19 Find the Best Tools for the Job: Experimenting with Writing Workflows

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Overview

This chapter introduces "writing workflows," a concept that helps writers examine how tools shape writing processes.* It suggests that writing does not take place solely in the mind, with the tools merely transcribing that activity. Instead, it describes how any experience of writing is shaped by tools. Writing with a software application that supports you and your way of working, instead of opposing you, can make a big difference. Thus, if you want to enjoy writing more, to learn more from it, or to feel more supported in it, you might benefit from reflecting on your writing workflows and experimenting with a variety of tools (and ways of using those tools). Included in the chapter are several reflection prompts, as well as a larger activity asking you to annotate the chapter itself using different tools and practices and then to reflect on each workflow.

Think back to the last time you held an object that fit perfectly in your hand. A broken-in baseball glove. The contoured handle of a chef's knife. A game controller with smooth curving sides. How do you feel when you're holding one of these? Maybe ready and excited to make a catch, cook a meal, or play a game. Or perhaps just quietly satisfied. As writing teachers, we think this collection of feelings is undervalued when it comes to writing. Although some writers find pleasure in a fancy pen or a special notebook, many people simply reach for the nearest available tools. By tools, we mean the objects you choose to write with: perhaps

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a pen and paper, or maybe a laptop and Google Docs or Microsoft Word. With this chapter, we'd like to suggest that the tools you use to write with matter, and your use of those tools can productively change your experience of writing.

To make that case, we want to introduce a new term for thinking about writing—the *writing workflow*. A writing workflow describes the tools and the process used for a writing task. For example, Derek wrote this paragraph on his laptop in an app called Drafts and then pasted the paragraph into a shared Google Doc. Tim printed this paragraph, revised and added sentences using an ink pen (an orange Uni-Ball Signo DX, to be precise), and then typed those revisions in the shared Google Doc. After using a chat app (Slack) to discuss the revisions with Tim, Derek saved the Google Doc as a Word file, edited the formatting, and submitted it to the editors for review. The tools, then, are the laptop, the Drafts app, Google Docs, paper, an orange ink pen, Slack, and Microsoft Word. The process describes how those tools were used to write this paragraph.

However, this business-like description of the process does not fully reflect our experience of writing the introduction. Nearly anything Derek writes starts in the Drafts app, either as a scrap of an idea dictated by voice into an iPhone or typed on a laptop. These notes sync between devices where Derek can easily merge or split them, and he can paste them into a word processor, convert them to a reminder, or decide they're a bad idea and delete them. For Derek, Drafts is that broken-in baseball glove. Tim, meanwhile, often writes on paper because he likes how free form it is: he can rotate it in different directions, he can draw, he can scribble in the margins, and he can give the page a satisfying crumple when he's stuck. But he also uses paper alongside an outline on his computer, which helps him see the bigger picture and rearrange it as his ideas change. For Tim, the outline is like a recipe and paper is a trusty cutting board. A workflow, then, is not just a bare description of the tools and how they are used, but it is also a loose collection of feelings and memories and mind states evoked or supported by those tools.

This chapter won't suggest that you craft the singular, perfect workflow because writing tasks are situational, contextual, and ever changing, and there isn't a single writing process that always yields best results. Likewise, a tool and process that works well for one task may not fit another. Workflows help us see this, and they help us best match a writing task with a set of tools and our preferred ways of working. But workflows also help us imagine the possibilities offered by different tools and new approaches. We hope to show you how thinking about your tools, processes, and pref-

erences can help you better understand your workflows—and make your writing process more enjoyable.

In this chapter, we will explore the concept of the writing workflow in more detail, first by examining writing tools and how they can change what it feels like to write. Next, we'll define writing workflows in more detail and guide you through a few activities to get you thinking about your own tools and workflows.

Writing Tools and Mediation

Writing is a mediated activity. When we say *mediated activity*, we mean that writing is an activity that requires tools, and when people use different tools (or the same tools in different ways) the activity can change dramatically. It is easy to imagine writing as strictly a mental activity: we think hard about our great ideas and arguments, we transcribe those thoughts, and we turn them in to our teacher. But in this chapter we want to suggest the opposite. Writing is primarily an activity mediated by tools, and different tools can change the activity.

