political, and even social relationships were being conducted through documents—spurred by the development of corporations and the concentrations of power and money that they accrued. Direct market relations between individuals gave way to corporate-style activity—a growth in bureaucratic structures, interdependence, planning, restrictions on the flow of information, and other forms of control, all based largely on written and other symbol-based instruments (p. 185). The industries of insurance and banking grew in size and complexity to handle problems associated with large-scale investment. Governments grew in kind as efforts to regulate commerce and administer justice under these changing conditions required public bureaucracies equal in size and strength to private ones. These developments helped to standardize contracts, rules, and rights, and, in some ways, illiterates and literates alike benefitted from protections built directly into standard language. However, as more political and economic processes were bound up with documents, illiteracy grew more limiting and more punishing. Indeed, these developments strained the basic literacy of all citizens, as staying informed, exercising rights, and claiming a fair share of public resources all involved the negotiation of increasingly complex institutional systems and their thickets of documents. The potential power of one’s civil rights rose or fell depending on one’s ability to match or surpass a growing standard of sophistication in reading and writing. In an advanced contractarian society, the ability to write has grown as integral as the ability to read; in a world of print, writing is often the only viable way to have voice. At the start of the twenty-first century, the troubled and troubling connections between literacy and justice persist in new form, as society’s political and economic relations move increasingly on-line. Unequal access to computer technology introduces new sources of inequality into the processes of staying informed, exercising free speech, and enjoying economic benefits and choices. In a practical way, computer technology amplifies the civil and economic rights of those that have it over those that don’t.

Dorothy Smith (1974) explored other ideological dimensions of what she called “documentary reality,” a term she used to underscore that in contemporary society, much of what we count as basic features of work and life already has been highly processed through print and other symbolic media. Those who control everything from news reporting to reporting forms structure the ways that people can know the world and determine what counts as fact. Smith called the accounting categories and documentary procedures of any organization its “enforced linguistic resources” (p. 265), the manner and substance in which organizational thinking and action occur. That which is unrepresented or unreported falls away as if it were not there or had not happened. When documents then become the basis of official decision making, their power grows even more profound. Written reports in schools, mental health care facilities, credit bureaus, prisons, hospitals, divorce court, personnel departments, adoption agencies, and Social Security offices—in fact, documents in all modern organizations—control the way that decisions are made, justice is rendered, and resources are distributed. The domino of documents in very real ways constructs who we are and to what we are and are not entitled. “Our relation to others in our society and beyond,” Smith observed, “is mediated by the social organization of its ruling” (p. 267). Again, the growth of computer-based communication will only intensify these trends as more basic social activity will play out in the symbolically arranged world of virtual reality.

Written accounting procedures were a ubiquitous presence in the literacy histories that I collected, and it was clear that learning to write in the twentieth century involved many people in learning how to negotiate—and, at times, circumvent or subvert—various systems of accounting procedures. Henry Schmidt, born in 1908 and a dairy farm inspector for a large milk processing corporation, used to physically carry loan documents and government regulatory booklets into the barns and milk houses that he visited, convincing small-dairy farmers to negotiate loans from his company for modern equipment and helping them to complete government reporting forms that would protect the grade A status of their milk. Independent plumber Sidney Vopat, born in 1913, recalled how he learned to read regulations regarding construction materials and procedures, translating them mentally all the while into cheaper alternatives that still technically met code. “You had to abide by it,” he said about plumbing regulations. “But we could always find a cheaper way of doing it.” You learned how to be an honest crook.” Meat salesman Bill, born in 1919, laughingly referred to the expense account he had to keep track of as his “swindle sheet.” Animal technician Phil, born in 1907, recalled increasingly formal accounting procedures at a large public institution that employed him—procedures that required bids for virtually any purchase. In reaction, he and other blue-collar technicians increasingly were called on to make or jury-rig needed equipment as a way to circumvent the lengthy and cumbersome outside contract procedure. Gladys Robinson, born in 1946, served as a home health aide to her ailing mother as a means of supporting both of them as well as an extended family of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As she documented her mother’s condition, she was well aware that the forms also would be scrutinized for judgments about continued funding of her position. Just how much the
power by hiring attorneys to represent them in grievance and contract negotiations. “Pretty soon,” Lowery observed, “ninety percent of the people I was dealing with across the table were attorneys.”

