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WRIT 2000: Theories of Writing – Dr. KT

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Part 1

Writing is my form of expression, it lets loose everything my mind and body want to express, but in a discrete place where I feel safe. Stories have been my form of escape, when life gets too tough or too messy, I can get lost in a story with characters fighting imaginary battles. But writing and stories and reading also mean more than that, they give voice to the silenced and share parts of the world that most people don't experience. My stories walk this line, and maybe my theory does too.

I can't remember a time when I wasn't writing. I've been in school for the past 16 years, but before then I was making up stories in my head with my toys and explaining them in elaborate detail to my parents and dog. When I was in elementary school, I had an app on my iPad that acted like a typewriter, with the clicks and everything, and I would use it to document what I called "The Zoe Chronicles." Before I necessarily knew *how* to write, I was learning what writing *is*, as my parents always read me a bedtime story to create good dreams. Language and stories have always been a sense of comfort to me, as they explain the complexities of the world and offer an escape at the same time.

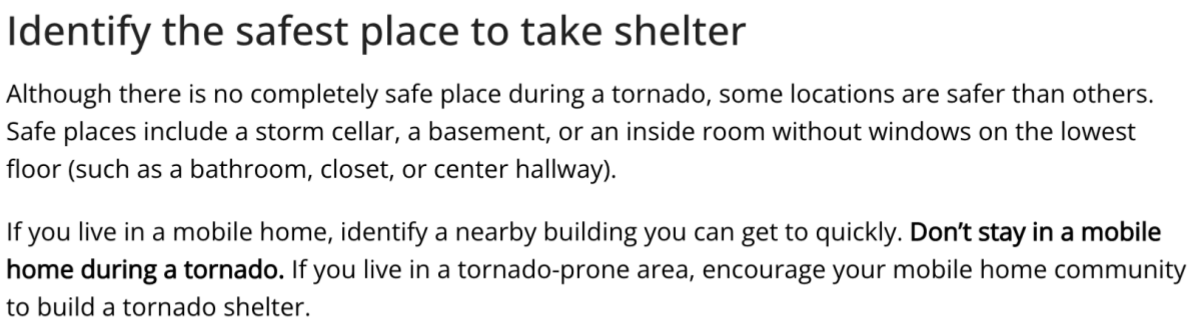
But, sometimes, people use language and stories in ways that end up hurting others. Sometimes they know what power their words hold, but majority of the time they are ignorant of the impact their words have. When something as universal as stories and language have the power to exclude and minimize people's voices, dangerous territory is created. I've seen the damage that words can create firsthand; I've overheard ableist comments, I've had my presence completely ignored, I've been spoken down to simply because I'm in a wheelchair. Hearing professors use phrases like "the short bus," or having peers generalize and assume I'm the same as every other disabled person they've known, is harmful. And for me, someone who has constantly been comforted by words, negative words have an intense impact on me. Usually I shrug the comments off, but when they come from professor or peers at an institution where language and learning should be a safe space, they sting a little more.

Writing should be a tool to enhance the accessibility of language and stories; whether that's through physically handwriting or typing the words, dictating verbally, or expressing a story through different mediums such as sounds and visuals. No one has the right to determine who has a voice and how they get to share their story.

This year, I started working as a Writing Consultant at the university's Writing Center. I was eager to have conversations with writers about their work, but I was unsure of what that would look like. In preparation, they had us read a few theories explaining the universality of language and how to ensure accessibility and confidence with writing. This made me realize the potential I would have as a Consultant, where I could work with people and help boost their morale with writing. I have worked with a range of writers, some who don't consider writing their best skill, and some who speak English as a second language and have those obstacles. Working with them can be challenging, but I try to put myself in their position and understand the potential frustration and confusion they may be facing. These consultations have shown me the many different perspectives of writing, and when I help someone feel relieved about their writing, it makes me have a greater appreciation for it all.

While my body may be physically limited, my mind is always racing with thoughts and ideas of different worlds and character developments unlike my own life. Whenever words have a negative impact, I remind myself of the positive impact *I* can have. No one can tell my stories better than I can, and I need to remind myself that sometimes. Writing is my way of expressing everything I want in this world and an imaginary one, where there are no physical barriers or words that hold negative power.

