Review of Composition in the Age of Austerity, Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, Eds.

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Reviewed by David M. Grant, University of Northern Iowa

Product Details

This review surveys the edited collection Composition in the Age of Austerity, which works at key intersections of interest to readers of Kairos: the discussion between critical and new materialisms, the debates about economics and digital humanities, and the 2016 election's significance for our future as teachers, scholars, and champions of justice. The navigation bar at the top of each page in this webtext allows for reading in any particular order. The tabs of the navigation bar reflect my own reading across the sections and chapters included in the collection, offering my thinking with and against the premises of both the included works and the volume as a whole.

Focus

This book registers emotionally. It is meant to make one angry, to be a clarion call for stronger and louder voices in literacy efforts across the country. Perhaps it will be. As higher education is transformed by financial pressures, technology, governmental policies, and voices from among commerce, technology, and politics, we need to have conversations about what those voices say and how we might respond. While the authors and editors often posit a fairly monolithic "neoliberalism" as the common enemy, the collection as a whole weaves connections across submissions so that differences arise.
This may be its strongest point: the specificity of narratives, events, contexts, and reactions to reduced funding for education in general, and literacy and humanities in particular. Such specifics are locally situated and aware of their emplacement within specific, rather than general, webs of power. Overall, it is a diverse collection that tackles concrete examples of composition both inside and outside the academy. It is good for anyone wanting to see how budget cuts and other policies have concrete impacts on prison literacy, writing programs, community literacies, basic writing, and National Writing Project sites, as well as those wanting more theoretical explanations of higher education economics, institutional politics, or composition's own complicity in adjunctification and decision making trends over the past forty years.

The collection is divided into three sections, Part One: Neoliberal Deformations, Part Two: Composition in an Austere World, and Part Three: Composition at the Crossroads. Each section serves to focus the contributions within by, respectively, defining the problem, examining the problem, and suggesting possible responses. The sections are preaced with an eponymous introduction that begins by pointing to the rhetorical shift in educational policy expressed by President Barack Obama in a 2013 address in Syracuse, NY. In this speech, Obama moved from a metaphor of "ladders of opportunity" to "pathways" charted by "new measures of accountability" (Welch & Scott, 2016, p. 3). Welch and Scott began with this speech as a means to "respond to a felt sense of crisis among those who teach and do research in postsecondary writing education" (p. 4).

**Contributors & Scope**

Many of the contributors are not just academic scholars, but persons who have deep experiences serving in administrative roles. This is not a collection from disgruntled faculty lacking jobs or tenure. Contributors see quite clearly the challenges facing higher education and composition. Alongside administrative voices, editors Nancy Welch and Tony Scott include a lecturer, an adjunct faculty member, and a graduate student who appears as co-author on a chapter. This supports their inclusive editorial ethos and establishes that the scope of the book and its intended audience is already concerned with the interface between composition practitioners and leaders, even as some readers might identify as both. The problems described in the collection, then, look to a wide web of pressures and causes, tracing out how institutional, extra-curricular, legislative, and economic forces shape contemporary writing and literacy instruction.

This collection has much to offer beyond the narrow moment of composition history, much of which is of great concern to readers of *Kairos*. Digital scholars are cognizant of the debates regarding the digital, the political, and the academy. Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Columbia's (2016) "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities" comes to mind as a touchstone moment against which scholars like Michelle Rosen (2016) and others (2016) defend their work. Such attacks are not new, of course. We can add other titles like Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Richard Grusin, Patrick Jagoda, and Rita Raley's (2016) "The Dark Side of the Digital Humanities" and Tony Scott and Nancy Welch's (2014) collaboration for *College English*, "One Train Can Hide Another: Critical Materialism for Public Composition," as texts that link digital scholarship to the forces of neoliberalism. *Composition in the Age of Austerity* cannot be divorced from this context.

