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Closet writing

Abstract
In this article I view academic writing through the metaphor of 'closet writing', whereby the process of writing is concealed and erased, allowing public exposure of only polished articles as final products. I explore some of the reasons for the implicit shame and embarrassment that many academics, myself included, feel about their unfinished pieces and practices of writing. Among those reasons are the felt discrepancies between the imagined, and often mutually conflicting, ideals of academic writing as practice, process and product, and each individual's lived experience of it. I question the sources of such ideals, and suggest some resistance to the ideal through advocating care for ideas, rather than ideals. I query where assumptions about writing as a clean, fast and easy process come from, and counter these assumptions with values of mess, uncertainty and struggle. I argue that the absence of conversation around academic writing, and 'closeting' of the often messy add to further mystification of it. Academics are invited to venture out of their closets of writing, and risk some exposure of the process through either shared drafts or honest conversations.
Keywords: academic writing, academic ideals, shame

> Perfection itself is imperfection
> —Vladimir Horowitz

> Perfection is finally attained not when there is no longer anything to add
> but when there is no longer anything to take away, when a body
> has been stripped down to its nakedness
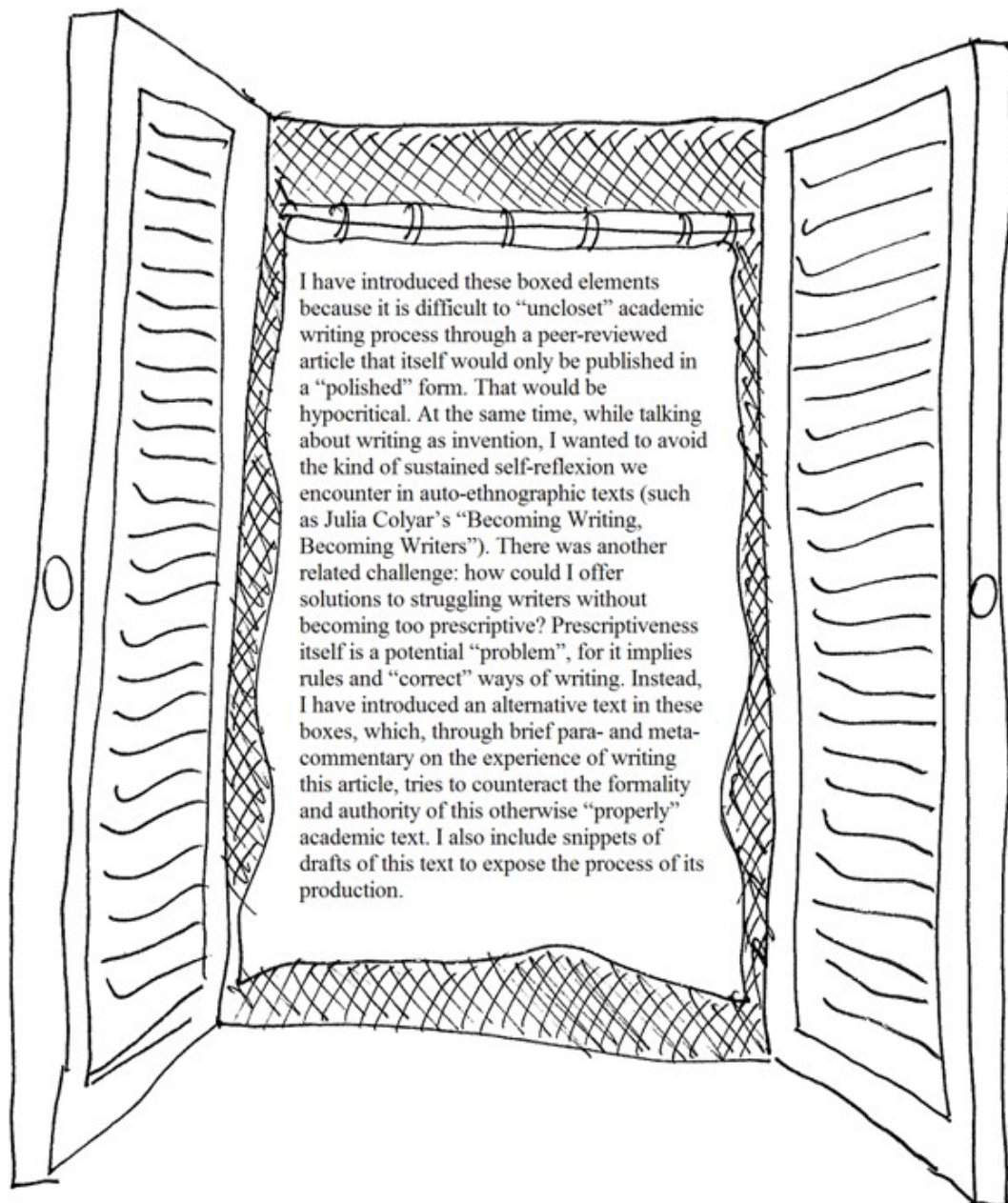> —Julia Cameron

What is 'closet writing'?

Myths are often born from facts in hiding. They can be a response to something concealed, and so to something misunderstood or misbelieved, be it a phenomenon, a process or a practice. Writing, for example, which is not always and entirely a solitary act, is nevertheless epitomized by the archetypal image of a scribe (such as the 18th-century tormented writer-figure) working in monastic solitude (in a lockable closet – see Bobker 2014). Conversely, there are not many myths about a process of writing that would involve groups of writers working together and/or with a wider audience. So there is a certain relationship between concealment and misunderstanding, between writing while hidden away and not entirely understanding what writing as a process involves. Mythologies arise from the concealment and erasure of the actual process of writing. Such is also the case of academic writing, much of which is 'closeted'.

What is 'a closet', and how can this metaphor help us understand academic writing practices? Looking at the word's etymology takes us on a journey from 'small enclosures' and 'confinement' to 'bedrooms', 'inner chambers' and 'secret rooms' [1]. As an adjective, 'closet' came to mean from a late 17th century 'private', and, later, 'secret', 'unknown' – we know that one can be 'closeted' or 'come out of the closet' (that is, admit something openly, reveal their supposedly 'shameful' secret). Let us also not forget the 'water-closet' (a flushable toilet) that emerged at the end of 18th century. But with the modern sense of a 'small side-room for storage' emerging in records around 1610, it originally meant in English 'a private room for study or prayer'. The interchangeable use of the words 'closet' and 'dressing room' in the first half of the 18th century suggests that the two domestic spaces shared some similarities (Lipsedge 2012: 38). Hence, I think of academic closets in these

terms: as intimate and secret-sacred writing spaces, which at times omit a faint smell of embarrassment [2].

Connotations of the word 'closet' have shifted over time, from a space of solitary writing (or the 'space of the mind' as in empiricism; Bobker 2014: 70) to women writing secretly in the 19th century. From the 20th century onwards, the metaphor's dominant meaning relates to queer (predominantly male) secrecy and shame. In this article, however, I do not directly engage with the queer discourse of the closet (as explored by Sedgwick 2008, Brown 2005, de Villiers 2012, etc). I am more interested in exposing problematic academic writing practices in the light of the word's broader meanings.
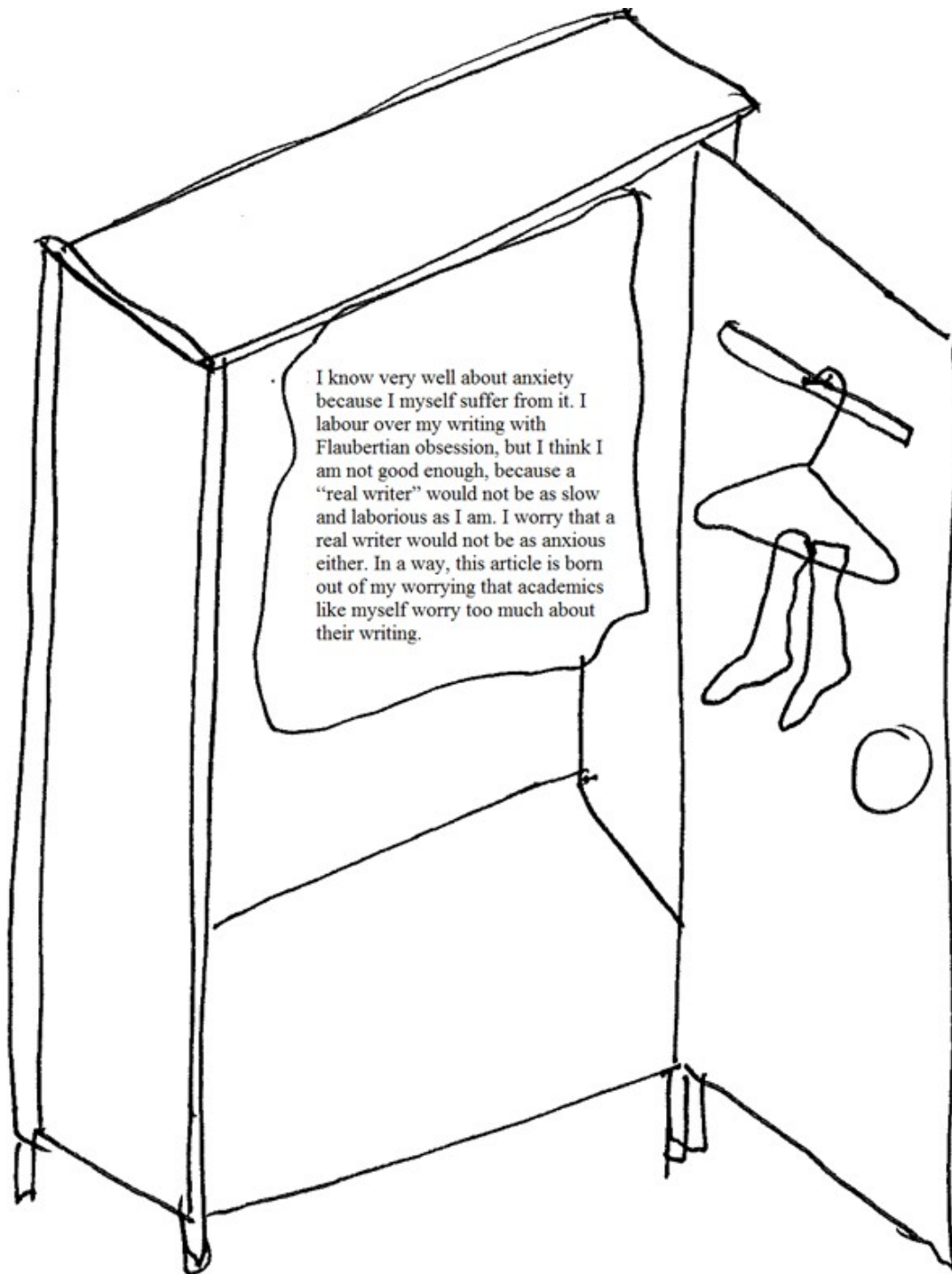
In the most common contemporary sense, a closet is a thing that, simply put, provides structured space for storage. Importantly, the closet renders the stored material invisible to an outsider's eyes. With the closet doors closed, we have no way of telling whether the interior space is empty, or filled, whether dominated by order or mess. We cannot even see its internal structure (how many shelves, how many racks). In *Closet Space*, Michael P Brown calls it 'a place where things are hidden' (Brown 2005: 2). For someone to be 'shut up as in a closet' is not without its advantages. The closet provides a safe place in which a writer can secretly rehearse the production of writing. Yet, even though concealment has its benefits (safety, privacy), when everyone starts to hide too much, it can become a problem.

