

On the Occasion of the Scholarly Writing Program's 10th Anniversary

by Genevieve Creedon

Who is the Scholarly Writing Program for? This question often seems to be just below the surface of our work together. On the one hand, it's an easy question: it is for and by all of you writers. On the other hand, it's a question we get a lot in various forms.

Every year at the new faculty picnic, new faculty come by our table, and as I start telling them about our program, they say, "Oh, I don't think this is for me; I don't do that kind of writing," or "I don't really write; I'm a data scientist, a videographer, a fill-in-the-blank." Both within IU and when I talk to people outside of IU, I often get a variation on the question "what do you actually do?" or "who is it for?" Sometimes these questions specifically interrogate the term "Scholarly Writing," but usually that interrogation is implicit. My outside IU translation has relied on explaining that this is a program for faculty writers. There are plenty of programs for students, and I worked in several of those before coming here. Their task is a bit better understood. You know, kids these days don't know how to write and all. But a faculty writing program?

It is notable that the SWP is not called the Faculty Writing Program. Instead, its emphasis is on the scholarly. I don't know about you but much of my writing graining--dating from high school--often started with interrogating the need for adverbs and prepositions (which *are* overused and often unnecessary), the two parts of speech that seem important in announcing or explaining what kind of Writing Program we are.

As an editor of both my own writing and others', one of the most expedient cuts I make is to prepositions, in particular. The Writing Program for Scholars is clunkier than "Scholarly Writing Program." Plus, the "for Scholars" bit gets into the messiness of whether and how faculty identify as "scholars"--which is also the case with the term "writer." As a side note, I emphatically do address all of our faculty as writers, because I believe that a writer is not a mythical creature with special powers but simply someone who writes.

As a sophomore in high school, I had an English teacher, Mr. Martin, who insisted that our class memorize a list of prepositions so we could more readily identify them and banish them from our writing. Strong writing, he urged, is based on nouns and verbs. Prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs play supporting roles.

The list went something like this: about, above, across, after, against, along, amid, around, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, beyond, by, during, for, from, in,

inside, into, of, on, onto, outside, over, to, toward, under, until, up, upon, with, within, without. I later learned that this list wasn't exhaustive, but these are the most common prepositions.

While I'm not suggesting we start sprinkling prepositions everywhere, my time in the SWP has pushed me to reconsider their value--not only as modifiers or supporters but as sense-making relationship builders, much like, say, the Scholarly Writing Program itself. The university is made up of many different parts--some of which are the nouns and verbs of the institution, and some of which play what we might call critical supporting roles.

The Scholarly Writing Program is for, by, and with faculty. It is about accountability and builds toward community by working against isolation and toxic competition. Our community is so special in part because we operate across ranks and departments, schools, and disciplines, pushing us outside our silos and toward other ways of thinking, conducting research, writing, and creating knowledge. These opportunities to move beyond the boundaries of our own training and departmental cultures can be invaluable in shaping new collaborations, sparking important questions, and forging friendships. Our writing groups, workshops, and retreats take place amid, around, before, besides, between, and sometimes during a wide range of other commitments, teaching, administrative work, service, and so on. As such one of its key functions is to help you all guard your time for writing and from many other things. That doesn't mean that writing stands over or above other aspects of our professional lives but that without some structure and encouragement to protect the time to think and read and analyze, and, yes, actually also put words down, the work of knowledge-making might not otherwise get done--until an ever-undefined later. For those of you keeping count, I managed to include 25 prepositions in this paragraph.

Every semester I hear from faculty writers who share that they signed up for an SWP program thanks to someone else's encouragement, but they didn't think our programming was for them. I hear this from assistant professors, full professors, lecturers, clinical faculty, and researchers. And the reasons for which people think our program isn't for them--as in it wasn't designed with them in mind, not just it isn't their thing personally--are varied. Some think it's for faculty in early career stages. Some think it's for more established writers. Some think it's only for those writing books or articles. Some think it's only for "real writers" (I still don't know what that means other than "not me"). Some aren't sure that what they do is "scholarly;" some aren't sure whether their work counts as "writing."

And, yes, the Scholarly Writing Program is for all of them. In fact, without all of them--all of you--our map of what scholarship is and can be woefully incomplete. Faculty in our programs work on books, articles, grants, exhibits, op-eds, reviews, reports, textbooks, films, poetry, grants, promotion dossiers, book reviews, public-facing work, handbooks, and many other kinds of writing. One of the great joys of getting to lead this program is the ever-expanding recognition that the map of scholarly writing will always be incomplete, but it's also always-expanding through and with you and your work.

Departments and schools may be the nouns and verbs of this institution. They are the primary actors and units on campus, but their work isn't always possible without those pesky prepositions in supporting roles. I'm sorry, Mr. Martin, for overdoing it on the prepositions here--but I hope it's with good reason. Thank you for enduring these geeky grammatical reflections, and let me reassure any of you having doubts that you don't even need to know what a part of speech is to partake in the Scholarly Writing Program.

Prepositions may seem extraneous sometimes--and slashing them is still a good editorial move in many cases--but they can also be crucial relationship-builders and support structures, essential to the meaning of the nouns and verbs of a sentence. While many may not know what a Scholarly Writing Program is or who it's for--because they have likely never encountered one before--it, too, does some crucial supporting relational work across ranks and disciplines, within and beyond writing groups, between writers and their own processes, and more. Thank you for being part of that work and continuing to grow and expand not just "scholarly writing" but these crucial supporting relationships among us.