Given this, I'm not looking to do a hatchet job. Having been through budget and program cuts at my own university, I have seen the catastrophic effects of austerity measures. While I acknowledge that the actions performed and structural inequities maintained are done in the name of budgetary woes, I am not always convinced this is the result of a coherent philosophy. I first read the book over mid- to late summer in 2016, often around teaching online a small group of teachers looking to earn the required graduate-level credits to teach dual-enrollment courses. I then left for the Black Hills, making a stop at Wounded Knee, one of the most austere places on our continent. I returned to the book and to writing/designing with Dreamweaver as classes...
resumed in August, as protests about the Dakota Access Pipeline increased, as Labor Day brought news of the lock-out at LIU–Brooklyn, as the presidential campaign news sunk to all-new lows, and as the election itself brought further fears and anxiety over already shrinking budgets coupled with outright animosity in the shaping of a Donald Trump administration. I could not read this book and blithely dismiss what it had to say as Iowa's legislature evISCERated collective bargaining in 2017 and one legislator proposed a partisan hiring quota at state universities.

Rather than take a sequential journey through the text in this review, I look at several key factors across its contributions. I look at the theoretical tensions evident across the chapters in Conversations and Assessments, while looking at the more pragmatic details presented in the volume in Impacts. I then summarize my insights in Statement. I use an austere design style to present this webtext, combining practices that can be considered literate (e.g., close reading) and electrate (e.g., more distant reading) in order to match both the subject matter and the diverse audience I hope is interested in reading this work.

**Conversation Across the Curation**

Four contributions show the book's strength to engage in cross-talk rather than forwarding a singular solution. The first two chapters, "Our Trojan Horse: Outcomes Assessment and the Resurrection of Competency-Based Education" by Chris Gallagher and "Confessions of an Assessment Fellow" by Deborah Mutnick both traced the historical antecedents of austerity in current U.S. higher education. While they agreed that policy has changed to reward outcomes rather than inputs, and that this may actually decrease opportunity for education for those most disenfranchised in our society, they arrived at very different answers to the question Gallagher used as the subtitle in his closing section, "What to Do?"

Gallagher's chapter further developed his (2012) argument in College English, that the field of composition compromised itself in taking up the cause and administration of outcomes assessments. He (2016) suggested, "our tacit acknowledgement that results are all that really matter in education... has opened the door to CBE [content-based education, for a scholarly description], which, in its worst forms, disregards the educational experiences of teachers and students altogether" (p. 23). Citing a specific instance involving an assessment report using an eportfolio, Gallagher concretely summed up, "This is what writing looks like under CBE: a highly instrumentalist means of conveying information for the purpose of evaluation. Instructors don't so much teach writing as they facilitate the completion of tasks that happen to require writing" (p. 30).

Conversely, Mutnick's stance was one she avowed "was not then—nor... now—hostile to the idea that better assessment could improve teaching and learning" (p. 38). She provided a view from her own personal complicity in promoting "assessment fellows" at her university while still being critical of how that advocacy has panned out. Mutnick traced many of the same problems and history as Gallagher—the heavy hand of accreditors and federal programs, the influence of private corporations and their profit motive, and the social norms embedded in outcomes. Yet, unlike Gallagher, Mutnick focused on these as problems to be addressed through ongoing work. In her words, "simply refusing to participate within one's own institution strikes me as pointless if the result is to shift the burden of responsibility to other colleagues or jeopardize accreditation" (p. 46). In this way, her article worked to lead the call to "reclaim assessment and perform it on our own terms" (p. 40).

Another pair showcasing the depth and range of the works collected and curated by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott closed out the second section and opened the third section, respectively. Nancy Welch's "First-Year Writing and the Angels of Austerity: A Re-Domesticated Drama" was a fierce socialist feminist critique of administrative action while Jeanne Gunner's "What Happens When Ideological Narratives Lose Their Force?"
took a Latourian approach to a situation in which "critique becomes gestural, an epideictic rhetoric that does not materially move" (p. 153). As with Gallagher and Mutnick, we have two very experienced compositionists who have served in important administrative capacities. As such, we dismiss their insights at our peril.

Centrally located within the collection, Welch's article made a strong case that

*if we consider that the neoliberal restructuring of higher education is a long-term project to reorder permanently the terms and costs of education, something disturbing comes into view: the increasingly widespread and naturalized expectation that writing programs can endure without provision, can endlessly adapt to terms of increasingly lean social reproduction.* (p. 138)

In other words, as Welch argued, administrators are not really persuadable since they are often directed to view composition not as a social good, but as a function of the more home-bound private sphere. The teaching of writing is best left as an "up-to-the-individual, leave-it-to-the-family responsibility" (p. 135). All this serves to unload the real labor costs on others so, under neoliberal logic, literacies can be appropriated after the labor required to produce them has already taken place.