I have introduced these boxed elements because it is difficult to "uncloset" academic writing process through a peer-reviewed article that itself would only be published in a "polished" form. That would be hypocritical. At the same time, while talking about writing as invention, I wanted to avoid the kind of sustained self-reflexion we encounter in auto-ethnographic texts (such as Julia Colyar's "Becoming Writing, Becoming Writers"). There was another related challenge: how could I offer solutions to struggling writers without becoming too prescriptive? Prescriptiveness itself is a potential "problem", for it implies rules and "correct" ways of writing. Instead, I have introduced an alternative text in these boxes, which, through brief para- and meta-commentary on the experience of writing this article, tries to counteract the formality and authority of this otherwise "properly" academic text. I also include snippets of drafts of this text to expose the process of its production.

Dominant academic practices mythologise writing (Colyar 2009, Belcher 2009, Thornton 2013, Cameron et al 2009), while also making it appear 'natural' (that is, incontestable – see,

for example, Badenhorst 2010: 55). While a plethora of prescriptive books, articles, websites, and so on, tells us, academics, *how* to write, we hardly get to see any material that attempts to describe how one might *actually* write [3]. In fact, the 'extraordinary amount' of *how-to* resources available on academic writing reflects the level of anxiety experienced by academic writers and graduate students (Mewburn et al 2014: 220, Aitchison & Guerin 2014: 4). Furthermore, as Helen Sword points out, 'the one-size-fits all prescriptiveness' of many self-help books, rather than encouraging struggling academics can intensify their feelings of inadequacy and guilt (Sword 2017: 4). At the heart of such literature too often 'lurks a puritanical belief that productivity is a mark of personal virtue, while failure to publish denotes a deep-seated character flaw' (2017: 4). These imaginary virtues belong to writing ideals that are deeply embedded in the structures of power and institution; they feed from the lack of confrontation by how most writing is actually done.

Despite valuable work by advocates of expressive writing and/or cognitive process theories (Elbow 1973, 1981, and 2000; Flower & Hayes 1981; among others), we lack everyday discussion about the emotional and practical complexities of writing, which persistently get 'repressed' (Belcher 2009: 2). Ralph Keyes calls the 'crippling anxieties' (which are 'as much part of the writing process as punctuation') a 'Great Unspoken' (Keyes 1995: 10). Wendy Belcher pushes this metaphor further (2009: 1) by comparing writing in academia to sex in 19th century Vienna (a Victorian 'sex capital'): 'everybody does it and nobody talks about it'. As work by Belcher, Keyes and others consistently reiterate, we need *more* commonplace self-reflection on how we 'do' and talk about writing. Apart from the shortage of expository materials on writing, absent is also conversation surrounding this very lack of exposure of how academics write. That is to say, not only is the practice of writing concealed, but also honest reflection on this concealment.

> I know very well about anxiety because I myself suffer from it. I labour over my writing with Flaubertian obsession, but I think I am not good enough, because a "real writer" would not be as slow and laborious as I am. I worry that a real writer would not be as anxious either. In a way, this article is born out of my worrying that academics like myself worry too much about their writing.

The resulting culture of cover-up evokes and sustains academic writing mythologies. Riddled with unchallenged myths, misunderstandings, and excessive expectations, writing makes many academics worried. Various levels and kinds of worry consistently get recorded by academic writing literature, anecdotal material, testimonies and large-scale survey projects, such as Helen Sword's recent survey of 1,223 academics on their writing-related emotions (Sword 2011-2015, from now on referred to as Sword's surveys 2011-2015) [4]. As analysis of Sword's survey data shows, 'anxiety' is the next most frequently cited emotion word after 'frustration' (Sword 2017: 155). Because of this concealment of, and silence around, the process, 'writing dysfunction is common in academia' (Belcher 2009: 1). Cecile Badenhorst notes (2010: 16) a paradox of academic life – 'writing is so essential to what we do, and yet it generates such anxiety.' The anxiety – which, admittedly, on occasion can serve as a productive force – too often is generated by a sense of inadequacy and shame. And when one feels shame about writing, one starts to cover it up.

A closet is therefore more than a safe space for storage and a secret workshop for handling raw material. It can potentially hide menace. One such beast is the abstract perfect writer who writes only polished copies and is what I call a 'monster of the ideal'; for Badenhorst (2010: 85), it speaks through the voice of 'internal criticism' and is 'the monster in the mirror'. As long as academics keep their writing practices 'closeted away', such beasts of imagination

will continue to haunt our writing. Closet spaces breed bogeymen, skeletons, spiders, moths and mould.

A significant question, then, for us to ask is not only 'How do we, academics, write?' or 'How do we, academics, think we write?' but also 'How do we think academics *should* write, and why?' In this article I tackle these questions by taking not a close, or closed, but merely a *closer* look at the idea of 'closet writing'. I hope such a metaphoric treatment, even if sketchy and partial, can expose and weaken some of the existing mythologies.

What does the closet hide?

We may start by asking – what is there to hide? Curiously, for example, a closet containing clothes (a wardrobe) changes how we view those clothes. We have no problem showing them in public; in fact, we often wear them for show more than for their function. True that, under those, we wear private garments not meant to be seen by most. Yet, in a closet, exposing even the upper layers would feel like an invasion of privacy. It is too intimate. The sense of violation of the personal, and the associated shame, does not come from the exposure of our clothes. The embarrassment happens because the wardrobe itself speaks of our nakedness, of dressing and undressing, of covering up and uncovering, of the intimate process of getting ready and tidy, and of all that mess that pre-exists our carefully curated public facade. It suggests both awkwardness and vulnerability that precedes and accompanies the process of making oneself ready. That is to say, the very thought that there exists a space and place in which things are raw, naked, awkward, and 'imperfect', is enough to cause embarrassment.
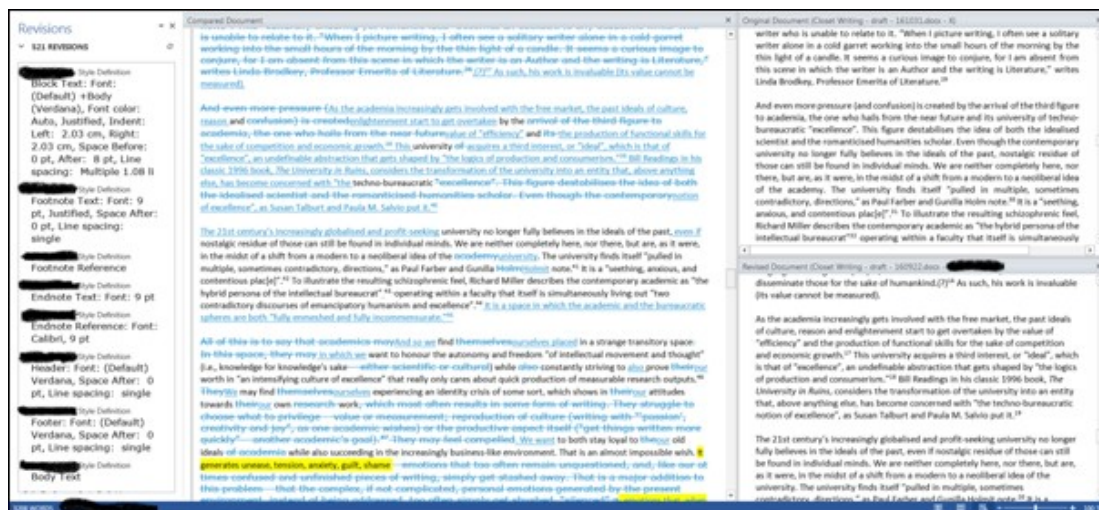

Figure 1. Comparison of the article's two drafts at different stages of writing

What is not seen in public, and never talked about in public, is presumably unmentionable (like one's salary or the most comfortable underwear brand). The dominant belief among academics, notes Belcher (2009: 1), is that 'writing, like sex, should come naturally and should be performed in polite privacy' – in one's (bed)chamber. And so, even in an abstract and generic sense, drafting, this process of making texts ready and 'presentable', appears to be somewhat shameful and uncomfortable. When Julia Colyar attempts to describe the consequence of closeting the 'embarrassing' writing process, she refers to David R. Olson's work on the psychology of literacy:

> Most writing, when we encounter it, is revised, polished, not only product, but complete, as if sprung fully formed [like Athena] from the head of Zeus. Writing puts on its trousers one leg at a time, but we rarely see it in stages of undress. (Colyar 2009: 424)

That is to say, beyond a very vague sense that most writers *do* perhaps some mind-mapping, scribbling, drafting and revising – in a similar way as we know that all human beings, like all

animals, perform certain hygiene rituals and bodily functions that nevertheless are not publicly discussed – we really have no idea how one writes.

Shame and embarrassment typically attend the disclosure of early written drafts of research publications. For academics, 'exposure', 'shame' and 'fear' go hand-in-hand with writing, as a number of studies in recent years have suggested (Turner et al 2014, Cameron et al 2009, Sword's surveys 2011-2015, Toor 2011). Showing someone one's early drafts (the 'undies' of writing) was aptly named by a doctoral student as 'an intellectual striptease' (Caffarella & Barnett 2000: 46). Most other metaphors for exposure of writing involve 'some state of undress' – like appearing before public 'with pants down' (Keyes 1995: 39). Writing is, indeed, a form of 'dis-closing' (dis-clothing?) – of our 'ideas and judgments and even ourselves as we write' (Badley 2009a: 217, also Badenhorst 2010: 56).

Figure 2, on the left. Mind-mapping thematic connections among researched literature on academic writing;
Figure 3, on the right. Revision notes at a later stage of writing, following a peer-review session

Such exposure is avoided because it disempowers. It essentially shows that, even for the most acclaimed academic writers, perfection is not instantaneous but can only be approximated through laborious work with one's own imperfect arguments, awkward phrases, wobbly structures and other embarrassing mistakes. In the Derridian sense, as Graham Badley notes, *scribbling* (his name for a drafting process) is performed as 'a private, often secret, ruse', 'a deliberate encryption or encipherment', used by 'an *expertocracy* to conceal knowledge from less privileged others' (Badley 2011: 260). Here, the 'knowledge' may also refer to the know-how of the process of writing itself. (Here, the closet as a device for hiding exclusive knowledge becomes a treasure trove. The closet, and the power relations between the closet, the closeter, and the 'outsider' are reversed from their assumed positions in queer discourse.)

