

The Materiality of Research: ‘On the Materiality of Writing in Academia or Remembering Where I Put My Thoughts’ by Ninna Meier

*In this feature essay, **Ninna Meier** reflects on the materiality of the writing – and re-writing – process in academic research. She explores the ways in which our ever-accumulating thoughts come to form layers on the material objects in which we write our notes and discusses the pleasures of co-authorship.*

This essay is the first in a new series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books at lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk.

On the Materiality of Writing in Academia or Remembering Where I Put My Thoughts



Image Credit: [Nic McPhee](#)

Like many other researchers, I write things down to ‘know what I think, when I see what I write’, similar to Karl Weick’s famous sense-making recipe. My challenge is that I write in two different iterations, so to speak. I write the ‘official paper’ in a word file (like this text), but I also write bits and pieces or even long sentences and fully-formed arguments in emails, text messages, on notepads and in the back of black notebooks, on post-its put on the pages of printed-out journal articles and in the margins of books, as if I am coating it with a layer of my own thoughts. I write in all these places as I go about my everyday work whether or not I am ‘writing’ a paper or not. But then when I *am* writing a paper, I find that whole arguments have already been made and can be lifted off these different material artefacts and into the second iteration of writing: the text in the word file.

The weakness of distributing one's thoughts onto different material things is that these can get lost: you can misplace them or forget that they contain thoughts on the topic you are writing about. The black notebooks contain my field notes from observations: these run from the beginning to the end. However, the writing-on-the-go-notes are also in here, always to be read from the back like Japanese cartoons. I write these in the 'on call room' after a long day of observations or travelling to and from the research site. Trains are particularly great places to think and write, but only these kinds of thoughts. It is as if the unfinished, experimental jottings of the first iteration are well suited to the intermediary nature of this type of time.

As a rule, I know that I have never finished writing a text just because the word file is done. This is merely the initial layer of thoughts put into words and spread onto the page in a first layer. I know this, because at this point in the process, the text is 'thin': the density of the knowledge in there is no way near satisfying, the arguments and sentences are not nuanced enough. These will then need to be read and revised. I have to read more and think more and then get back to the text to improve the texture; this is measured in how it feels when I read it. Often, I find that reading that last book chapter, article or bunch of analysis notes will provide me with the piece that the text is missing and that hard-to-articulate feeling of being dissatisfied with the text as it is will finally go away. This is why I actually like review processes or co-authors: they provide a much-needed break and opportunity to distance myself from the text (it's at their desk, so to speak, and not on mine).

The scary part of this is when it comes back, the text. When this happens, I am often appalled at how unfinished it was when I submitted it and even more appalled that I couldn't see it at the time (how can this be? I have never understood it). This is perhaps why I don't trust the 'current-author me', because 'future-author me' will have read more and understood more and thus be able to write much better thoughts into the text and improve the overall result. As a coping strategy, I distribute key points in any current analysis or writing project within the physical space I work in; it works like an extension to my mind and I love that it is right there, in sight. My desk is filled with piles of books of current writing projects (so I have them near in case I need to find a specific section), my walls have photos and drawings on mobile whiteboards and my book shelves fill the back wall not more than a metre behind me, so I can rise and get any book, notebook or journal article I need from my library. This is a very comforting thought and I love working here.

I have always worked like this. I keep mountains of material from back when I was at university: books, notes from lectures and articles I read during the PhD, where notes and markings in different colours on the pages reveal that they have been read several times. I suspect I am doing this as a way to capture the thoughts as they emerge through reading, and one of my absolute favourite things is to reread a seminal article in my field and discover both the author's well-formed arguments *and* the initial layer of thought I put down on the paper the first time that I read it. When it really works, this kind of experience will shake new insights loose in my head and ideas or sentences I didn't know were in there will escape and run off, spilling onto the page where they will be lost to me unless I write them down before they evaporate. This 'shaking loose' of thoughts I didn't know I had can also happen when I write to my favourite co-author: sometimes I take advantage of her passion for exploring the process and practice of writing and use her as 'the text' on which I add my thoughts (for instance, I imagine writing to her right now) or as a filter through which I can run my thoughts to purify them. It feels as if the mere process of writing down what I want to say in order to send it to her, of distributing my cognitive process to include her, somehow allows new or forgotten things to surface.

When we are initiating new projects, we may simultaneously text, email and call each other, while we send a master of 'the text' back and forth, sometimes with a pace that leaves me feeling like an addict chasing the next high, checking my phone: 'has she responded? What did she write "on top" of my text? I need to read her text and immediately reply with my writing, to keep the text flying.' During these periods, my kids will tease me and call me a teenager because I check my phone so often, and my husband will comment on my impressive ability to be physically present and yet in another dimension mentally. And I understand them: it does feel like our writing assumes a life of its own, commanding attention, proliferating into parts of life where it actually has no official business. But it's worth it: so far, every project has given birth to at least one new idea while we were making it and

in this very beautiful way, writing with my co-author feels both like playing and like working very hard at the same time.

Ninna Meier is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Organisation at Copenhagen Business School.

Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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