Gunner's insight feels less debilitating in light of larger questions about the value of critique. Gunner noted how many in composition and elsewhere "seem to be approaching an ideology fatigue, and a related loss of belief in the material efficacy of discursive and rhetorical modes of resistance" to argue for an Elbowian "believing game with emerging theories that question near-naturalized disciplinary and critical constructs of the field" (p. 150).}

Looking back at composition’s history, she saw that

we find ourselves the victim of our own habitus; from our earlier pursuit of cultural capital—the attempt to align with the research university model—to the manifest conservatism of the field today, we have been seeking a berth in a sinking ship. (pp. 152–153)

In response to past concessions to accumulate cultural capital, Gunner teased out how "consent can take a creatively disruptive form of complicity, and indirectly consenting to comply with an austerity agenda might open up space for change" (p. 154). She went on to show how displacing ideological critique from the center of composition and rhetoric is already underway through such works as Sid Dobrin's (2011) Postcomposition, Jeff Rice's (2007) The Rhetoric of Cool, and object-oriented studies. These works and others, in Gunner's estimation, hold power because of their distributed nature where actions arise immanently rather that from a central command and control (and critique) apparatus. Following this with examples of guerilla academic actions, she suggested that these efforts might "include and revise ideological critique, lessening the risk of inducing a kind of closed and unresolvable mirror stage, in which the oppressor we encounter leads us to construct ourselves as a totalized body of resistance" (p. 159).

Through such counterposing perspectives, Nancy Welch and Tony Scott have presented a remarkable volume that raises many important questions through its inclusiveness and coverage of different perspectives. I especially like that they included Gunner's admiration of Latourian methods and admission that critique might just play further into neoliberal hands with its repeated gestures. The collection could certainly have taken up this debate up to a greater degree, but perhaps that would shift the focus on local literacy sites and is therefore work best left to another collection.

Assessing Neoliberalism

One of the disputes raised within critiques of neoliberalism by literacy educators and advocates is the question of assessment. What, exactly, is valued in the work of literacy and composition? While critiquing Irv Peckham's (2012) explanation of an outcomes-based test to his dean, contributor Chris Gallagher noted that Peckham "accedes to a managerial logic" rather than "arguing that first-year writing is a valuable experience for all students and therefore worth paying for" (p. 24, italics in original). While we might certainly desire first-year writing for all students just as we might desire physical education or art or computer science experiences, Gallagher takes the experience itself as an inherent good. Similarly, in her closing reflection, "Afterword: Hacking the Body Politic," Lil Brannon reiterated Gallagher's claim that composition offers unique experiences unavailable elsewhere. Like Gallagher, she left assumptions about that experience unexamined. What makes the composition experience so unique?

Gallagher's argument was an explicitly Deweyan one, in which "we are expert shapers of educational experiences for individuals and groups" (pp. 30–31) and have the prerequisite knowledge to "build environments and experiences that promote students' learning" (p. 31). This seems rather assumptive of a host of things Kairos readers might already be focusing on in their own classrooms and scholarship. Certainly digital tools and objects are part of our students' environments and learning. Inquiry into the outcomes of their use—indeed, some form of assessment of their potential at the very least—is how we shape our classes, curricula, and argue for those experiences. Further, to suggest that somehow composition teachers are already fully equipped masters of reaching into the lives of
our students and transforming them into discerning citizens who can "make a life and... live well with others in a participatory democracy" (p. 31) seems a stretch. It is a laudable vision, but do we really want to put all that into a semester or two? And doesn't composition need to work with other subject areas like ethics, speech, sciences, and the arts? If we accept that we cannot go it alone, how else do we hold cross- and trans-disciplinary conversations, without talking about what we feel our students have learned by the end of our courses?