Figure 4. Early brainstorming notes after an initial draft

The secrecy of drafting is an issue raised by Jenny Cameron, Karen Nairn and Jane Higgins (2009: 271), among others, who note how the recursive and klutzy nature of academic writing is kept safely hidden – especially from those in lower ranks, such as novices to academia, who very rarely get to glimpse other academic's drafts. Novices 'experience their own writing in all its messiness, while the work they are reading seems to spring fully formed onto the page' (Cameron et al 2009: 271, also Belcher 2009: 7-8). They only see other's writing 'in its most finished form – the published refereed journal article or the published book – when all evidence of the recursiveness of writing, of the numerous iterations that a piece of writing usually goes through, has been obliterated' (Cameron et al 2009: 271). Working alone, and 'with others' polished work as the standard,' no wonder newcomers to academic writing quickly and easily become 'filled with self-doubt' (Cameron et al 2009: 271). As a result, any struggle is interpreted as being not very good at writing (Maura Nolan in Akbari 2015: 59-60).

Indeed, a muddled and unfinished draft may look unconvincing, if not incoherent. Often it speaks of the author's inability to clearly express an existing thought or the uncertainty about it. Arguments, for example, may often start as awkward descriptions, tautological statements, weak and contradictory proclamations. They do not appear 'out of thin air', ready-made and carefully weighed; they tend to slowly acquire their shape and focus through the process I call (p(re))writing, confirming that not only writing but also thinking itself is indeed a recursive act (Badenhorst 2010: 31, Belcher 2009: 33).

Early drafts can especially convey this uncertainty. An experienced academic's struggle not only to clearly iterate an original thought but also to create that thought is seen as a source of shame – as if only 'novices' could afford incoherence – and so necessarily becomes concealable. Such a draft would be no less than one's confession that 'I don't even know what I am trying to say'. As Colyar confesses:

> the first draft of our papers are [sic!] messy, more incomplete than
> substantive, full of blank spaces and filler phrases that will be carefully
> edited out. Perhaps that writer, the one with the blank spaces, is the writer I
> don't want others to see. That writer expresses uncertainty in too many
> ways. (Colyar 2009: 434-435)

To be a writer, then, as the myth goes, means to be confident of what and how to say even before writing; to already have known what to say, and not to have discovered it in the process of writing. The writer 'knows', as conveyed by the accomplished written text. The myth insists that texts 'spring fully formed from the mind of the writer' (Belcher 2009: 6). It is not clear how one gets from the blank page on paper or computer screen to 'there' (wherever that is that a writing guide takes you – the perfect introduction, the persuasive argument, or the entire text).

A 'monster of the ideal'

Writing-associated anxiety, guilt and shame come from a lack of understanding of the writing process and the monstrous expectation of ideal academic form. When academics evaluate their writing capabilities, they do so with often abstract ideals in mind. As psychoanalyst Elisabeth Hanscombe explains, shame 'strikes at moments of 'cognitive dissonance', when certain expectations are not met' (Hanscombe 2012: 17). So it is always us against our expectations. And, noting how frequently academics of all ranks explicitly or implicitly express feelings of shame towards their writing (such as in Sword's surveys 2011-2015), I question the nature and size of their expectations, and the scale of the dissonance. These often-abstract writing fantasies, and the burdens they impose, are also 'closeted', very much like the practice itself.
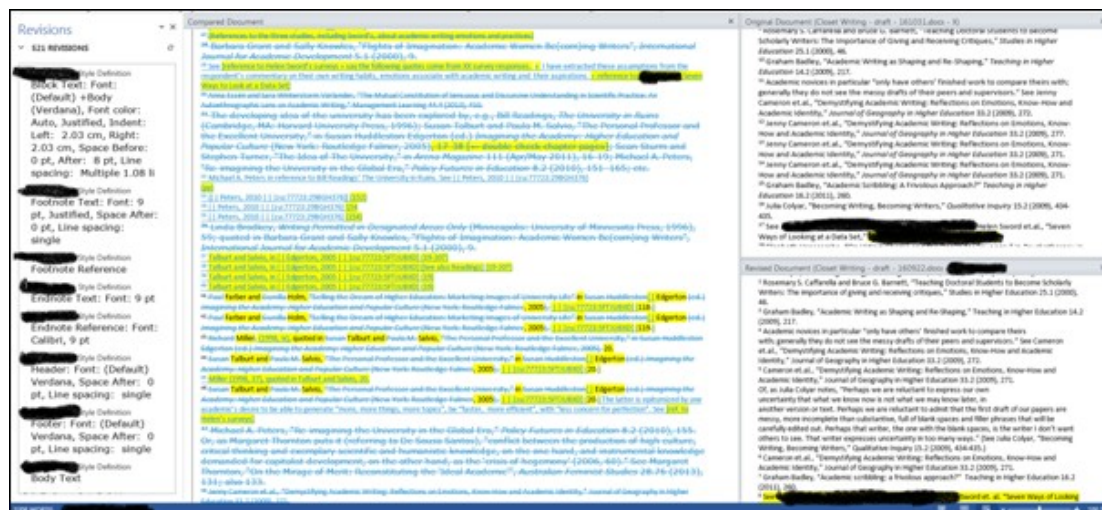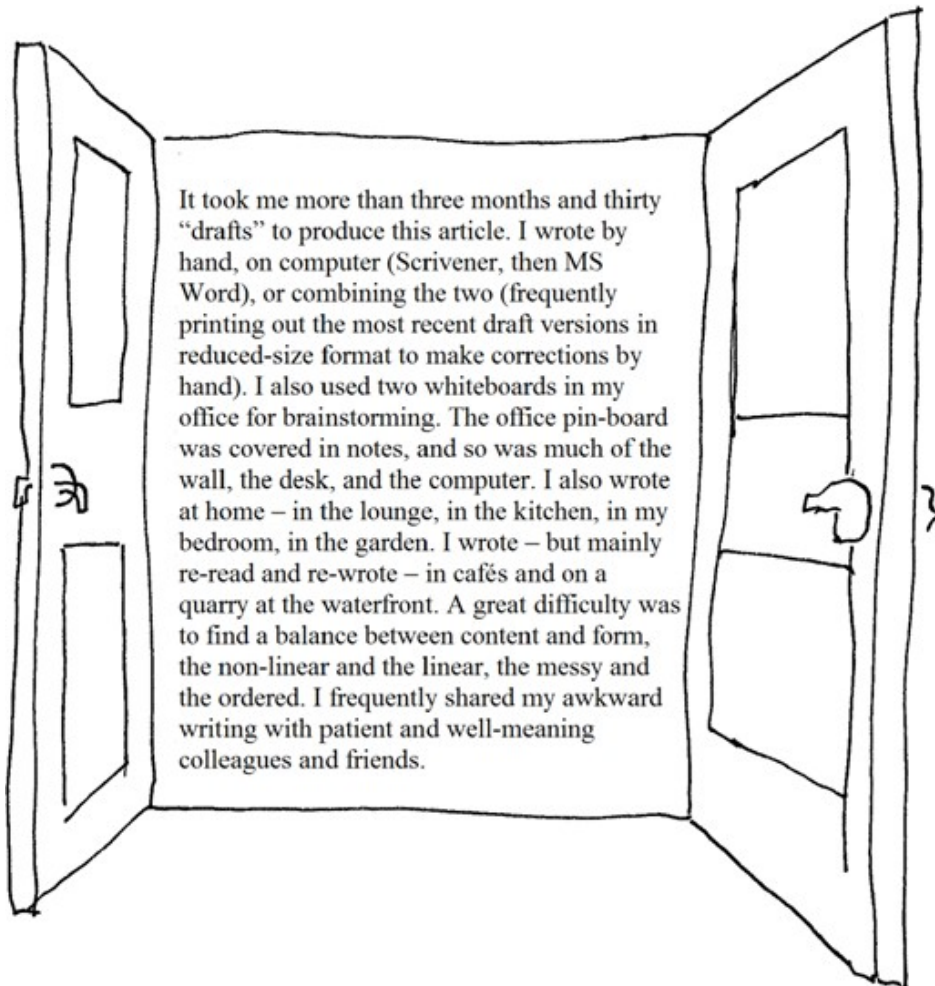

Figure 5. Comparison of two different draft versions (showing the article's endnotes)

It took me more than three months and thirty "drafts" to produce this article. I wrote by hand, on computer (Scrivener, then MS Word), or combining the two (frequently printing out the most recent draft versions in reduced-size format to make corrections by hand). I also used two whiteboards in my office for brainstorming. The office pin-board was covered in notes, and so was much of the wall, the desk, and the computer. I also wrote at home – in the lounge, in the kitchen, in my bedroom, in the garden. I wrote – but mainly re-read and re-wrote – in cafés and on a quarry at the waterfront. A great difficulty was to find a balance between content and form, the non-linear and the linear, the messy and the ordered. I frequently shared my awkward writing with patient and well-meaning colleagues and friends.

The academic writer feels uncomfortable when uncovered. The naked reflection in the mirror, with all its perceived imperfections, appears embarrassingly far from the expected ideal. Women in particular would know that their 'imperfections' should never be publicly seen. Barbara Grant and Sally Knowles cleverly describe the problematic self-reflection of female academics:

> [W]hen women are asked to share their writing with each other, the anxiety is often palpable. 'It is not ready', we claim, protectively holding our papers to our bodies. The strong reluctance to show the imperfect body of the text bespeaks feelings of shame towards our texts, reminiscent of dominant Western cultural attitudes towards viewing the physical body of a woman – if it's not perfect, then it's not good enough to show. (Grant & Knowles 2000: 9)

Our writing ability starts with our perceived self-reflection as academic writers. One needs to be able to 'see' oneself as 'a writer' in order to be able to write. Because writing is both material and abstract, both tactile and cognitive, no less important than the writer's physical situatedness is the imaginative space one needs as a writer (Grant & Knowles 2000). As academics themselves explicitly or implicitly suggest (Sword's surveys 2011-2015), too often that space is taken by adverse figures of perfection that dictate *how* one is to write, including in terms of the physical and temporal positioning (every day, in the office, in early mornings, producing x number of words each time, etc). Failure to match these criteria in writerly practice leads to a sense of guilt and shame, and an inability to recognize in one's self-reflection a valid image of 'a writer' (Sword's surveys 2011-2015, Grant & Knowles 2000, Essén & Värlander 2013: 410).