This move brought dramatic changes in the writing practices of union reps, and, in Lowery’s estimation, a simultaneous waning of the power of workers and the power of his own literacy. “It used to be we got our way through muscle or through political connections,” he said. “Now we had to get it through legalistic stuff. It was no longer just sit down and talk about it. Can we make a deal?” Instead, all activity became rendered in writing: the exhibit, the brief, the transcript, the letter, the appeal. Because briefs took longer to write, the wheels of justice took longer to turn. Delays in grievance hearings became routine, as lawyers and union reps alike asked hearing judges for extensions on their briefs. Things went, in Lowery’s words, “from quick, competent justice to expensive and long-term justice.”

In the meantime, Lowery began spending up to 70 hours a week at work, sweating over the writing of briefs, which are typically 15- to 30-page documents laying out precedents, arguments, and evidence for a grievant’s case. These documents were being forced by the new environment in which Lowery’s union was operating. He explained:

When employers were represented by an attorney, you were going to have a written brief because the attorney needs to get paid. Well, what do you think if you were a union grievant and the attorney says, “Well, I’m going to write a brief” and Dwayne Lowery says, “Well, I’m not going to”? Does the worker somehow feel that their representation is less now?

To keep up with the new demands, Lowery occasionally traveled to major cities for two- or three-day union-sponsored workshops on arbitration, new legislation, and communication skills. He also took short courses at a historic school for workers at a nearby university. His writing instruction consisted mainly of reading the briefs of other field reps, especially those done by the college graduates who increasingly were being assigned to his district from union headquarters. Lowery said he kept a file drawer filled with other people’s briefs from which he would borrow formats and phrasings. At the time of our interview in 1995, Dwayne Lowery had just taken early and somewhat bitter retirement from the union, replaced by a recent graduate from a master’s degree program in industrial relations. As a retiree, he was engaged in local Democratic Party politics and was getting informal lessons in word processing at home from his wife.

Over a 20-year period, Lowery’s adult writing took its character from a particular juncture in labor relations, when even small units of government began wielding (and, as a consequence, began spreading) a “legalistic” form of literacy to restore political dominance over public workers. This struggle for dominance shaped the kinds of literacy skills required of Lowery, the kinds of genres he learned and used, and the kinds of literate identity he developed. Lowery’s rank-and-file experience and his talent for representing that experience around a bargaining table became increasingly peripheral to his ability to prepare documents that could compete in kind with those written by his more highly educated, professional adversaries. Face-to-face meetings became occasions mostly for a ritualistic exchange of texts, as arbitrators generally deferred decisions, reaching them in private, after solitary deliberation over complex sets of documents. What Lowery was up against as a working adult in the second half of the twentieth century was more than just living through a rising standard in literacy expectations or a generalized growth in professionalization, specialization, or documentary power — although certainly all of those things are, generically, true. Rather, these developments should be seen more specifically, as outcomes of ongoing transformations in the history of literacy as it has been wielded as part of economic and political conflict. These transformations become the arenas in which new standards of literacy develop. And for Lowery — as well as many like him since the mid-1970s especially — these are the arenas in which the worth of existing literate skills become degraded. A consummate debater and deal maker, Lowery saw his value to the union bureaucracy subside, as power shifted to younger, university-trained staffers whose literacy credentials better matched the specialized forms of escalating pressure coming from the other side.