Tools and mediation affect how we think about our work. We often recognize different types of writing by the required attributes of the final product. Your philosophy professor might want a ten page, double-spaced document in Times New Roman, and your business professor might ask for a ten minute spoken presentation delivered alongside a PowerPoint file. That doesn't mean, however, that you need to begin your process in a document or in slides. Instead, by experimenting with different tools in your writing process, you might find that you're better able to think through complex problems, that you can more easily revise, or that you simply find the act of writing a bit more pleasant.

An example might help. The educational psychologist James Wertsch studies how people learn and has been a key figure in developing this theory of mediated activity. He uses pole vaulting as a way to illustrate how new tools can dramatically change an activity. In a previous era, pole vaulters used bamboo poles to fling themselves over the bar. Later, fiberglass poles—which are much springier than bamboo ones—were introduced to the sport. Because fiberglass poles bend, the pole vaulter can use the pole's springiness to propel themselves over a much higher bar. A champion pole vaulter from the bamboo era flatly refused to use a fiberglass pole, saying that it changed the activity too much, calling it a circus trick.

Just like pole vaulting, writing went through a distinctive shift in the tools used. In the late 1980s and 1990s, most writers transitioned from

some kind of print technology (pen & paper, typewriter) to computers. In his history of word processing, Matthew Kirschenbaum describes how some writers quickly adopted computers for writing and how others were resistant. He quotes the writer Paul Aster, who first composes with a pen and later types his drafts because "Keyboards have always intimidated me. I've never been able to think clearly with my fingers in that position. A pen is a much more primitive instrument. You feel that the words are coming out of your body and then you dig the words into the page." Aster uses a typewriter and says "there is no point talking about computers and word processors" because of the risk of pushing the wrong button and losing a day's work (qtd. in Kirschenbaum 21). Kirschenbaum also describes how Joyce Carol Oates first writes in longhand and then uses a typewriter to finish her drafts, because the typewriter is "a rather alien thing—a thing of formality and impersonality" (qtd. in Kirschenbaum 22).

If you're used to writing on a computer, tablet, or smartphone, you might think these perspectives are the old-timey views of people who don't like digital technology. And in the 1980s and '90s, there were plenty of questions about how computers would change writing, and some writers preferred to stick with pen and paper. But writing with a computer *is* different from writing with a pen and paper or typewriter. At the most superficial level, you can edit the text on a computer screen without needing to retype the whole document. Even this simple change can lead to very different approaches to writing. Some writers might struggle with a word processor because they can easily and endlessly rewrite the first sentence of a document. Other writers may feel more willing to revise their documents because it *is* easy to edit them, which means they can try out activities like freewriting, where you just type without stopping for a set period of time in order to generate ideas or get to a rough first draft.

As Wertsch suggests, neither tools alone nor the person and their skills can fully explain mediated activity: "The pole by itself does not magically propel vaulters over a cross bar; it must be used skillfully by the agent. At the same time, an agent without a pole or with an inappropriate pole is incapable of participating in the event" (Wertsch 27). As writers, we cannot select a magic writing tool that makes the challenging task of writing simple. Yet, we also cannot write well with tools that are inappropriate for the task. Finding appropriate tools means understanding what different writing tools can do.

Computer interface designers often refer to the different functions of a specific tool or technology using the term "affordances." If the tool will do a specific task in a specific environment, we say that the tool "affords" it.

For example, a ballpoint pen affords writing on paper. But it doesn't afford writing on glass well—you'd need to use a marker for that. Additionally, it's hard to write with a pen on paper without a hard surface—the environment matters too. The concept of affordances is useful because it describes things tools can do that exceed what the designers of the tool may have intended. A heavy wooden chair affords sitting, for instance, but it also affords blocking a door, burning, lion taming, and blanket fort building. Similarly, computer software is built with certain features designed for certain actions, but there are typically more affordances available. Therefore, one of the ways to improve your writing is to find tools that afford productive writing practices and learn to use these affordances.

Of course, your friend may tell you about an incredible new writing app that helps them stay focused on their writing, but you might find it frustrating and annoying to use. Different people react differently to tools and their affordances. Many pole vaulters found the new springy fiberglass poles great, but some preferred the way the bamboo poles worked, even if they couldn't go as high. Something about the experience of springing over the bar wasn't as appealing. Some writers find the fluidity of writing with a word processor on a computer freeing, while others find it paralyzing because they find themselves deleting or fixing each sentence as they write it and not making any forward progress.