A number of recent studies, as well as extensive anecdotal evidence, provide striking insights into what academics think a good writer ought to be like, in terms of both a writing process and a practice (Sword's surveys 2011-2015, Cameron et al 2009, Grant & Knowles 2000). A 'good' academic writer is imagined by academics (Sword's surveys 2011-2015) to be someone who always writes quickly and easily, fluently and efficiently, with creativity and

flair. This super-writer manages to 'get it right first time' (Sword's surveys 2011-2015, Badenhorst: 2010: 89) or, at least, significantly reduce the amount of revision required. He writes regularly – every day, despite external distractions. And, since the ideal academic writer embodies the ideals of his institution, his writing is situated within the confines of institutional space and time (his office, his allotted 'research' time).
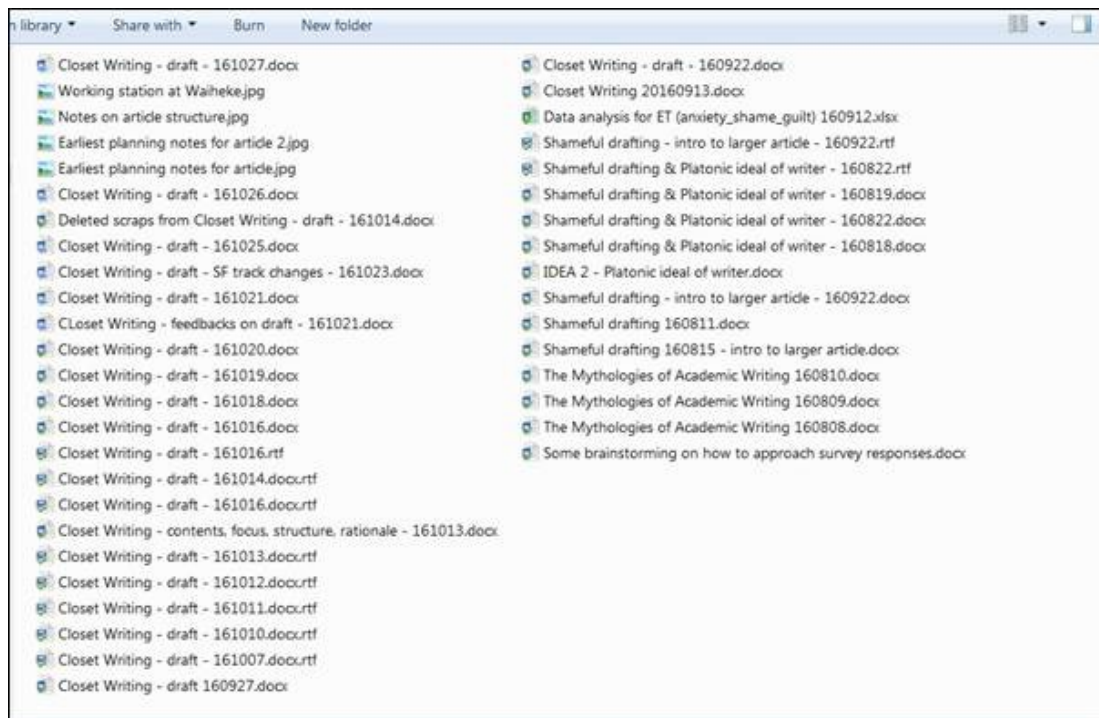

Figure 6. Digital archive of the draft files, showing crystallisation of the article's focus

This ideal's perfection deceives, since it comes from a privileged position. As Grant and Knowles note in their essay on the impossible figure of the ideal female academic (for the writer-image is traditionally gendered as masculine), the most pervasive fantasy is that of a writer, wealthy in time and inspiration:

> Watch the words flow effortlessly on to the page. But where are the children, the essays to mark, the committee agendas, the elderly parents, the toilets to clean, the friends to enjoy and support? This is a deeply gendered image – the individual outside of relationships and careless of physical needs, the implication being that someone else will provide for them. (Grant & Knowles 2000: 9)

There are, of course, ways to combine one's writing practice with the demands of everyday working life, yet writing from outside the institutional bounds (from home, from a café) is often followed by a sense of guilt (or even failure?). Having questioned 18 academic practitioners on their writing, Anna Essén and Sara Winterstorm Värlander observe (2013: 410) a trend: 'A day at home, although extremely productive, is typically accompanied by a bad conscience'.

External distractions and demands aside, these fantasies about ideal writing skill and practice not only collide with the kinds of actualities of writing that many writers experience, but also clash among themselves. The ideal writer is unattainably perfect also because, strictly speaking, we can identify at least a couple of conflicting ideals simultaneously at work in present-day academia. In other words, not one monster, but several, lurk in the depths of those closets. How did they get there?
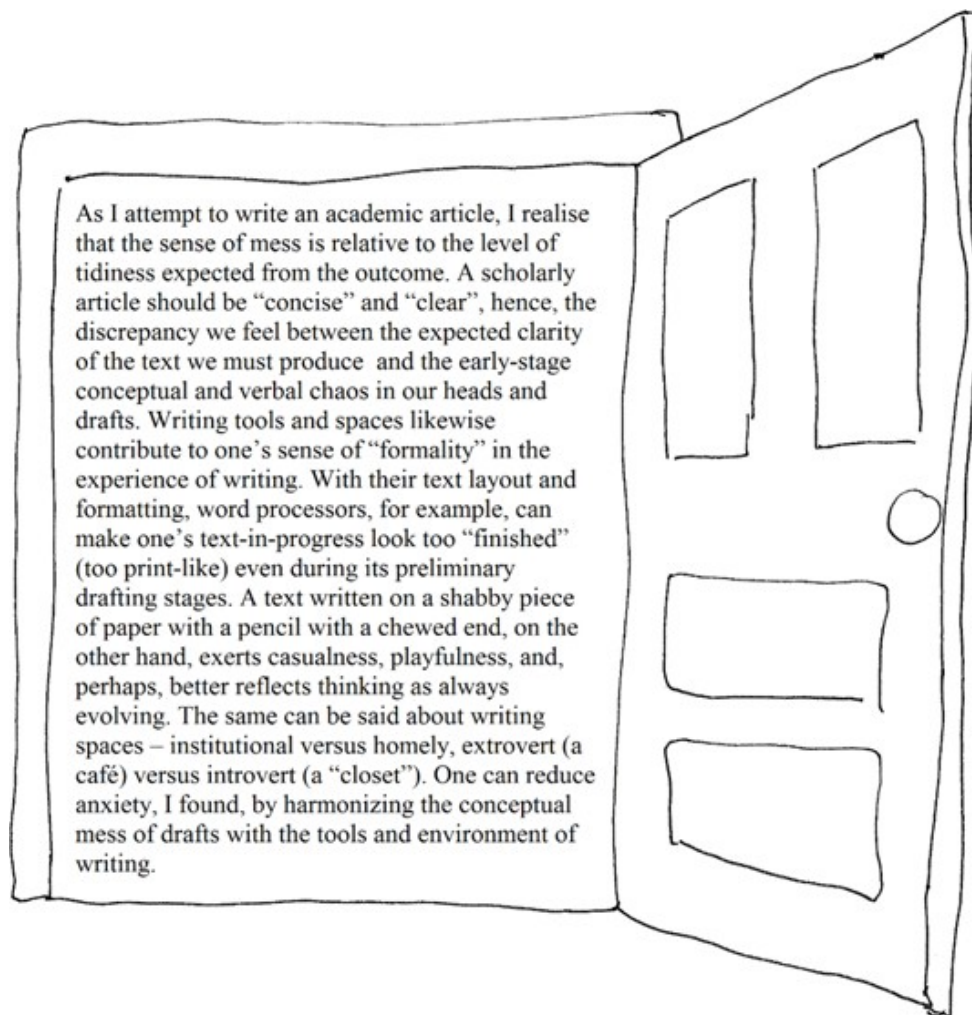
Where academic writing myths come from

There has always been a certain tension between two clashing ideas of knowledge and the university, and, consequently, also between two ideas about research-based writing (cf

Readings 1996, Talburt & Salvio 2005, Sturm & Turner 2011, Peters 2010). On the one hand, the Kantian idea of the university as a place of rational science seems to hold as its *étalon* the precise and 'objective' report-writing that is still practised by many today; this is where, in a way, also the formal conventions of academic writing come from. On the other hand, the Humboldtian idea of the university as a place for culture sees the greatest value in what we could broadly call 'the Humanities essay'. This unsolvable internal contradiction can make it difficult for scientists to see themselves as legitimate 'writers', and for humanities scholars to feel adequate as academic writers because they struggle to adhere to more rigid academic form.

This tension is manifested most in the so-called 'sciences of man' (anthropology, sociology, psychology), which challenge writers to bring the two strands – the 'objective' and the subjective – coherently together. We see it in the social scientists' almost compulsive adherence to prescribed conventions in academic writing (the APA style, the IMRAD structure model), which suggest formal 'objectivity', as if to compensate for any instances of unwanted subjective intervention in the presentation of objective research. It is as if in the sciences of 'MAN' (and their hu-MAN-ities part), the observer/researcher position has been closeted by an academic ideal for objectivity. To bring the two attitudes together in writing can indeed be a challenge.

Furthermore, either of these ideals of writing can be problematic, when taken too seriously. One idea sees writing as plain reporting of scientific research (with its old-fashioned claims for 'objectivity'), the other as a philosophical and creative discovery that is also literary. We will yet talk about the former, but it is worth noting that the latter, born with the 'literary turn' of the university, can likewise be troublesome, for it idealizes the scholar of literature as the epitome of the academic writer. Like the Kantian-Humboldtian-Newmanian modern university itself, this 'scholar' still trusts in the power of knowledge and language to 'enlighten' people, and devotes himself to foster, advance and disseminate those for the sake of humankind. He does so through his eloquent and refined writing. Naturally, he writes 'easily' and a lot, and for him 'writing flows'.

This 'culturally enduring yet romantic idea' unsettles any academic writer who cannot relate to it – and, especially, female writers (Grant & Knowles 2000: 9). How could one relate to the mythical yet persistent image of the (typically male) academic writer as 'someone who works alone for months in a cold garret, subsisting on bread an cigarettes while coughing consumptively and churning out page after page of sui generis prose' (Belcher 2009: 6)? As Linda Brodkey (1996) writes, 'When I picture writing, I often see a solitary writer alone in a cold garret working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle. It seems a curious image to conjure, for I am absent from this scene in which the writer is an Author and the writing is Literature' (quoted in Grant & Knowles 2000: 9).