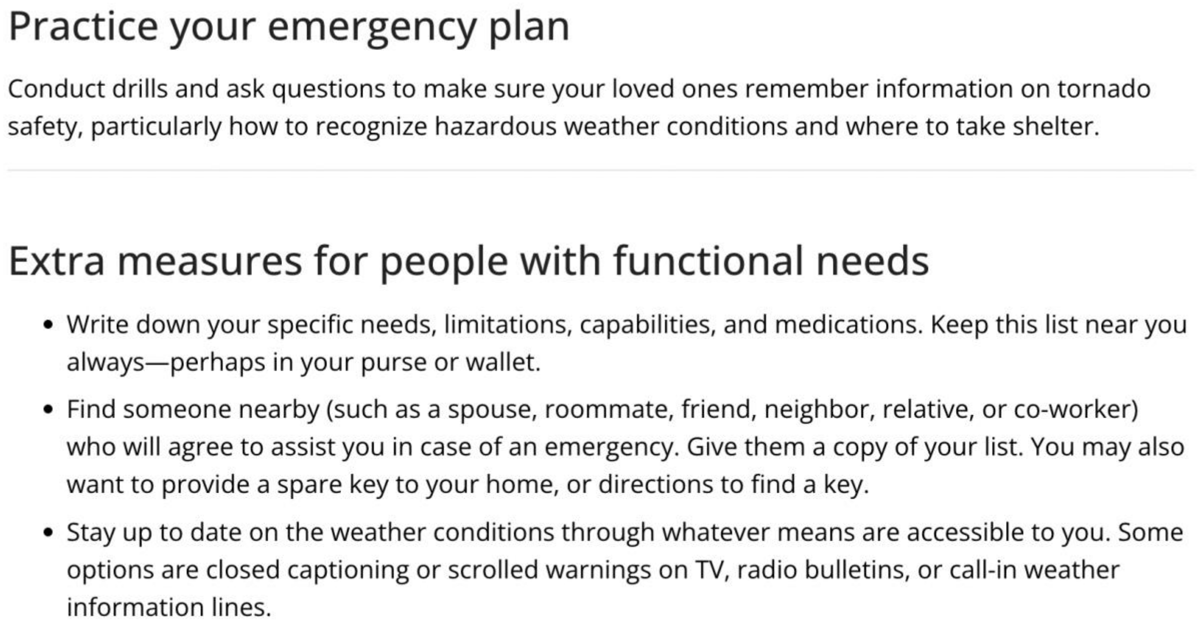
Theory of Writing: Part 2 *Inspired by the CDC's Preparing for a Tornado Resource*



Identify the safest place to take shelter

Although there is no completely safe place during a tornado, some locations are safer than others. Safe places include a storm cellar, a basement, or an inside room without windows on the lowest floor (such as a bathroom, closet, or center hallway).

If you live in a mobile home, identify a nearby building you can get to quickly. **Don't stay in a mobile home during a tornado.** If you live in a tornado-prone area, encourage your mobile home community to build a tornado shelter.



Practice your emergency plan

Conduct drills and ask questions to make sure your loved ones remember information on tornado safety, particularly how to recognize hazardous weather conditions and where to take shelter.

Extra measures for people with functional needs

- Write down your specific needs, limitations, capabilities, and medications. Keep this list near you always—perhaps in your purse or wallet.
- Find someone nearby (such as a spouse, roommate, friend, neighbor, relative, or co-worker) who will agree to assist you in case of an emergency. Give them a copy of your list. You may also want to provide a spare key to your home, or directions to find a key.
- Stay up to date on the weather conditions through whatever means are accessible to you. Some options are closed captioning or scrolled warnings on TV, radio bulletins, or call-in weather information lines.

The world is an inaccessible place, and that's not shocking news to share. Stairs seem to be the solution to everything, things are always at a convenient height for those who can stand, communication is either verbal or written; the design of the world is not universal for any slightly different ability. While most aspects of life have what businesses call "reasonable accommodations," most safety procedures still centralize able-bodied people.