Some critics might dismiss these different responses to tools as trivial differences in taste. Regardless of what tools people want to use, a critic might say, the larger activity is the same—people are still flinging themselves over a high bar or producing written documents. However, we find that this perspective ignores an important aspect of activity: our affective experience. Affect, the designer Don Norman says, is "the queasy, uneasy feeling you might experience, without knowing why" (11). Affect is sometimes described as the feeling you have before you identify it as a specific emotion (like happy, sad, angry). We would argue that people who don't want to use springy fiberglass poles for vaulting do not enjoy the affective experience of springing. We also believe that affective responses to activities and tools matter. If someone is able to produce a written document using a set of tools and practices, but they have a sharply negative affective experience, then that affective reaction has either reduced the quality of that document or will do so eventually, as the writer finds the activity more and more unpleasant over time. If you find that writing with the tools everyone else uses or in the ways your previous teachers demanded has led to some negative affect, you may have resigned yourself to the idea that maybe you just don't like writing. We hope that this chapter changes your

mind and encourages you to experiment with other tools and practices that may lead to other affective reactions.

Short Activity: Describing Your Writing Tools

Think of something you've recently written: a class assignment, a short story, a journal entry, or maybe a simple note to self. List and describe the tools you used when writing. Did you write in a Google Document? If so, what type of device did you write on? What did you name the file? How did you organize it? Was it a one-off note or do you hope to find it again? Or maybe you wrote on a piece of paper. If so, what kind of paper? Was it loose leaf, in a binder, or in a notebook? Did you use a pencil or pen?

Next, think about this process. Why did you select these tools? For how long have you used them? When did you start using them? Are you using these tools in the "official" way or are you using them for tasks the designers may not have imagined? What is your affective response to them?

In a small group, share your answers with your classmates. Listen to how others describe their workflows, and consider how those workflows complement and contrast with your own.

Writing Workflows

Now, when we say we want you to focus on the tools of writing, we don't mean that you should do this every time you sit down to write. After all, as the writing researcher Christina Haas remarked: "Writing would be inefficient and almost prohibitively difficult if writers had to constantly and consciously attend to their writing tools. Imagine using a pencil in which the lead broke every fourth or fifth word, or imagine learning a new word processing program each time you sat down to create a document" (xi). So if we don't want you to learn a new word processing program before every writing session, what are we saying?

It's likely that when you write, you follow a series of similar steps using the same tools. For example, one of us, Derek, starts writing projects by recording ideas in a mind mapping/outlining application on the Mac. This application, called Tinderbox, displays each idea as a separate card that can be moved around on a wide space, allowing him to group ideas together loosely and rearrange them easily. Eventually, these loose groupings become more solid and can be rendered as an outline in Tinderbox, and then printed or opened directly in a word processor. Derek doesn't always go through this process the same way for every project, but this generally

describes how he starts writing. Tim, on the other hand, likes to begin in flexible outliner tools like Workflowy and Dynalist that let him quickly write down thoughts, phrases, and sentence fragments in unordered lists. Tim will freewrite ideas until he sees a pattern take shape, and he will then organize the list items into groups and sequences. Once he's comfortable with an initial structure, Tim will start writing on legal pads with a pen, returning to the outliner software as he revises and moves toward a first draft. We call these kinds of repeated writing processes "writing workflows." A writing workflow defines the steps and tools a writer uses to move through a writing task or project.

A "workflow" is a common term in business contexts, often referring to a standard process the business follows for accomplishing tasks. Our use of the term refers to a process that is more fluid, because we want to highlight how each writing situation might require or benefit from slight or major adjustments to one's typical writing workflow. For example, consider a student who has always written papers in a word processor from beginning to end—starting with the introduction and finishing with the conclusion, often in one sitting. Imagine this student is now in a senior capstone course and required to write a 50-page report that spans many drafts and assignments. This is not the type of document that can be written in one sitting, and it would be challenging to write it from start to finish—the writer might find it easier to start in the middle and do the introduction later, when they are more sure about the scope of the report. While many writers recognize that new situations like this require new ways of working, they often try to shoehorn their old tools and practices to fit these new ways. While this hypothetical writer might realize it is easiest to start writing in the middle, they may continue to use the same word processor and just work with a single file as they are used to doing. But this writer might feel overwhelmed when what seemed like the middle of the paper becomes the second of five sections, or when that section later turns into a series of footnotes. Other tools or practices could help this writer deal with complex revisions in new and different ways.