As I attempt to write an academic article, I realise that the sense of mess is relative to the level of tidiness expected from the outcome. A scholarly article should be "concise" and "clear", hence, the discrepancy we feel between the expected clarity of the text we must produce and the early-stage conceptual and verbal chaos in our heads and drafts. Writing tools and spaces likewise contribute to one's sense of "formality" in the experience of writing. With their text layout and formatting, word processors, for example, can make one's text-in-progress look too "finished" (too print-like) even during its preliminary drafting stages. A text written on a shabby piece of paper with a pencil with a chewed end, on the other hand, exerts casualness, playfulness, and, perhaps, better reflects thinking as always evolving. The same can be said about writing spaces – institutional versus homely, extrovert (a café) versus introvert (a "closet"). One can reduce anxiety, I found, by harmonizing the conceptual mess of drafts with the tools and environment of writing.

And even more pressure (and confusion) is created by the arrival of a third figure to academia, the one who hails from the near future and its university of techno-bureaucratic 'excellence'. This academic, preoccupied with generating knowledge capital through ever-increasing production of quantifiable output measures, destabilises the idea of both the idealised scientist and the romanticised humanities scholar. We are, as it were, in the midst of a shift from a modern to a neoliberal idea of the academy. The university finds itself 'pulled in multiple, sometimes contradictory, directions,' as Paul Farber and Gunilla Holm note (2005: 118). It is a 'seething, anxious, and contentious plac[e]' (Farber & Holm 2005: 119). To illustrate the resulting schizophrenic feel, Richard Miller (quoted in Talburt & Salvio 2005: 20) describes the contemporary academic as 'the hybrid persona of the intellectual bureaucrat', operating within a faculty that itself is simultaneously living out 'two contradictory discourses of emancipatory humanism and excellence' (Talburt & Salvio 2005: 20) [5].

Academics thus find themselves in a strange transitory space. In this space, they may want to honour the autonomy and freedom 'of intellectual movement and thought' (ie, knowledge for knowledge's sake – either scientific or cultural) while also constantly striving to prove their worth in 'an intensifying culture of excellence' that really only cares about quick production of measurable research outputs (Talburt & Salvio 2005: 20). They may find themselves experiencing an identity crisis of some sort, which shows in their attitudes towards their own research work, which most often results in some form of writing. They struggle to choose what to privilege: value or measurement; reproduction of culture or production of academic capital (Peters 2010: 155; Thornton 2013: 131, 133). Or, in other words, writing with ''passion', creativity and joy', as one academic wishes, or the productive aspect itself ('get things written more quickly', another academic's goal) (Sword's surveys 2011-2015). They may feel compelled both to stay loyal to older ideals of academia and to succeed in an increasingly business-like environment. This almost impossible wish generates unease, tension, anxiety, guilt, shame – emotions that too often remain unquestioned, and, like our at times confused and unfinished pieces of writing, simply get stashed ('closeted') away, or 'silenced' (Cameron et al 2009: 271).
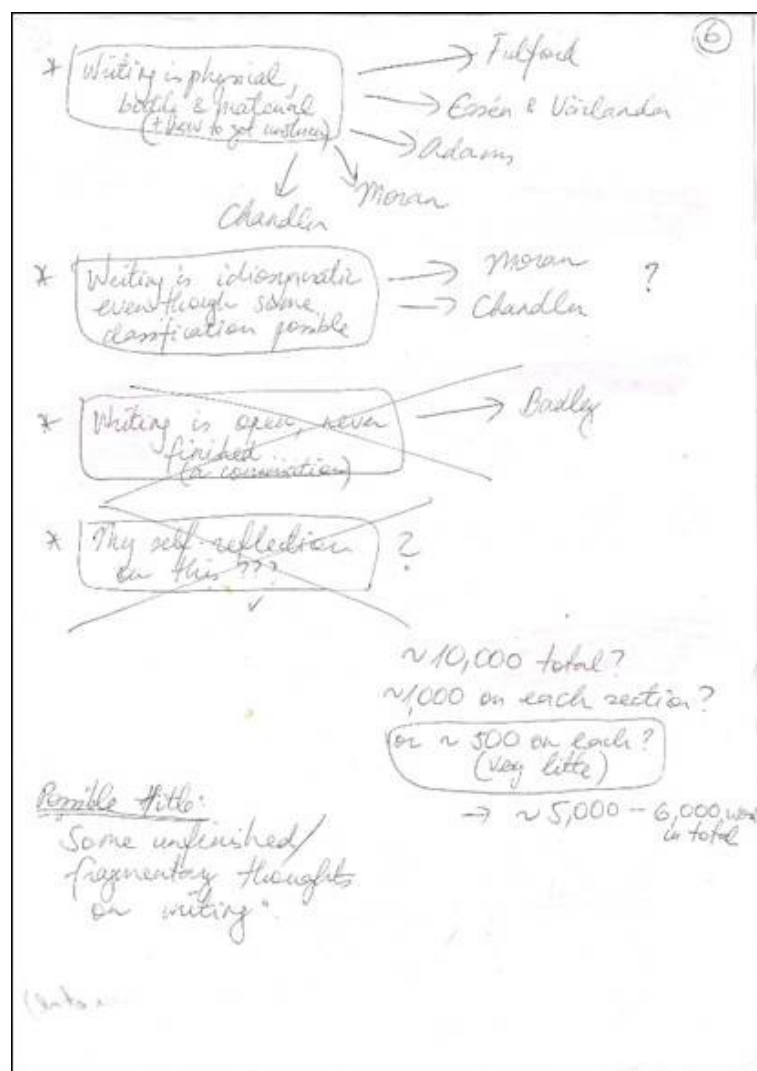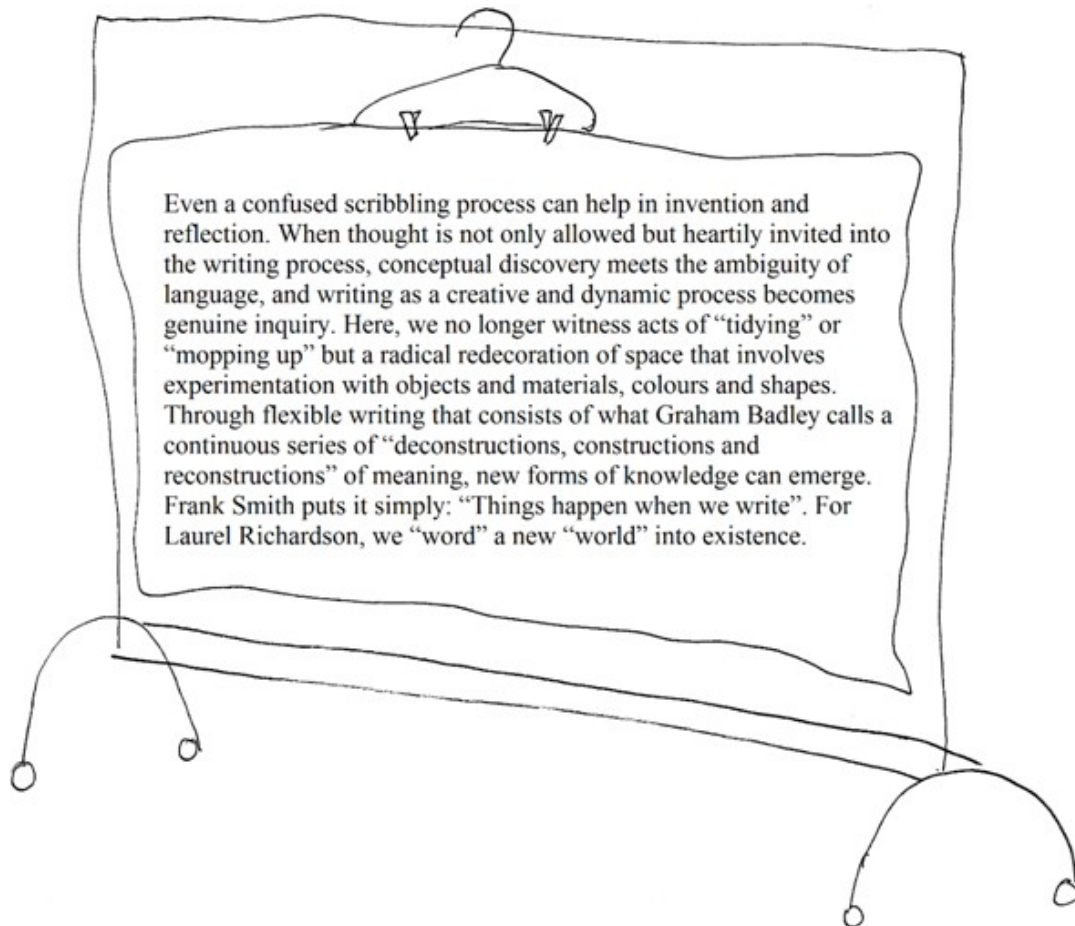
Figure 7. Early brainstorming: conceiving the idea for an article

> Even a confused scribbling process can help in invention and reflection. When thought is not only allowed but heartily invited into the writing process, conceptual discovery meets the ambiguity of language, and writing as a creative and dynamic process becomes genuine inquiry. Here, we no longer witness acts of "tidying" or "mopping up" but a radical redecoration of space that involves experimentation with objects and materials, colours and shapes. Through flexible writing that consists of what Graham Badley calls a continuous series of "deconstructions, constructions and reconstructions" of meaning, new forms of knowledge can emerge. Frank Smith puts it simply: "Things happen when we write". For Laurel Richardson, we "word" a new "world" into existence.

Given the genealogy of academic writing, academics in the Sciences and Social Sciences, as well as novice academics in the Humanities, often perceive of writing largely as an act of recording research findings, 'a stage to be completed once one's thinking is done' – 'just a case of 'writing up'' (Fulford 2016: 522, Probyn 2005). Here scientific report-writing becomes relevant. Beginner writers in particular typically think of writing in these terms – as a way to report back the knowledge transmitted to them or revealed via 'objective' research. Laurel Richardson (quoted in Cameron et al 2009: 271) calls this a 'static writing model', which consists of, as some other scholars describe it, a 'linear journey of doing research, and then writing up and reporting on findings' [6]. Writing is seen as 'the final "mopping up activity"', the last act in the process of tidying up a space (a 'closet'), as things are brought back to their pre-assigned places and carefully arranged to (re)establish order (quoted in Cameron et al 2009: 271).

There are two dangers with this approach. First, the creation of new thought is a cornerstone of scholarship, at least within the Humanities. One is invited to 'discover' new content, a new order of things, or a new way of looking at either, or both. That task unavoidably involves venturing into unknown territories, a presence of a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* that can be temporarily uncomfortable. Second, such an approach to writing sees language – whether scientific or creative – as 'an unproblematic medium through which we transmit reality' (Cameron et al 2009: 271). Yet language is ambiguous, and even the most formulaic writing cannot escape inaccuracy and uncertainty of the meaning expressed. Even Science, the most 'objective' of disciplines, has to turn to metaphor for help to express complex abstract concepts (Baake 2003). Even structured writers (or writers who would prefer to merely write things 'up' and 'down') cannot avoid the recursiveness of writing.