As shown in the screenshots above from the CDC, in the case of a tornado, people are encouraged to go downstairs to a basement or the lowest level of a building. These safety protocols also recommend disabled people to rely on others for safety; rather than creating universal systems to protect everyone, disabled people are responsible for their own safety.

While I don’t currently live in a state prone to natural disasters beyond blizzards, I used to live in Kentucky which is known for tornadoes, and I am considering moving to California where there are earthquakes. Looking into different states causes a lot of anxiety, moving in general can cause anxiety for anyone, but when you rely on a state’s Medicaid and safety procedures, extra anxiety is produced.

When I lived in Kentucky, we often had tornado drills in practice and reality as the sirens would wail throughout the county. My peers were instructed to gather in the hallways, facing the wall crisscross-applesauce with their heads in their laps protected by their hands. Meanwhile, I would sit in the bathroom with the teacher holding a textbook over my head. It was during these drills that I started to realize the world isn’t built for someone like me. While I had to use a different bus, a different bathroom, and sometimes a different desk at school, I assumed all of that was standard. It wasn’t until I asked that they created the bathroom/textbook plan. That caused a lot of stress for my little eight-year-old self.

Now, I naturally create emergency plans in my mind whenever I go somewhere new. Even on the first day of classes, I try to arrive ten minutes early to call “dibs” on the best spot – one that places me with a good view of the whiteboard and my peers, one that attempts to make a clear path so people don’t trip on me (even though someone always does), and one that *could* have a quick and safe exit in the case of a drill or reality.

While I could bring these issues to the people who decide the classroom locations, it usually makes life an even bigger hassle. They created a desk for me, but it’s way too big and creates a barrier between me and my peers. They move all my classes to the same room, which is helpful, but creates a weird sensation when I spend up to four hours a day in the same space. So instead, I adapt and stay quiet. I know this just enhances the idea that the CDC follows, that disabled people will speak when they need to, but it's exhausting to always have to point out these issues. I just wish people would look past their own noses when designing buildings and creating protocols, it isn't that hard to consider others. At least, *I* don't think it is.

Reflection:

It took me a while to decide what text to work with, and how to transform it into a piece of non-fiction. I thought about choosing a stereotypical love story and adding a disabled character, or maybe even a unique one like *The Fault in Our Stars*, which depicts the reality of living with a disease. I wanted to use something popular and universal, so when I added the disabled representation, people would be able to conceptualize it in their own life. I looked at the books I've enjoyed, including *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*, and I thought how interesting it would be to have a disabled character in a dystopian world, and how fast they would struggle. I almost wrote a version of *The Walking Dead,* showing how I would not survive without electricity since my wheelchair, ventilator, and refrigerated medicine wouldn't be available. But that gave me a weird amount of anxiety, so I zoomed into a more realistic disaster threat.

I think by exposing the inaccessibility of safety procedures works well with my theory because it shows how something with good intentions and potential, like language, can actually cause damage when perspectives are left out of the conversation. My theory was inspired by language I have experienced firsthand at DU, and my remediation was inspired by the inaccessibility and inconsiderate actions by the adults in my childhood. These pieces work hand in hand, showcasing how ableism is something that exists in every space, language and safety included.

I think this entire final shows my passion for disability representation and inclusion in every aspect of life, and especially in educational settings. This is also reflected in other writings I have done this quarter and outside of the classroom, as I am working on my Honors Thesis which strives to write about disabled characters without tokenizing them. While being disabled is not the only piece of my identity or my writing identity, it is a core element that motivates how I approach language and writing, shown especially in my work at the Writing Center.

This process helped solidify a lot of my beliefs about language and writing, and (ironically) helped me put them to words. I always knew I had a passion for inclusion, and that I was enacting those beliefs in my own writing and consulting styles, but putting them in a theory and then displaying them in the remediation helped. This will help me as I start workshopping my Honors Thesis, and as I enter grad school I will have a motivating passion (put in words) to help guide my choices.