Recognizing the limits of one's workflow for varying situations is a key part of maturing as a writer. Both of us write daily, but our writing tasks differ from day to day and month to month, and we have developed several different workflows that accommodate these variations.

Changing Your Writing Workflow

So how can you know whether a writing situation requires any adjustments to your writing workflow? Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules here. Over time, you can develop an instinct for distinguishing between when it will pay off to learn new techniques or tools and when it's best to continue with what has worked in the past. However, the only way you can learn this is to become sensitive to the demands that each new writing situation is making. Even if you decide in any specific instance to keep your writing workflow the same, this should be a deliberate decision instead of a default assumption.

One way to increase your sensitivity and develop this instinct is to deliberately look for aspects of your workflow that are frustrating. In our research on professional writers who attend carefully to their tools and workflows, we found that these writers often talked about encountering "friction" in their workflows. For them, friction referred to any set of tools or processes that seemed to take more effort or time than warranted. These were writers with significant expertise with computer technologies and were able to write computer scripts (essentially mini computer programs) that would automate certain repeated processes they did over and over as part of their work. Any time they noticed that they were doing the same set of steps more than a few times (say, writing an email to a customer who had experienced difficulties downloading a digital book), they would create a script that would automatically complete that process (the script would use a template to draft the email and create a few free download codes for the customer, all with the writer just pressing one button).

But friction—and its remedies—can extend beyond tools, and you don't need computer expertise to find or resolve it. For example, Alex Borowitz, one of Tim's former students, produced a short, stylistic video about writing in which a frustrated writer finds focus and inspiration in a campus garden (Borowitz). Many writers have shared a similar experience and have found commonplace solutions to environmental friction: taking a walk or folding laundry or making a cup of coffee. If you know how to search for friction, you can sometimes find that what initially seems like procrastination is actually a habitual response to the friction in your writing workflow. And smoothing out that friction might require you to recognize that your desk or room just isn't conducive to writing, or that you don't have a good system for working with a longer writing project that will go through multiple versions.

Short Activity: Finding Friction

First, divide a piece of paper or a digital document into three columns. Label the left column "Friction," the middle column "Source," and the right column "Change."

Next, think about a recent writing task you completed (you can use the same one from the previous activity). Where in that writing task did you experience friction? Which parts were the most annoying? Which took longer—or more effort—than they should? Which tasks caused you to stop working? List these in the "Friction" column.

For each item in the friction column, identify the source of that friction and list it in the middle column. Maybe it was difficult to find a file or website. Maybe the white background of the writing app was too bright. Maybe the library website wasn't working. Or maybe it was hard to keep your research notes in view as you were summarizing them in your paper.

Once you've identified a moment of friction and its source, imagine ways of replacing it and list them in the "Changes" column. You might change the default settings of the app you're using (to make the background darker, for instance). You might try a different app altogether, or you might switch to pen and paper. As you make these notes, pay attention to your affective responses. Are you interested in this change? Does it make you feel more relaxed? Could it help you work in a different environment or at a different time?

Finally, share your three-column document with a small group. What do you notice about the friction that others have identified? Do you share similar sources of friction? Do any of their changes align with yours?

Long Activity: Finding an Annotation Workflow

One way to better understand how your writing tools shape your workflows is to try different tools on a low stakes task. This activity asks you to use several approaches to annotation and then consider how the tools shaped your work (and how, in turn, your work might shape future uses of that tool).

You have likely had a teacher tell you the importance of annotating or notetaking while reading. Maybe they encouraged you to underline key terms, highlight important sentences, or make notes in the margins of the text. But how do you do that? And what happens when you choose to annotate or take notes with one tool over another?

If you're working with a print copy of an assigned reading, you might choose to underline passages in pen, perhaps with a color that's different

from the text in the article, to help you better see your underlines. If you're working with a library book, you might use Post-It notes rather than write directly on the page. And if you're working with a digital copy of the text, you might use a software solution (like the annotation tools in a PDF app) or find the nearest campus printer.