As soon as a word, number or sentence is 'written down', it stares back at the writer, inviting to reflect. An entire draft does the same. 'Mistakes' (such as mismatches between signified and signifier, or between intended and achieved 'effects' of text) become unavoidable, and the writer has to reconsider some of the semantic and structural choices made. In other words, because meaning in thought and language is elusive, ideas can only be brought into being through persistent writing and rewriting, or through trial and error. That is a secret well-kept from academic novices, who can easily be 'thrown into turmoil when they cannot seem to "get it right" the first time' (Cameron et al 2009: 272). It might also be optimistic to say that

'[e]xperienced academic writers know otherwise' (Cameron et al 2009: 271, cf Badenhorst 2010: 73), and would be aware that meaning gets created through the dishevelled business of writing and rewriting (or 'recursive writing') (Torrance & Thomas quoted in Cameron et al 2009: 271).
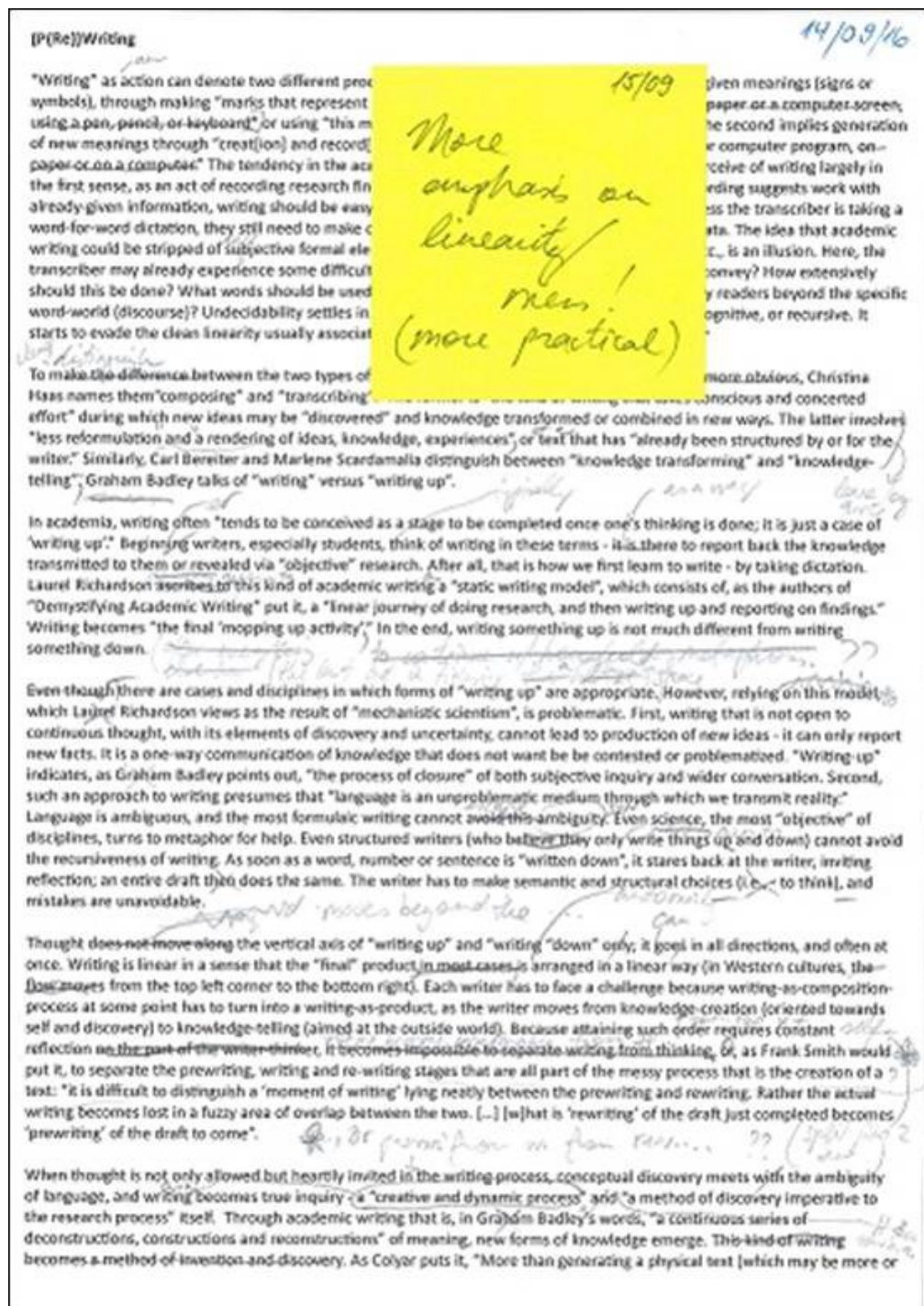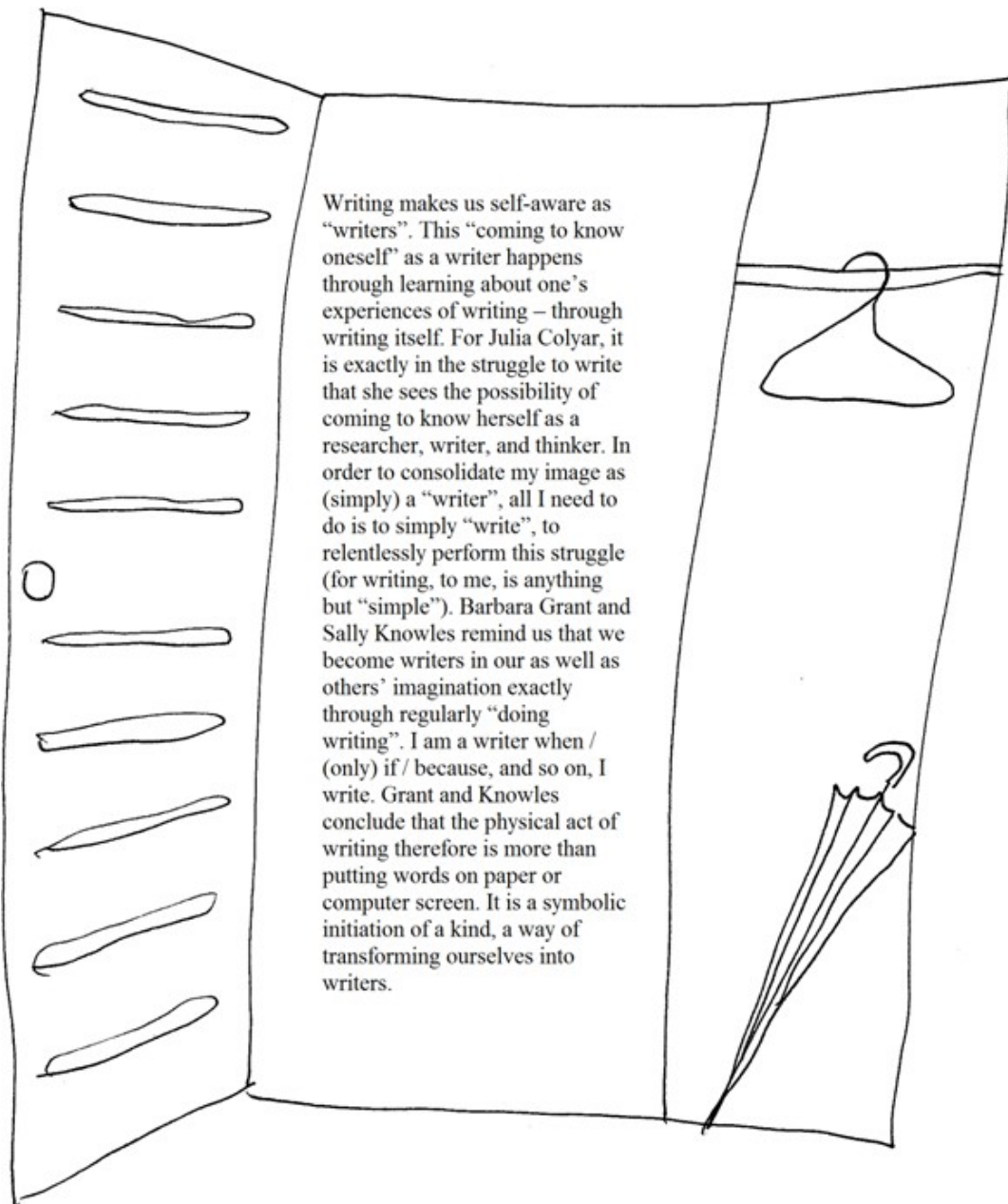

Figure 8. Sample from an early draft section, written in Scrivener and edited by hand

Writing can indeed be laborious, time-consuming, challenging. To write often means to get one's hands dirty in order to patiently work through the mess. Amanda Fulford (2016) compares this 'often difficult labor' to the physical effort of manually working the land, of 'hoeing'. Too often amongst academics, the potentially unpleasant process of writing itself (described by one scholar as 'yucky') is neither embraced nor welcomed, but is minimized or, ideally, avoided altogether (Sword's surveys 2011-2015). Like students who so often 'want to have been, but not to be, in the classroom', academics often want to have written publications but never to actually write (Talburt and Salvio 2005: 21). That is, I may be writing for the sake of having written, and so I am no longer present in the process itself. Yet such an attitude

results from more than the cognitive and mental difficulty associated with writing, and the consequent fear of failure. It also largely results from the emergence of new expectations and ideals of academic writing, brought about by the neoliberal university with its insatiable demands for measurable outputs of knowledge capital.

Writing makes us self-aware as "writers". This "coming to know oneself" as a writer happens through learning about one's experiences of writing – through writing itself. For Julia Colyar, it is exactly in the struggle to write that she sees the possibility of coming to know herself as a researcher, writer, and thinker. In order to consolidate my image as (simply) a "writer", all I need to do is to simply "write", to relentlessly perform this struggle (for writing, to me, is anything but "simple"). Barbara Grant and Sally Knowles remind us that we become writers in our as well as others' imagination exactly through regularly "doing writing". I am a writer when / (only) if / because, and so on, I write. Grant and Knowles conclude that the physical act of writing therefore is more than putting words on paper or computer screen. It is a symbolic initiation of a kind, a way of transforming ourselves into writers.