In the broadest sense, the sponsorship of Lowery’s literacy experiences lies deep within the historical conditions of industrial relations in the twentieth century and, more particularly, within the changing nature of work and labor struggle over the last several decades. Formal relationships of all kinds came to rely on elaborately explicit rules and regulations. For labor, these conditions only intensified in the 1960s and 1970s when a flurry of federal and state civil rights legislation curtailed the previously unregulated hiring and firing power of management. These developments made the appeal to law as central as collective bargaining for extending employee rights. I mention this broader picture first because it relates to the forms of employer backlash that Lowery began experiencing by the early 1980s and, more important, because a history of unionism serves as a guide for a closer look at the sponsors of Lowery’s literacy.
These resources begin with the influence of his father, whose membership in the United Rubber Workers during the ideologically potent 1930s and 1940s grounded Lowery in class-conscious progressivism and its favorite literate form: the newspaper. On top of that, though, was a pragmatic philosophy of worker education that developed in the United States after the Depression as an anticommunist antidote to left-wing intellectual influences in unions. Lowery's parent union, in fact, had been a central force in refocusing worker education away from an earlier emphasis on broad critical study and toward discrete techniques for organizing and bargaining. Workers began to be trained in the discrete bodies of knowledge, written formats, and idioms associated with those strategies. Characteristic of this legacy, Lowery's crash course at the Washington-based training center in the early 1970s emphasized technical information, problem solving, and union-building skills and methods. The transformation in worker education from critical, humanistic study to problem-solving skills was also lived out at the school for workers where Lowery took short courses in the early 1970s. Once a place where factory workers came to write and read about economics, sociology, and labor history, the school is now part of a university extension service offering workshops – often requested by management – on such topics as work restructuring, new technology, health and safety regulations, and joint labor-management cooperation. Finally, in this inventory of Lowery's literacy sponsors, we must add the latest incarnations shaping union practices: the attorneys and college-educated coworkers who carried into Lowery's workplace forms of legal discourse and "essayist literacy." 

What should we notice about this pattern of sponsorship? First, we can see how the course of an ordinary person's literacy learning – its occasions, materials, applications, potentials – follow the transformations going on within sponsoring institutions as those institutions fight for economic and ideological position. As a result of wins, losses, or compromises, institutions undergo change, affecting the kinds of literacy they promulgate and the status that such literacy has in the larger society. So where, how, why, when, and what Lowery practiced as a writer – and what he didn't practice – took shape as part of the postindustrial jockeying going on since the 1970s among labor, government, and industry. Yet there is more to be seen in this inventory of literacy sponsors. It exposes the deeply textured history that lies within the literacy practices of institutions and within any individual's literacy experiences. Accumulated layers of sponsoring influences – in families, workplaces, schools, memory – carry forms of literacy that have been shaped out of ideological and economic struggles of the past. This history, on the one hand, is a sustaining resource in the quest for literacy. It enables an older generation to pass its literacy resources onto another. Lowery's exposure to his father's newspaper reading and supper-table political talk kindled his adult passion for news, debate, and language that rendered relief and justice. This history also helps to create infrastructures of opportunity. Lowery found crucial supports for extending his adult literacy in the education networks that unions established during the first half of the twentieth century as they were consolidating into national powers. On the other hand, however, this layered history of sponsorship is also deeply conservative and can be maladaptive because it teaches forms of literacy that oftentimes are in the process of being overtaken by new political realities and by ascendant forms of literacy. The decision to focus worker education on practical strategies of recruiting and bargaining – devised in the thick of Cold War patriotism and rapid expansion in union memberships – became ripe, by the Reagan years, for new forms of management aggression and cooptation.

It is actually this lag or gap in sponsoring forms that we call the rising standard of literacy. The pace of change and the place of literacy in economic competition have both intensified enormously in the recent past. It is as if the history of literacy is in fast-forward. Where once the same sponsoring arrangements could maintain value across a generation or more, forms of literacy and their sponsors can now rise and recede many times within a single life span. Dwayne Lowery experienced profound changes in forms of union-based literacy not only between his father's time and his but also between the time he joined the union and the time he left it, 20-odd years later. This phenomenon is what makes today's literacy feel so advanced and, at the same time, so destabilized.

Johnny Ames, Born 1950

If we can say, in a rough sense, that Dwayne Lowery's literacy was overpowered by late-century competitions between labor and management, we find in Johnny Ames a man whose experience moved him in an opposite direction – from illiteracy to literacy – in approximately the same time period, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Ames was an inmate for more than 16 years in maximum- and medium-security prisons in the Midwest during a period of sharp ideological fluctuations in approaches to penal administration, prisoner rights, and rehabilitation. The same civil rights rulings that informed labor-management battles in which Lowery was involved also informed inmate-institution battles during approximately the same time period. In the cross-currents of these competitions,