Gallagher’s implication that outcomes assessments are rarely connected back to the curriculum and pedagogy and Brannon’s description of a missed opportunity are both well founded. Yet, as Brannon mentioned in her afterword, when it came to formulating national outcomes,

*The National Council of Teachers of English got into the game, seeking to set its own standards—which Barack Obama’s Secretary of Education Arnie [sic] Duncan then set aside in favor of new ‘more rigorous’ standards developed by a beltway think-tank funded by the National Governor’s Association. (p. 222)*

To listen to the way the issue is presented here is, I think, to suspect almost any assessment of capitulating to neoliberal market forces. So, while the opportunity was missed, I am not convinced it was missed because of inattention to ideology or lack of critical awareness about how literacy works, can be taught, or fits within the broader scope of education for civic, personal, and economic life. Rather, as Brannon also reiterated from Gallagher, "the field played along 'like good citizens' when mandates for outcomes and assessments started to emerge, but we were 'bamboozled’" (p. 226).

I make a point of these details in order to push back a little on the logic of the volume itself. Many of us are troubled by the direction of education in our country and decry the influence that can be had by moneyed interests, especially the reduction of what we do to functionalist measures while cutting budgets in areas like the arts, literacies, critical thinking, and humanities. But terms like "experience" and "neoliberalism" reference abstract, discursive constructs that contrast with the more concrete, ground-level work being hampered by social
forces described in other chapters (see Impacts). Similar to the rhetoric Matthew Kirschenbaum (2014) detailed regarding digital humanities, such discursive constructs elide the material dimension of labor, the actual projects themselves in all their manifold diversity. Kirschenbaum critiqued a distinction between "textual scholarship" and "digital humanities" because that "speaks to no body" by virtue of it being "a catechism that makes sense only in the construct, that virtual discursive space where Morpheus and Neo (who are both really on the same side, remember) can battle without regard for bodies, history, or physics" (p. 13, italics in original). I think the discussion of neoliberalism does a similar thing, forgetting that not one path led us to our state of affairs and, perhaps, not one event can rescue us from it. A bit more pointedly, I think Brannon is right: we have been bamboozled by political leadership in America. Republican and Democrat alike have disregarded expert input despite sincere attempts to make it available for the common good.

Tony Scott defined neoliberalism in greater detail in a more recent article (2016), and I wish he and Nancy Welch had done so here or suggested that contributors unpack their own assumptions on this point. Neoliberalism is not, Scott explained in this recent essay, just the privatization of public services, but "the embedded commonsense principle that most spheres of human life are better perceived, managed, and evaluated as markets" (p. 14). Thus, assessment tools are geared toward language and perspectives that "had formerly been more contained within the realm of commerce" (p. 14). That explanation could have served this volume to help further its theoretical framework and, perhaps, clarify some of the critiques as well as help explain why experiences with certain kinds of texts, curricula, or pedagogies should be valued over others and in which contexts. Even good stances can lead to poor outcomes and potential misunderstandings. I do not see Scott and Welch clarifying that in this volume, which left me admiring Brannon's bamboozlement all the more. Our ills may not be entirely due to a certain way of thinking—a particular ideology to be detected through critical tools and exposed to disinfecting sunshine. Rather, our ills may be about certain individuals' self-proclaimed mantle of decision-making without "closing the loop" and vetting their own decisions with those who are affected. It's overreach and lack of accountability caused by plain old human ego, problems that can happen at any level of an organization, no matter the ideologies adopted by its members. And this is a very, very old—and very human—problem, one left largely unaddressed in the collection.

**National Impacts**

Beyond tackling the heady and often theoretical scope of austerity writ large, Nancy Welch and Tony Scott have also included finer-grained looks at programs and the effects that outcomes and austerity have had on them. These offer more nuanced and detailed support for larger claims about neoliberalism and austerity made by others in the volume. Emily Isaacs, in "First-Year Composition Course Redesigns: Pedagogical Innovation or Solution to the 'Cost Disease'?", reviewed data on course redesigns from the non-profit National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT). While NCAT appears promising to help contain costs relative to more homogenous technological solutions like MOOCs through what it calls Course Redesign, Isaacs ultimately faulted much of it for "push assessing (think: push polling): a reinvigorated focus on grammar and other lower-order concerns, and a procedural, lowest common denominator interpretation of writing as a process" (p. 52). Similarly, Marcelle Haddix and Brandi Williams, in "Who's Coming to the Composition Classroom? K–12 Writing in and outside the Context of Common Core State Standards," examined Common Core State Standards (CCSS), not for what they specifically do, but for what they leave out. As Haddix and Williams claimed,

*The problem is not the emphasis on these three writing styles [argumentative, informative, and narrative as the focus of CCSS], but the de-emphasis on other writing styles that may allow for a more creative expression that youths experience through digital and other media outside of school spaces.* (p. 65)
They contrasted CCSS with *Writing Our Lives*, a writing project for urban youth that "creates a space for youth writers to come out and be known as writers" (p. 66) and noted that, under CCSS alone, "there may be limited opportunities to engage in extended writing projects in multiple genres and for diverse purposes within the school context" (p. 72).