But how do you make these choices, and why? Is convenience your primary concern? (The closest campus printer is in the library, and that's a ten minute walk...) Or does focus matter more? (You find it easier to read and concentrate on the screen rather than printed pages.) Are there other factors that inform your choices?

This activity asks you to consider those choices and to examine what happens when you work with a different set of tools.

Step 1: Annotate According to Your Teacher's Instruction

Re-read the first section of this chapter and annotate it as suggested by your instructor. Depending on you and your classmates dis/abilities, they might suggest using a print-out and highlighter, a digital annotation feature in Adobe Acrobat, or some other method that is accessible to all students. Either before you start reading, or while you're reading, decide on a few types of markings or notes that will help you better remember *why* you've annotated something. For example, you could draw a star in the margin next to important paragraphs if you're taking physical notes You could use a specific kind of highlighter in a digital app. You could write or type a question mark next to something you don't understand. Keep a legend somewhere to help you remember the meaning of each type of marking or note.

Step 2: Annotate in a Separate Document

Re-read the second section of this chapter and continue to annotate using your teacher's instructed method, but do so in a separate document (either physical or digital). Try to mark the same types of information that you did in Step 1 (for example, main points, interesting statements, points of confusion, keywords, etc.), but do so without writing directly in the chapter document. Try to develop a similar system—how can you annotate, take notes, and return to the sentence or paragraph you're annotating?

Step 3: Now Try Your Own Method

Now explore a completely new method, different from the one your instructor showed you. Depending on your own learning style and prefer-

ence, you might use a different digital annotation tool, or a method for doing annotations on a printed page. Develop or expand your previous system for annotating, including ways of marking different types of passages.

Questions/Discussion

In a small group, share your process for the above steps and discuss the following questions.

- Which of the three steps worked best for you? Which seemed easiest? Which best matched your preferred style of working? Why?
- How might you use your annotations to write a short paper? Which annotation method would be easiest to refer to? Why? What if you were writing a much longer paper?
- Could you teach someone your process? How would you do so?
- After seeing the annotation strategies used by your classmates, how might you change your process? What changes would you adopt? How might they help?

Conclusion

Research about reading has shown us that highlighting and annotating while you read—what we call an "active reading" strategy—can improve your focus. But it's also possible to use active reading strategies mindlessly. You could, for example, highlight the first sentence of every paragraph because a teacher once required it. Doing so without a purpose or strategy might help you see where paragraphs begin and end but tell you little about the ideas contained within them.

Writers can make the same mistakes with their workflows. They might adopt a new notebook or popular piece of software because they read a glowing review of it or because they saw a friend successfully use it. That initial inspiration is important, and it can help us find new ways of working. But much like highlighting without a purpose, it's easy to adopt a tool—or even an entire workflow—without asking why it's beneficial to do so. If a teacher requires us to turn in a paper in Microsoft Word format, we might default to using that tool for the entire project. And when we mindlessly adopt tools and practices, we are missing important questions about how we work, how we might improve, or how we can make a process more enjoyable. To extend James Wertsch's metaphor, when we don't examine mediation and practice we are grabbing whatever tool is convenient,

heading to the track and field competition, and hoping we break the pole vaulting record.

But the inverse is also possible. Some writers find a process and tool that works well enough and stick with it for years. And perhaps this is the best possible configuration of tools and activity for them. But if they don't occasionally ask questions of their tools and examine what else might be possible, they might miss new ways of working or new affective possibilities.

A writing workflow, on the other hand, offers an alternative practice. It gives you a way to ask questions about your work, such as *Why am I highlighting? Why am I using this method of highlighting? Why am I highlighting particular passages instead of others? And how will this highlighting practice help me later?* By looking at your workflow, you can examine how you're approaching the work of writing and ask how your tools are shaping that approach.

To do so, start by thinking about mediation, affect, and friction. Ask:

- What tools am I using? Why am I using them? How do they encourage specific types of working or working in specific spaces? What might I gain by adding a new tool to my process or replacing another?
- What parts of my process are bothersome? When do I enjoy writing the least? When do I feel friction? When am I most likely to step away from my writing? How might this be related to my tools or my process?
- What parts of my process are most enjoyable? What tools do I like to use the most? Do I find myself tinkering? If so, when and why?