And that is another related reason why we disregard the value of the writing process. Current institutional expectations that writing gets efficiently 'produced' has shifted the attitudes of many academics to focus on the product exclusively (Badenhorst 2010: 18, Murray et al 1994). When writing becomes a goal-oriented duty ('boring writing', as one academic named it; a kind of mandatory 'writing up' act), indeed it starts to feel like a chore (like tidying up a mess) (Sword's surveys 2011-2015). Tedious, gruesome and dull, it only allows satisfaction to be felt upon, and for, the completion of the task, for being able to 'get it over with as quickly as possible', and be done (Sword's surveys 2011-2015). The process that does not get valued becomes 'a hurdle to overcome rather than a developmental activity' (Colyar 2009: 432). What becomes valued by both the writer and their institution is the product – the publication, the steps towards which are often prescribed but rarely realistically described. All attention is given to the end result, solid and measurable.
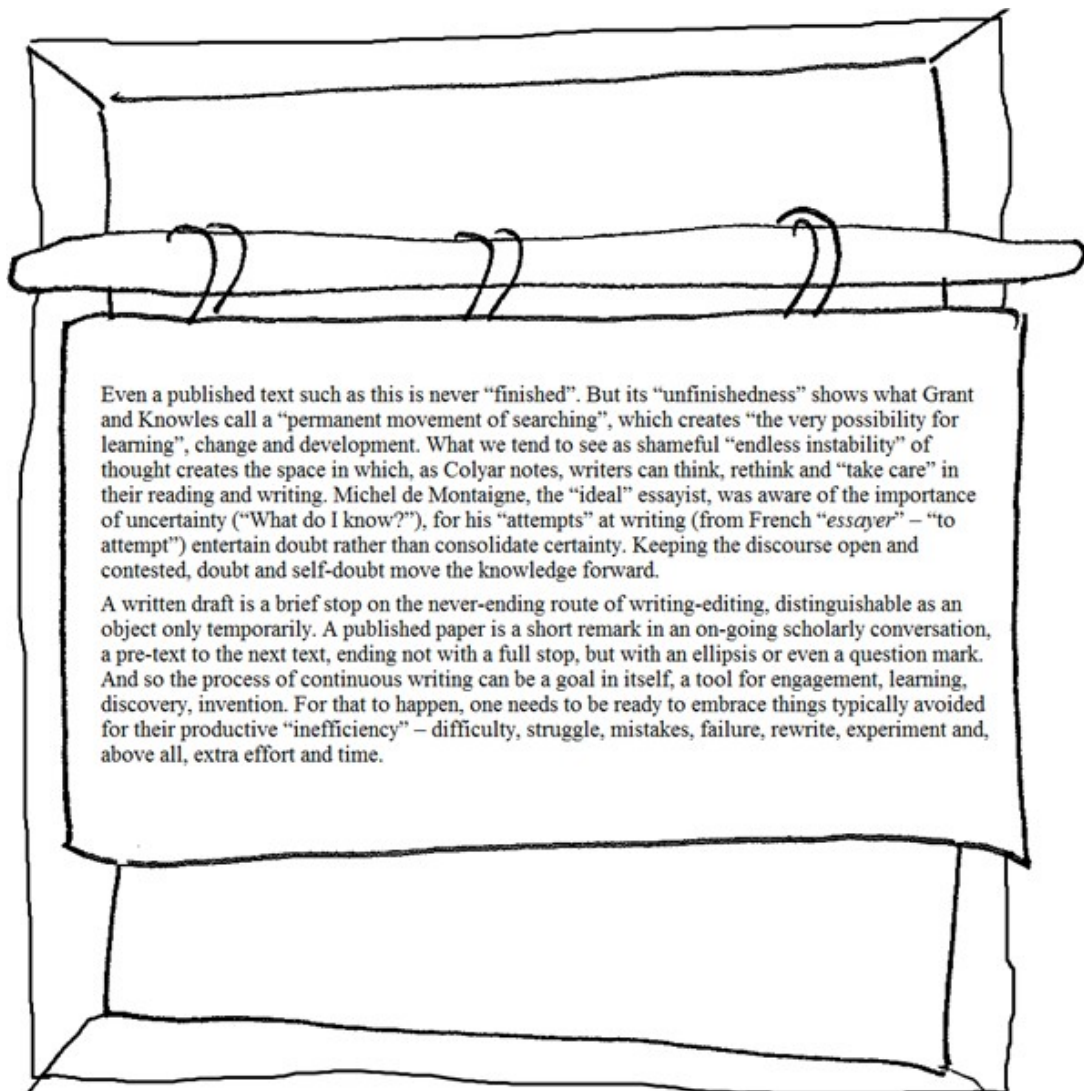
Even a published text such as this is never "finished". But its "unfinishedness" shows what Grant and Knowles call a "permanent movement of searching", which creates "the very possibility for learning", change and development. What we tend to see as shameful "endless instability" of thought creates the space in which, as Colyar notes, writers can think, rethink and "take care" in their reading and writing. Michel de Montaigne, the "ideal" essayist, was aware of the importance of uncertainty ("What do I know?"), for his "attempts" at writing (from French "*essayer*" – "to attempt") entertain doubt rather than consolidate certainty. Keeping the discourse open and contested, doubt and self-doubt move the knowledge forward.

A written draft is a brief stop on the never-ending route of writing-editing, distinguishable as an object only temporarily. A published paper is a short remark in an on-going scholarly conversation, a pre-text to the next text, ending not with a full stop, but with an ellipsis or even a question mark. And so the process of continuous writing can be a goal in itself, a tool for engagement, learning, discovery, invention. For that to happen, one needs to be ready to embrace things typically avoided for their productive "inefficiency" – difficulty, struggle, mistakes, failure, rewrite, experiment and, above all, extra effort and time.

A focus on writing as a product does not surprise in this context, writes Colyar (2009: 424), for 'written products are the currency we use to transact in the world, and they help define us as researchers and scholars' (Badenhorst 2010: 16, 18; Crosby 2002). We feel indeed that an academic's 'worth' is, in the words of Suresh Canagarajah, 'judged according to how many articles they have published,' and especially so if the academic is a less 'established' figure in the department (quoted in Moriarty 2014: 79). Hence the desire for some to become a super-writer, the new kind of an academic that is results-driven, fast, productive and efficient, capable of successfully producing written outputs under any circumstances and despite other institutional commitments.

The writing process is no longer valued for its ability to foster thinking, because thinking is not a measurable 'output'. Neither research-related conversations are valued, nor informal writing and prewriting processes. That raises important questions about what we take 'writing' to mean. Clearly, we prefer its literal interpretation – creation of a recorded text, an object. The craftsmanship and laborious process behind its creation are irrelevant, and, consequently, not talked about. Drafting, this natural and crucial part of writing, is viewed as an embarrassing activity that needs to be covered up (like getting ready for work in the morning, or taking care of personal hygiene). Extensive drafting is viewed as a sign of weakness, inadequacy, inefficiently – and ultimately, failure. So it is also a discreditable activity. A person who uses too much effort, time and resources to write, one who 'thinks too much', is viewed (and may view themselves) as a 'failed' (inefficient and unproductive) writer (or, worse, a useless 'academic'). Hence, again, the closeting of the process, the covering-up of all signs of invested effort and time. Can we escape such thinking?

Towards writing without an idea(l)

Bill Readings once observed (1996: 118) that the emerging academic institution is a 'university without an idea' – or, without an 'ideal', for its driving force of 'excellence' is fundamentally an empty and meaningless concept. If so, in this environment we could potentially find liberation from *any* kind of ideals. Perhaps, to be without a governing idea(l) is not such a bad thing, after all, for it implies not only a state of uncertainty, but also of freedom. (I am playing here, of course, for the thought of being 'without an idea/ideal' is in itself an idea/ideal.) Writing without punishing figures of perfection in mind might lead to 'imperfect' writing – neither purely scientifically 'objective', nor stylistically 'immaculate'. Rough, at times uncertain, and perhaps even 'improper', it would place its emphasis on the idea and shamelessly exhibit any traces of the struggle to express it. It might not be very 'efficient', nor 'excellent', but neither would it be too anxious about the lack of these qualities.

In response to the insatiable demands of present-day university, Carl Cederström and Michael Marinetto in a recent *The Chronicle of Higher Education* article offer the following advice: "distance yourself from the spirit of the professional university" and spend time on "meaningful intellectual activities" that you care about. Don't be the ideal scientist, the ideal humanities scholar, or the ideal academic entrepreneur. "Kill your institutional aspirations" and "be an amateur", they say. Let sombre anxiety be replaced by mischievous excitement. In that way you may even enjoy writing again.

In other words, such an 'un-ideal' could help an anxious academic strive for more writing, guided not by ideals, but by ideas. Then, perhaps, instead of fear of 'exposure of their imperfections or lack of having something interesting to say', like-minded academic writers could feel driven 'by the desire to be heard' (Grant & Knowles 2000: 10); what Judith Brett describes as a sense of 'Listen to me, I have something to tell you' (quoted in Grant & Knowles 2000: 10). Scholarship, which is also a product of cultural and social interactions, depends on such generosity and sharing of ideas. Knowledge advances through shared – not concealed or withheld – experience.

Therefore, above all, I invite academic writers to throw their closets open and share their drafts in honest conversations [7]. 'Just let it all hang out,' that 'shitty first draft' (Belcher 2009: 30, also referring to Anne Lamott; Rettig 2011: 100). There is strength and reassurance in seeing that one's weaknesses and concerns are most likely widely shared. Unspoken writerly fears, such as 'writing oneself 'into a corner' and therefore having to rethink the whole argument', may turn out to be 'the very thin[g] that experienced academic writers do to create meaning' (Cameron et al 2009: 280). Witnessing the sweat, tears and blood (and a lot of awkwardness) shed by others in creating new thought through writing, the self-doubting academic might recognize the imagery, and respond – 'I too am like that'. Knowles and Grant call this kind of exposure 'strangely comforting' as it helps 'break down the myth that others always write more easily than we do' (Knowles & Grant 2014: 118).

When writing gets shared, the 'writer-becoming' is aided by recognition that most other writers, each in their own way, are experiencing similar struggles (eg, Badenhorst 2010: 6). One is only able to think of oneself as a real 'writer', or 'academic writer', if one stops comparing oneself to destructive ideals that are no less than 'fictional construct[s] shaped by power' (Thornton 2013: 138), and, instead, recognizes that one's perceived 'imperfections' are inherent and natural to most. As Badenhorst observed after her playful dissertation writing workshops, most often her participants walked away with a sense of '*I am a writer*' (2010: 7). Acceptance of own and others' imperfections gives a writer freedom to leave the confines of the boxy closet behind.

To escape the entrapment of the closet would also mean for the ashamed writer 'vacating the solitude of the garret (read office, a contemporary 'closet') and moving into the house with many rooms' (Grant & Knowles 2000: 11), so that one can 'imagine [one]self in the company of others even as [one] sit[s] alone writing' (Linda Brodkey quoted in Grant & Knowles 2000: 11, Belcher 2009: 6-8). Emphasized here is the imaginary space that needs to be shared with other writers through real practices – 'imperfect', messy (or not), and idiosyncratic (for no two writers will write the same way). One would then, even when writing alone, be able to not *feel* alone (Akbari 2015: xxii).