Part Two: Composition in an Austere World tackles many of the known areas and institutions within the field of composition: the National Writing Project (*NWP*), basic writing, prison literacy programs, public rhetoric, and First-Year Composition (*FYC*). Tom Fox and Elyse Eidman-Aadahl detailed the effects of removing directed federal funds to the organization in "The National Writing Project in the Age of Austerity." They noted how NWP, as a non-profit institution, is pulled in several directions as different funding interests shape the work it can do. They provided a short history of the NWP both during and after federal funding, which I am sure will be of value to historians of the field. They noted the current prominence of randomized control trials (RCTs) "as the 'gold standard' for educational research" (p. 87) that can be scaled and compared across contexts according to the *What Works* national database. In the end, they suggested an intriguing détournement of systems by local agents in a long line of theorists from Pierre Bourdieu to Henry Giroux, from Gerald Vizenor to Galloway and Thacker. As they stated, "Working in the age of austerity is *more work*" (p. 89), and that work is always rhetorical, as risky and unfair as it might sometimes be.

In "Occupy Basic Writing: Pedagogy in the Wake of Austerity," Susan Naomi Bernstein juxtaposed *Occupy Wall Street* and basic writing, "one of austerity's first victims" (p. 92), at CUNY in the wake of the 2009 elimination of open admissions at the community colleges. Her contribution is relentlessly personal, reflecting at times on the death of a friend, her job loss, her dissatisfaction with protests, and her move to Arizona. In this way, and explicitly conscious of educational scholarship by Mina Shaughnessy, Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, Amy Winans, and Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, Bernstein weaved a tapestry that called for "a revised epistemology; ways and means of knowing based on material realities and embodied events of everyday life in the wake of austerity" (p. 104).

Taking up the remaining "tatters" of prison education in "Austerity behind Bars: The 'Cost' of Prison College Programs," Tobi Jacobi questioned the true costs of austerity on the prison system from the perspective of composition as "part of the core curriculum in these prison college programs" (p. 107). Jacobi drew from critical intellectuals like Angela Davis and Jimmy Santiago Baca and from think tanks like the RAND Corporation and
Pew Center on the States to ask seemingly small scale—but critically important—tactical questions: "At what point do we ask this system to engage issues of justice beyond our own labor and on-campus students' needs? Where and when will we advocate and for whom?" (p. 116). Her attention to tactics in a book largely about broader strategies (be they conscious or not) is a welcome one, figuring as many of these more local contributions do into the contingent and sometimes idiosyncratic nature of composition work.

Local Impacts

Administrative bloat and the rise of "deanlets" occupy much of Eileen Schell's contribution, "Austerity, Contingency, and Administrative Bloat: Writing Programs and Universities in an Age of Feast and Famine," while Ann Larson's chapter, "Composition's Dead," focused on the role of contingent and contract labor in composition's austerity. Here again lies a tension between and across the volume's contributions, a tension often between larger questions of strategy and local questions of tactics. Schell stated that her goal is not to denigrate administrative positions or those who seek them, but to ask tough questions about how money spent on managing the university organization and university programs and funds allocated to 'entrepreneurial' or extracurricular initiatives have to be balanced against monies spent on the instructional budget in the form of stable, well-paid positions. (p. 178)

Larson was more strident and grounded in a traditional Marxist view, in which "the people who actually teach writing,' to use Harris's phrasing" are the real heroes operating in a world of alienated "zombie" labor (pp. 172–173). Larson advocated "that we examine and discredit ruling class rhetorical tactics that erode solidarity" (p. 174), again pointing, as so many contributors did, to tactical maneuvers grounded in our respective places. For her part, Schell pointed to what I think is really at stake here: "we are in a battle for the soul of shared governance" (p. 185). Divisions between academic contract labor, tenured or tenure-eligible faculty, administrators, and student services staff are exploited for many reasons, few of which allow for robust, democratic conversations. Schell described one tactical approach "to take steps to address these issues on our
own local campuses" (p. 185) in the form of Syracuse University's Campus Equity Week programs sponsored annually by the Labor Studies Working Group.