Rather than describing some idealized workflow or "best practices" for tools or apps, we conclude this chapter by asking you to look at your writing activity in a new light. If your goals have been related to efficiency (such as getting the paper done as quickly as possible), consider that these goals may be covering over some negative affect—there's something you don't like about the process of writing, so you want to finish it as quickly as possible. Perhaps your experience has been like the champion pole vaulter: the tools you're using spring you up high over the bar, but you just don't like it. It might be that you would enjoy more the way a less flexible pole works, even if it doesn't take you as high (or let you finish as quickly). And if you enjoy it more—or learn more from it, or develop new interests as a result—maybe taking more time isn't such a problem! By better understanding affect, friction, and mediation, you can develop workflows that will help you see your writing activity in new and creative ways.

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Teacher Resources for Find the Best Tools for the Job: Experimenting with Writing Workflows

Overview and Teaching Strategies

This chapter is best taught at a time when students can reflect on their writing process and personal approach to mediated activity. The activities ask students to reflect on a recent writing task, and you might assign this chapter early in the semester, after an initial informal writing assignment, or closer to midterm, after students have completed a more substantial assignment. We recommend that it follow an assignment completed outside the classroom, rather than in-class writing, so students can reflect on their tools, preferences, and environments.

If you want to weave questions of mediation more deeply into your course, you can introduce the chapter early in the semester and have students revisit their workflows as they complete additional projects. This might lead to meaningful conversations about how certain tools work well for some tasks and not others, or how students have to change their workflows to match their available resources or energy levels at different points in the semester. Affect and motivation are important concepts for us, and we have tried to highlight them in the chapter. Conversations about tools and tinkering can be fun and useful, but we would encourage students to focus more deeply on affect and motivation—asking questions about how they're working in particular ways, why they choose to do so, and how that relates to their feelings about writing.

We have found success in asking writers to draw visualizations of their workflows (what we call "workflow maps"), and these maps can be a helpful introduction to mediated activity and suitable for an in-class assignment. We put students into groups, distribute sheets of plain printer paper and markers or colored pencils, and then ask students to make a list of every tool or technology they used in a recent project. The students should consider the breadth of their process for a project, first thinking about the tools used to write the first draft, then for revisions, and so on. These might include PDFs, library books, websites, pencils, notetaking apps, word processors, printed pages, post-it notes, napkins, personal computers, lab computers, smartphones—the options are endless. After the students have a list of tools, we ask them to draw visual representations of those tools (messy drawings are the best) and use lines with arrows to show how

tools are connected. So if a student downloaded PDFs from the library website and then copied quotations from those PDFs into a Google Document, they'd draw a representation of the PDFs, draw a representation of the Google Document, and then draw an arrow connecting the two. They should try to visualize all of the tools in the list they brainstormed. Students can then share their drawings, which will likely remind them of similar things they did and forgot—or introduce them to new things they might like to try. If you're interested in this process, we discuss it in greater depth in our open-access scholarly book, *Writing Workflows*

We have also found it helpful to have students annotate these maps. You might ask them to annotate for "affect" by placing a smiling face next to tools they enjoy using or a frowning face by tools that aren't enjoyable to use. Students can then talk in small groups about what's enjoyable, what's not, and how they might adjust their workflows accordingly. If you assign this mapping project earlier in the semester, you can ask students to return to it as they complete additional writing assignments. Students can then consider how their workflow changes based on an awareness of mediated activity and affect, or the demands of different writing assignments, or the challenges they face across the semester. This process of reading for mediated activity and preferences, mapping it, and analyzing it can help students better see how their tools and environments shape their writing.

Discussion Questions

1. Many writers have to work in contexts where their schools or employers require them to use certain tools. How might these writers avoid the feeling of friction, even when they are required to work with specific tools?

2. This chapter asks you to experiment with an annotation workflow. Are there other reading- or writing-related activities that might benefit from similar experimentation?

3. When was the last time you read the instructions for a new device, tool, or process? Was it a last resort after you had already tried to do it on your own? Or did you read them beforehand? When does it feel "worth it" to read the instructions for a tool?

4. In a writing application you use, pick a feature that you've not used or one that confuses you. Read the instructions or find a tutorial on the web that explains it or shows how it can be useful. Try the feature out and imagine a future scenario where you would use it.