Initiatives aimed at making writing practices visible, shared and real (ie, embedded in realistic and accessible environments, such as public cafés and domestic spaces) are slowly taking root, as exemplified by the growing trend of informal writing groups, writing retreats and international social writing movements (Mewburn et al 2014, Knowles & Grant 2014, Aitchison & Guerin 2014, Belcher 2009). One such conceptual writing initiative, *Shut Up & Write!*, focuses more on shared practice and process – rather than product – of writing, envisaging collective work in an informal and relaxed setting, with fluid organizational structure and purpose, and flattened institutional hierarchies (there, students, supervisors and staff all become 'writers'). Writing together in such an environment can become an liberating experience. A public café is the opposite of a closet. Sharing of the act of writing in such a space can become the first move towards sharing of written texts-in-progress themselves.

As Grant and Knowles dare to imagine:

> In this different, social, scene of writing, the production of text is experienced as a messy process of engagement with the word and the world, and is integrally tied up with revision and response. The risk of ultimate exposure, which may prevent us from ever starting to write, is re-empted by multiple exposures to others in the community along the way. (Grant & Knowles 2000: 11)

Exposing the process and practice of writing, and an open conversation about it, will add to our shared knowledge of what writing involves and, consequently, also to our self-belief as writers (Grant & Knowles 2000: 11). For that to happen, we need more description of, and not prescription for what, how, where, why, and when academics write. We need more revealing conversations, processual exposure, intellectual undressing. The hope is that then we will all be able to write if not more eagerly and openly, then at least – more unashamedly. The hope is also that then we will not only share more writing and less anxiety, but also create better knowledge, including greater awareness of exclusive structures and institutions of power.
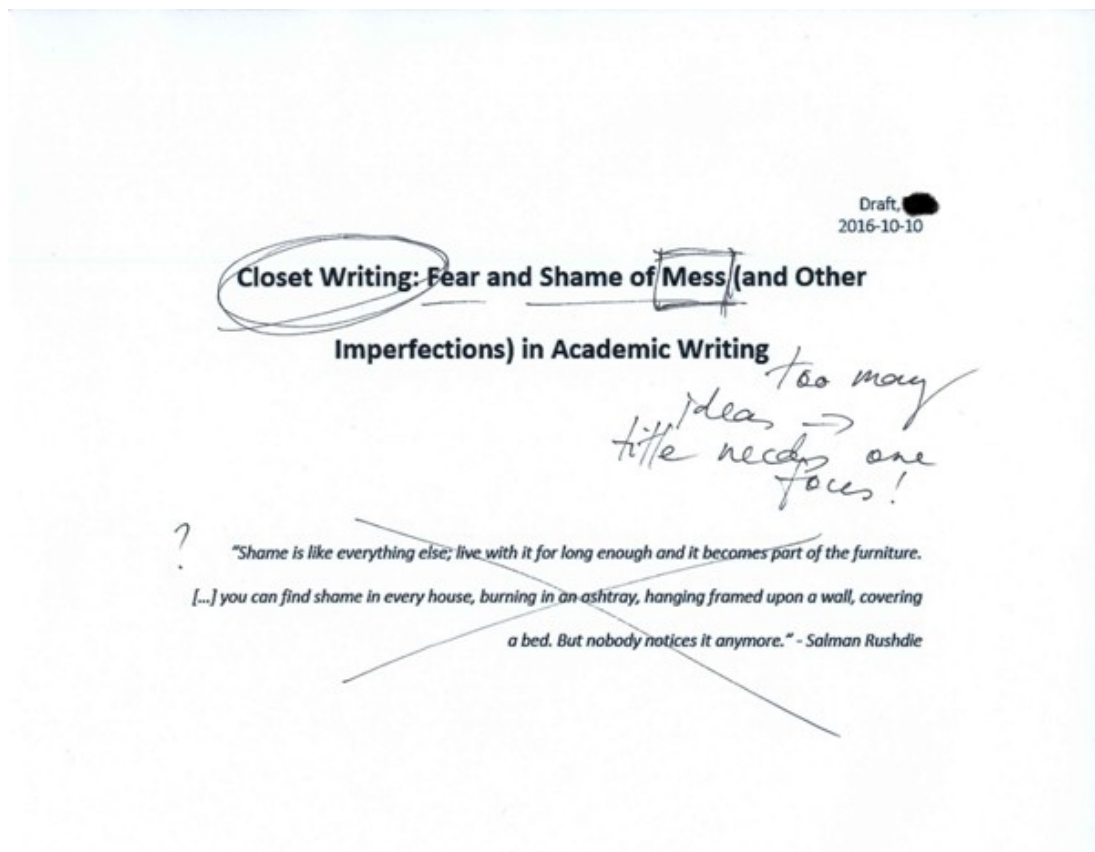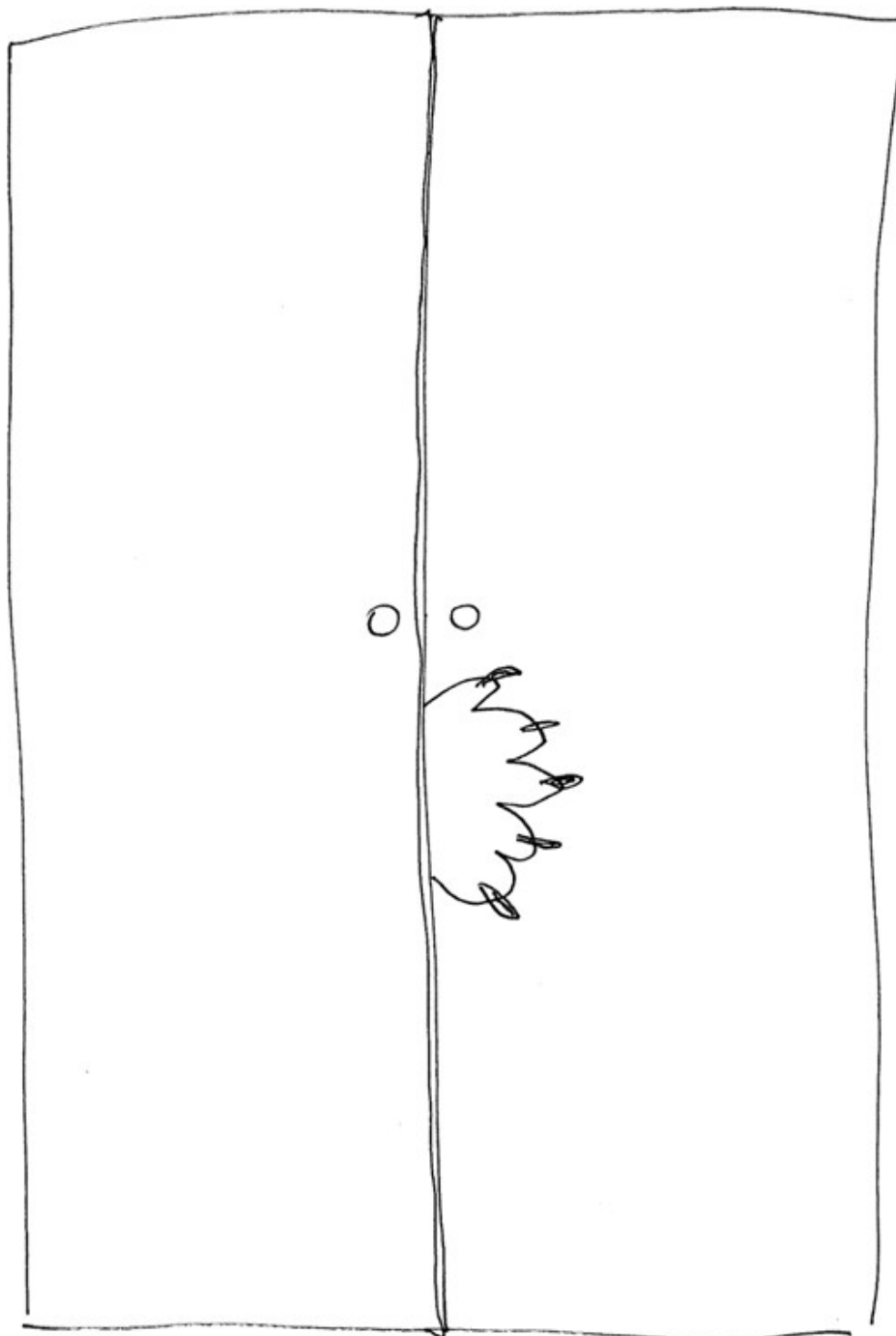
Figure 9. A later draft version: editing the title and epigraph

Notes

[1] See entries in, for example, *Oxford English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, and *Online Etymology Dictionary*. return to text

[2] For Ralph Keyes, the lack of open discussion about universal writing fears creates stale environment: 'Much of the paralyzing fear of writing is due to the fact that its power isn't dissipated by opening windows to air this subject out' (Keyes 1995: 12). return to text

[3] Books like the quirky *How we write: Thirteen ways of looking at a blank page*, a collection of essays describing personal academic writing processes, in 'all their messy, frustrated exuberant, and awkward dis/order' (Akbari 2015: back cover), are a rarity in academic writing literature. return to text

[4] Based on ethics-approved research data. Over 1,200 academics of different ranks and disciplines, and from fifteen countries, were anonymously surveyed between 2011 and 2015 on their writing habits, background and emotions as part of a large research project on academic writing and emotion. Helen Sword from the University of Auckland was the principal investigator of the project, and I was given access to the data as part of a

collaborative interpretive initiative. For more information on the demographics of the surveyed academics, see her book *Air & light & time & space: How successful academics write* (Sword 2017). return to text

[5] As Hillary Rettig observes, the most 'stuck' writers are 'those trapped between conflicting values systems or goals' (Rettig 2011: 114). return to text

[6] To more clearly distinguish between the two types of writing (or two types of thinking about writing), Christina Haas names them 'transcribing' and 'composing' (Haas 1990). The former involves 'less reformulation and a rendering of ideas, knowledge, experiences, or text that has already been structured by or for the writer' (Haas 1990: 513-514). The latter is 'the kind of writing that takes conscious and concerted effort' during which new ideas may be 'discovered' and knowledge transformed or combined in new ways (Haas 1990: 513). Similarly, Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia (1987) (quoted in Haas 1990: 514) distinguish between 'knowledge-telling' and 'knowledge transforming'; Graham Badley meanwhile talks of 'writing up' versus 'writing' (Badley 2009a, 2009b, 2015). return to text

[7] Hillary Rettig actually talks about the need 'to come out as a writer' using the analogy of 'coming out of the closet' in terms of self-disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity (Rettig 2011: 110, also 116-118). return to text

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