Mary Ann Cain's essay, "BuskerFest: The Struggle for Space in Public Rhetorical Education," detailed a public literacy program in Chicago's Bronzeville Art Center, and she used a different narrative tone to drive its argument. While she detailed the unhoming of Three Rivers Institute of Afrikan Art and Culture, a public afro-centric literacy program, Cain announced that her purpose was "to provide here-and-now observation of micro-moments of public space-making in and beyond writing classrooms as a way to understand how public space is made by claiming it" (p. 121). In the end, Cain was "hopeful" because she and her students "are all now connected in ways we never could have imagined on our own. And we can tell others about why they should want to be, too" (p. 130). Through such attention to public space and the rhetorical effects of repetition, Cain crafted a bright narrative in an otherwise dark book.

Summary Statement

One interest I had in reviewing this work was to situate it within and between two major conversations in writing studies: on the one hand, the critical studies model of composition focused on ideological critique designed to actively intervene in socio-political matters, and on the other, the new materialist model of composition that traces networks, bodies, tools, spaces, and inventions under a broad range of procedures aimed at discovering the sorts of grammars and environments by which things come to be and persist in the world. How might the latter insights bear on our diagnoses of injustice or on our formulation of ways to intervene in the world? I do not think the different starting points to do these things are entirely incompatible and, judging from this volume, I am not alone.

Overall, the collection is worthy of praise for including a range of insightful contributions, both theoretically and with regards to academic rank and situation. Nancy Welch and Tony Scott demonstrated commendable editorial judgement on such a controversial and emotional topic. The details presented here are compelling and, though the situation may be dire, demonstrating the hard work and careful thought involved at national, local, and community levels is a valuable step toward whatever kind of recovery might attend a (re)turn to literacy advocacy and justification for sponsorship. To this end, I think the cases presented in this volume can inspire and, rather than create a national movement, offer hope for smaller-scale successes. It is upon those successes that a (re)turn to advocacy will grow.

Line-drawing cartoon of Jimmi Hendrix sitting across as desk with an interviewer asking, "Nice resumé, Mr. Hendrix, but are you experienced?"

The volume could have stayed more true to its title and given focus to austerity, rather than use that term as a cover for neoliberalism. Governmental retreat from higher education and public literacy can be attributed to neoliberal thinking, though I am not convinced the term is used as precisely as it should be, given the history of the term and it various uses. Still, the editors present a worldview of their own which is not without merit. They also demonstrate that theirs is not the only possible worldview, though the volume leans heavily toward it under their editorship.

Theoretically, the tension between experience and assessment is the most rich and compelling aspect across contributions. It seems to signal a basic difference in orientation within the field of composition, one rooted in historical developments and responses to other moments of acclaim and crisis for composition's work. It reminded me of the skills vs. qualities debates that seem to always hold a place for something deeper and more mystical about writing and composition, something ineffable that can never be captured or measured with talk of skills or outcomes. I agree that skills and outcomes can never capture the full range of what happens when someone composes a text, either on a page or electronically. The urge to ground the field in experience is therefore good and necessary, so we are compelled to stay restless. Yet we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good, either. This volume, thankfully, does not let it come to that, but the tension is there and useful for thinking with.

While the book takes its own troubling turns, I certainly hope this collection inspires and furthers related discussions among graduate and undergraduate students, tenure and non-tenure track faculty, community leaders, legislators, and parents, all of whom have a vested interest in quality instruction and can learn from the voices here. The editorial job is excellent in terms of both selection and curation, and Welch and Scott have made a solid contribution to the field by addressing a range of questions from the political to the theoretical to the very practical. Not all will agree with the contributions or the volume's take on neoliberalism, but it nonetheless offers an important node in our thinking about our work, be that teaching, scholarship, service, advocacy, craft, or just simply writing.

References


Image Sources


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