hard to find.  

The forty interviews I conducted indicate that messages about the prestige of reading are sent to children early and often. Reading is incorporated into shared family rituals and is supported independently of school through such avenues as religion, hobbies, and the values of parent-child involvement. Writing, though far from absent in households, is less explicitly taught and publicly valued, largely because writing practices are embedded in mundane work and are more stratified generationally. Though parents do not hesitate to endorse and promote reading, their involvement with children's writing seems more restricted and circumspect. Many parents intervene only to provide technical information or assistance with school projects, and many are outwardly wary of what they sense are the creative and mysterious origins of writing. Conventions of gift giving favor books over materials associated with writing. And perhaps because of the private subject matter of much self-sponsored writing at home, there are barriers to adult-child sharing. Writing overall seems more associated with troubles. There were more accounts of getting into trouble with writing than with reading and about using writing as a response to trouble. Even in school, where reading and writing are most explicitly connected in
official tasks, unofficial literacy lessons occur and, as in the home, may send mixed messages about the consequences of reading and writing.

In tracing the cultural dissociations of reading and writing as they emerged in these interviews, I join other voices who have lately called for a broadening of the scope by which we study literacy practices and the need to understand school-based writing in terms of larger cultural, historical, and economic currents. Much wisdom already has come from such an expanded view, particularly in appreciating various clashes between schooled and non-schooled literacy, the public and private, the dominant and the marginalized. The interviews that I have collected and still am in the process of collecting do not dramatically point to ruptures or differences between the literacies of home and school. (Indeed, as formal education accumulates in middle-class and working-class families in the twentieth century, the effects of that education inevitably flavor the early home literacy experiences of subsequent generations.) Rather, I have appreciated how school and home practices together participate in the broader cultural diffusions of literacy in the twentieth century, a process that multiplies the contexts in which the young encounter and acquire reading and writing. That historical process is what most deserves our attention. Fern Kaplan, born in 1965 near Washington, D.C., recalled how, at seven or eight, she read for the first time the heavily censored FBI file of her father, an attorney disbarred during the McCarthy investigations. The only thing she remembers about the conversation afterwards was her father telling her that she should always put a date on anything she wrote, "a compulsion," she said, "that has stayed with me." If we are going to understand better what literacy instruction represents to students in the future and how it sometimes, inexplicably, can go awry, it is especially important to know about the settings in which knowledge of reading and writing have come to them and the significance implied in those settings. We must understand better what is compelling literacy as it is lived.

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Notes

1. See Ackerman for a full articulation of writing-reading relationships in literacy scholarship.
2. I report here on partial results of a pilot study undertaken for a longer interview project that is ongoing and will eventually involve 150 individuals. For a full description of this project, write to me in care of the Department of English, 600 N. Park Street, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706.
3. All subjects have been given pseudonyms.
4. Two of the people I interviewed, one a mother and another a father, were separated from their children at the time of our interview. Both reported writing letters regularly to their children.
5. Also see Radway.
6. Langer makes a similar observation in *Children Reading and Writing*.
7. See Laqueur, Furet and Ozouf, and Monaghan and Saul.

Works Cited


8. For discussions of the political significance of the subordination of writing to reading in school, see Slevin, Berlin, Miller, and Elbow.
9. See Bereiter and Scardamalia, Tierney and Lays, Langer, and Spivey.
10. See, for instance, Hollis, Gere, Courage, and Heller.


